

Does Membership Matter?
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NWIBA Pastors Roundtable
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Intro: These pastors' roundtables are designed to provide a setting to dialogue about information of some best practices/ideas that are relevant for our ministries. But they are also designed to challenge us to think about doing ministry different than maybe the ways we've done it historically. So with some of these Roundtables you might walk away not agreeing with everything that's been discussed ... or you might walk away disturbed knowing that how you've done some things in the past are not going to be biblically effective for the present and future.

The topic we're discussing today is one of those that some may walk away having some disagreement with how I approach this subject...and that is membership.

Sometimes in the church world we throw around terms that can be misunderstood...like church service or worship service etc. But one of the terms or phrases that we throw around today that we really can't get a grasp on is phrases like "Joining the church" or we talk about "church membership" or we talk about "church members". I mean what does it mean to be a church member? Do we join the church like we would join the military; like we would join a civic club, a sports team... do we join the church like we would Sam's Club...are we members of a church like we members at a country club?

Obviously, the answer to that is “no”. Church membership is not to resemble any of those other memberships...but often times it does.

I’ve titled this Roundtable: “*Does Membership Matter?*” And my argument is: First, Membership Does Matter. Second, the way we’ve done membership in SBC churches in some cases doesn’t really indicate that it does matter.

The way that I’ve done membership for a good part of my ministry is the traditional way of most Southern Baptists churches. That is, someone will come down at the end of the service and we counsel with them right there and then, and then we present them to the church for membership.

Therefore, I’m going to share how we transitioned in doing membership differently for our church and what that looked like for us. But before we go there, I want to take some time do a little theology of the church and membership, because before we can even answer does membership even matter, we have to determine if it’s even biblical and what that membership should look like.

I. The Church Dater

Intro: Now we have in our culture what is traditionally called the *church hoper*...but I think a better term would be the *church dater*. Now how do you spot the church dater? Well there are three types of attitudes we see toward the church that are prevalent.

A. The Socialite - Attitude toward the church is me-

centered. They go to the church for social interaction, programs, and activities. The driving question is, “*What can the church do for me?*” (Kind of like the guy who’s looking for a relationship that is a one-way relationship)

- B. The Independent**- This the person who may be faithful to attend but avoids getting too invested in others. (Guy may be faithful, but he never wants to get to know the girl).
- C. The Savvy Consumer**- Always critiquing, the savvy consumer looking for the best product on Sundays. The best bang for their buck (or even better, someone else's buck). (guy who dates a girl until something better comes around)

Conclusion: When we resist a passion and commitment for the local church everyone gets cheated: 1) you cheat yourself, 2) you cheat a church community, and 3) you cheat the world.

II. The Church Defined

- There is never an example of in the Bible of people going to a place called church. In fact, biblically the church is not a place you go.
- A Church is an institution in which Jesus is the HEAD.
- The Church should not be a place of hyper American consumerism where people come to get there religious goods and services without having to sacrifice and be on mission
- “*The local church is a congregation/gathering of regenerated believers, that function as the body Christ, of which Jesus is the head, displaying the glory and wisdom of God to His creation. The church is unique in its*

message, the Gospel, and its marks, which are the ordinances of Baptism and Lord's Supper. It is the only institution entrusted by God with the message of "repentance of sins and belief in Jesus for forgiveness." -
Mark Dever

- *"The local Church is a community of regenerated believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. In obedience to Scripture they organize under qualified leadership, gather regularly for the preaching and worship, observe the biblical ordinances of Baptism and Lord's Supper, are unified by the Spirit, are disciplined for holiness, and scatter to fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission as missionaries to the world for God's glory and their joy." Mark Driscoll*

III. The Church Scripturally Revealed

Intro: So, before we talk more about membership, let's see the first use of the word "church" to understand how it relates to membership.

- **Matt16: 18-** *"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*
- **Matt 18:17-** *"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."*
- **Acts 5:11-** *"And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things."*
- **Acts 8:1-3-** *"And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered*

*throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the **church**, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”*

- **The church is also identified as:**
 - *the body of Christ (e.g., 1 Cor 12; Col 1:24; Eph 1:22–23),*
 - *the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16–17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:20–21),*
 - *the bride of Christ (Eph 5:22–33),*
 - *the people of God (e.g., 1 Pet 2:9–10).*
- **Eklesia used 114 times in the NT** (over 90 referring to local expressions of the body of Christ)
- To understand how the church should function we must rethink church as a family. Am I committed to Jesus and His people. What does that commitment look like? *my time, service, love, money, talents/gifts, honesty, life, my sanctification.*
- Committing to a local Church as a partner/member gives you specific accountability, care, encouragement, and leadership. But, for many the prevailing attitude is, “I am here...tentatively...for now, at least for the immediate future...I think.”
- For many membership in the local church has the connotation of membership in a *Country Club*...people join country clubs for the perks (swim in their pools, play golf on their courses etc.)...you pay your dues and go there to receive goods and services. You go to the Country Club to be served...and if you’ve been a member of the Country Club for a long time, then you’ve

built up some seniority perks and you expect to be treated a little better.

