

Church Membership

by Craig Alan Myers

Used by permission of the **Brethren Revival Fellowship (BRF)**, published in **BRF Witness, September/October, 2006, Volume 41, Number 5**

The only institution ever directly begun by Jesus is His church. In **Matthew 16:18**, He said, “I will build My church, and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it.” **Ephesians 5:25** says that Christ “gave Himself for the church.” Jesus prayed for the church in Gethsemane before He died on the Cross. He gave apostles, prophets, and evangelists to build up the church (**Ephesians 4:11-12**). Paul instructed Timothy on proper order in the church (**1 Timothy 3:15**). Most New Testament letters were written to specific bodies or assembled groups of believers and were often named by the city in which the church was located. Jesus did not merely die for the salvation of individuals; He established that Christians are a part of a larger body, His church. The New Testament assumes that Christians “connect” to a local church where they live out their commitment to Jesus.

1. Church Membership is Scriptural

While the New Testament does not explicitly state that the church is to have an official roster of members, it is obvious that in the early church, people knew who was in or not in the local church body. There is a sound basis to state that a members’ roll is a legitimate and useful tool.

For example, **Acts 1:15** says that “the number of names (of those meeting in the upper room before Pentecost) together was about a hundred and twenty.” Likely, someone counted and had a list of the names of those present. After Pentecost, the Bible says that the Lord added to the church “daily those who were being saved” (**Acts 2:47**). It is quite possible that there was some form of record keeping as Luke was told how many people were being added to the church regularly.

First Timothy 5:9 mentions a list of widows who needed financial assistance from the church. If a special roster was kept for this purpose, it is likely that there was a list or lists of members in good standing in the local church bodies wherever they were established. In **1 Corinthians 5:2**, Paul called for the disfellowshipping of a wayward

member of the Corinthian church, after that member refused to respond to lesser forms of correction. Formally excluding a member presupposes formally including him. If membership lists were unknown, it would have been difficult to practice church discipline, as no one would know for sure who was in good standing and who was not.

Finally, **1 Corinthians 14:40** says, “Let all things be done decently and in order.” A members list helps maintain church order and prevents confusion. The real purpose of identifiable membership is to supply an effective means through which the organized body of Christians can fulfill its responsibilities in the Great Commission.

2. Essential Requirements for Church Membership

The conditions for membership in the local body of believers must reflect the truths of Scripture and our willingness to abide by them. Those conditions are:

1. Awareness of having been born again (**John 3:3**). The primary requirement is that we have experienced the new birth (**Acts 2:37-41; Romans 10:9-10**);
2. An obligation to be obedient to God’s Word with baptism and participation in the ordinances set forth in the New Testament (**Acts 8: 29-39; 1 Corinthians 11:2-34**);
3. Evidence of new life in Christ and spiritual growth (**2 Corinthians 5: 17; Galatians 5:22**);
4. Willingness to serve in the local church, using the gifts given by the Holy Spirit (**1 Corinthians 12**);
5. Commitment to the church’s doctrinal positions (**2 Timothy 1:13-14**). One should join a local fellowship primarily out of agreement with its teachings, rather than enthusiasm for its programs or love of its building.

3. The meaning of local church membership

What does it mean to be a member of a local church? It means you have made a commitment (**Romans 12:1**). We are no longer conformed to this world’s directives, but instead we take our orders from Heaven itself. When we join the local church, we state publicly that we are taking up the banner of Jesus Christ as expressed through His local congregation. We are saying:

“I am here—in this local body.”

“I will be here—to worship and to serve in this local body.”

“I will serve—gladly when called upon in this local body.”

“I will pray—that Jesus Christ will be glorified in this local body.”

“I will give—of my time, talents, and possessions to build up this local body.”

We are also saying, when we join a local expression of the church, “I agree.”

“I agree—in the doctrinal or confessional stands of this congregation.”

“I agree—in the practices of this local congregation.”

“I agree—in the essential program of this local congregation.”

To join a local church means that you are making yourself accountable to other believers in a formal way. For example, in **Acts 5**, Ananias and Sapphira had converted to Christ and joined the local congregation in Jerusalem. They made certain commitments, but then decided that those commitments were too costly to uphold. So then, they broke their faith with the church, lied to the congregation and God, and as a result were accountable to the church leadership.

