

Why Is Church Membership Important?

Series: Roadmap For Christian Living

Who keeps you accountable?

Why is joining a church important for accountability?

What Does The Bible Say?

“If another believer sins, rebuke that person; then if there is repentance, forgive. (Luke 17:3 NLT)

We see church membership implied throughout the New Testament.

41 Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all. (Acts 2:41 NLT)

4 But many of the people who heard their message believed it, so the number of men who believed now totaled about 5,000.

(Acts 4:4 NLT)

12 The apostles were performing many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers were meeting regularly at the Temple in the area known as Solomon's Colonnade. 13 But no one else dared to join them, even though all the people had high regard for them. 14 Yet more and more people believed and were brought to the Lord—crowds of both men and women. (Acts 5:12–14 NLT)

The early church grew so much in Jerusalem, that they could not keep up with the count.

But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

2 So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, “We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program. 3 And so, brothers, select seven

men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility. 4 Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word.”

(Acts 6:1–4 NLT)

As the church developed, they picked leaders and gave them responsibility.

How Can You Obey?

15 “If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. 16 But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. 17 If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won’t accept the church’s decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector. (Matthew 18:15–17 NLT)

Think of your Christian Community as your own Iniquity Incognito (II). A place of accountability.

If you are serious about your faith, then you are serious about accountability.

Additional Notes:

If you would like to use your home to disciple others, check out our training at www.crosswaveschurch.com/host. Cross Waves has produced short videos to train you how to use your home to reach others for Christ. So please check it out.

Explore:

Today's Insights to The Biblical World comes from Heiser, M. S. (2018). Brief insights on mastering the bible: 80 expert insights on the bible, explained in a single minute (p. 31). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Explore:

Why Christians Don't Join the Church

We have considered four very significant reasons Christians should become formal members in a local church. Now, let's take a brief look at why countless Christians the world over don't become members despite the Bible's clear teaching.

Ignorance

One common reason Christians don't join the church is because of ignorance. Some believers just don't understand what the Bible actually teaches about membership. This happens because the truth is often shrouded by 2,000 years of formal and informal man-made religious traditions and conventions.

The human tendency through the ages when it comes to religion is to deviate from God's standard and what He actually says in His Word, and then supplant God's truth on any given issue with

man-made rules, regulations and customs. The teaching on church membership has not escaped this perennial vice. If this has been true with you then you can be comforted by Jesus' words when He said, "know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). Doing things God's way—the way of truth—is always liberating and attendant with His blessings in your life.

Church background

A second reason people don't join the church may be due to their religious background. There are plenty of churches and denominations out there that formally teach that church membership is not taught in the Bible. I have met many Christians of this persuasion. I have had some wonderful Christian people attend and affiliate in my church who were saved or served for years at such churches that taught there is no such thing as required membership.

They like to say, “God’s Church is everywhere, all over the world—He knows who His sheep are. He doesn’t need a membership list.” That sounds quite spiritual, but it simply is naive and not true, as we have already seen what the Bible says on this issue.

Bad previous experiences

A third reason Christians don’t join a local church is because they may have had bad previous experiences. Maybe they were at a church that misused the membership process to manipulate the people. Or maybe they were members at a church where they got burned by the pastor or the church leadership. That happens all too commonly, and that is wrong and it grieves Christ. Such pastors and leadership will have to give an account to God for misuse of power (James 3:1). But someone else’s sinful behavior does not negate what God commands and expects in other contexts. God still expects Christians to become committed

members despite any previous malfeasance on the part of another church.

A lack of commitment

A fourth reason people don't join the church is because they simply do not want to commit. That's how many people are these days—they don't seem to want to commit to anything, be it the church, marriage, relationships, appointments, a job, whatever. They want to reserve the right to do their own thing at any time on a whim.

It's not uncommon for many Christians to have hit-and-miss church attendance for the sole purpose of maintaining their busy leisure schedule, their highfalutin entertainment plans or their extensive travel calendar. "If I join the church," they fear, "then I can't do my own thing." Well ... they are right. Being a part of Christ and His Church is not all about doing our own thing or

doing what we want—it's all about doing His thing and what He wants (Matthew 6:33).

