

## QUESTION 6

# Is Church Membership Biblical?

**B**eyond the theological framework mentioned in the last chapter to argue for church membership being made up of regenerate people, the common question that arises regarding this topic is if it is explicitly biblical. Can you go to a set of verses and passages and prove that church membership is a biblical idea? If not, can I simply attend a church and not worry about going through the process of joining?

These are fair questions and need to be addressed. Much like the Trinity, the term “church membership” cannot be found if you do a search in a concordance. However, the concept of membership and the implications for membership are found in numerous places throughout Scripture, especially the NT. As noted in the previous chapter, there are covenantal differences under the new covenant that must be noted when discussing the people of God. But there are also some OT trajectories to observe when forming the biblical picture of church membership. And more emphatically, we see NT evidence that the norm for the church should not merely be a loosely connected group of uncommitted attenders, but of members in covenant with God and one another.

### OT Trajectories

As has been stated previously, while Israel and the church are not synonymous, and there are definite differences between the two, there is also continuity present. Thus one can look at OT trajectories that form a pattern for NT practice while being mindful of covenantal variances that do exist between Israel and the church. Looking at these OT trajectories applies as one examines the biblical pattern of church membership. Therefore, the trajectories will first be noted, followed by the distinct covenantal differences that set Israel and the church apart.

God called Abraham through whom a people as numerous as the stars would come. He promised this people a land and that they would be blessed and serve as a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–5). God was acquiring a congregation,

purchased and redeemed to be his heritage (Ps. 74:2). To be a part of this covenant community, one was either born into the nation—with newborn boys receiving the covenant sign of circumcision (Gen. 17:9–14)—or one could come into the covenant community as a proselyte (Exod. 12:48–49; Deut. 29:10–13; Ezra 6:21). God covenanted with this nation and told them that if they obeyed the law that was given, they would be blessed, but that if they disobeyed that law they would be cursed by God (Deut. 28–30). Thus, the nation of Israel was a community, with a distinct “membership,” a people who were in covenant with God and one another to live holy lives in the midst of the nations (Lev. 11:44–45).<sup>1</sup>

However, Israel, as God’s covenant people, failed again and again to keep the covenant in the OT. As such, Israel experienced the covenantal curses of Deuteronomy and underwent exile from the land. The OT prophets, therefore, told of future hope wherein a king from the Davidic line would restore the nation (Jer. 23:5–6). There would be rebuilding, forgiveness of sin, and new hearts granted to the people (Ezek. 36:22–36). And this hope was not for the nation of Israel only. In the prophets there is anticipation of the time when non-Israelites would come to worship the Lord and be part of his covenant community (Isa. 49:5–6; Zeph. 2:11).<sup>2</sup> This future covenantal destination would be inclusive of a fully forgiven people (Jer. 31: 33–34) indwelt by the Spirit of God (Ezek. 36:26–27), bought by the shed blood of Jesus Christ (Matt. 26:28; Heb. 9:16–17, 22).

In the old covenant, all are members of a nation, but not all of Israel is truly Israel (Rom. 9:6). In the new covenant, all are members of a community, not by being born spiritually into a particular people group, but by being born again through the work of the Spirit (John 3:1–10). One enters the new covenant community through conversion, attested to by baptism. Thus, while different due to the covenantal expectations under which they operate, OT trajectories are present when noting membership in God’s covenant community.

### Local vs. Universal

The reader may note that what has just been described relates mainly on a universal level. However, the questions that are asked most often about church membership relate to the church as a local institution. Much more will be said on this topic (see Question 9), but at this point it is sufficient that the signs of the new covenant—namely, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s

1. See Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 56–59.

2. For an extended treatment of this OT anticipation of Gentiles being part of God’s covenant community through the work of Jesus Christ, see Jason S. DeRouchie, “Counting Stars with Abraham and the Prophets: New Covenant Ecclesiology in OT Perspective,” *JETS* 58, no. 3 (2015): 445–85. A condensed version is found in “Father of a Multitude of Nations: New Covenant Ecclesiology in OT Perspective,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, eds. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 7–38.

Supper—are what make the church visible and thus local. In other words, God’s people have a visible, corporate, political existence on earth.

Bobby Jamieson helpfully elaborates on this point: “By drawing a line between the church and the world, the ordinances make it possible to point to something and say ‘church’ rather than pointing to many somethings and saying ‘Christians.’ A church is born when gospel people form a gospel polity, and the ordinances are the effective sign of that polity. They give the church visible, institutional form and order. They knit many into one.”<sup>3</sup> Baptism serves as the initiating-oath sign, and the Lord’s Supper as the renewing-oath sign, of the new covenant. These are experienced and shared in local church communities operating within the parameters of the new covenant.

### New Testament Witness

With this background regarding the universal and local church in mind, one should note that membership in a local church is rooted in the dynamic of shared life in the Spirit. Communing members are born of God, and their fellowship is with the Father and with the Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> Church membership goes beyond mere attendance at a weekly gathering; it is participation in a divine reality. Thus, it is a high privilege to assemble with God’s people and participate corporately in communing with God and ministering to one another.

