



# Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 6 – THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH  
LESSON 104 – CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

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# Membership Matters

- ▶ Commitment is rare so it should come as no surprise that so many believers make church membership such a low priority. Sadly it is not uncommon for Christians to move from church to church, never submitting themselves to the loving oversight of elders and never committing themselves to a group of fellow believers.
- ▶ To neglect, or refuse to join a church as a formal member, however, reflects a misunderstanding of the believer's responsibility to the body of Christ. And it also cuts one off from the many blessings and opportunities that flow from this commitment.
- ▶ It is essential for every believer to understand what church membership is and why it matters.

# Defining Church Membership

- ▶ When an individual is saved, he becomes a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13).
- ▶ Because he is united with Christ and the other members of the body in this way, he is therefore qualified to become a member of a local expression of that body – a member of a local church.
- ▶ To become a member of a local church is to formally commit oneself to an identifiable body of believers who have joined together for a specific, divinely ordained purpose.
- ▶ These purposes include worshiping God (John 4:23), receiving instruction from God's Word (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2), serving and edifying one another through the proper use of spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-31; 1 Peter 4:10-11), participating in the ordinances (Luke 22:19; Acts 2:38-42), and proclaiming the gospel to those who are lost.

# Defining Church Membership

- ▶ When one becomes a member of a church, he submits himself to the care and the authority of the biblically qualified elders whom God has placed in that assembly (Heb. 13:7, 17).
- ▶ From the PRBC Church Constitution: This congregation exists in order to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37), to worship God alone (Luke 4:8; Revelation 22:9), to advance the Kingdom of God around the world through the making of disciples of all people (Matthew 28:19-20), to equip believers in Jesus Christ for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Romans 8:29), and to preach and teach the Word of God (Romans 1:16-17; Mark 16:15). As believers in Jesus Christ, we band ourselves together by covenant to be loving and obedient citizens in the Kingdom of God. Our only rule for living shall be found in the Holy Scriptures. (See Church Covenant attached).



# Biblical Basis for Church Membership

- ▶ The Biblical foundation for church membership, while not contained in a specific command, does permeate the New Testament. This basis can be seen in 1) the example of the early church, 2) the existence of church government, 3) the exercise of church discipline, and 4) the exhortation to mutual edification.
- ▶ 1) The Example of the Early Church – in the New Testament we see a clear picture that coming to Christ was also to come to the church. The idea of experiencing salvation without then belonging to a local church is foreign to the text of Scripture.
- ▶ When individuals repented and believed in Christ, they were baptized and brought into the church (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 16:5).

# Biblical Basis for Church Membership

- ▶ More than simply living out a private commitment to Christ, this meant formally joining together and identifying with other believers in a local assembly and devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread (ordinances), and prayer (Acts 2:42).
- ▶ The epistles of the New Testament were written to specific churches, and while often shared with one another, we see that they are addressed to the main congregation for which the letter was intended. Some were written to individuals (Timothy, Titus, Philemon).
- ▶ The letters also show us that the church was expected to have a list of widows eligible for financial support (1 Tim. 5:9), and there may also have been a list of members that grew as people were added to the church by being saved (Acts 2:41, 47).

# Biblical Basis for Church Membership

- ▶ We also see evidence that when a believer moved to another city, his church often wrote a letter to send with him commending him to the new congregation (Acts 18:27; Rom. 16:1; Col. 4:10; 2 Cor. 3:1-2). These letters would be impossible to write if these believers were not known by and associated with and accountable to their local church and its leadership.
- ▶ The book of Acts uses terminology that fits with the concept of formal church membership: “the whole congregation”, “the church at Jerusalem”, “the disciples”, “in every church”, “the whole church”, and “the elders of the church” at Ephesus (Acts 6:5; 8:1; 9:26; 14:23; 15:22; 20:17).
- ▶ Unless one knows who the members of the church are, one cannot say whether the whole church is present. In other words, knowing that the whole church has gathered implies that the leadership is aware of everyone who belongs to that local congregation, which, in turn, implies recognized membership.

# Biblical Basis for Church Membership

- ▶ 2) The Existence of Church Government – The New Testament displays a consistent pattern of elders overseeing each local body of believers – elders specific to each local church. Their instructions and duties presuppose a clearly defined group of church members under their care and specific souls for whom they will one day give an account (Heb. 13:17).
- ▶ Among other things, these godly men are responsible to shepherd God's people (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2), to labor diligently among them (1 Thess. 5:12), to have charge over them (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17), and to keep watch over their souls (Heb. 13:17).
- ▶ These responsibilities require that there be a distinguishable, mutually understood membership in the local church.



# Biblical Basis for Church Membership

- ▶ Elders can shepherd their people, provide oversight for them, and give an account to God for their spiritual well being only if they know who is part of the flock and who is not.
- ▶ The elders of a church are not responsible for the spiritual well being of every individual who visits the church or those who attend sporadically, rather, they are primarily responsible to shepherd those who have submitted themselves to the care and leadership of the elders, and this is done through church membership.
- ▶ Conversely, Scripture teaches that believers are to submit to their elders. The question to each believer then is, “Who are your leaders?”
- ▶ The one who has refused to join a local church and entrust himself to the care of the elders has no leaders. Hebrews 13:17 implies that each believer should know to whom he must submit and obey in the church, which assumes a clearly defined membership in the church.

