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# The Meaning of Membership and Church Accountability

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## **Is Church Membership Taught in the New Testament?**

Membership in a local church involves commitment to worship the Lord corporately, edifying brothers and sisters through mutual exhortation and service, cooperating in mission, and holding each other accountable to walk in a manner pleasing to the Lord as a witness to the truth of Christ in the world.

We believe that covenant church membership is a wise and helpful path for those who desire to walk together in obedience to the Lord and in a manner that is worthy of the gospel of Christ (Philippians 1:27). This becomes evident when we consider how the New Testament teaching on church government and church discipline relate to mutual accountability and thus to the concept of covenant membership.

The New Testament teaching about church government and church discipline would be meaningless if some form of commitment to mutual accountability in a body of believers were not expected.

## **Church Government Implies a Membership of Accountability**

The New Testament teaches that the local church has elders or overseers who have special responsibility to equip (Ephesians 4:11) and care for (Acts 20:28) and teach (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9) the members. The New Testament teaches that the members are to respect (1 Thessalonians 5:12f.) and be submissive to (Hebrews 13:17) these leaders, but not to treat them as infallible (1 Timothy 5:20) or in the place of Christ (Matthew 23:8-12). They are servants, not masters (Luke 22:26), and their leadership comes from their divine call to serve (Acts 20:28), not from their desire to rule. Their leadership does not replace the congregation of believers as the body

with final authority under the Lord (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:4; Acts 6:3; 15:22).

This whole picture of called leaders, and people who affirm that leadership, assumes the existence of “church membership” that consists in a corporate life of mutual accountability. Leadership and submission have no meaning where there is no commitment to accountability (that is, to membership).

### **Church Discipline Implies a Membership of Accountability**

Jesus said, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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” (Matthew 18:15-17).

What this implies is that Christians are to be members of churches where they are held accountable to walk in a way that pleases the Lord. If there were no relationship of accountability, it would be meaningless to “tell it to the church,” because the offending person would simply say, “That church has no jurisdiction over me.”

The same thing is implied in 1 Corinthians 5. A man in the church is living in blatant immorality and is proudly unrepentant (v. 2). Paul writes, “Let him who has done this be removed from among you” (v. 2). He goes on to say, “When you are assembled . . . you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (vv. 4-5).

None of this would be feasible if the immoral man could simply say, “I am not accountable to you. I can do what I please. You have no authority or rights over me.” In other words, the teaching of the New Testament on church discipline implies that church membership (involving mutual accountability among the members) is the will of God for all Christians.

### **The Church Covenant**

The biblical call for a membership of mutual accountability in a local body of believers suggests the need for believers to make a covenant with one another. This is simply implied in agreeing to hold each other accountable to walk in a manner pleasing to the Lord.

The church covenant is a written summary of biblical practice that a church agrees should be the basis of its accountability. The covenant allows for freedom of conscience in areas where the Bible is not definite in its guidance. The covenant focuses on principles, especially as they relate to our corporate life together.

What follows is the Bethlehem Baptist Church Covenant:

(1) Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and, on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, in the presence of God, angels and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.

(2) We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love, to strive for the advancement of this church in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines; to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations.

(3) We also engage to maintain family and secret devotions; to educate our children in the Christian faith; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our deportment, to avoid all tattling, backbiting and excessive anger; to seek God's help in abstaining from all drugs, food, drink, and practices which bring unwarranted harm to the body or jeopardize our own or another's faith.

(4) We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in prayer; to aid one another in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the rules of our Savior to secure it without delay.

(5) We moreover engage that when we remove from this place we will, if possible, unite with a church where we can carry out the articles of this confession and the spirit of this covenant.

This covenant provides a summary of the life which we will hold each other accountable to pursue. When a person becomes a member of Bethlehem he

or she engages to live by this covenant and to help others in the church do the same. The assumption is that the “children of the light” will walk differently from the world. But this raises the following question.

### **Is the Goal of Disciplined Church Membership a Pure Church?**

Accountability in the local church does not mean that the church will ever be perfectly pure in this age. We sin after conversion. The church is a company of forgiven sinners who wrestle against their own remaining sinfulness every day.

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23)

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8)

“When I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind.” (Romans 7:21f.)

“Not that I have already obtained [the resurrection] or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ has made me his own.” (Philippians 3:12)

Therefore, church membership does not involve an expectation to live perfectly. Rather, church membership is a commitment to worship and minister in a body of believers where the members covenant together to hold each other accountable to pursue obedience to what Scripture teaches.

The pursuit of obedience is not the same as perfection. It will involve failure and confession on a regular basis. The mark of a true Christian, and the mark of a church member in good standing, is not perfection, but the persistent fight of faith that recognizes sin as sin, confesses it, and turns from it in new resolves of holiness again and again.

### **How Does Church Discipline Work?**

In a good family, discipline should be overwhelmingly instructive and encouraging. Teaching a child how to make his bed by patient instruction is part of a well disciplined home. Nevertheless, spankings (especially in the younger years) will probably be a needed part in an atmosphere of loving, patient instruction and admonition.

