

What the Bible says about Church Membership

by Dan Horn

Why should we discuss church membership? It is an issue that comes up frequently in our churches. People ask, why do they need to join a church? Why can't they just worship with their brothers and sisters in Christ? Isn't it extra-biblical anyway? Our position is that church membership is Biblical, even though it is not explicitly commanded in scripture. Before we can agree on church membership however, we must first understand how to handle scripture. God has not given us explicit commandments for everything that we are to do. The doctrine of the sufficiency of scripture does not say that God has given us every jot and tittle of what we are to do, rather that the principles are taught in scripture so that we can know what is the right response in every circumstance.

Since our practices in the church should be regulated by God, when we come up with our own ideas, we are denying the authority of scripture. But since scripture does not speak directly to everything, we need some standard to judge how to apply scriptural passages. Here is how the Westminster Confession defines what the standard should be for sufficiency of scripture in Chapter 1 Paragraph VI:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

The standard for church membership as with other practices for the church does not need explicit commands, but they need to be a good and necessary consequence. So what is a good and necessary consequence? A good consequence means that the practice fulfills the prescriptive will of God. In other words, even though He does not command it, it is something that is necessary to do other things that God has commanded. A necessary doctrine or practice is something that is required to fulfill the commandments of God. What might be necessary can change depending on the external circumstances, as long as it is required to fulfill the commandments of God. That means at different times and places the necessary consequence could be different because of external factors. For instance, through much of the history of the church, there was no need for explicitly joining a church. The state was enforcing the membership, i.e. if you professed Christ you were automatically considered a member of the church which covered the physical location where you lived. In such a situation, the need for covenantal church membership could look considerably different, but still fulfill the prescriptive will of God.

Authorities

To understand the basis of church membership, we must therefore understand the age in which we live. We live in an age where we are taught that nothing should hurt. We are told that if we feel ill, we should take a pill; if we are hungry, the government should feed us; if our spouse does not make us happy, we should just get divorced; since

children cause difficulties, we shouldn't have any; if the church offends you, just leave and find another. Both pastors and congregants do this frequently, but church hopping is not what the people of God should do. We learn from the Bible that Christians need to be part of a body for edification and to edify others. We are living stones that are rubbing against one another and this can cause discomfort. We read in James 1:2-4,

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Many people in family integrated churches started out by homeschooling. They decided not to give their children to be raised by the civil government, and then realized they didn't want to send their children to Sunday school teachers or pastors to raise either. Both of those are biblically sound positions, but there is a risk to reject more authority than the scripture rejects. There is a tendency for a father to say that they are in authority everywhere and reject the authorities that God in His grace established over them to protect them from their sins. Instead, they should desire to render to Caesar that which is Caesar's. We are told in Hebrews 13:17,

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

Adam fell because he rejected God's authority. We need to examine ourselves and verify that we are not in rebellion to the authorities that God has put over us. There are multiple spheres of authority, such as family, church, and state. We each have to understand that in our flesh, none of us wants to be told what to do. None of us want to submit. With the Holy Spirit, we are now free to govern ourselves, but part of governing ourselves is to submit to those authorities which God puts in the world to constrain our depravity.

Covenants

But the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after He had said before, 'THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS INTO THEIR HEARTS, AND IN THEIR MINDS I WILL WRITE THEM,' then He adds, 'THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE.'

- *Hebrews 10:15-17*

From this verse we see that a covenant is at the center of the gospel. God makes a covenant with us to change our heart, and to not remember our sins or lawless deeds any longer. God deals with us covenantally, so we also need to be covenantal in our thinking. Consider what God says about oaths in Matthew 5:33-37:

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your

head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

We need to be very explicit in our promises. A covenant is not a covenant unless both parties actually have the opportunity to understand and agree it. There should not be implied church membership covenants. It is only just if we explicit say “yes, we are joining this local body” in membership covenants.

When the Israelites are given the Old Testament law, God requires them to explicitly state that they were being joined to it. In Exodus 24:7,

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient." And Moses took the blood, sprinkled *it* on the people, and said, "This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words."

