

Church Membership

A Biblical Basis for Maintaining Local Church Membership Lists

Most local churches maintain membership lists. To some people this is very important. When they leave one church of which they have been a member, and begin attending another church, they soon transfer their membership. To some local churches this is also very important. They maintain regulations which restrict certain leadership and teaching positions to members only.

Not everyone agrees, however, on the importance of local church membership. Most churches which maintain membership lists, also have a good number of folks who attend on a regular basis and never join. There are various reasons they do not join: some do not want to be asked to serve in leadership roles, some do not want to make a commitment, some want to avoid the potential of conflicts they experienced in other places, and some do not believe that local church membership is either necessary or appropriate.

Who is right? Is membership important in the local church or should we do away with it all together? Can local church membership be established from a biblical basis, or is it entirely a matter of man's imagination?

The Biblical Basis for Local Church Membership

1. Membership in the Whole Church

The Bible presents the church on two different levels. The first level is the whole church made up of all those who have been born again by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. There is really only one church, that is, one body of Christ. Ephesians 4:4 says, *There is **one body**, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling.* Romans 12:4-5 says, *For as we have many members in **one body**, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are **one body** in Christ, and every one members one of another.* 1 Corinthians 12:12 says, *For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that **one body**, being many, are **one body**: so also is Christ.*

Membership in the whole church, or the body of Christ, results from an individual's salvation and relationship with the Holy Spirit. Salvation, of course, occurs only by grace through faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A person first must understand that he is a sinner and cannot save himself. Then he must understand that what Jesus Christ did on the cross in bearing his sin for him is all that needs to be done. If he confesses his sins and receives Christ, he is born again into the family of God. John 1:12 says, *But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.* In the very moment that a person is born again by faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in his body. Thus Galatians 4:6 says, *And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.* Then in the very moment that the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the believer, He places the believer in the body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:13 states, *For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body.* The word baptize means to immerse or place into. Here the Scripture teaches that all believers are spiritually immersed into

the one body of Christ. All believers thus become members of the body of Christ. As 1 Corinthians 12:12 says, *...the body is one, and hath many members....*

2. Membership in the Local Church

The second level on which the Bible presents the body of Christ is the local church. While it is clear from the verses listed above that there is only one church, or one body of Christ, the Bible often speaks of multiple churches as it refers to local manifestations of the body of Christ. Several times groups of churches are identified by region as the churches of Galatia in 1 Corinthians 16:1, or the churches of Asia in 1 Corinthians 16:19, or the churches in Macedonia in 2 Corinthians 8:1. Other times, multiple churches are referred to in more general terms as in Acts 16:5, *And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily;* or in 1 Corinthians 7:17, *But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches.* In still other places, specific local churches are identified individually as the church which is at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2) or the church of the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:1).

Regarding membership in the local church, there are numerous references which identify people with a specific church in a specific place. Sometimes believers are identified with a local church in a particular city such as the saints of the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2). At other times, believers are identified with a particular household meeting place of which there may be several within the same city. For example, when Paul wrote to the saints in Rome, he sent separate greetings to the groups of believers that met in the houses of Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:3-5), Aristobulus (Romans 16:10), Narcissus (Romans 16:11) Asyncritus (Romans 16:14), and Philologus (Romans 16:15). Clearly there were individuals who worshiped regularly in each of these households and developed an identity with that particular local church. This is why Paul greeted them separately as members of distinct local churches.

Romans chapter 16 is a key passage in establishing a biblical basis for maintaining local church membership lists. The book of Romans was written to all the saints in Rome (Romans 1:7). But Rome was an immense city and the church there was too spread out for all of them to be able to gather in one large meeting place for worship, especially in the hostile environment that existed under the pagan Caesar, Nero. Romans chapter 16 identifies at least five different assemblies that met in private homes throughout the city. As Paul referred to these various local churches he addressed the specific groups of people that were identified with each one respectively. There was **the church** in the house of Priscilla and Aquila, **them** which were of Aristobulus' household, **them** that be of the household of Narcissus, **the brethren** which were with Asyncritus and his associates, and **all the saints** who were with Philologus and his associates. There is no indication that believers in Rome floated around from place to place. In fact, the implication of the words of Scripture is that each household church had a very specific list of people who were identified with that meeting place.