- But for others, their church involvement looks more like a ***dating relationship*** than a committed marriage. Are you Dating the Church or Married to the Church?
- Within the context of a local church, the members are to be carrying out the “one another’s”, but in many cases they have traded the “one another’s” for the “ought to’s” or the “I don’t have to’s”:
 - Love one another - John 13:34
 - Be devoted to one another - Romans 12:5
 - Honor one another - Romans 12:10
 - Rejoice with one another - Romans 12:5
 - Serve one another - Galatians 5:13
 - Carry one another’s burdens - Galatians 6:2
 - Forgive one another - Ephesians 4:32
 - Encourage one another - 1 Thessalonians 5:11
 - Offer hospitality to one another - 1 Peter 4:9
 - Confess our sins to one another - James 5:16
 - Pray for one another - James 5:16
- So when we don’t have healthy membership carrying out the commands of Scripture then everyone suffers...the individual, the church, and the world.
- I like what Joshua Harris, who wrote a book, “Stop Dating the Church” said:

“After all, the power of church in a community starts with its example. As our generation knows too well, hypocrisy destroys a church’s witness and leaves its message discredited. A

church committed to glorifying God and reaching the lost world will not only have membership, but will clearly define what that membership requires. It will want to be able to answer clearly anyone who asks who is truly part of the church and who is not.” - (Stop Dating the Church, Joshua Harris, p.84)

So before I get into what we did in how we approached membership, I want to focus on what I believe is the Biblical precedence and importance of making a commitment/covenant/membership with a local church-the local expression of the body of Christ.

IV. Precedence for Membership in the NT

- 1 Timothy 5:9-11a had *a list of widows*:

“Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband,” and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work. But refuse to enroll younger widows...” (1 Timothy 5:9-11a).

- In 1 Corinthians 5:1 there is a man in immorality, that doesn’t even happen among the pagans and Paul tells them to exclude him from the assembly. *How do you exclude someone who is not formally a part of the assembly?*
- *A Temple has bricks, vine has branches, flocks has shepherd, a church has members.*
- *Leaders are accountable to their congregations:*

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them...Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

- So the implication is: If leaders are accountable for their congregation they must know who they are accountable for. This is why we have established the membership process that we have.
- *Church Discipline requires some type of formalized membership.*

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17).

- If you have a brother who refuses to repent bring it to the church (not the elders)...how can the church make a

decision on excommunication of an unrepentant fellow member if there is no recognition of membership?

- *1 Cor. 5:11-13- “¹¹ 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. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”* - The church congregation was to remove the unrepentant “brother” from them. God judges those outside but we are to judge those inside the church.
- *1 Cor. 14:23-25- “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? ²⁴ But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵ the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.”* Paul speaks of unbelievers and outsiders. This implies there were insiders who had not believed but were allowed. So it seems there were 3 groups: 1) insider/believers, 2) insider not yet believers, and 3) outsiders.

V. The Resistance to Church Membership

Intro: Reasons people won't commit to a local church:

- Bad past experiences with the Church

- Bad Ecclesiology- they are unaware of the Biblical teaching regarding church involvement and membership.
- Commitment-phobia
- Don't want accountability- don't ask don't tell.
- Individualism- lone-ranger-ism- I don't need anybody else.

VI. Myths About Church Membership

- Being a church member makes you a Christian.
- Signing a Church covenant or membership card, etc... makes me a member. No you can sign, verbally affirm, go through a class, etc... but membership/partnership cannot be affirmed apart from active participation with the body of Christ.
- Only Church Members can belong and be cared for.
- Only Church Members can serve...non-members can serve and help at some levels of service.

VII. The Reason for Membership in a local Church?

Intro: Why should I join or be a member of a local Church?

- A. A Biblical Reason:** *Christ is committed to the church.*
Ephesians 5:25: “...just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ...” Membership is a practical expression of commitment.
- B. A Cultural Reason:** *It is an antidote to our society.*
 We live in an age where very few want to be committed to anything...a job...a marriage...our country. This attitude has even produced a generation of “church shoppers and

hoppers and daters.” Membership swims against the current of America’s “consumer religion.” It is an unselfish decision. Commitment always builds character.

C. A Practical Reason: *It defines who can be counted on.* Every team must have a roster. Every school must have an enrollment. Every business has a payroll. Every army has an enlistment. Even our country takes a census and requires voter registration. Membership identifies our family.

D. A Personal Reason: *It produces spiritual growth.* The New Testament places a major emphasis on the need for Christians to be accountable to each other for spiritual growth. You cannot be accountable when you’re not committed to any specific church family.

E. An Assurance Reason: *It gives evidence of genuine salvation.* Membership in a local church is intended as a testimony to our membership in the universal church. Church membership does not save, but it is a reflection of salvation.

Throughout the Bible we are repeatedly challenged to examine ourselves and not be deceived. Nowhere in the Bible are we told to look back on a prayer to get assurance on our salvation.

- John 14:21- *“Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”*
- John 15:10- *“If you keep my commandments, you will*

abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."