Since God has shown us a pattern of covenanting together, it is a valid pattern for the church. A public statement of affirmation of the covenant, makes it clear that everyone is obligated by the terms of the covenant, both the church and the member.

Teacher, which *is* the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, 'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' This is *the* first and great commandment. And *the* second *is* like it: 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets. - *Matthew 22:36-40*

Our love of God is reflected in our love for our neighbor. The Greek word for “like” here is ομοιος, which means literally another of the same kind. These two laws are not different in form, but in application. The one is an unseen love for God, while the other is a visible love for the seen neighbor. We read in 1 John 4:20, “If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” Our relationship with the Lord is reflected in our relationships with others. If we do not love our brother, there is no reason to believe that we love God.

We see another covenant in the Bible in the marriage covenant:

For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. "FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH." This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. - *Ephesians 5:30-32*

Why do we call marriage the marriage covenant, if there is not explicit scriptural basis for it actually being a covenant? We call it a covenant because the Bible says it reflects the covenant between the church and it's bridegroom, Christ.

What does all this have to do with church membership? We read in Romans 10:9: “that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God Ahas raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” It is reasonable for us to make a public confession of our belief in the Lord Jesus Christ with the other members of our church. Just attending a church is not enough to become a member of the new covenant, we must believe in the power of God and be saved by him. Similarly, only attending is not enough to become a member of a church. A public confession of belief is appropriate.

There are also Old Testament examples of people covenanting together to hold each other responsible for maintaining righteous practices. Isaac and Abimelech¹, Jacob and Laban², Joshua and the Hivites³, Joshua and the Israelites⁴, Jonathan and David⁵, David and Abner⁶, David and the elders of Israel⁷, Jehoida and the captains of Israel⁸, Jehoiada and the Lord, the king and the people⁹ and Ezra and those who returned from captivity¹⁰. Many of the covenants are done for exactly the same reason as a membership covenant, to testify before God and man that you will hold each other to obedience to God's law. Perhaps the clearest parallel to the membership covenant would be the covenant that the Jews entered into after the return from Babylonion captivity with Nehemiah where they say:

Now the rest of the people—the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding—these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes:

They then list all of the things that they will hold each other accountable to obey. This is the same purpose and structure of proper church covenants today. These were not new laws that were adding on each other, but it was a testimony to others that they were willing to be held accountable to that standard. It did not explicitly list all of the areas that they would be held accountable because it says that standard is the word of God, but it does list those areas where they are most likely to fall because they had fallen in those areas before, for example, keeping the Sabbath and not marrying foreign wives. A proper church covenant likewise highlights those areas where people are most likely to stumble in our day, such as family worship and improper use of the internet.

Protection for Members

1 Genesis 26:28

2 Genesis 31:44

3 Joshua 9:6

4 Joshua 24:25

5 1 Samuel 18:3

6 2 Samuel 3:12

7 2 Samuel 5:3

8 2 Kings 11:4

9 2 Kings 11:17

10 Ezra 10:3

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to *your* elders. Yes, all of *you* be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "GOD RESISTS THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE." Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle *you*. To Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. - *1 Peter 5:1-11*

We see from this passage that Satan is a lion, who devours the slow, weak, and the solitary. Everyone is depraved, even with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Christians still sin and deceive themselves in their own unrighteousness once they are saved. Paul gives us the example of the Israelites sinning in 1 Corinthians 10:11-12, "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."

We attest to the absolute sovereignty of God, but that does not eliminate secondary causes, but rather establishes them. Secondary causes are the people, commandments and other things that God uses to fulfill His decretive will. Some of the secondary causes that God uses are the institutions that he has set up. We need to understand God's mercy and grace toward us in the jurisdictions that he has set up. The three jurisdictions are family, church and state. All of these jurisdictions have a constraining influence on the evil of men. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." - *1 John 1:8*. God says that there are blessings for being inside the local church, one of the jurisdictions that he has set up, including the Lord's supper and fellowship with other believers. Paul speaks of these blessings in Ephesians 4:11-16:

And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ— from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body

for the edifying of itself in love.