# Biblical Basis for Church Membership

- ▶ 3) The Exercise of Church Discipline – As noted previously, Matthew 18:15-17 outlines how the church is to seek the restoration of a believer who has fallen into sin – a 4 step process known as church discipline.
- ▶ The exercise of church discipline according to Matthew 18 and other passages (1 Cor. 5:1-13; 1 Tim. 5:20; Titus 3:10-11) presupposes that the elders of a church know who their members are.
- ▶ Without any kind of formal relationship between the congregation and its leaders there would be no basis for the spiritual accountability that the New Testament requires.
- ▶ Further, when disciplined, unrepentant individuals are “put out” of the church and to be excluded – you cannot put out one who has not been put in.

# Biblical Basis for Church Membership

- ▶ 4) The Exhortation to Mutual Edification – the New Testament teaches that the church is the body of Christ and that God has called every member to a life devoted to the growth of the body. In other words, Scripture exhorts all believers to edify the other members by practicing the “one another” commands of the New Testament.
- ▶ Members are also to exercise their spiritual gifts within the body for mutual edification and the building up of the body in love.
- ▶ Living out a commitment to a local church involves many responsibilities: exemplifying a godly lifestyle, exercising spiritual gifts, contributing financially to the work of the ministry, giving and receiving admonition with meekness and love, and faithfully participating in corporate worship.

# Church Membership Covenant

- ▶ Our church has formalized our membership commitment to the church (to one another and the Lord) by signing a Church Covenant. This is not a document that can be used to prevent people from leaving the church (as some churches have so used a covenant), but it is a formal recognition that being a member of the body with one another matters and means that we have responsibilities to one another in obedience to Christ's commands given to us in Scripture.
- ▶ Our Church Covenant was written by Benjamin Keach for use in his church in 1689, and it was also adopted and used later by Charles Spurgeon at his church, and by many other Reformed Baptist churches throughout history.



# Church Membership Covenant

- ▶ We who desire to walk together in obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ and His Word, do, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, profess our deep and serious humiliation for all our transgressions. We also solemnly in the presence of God and of each other, in the sense of our own unworthiness, surrender ourselves to the Lord in a local church body according to the New Testament pattern, that He may be our God, and we may be His people, through the New and Everlasting Covenant of His free grace, in which alone we do hope to be accepted by Him, through His blessed Son Jesus Christ, Whom we take to be our High Priest to justify and sanctify us, our Prophet to teach us, and our King to rule over us in order that we may conform to all His Holy Laws and Ordinances for our growth, establishment, and consolation, that we may be His holy bride, serving Him in our generation, waiting for His second coming as our glorious Bridegroom.

# Church Membership Covenant

- ▶ Being fully convinced and persuaded of the Biblical pattern for church life, and of the presence of the Truth of Grace in some good measure in one another's lives, we do solemnly join ourselves together in holy union and fellowship, humbly submitting to the discipline of the Gospel, and all the holy duties required of a people in such spiritual communion.
- ▶ 1. We do promise and covenant to walk in all holiness, godliness, and brotherly love as much as is possible to render our fellowship delightful to God, pleasing to each other, and lovely to the rest of God's people.
- ▶ 2. We do promise and covenant to watch over one another and not sin against one another, so far as God shall reveal it to us, or to any of us, and to stir up one another to love and good works; to warn, rebuke, and admonish one another with meekness, according to the will of God as recorded in His Word.

# Church Membership Covenant

- ▶ 3. We do promise and covenant especially to pray for one another, and for the increase and growth of the Church, and for the presence of God in it, and for the pouring forth of the Holy Spirit on it, and His protection over it to His glory alone.
- ▶ 4. We do promise and covenant to bear one another's burdens, to cleave to one another, and to have fellowship with one another as members of the Body of Christ, in all conditions both outward and inward, as God in His providence shall place any of us into.
- ▶ 5. We do promise and covenant to bear with one another's weaknesses, failings, and infirmities, with much tenderness and love, not publicly revealing these things to anyone outside the Church, or any within, except doing so according to Christ's rule and the order of the Gospel provided in that case.
- ▶ 6. We do promise and covenant to grow together in the truths of the Gospel and the purity of God's ways and ordinances, to avoid causing (and the Causers of) disputes and division, endeavoring at all times to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

# Church Membership Covenant

- ▶ 7. We do promise and covenant to meet together on Lord's Days and at other times, as the Lord shall give us opportunities, to serve and glorify God in the way of His worship, to edify one another, and to work together for the good of the Church.
- ▶ 8. We do promise and covenant, according to our ability (or as God shall bless us with the good things of this world) to share in provision for our pastor and ministers, God having ordained that they that preach the Gospel should live by the Gospel.
- ▶ These and all other Gospel duties we humbly submit to, promising and purposing to perform, not in our own strength, being aware of our own weakness, but in the power and strength of the Blessed God whose we are, and Whom we desire to serve – to Whom be glory now and forevermore. Amen.



# Members of One Another

- ▶ 1 Corinthians 12:12 For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. 14 For in fact the body is not one member but many. 15 If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? 16 And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? 18 But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. 19 And if they were all one member, where would the body be?

# Members of One Another

- ▶ 1 Corinthians 12:20 But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. 21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. 23 And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, 24 but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, 25 that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. 26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. 27 Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.