We are accountable to the church body of which we are members. Elmer Towns, writing on church growth and leadership, says that people “don’t do what others expect, but what others inspect.” In other words, apart from biblical accountability, Christians are likely to grow lax in their work and testimony.

Members of the church are also responsible to every other member of the church. When you associate with the local church, you are asking for help in keeping true to your baptismal vows, and you are pledging your support in helping others stay faithful as well. Mark Dever points out in *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, “By identifying ourselves with a particular church, we let the pastors and other members of that local church know that we intend to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer, and service. We increase others’ expectations of us in these areas, and we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving with them, and we call for their commitment to serve us in love and to encourage us in our discipleship.” Every believer in Christ should become an integral part of a local organized group of believers and make a firm commitment to it.

Being a part of the local church means you have publicly identified with a local expression of the universal church of Jesus Christ. The members may be known by their

church, and the church can be known by its members. You are not merely “floating” from one body to another, but are known as a part of a definite local church body.

4. The Benefits of Local Church Membership

The church, when operating biblically, serves spiritual food through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. There are inherent limitations to studying the Bible on one’s own. For example, one may focus on one book or portion almost exclusively. However, in the local church, the Bible comes alive as it is taught and studied in context. Ministers and Sunday School teachers ideally point out the original occasion and theme of the Scriptures they are teaching, and then apply that Scripture to today’s living.

A person may receive great benefit from listening to recorded sermons; some may greatly enjoy videos of their favorite Bible teachers or Christian music groups; certainly printed messages and books are valuable. However, the difference between these avenues of learning and regularly gathering with the church for worship and instruction is the very presence of the Holy Spirit. The Word of God, taught in the fellowship, allows more opportunity for false views to be exposed, and to honor sound perspectives. The Bible is then applied to real-life situations, as real people bring the Scriptures to bear on the issues that confront us from day-to-day, whether in parenting, workplaces, relationships with others, or basic Christian living.

The church affords its members spiritual fellowship and support. God never intended that His people be hermits. The early church in **Acts 2** continued in fellowship. Participation in the local church brings growth in our maturity as believers. We share our experiences of living the Christian faith, helping others to draw on our own struggles and to find victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil. We have opportunities to give—to give of our time in developing our spiritual gifts; to give of our material goods as God takes our portion and multiplies it in gifts to many others; to give of ourselves which helps us look beyond our own mere concerns to the needs of others.

The great sequoia trees of California are some of the largest living things on earth. Yet, one seldom sees a sequoia standing by itself. Scientists tell us that the sequoia has a relatively shallow root system and that if storms come, a single tree can be felled easily. Nevertheless, a grove of sequoia trees intertwines their roots together, and that provides support for each other in the face of the storms. It is a marvelous picture of the importance of the church as its members support, uphold, and encourage one another.

We further have the need of regular confession and reconciliation with others (**James 5:16**). Sometimes the confession is that of our own weakness; sometimes it is the confession that God does help His people. We have occasion to “**confess our trespasses**

to one another.” We also have the benefit of forgiving one another, as Christ has forgiven us. David Hoke writes, “God puts us together with a variety of people. He puts us with people we like and people we like less. He puts us together with people who fit our comfort zone and people who do not. We need them and they need us.”

The local church supplies the primary arena for spiritual service and exercise (**1 Timothy 4:7**). That service involves evangelism. We find the church as a solid base from which to take the Gospel of grace into the world around us. We tell the Good News, we bring the unsaved in with us, they trust Christ, and then are baptized in obedience to Christ’s command.

That service involves teaching and learning. Gifted teachers instruct others, who then reproduce that sound teaching to others, from generation to generation. Not all are teachers, but all are disciples, and can learn more of God’s Word and how to apply it.

That service involves spiritual gifts (**1 Corinthians 12**). Every Christian receives at least one of the eighteen listed spiritual gifts. He or she then has the duty to develop that gift and use it to build up the church and to glorify God. Sometimes it is not the most prominent of responsibilities; yet even the assisting of those who are engaging in active ministry is important. We sometimes hear of Christian workers who are “burned out” in their service. A major reason for the problem is that there is plenty of work to do in every congregation, but there are relatively few who take up the call to service. Strong local congregations have not become strong by having their members depending on someone else to do the labor. Will you not encourage someone in your church by saying “yes” when asked to fulfill a particular ministry?

