

Re-Membering the Body: Why Local Church Membership Matters

Walter Henegar, Pastor of Atlanta Westside Presbyterian Church (PCA)

“The very word membership is of Christian origin, but it has been taken over by the world and emptied of all meaning. ... I am afraid that when we describe a man as ‘a member of the Church’ we usually mean nothing Pauline; we mean only that he is a unit—that he is one more specimen of some kind of things as X and Y and Z.” —C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (1949)

Claim: Every Christian who believes the Bible should become a member of a local church, wherever he or she lives, for however long, as quickly as possible.

Does that statement rankle you or raise objections in your mind? If so, this article is written for you. But don't worry; you're not alone. Ambivalence toward formal church membership is increasingly common, and not without reasons. On the other hand, does the same statement stir strong agreement, even indignation, in your mind? If so, this article is for you, too. Especially if you're a pastor, elder, or other church leader — because you share the blame. Membership doesn't mean much to laypeople because it doesn't mean enough to those of us in leadership.

Contemporary cultural trends compound the problem. Most people are highly mobile, moving half a dozen times or more in a lifetime. Technology enables us to communicate more, yet remain increasingly anonymous. Marketing invades every corner of our lives, warning that “everyone's selling something.” And the Church's chronic, heartbreaking fragmentation into ever-smaller denominations makes it difficult to trust historical or theological markers. Despite these powerful forces, far more is at stake than simple conformity to biblical standards. Both the peace and purity of the church — its internal harmony and the integrity of its external witness — depend on a robust understanding and practice of local church membership. In fact, it is impossible to obey the whole Bible without it.

Seams and Lines

The Bible uses sturdy metaphors to portray the vital connection between those who are united with Christ by faith, and therefore united with each other in His church. These pictures include: a *body* of uniquely gifted individuals united in a common purpose (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4); a *spiritual house* made up of living stones (1 Peter 2:4-5); and a *holy nation* of citizens in the kingdom of God (1 Peter 2:9-10). In a more unitary sense, the collective Church is like a *bride*, cherished and beautified by her Groom (Ephesians 5:25-32).

Ironically, however, these very metaphors tend to supply the most common objection to church membership: Doesn't my relational connection to other believers matter far more than any formal commitment to a church organization? Indeed, it does. But what's often missed is that all of these metaphors are inherently organizational, requiring two key components in order to function: seams and lines.

If body parts, stones, or citizens are joined together, some bonding agent must hold the seam between them. And in order to distinguish a body, house, or nation from other groups around them, the lines between them must be drawn. Simply put, we have to define who's “in,” and what binds us together. Formal membership vows accomplish both, declaring to the world that we belong to Christ (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), and declaring to a particular group of fellow believers that we are “members one of another” (Romans 12:5).

Spiritual Stitches

If we highlight the body metaphor, membership vows function like stitches, binding body parts together long enough to graft the tissues together into a vital exchange of spiritual lifeblood. By contrast, the band-aids that normally connect members to each other—demographic similarity, social connection, or a nebulous sense of “being fed” —can all dissolve and dismember the body at any moment. The same effect undermines the other biblical metaphors: imagine a bungalow gummed together with Juicy Fruit, or an inland Middle Eastern nation with no map of its borders.

Yet many churches function exactly this way. As long as individuals attend fairly regularly, tithe, attend a Sunday school class or small group, or serve in some ministry of the church, they are regarded as de facto, common-law members. Such churches may also receive members formally, but in practice it is seen as an option, required only of those wishing to take leadership roles or wishing to baptize their children. The underlying message is: *You're here because of what you do for us, not because of what God has done for you.* We have thus unwittingly fostered a culture of spiritual cohabitation, leading many to shack up with a local church without ever saying "I do." As every dating couple knows, love is perilously fragile until the knot is tied.

Of course, no church will hold its seams or draw its lines perfectly. Until Christ returns, some weeds will always grow among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30). But this does not authorize us to become sloppy farmers. Most Christians who have grown up in church know all too well how easy it is to drift out of a church over time without so much as a phone call from a pastor or elder. Is it any wonder that membership means so little to them?

