

## CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

### 1. IS CHURCH MEMBERSHIP BIBLICAL?

Many Christians think that there is nothing like formal church membership in the New Testament church. That is, there is no need for a Christian to have his or her name on a membership list. To many, attendance at church meetings is all that is required. Is this really true? We shall start by looking at the first church in Jerusalem.

On that day of Pentecost, the following things happened.

- A specific group of people were identified by being publicly baptized (Acts 2:41).
- The numbers of those baptized were recorded, 3000 (v. 41). See also the number in Acts 4:4.
- These were “added” to the already existing group, the 120 (v. 47).

In conclusion, it was known exactly who was part of this church in Jerusalem. If you to ask someone in Jerusalem, ‘Are you a member of the church?’, if they were, they would tell you that they have been baptized.

There are other Biblical reasons why formal church membership is necessary. By ‘formal’ is meant that it is known exactly who is and who is not a church member. Those who are members can be listed on a piece of paper. Why?

(1) The church is called ‘the body of Christ’ (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 4:12). Christians are members of this body. We know exactly which are the members of our own body, and there is no doubt about it. So it is with the body of Christ.

(2) There are many responsibilities Christians have to fellow Christians, expressed by the words “one another” (see, for example, Eph. 4:2,32; 5:19,21). Such instructions are written, not to individuals, but to local churches, such as at Ephesus. These are not first of all commands to be fulfilled towards every person in Ephesus, but specifically in the church. How can this be carried out if it is not known who is really in the church? The letter to the Ephesians describes those who are part of the church: they are “saints”, and “faithful in Christ Jesus” (1:1). They are those who have “faith in the Lord Jesus” and “love towards all the saints” (1:15).

(3) Local churches must make decisions, for example, about leadership, both elders and deacons. The Seven, who we now call the first Deacons, were ‘picked out’ by the Christians and so ‘chosen’ by them (Acts 6:3,5). In the same way, not everyone living in a country can vote in the elections. There are visitors and aliens. Only those with the right qualifications can vote.

(4) Specifically, in order for there to be church discipline there must be a known membership. Someone who is not a member, who is not ‘in’, cannot be disciplined, because to be disciplined is to be excluded from the church, to be considered as “a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17). To the Corinthians Paul refers to two groups: those ‘outside’ and those ‘inside’ (1 Cor. 5:12). In discipline, the insiders are made to be outsiders, to be “removed from among” the members (v. 2). And this is to be by the assembly of the Christians (vv. 4-5). The case of church discipline is described as “punishment by the majority” (2 Cor. 2:6).

-----

## 2. WHAT QUALIFIES A PERSON TO BECOME A CHURCH MEMBER?

So, if it is necessary for a person to be identified as a church member, who is eligible to become such a member of a local church? We will go back to those who became part of the church in Jerusalem, as described in Acts 2.

(1) **Church members are those who have 'received the word of God'** (v. 41). Two questions must now be answered: What is this word of God? and, What does it mean to 'receive' it?

11. These people had heard Peter preach (vv. 16-36,38-39). Peter also gave many other words of exhortation (v. 40). What had Peter told them?

- This word is about what God has done in Jesus of Nazareth. God has planned it all (v. 23), it had been prophesied (vv. 16-21), and it has now come to pass. God has given His attestation to Jesus of Nazareth through miracles (v. 22). It is He who delivered Him up (v. 23), who raised Him (v. 24), and made Him both Lord and Christ in His exaltation (v. 36).
- It is a word about what God thinks of our conduct. God had given countless attestations in their very midst, so they were not ignorant, but they resisted the light (v. 22). They murdered Jesus, using the hands of the Romans (v. 23, see v. 36). This was a direct challenge to their most wicked conduct. True gospel preaching shows clearly what God thinks of our sins.
- The word concerns what God promises to the one who repents. There is hope for the sinner because of what God has done in Christ. Sins can be forgiven by God. The Holy Spirit can be received for new power for living. The promise is to the repentant one, who turns his back on the world, what Peter calls "this crooked generation" (v. 40). In this context it specifically means to change your thinking about who Jesus is, and to live accordingly.

12. This is the word that they 'received'. This is another way of saying that they became Christians (see 8:41; 11:1; 1 Thess. 2:13). It is impossible to be a true Christian without hearing and then receiving the word. To 'receive' is the opposite of to reject, and rejection by the Jews resulted in the crucifixion! What a great change is involved in receiving.

