



REDEEMER  BIBLE CHURCH

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP



FIND YOURSELF IN
MEMBERSHIP

THE BIBLE AND LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Local church membership is a peculiar thing. On the one hand, the New Testament is very clear that there is such a thing as membership in the local church. On the other hand, it's not so clear about how people formally enter that membership.

When you think of membership, think simply of belonging, of being a part of a whole, of entering a community. Understood this way, it is clear that when people became Christians they became a part of a local congregation. Acts 2:41 is a representative example: "So those who received [the Apostle Peter's] word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls."

On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached a sermon that resulted in three thousand conversions. And Luke (Acts' author) reports that the three thousand were "added." Added to what? They were added to the local Christian community in Jerusalem. Acts 1:15 says that the Jerusalem church started out with "about 120" people. Peter's sermon, following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, resulted in that number increasing 30 times! And although a church increasing its size 30-fold in a single morning is worth celebrating, the point here is simply that the three thousand were added to the Christian "company of persons" that already existed in Jerusalem prior to Pentecost.

Moreover, the New Testament sees belonging to a local church as an entailment of becoming a Christian. In fact, the language of Acts 2:41 is grammatically passive ("there were added that day about three thousand souls"), which means that being added to the church is not something that these Christians did to or for themselves, but is something that was done to them.

Whenever you encounter a passive verb, it's helpful to try to assign a subject to that verb - to look around the context to discover who is performing the action. If these believers didn't add themselves to the

Jerusalem membership, who did? The answer is that the Lord did. Acts 2:47 makes the connection explicit: “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Therefore, the same Lord who saved them is the one who added them to the local Christian community. In this sense, coming to Christ involves belonging to the local church. A member of a local church is who a Christian is.

And yet, so often, especially in a culture like ours, with a long history of volunteerism, church life gets reduced to a mere activity: “What do you have going on this weekend?” “Well, we’ve got to go to the cross country meet and the tennis match and my book club and...oh, yeah...church.” It’s just one of the many activities on the list of the busy suburbanite. But according to the New Testament, your membership in a local church is not an activity; it’s part of your Christian identity.

So then, the Bible is clear that there is such a thing as membership in a local church.

Yet as we mentioned earlier, Scripture is not so clear on a formal process for membership. Indeed, there isn’t a single example in the New Testament that teaches or describes a specific, transferrable process for incorporating people into the local church. Because of this, some Christians have even claimed that the idea of local church membership lies outside the scope of the Bible’s teaching.

But simply because something is not explicitly taught in Scripture does not mean it is not biblical. Inferences from the Bible, if they are reasonably deduced from Scripture, are just as binding for Christians. When it comes to local church membership, even though there is no specific process for adding Christians to local churches, it’s apparent that one must have existed; otherwise, many Scriptures would simply make no sense. Here are just three examples:

- *1 Cor 5:11-13: “But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you.”*

In this passage, the Apostle Paul refers to insiders and outsiders of the church. In order to have such a thing as insiders and outsiders, you have to be able to distinguish between the two. How would the church at

Corinth have done so without some way to identify those who belonged?

- *1 Cor 14:23: "If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?"*

Here, Paul mentions "the whole church," and if the Corinthians could know when the whole church was gathered, the implication is that there were a definite number of believers in Corinth who were expected to gather together. How could such a number be identified without any procedures for doing so?

More than that, this passage talks about the entrance of outsiders and unbelievers to the congregation. Again we could ask how the congregation would know that the whole church was gathered and at the same time distinguish between outsiders or unbelievers, without some form of recognition for those affiliated with the church and those who aren't. The whole church of Corinth would not have been small enough to spot what we would call a "guest."

- *2 Cor 2:6: "For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough."*

How can you have a "majority" without a definite number of members in the church? There must have been some list or way of identifying the people of the congregation.

Verses like these make no sense without one.

In addition to passages like these, the New Testament describes aspects of church life that will not work unless some formal connection to the local assembly exists. For example,

- Without a formal connection to the local church, you can't properly participate in the Lord's Table because according to 1 Cor 11:29 a prerequisite for taking Communion is to make sure all is well between you and your brothers and sisters in your local church. If you don't know who belongs to the church, how can you apply this text?
- Without a formal connection to the local church, you make pastoral care difficult and even perilous for your pastors. Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your leaders and submit to those who rule over you, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for it would be unprofitable for you." According to this verse, pastors have to give an account for their sheep on the Day of Judgment. How can pastors faithfully discharge this duty without knowing who is actually under their care?

- Without a formal connection to the local church, you can't obey your leaders (Heb 13:17). How can you obey your leaders without knowing who they are?
- Without a formal connection to the local church, you can't practice church discipline (Matt 18:15-20). In the third stage of church discipline, Jesus says that if brothers or sisters refuse to repent after two or three have tried to win them back to the Lord (stage two), we should tell it to the church. Clearly, Jesus isn't talking about the universal church. He's talking about the local church. If people are not formally connected to a particular local church, how will we know which church to inform of the failure at stage two?
- Without a formal connection to the local church, you lose a key element of the assurance of salvation (Matt 18:15-20). Membership exists in part to verify your claim to be a Christian. If the church welcomes you into its fellowship, all things being equal, there is a very real sense in which the Lord himself is saying that you are a bona fide Christian.

