

# WHAT IS MEMBERSHIP?

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A Resource for those thinking about (or through) Membership

*Membership is a very important New Testament principle but it is often misunderstood or neglected (even by members!). This resource has been prepared to help those considering membership, thinking it through, or desiring to deepen their appreciation of it.*

## I. What Membership is Not

Church Membership is not the same as membership in a secular club, organization, sport or political party. Membership in these is not commanded by God and participation in them is not governed by Him either. For example, I could join a hockey team or a political party without being a hockey enthusiast or committed to a certain manifesto. I would simply have to pay some fees and sign a form and just like that I'd be a card carrying member. Not so with the Church.

## II. Universal Membership in the Church

Church in the Bible (*ecclesia*) simply means assembly. What sort of assembly is it? It is a body made up of members who are *believer's* in the Lord Jesus Christ; those who've personally trusted in Him for the forgiveness of their sins, received the gift of eternal life and are following Him as Lord in newness of life. It is a believer's church. Church in English stems from the Greek word, *Kyriakos*, 'those called out from the world' or 'those belonging to the Lord.' This is such a great definition for Tit 2:13b–14a:

*Christ...gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His possession.*

The Church is not a building it is a universal body made up of true Christians who are spiritually knit together by the bond of the Holy Spirit. It is instituted and loved by Christ (Eph 5:25) and clad with authority (Mt 28:18) as Christ's representative body on earth.

## III. Local Membership

While the Church is global, or universal—"I believe in the *holy catholic* [universal or global] *Church*" (Apostles Creed)—this is visibly, tangibly and practically expressed through membership in local congregations made up of baptized believers who freely covenant<sup>1</sup> together (whether this be formal or less formally achieved).<sup>2</sup> A survey of Acts reveals how 16% of the use of "church" refers to the universal church whereas 84% refers to the local

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<sup>1</sup> A church is not 7 Christians meeting at a campground, but rather 7 Christians who covenant—formally and voluntarily agree—to form a Church under Christ and walk in His ways. It is a New Covenant (Gospel) Community that covenants together.

<sup>2</sup> The local church is made up of baptized believers who freely covenant together: to aid in its governance under its officers (Elders and Deacons); for the worship of God; the preaching of His Word; the administering of the ordinances (Baptism and the Lord's Supper); for fellowship, care, discipline and mutual edification; and evangelism and good works.

church! Here God wants us to become a member (i.e. part of) as Paul uses the word in Ro 12:5 *so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another* (c.f. 1 Cor 12:2).

A body of members is made up of a skeleton and the flesh. The flesh may be likened to the relational and organic matters of the Christian life (e.g. the one another's of the New Testament), while membership may be likened the skeleton or structure. The truth is each needs the other for the body to function. Membership gives support to the life and the life substance to membership. Though in our anti-institutional and individualistic age commitment to Christ's body may not be popular we need to remember that Christianity is deeply personal but not private, rather it is corporate.

## IV. Biblical Support

Up until now, Biblical support for local church membership has been rather broad, though not unimportant. There are many verses that clearly imply membership in the local body:

- Those who responded to the Gospel in Acts 2:38 were baptized and joined the Church in Jerusalem.
- How can you submit to your elders if you aren't a member? (Heb 13:17)
- How can you help choose your leaders if you aren't a member? (Acts 6)
- How can you be put out of the local church if you weren't part of it? (Mt 18)

In fact since the local church has been given the authority of identifying who belong to Jesus—"binding and loosing" (Mt 16:19, 18:18 [c.f. Jn 20:23])—no believer would want to be without it.

## V. Privileges and Responsibilities

Because the Church is made up of believers and to be a member is to commit as and be affirmed as a believer, membership is the gateway to ministry in the local Church, both being ministered too and being able to minister. We believe to become a part of the church and then in belonging can serve and be served.<sup>3</sup> Membership becomes one's passport to the privileges and responsibilities in the Church.