3. The Biblical Necessity for Local Church Membership.

We have no way of knowing whether a written list was kept of the those who "belonged" to each local church in the first century, but practical reasons emerged very early for knowing who did and who did not belong.

In Acts chapter two, the whole church consisted of only one local church in Jerusalem. There, all the saints who made up the church were together in one place and had all things in common (Acts 2:44). They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking bread and in prayers (verse 42) and they continued daily with one accord in the temple, breaking bread from house to house (verse 46).

As the church dispersed from Jerusalem, groups of believers gathered in other cities. In these new places they continued what they had learned to do in Jerusalem (Acts 8:4; 11:26; 13:1-3). In these new local churches and in many others started by the apostles, leadership was ordained and believers were established in the faith. In these local manifestations of the body of Christ, Christians found the opportunities to identify personally with others with whom they shared membership in the whole church. Scripture emphatically mandates the assembling of believers together in these local places (Hebrews 10:23-25).

In the infant church, scrutinizing those who participated in its ministry activities became extremely important. For example, in Galatia false brethren were **brought in** unawares to spy out the liberty of gentile believers (Galatians 2:4). Peter warned of false teachers who would be **among** the true believers, bringing in damnable heresies and causing many to follow their pernicious ways (2 Peter 2:1-2). Jude lamented that certain men had **crept in** unawares and were turning the grace of God into lasciviousness. In each of these cases, unrighteous men were able to infiltrate local churches under a cloak of deception and implement their destructive schemes before the true believers knew what was happening. The Apostles quickly exhorted local church leaders to put safeguards in place to identify those who would try such things and prevent them from being successful (Acts 20:28-31).

Such is indeed a biblical basis for modern day local church membership lists. If local churches in the first century could be successfully raided by destructive forces, how much more vulnerable is the church of today. Back then, it was much easier to know who was a Christian and who was not. After all, with persecution as intense as it was, it was not socially fashionable to be a Christian. A person generally had a serious reason for identifying himself as a Christian. Either he was a genuine believer, or he had some ulterior motive of destructive influence to impose upon the church. Today, with so many different doctrinal opinions and persuasions, and so many brands of Christianity which people follow, responsible leadership must have a means for determining who should be allowed to teach and lead and who should not. Having individuals make a commitment to the local church and its doctrinal convictions through the membership process provides considerable assurance to the whole group of local believers that they are protected from unwanted intruders.

The Practical Rationale for Local Church Membership

Through the centuries, culture, society, government and organized religion have continued to bombard the church with a variety of influences greatly expanding the practical reasons for local church membership. Please note the Scripture passages attached to each point, indicating that even these expanded practical reasons for maintaining local church membership lists are rooted in biblical principle.

1. Membership in a local church serves as an expression of commitment between the group

and the individual. This gives the local leadership the best way of knowing who is looking to them for personal ministry and who is receptive to personal exhortation. Otherwise, some may be neglected unnecessarily, or others may resent what they consider to be an unwanted intrusion into their personal lives, creating nasty complications for the local church family.

Acts 6:1-7
Galatians 6:1-8

2. The Bible directs the setting apart of elders and deacons to function as leaders in the local church. Much space is given in the New Testament to describing what their responsibilities are and how they are to qualify to serve. The need for qualified leadership assumes a membership from whom and by whom these men can be appointed.

I Timothy 3:1-13
Titus 1:5-11

3. The need for church discipline also suggests the imperative of a definite membership list for a local church. The Scripture has clearly outlined the responsibility of the local church to judge sin and to discipline its members when their sins are of a serious nature. When a Christian sins today, it is very easy for him to move on to another church that is either ignorant of his transgression or willing to tolerate it. Without a membership commitment, it is nearly impossible to pursue the individual and help him see the error of his ways. With a membership commitment, local church leadership has a basis for imposing church discipline upon the individual in an attempt to rescue him from his fault.