Priority Love

Jesus drew the widest possible definition around the word "neighbor," calling all Christians to show love and mercy to anyone God puts in our path, including our enemies (Luke 10:25-37, Matthew 5:44). At the same time, he strongly emphasized love between believers: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). The early church at Jerusalem devoted themselves, among other things, to "the fellowship" (Acts 2:42). Paul echoed this emphasis: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, especially those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10). The same refrain rings throughout the first letter of John: "Beloved, let us love one another" (1 John 4:7). In short, we can never put limits on our love, but we must give priority to our fellow believers in Christ.

Membership gives shape and direction to our love, while helping to guard us against the sin of favoritism (Luke 12:12-14, James 2:1-13). Even in a relatively healthy church, love normally travels along the tracks of natural affinity. Friendship based on affinity is not sinful; it is simply incomplete. For example, suppose two people in your church are miserably sick. One is an older single man who is financially successful but lives alone and has few friends. The other is a young mother like you who lives down the street, takes her kids to the same play group, and who once brought you dinner when you were sick. To whom will you bring a meal? Membership stretches us to love those who are different from us, but who nevertheless share the most important feature of our identity. Contact with all the diverse gifts — and burdens — of the body both sharpens us and blesses us.

Bearing Burdens Together

The 80/20 rule is a hallmark of virtually every nonprofit or volunteer organization: 20 percent of the organization tends to do 80 percent of the work. This rule often holds true in the church as well, and its primary cause is a low view of membership. In the absence of strong commitment to one another, responsibilities are either commandeered by the aggressive or dumped onto the passive, or both. This sort of imbalanced distribution of labor ultimately leads to conflict and division. Paul commanded the Galatian Christians to "bear one another's burdens," but also for each person to "bear his own load" (Galatians 6:2, 5). He rebuked "busybodies" in Thessalonica for the same reason (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12), and urged generosity among believers in Corinth "that there might be fairness" (2 Corinthians 13:7).

Without the common commitments of membership, church leaders easily resort to manipulation, coercion, clever marketing, or guilt-tripping people into serving each other. Of course, membership can't prevent those sin patterns, but it provides a framework for members to work out pre-existing commitments rather than unevenly distributing expectations.

Identifying Authority

This is the most decisive argument for membership in the Bible. If you believe in spiritual authority, you *must* practice some form of membership. Jesus repeatedly conferred spiritual authority to His disciples, including the loaded "keys to the kingdom" in Matthew 16:19. It was Paul's consistent pattern to establish qualified elders in every church (Titus 1:5-9, 1 Timothy 3:1-7), as well as deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13), both of which he addressed as

distinct offices in Philippians 1:1. Before leaving Ephesus he charged their elders to “pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” Likewise Peter exhorted elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you,” while also charging those who are younger to “be subject to the elders” (1 Peter 5:1-5).

In order to even attempt to obey these commands, we must answer two simple questions: “Who is my flock?” and “Who are my elders?” In churches with a weak view of membership, only the most winsome leaders and most committed believers can be sure of their relationship to one another. Simultaneously, wise but less-magnetic leaders lose their appropriate influence, and weak, immature, or wayward sheep who need special care are neglected. Membership is even more indispensable for churches with presbyterian or congregational forms of government. Think about it: If the group that is best able to identify spiritual leaders is the congregation in which they serve (a treasured principle of Presbyterianism) whose “vote” will count toward selecting them? Membership, anyone? Find any remotely democratic organization without voting requirements, and you have found a pointless organization, devoid of any real substance or authority.

Redeeming Authority

Because spiritual authority is so often abused and therefore evaded, we must also clarify what it is *not*. When my children insist on getting their own way, I often ask them, “Who’s in charge?” If they’re feeling one-upped, they’ll moan, “You are, dad.” But I still correct them: “Actually, God is in charge – of all of us, including me. And he put me in charge of you.”

I mention this because any view of spiritual authority flows from the ultimate authority of God. As a pastor, I am not the shepherd of my sheep; I am their *undershepherd*. With them I follow the Good Shepherd, to whom all authority in heaven and earth has been given (Matthew 28:18). Our model is neither Caesar nor CEO, but the Son of Man, “who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Any authority exercised by a human leader is delegated, entrusted by God “for building up and not for tearing down” (2 Corinthians 13:10).

