

## QUESTION 1

# Why Are Church Membership and Church Discipline Important?

Throughout its history the church has experienced both moments of cultural ascendancy, as well as periods of ridicule, ostracization, and persecution. In the West we are currently experiencing what Russell Moore describes as “the collapse of the Bible belt,” as Christians find themselves less of a moral majority, and operating more as a prophetic minority.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of how culture views us, the church is called “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3), and if this makes the institutional church less appealing and popular in our day and age, we are not surprised (1 Peter 4:12). We know that the world may not resonate with our message and may not join in fellowship with us, seeing such actions as irrelevant and unnecessary.

We expect this kind of posture from the world around us, but when ambivalence and apathy characterize those who would claim to be Christians in regards to the importance of the institutional church, this presents reason for concern and a call for action. Most Christians are not hostile to these concepts, but at times we struggle to understand the importance or relevance of such concepts to our modern-day lives. As Leeman states, although people have a vague sense that Christians should attend and be involved with a local church, “they would also say it’s not the most important thing in the world, so we shouldn’t make too big a deal about it. If Christians spend several years hopping from church to church, or if they decide to attend one church indefinitely without joining, that’s okay too.”<sup>2</sup> The aim of this book is to refute

- 
1. Russell D. Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 1–10.
  2. Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 18.

such thinking and establish the critical importance of church membership and discipline in the life of the Christian.

### The Importance of the Church

In terms of “theological triage”—the ordering of doctrine as it relates to its proximity to the gospel—the doctrine of the church can often be overlooked today in comparison to other doctrines.<sup>3</sup> The deity of Christ, justification by faith alone, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the atoning work of Christ are just a few examples of issues that are more tightly tethered to the truths of the gospel. However, given the fact that the doctrine of the church is not the most important, that does not make it unneeded or unimportant. In fact, one should recognize that ecclesiology is connected to the doctrines of God and salvation and, as such, must be factored into our understanding of theology and redemptive history.

John Webster notes that God relates both to himself (immanent Trinity) as well as to his creation (economic Trinity). God is intrinsically perfect in his life and activity.<sup>4</sup> But, continues Webster, “within that life and act there is a movement or turning *ad extra*, in which out of his own perfection God wills and establishes creatures.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, God did not remain as a Being merely relating to himself, he also created for his glory and is relationally involved with his creation.<sup>6</sup> In holy love and grace God creates humanity as his image-bearers and the pinnacle of creation (Gen. 1:26–28). Due to the Fall, humanity is in need of saving grace, and the church is “the society of those elected, called, redeemed, sanctified, and glorified in Jesus Christ.”<sup>7</sup> In this way, the doctrine of the church is grounded in the perfections of God and the grace of the gospel.

Based on these points, Allison summarizes the necessity and importance of the church in the following way: “[Ecclesiology] is part and parcel of (1) the eternal purpose of God in redeeming his fallen human creatures; (2) the Father’s mighty work in regard to the exaltation of his humiliated and crucified Son; (3) the eternal divine counsel with regard to the revelation of himself

3. For more on the concept of theological triage, see R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Conservative Evangelicalism,” in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 68–96; idem, “The Pastor as Theologian,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2014), 725–26.

4. John Webster, “On Evangelical Ecclesiology,” *Ecclesiology* 1, no. 1 (2004): 12–13.

5. *Ibid.*, 13. For more on the connection between God as Trinitarian and the church as Christ’s bride purchased by the Father see Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies (Entry Nos. 501–832),” no. 741, *WJE* 18, ed. Ava Chamberlain (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 367–68.

6. For an extended treatment dealing with God creating for his glory, see Jonathan Edwards, “Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,” in *WJE* 8, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 405–536.

7. Webster, “On Evangelical Ecclesiology,” 10.

and his ways; and (4) prophetic Scripture that assigns an important role to the church in the outworking of salvation.<sup>8</sup> As such, while ecclesiology may not be the doctrine that holds highest importance, it is a necessary area of study due to its close connection to other crucial doctrines (e.g., God and salvation). And this in turn gives credence for understanding the doctrine of church membership and church discipline to also be of great value.

### The Importance of Church Membership

Church membership and church discipline are both connected to the realities of community and authority. However, in societies that possess a strong individualist impulse, consumeristic bent, or a resistance to authoritative structures, the call for joining a church formally and submitting to God-given authority is often not well received. The question of authority is relevant to the discussion of local church membership and discipline, because membership and discipline involve a life of submission.<sup>9</sup> This life of submission begins with what we might call the “front door” to the church, namely, church membership.

