

Church Membership

Unpacking The "Why" Behind The "What"

1. Elders are commanded to care for a *specific* flock

While elders can, and should, show love and concern to as many Christians as possible, they are especially commanded to care for the specific flock God has entrusted to them. In other words, as an elder at Frontline, I will not give an account for the people of Austin Stone or Bridgeway. But I will, however, give an account for the people of Frontline Church.

- *"Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." - Acts 20:28*

This also means that church members deserve an even higher level of pastoral care, concern and devotion than a regular attender or someone who hasn't identified themselves as truly belonging to our "flock". The apostle Peter makes this reality even more clear in 1 Peter 5:

- *"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." 1 Peter 5:1-3*

Apart from a healthy church membership, the elders of a particular church will never know who their specific flock truly is.

2. Church membership helps the church know who their leaders are

Over and over, the Bible commands the church to respect, submit to and obey their leaders. But this does not mean that the people in Frontline Church are commanded to respect, submit to and obey Pastor Sam Storms or Pastor Mark Driscoll. Church membership is a formal relationship between the Christians in a particular local church and the elders of that particular local church. Therefore, church membership helps the people of Frontline know specifically who they are commanded to respect, submit to and obey.

- *"We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves." 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13*
- *"Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." - Hebrews 13:7*
- *"Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." 1 Timothy 5:17*

3. Church membership creates a system for discipleship

The Bible is filled with “one-another” commands:

- A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another (John 13:34).
- So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another (Romans 12:5).
- Outdo one another in showing honor (Romans 12:10).
- Live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16).
- Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother (Romans 14:13).
- So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding (Romans 14:19).
- May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus (Romans 15:5).
- Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Romans 15:7).
- I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another (Romans 15:14).
- Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you (Romans 16:16)
- that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25).
- For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another (Galatians 5:13).
- Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2)
- with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2; Col. 3:13).
- Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32; Col. 3:13)
- submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21).
- Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves [lit., “count or regard one another as more significant than yourselves”] (Philippians 2:3).

- Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices (Colossians 3:9).
- Therefore encourage one another with these words (1 Thessalonians 4:18).
- Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing (1 Thessalonians 5:11).
- See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone (1 Thessalonians 5:15).
- And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24).
- Do not speak evil against one another, brothers (James 4:11).
- Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door (James 5:9).
- Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working (James 5:16).
- Show hospitality to one another without grumbling (1 Peter 4:9).
- Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Peter

But it is impossible to fulfill these “one-another” commands with all Christians everywhere at all times. In other words, the people of Frontline cannot faithfully live in community together with the people of The Village Church. These commands were given to specific people in specific local churches. Church membership creates a system for discipleship because it helps you to identify who belongs in your immediate “family”, as it were. Without a healthy church membership in place, we cannot expect the people of Frontline to know who they are specifically entering into a covenant relationship with to “do life together”.

4. Church discipline is meaningless (and impossible!) apart from a healthy church membership

Notice carefully the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:

- *“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*

And again, the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:12-13:

- *For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you." - 1 Corinthians 5:12-13*

As Sam Storms as noted:

"If there is no church membership, how can you define the group that will take up this sensitive and weighty matter of exhorting the unrepentant person and finally rendering a judgment about his standing in the community? It's hard to believe that just anyone who showed up claiming to be a Christian could be a part of that gathering. Surely, "the church" must be a definable group to handle such a weighty matter. You know who you mean when you "tell it to the church." Apart from certain criteria or qualifications that enable you to know who is the "church" and who isn't, there is simply no way to obey this command." - Sam Storms

Michael McKinley adds:

"I cannot be removed from the Northern California Left Handed Golfer's Association because I have never been a member of such an organization. Now according to their website, the NCLHGA will remove people from membership for several reasons (like right-handedness, perhaps?). But I am in no danger of being subject to such an action, because you can't kick a person out who was never a member to begin with."

5. Church membership creates a system of pastoral care

- *"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, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith." - 1 Timothy 5:9-12*

Apparently, Timothy's church in Ephesus (the largest church of Paul's day) actually had a church role, presumably up-to-date! This role allowed them to know who in their church was an eligible widow in need of official care from the church. Church membership helps us track who needs special pastoral care for specific situations.

- *"So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." - Galatians 6:10, ESV*

6. Church membership is a covenant/commitment between three parties

- (1) First, the elders are covenanting/committing to carry out certain roles and responsibilities specifically for a particular group of people within the Church.
- (2) Second, a particular group of Christians are covenanting/committing to a specific group of elders in a particular church.

(3) Third, a particular group of Christians are covenanting/committing to a specific body of believers in which to “do life together” in a way that fulfills the obligations laid out in the Bible.

Summary

While church membership isn't explicitly mentioned in the Bible, it is beyond clear that it is heavily implicitly implied and assumed. In short, it is extremely difficult to see how we can continue as a healthy, strong and God-honoring church while not having a healthy, strong and God-honoring church membership in place.

(For further study, see “The Biblical Blessing Of Covenant Membership In The Local Church” - part 1-4 by Sam Storms)