

# Covenant Membership

## Session 2: An Introduction to Church Membership (Part 2)

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### Introduction

#### Administrative Introduction

- A. We are in the middle now of our **Covenant Membership Series**. I realize the **complexity** of doing such a thing during a Sunday Service, due to the variety of people that may be attending.
- B. So each week I will continue to point you to the **Administrative Introduction** on the first page of your Covenant Membership Notebook. It addresses my heart for you in this series no matter where you are at in relationship to this church—(1) **Already** a Member, (2) **Not Ready** to Be a Member; (3) Just a **Visitor**; (4) **Not a Christian**. I cannot go through this each week, but I encourage you to please read it on your own time.

#### Key Text

*“<sup>16</sup> The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?<sup>17</sup> Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:16–17).*

### What Is Church Membership (cont’d)?

#### The Five Aspects of Church Membership

- A. We’re in **Session 2** now and the **second part** to what I’ve titled: **An Introduction to Church Membership**.
- B. In all of our discussion last week we still didn’t really answer the **question: What is church membership (particularly at a local church level)?** It is this question that I now want to address with you in earnest. And I’m going to do so by presenting to you what I call the **five aspects** of church membership.

#### (1) Church Membership Is *Affirmation* from the Elders

- A. Now, I’m going to open with some **heavy thoughts** that might not initially sit well with us, but hang with me. We want at this church to bow before the **full counsel** of God, and not just pick and choose the parts that please us. We trust that **His way**, not our way will lead to abundant **life** and **joy**.
  - 1. So don’t **walk out** on me here. Stick with me. And I trust that, by the end, you just might come to see what God’s up to in all this.

- B. Church Membership Is **Affirmation** from the Elders—I'm going to start with the **process** I have in mind here and then we'll move back towards the **theology** that stands behind it.

#### THE PROCESS:

- A. If an individual feels called to **join himself** to this church as a Covenant Member, then he would go through the **formal process** we're developing here, which would land him eventually across the **table** from an **Elder** or two for an **interview**.
1. The purpose of this interview is **threefold**:
    - a. To give you a chance to get to **know us** and confirm that this is the right **local church** for you.
    - b. To give us a chance to get to **know you** and confirm that you understand that **gospel**, and that Jesus seems to be your **Savior** and **Lord**.
    - c. And, through this, to begin the beautiful process of being **knit together** in love as we share stories and get to know one another.
- B. I say Church Membership is affirmation from the **"Elders"** in particular here because that's really where the process of affirmation begins.
1. And rightly so. Elders are commissioned by the **Holy Spirit** through the **church** to **oversee** and **care** for all of it's members. They are to **lead** the way in **shepherding** the flock, which would mean leading the way in **adding** to the flock: *"Is this a **sheep** or is this a **goat** or, worse, is this a **wolf**?"* (cf. [Act 20:28-31a](#)).
- C. But the process of affirmation doesn't stop with the Elders, it **culminates** finally with the **whole church**.
1. Assuming things progress for the prospective Covenant Member, notice of the **Elders' recommendation** will be given to the **current membership** of the church, and they will have an opportunity to bring any **concerns** that they have to the Elders for their consideration.
- D. Now, **pause**. I imagine at this point that, for some of you, your **heart** is racing, your **palms** are sweating, your **blood pressure's** rising. So let me be clear.
1. We are not talking here about that stuff that goes down on those **cop shows** you watch on TV before bed. Like we're doing some sort of **criminal investigation** on you—we've got the **warrant**, we're breaking down your **door**, and we're going through all your stuff with our **magnifying glasses** and **clipboards**—"What's that? She watches **Oprah**? Ya we're going have to put that on your record." No!
    - a. We just want to do **our best** to confirm that you're a **Christian**. That's it.
  2. We are **not** talking about—"Does this person understand the full index of **biblical theology**?" We are **all growing** in our knowledge of Scripture.

- a. We **are** talking about—“Does this person understand the **gospel**—that they are a **sinner**; that they need a **Savior**; that Jesus **died** and **rose** for them?”
  3. We are **not** talking about—“Does this individual have **any sin** in their lives?” We **all** have sin.
    - a. We **are** talking about—“Does this individual have **clear, consistent, calloused unrepentant sin in his life that brings his profession of faith into question?**”
  4. We are **not** talking about—“Has this person attained **perfection?**” Is anyone perfect here? This church would be **empty** if that were the qualification for membership.
    - a. We **are** talking about—“**By grace, is this person heading in the right direction?**”
  5. We are simply wanting to confirm that this person has a **credible profession of faith**; that they seem to be **Christians—banged-up, sin-struggling, grace-embracing, slowly-growing** Christians, just like the **rest of us**.
- E. **Jonathan Leeman** writes wonderfully on this subject: “It’s not a person’s moral perfection that qualifies him or her for church membership. It’s just the opposite. It’s his or her recognition of a lack of moral perfection coupled with a hunger for it. It’s not the people who never sin; it’s the people who fight against sin. A church’s judicial work is to affirm not the righteous but the unrighteous who thirst for righteousness—the righteousness only God in Christ can give. Here’s one more way to say it: what makes people acceptable to a church is not their own moral purity, but Christ’s—not what they have done to save themselves, but what God has done to save them” (pp. 88-89).
1. Church membership is not a **pride** thing—“I’m **in** and you’re **out**.” No! It’s actually just the opposite. The only way you get **in** is by finally acknowledging that you’re **out**—“I’m out of **strength**; I’m out of **righteousness**; I’m out of **riches**; I’m out of **options**; but I have **Christ**. Can I come **in**?” “**Yes!**”