Some are content to be mere spectators, but it is the foolish person who merely “sits around” when there are opportunities abounding to do great things for the Lord’s sake. Someone has compared the church to a college or professional football game: 75,000 people who desperately need exercise, watching 22 men in desperate need of rest. That is not the New Testament picture of the church.

Rather, we read of an energetic body of faithful believers who are engaged in regular ministry to one another and to the world. They proclaimed the Gospel together, they taught believers together, they worshiped together as often as they could possibly do so.

Another benefit of local church membership is that the church protects and guides its members. God has determined that elders and deacons are to lead the church, and they are given responsibility to direct and aid the overall ministry of the church in this present age. We find their qualifications listed in **1 Timothy 3:1-13**. Men of sufficient godly character are to be called forth and put to work for the benefit of the body of

Christ here on earth. These leaders of the church are to watch over the flock of God so that Christians will be built up and increasingly avoid sinful living.

The church also protects its members through the teaching and preaching of Bible truth. We find that the faithful church upholds the Word of God, realizing that the Word has power to instruct us in the deep things of God, keeping us from sin, and challenging us to practical obedience.

The church also benefits its members in bestowing a sense of ownership and identification with a local church body. The church is your church, for you are the church. We know a bit of where our boundaries lie as distinctive Christians when we say, “I am a member of the _____ Church of the Brethren.” When one identifies himself as a member of a particular body of Christians, it provides a shorthand means of distilling one’s essential beliefs and practices.

5. The Importance of Active Participation in the Local Church

Our faithfulness and consistency in participating in church and worshipping God in fellowship with other believers is important—possibly more important than we fully understand. To assemble ourselves together with the Lord’s people at established meetings for worship (unless we are ill):

1. *Displays* a warm heart for the Lord and a love for Christ (**Revelation 2:4; 3:20**);
2. *Honors* the apostolic example and command of God’s Word (**Acts 2: 41-47; Hebrews 10:25**);
3. *Grants* blessing and help for the coming days;
4. *Sustains* fellow believers with blessings and help they receive from our use of spiritual gifts and mutual ministry (**1 Thessalonians 5:14; Hebrews 10:24**);
5. *Pleases* the Holy Spirit who indwells each true Christian individually, and the church as a whole;
6. *Encourages* the ministers who proclaim the Word of God to assembly (**Hebrews 13:7**);
7. Positively *influences* others to use their gifts and encourages others to be faithful, active, and self-sacrificing (**2 Corinthians 3:2-3**);
8. *Offers* a strong testimony to the unsaved, who may note the consistency of our profession and practice;
9. *Demonstrates* that we have a vision for the future of our congregation;
10. *Prevents* backsliding and apostasy (**Hebrews 10:19-39**);
11. *Shows* respect for the Lord’s Day, on which Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

J. Allen Blair tells of an elderly lady in a congregation who was so deaf that she could not hear the loudest noise. Nevertheless, she was always one of the first ones present to attend every church service. Since the pastor knew that it was completely impossible for her to hear anything that was spoken from the pulpit, one day he asked her why she came. She replied, "Even though I can't hear anything you say in the service, I attend because I love God's house and wish to be found walking in His paths. And the Lord gives me many good thoughts about the text of your sermon that someone always points out to me in the Bible. Another reason is that in church, I am in the very best company. I am in the presence of God and those whom He has made holy and whom He will eventually make glorious. Why shouldn't this make me happy? It is not enough for me to worship God in my home; it is my duty and my privilege to worship Him publicly in the church services."

The church is not optional for the faithful Christian. He will seek it out, minister in it and through it, and bring others to fuller stature in Christ as a part of it. A local church is not always perfect, but it still raises a standard for God and carries a testimony for what is right and good. It still sends forth the true Gospel. It still encourages and builds godly living. It still is the fullest expression of His body in this present age. Making a commitment to the local church is more than adding a name to a roll book. It means taking the responsibilities along with the privileges and saying "No" to the world's standards and "Yes" to God's. These are good reasons to join the local church.