Is local church membership biblical? Absolutely. But since the process the early church used for formally including people in local churches isn't transparent in the New Testament, we are left to use our judgment for a process that will enable us to walk in step with the Bible's clear teaching about membership.

THE BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP

The number one reason why you should be a member of a local church is that it's biblical. Our beliefs are only legitimately Christian to the extent that they are truly biblical. But if your only motivation for membership is a desire to do what the Bible says, you may find your interest wavering. Scripture doesn't set forth the priority of local church membership without giving reasons for it. Consider the following benefits of joining yourself to a local congregation:

PROTECTION (1 COR 5:5; 1 TIM 1:20; 4:1-6): Pastors have been charged with protecting the flock, especially from teaching that undermines the gospel. By joining a local church, you avail yourself of the blessing of the watchful eye of qualified Bible-teachers. And although, as we mention below, you can receive plenty of helpful teaching through various media, the people who teach you from a distance cannot help you detect the false teaching in the details of your life.

GUIDANCE (1 PET 5:1-3): If you are not a member of a local church, you forfeit the benefit of the guidance that pastors have been called to give you. While the leaders of RBC are more than willing to counsel and advise anyone who walks through our doors, our first responsibility is to those we know are under our care.

CARE (JAS 5:14; 1 PET 5:1-3): Prayer for your needs – especially for the needs you don't instinctively ask the Lord to meet – is one of the key ways the pastors of a local church care for their flock. In addition, we care for our sheep by feeding them God's word and by looking after the weakest of our congregation. A local church membership process allows us to know those whom the Lord has placed under our care.

FELLOWSHIP (ACTS 2:41-47): The “one-anothers” of the New Testament may be the most underutilized and overlooked texts in Scripture (see below). Loving one another, encouraging one another, admonishing one another, singing to one another – these take place in the life of the local church. Much like pastoral care, without entering the membership, it becomes impossible for your brothers and sisters in Christ to know their level of responsibility to you.

INSTRUCTION (EPH 4:11-16): While it’s true that there is a lot of wonderful teaching available through various media (radio, television, and especially the internet), God’s intention is not that you would be instructed by a talking head with whom you have no real relationship. His design is to deliver the truth in community in three ways: (1) publicly, through the preaching of God’s word on Sundays; (2) privately, through your own devotional life; and (3) interpersonally, through the other members of your local church “speaking the truth in love” to one another (Eph 4:15-16). Though it may be possible to experience (1) & (2), number (3) can’t be experienced without belonging to a local church under the care of pastors and teachers (Eph 4:11).

DISCIPLINE (MATT 18:15-17): Discipline may sound more like a drawback than a benefit of local church membership, but it’s not. Church discipline is mainly formative discipline – the discipline that forms you more into the image of Jesus Christ. Having other people hold up the mirror of God’s word to us, showing us the opportunities for change that we wouldn’t otherwise discover on our own, is one of the key ways you become more like Jesus. It is only the final stage of church discipline that is punitive, and yet, even that has a positive effect on the membership at large. On the rare occasions when people are put out of the fellowship, the remainder of the congregation is exhorted to take their sin more seriously and comforted by the loving boundaries put in place by the heavenly father.

OUR PROCESS FOR LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

When it comes to local church membership, your past church experience can weigh you down with preconceived notions as to how membership ought to work.

Many, if not most, evangelical churches today do not stress membership in a local church. It is rare for it even to be mentioned. And occasionally, some churches will resist membership as an unbiblical invention. Where membership is a part of congregational life, it frequently lacks biblical underpinnings. For example, attendees are added to a membership roll after a specified number of visits, a roll about which the new “members” know little, if anything. In cases where people explicitly join a church, the mutual commitments are often lop-sided: pastoral staff does the heavy lifting in the relationship while members are charged with nothing more than a financial commitment. As wonderful and necessary as those financial commitments are, there is much more to local church membership than writing a check.

So when you begin to spend time at Redeemer and hear our emphasis on membership, we may seem radical by comparison. Yet as we’ve seen, the early churches had lists of members and some kind of procedure for adding members to their rolls. RBC is not introducing something new to contemporary local church life, but reintroducing something old – doing what we can to apply the biblical principles of local church membership in our congregation in the Twin Cities.

OUR PROCESS OF MEMBERSHIP HAS FOUR PARTS

REDEEMER 101: Once each quarter we offer an introductory class for prospective members offering an overview of our vision, values, doctrine, polity, and ministries. During this class we will also offer the biblical rationale for church membership. Redeemer 101 is an informal time of teaching and conversation designed to be both engaging and informative.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION: After prospective members have taken Redeemer 101, they are encouraged to submit their application to the church office.

MEMBERSHIP INTERVIEW: Once the application is received, the office will schedule an interview for prospective members with a couple of RBC elders. Following a favorable interview, they will be received into membership and presented to the congregation as new members of the RBC faith family.

MINISTRY INVOLVEMENT: After being received into membership, we will provide a specific platform for new members to explore the various ministries at RBC in an effort to help them get plugged into serving Christ's body.