- The word is received as true in the mind. What a change from having shouted "crucify Him" thinking He was a blasphemer. Now they consider Him the total opposite, as "Lord and Christ".
- The word is received as truth to live by. The word affected the very depths of their being (v. 37). "Cut to the heart" means that their conscience pricked them so that they felt justly condemned before God. The message of forgiveness received brought a joyful release from condemnation. Life lived under One who is the exalted Lord and Christ can never be the same. You humbly face your sinfulness and so cry to God for forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ. You separate yourself from this world knowing the judgement that is coming upon it because of its wickedness. You now make Jesus Christ the Lord of your life, willing to do anything for Him who gave Himself for you, putting Him first who God has exalted to highest heaven.

Church membership is not for those who are perfect (there are none!), but for those who have started the Christian life, who sincerely, and with all their heart seek to live according to the word about Christ they have heard and received.

**(2) Church members are those who have obeyed the command of Christ to be baptized.**

On this day in Jerusalem all those “received his word were baptized” (v. 41). This is what Peter had commanded to be done (v. 38). Jesus Himself commanded this in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20), and it was the constant practice when sinners believed/repented—see Acts 8:12-13, 36-38; 9:18 & 22:16; 10:47-48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5. Baptism is therefore the entrance, the initiatory rite, unto church membership. It openly declares that the person baptized has received the word of the gospel. Baptism signifies the following things about the baptized: you have been cleansed from your sin (the water), your old life is buried and gone and you have risen to a new life (immersion), and you are in union with the Triune God (name of God into which you are baptized).

Baptism does not make anyone a Christian. You first receive the word and then you submit to baptism. If you went through a ceremony called baptism before you were a true Christian, whether as a baby or even as an adult, then you have not been baptized in the Biblical sense. Do not hide behind the ‘household baptisms’ in Acts. Lydia was unmarried and was a business woman (16:15). All the household of the Philippian jailer had the word spoken to them (16:32-33). All of Crispus’ household believed (18:8). Baptism is for any believer, of whatever age. Some do not think baptism is very important. Can you really say that any one of Christ’s commands are not important? It is vital that you declare yourself a disciple of Christ, so be accepted as such by other Christians, and be formally a part of His church.

-----

### **3. HOW DOES A CHURCH MEMBER LIVE?**

Now we must ask how church members are to live. There is a concise description of the life of this first church in Jerusalem in Acts 2:42. We have seen that the church is a recognizable community of repentant and baptized Christians. Such leave the community in which they grew up and join a new community. It is a community, not a club that you go out to when you choose, but a community of which you are a part daily. Like a cohesive family. Four activities are referred to.

(1) “The apostles’ teaching”. The emphasis is not on the doctrine taught by the apostles, important as that it (2 Thess. 2:15). It is the activity of the apostles as God-appointed, authoritative teachers. Such teaching is absolutely essential to the Christian life, at its beginning (Rom. 6:17), and in its growth to maturity (Eph. 4:12-13), The apostles are no more, but their teaching is now our New Testament. A church member commits himself to being under this teaching as a priority in life, much more than in singing, social gatherings and committees, although these have their place.

(2) “The fellowship”. The idea of fellowship is having things in common, sharing together. It is based upon our common participation in Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit. It depends upon a common conviction of being united together in a community. It therefore

covers a very wide range of activities, eating together, sacramental feasts, distributing to the poor among us (see 2:44-47). They shared their lives, their time, their homes and their possessions. They loved to be together. Church membership is far more than a Sunday morning activity.

(3) “The breaking of bread”. This almost definitely refers to the Lord’s Supper. The idea of ‘breaking’ is from Jesus’ action in the last supper (Lk. 22:19, see Acts 20:7). The church members gather together to remember Christ’s death. It is an expression of our unity as those who belong to Christ. So it is a privilege of church members and is not for those who refuse to identify with God’s people.

(4) “The prayers”. This is corporate, not private, prayer. There are stated times when the church gathers for prayer (see 3:1). This is another very vital part of church life. It is unthinkable that the whole church would not gather to pray as an expression of total dependence upon the Lord. What a privilege to be a part of a praying people as we especially pray for one another.

These four activities, especially, are what it means in practice to be a church member. Members are to be ‘devoted’ (ESV), to ‘continue steadfastly’ (NKJV), in these activities. There is to be a constancy, a perseverance. They are to be given priority over other things (see also 6:4). Think of the devotion of mother towards her baby. When the baby needs her she puts everything else aside, even tiredness. These things are not to be considered a burden but a privilege, the necessary means of grace.