God also gives curses to those who are outside of the local church. Paul refers to it as turning over to Satan. We should not take being outside of a local body lightly.

Testaments

In Greek, the word translated covenant is also frequently translated testament. For example, the Old and New Testaments are referring to the testimony that God has given his people. The idea of testimony is also embedded in the church covenant. When God saves us, we receive the seal of the new covenant, the Holy Spirit. That change of the heart will manifest itself in works, as we read in James. The Holy Spirit is a testimony of our salvation, and church membership is a mutual testimony between the individual and the rest of the church body. The individual testifies that the church he is attending is a true church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the church testifies that it believes the member to be a true Christian. Neither of those testimonies are absolutely certain. We reflect the image of the testimony God gives us, the Holy Spirit, but there are distortions to that image. We might join a church, and discover too late that serious heresies are being taught.

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. - *Romans 16:17-18*

In a similar way, a church might do church discipline on someone, and by removing the person from the church, they testify that they can no longer believe that person to be saved, because of his unrepentance. Our goal should not be to find out if everyone in our church is saved. Only God knows the heart, but our expectation should be that we can testify that those in the church are acting like Christians. If someone has a pattern of sin, like willfully avoiding the assembling of the saints, church discipline needs to be done on them. On the other hand, the members testimony is not that every doctrine is completely correct in the church he is a part of. That will never happen. The testimony of a member is that he believes that it is truly a local body of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The testimony of the church is that the person has a credible profession of faith. We should not be hasty about making these testimonies. Both parties should examine each other enough to be prepared to testify of the other. The examination should not be done without consideration of sanctification. Someone who professed Christ thirty years before should look different than someone just saved. God promises that the work he started in us will proceed and be completed. A static life is not a witness of the Holy Spirit working. That does not make it right to exclude the man who was just saved from a life of debauchery should be held to the same standard. He needs the protection of the church as much or more than the mature believer.

Church polity will change what a church needs to expect for membership. A strict Congregationalist church with no authority in the elders will have problems. They can't let a rush of immature believers join the church or the doctrine of the church will change, because the new believers will not have sufficient Christian maturity to be discerning

proper doctrine. Scripture says that authority should be given to men “who are not novices.” The mature believer also needs to be examined as to why he is leaving the church where he previously attended.

Membership Roles

Some people use the bad argument that when it says in Acts that three thousand were saved at Pentecost, that shows that they were keeping membership roles. They were clearly keeping records, but it does not imply that the records were any more than how many people were baptized.

There are parallels between the Abrahamic covenant and the New covenant, but we have to be careful with this. In my mind, Paedobaptists go too far. Circumcision and baptism have parallels, but to say that they are the same has serious scriptural problems. In the Old Testament, we see the commandment for the Israelites to circumcise male children. We do not see a direct commandment to make a record of the circumcision of children, but we clearly see that they did. One example is the two genealogies of Christ, and we see another in Ezra 2:59-62:

And these *were* the ones who came up from Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer; but they could not identify their father's house or their genealogy, whether they *were* of Israel: the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, and the sons of Nekoda, six hundred and fifty-two; and of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Koz, and the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name. These sought their listing *among* those who were registered by genealogy, but they were not found; therefore they *were excluded* from the priesthood as defiled.

Turning over to Satan

“Turning over to Satan” is the terminology that Paul uses about being put out of the church in 1 Corinthians 5:1-7:

It is actually reported *that there is* sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying *is* not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.

We see from this passage that it needs to be clear who is “among you.” When you are not being confronted with sin, it is easy to say that you are part of the body even though you

have not joined. It is easy to say that you will listen to the church if they come to rebuke you in sin when you agree with them, but when the time actually comes, without membership the answer will be, "You are not my church." Without membership, the blessing of the protection of the church is eliminated, because when they need the protection the most, it is then that they reject it.