## VI. Discipline

Not only do you gain a family through membership, you gain a family who loves you enough that they are willing to hold you accountable in your discipleship and sanctification (i.e. if you were heading for a cliff and someone did not stop you that would be unloving). This is what God does (Heb 12:6, 10, 11). Discipline is therefore primarily restorative and corrective in nature. With love for the wandering, compassion and humility (Mt 18:12; Gal 6:1) we are to seek to win our brothers and sisters. Other verses speak into this too (1 Cor 5; Tit 3:10) but

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<sup>3</sup> Though some seekers churches encourage helping people feel as if they belong before they believe (and there are some ways to do this), one truly must believe to belong.

the classic is Mt 18:15–20, which begins at the lowest common denominator between two members and looks to garner the truth and produce repentance. If this step fails then the witness is expanded and greater godly pressure added as one witness becomes two or three. This Old Testament principle of witnesses is also to ensure fairness (Dt 19:15). If this second step fails the matter is to be made public to the whole Church so they might seek to win their brother. If their person persists in unrepentance, which is not a Christian characteristic, the Church is to dismiss them from membership. Dismissal means the individual is no longer viewed as a believer but treated as an unbeliever (i.e. “Gentile”-outside the Covenant community; even a “tax collector”- someone who has betrayed the Covenant community). The Church exercises her judicial authority to assess someone’s profession of faith authoritatively “binding and loosing.”

Discipline is for the glory of God, the good of the erring one, the purity of the local church and to instruct all members in the fear of the Lord.

## VII. Conclusion

Membership is mere Christianity; it is simply Jesus’ plan for His Church.

## VIII. Membership Process at MBC

The requirements to join MBC are straight forward:

- a) Provide a credible confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour;
- b) Shows the fruit of faith;
- c) Have been baptized as a believer by immersion;
- d) Be in agreement with our Statement of Faith;
- e) Would abide by our governance Handbook.

Someone who desires to become a member will follow something of this process:

- 1) Speak to an Elder
- 2) Meet with an Elder(s) to determine whether they meet the membership requirements and be given the opportunity to ask questions about the Handbook.
- 3) Provide a written testimony for the Elders/Membership
- 4) Upon recommendation to the members be affirmed at the next convenient Members’ Meeting
- 5) Sign a statement of agreement with our Statement of Faith
- 6) Be welcome through the right hand of fellowship at the next observance of the Lord’s Supper.

## IX. FAQs

### ➤ Does membership save?

No, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t extremely important; the local Church’s testimony of your faith being a key outward test of assurance (Mt 18:18). Just as the thief on the cross wasn’t

baptized (Lk 23:42–3) and yet was a Christian so too are there many Christians who, because of want of teaching or humility, have not become members of a local Church. If you are not a member become one as quickly as possible.

➤ **Must I be baptized to be a member?**

Yes, because the church is made up of baptized believers. In the early Church every believer was baptized and hence considered a member of their local Church.

➤ **Age for membership**

If you are old enough to profess faith in Jesus Christ and be baptized then you are old enough to become a member of the family of faith. Some churches may limit voting on certain matters or areas of service until you have attained a more mature age.

➤ **Isn't attending good enough?**

This is a common question. I attend, give, participate as I am able, isn't that good enough? Many people remain on the edge of a local Church as an adherent or hearer. This may be likened to being a spiritual orphan. You might be in the foster care of a family but to join that family you must do so formally.

➤ **I was burned once as a member and therefore don't want to become a member again**

I certainly sympathize with what you've experienced, however, if I found the perfect church I wouldn't join it for then it would no longer be perfect! I've heard a similar argument used against faith in Jesus: I knew a hypocrite who called himself a Christian, therefore I won't believe in Christ. Wait a minute, one person's hypocrisy, while lamentable, cannot dismiss the truthfulness of Christ and our call to follow Him. In the same way, bad experiences do not negate the Biblical pattern of membership.

➤ **Dual membership**

Dual membership is when someone is a member of two congregations. This is usually the case when a student goes off to college or university or a missionary goes to a mission field. A far better option is for the individual to become a member in the majority place that they are serving (i.e. for the student or missionary to join their local church). The individual can still enjoy being in fellowship with their home church.

➤ **I've moved**

It can be hard to leave a meaningful experience with a local church, however, there are meaningful ways to maintain those friendships and that connection (like with a home church) while moving ahead in uniting with a new local Church.

➤ **Can I participate in the Lord's Supper if I am not a member?**

I tell people that if you are baptized and know and love the Lord and are walking with Him then you are welcome at the Lord's Table. We do not police the Table beyond this; it

becomes a matter of conscience for you as to whether you're eating and drinking worthily. However, I would view membership as being part of walking with the Lord and so a normative part of joining around the Table. While some limit the Table to those from a particular Church, to me the Table is open to anyone who is a member in good standing.

➤ **Do you accept membership "Transfers"**

Not as such, however, a reference from a former Church is a useful tool in the local Church determining whether to admit you as a member.