ADDITIONAL MEMBERSHIP REQUIREMENTS

Aside from the class, application, and interview described above, the only additional requirements are that each member gives a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ and has been baptized as a believer according to Christ's command.

The reason that faith and baptism are required for church membership is that these are the requirements given for membership in the New Testament: "So those who received [the Apostle Peter's] word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). First, they received the word; that is, they believed the gospel Peter preached. Second, they were baptized. And third, they were added to the Jerusalem church. The pattern for membership at Redeemer is the same.

We also ask you to affirm your agreement with our church doctrine in the basic areas.

WE BELIEVE in the inspiration, inerrancy, authenticity, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture.

WE BELIEVE in the absolute sovereignty of the Triune God - God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

WE BELIEVE in the essential deity of Jesus Christ. His virgin birth, His sinless life, His vicarious death, and His physical resurrection from the dead.

WE BELIEVE that Jesus Christ is presently in heaven fulfilling His role as our High Priest and Advocate.

WE BELIEVE in the total depravity of man and the necessity of regeneration.

WE BELIEVE that salvation is the free gift of God, entirely apart from works, and is possessed permanently by all who have trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from sin and eternal life with God.

WE BELIEVE that the Holy Spirit is a divine person indwelling all believers. His baptism is the sovereign work of God that occurs at the moment of conversion whereby the Holy Spirit places believers permanently in the body of Christ, the church.

WE BELIEVE that the church is made up of all those who have come to God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone - plus or minus nothing.

WE BELIEVE in the personal and imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

WE BELIEVE in the bodily resurrection of the just and the unjust; the everlasting blessedness of the saved and the everlasting punishment of the lost.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

CHURCH COVENANT

Having, as we trust, been brought by divine grace to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and having been baptized upon our profession of faith in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we do now, relying on his gracious aid, solemnly and joyously covenant with one another.

- We will work and pray for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
- We will walk together in brotherly love, as befits the members of the Christian church, exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other and faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require.
- We will not forsake our own assembling together, nor neglect to pray for ourselves and others.
- We will endeavor by a pure and loving example to seek the salvation of our families and friends.
- We will endeavor to raise our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.
- We will rejoice at one another's happiness, and endeavor with tenderness and sympathy to fellowship in one another's sorrow and suffering.
- We will seek, by divine aid, to live carefully in the world, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, and remembering that as we have been buried by baptism and raised again from the symbolic grave, so there is on us a solemn obligation to lead a renewed and holy life.
- We will work together for the continuance of a faithful evangelical ministry in this church as we sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines.

- We will contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel to all nations.
- We will, when we move from this place, as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's word.

FAQS

WHEN SHOULD I BECOME A MEMBER OF REDEEMER BIBLE CHURCH?

The short answer is that you should enter the membership as soon as you're able. At the same time, it is important for you to know what membership at RBC entails before making a commitment of this kind. So we recommend what we call "the six-week experiment." Attend everything for six weeks, not just the stated meetings, but the optional ones as well. Then, enroll in Redeemer 101. This approach will put you in the best position to make an informed decision about membership at Redeemer.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING A MEMBERSHIP INTERVIEW?

Membership interviews are conducted by the elders of Redeemer and last approximately thirty minutes. Every interview has six parts: (1) a brief oral version of your Christian testimony as well as a succinct summary of the gospel message; (2) follow-up questions by the elders; (3) questions from the candidate(s); (4) an invitation from the elders for candidates to ask additional questions; (5) a reminder of the membership commitment; and (6) signing of the Church Covenant. Under normal circumstances, candidates are welcomed into membership on the spot.

WHAT IF MY JOB PREVENTS ME FROM FAITHFULLY ATTENDING THE STATED MEETINGS?

Your job can't prevent you from faithfully attending Redeemer's stated meetings, only from perfectly attending Redeemer's stated meetings. Faithful Christians' first responsibility is to fulfill their various callings in the world. Sometimes those callings prohibit them from being as present as they would like to be with their church. Business trips, manufacturing schedules, law enforcement, nursing, on-call medical/surgical activity, and other vocations can make perfect attendance impossible. This

explains why we set the bar at faithful, rather than perfect, attendance at our stated meetings.

At the same time, if there is a way to rearrange your schedule to allow you to attend our stated meetings, we would recommend you do so – for your own sake, and especially for the sake of your brothers and sisters who miss out on your unique contribution to church life by your absence.

IS THERE AN AGE REQUIREMENT FOR MEMBERS' CHILDREN ENTERING THE MEMBERSHIP?

There is not a minimum age; instead, our policy is that once children are out of their parents' care, they should come under the elders' care on their own. Generally speaking, "under their parents' care" means that they are dependent on their parents for the necessities of life. If you're a high school or a college student still effectively dependent on your parents to survive, then we would consider you as part of a Redeemer member family. If, on the other hand, you are a college graduate, or married with children, still living under your parents' roof for any number of other reasons, we would encourage you to enter the membership apart from your parents.

High school or college students whose parents are not yet Christians or are otherwise not a part of Redeemer are welcome to join our church.

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