- John 13:17- *"even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. "*
- In a recent survey of Southern Baptist Churches, the typical Baptist church has 233 members, only 70 of whom are present at the typical Sunday Service. Where are the other 163 members? What does this say about the church and their commitment to one another when 163 of the "members" are unaccounted for?

F. A Mission Reason: *It puts us on mission with God and other believers to reach a lost world.*

"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, 5because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:3-5).

- Evangelism and Mission is a collective commandment and task...it is the mission of the church.
- We're to be part of the church in order to join the task of local, regional, national, and global evangelism.

G. A Gospel Reason: *It demonstrates to a watching world the true nature of the Gospel.* You see, churches are not for the self-righteous...we are to be fellowship of sinners who are repenting. The world often sees the church as being full of self-righteous people who are overly concerned that somebody somewhere is having some fun, yet confident

their own good deeds, please God.

Charles Spurgeon - *“Do not go where it is all fine music and grand talk and beautiful architecture; those things will neither fill anybody’s stomach, nor feed his soul. Go where the gospel is preached, the gospel that really feeds your soul, and go often.”*

H. An Edification Reason: Membership is a way to reject individualism and consumerism and live for mutual edification and encouragement. In Hebrews 10:19-25- notice the "let us's" of this passage.

*“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² **let us** draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.²³ **Let us** hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.²⁴ And **let us** consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.²⁵ **Let us** not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but **let us** encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching”. (NIV)*

“Joining a Church increases our sense of ownership of the work of the church, of its community, of its budget, of its goals. We must begin to view membership less as a loose affiliation useful only on occasion and more as a regular responsibility involving us in one another’s lives for the purposes of the Gospel.”

Mark Dever

I. A Glory of God Reason: Joining a community of believers in a local church brings glory to God.

“Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation”

(1 Peter 2:12).

VIII. Our Method of Church Membership

- We required for membership a class called Connection.
- It covered 4 basic areas:
 - ***Doctrinal*** – We especially went into thorough explanation of the Gospel and ask them to share their testimonies and to explain the gospel to us. In addition, we explained the two ordinances of baptism and Lord’s Supper. We would also briefly go over the Baptist Faith and Mission with emphasis placed on eternal security.
 - ***Values/Vision/ Mission/Discipleship Strategy*** – We would talk about the values of our church...we had

⇒ **Values**

- *We Value a Bible- Centered Teaching and Preaching Ministry*
- *We Value Authentic Worship*

- *We Value Prayer*
- *We Value Evangelism*
- *We Value Missions*
- *We Value Relationships*
- *We Value the Family*
- *We Value A Mobilized and Ministering Membership*
- *We Value Transformational Discipleship*
- *We Value Ministry Excellence*

⇒ **Mission: WCHBC Mission Statement:**
Our mission is to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with all people and to assist them in becoming His fully devoted followers.

⇒ **Church Vision Statement:** *We envision a church where our people are connecting with God, growing in Christ-likeness, serving in joy, and going to evangelize.*

- **Our Uniqueness** (What distinguished us from other SBC churches in the area)
 - Making Disciples Vs. Making Decisions
 - Preaching For Depth Vs. Preaching For Breadth
 - Participatory Worship Vs. Spectator Worship
 - Contemporary Feel Vs. Traditional Feel

- Missional Vs. Attactional
- Gospel Centered Vs. Moral Centered
- Kingdom Minded Vs. Sectarian Minded

– **Our Structure**

- How Our Church is Structured
- Our Cooperation – What it means to be a SBC church.
- Membership Expectations

- ⇒ Promote Unity (acting in love toward others, refusing gossip, following leadership)
- ⇒ Sharing Responsibility (Praying for growth, inviting and evangelizing, welcoming)
- ⇒ Serving (Discovering spiritual gift and talents, serving in at least one area)
- ⇒ Attending Faithfully
- ⇒ Living Godly
- ⇒ Giving Financially

- **Membership Covenant** – They would have to sign a membership covenant agreeing that they agree with our vision, mission, values, and strategy...that they had in fact repented of sin and surrendered their life to Christ and been baptized by immersion in a believers baptism, and that they agree with and will do what is required in the membership expectations.

- Once they completed our Connection class and agreed and signed our membership covenant, then we'd present them to the church for affirmation.

IX. Concluding Observations

- Our Connection Class provided a great opportunity for prospective members to develop a relationship with the pastor.
- ***Weakness***: We raised the bar of expectation for membership but we did not address what would happen if they did not meet those expectations.
- Our Connection Class was an affective tool for ***evangelism***. It helps promote a regenerate church membership.
- Our Connection class was a healthier and more effective way of ***assimilating*** attenders into the life of the church. Why? Because they got to know us and we got to know them.
- Our Connection class was effective in moving prospects not only into membership, but also into ***ministry***. It served as ways to move people into entry-level positions as soon as possible. In some cases, new members classes have each participant complete a spiritual gift profile.

Resources:

I Am A Church Member – Thom Rainer

Church Membership - Jonathan Leeman

***Membership Matters: Insights from Effective Churches on
New Member Classes and Assimilation - Chuck Lawless***

***Stop Dating the Church!: Fall in Love with the Family of God
– Joshua Harris***