

Reference: VARIOUS

Church: GRACE

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Membership of the Church

Purpose: To show the Biblical case for Church Membership

1. Introduction

We are in the midst of a series on the Church

We have looked at:

- The invisible church and the visible church
- The marks of a true church
- The purpose of the church
- The government of the church – Elders and Deacons
- Inter-church relationships

Now move on to look at membership

Important to do so in this day and age

Many have very loose ideas:

Regard keeping lists as very formal, old-fashioned

Prefer more informality – spontaneity

This sounds very spiritual, but what does Scripture say?

We will look at the Biblical evidence for church membership

Also make deductions from the nature of the church

2. Lists and Numbers in the NT Church

There was no reluctance to number the church in the Bible!

In OT also, numbering and listing were very common

Not surprising to find it in the church too

God is a God of order, not of chaos

2.1. **Numbered members**

Many indications that church numbers were known:

Acts 2:41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

Acts 2:47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 4:4 But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.

Acts 6:7 The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

Believers names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life

2.2. **Lists of people**

Also find keeping lists in OT and in NT

Numbers 3:40 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Number every firstborn male of the sons of Israel from a month old and upward, and make a list of their names.

1 Timothy 5:9-11 A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man,¹⁰ having a reputation for good works; and if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, and if she has devoted herself to every good work. 11 But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married,

So it's a modern phenomenon to abandon this

The Biblical approach is to keep careful records of these things

3. Joining the church – NT evidence

Also find evidence of people joining the church

Acts 5:12-13 At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. 13 But none of the rest dared to associate (**Lit glue, join**) with them; however, the people held them in high esteem.

v13 Unlikely to refer to people walking up to hear/see

They could all do this in such a public place

This is talking about becoming an adherent (literally!)

Clearly the church was separate form the world

Joining it meant becoming a member

See something very similar with Paul

After conversion and return from Damascus to Jerusalem:

Acts 9:26-28 When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate (**Lit, glue or join**) with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord.

This sounds remarkably like a church membership procedure

Paul was kept out of the church

Barnabas sponsored him and brought him to the apostles

Then he was received and began to serve

4. Argument from Church Discipline

The Lord has established the church for nurture and protection
The elders watch over the flock as those who must give account

They exercise authority over the Lord's people

This has been established for the good of the believer – why?

To keep on the narrow path

And for the purity of the church – why?

To prevent gross sin creeping into the church

And for the glory of God – why?

The church bears His name – she must be pure

What is the ultimate sanction in Church discipline?

To put out of the church and bar from the Lord's table:

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. 2 You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, **so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.** 3 For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. 4 In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 I have decided **to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh**, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. 6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? 7 Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. 8 Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. 9 I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; 10 I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. 11 But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. 12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? 13 But those who are outside, God judges. **Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.**

This passage is a clear indication of church membership:

How can someone be put out of the church if they never joined?

When people join the church, they acknowledge authority:

Vow to submit to the government of the church

Recognize elders' right to rule them with Christ's authority

What would be the case if there were no membership?

How could there be discipline?

How could the elders rule?

How would elders know who was in the flock and who was not?

5. Argument from separation

1 Corinthians 5:12 For what have I to do with judging **outsiders**? Do you not judge those who are within the church?

Colossians 4:5 Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward **outsiders**, making the most of the opportunity.

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, 12 so that you will behave properly toward **outsiders** and not be in any need.

Many churches abandon formal membership

Try to get people involved in programs very early on

Keep them coming by getting them involved

Not too concerned about their spiritual condition

Make them feel involved and valued

What is wrong with this?

Lots of things!

5.1. **Giving the wrong message**

Need to maintain a distinction

Unbelievers are not part of the church

And should never be made to feel that they are

Need to realize they are are “outsiders”

Did they try to get Paul involved in Jerusalem?

We welcome outsiders to hear the Gospel

But we do not get them involved in service

Until they have given credible testimony

Until they have committed themselves to the church

Until they are subject to its government

5.2. **Church purity**

If unbelievers serve – no good will be done

Will the Lord bless their efforts?

Should we condone them, since motives cannot be right?

Also opportunity for scandal and injury to church reputation

What about believers who are not members?

Should they serve as a regular practice?

No – service is a privilege of membership
And is to be done in submission to the elders
If people have not submitted to the rule of the elders
How could it be right that they serve in the church?

6. Argument from the Invisible Church

6.1. *Purity of the church*

We know that Visible church should resemble Invisible
All members of the invisible church are believers
As far as possible, communicant members must be believers
That is why they are examined by the elders -
To determine if they have a credible profession
If not, they will not be admitted to the church
Because the church must be kept pure

6.2. *Unity of the church*

Likewise, **all** believers are members of the Invisible church
It cannot be otherwise
So all believers should be members of the visible church – local
fellowship
Otherwise comparison is less clear
Scripture doesn't portray people wandering around
Those who do so will never grow in the faith
Why not?

- No oversight
- No discipline
- No consistent Ministry
- No fellowship

7. Argument from right administration of the Sacraments

The table is “fenced” - Restricted to members
Also to members in good standing in like-minded churches
Why?

- Because they have been examined and have a credible profession
- Because they are not under church discipline and barred

How could this work at all if there were no membership of the church?
How could only those entitled be invited to the table?

8. Conclusions

Have examined many arguments for church membership
Flow from all that we have seen on the church before
These are challenging thoughts
Not commonly taught in churches today
Have abandoned these principles
Those of you who are not members but regular attendees – join!
For all the reasons we have seen:

- The good of the church – strengthen and encourage
- To open doors for service
- The good of your souls – under godly rule
- The glory of God – clearer picture of the invisible church
- Great blessing in being a part of the Lord's work

Challenge those already in membership
This is a high and holy calling
Are you active for the Lord?
Are you in submission to the rule of the elders?
Are you committed to all the saints of God in this place?
Renew and redouble your efforts and He will bless!