Church membership can be defined simply as a formal commitment or covenant between an individual and a local church.<sup>5</sup> God calls for his people to gather corporately (notice, for example, that most of the NT epistles are addressed to specific churches), to submit to qualified leadership (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9), to come under the teaching of the Scriptures and faithfully partake of the ordinances (Acts 2:37–47; 1 Cor. 11:23–26; 2 Tim. 4:1–2), and to exercise the authority Christ has given to them (Matt. 16:19; 18:17). In Matthew 16, 18, and 28, Jesus gave the apostles and the apostolic church the power of the keys. This authorized the church to guard the gospel, affirm credible professions, to unite such professors to itself, oversee their discipleship, and exclude

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3. Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 144.

4. See Mark Lauterbach, *The Transforming Community: The Practise of the Gospel in Church Discipline* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003), 163.

5. Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, eds. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 32. Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Church Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 234, also helpfully defines church membership as a covenant union between a particular church and a Christian, consisting of the church’s affirmation of the Christian’s gospel profession (Matt. 16:19), the church’s promise to give oversight to the Christian, and the Christian’s promise to gather with the church and submit to its oversight (Heb. 3:12–13; 10:24–25; 13:17).

hypocrites.<sup>6</sup> As the people of God under the new covenant, a local church is committed to the truth that God is identifying them as a people for himself, distinguishing them from the world, calling them to righteousness, making them his witness, using them to display his glory, identifying them with one another, and rendering accountability and protection for members.<sup>7</sup> Thus, a local church gathers for a specific purpose, and they do so as the people of God who have been redeemed through faith in Christ (Col. 1:13–14).

While church membership may not be explicitly demonstrative within the NT, there is certainly evidence to the necessity of its existence within a local church. Observing Hebrews 13:17 and 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13, one can deduce that the kind of accountability spoken of demands a commitment made by an individual to formally join a local church.<sup>8</sup> Merkle also makes the simple point that church discipline as advocated in Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 cannot be properly carried out if a church does not have an official membership roll.<sup>9</sup>

Church members also have particular responsibilities toward one another, most generally that they love each other (John 13:34–35). This love includes watching over one another and holding each other accountable (Rom. 15:14; Gal. 6:1–2; Phil. 2:3–4; 2 Thess. 3:15; Heb. 12:15).<sup>10</sup> These commands to care for one another are given in order that believers would not be hardened by sin but instead would corporately pursue perseverance in the faith (Heb. 3:12–13; 10:24–25).<sup>11</sup> From this evidence one can thus observe the implicit standard of church membership in the NT as a pattern to be followed for today.

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6. Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 180. See also Derek Tidball, *Ministry by the Book: New Testament Patterns for Pastoral Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 24.
  7. See Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 236–70.
  8. Merkle states, “In order for Christians to give respect and recognition to their leaders, they must place themselves under the authority and accountability of those who will shepherd them. . . . Church membership provides the God-ordained means of providing accountability that all sheep need” (“The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” 36–37).
  9. *Ibid.*, 40. In Matthew 18:15–20 we see that the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:19) extend to the local church. As a result, Jonathan Leeman, asserts that “the local church has heaven’s authority for declaring who on earth is a kingdom citizen and therefore represents heaven.” (*Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*, 9Marks [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 61.)
  10. Newport asserts, “The church is not a chance collection of people but a community of believers called and united together by the grace of God—a covenant people. Christian believers therefore accept responsibility for each other and agree to exercise such discipline as is necessary to remain faithful to God’s covenant. The church should take seriously the Bible’s many injunctions to warn, rebuke, exhort, encourage, and build one another up in love” (John P. Newport, “The Purpose of the Church,” in *The People of God: Essays on the Believers’ Church*, eds. Paul Basden, David S. Dockery, and James Leo Garrett [Nashville: Broadman, 1991], 28).
  11. See David Peterson, who aptly observes, “Practical holiness means working out in everyday life and relationships the moral consequences of our union with Christ” (*Possessed*

## Summary

Joining a local church is not just an idea someone came up with recently to ensure better attendance on a Sunday morning. As this chapter has demonstrated, church membership is a biblically defensible doctrine. Beginning with the OT one can see that, while taking into account the covenantal differences between Israel and the church, the nation of Israel was a community with a distinct “membership,” a people who were in covenant with God and one another to live holy lives in the midst of the nations. This membership was being part of a nation with social and political components that differ from the makeup of the church under the new covenant. Nevertheless, the concept of membership and the people of God begins in the OT and serves as a trajectory for NT understanding.

The NT demonstrates that this membership is not merely in the universal church but is also comprised of belonging to and being in covenant with a local assembly of believers. God calls for believers to gather together locally, administer ordinances, exercise the authority of the keys of the kingdom, fulfill the “one another” commands, hold one another accountable, and exercise church discipline. Thus, while church membership is not explicitly mentioned in numerous places throughout the NT, one can see that all of the items listed previously assume and demand that people are gathered together locally and living out and overseeing one another’s discipleship in specific ways. The Bible, therefore, calls us to submit to local church membership.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What OT trajectories can be noted that point someone toward the reality of membership within the people of God?
2. What is mentioned in this chapter that makes the church visible and thus local?
3. How is church membership defined in this chapter?
4. What other dimensions of church life are connected to church membership?
5. How is church membership connected to growth in sanctification?

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*by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, NSBT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 114). In short, church membership demands that we exhort one another regularly so that we will not be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:12–13).