#### THE THEOLOGY:

- A. Now, I said I’d get to the **theology** behind this process. Let’s briefly look at some of this now.
- B. What I have in mind here is what’s been referred to as the church’s **power of the keys**. These keys are first mentioned by **Jesus** with reference to **Peter** upon his **profession of faith** in Jesus as the **Christ**: “<sup>18</sup> I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build **my church**, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the **keys of the kingdom of heaven**, and whatever you [sg.] **bind** on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you [sg.] **loose** on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (**Matt 16:18–19**).
1. Christ is giving Peter “**the keys of the kingdom of heaven**”. Keys **open** doors and let people in. But they also **lock** doors and put people out.

- a. With these **keys**, Christ is giving Peter the authority to **bind** or **loose**, to **affirm** or **reject**, an individual's **participation** in His **kingdom** and **church**—some that try to attach themselves to the church will be bound (affirmed as **true believers**); others will be loosed (rejected as **false professors**).
- C. But then, amazingly, just two chapters later, we see plainly that these keys are not just given by Christ to **Peter**, they are given to the entire **church**. Speaking of an **unrepentant sinner**, Jesus instructs His disciples: *"<sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.<sup>18</sup> Truly, I say to you, whatever you [pl.] **bind** on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you [pl.] **loose** on earth shall be loosed in heaven . . . <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them"* (**Matt 18:17–18, 20**).
1. The same key-wielding activity of **binding** and **loosing** is referred to, only now the **"you"** doing it is **plural** in the Greek. Jesus is talking about the **church**. He's talking about **you** and **I**!
    - a. Have no doubt: these are **Christ's keys**; it's **His authority**. But He uses those keys, He exercises His authority, through the **church**! The church is to take part in **affirming** true believers and **rejecting** false professors.
- D. I **tremble** at the thought! This is an **awesome** task. Please do not ever think that I am looking to **monopolize** these keys and use them as some sort of **power play** to **manipulate** you for selfish gain.
  1. There's a big part of me that **doesn't want** the keys. I just want to put them back in **Jesus' hand** and say, *"You do it! I'm not worthy of such a thing. I'm going to screw it up!"*
    - a. But He wants me to **shepherd**. He wants me **care** for the flock. As an **Elder**, I think he wants me to **lead the way** in this. But, as His **church**, He wants all of us **involved**.

## (2) Church Membership Is Assurance for the Individual

- A. Now you might think what I just outlined sounds like a **horrifying** process.
  1. Maybe you're an **introvert**, already prone to **fear** what others are thinking. Maybe you've imbibed the full spirit of American **individualism**—*"Get out of my business! Who do you think you are?"* Or maybe you've suffered painful **abuse** at the hands of church authority in the past—*"You're just waiting to **hurt me**, to condemn me, to manipulate me, to embarrass me!"*
    - a. Whatever the case may be, hear me now: this process is not designed to be **horrifying**; it's actually designed to be **healing**.

- B. We might feel **safe** doing our Christianity thing on the **fringes**, but it is actually quite a **dangerous** place to be. The **lone Christian** is terribly prone to the errors of either **self-deception** or **self-doubt**.
- C. On the one hand (**self-deception**), you might be thinking you are just **fine**—“*Me and Jesus are tight.*” But maybe you’re not. Maybe you don’t really get the **cross**. Maybe you’re still stubborn in your **sin**. Maybe you’re **self-deceived**.
  - 1. Maybe you’re headed towards that **haunting verdict** described in **Matt 7:22-23**: “*22 On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ 23 And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’*”
    - a. If the **devil** can keep you thinking you’re fine, doesn’t the devil **win**?
      - i. **An Elder Council**, a church, that wants to help you avoid that kind of **self-deception**, is not a **horrifying** thing. It’s a **healing** thing. When you do truly come to know Christ, when they do affirm your relationship with Him, it is for your **blessed assurance**.
- D. On the other hand (**self-doubt**), you might be terribly prone to doubt your salvation. You might have such a **sensitive conscience**, and feel so **painfully condemned**, that you are all but certain that the Elders and the church will **turn you away** once they really get to know you.
  - 1. If the **devil**, the **accuser of the brethren**, can keep you doubting your salvation, does he not rob you of all the **joy** that is yours in Christ?
    - a. So what then when you finally gain the **courage** to let the **Elders** and the **church** in and they declare: “*As far as we can tell, you are the **real thing**. **Rest assured** dear sister, dear brother. You are a member of **Christ’s body** and a member of this **church**.*”
      - i. Again, an **Elder Council**, a church, that wants to help you avoid that kind of **self-doubt**, is not a **horrifying** thing. It’s a **healing** thing.

