

A Primer on Membership

Our confession of faith, the 1689 London Baptist Confession, declares, *“All believers are bound to join themselves to particular churches, when and where they have opportunity to do so . . .”* (26.12).

The Puritan John Owen wrote, *“It is the duty of everyone who professes faith in Jesus Christ, and takes due care of his own salvation, voluntarily and by his own choice to join himself to some particular congregation of Christ, for his own spiritual edification, and the right discharge of His commands”* (XV, 320).

The word “membership” does not appear in the New Testament. Though it is never explicitly commanded in the New Testament, it is most definitely implied and manifested. In other words, it is Biblical.

I. Grounded in the New Testament Importance of the Local Church, 1 Tim. 3:14-15.

- A. **Major Focus of New Testament Revelation Respecting the Church.** The bulk of the New Testament was written to local churches.
- B. **Special Object of Christ’s Work and Exalted Care, Eph. 5:25; Acts 20:28; Rev. 1:13, 20; 2-3.** He died for the church; He builds the church; He appointed its ordinances (baptism and communion); He gives gifts to the church; He nourishes and cherishes and protects and perfects the church; He prays for the church, He gives His life and virtue by the Spirit to the church.
- C. **Practical Concern of the Apostolic Labors, Acts 13:14; 14:23, 26-28.** *“Everything the apostles did was connected with the churches”* (Earl Blackburn).
- D. **Central Instrument for promoting Kingdom Living and Ministry.** (Eph. 4:8-13)

“The local church is the principal instrument by God’s appointment through which the truth concerning the Lord Jesus Christ is preserved, promoted, and proclaimed; and God is glorified . . .” (Owen). It is *“the place where God has ordained for His gospel to be defended and displayed”* (Zens).

“We must grasp once again the idea of church membership . . . as the biggest honor which can come a man’s way in this world” (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones).

- II. **Patterned in the New Testament Practice, Acts 2:44-46; 4:32.** A significant note is made by Luke in Acts 5, after the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. We are told in verse 11 that **“great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard [about it].”** And we are told in verse 13 that **“none of the rest dared to associate with them . . .”** The ESV and other versions uses the word “join.” It is a good word. It literally means *“to be glued or stuck fast . . . to cleave or adhere to anything or person.”* It denotes more than mere association, but connection and adhesion. In the context of the early church is spoke of a cohesive and binding relationship.

- A. **Immediate.** **“Those who received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls”** (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14). *“Those who came to know Christ were committed at once to the local church where they were instructed and shepherded and were submitting to the teaching of the apostles and elders.”* Its steady increase was noted (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7). As one commentator noted, someone was counting who came in! There was a distinction between those who had come by public profession and those who remained outside.
- B. **Intimate.** **“All those who believed were together”** (Acts 2:44, 46; 4:32; 5:12). Robert Coleman noted from his study of Acts, *“One gets the impression that the early Christians just enjoyed doing things together. In their casual relationships . . . they learned what it meant to follow Christ in the daily routine of life. The spiritual life of the Christian community clearly is interwoven with their continuous interpersonal association.”*

- C. **Identifiable.** “**Epaphrus, who is one of your number**” (Col. 4:12). Identifiable leaders (1 Th. 5:12; Heb. 13:17), identifiable widows (1 Tim. 5:9-16), identifiable workers (Phil. 2:25; 4:18; Col. 4:9, 12; Rom. 16:1), identifiable offenders (1 Cor. 5; 1 Tim. 1:20; 3 Jn. 9).
- D. **Independent (yet Interdependent).** The local bodies were self-governing, exercised their own discipline, handled their own internal issues (with counsel), upheld the truth of the gospel, and were directly accountable to Christ.

III. **Supported by the New Testament Analogies, Rom. 12:4-8; Eph. 2:19-22; 4:15-16; 1 Peter 2:4-5.**

- A. **“Members of One Another,” Rom. 12:4-8.** “*And idea of enjoying salvation or being a Christian in isolation is foreign to the New Testament writings.*”
- B. **“Christ’s Body,” 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:15-16.**
- C. **“God’s Household [Family],” Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15.**
- D. **“Holy Temple,” Eph. 2:21; 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 1 Pt. 2:4-5.**

IV. **Required by New Testament Order, Responsibilities and Realities.**

- A. **New Testament Polity, Acts 14:23; 20:28; Eph. 4:11-13; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-19; Heb. 13:17.** “**That you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you . . .**” (Titus 1:5).
- B. **New Testament Discipline, Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-13.**
- C. **New Testament Responsibilities.** It is within the context of the local church that the outworking of the “one another’s” find their most immediate and practical expression, the chief of which is to **“love one another fervently,”** out of which all the other “one another’s” are carried out (1 Pt. 4:8-11). **“The one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God who he has not seen”** (1 Jn. 4:20). The local church is the context in which we exercise the gifts and graces that God has given to built us up in our common faith.
- D. **New Testament Realities.** The opposition of the flesh, world, and the devil. *“The fellowship of a group of committed believers is vital to our spiritual health and safety, and to our endurance in the faith”* (Jim Eliff). (Heb. 10:23-25—a command!). We need the local church! We need its oversight and protection. We need its encouragement, exhortation, and godly example (its holy “peer pressure”). We need its accountability. We need “one another.”

V. **Carried Out through an Abiding Faithful Commitment.** What “form” does this commitment take?

To be a member of a local church is *“to voluntarily submit oneself to the leadership and membership of a particular local body and commit oneself to the mutual responsibilities owing to that local body.”* Membership is a commitment of “loyalty” to a local body that involves a willing identification and active involvement

- A. **A Saving Commitment to the Living Head of the Church.**
- B. **A Substantial Commitment to the Biblical Confession of the Church.** Our church holds the London Baptist Confession of 1689 as our confessional standard of what the Bible teaches.

[Handout: “Household Duties”]

- C. **A Submissive Commitment to the Faithful Leadership of the Church.**
- D. **A Sacrificial Commitment to the Loving Service of the Saints.**