Fear of accountability

A fifth reason Christians don't want to join the church is because they don't want to become accountable to anyone. Some people don't want to be told what to do—they don't want to answer to anyone ... at least not at church! This kind of independent spirit is pervasive in our culture, for after all—this is America—the place where rugged individualism is a virtue, where personal autonomy is prized, and where people are indoctrinated to have it their way. As that “Blue Eyes” guy used to sing ... “I did it my way.”

Becoming a church member means being willing to submit oneself and subject oneself to local church authority. But authority is despised in our culture. We are told not to trust authority. Popular bumper stickers and T-shirts enjoin us to

“QUESTION AUTHORITY!” Submission, respect and honor for authority are despised, not esteemed. But God’s Word is clear on this issue: “he who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves” (Romans 13:2).

Many people don’t want to become accountable for how they use their time, treasures and talents. To do so is to become vulnerable or even exposed. This kind of living goes against the grain of secular society. It takes supernatural trust and faith to live that way—faith that only God can provide. But the Bible says, “without faith it is impossible to please God.” (Hebrews 11:6).

So if such a reluctant spirit characterizes you, and has kept you from joining a local church, then pray and ask God to soften your heart with His Word and His Holy Spirit. Ask Him to give you the right attitude. And if you pray with sincerity you’ll find

that in time God will indeed answer that prayer and He will change you. He'll do it because it is His perfect will (1 John 5:14).

Too burdensome

A sixth reason people don't join a church is that the process seems too intimidating at times. Becoming a member at some churches requires jumping through countless hoops, passing theological litmus tests, enduring twelve-week membership classes with inordinate homework assignments, writing out and verbally presenting your testimony, and a host of other frightening and laborious requirements. With such rigorous prerequisites it's understandable why some people loathe the infamous membership process.

But it does not have to be that way. Sometimes, simply asking a few questions of the church leadership can alleviate unfounded fears. In most instances church leaders will graciously walk you

through the process step by step, even accomodating special needs or requests you might have to help you through the process. If there is formality to the process, that's OK too. Being formal, thorough and systematic is not unspiritual. God wants the church to do all things with excellence and sobermindedness (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Personal differences

A final reason Christians might not formally join the church is because they may have a difference with the local church they are currently attending. This is a frequent occurance. Some might resist formal membership if they disagree with the statement of faith, or maybe they don't agree with some item in the church constitution or philosophy of the church.

In such instances a believer may need to ask why there are differences. He should ask himself if the disagreements are major doctrinal issuses or secondary issues of preference.

Tangential issues of preference should not preclude one from joining a Bible-teaching church. On the other hand, if the differences are over core doctrinal issues, then there is a problem. In any case, you may have to choose one of three options.

Option one is to realize that you are at the wrong church ... if they are teaching something basic that is not biblical—heretical views on major doctrines, for instance. If a church denied Jesus' full deity, His virgin birth, the inerrancy of Scripture, the Trinity, salvation by grace through faith alone, and the like, then it would be best to find another church that taught the truth on basic issues. Don't compromise core biblical convictions. Also, don't try to reform any local church by thinking you can single-handedly overturn a local church's entire leadership, constitution, and history. That would just be plain divisive ... and futile.

Option two is to consider the possibility that you might be wrong in what you believe about a particular key doctrine. This means you need to maintain a humble and teachable spirit. Ask what God might be trying to teach you in that situation. Maybe He is trying to teach you that you have bad theology in a particular area. That happens on occasion ... to everyone. No one but the Trinity and the Bible has a corner on the truth.

Option three pertains to when someone has a secondary disagreement with the church, but not a major doctrinal dispute. There might be a difference regarding style, philosophy, methodology of ministry, or the personality of a pastor. Maybe a given church has good theology, but the music played and sung is not the style or brand of choice, or the lighting is too modern or archaic, or the attire is too stuffy or casual, etc. In such instances, if the church is an advocate to the basics of preaching, discipling, praying and serving in a godly manner then the

mature thing to do would be to set aside your personal preferences and join the church in a committed manner.