By contrast, the absence of authority does not yield freedom, but the tyranny of our own sinful desires (Romans 6:16-23, Philippians 3:18-19, Hebrews 3:13, Jude 1:16). If you are reluctant to place yourself under the spiritual authority of other human beings, consider the chilling alternative: yourself. However spiritually mature you may be, you cannot see yourself clearly enough to shepherd your own soul. Think of the last diet or devotional resolution you made to yourself in secret. How long did it last? The practical need for spiritual authority is especially true of college students and those with highly mobile careers. The PCA’s “associate member” category was designed for this purpose: to place oneself under temporary spiritual authority while retaining home-church membership. Few churches even make their people aware of this important option.

Limiting Authority

Scripture’s view of authority is neither cynical nor naïve. Human spiritual leaders are to be imitated, obeyed, honored and remunerated, but never uncritically. Paul himself acknowledged his own remaining sin and provided an explicit procedure for confronting an elder “on the evidence of two or three witnesses” (1 Timothy 6:19-20). He also rebuked the apostle Peter when he refused to eat with Gentile believers (Galatians 2:11-14).

Practically, this means you may rightly avoid becoming a member of a church whose spiritual leaders prove heretical or ungodly, but if you are *already* a member of such a church, you first have a biblical mandate to seek to humbly correct them (Ephesians 4:15-16). Every human leader needs rebuke at times — I certainly do! — yet ungodly leaders often persist in error because godly believers refuse to speak up, instead “voting with their feet” by quietly leaving the church. Both errors are made easier by the absence of a strong membership commitment. Membership won’t prevent conflict, but it can help ensure that conflict is handled in a biblical, redemptive way.

Re-Membering Discipline

Church discipline is a foreign term to many churchgoers today, but Jesus Himself taught it, and it is impossible to practice without functional membership. If an offending brother (or sister) refuses to repent after one-on-one

rebuke, and also to confrontation by two or more others, Jesus said his or her sin must be exposed “to the church” — implying a clearly defined group of people, and perhaps referring specifically to its leaders. If still unrepentant, the person must be treated “as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17) — i.e., no longer a member of the church. At minimum, this makes him an object of prayer and re-pursuing with the gospel.

Likewise, when the Corinthian church tolerated a man who was sleeping with his step-mother, Paul charged them unequivocally to “not associate with” and even to “purge the evil person from among you” (1 Corinthians 5:11-13). In 1 Timothy 2:19-20, he “handed over to Satan” two opponents of the gospel. These are hard words, but they’re nevertheless designed to produce repentance and restoration. In Scripture, vital membership is such a precious privilege that being severed from the body carries a painful sting. Dis-memberment begs sinners to remember God’s grace and re-member with His church.

Fit and Fitness

Granted: Finding a Bible-believing church that fits with one’s spiritual gifts, maturity, family stage, and musical tastes can be difficult — especially in smaller cities with few churches to choose from. But beyond faithfulness to the Bible, we simply don’t have the right to expect a perfect fit. In fact, the reason a church may appear lacking in some area is because you aren’t yet a part of it!

For those who are convinced and eager to practice biblical membership, one discouraging hurdle often remains: Many churches, especially in the PCA, have made the process of becoming a member unnecessarily complicated. Someone has quipped that “It shouldn’t be harder to get into a church than it is to get into heaven.” Actually, it should; God knows our hearts, instantly, whereas validating a profession of faith takes effort. But it’s still worth asking: How much harder should it be? Churches rightly desire to disclose their theological convictions and distinctive visions, but how much of this needs to be front-loaded into the membership process? How many classes, presentations, forms, and essays are needed to verify that someone is a brother or sister in Christ?

Our Swearing God

If the idea of making a formal membership vow still strikes you as unnecessary or traditionalist, consider our supreme model: God Himself. He created us, and He reveals Himself to us in creation and in Scripture. He has continually acted in history on our behalf, climactically in the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus. Was all this enough? Yes. But God didn’t stop there.

From the first moment after humanity’s fall into sin, God has been making covenant promises. Not only promises, but oaths. God swears! (See Genesis 12, 15, 17, Luke 22:19-20, and Hebrews 6:13-20.) And He not only gives promises and oaths, but signs as well — think rainbows, circumcision, a virgin with child, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. God goes way out of His way to assure us that He is going to keep His promises. And He does, every time.

The Church is the Bride of Christ. He has sworn himself to her — and to us. Should we not do the same?