### (3) Church Membership Is *Accountability* to the Church

- A. As members of this local expression of Christ’s universal church, we are to be **more** than just **hospitable** or **charitable** to one another (though even this is an astounding miracle)—we are also to be **accountable**.
  - 1. This means that we are **honest** with one another—about our **lives**, about our **hearts**, about **who we really are** and **what we’re really dealing with**. It means that, not only is the **front door** to my home open to you, but that **closet door** in the furthest, darkest, back room—where I keep all of my **skeletons** and **cobwebs**—that door is open to you as well.

- a. Now, please don't **misunderstand** me. I'm not saying we don't use **wisdom** in **who** we share with and **how**. I'm not saying all your junk's gotta be posted to your **Facebook wall** or something's up with you. I am saying, that the **strangest thing** happens when Christ gets a hold of us. Suddenly I want to **let you in**. I want to **confess sin** and get **accountability** and **open** my life up to others.
- B. To be a **Christian** is to **come out of hiding**—to come out of **darkness** and into the **light**.
  1. Jesus says in **John 3:19-20**: *"<sup>19</sup> The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. <sup>20</sup> For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed."*
    - a. But the Christian is one who says, "I'm done **hiding**. I need **help**. And **Jesus** is the One who can help me." We step into the light of the **cross** and find from God not **condemnation** but **salvation**.
- C. And in the glory of that light, when at last we look to our **left** and our **right**, what is it that we see? The **church**. **Brothers** and **sisters** given by God to us as gifts, to keep us **living**, **walking** in that light.
  1. That's why the author of Hebrews exhorts the church: *"<sup>24</sup> [L]et us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb 10:24–25).*
- D. There are **roaches** still crawling in our flesh. There's a **countermovement** in us that still longs for the **damp darkness** of sin.
  1. **Church membership** says: "I want that **Day** to go **well** for me and for you. Therefore I want you in **my life**, and I want to get into **yours**. I want to be **accountable** to the church."

#### (4) Church Membership Is *Announcement* before the World

- A. Let me ask you? Who in this church is **representing** Christ to the nations? Who among us is a part of that **blessed assembly** that has unique access to the **presence** of God, as His **people**, commissioned with His **purpose**?
  1. **Anyone** that walks through these **doors**? Certainly you wouldn't say so. We have an **open door** policy here. We want **unbelievers**, **apostates**, **backsliders**, **rebels** in our midst. But we wouldn't want the world looking to them to try to discover what Christ is like.
    - a. So **who** would we point them to?

B. **Church membership** helps us draw a **clearer line** around those whom we as a church **know** are walking with Christ, and those whom, either we **know aren't**, or whom we **don't know enough** about to say either way.

1. To admit a person into membership is to **announce** before the **world**: "If you're wondering what **Jesus** is all about, **look to this brother or sister** and you'll soon see!"

## (5) Church Membership Is *Ardor* for God's Name

A. To become a Christian is to **take the name** of God upon us. We are **baptized** *"in [Gk. 'eis' — lit. 'into'] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"* (**Matt 28:19**).

1. This reality is **powerfully pictured** for us in what is described of the **saints** in **Rev 22**: *"They will see his face, and **his name** will be on their **foreheads**" (v. 4).*

B. So what happens in a **country** where, according to the **Pew Forum**, **70%** label themselves as Christians? *"I'm a Christian. I'm a pretty **good person**. I go to church on **Christmas** and **Easter**. I wear a **cross necklace**. I don't **smoke**. I'm certainly not a **Buddhist**. So I suppose I'm a **Christian**."*

1. You want to know what happens? Christ's name is **defiled**. Because so many **take His name** upon themselves without even **knowing Him** in the first place. People look in and think: *"This guy's supposedly a **Christian**? I want **none of that!**"*

C. **Church membership** comes in and says, *"Wait a minute. Let's **clean up the stats** a bit. Not everyone who **professes** Christ **knows** Him."* It seeks to draw **crisper lines** between those who seem to be **true believers** and those who seem only to be **false professors**, so as to **preserve** the name of our God.