The church might not even be doing a great job in any of these areas, but if there is at least a biblical conviction to pursue those things, then consider joining that church. Make that church a better and more biblical church by serving it with all your heart. Quit looking for the perfect church! It's not out there. When you serve in a local church, you are not there serving humans, you are there to serve God and Christ. "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward" (Colossians 3:23–24).

That is the essence of being Christ-like. The Bible says we should "consider others better than" ourselves (Philippians 2:3).

Be different and set a rare trend by asking yourself not what your

church can do for you, but rather what can you do for your church?

McManis, C. (2006). *Christian Living Beyond Belief: Biblical Principles for the Life of Faith* (pp. 62–66). The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications.

Explore:

The Elders' Readiness (vv. 2b, 3)

Given the exalted nature of the work, is it any wonder that Peter goes on to talk of the elders' readiness? Just as we looked at the role of elders by way of contrast, so when it comes to the elders' readiness, Peter explains what that means by the same method.

He employs three negatives (“not”) followed by three affirmations (“but”) in the space of two verses.

- Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight
- not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you;

- not for shameful gain, but eagerly;
- not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Three pitfalls impair elders' readiness—duty, greed, and a misuse of power.

Not under Compulsion, but Willingly

The church is not helped when her leaders' readiness falls into the pit of begrudging service. Men who serve only from a sense of duty will not have the requisite love necessary for God's people to flourish. C. S. Lewis put the distinction between love and duty this way:

A perfect man would never act from a sense of duty; he'd always want the right thing more than the wrong one. Duty is only a substitute for love (of God and other people) like a crutch which is a substitute for a leg. Most of us need the crutch at times; but

of course it is idiotic to use the crutch when our own legs (our own loves, tastes, habits, etc) can do the journey on their own.

Biblical elders need to do the right thing, even when they don't feel like it, but elders who are governed merely by duty and not love are falling short of serving God as he would have them. In this regard, we need to throw away the crutches and walk willingly on our own two feet. We must grow in a genuine love for God's people, especially those whom we find unlovely.

Not for Shameful Gain, but Eagerly

Today, as in Peter's day, far too many teachers and preachers of God's Word are in it for the money. In the end those who exercise leadership in the church for financial gain pervert the truth and peddle God's free gift of true grace. There is not a more fitting example of this than the contrast between the trustworthiness of Elisha and the greed of his servant Gehazi (Numbers 5).

The New Testament also warns us of the ungodly link between one's teaching and one's love for money.

- In 1 Timothy, Paul writes that an elder must not be “a lover of money” (3:3).
- In 2 Timothy we learn that false teachers are “lovers of money” (3:2).
- In Titus we see that an overseer must not be “greedy for gain” (1:7).
- From the ministry example of Paul we learn that true gospel service “covet[s] no one's silver or gold or apparel” (Acts 20:33).

Elders must be eager to teach but not eager for cash. In fact, they ought to readily store up provisions for kingdom use. There is a great moment in Josephus's Antiquities when the Jews are joining with Antiochus. In doing so they were said to be “making abundant provision for his entire army and they readily

joined his forces.” Peter is concerned that elders not join gospel work to make abundant provision for themselves. After all, even in the days of Josephus, the virtuous ones were those who readily (the word “readily” in the works of Josephus is the same one Peter uses, which is translated “eagerly”) joined the work and made all the necessary provisions for its success.

Not Domineering, but as Examples

The third pitfall of leadership is the misuse of power. The axiom that “absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Lord Acton) has long stood the test of time. We see it in politics. We see it in business. But according to Peter, we should never see it in church.

Those men who exercise the office of elder must always remember that the misuse of their power only impairs the church. Instead elders ought to go beyond the call of duty in proving themselves as examples to the flock. We are to emulate Jesus, who came to serve and not to be served (see Mark 10:45).

Humility and sacrificial service are the hallmarks of godly leadership.

Helm, D. R. (2008). 1 & 2 Peter and Jude: sharing christ's sufferings (pp. 161–163). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

Explore:

The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin

(15:1–10)

Jesus is under attack for the company he keeps. Why does he spend so much time with sinners? Their lives are a mess and their morals a disgrace.

