

# GRACE

Community Church New Plymouth

*Loving God, Loving God's People, Loving Gods World*

## **MEMBERSHIP**

*Adapted from: A Display of God's Glory by Mark E. Dever*

Let's begin by admitting that the whole idea of church membership seems counter-productive to many today. Isn't it unfriendly, and maybe even elitist to say that some are in and others out? Can we go so far as to say that it is even unbiblical, and maybe even unChristian? The end of Acts 2 simply says that "*the Lord added to their number*" (that is, to the church) those who were being saved. Isn't that all there is to it? Also, in Acts 8, an official of the Ethiopian government had been traveling in Palestine and was returning home on his chariot, reading the prophet Isaiah. Philip was led by the Holy Spirit to intercept him and talk to him; the man believed and was baptized. In that case, wasn't the Ethiopian automatically a member of the church?

### **I. Commitment-phobia & membership**

All of this is more important than many people today think it is. In fact, I'm convinced that getting this right is a key step toward revitalizing our churches, evangelizing our nation, furthering the cause of Christ around the world, and so bringing glory to God! American evangelicals are in pretty desperate need of rethinking and reconsidering this topic, especially our own fellowship of churches in the Southern Baptist Convention. According to one Southern Baptist study a few years ago, the typical Southern Baptist church has 233 members with 70 present at the Sunday morning worship service. My question is this: where are the other 163 members? Are they all at home sick, in a rest home, at college, on vacation, or in the military? Maybe some are, but all 163 of them? What does this convey about Christianity to the world around us? What do *we* understand this to mean about the importance of Christianity in our lives? And what is the spiritual state of those people, if they've not been at church for months, or even longer? Is their non-attendance really any of our business? To understand this, we need to first ask the question, "What really *is* a church?"

### **II. What Really is a Church?**

By the word "church" we refer not to an organizational unit of a religion. We don't refer to Buddhist churches or Jewish churches. By "church," we don't fundamentally mean a building; only in a secondary sense is it that. The building is simply where the church meets, thus the New England puritan name for the church building, "meeting house." The earliest New England churches looked like large houses from the outside. It was just the house where the church met. According to the New Testament, the church is primarily a regular assembly of people who profess and give evidence that they have been saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone.

This is what a New Testament church is; it is not a building. The early Christians didn't have any buildings for almost three hundred years after the church began. From the earliest of times, though, local Christian churches were clearly congregations of specific people. Certain people would have been known to make up this assembly, and others clearly known as outside of it. Thus the censures taught by Jesus in Matthew 18 and Paul in I Corinthians 5 envision an individual being excluded, not from a political community, but from a distinct social one. While we don't know for sure that physical lists of members existed in the earliest Christian churches, they may have. The idea was not unheard-of. We know that the early church kept lists of widows; we know that God Himself is presented as having a list of those in the universal church in the Book of Life.

And we know from II Corinthians 2 that both Paul and the Corinthians could clearly identify a majority of a certain set of people which they understood to be those who were members of the church, i.e. those who were eligible to vote. The idea of a clearly defined community of people is central to God's action in both the Old and the New Testaments. From God working with Noah and his family, to Abraham and his descendants, to the nation of Israel, to the church in the New Testament, God has chosen to maintain a distinct and clearly separate people in order to display His character. God's intention has always been that there be a sharp, bright line distinguishing those who trust in Him from those who do not. This concept of the church as a gathered community is something that has distinguished Baptist Christians from many others. At the time of the Reformation the relationship between state and church was both close and complicated. The discipline of either the church or the state often carried consequences from the other as well. It was assumed that everyone born within the bounds of a certain political jurisdiction should be able to be a member of the state church. The recovery of the baptism of believers at the time of the Reformation threatened this association at its very roots as Baptists recovered the New Testament idea of the church as a congregation of those both personally professing and giving evidence of regeneration.

One interesting side note for historians—the church as a voluntarily covenanted community of believers is an important contribution that Baptists particularly have made to our nation's religious liberty. This may surprise you. Some today see Baptists as the forces of benighted, oppressive, religious totalitarianism. But that is far from the case historically, and it is terribly ironic. In some senses, the freedom some use to speak and write about our bigotry is protected by the very understanding of the church that we Christians who are Baptists have advocated in this country for three centuries. The church is not finally something that is for you and every member of your family by physical, natural descent, or by virtue of your citizenship in this nation. No, the New Testament teaches that the church is for believers. So we advocate laws in this land that make for the kind of freedom for that church to be able to operate in liberty. Baptists are not, then, advocating a new established church in America; indeed we are its firmest foes. Our very understanding of the church will not allow that. We are advocating the evangelization of the nation through churches that freely cooperate together in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And a church is a local collection of Christians committed to Christ and to each other.

### **III. Why Join a Church?**

This topic is a must for our churches, and for us as Christians today. It is a crucial topic for understanding what Christ is calling you to as a disciple of Him. Joining a church will not save you any more than your good works, your education, your culture, your friendships, your contributions, or your baptism will save you. Non-Christians shouldn't be trying to join a church, but to learn more what it means to be a Christian. But for those who are confessing Christians, let me ask the question:

*What does it mean to live the Christian life? Do we live the Christian life alone?*

There are many other good questions we could ask which would point up our need for a church, but let me give you five good reasons to join a church which preaches the gospel, and models Christian living.