1 Corinthians 5:1-12
2 Thessalonians 3:11-14
2 Timothy 2:24-26
Galatians 6:1
1 Timothy 5:19-20
Titus 3:10

4. Legal constraints and regulations give an institutional nature to the church today. Membership and records are needed for good compliance with regulations of society. Weddings must be performed by licensed or ordained pastors, and licensing and ordination are done by organized memberships of church institutions. Also, chaplaincies of military and medical institutions usually are assigned only to organized church groups.

1 Peter 2:13-16

5. The principle of "orderliness" supports local church membership. If both saved and unsaved, or if both carnal and spiritual believers help make decisions in a local church because the lack of membership guidelines allows it, the door is open to mass confusion. Maintaining active membership lists provides some confidence that those who are voting agree at least on doctrines and basic church policies.

I Corinthians 14:40

6. The principle of "safeguarding the truth" encourages church membership. If the church were in the hands of unqualified leaders because unqualified voters put them in office, it would not

be long before doctrinal error and unscriptural practice would creep into the local assembly.

1 Timothy 3:15

7. The principle of “identification” supports membership. Through membership, a person publicly identifies with a local fellowship of believers and its beliefs. On the positive side, this identification helps the community to know what a particular church stands for by the public testimony of its members. On the negative side, one’s identification with a local church serves as a wholesome restraint against the committing of certain sins, knowing that such transgressions will bring reproach upon the whole assembly of which he is a part.

1 Timothy 3:7

1 Timothy 5:24-25

3 John 1:12

2 Corinthians 6:3

8. The principle of “belonging” teaches church membership. Some do not really feel a part of that to which they do not belong. Reluctance to teach, to take positions, to exercise leadership and to share responsibility in a local church may rise from the words, “I am not a member.”

1 Corinthians 12:22-27

10. The principle of “care and nourishment” is enhanced as individuals come under the watchful guidance of godly leaders in a local church. Local church membership allows local church leadership to know for whom they must give an account. One source of grief such leaders experience is from the detachment and unsubmitive attitudes of some believers.

Hebrews 13:17

11. The principle of “family stability” promotes membership. As a man joins the local church, he leads his family in the path of godly direction, thus bringing greater stability to his home.

1 Timothy 3:4-5,12

12. The principle of “unity of service” argues for membership. As a person joins the local church, he promises to “join hands” with that membership in a unity of service and prayer and in support of the ministry of the Word at home and abroad.

3 John 1:5

Romans 16:1-2

1 Thessalonians 4:9

Conclusion

When a person is saved, one of the things he should do is be baptized with water. Water baptism does not save a person, make him more saved, or add to his true spiritual condition in any way. What it does do is give the believer an opportunity to publicly declare his identification with the body of Christ. While local church membership is not an ordinance of the LORD like water baptism, joining a local church may be seen as serving a similar purpose. As

water baptism serves as a public testimony of a person's identification with the whole church, local church membership serves as a means by which a person can publicly identify with and declare his commitment to a local church.

The Bible says that the Chief Shepherd knows exactly who belongs to Him in the whole church. In John 10:3, He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. In following the example of the Chief Shepherd, it is reasonable for each local church and its under shepherds to know who belongs. This is necessary not simply to affirm those who are genuine members of the body of Christ for whom these shepherds are responsible, but even more importantly to protect these local sheep from the wolves who would bring in destructive schemes. Establishing and maintaining membership lists in local churches is a means by which these under shepherds can accomplish this.

If the reader is a member of the body of Christ, but not a member of a local church, please answer a few questions. Do you have a biblical basis for not being a member of a local church? Does the Bible teach that individual believers should be detached from the local church? Does the Bible teach that individual believers should be independent of the local church? Does the Bible teach that individual believers are free of accountability to local church leaders? For which side does the Bible provide the strongest support – no membership, or maintaining membership in the local church?

Please carefully examine the evidence offered in this article for the biblical basis of maintaining local church membership lists. If the case has been made convincingly, will you consider making a more definite commitment to your local church? Talk to your pastor soon, and tell him you are ready to publicly identify with your local church family.