So it will be in the church. Mutual accountability should be mainly instructive and affirming. It means that all of us in the church are responsible both to give and receive encouragement, counsel, consolation, exhortation, and admonition (1 Thessalonians 5:14; Hebrews 3:13; Galatians 6:1; 2 Corinthians 1:3f.).

This is implied in the precious doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10). We are priests for each other in that we minister God's grace to each other (1 Peter 4:10), intercede for each other with God (Romans 15:30), and confess our sins to each other (James 5:16). Membership in the church then is a commitment to the tender love of encouragement, and the tough love of confrontation—to give it humbly and to receive it without defensiveness.

Only in rare cases does the New Testament suggest that accountability will lead to an all-church, disciplinary act of excommunication. This kind of discipline results when a member forsakes the covenant and persists in a refusal to forsake and repent of willful sin. Such cases seem to be ones in which the sin of a member is open for the public to see and is impenitently persistent. In other words, the commitment to pursue obedience is broken. Instead of pursuing obedience, the member has settled into a behavior or an attitude with no effort to flee from it as sin. This would be a willful decision to live in violation of the covenant.

In this case, those members who are the nearest friends should, if possible, approach the person early in his or her slide into sin. If there is no repentance, the process of Matthew 18:15-17 should continue to be followed. The goal at every step of the way is repentance and forgiveness and reconciliation for the good of the offender and the spiritual health of the church and the glory of Christ.

When the private efforts of loving church members do not bring about repentance, the overseers of the church should be brought in, and a process of patient inquiry and entreaty should be followed. If repentance does not result, the leaders of the church will present the findings to the church body and action will be taken to remove the person from membership in the hope that this will sober him or her and win repentance (1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Corinthians 2:6-7; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15). The fact that it is easy today for a disciplined person to be offended and withdraw membership and go to another church should not hinder the obedience of the church.

### **Guidelines from the *Bethlehem Baptist Church Constitution and By-Laws Concerning Church Discipline***

In Article III of the Constitution, immediately following the Church Covenant, church membership is defined as follows:

The membership of this church shall consist of persons who confess faith on the Lord Jesus Christ as personal Savior, who give evidence of regeneration by a living consistent with their profession and with the views of faith, doctrine, and practice of this church, who have been baptized by immersion and who have been received into its membership according to the By-Laws of this church.

A life consistent with “the practice of this church” is part of the commitment of membership. This “practice” has been spelled out in general terms in the Church Covenant.

In the By-Laws, Article I, Section 1, the general procedure concerning membership includes this initial sentence:

All actions regarding membership, either of accession or dismissal, shall be by vote of the church upon recommendation of the Council of Elders.

This accords with Matthew 18:17, which makes the church body the final court of appeal in whether a person is part of the church or not.

The last sentence of the Church Covenant is reinforced in Article I of the By-Laws, Section 6b:

Members who remove from this city, shall supply the church with their new address and apply for a letter of dismissal within one year provided there be a church of the same faith and order in the place to which they move.

Extended out-of-town memberships, when the health and mobility of a person allow for affiliation with another local evangelical church, signify an abandonment of covenant commitments, and the need for change or church discipline.

Article VII of the By-Laws is entitled “Discipline.” This is an attempt to acknowledge that we are all sinners and all need correction and admonition and exhortation regularly. Discipline is the daily ongoing effort of all the members to reconcile differences and help each other overcome doubt and

discouragement and temptation, and to call each other back from developing bad habits.

The New Testament teaches that there are acts of disobedience to Christ that require church action in addition to patient personal admonition (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5). Not all sins are equal in every respect. All are an offense to the holiness and goodness of God. All are worthy of condemnation. When we see them crouching at the door of our hearts, we should oppose all of them with great vigor (Matthew 18:89). But all are not equally harmful. And all are not equally common among men. And sometimes all are not fought and forsaken.

Some sins have harmful effects that reach deeper in the sinner himself (1 Corinthians 6:18) and are more destructive in the lives of others (1 Corinthians 5:6). Some sins bring more reproach on the name of Christ than others because they are acknowledged by such a large majority to be evil or hurtful (1 Corinthians 5:1). And some sins are more significant because they are pursued so long and with so little contrition and so little effort to change (1 John 5:6).

In any case, “The discipline of members shall be a responsibility of the Council of Elders under such rules and procedures as the Elders may from time to time establish on the basis of Scripture. All such proceedings shall be guided by a spirit of prayer mingling Christian kindness, forbearance, and holy firmness under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” (By-Laws, Article VII).

## Conclusion

Let our common prayer ascend that Bethlehem would be a covenant people full of love to one another and to all people; that we would reverence Christ and seek to please him in all things through the obedience of faith; and that we would be a “city set on a hill” that cannot be hid, and a company of sojourners full of good works that bring glory to God our Creator and Redeemer.

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