To answer these opinions, Jesus tells three stories: the lost sheep, the lost coin—and the lost son.

When a shepherd loses one of his sheep, he leaves the rest and goes to rescue it. When a woman loses a coin (a drachma—a silver coin worth a day's wages)—perhaps part of her dowry

from her father—she carefully sweeps the house until she finds it. And when sheep or coins are safe again it's an excuse for a party!

Jesus has come to find and rescue those who are lost. Some, like sheep, have stupidly wandered off. Others, like the coin, have been lost through no fault of their own. But Jesus shares the company of such people—so that they may share his salvation. It's a costly mission—but for everyone who repents, there's a celebration in heaven.

Knowles, A. (2001). *The Bible guide* (1st Augsburg books ed., p. 487). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.

Explore:

Acts 5:14 Nevertheless, more and more believers in the Lord, both men and women, were being added to their number.

We note three items:

First, Luke has lost count of the number of Christians in Jerusalem. After the healing of the cripple, he estimates the total membership to be about five thousand men (4:4). Now he remarks that “more and more believers in the Lord, both men and women, were being added to their number.” Regardless of the fear unbelievers display, the Holy Spirit is at work in the hearts of men and women. The growth of the church continues unabated. The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira keep the unbelievers from entering the church, yet at the same time large numbers of true converts join and strengthen the Christian community. In fact, Luke has abandoned his desire to be precise and now records that multitudes of people became members of the church.

Next, we observe that Luke specifically states that women joined the church. In the pre-Pentecost setting of the upper room, he records the presence of women, among them Mary the mother of Jesus (1:14). In his last tally of church membership, Luke

specifically mentions only the five thousand men, not the women (4:3). But in subsequent chapters, he refers to both men and women (e.g., 8:3, 12; 9:2; 13:50).

A third observation is that the Greek allows for two translations: either “Nevertheless, more and more believers in the Lord, both men and women, were being added to their number” (italics added) or “And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” (NKJV, italics added; and see KJV, NEB margin). Because the verb to believe usually takes a direct object (in this case, “the Lord”) and because of its position the verb to believe in the Greek sentence receives emphasis, the first translation is the better of the two choices.

Kistemaker, S. J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953–2001). Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles (Vol. 17, p. 192). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

Explore:

Acts 4:3–4 They arrested them and, since it was already evening, put them in jail until morning. ⁴ But many of the people who heard their message believed it, so the number of men who believed now totaled about 5,000.

The reaction of the people and their leaders is dramatically contrasted. The authorities seized Peter and John, hoping to silence them. Since it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day, when an investigation could take place (vv. 5–7).

However, many who heard the message about Jesus believed (cf. 2:37). Indeed, Luke records a further advance in numbers from the three thousand who believed on the Day of Pentecost (2:41): the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand (egenēthē [ho] arithmos tōn andrōn [hōs] chiliades pente; NRSV, ESV, ‘the number of men came to be about five thousand’). This number probably included the three thousand baptised at Pentecost. If men (andres) means only males, the total number

of believers, including women and children will have been much larger. However, as noted in connection with 1:16, females are included with males in some NT uses of this Greek word. The perspective of these chapters is that people in Jerusalem continued to be generally favourable to the new movement (2:47; 4:21; 5:13, 26), until they were swayed by the false charges levelled against Stephen (6:11–14) and became part of the opposition.

Peterson, D. G. (2009). *The Acts of the Apostles* (p. 188). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Explore:

1 Timothy 5:3 ³ Take care of any widow who has no one else to care for her. ⁴ But if she has children or grandchildren, their first responsibility is to show godliness at home and repay their

parents by taking care of them. This is something that pleases God.

Distressed widows are discussed in verses 3–8; those employed by the church in verses 9–16.

If older women must be treated as mothers, as Paul has just stated (see verse 2), and if mothers must be honored (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16; Eph. 6:2), it follows that distressed widows must also be honored.

Such widows (described in verse 5), must be honored, that is, treated with high regard, with great consideration, and this implies that those who are in need must receive material support. See also on 1 Tim. 5:17.