There are numerous reasons one should consider church membership to be an important doctrine, but three initial reasons are worth surveying here. First, as disciples we are called to persevere in the faith, and this is an ongoing community project. We are called to exhort one another day after day so that we are not hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:12–13) and not to neglect meeting together so we can stir each other up to love and good works (Heb. 10:23–25). Perseverance in the faith is not something we do merely on our own; it is meant to be pursued with brothers and sisters in Christ gathered around the Word of God, encouraging each other to put off sin and run the race with perseverance (Heb. 12:1–2).

Second, the covenant commitment of the local church makes the invisible new covenant visible.<sup>10</sup> We cannot see, hear, or smell a person being united to Christ and receiving his Spirit by faith, though it is real and eternal. Christ, however, intended for the realities of the gospel as displayed in the new covenant to show up on earth. Christians join a local church in membership, show the initiation of their covenant relationship with Christ through baptism, and demonstrate continual celebration of and submission to the new covenant and that local community through the Lord’s Supper.<sup>11</sup> These acts within a local church make the truths of the new covenant manifest for other church members, as well as for an unbelieving world.

---

8. Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 59. Allison is quick to point out that the “necessity” of the church is derivative and instrumental, not causative and foundational.

9. 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), 68.

10. Question 5 will deal with this point in much more detail.

11. Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 268.

Finally, as we conceive of what a church is, we must understand that a church is its membership. In other words, the actual constitution of the church, what its makeup consists of, is people joined in covenant with one another to oversee each other's growth in discipleship.<sup>12</sup> With this understanding, if we take away church membership, we negate the reality of the church as a visible entity.

### The Importance of Church Discipline

As one considers the cultural consequences of individualism, consumerism, and aversion to authority, it must also be noted that church discipline is a necessary reality as the “back door” of the church. Again, many more reasons will be enumerated for the importance of ecclesial discipline, but here we offer three. First, the practice of discipline is explicitly mandated in Scripture. Matthew 18:15–20 and 1 Corinthians 5:1–13—along with a number of other passages—specify in detail the methodology and reasoning for such a practice. With such clear warrant and direction from Scripture, it is imperative that we approach this area of church life with care.

Second, as counterintuitive as it sounds, discipline is a proper demonstration of the biblical concept of love. God disciplines those whom he loves (Heb. 12:6–11), and thus a church who claims to love its members without disciplining them contradicts Scripture and offers a different kind of love than God does.<sup>13</sup> Church discipline can potentially be a painful process, but as a spiritual family we are called to work through such matters faithfully and gently. Not only are we called to go through this process in a loving manner, the very act of discipline should be seen as an act of love.

Finally, as with membership, discipline is tied to the call for a persevering faith. Part of the work within membership to encourage one another to endure in the faith includes the process of church discipline. We undergo this process not merely to punish someone, but to call them to repentance. If someone undergoes the final step of church discipline, often referred to as excommunication, the church is essentially saying about that individual that they do not see the fruits of salvation exhibited in their lives in a demonstrative way. Their stubborn refusal to repent of sin does not characterize a Christian, and thus excommunication is a declarative sign of potential end-time judgment.<sup>14</sup> As such, the point of such an action is to call that person to repentance, and if they take that step we lovingly restore them to the body of Christ. Discipline, therefore, is a crucial practice for the life of the church.

---

12. See Leeman, *Church Membership*, 46–47.

13. Thomas White, “The Why, How, and When of Church Discipline,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, eds. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 201–2.

14. This point will be receive further elaboration in Question 39.

**Summary**

Though it can be argued that the doctrine of the church is not the central topic of Scripture, the theme of God's people across the Testaments is of vital significance. God purposed to save a people through the redeeming work of his Son, and thus the church is connected in noteworthy ways to the doctrines of God and salvation. Bearing this in mind, church membership and church discipline define in greater detail key doctrinal truths such as regeneration, perseverance of the saints, God's love and holiness, and end-time judgment. These are not mere cultural monikers dreamt up by people who thought it would be helpful in organizing the church more efficiently. These doctrines have real biblical warrant and theological import, and thus are worthy of further investigation for the good of the church and the fame of God's name.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. Though the doctrine of the church may not be central, why is it still important?
2. What is the concept known as "theological triage"?
3. What is the importance of church membership?
4. What is the importance of church discipline?
5. How is God's love and holiness evident in the practices of church membership and church discipline?