

Biblical Basis for Church Membership

Compiled by Rev. David J. Bauer

Church membership is a legitimate biblical concept. The Scriptures would teach us that the local church has an identifiable and specifically accountable membership. Membership in a local church is important for a number of biblical reasons.

1. Authors of the New Testament *identify* churches by their *location* as well as by their *number*. In Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14, a church beginning at 120 persons grew to 3,000 in one day, then later to 5,000 persons! Souls saved and new converts joining the church were counted and added to daily (Acts 2:47)! Paul the Apostle identifies members in local churches by their location in most of his epistles. He also addresses his letters to the many house churches outside of certain cities (Rom. 16:5; 1 Corinth. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 2). Members in these churches are counted and located.
2. *Leaders* are identified in churches where members have submitted themselves under their authority (1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:17). Leaders of a local church are expected to identify those to whom they must give an account (Acts. 20:28-30; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4). This means that the sheep should know their shepherd and that the shepherd must know his sheep. How can a pastor be responsible for sheep he cannot identify as his own?
3. Our Savior has commissioned His church to administer the rite of *water baptism*, a visible symbol of Spirit baptism (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-17; 1 Cor. 12:12-13). This is not only baptism into one universal body, but also into one particular local body – such as the “church in Corinth.”
4. Likewise our Savior has instructed His Local church to remember His death until His second coming by partaking together in the *Lord’s Table* (1 Corinth. 11:23-34). This instruction is clearly to people of a specific local fellowship, and the admonition is to be bound together by doing this symbolic and significant ordinance together.
5. Also, our Savior instructs His church in the proper way to *discipline* and *restore* wayward brethren, and even in the case of a disobedient and uncooperative member being removed by the local church united (excommunication – Matt. 18:15-20). By reasonable deduction, one cannot be *excommunicated* from those with which one has not previously *communicated*. If a person is now *out*, he once must certainly to have been *in*.
6. The local body and its leadership is where one is to go to submit requests for specific *benevolent needs*, and has the authority to accept or deny such requests based on discernment of need (1 Tim. 5:3-8; 2 Thess. 3:10-15; Acts 4:32-35). The church is clearly obligated to meet the specific needs of her members only.
7. Specific *leaders* of local churches are to be *supported* by that local assembly. It is the church’s responsibility to provide for their pastor in a material way (1 Cor. 9:14; 1 Tim. 5:17-18). Can a person be obedient to God’s Word if that person has no obligation to help with the support of God’s servant sent to watch over his/her soul (Heb. 13:17)?

8. The local church is the place where we should focus the majority of our *gracious Christian giving* (1 Corinth. 16:1-2; 2 Corinth. 8:1-5; 9:6-15), with expectation that our God both can and will supply all our needs (Phil. 4:19). Without being members of a local body how do we do this type of giving or be legitimate recipients of such Divine benevolence?
9. The *discernment* and *authority* of the local church would take the place of the legal counsel and unjust judges of our secular world (1 Corinth. 6:1-8). Christ's church is the vehicle He has ordained to make decisions in the present age (Matt. 16:16-19; Matt. 18:17-20). Note that Christ considers His local church of such importance that they are given the power to bind certain things in heaven as well as on earth (Matt. 18:18-20). If not bound to the authority of a specific local church, how can one gain the blessings associated with such a community?
10. God's People in Old Testament times were required to enter into a *covenant* with Him and His Law (Exodus 20-23). Children were taught from early age about God's promises (Deut. 6:4-9), and the Israel as a nation was to stand and take an oath while the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28-29 were verbally shouted in their ears from Mt. Gerizim and Ebal (Deut. 11:26-29; Joshua 8:33-35). There were *requirements* for the people of God to enter into covenant with Him and to be a part of His assembly.

It is not unreasonable for local churches to expect members to submit to similar *covenantal creeds*. As God informed ancient Israel as to their requirements toward Him, it is also proper for a church to have some form of instruction for prospective members, listing promises, stipulations and attending sanctions. Membership classes can be a good way of imparting such knowledge to ones seeking to enter into a covenant of membership with that local body. One cannot consent unless he is informed first of what he may be consenting to.

Prospective members should be prepared to consent to bind themselves in covenant with the local church they are in agreement with. This may require a verbal and written consent as to the doctrine and constitutional practices of the specific local assembly. Many churches may require a verbal testimony as to the person's knowledge of salvation, or even the physical act of baptism as a public testimony of such.

Most churches may require members to verbally enter into covenantal agreement with consent before the larger church body. New members may be required to give their verbal agreement with the church before the larger body in a membership ceremony, where the entire church receives them with a "Right Hand of Fellowship." This is a public recognition of the addition of new members to the body.



Bible Related Ministries

P.O. Box 272 Hinsdale, Illinois 60522-0272
708-579-3800 or 708-579-3801 – Fax: 708-579-3844
www.BibleRelatedMinistries.org - djbauer1@juno.com