Strikingly beautiful is what Scripture teaches with respect to widows:

(1) God is “a father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows” (Ps. 68:5).

They are under his special care and protection (Ex. 22:23; Deut. 10:18; Prov. 15:25; Ps. 146:9).

(2) By means of the tithe and “the forgotten sheaf” he provides for them (Deut. 14:29; 24:19–21; 26:12, 13). At the feasts which he has instituted, they too should rejoice (Deut. 16:11, 14).

(3) He blesses those who help and honor them (Is. 1:17, 18; Jer. 7:6; 22:3, 4).

(4) He rebukes and punishes those who hurt them (Ex. 22:22; Deut. 24:17; 27:19; Zech. 7:10; Job 24:3, 21; 31:16; Ps. 94:6; Mal. 3:5).

(5) They are the objects of Christ’s tender compassion, as is clear from the Gospels, especially from the Gospel according to Luke (Mark 12:42, 43; Luke 7:11–17; 18:3, 5; 20:47; 21:2, 3).

(6) In the early church they were not forgotten. It was the neglect of certain widows which led to the appointment of the first deacons, so that in the future widows might receive better care

(Acts 6:1–6). And according to James, one of the manifestations of a religion that is pure and undefiled is this: “to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction” (James 1:27).

Timothy, then, certainly knows what Paul means when he says, “Honor ... those who are really (what is implied in the name) widows.”

There is here a play upon words, for in the original the word widow means the one bereaved, deprived (of her husband; hence, often without means of support). Hence, what the apostle is saying amounts to this, “As deprived ones, honor those (who are) really deprived” (or “As destitute, honor those who are really destitute”). If certain etymologists are correct (not all agree), then we could have a similar play of words in English, for the word “widow” = Latin *vidua*, is by them linked with such words as void and devoid. Hence, one might say, “As *viduae*

(widows), honor those who are really devoid (of means of support).”

Gainful employment for widows was scarce. Besides, some widows were too old to provide for themselves. Hence, those who had no other means of support must be provided for by the church.

Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953–2001). *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* (Vol. 4, pp. 167–168). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

Explore:

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to God. Give them reason to do this with joy and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit.

13:17 “Obey ... submit” This is a PRESENT PASSIVE (A. T. Robertson lists it as a MIDDLE VOICE) IMPERATIVE and PRESENT ACTIVE IMPERATIVE. Although individuals are free in Christ we must yield ourselves to spiritual authority for growth and service (cf. v. 7; 1 Cor. 16:16; 1 Thess. 5:12–13).

This word of encouragement to submit to Christian leaders is much needed in our day of disrespect for authority of any kind, and an overemphasis on the rights and powers of the individual. God has placed some as leaders among His people. We honor them because of their call, training, commitment, and service. However, there is an opposite “ditch.” God’s calling has been abused by some authoritarian personalities. There must be a balance, a mutual respect, a co-operative spirit between God’s people and God’s leaders. All believers are called to be subject to one another out of respect for Christ (cf. Eph. 5:20).

© “keep watch” This term means “to be awake,” “to be vigilant” (cf. Mark 13:33; Luke 21:36; Eph. 6:18), which is a metaphor for diligent watchfulness and service (cf. Isa. 62:6; Ezek. 3:17; 33:7–9).

© “as those who will give an account” Leaders are responsible for their ministry and will give an account to God (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10–15). They are stewards!

© “Let them do this with joy and not grief” The attitude of the congregation does not determine the ministry, but it does make the process enjoyable or painful.

Utley, R. J. (1999). The Superiority of the New Covenant: Hebrews (Vol. Volume 10, pp. 140–141). Marshall, Texas: Bible Lessons International.

Question 1 of 5

If you are a church member, tell why you think it is important.

Question 2 of 5

List several common reasons Christians don't join the church.

Question 3 of 5

Why does church discipline require church membership?

Question 4 of 5

How does Acts 2:41 support the idea of church membership?

Question 5 of 5

Explain how 1 Peter 5:1–4 relates to a definite local church membership.