This does not mean that there may not be many people who are present at the meeting of your church that have not covenanted with you. That would be a normal situation and sometimes the reason may even be that the person does not agree with church membership. While that is a danger sign, because when people reject the authorities that God has established, it should be expected that they have hidden sin for which they do not want to be held accountable, but there can be others that are convinced of their theological position so they refuse to join. In the meeting of the church, we are never commanded in scripture to make certain that non-members are there. However, we are commanded not to associate with those that are causing dissension.¹¹ We should allow non-covenanted brothers to worship with us in the church as long as they do not cause dissension and they understand that they also are not protected by the church as they should desire.

Excommunication

One of the reasons that church membership is a good and necessary requirement for the practice of the church is that the church needs to be able to excommunicate someone. Excommunication is a serious process, as serious as trying someone for a capital offense. For the church to be disorderly to the point that it cannot determine who are to be the judges in that case, does not safely protect either the member being put under the final step of church discipline nor does it protect the church. In other words, if the church can remove people through church discipline, it must be legitimate for it to add people. Without official adding, the people can not be put out. When Paul writes about putting people out of the church, he can not be speaking of being put out of the meetings of the church, because non-believers are allowed in the meeting of the church.

This punishment which *was inflicted* by the majority *is* sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you *ought* rather to forgive and comfort *him*, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm *your* love to him. - 2 *Corinthians 2:6-8*

When Paul mentions the majority, he requires there to be some method of counting. A person should not be able to avoid church discipline by having a bunch of their friends come vote for them to stay. There must be some way to draw the line of when someone is part of the church.

Elders Must Give an Account

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief,

¹¹ Romans 16:17

for that would be unprofitable for you. - *Hebrews 13:17*

Those who are involved in the ministry must be able know who are the sheep that God has given them. An elder must know who are those that both God will expect him to give an account of their souls, but also, who are those who want to be shepherded. An elder's responsibility for those who are attending but have not joined is no different than what they have with any other Christian brother or sister. If they have not acknowledged by joining the church that the elders of the church are to oversee their souls, then the elders do not have to give account for them before God. It is unreasonable expectation for elders to give an account for everyone who has ever visited the church that they shepherd.

Summary

God works through covenants

We need to be a covenantal people. We are blind, and therefore need to walk in obedience to God and trust the authorities that he has put in place.

The Church has the Keys

Inherent to the church is the need for church discipline. Without the possibility to chastise, the church is not able to exercise the authority that God has granted to it in order to protect both the flock as a whole and the members of the flock. One of the ways that a church needs to show love to its members is by being willing to do church discipline, even to the point of excommunication and do it without any sense of vengeance. If a church is not willing to take that step, it is leaving its members without the protection that God intended for the members of His flock.

You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: *I am the LORD. Leviticus 19:17-18*

How can the church do church discipline, unless there is a clear acknowledgement that the church has the right to exercise discipline over the people? If we have no concern for the sin of our brother in Christ, we can not say that we love God. Without church membership, how can we say which church does a brother or sister have to hear? We do have a responsibility to confront any Christian we know in sin, but if you are yoked to them in church membership, then being in unrebuked and unrepentant sin denigrates your witness to the world.

Warning

We will close with a warning: Every church is filled with sinners, some of whom may be unsaved. God in his sovereignty puts governors and authorities in our path to constrain our sin. As an example: have you ever sped willfully? Romans 13:4 clearly commands us to submit to the civil magistrate. Would you have exceeded the speed limit if a police officer was right next to you? Even you as a Christian need the civil magistrate

to force you to obey the law. God uses that police officer to get you to do what you should have done voluntarily, but only the threat of force can get you to stay under the speed limit. You need the civil magistrate to constrain your evil. As Christians, God uses the local body that He has put us in to constrain our sin. How much more do we need to be held accountable to the Word of God than to the civil law? We should know ourselves well enough to understand that we should rejoice in the mercy of God that He would give us brothers and sisters in Christ and use them because we need help to walk as our Father has called us. In other words, *Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.*¹²