1. When the church admits someone into membership, we are saying: "Yes, we see that **Christ's name** is upon you."
  - a. And, consequently, we **promote** the **assurance** of the individual, we **protect** the **purity** of the church, we **proclaim** a clearer **message** to the **world**, and we **preserve** the **name** and **glory** of God!

## Why "Covenant" Membership?

### (1) Because It's *Strong*

A. Now, I want to close this second session by asking the question: **Why "Covenant" Membership?**

1. I went **back** and **forth** on this. But, interestingly, the very reason I initially went back on it is now the reason I am so passionately going forth with it. And that is, namely: it's a **strong** word. "Covenant".

- a. It sounds really **serious**, almost **scary**. At first, I hesitated on the word because it makes me think of **marriage**. It sounds like your joining this church for life, like a **cult** you can't break free from.
- B. But then, as I've been **pastoring** here with you for over a **year** now, I've begun to see just how **critical** this language is.
  1. We are going to get in **conflict** with each other. We are going to **hurt** each other. The church isn't always going to **meet** our needs. Sometimes the **music** is going to be **off key**. Sometimes (always) the **preaching** is going to be **too long**. Sometimes the **people** we thought would love us wisely will instead **wound** us deeply.
- C. So what do we **do? Leave?** No we **press in**. There is a **depth** of relationship and glory that can only be seen on the **other side of covenant**.
  1. This doesn't mean we're **married**. But it does mean that we're really **serious** about this. This doesn't mean your joining a **cult** and can never leave. But it does mean that you are joining a **community** and are **committed** to playing a **vital role** in it.
- D. My **father-in-law** was in town a couple of weeks ago and he was bemoaning the fact that the **tomato plants** in our garden are producing so much more fruit than those in his garden. Megan, being a horticulture major, pointed out that he was probably **watering too much**, that tomato plants produce more **fruit** the more they are **tested**.
  1. And I thought, *"Man, that's like the church! If we're always going after the **water**, the **comfort**, if every time things get **tough** we up and **left**, we wouldn't bear any **fruit**!"*
- E. ***"Covenant" Memberships** says, "I'm setting my **roots down deep** in this local community. I know it might get **hard**. But God's going to **use this**. And we're going to **see fruit here**. I'm not just looking to **come and go**, I want to **commit and grow**!"*

## (2) Because It's *Biblical*

- A. But there's another reason I chose this word **"Covenant"**. Not only is it **strong**, it's **biblical**.
  1. I wonder if you realize that when God brings people into **covenant** with **Himself**, He always brings them into **covenant** with **one another**.
- B. The easiest place to see this is with Jesus at the **Lord's supper**. Jesus is sitting down around the **table** with His guys to celebrate the **Passover** with them one **last time**.
  1. The **shadow of the cross** is heavy upon Him. **Death** has Him by the ankles. He already knows He's going to be **betrayed** by Judas and **abandoned** by the others—every last one of them will soon **scatter** to save his own neck.



- C. And yet Jesus doesn't **pull away** from them. No! He takes up the **bread** and the **cup**, and He **presses in**, He **covenants** with them—*"This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20b).*
1. He makes the **bread** and **cup** symbols of His **body** and **blood** and says: *"This is how much I love you...to death. I'm with you in this...to the end. Do you think your sins can keep you from Me? Think again!"*
- D. But now here's the **amazing** thing. This covenant Christ makes with **us**, **sets up** our covenant with **one another**. Because it's around a **table** that this is taking place. And there are **others seated** around this table. It's not just Him doing this with you and I **individually**.
1. Suddenly the disciples look around and they realize: "We are in this thing with Him together."
- E. **Paul** would later **spell out** this reality for the local church in Corinth: *"<sup>16</sup> The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?<sup>17</sup> Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:16–17).*
1. Do you see what he just did? He took the **elements** that Christ used as **signs** of His covenant with **us** and he made them **signs** of our covenant with **one another**!
    - a. The **bread** which signifies His body **broken for us** (going from **one** to **many**), at the same time signifies His church **uniting in Him** (going from **many** to **one**).
      - i. He gave His life on the **cross** so that He might not only call us into covenant with **Himself**, but into covenant with **one another**!
        - (1) And if He would give His **life** for a sinner like **me**, should I not also do the same for **you**?!
- F. So as we come to the table to partake of the bread and the fruit of the vine here in a few moments, by all means, **look up** at your **Savior**. Stand in awe of the cross whereby He receives and covenant with sinners like us.
1. But don't forget to stop and **look around** at the **brothers** and **sisters** gathered around the **table** with you—at your **family** in Christ.
    - a. When Christ brings us into covenant with **Himself**, He brings us into covenant with **one another**!