**1. Assurance for ourselves**—You should not join the church in order to be saved, but you should join the church to help you in making certain that you are saved. Remember the words of Jesus in John's gospel?

*“Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.... If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in His love.... You are my friends if you do what I command.... Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them,” (John 14:21; 15:10, 14; 13:17).*

In joining the church, we put ourselves in a position where we ask our brothers and sisters to hold us accountable to live according to what we speak with our mouth. We ask them to encourage us sometimes by reminding us of ways that they have seen God work in our lives, and other times to challenge us when

we may be moving away from obedience to Him. Your membership in a local church is that congregation's public testimony that your life gives evidence of regeneration.

Membership in a local church is not saving, but it is a reflection of salvation. And if there is no reflection, how are we to know about the salvation claimed? In becoming a member of the church, we are grasping hands with each other to know and be known by each other, and to help and encourage one another when we may need to be reminded of God's work in our lives, or to be challenged about major discrepancies between our talk and our walk.

**2. Evangelizing the world**—You should join a local church also for the sake of evangelizing the world. Together we can better spread the gospel at home and abroad. We can do this by our words, as we share the message of the good news with others, and as we help others to do that. A local church is, by nature, a missionary organization. We back this up with our actions as we work to show God's love by meeting the physical needs of orphans, the sick, children, or the disadvantaged. Through our own fellowship of churches we help spread the gospel around the world, and we provide millions of dollars and thousands of volunteers to help those who have some immediate physical needs like disaster relief, education, and countless other ministries. Even as imperfect as we are, if God's spirit is genuinely at work in us, He will use our lives and words to help demonstrate to others the truth of His gospel. This is a special role now that we won't have in Heaven. This is the special privilege of the church now—to be part of God's plan, to take His gospel to the world.

**3. Exposing false gospels**—God intends us to be together in this way to expose false gospels. It is through our coming together as Christians that we show the world what Christianity really is. In our churches, we debunk messages and images which purport to be biblical Christianity but really are not. Must it not surely be the case that some of those who are not members of evangelical churches are not so because they do not really believe the same evangel? Part of the church's mission is to recognize and defend the true gospel and to prevent perversions of it. We must realize that part of our task in evangelizing may very well be not only to present positively the gospel of Jesus Christ, but also to dismantle the bad, confusing, distorted witnesses that have raised themselves up as Christian churches, but which in reality confuse the gospel more than they confirm it.

**4. Edification of the Church**—A fourth reason for joining the church is the edification or building up of the church. Joining a church will help counter our wrong individualism and will help us to realize the corporate nature of Christianity. When you study the New Testament you find that our Christian lives are supposed to involve our care and concern for each other. That is part of what it means to be a Christian. And though we do it imperfectly, we should be committed to do this. We intend to encourage even baby steps in righteousness, love, selflessness and Christlikeness. In our church's membership class I often tell the story of a friend who worked for a campus Christian ministry while attending a church in which I was a member. He would always slip in right after the hymns, sit there for the sermon, and then leave. I asked him one day, why he didn't come for the whole service. "Well," he said, "I don't get anything out of the rest of it." "Have you ever thought about joining the church?" I responded. He thought that was just an absurd question. He said, "Why would I join the church? If I join them, I think they would just slow me down spiritually."

When he said this I wondered what he understood being a Christian to mean. I replied, "Have you ever considered that maybe God wants you to link arms with those other people? Sure, they might slow you down, but you might help to speed them up. Maybe that's part of God's plan for us as we live together as Christians!"

**5. The Glory of God**—Finally, a Christian should join a church for the glory of God. Peter wrote to some early Christians, "*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us,*" (I Peter 2:12). Amazing, isn't it? But then again, you can tell that Peter had heard the teaching of His Master. You remember what Jesus had taught in the Sermon on the Mount. "*Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven,*" (Matthew 5:16). Again, the surprising

assumption seems to be that God will receive the glory for our good works. If that is true of our lives individually, it shouldn't come as too much of a surprise to find that God's Word says that this is also the case with our lives *together* as Christians. God intends that the way we love each other will identify us as followers of Christ. Recall Jesus' famous words in John 13:34-35, "*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.*" Our lives together are to mark us out as His, and are to bring Him praise and glory.

#### **IV. Marks of Church Membership**

Given that we are in a fallen world, and are in at least partial league with it, how do we determine who is and who is *not* a member of a particular church? Who is in and who is out?

First, to be a member of a church, you should have been baptized as a believer in confession of your sins and as a profession that you have repented of them and are trusting in Christ alone for your salvation. Scripture records in Matthew 28 Jesus's clear command to baptize those who become disciples. Throughout the book of Acts, we see that the disciples understood and obeyed this command. Baptism, then, is essential for membership in a church because if one were to be admitted by a church, only to refuse such a clear command of Christ, then such an unbaptized person claiming to follow Christ would simply be immediately disciplined until they either decided to follow Christ's commands, or stopped having the church's endorsement of their claim to follow Him. There will never be anything that Jesus calls you to do that will be easier than baptism. Being a member of a church should mean being present at the Lord's Supper. This means, essentially, that you are continuing on as a Christian. Scripture records Jesus' commands to His disciples to take the supper of bread and wine as He said in His own words about the bread "*in remembrance of me.*" About the cup, He said, "*do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.*" We know from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that this was being done then, and it has continued to be done by confessing Christians since that time. The church's appearance at the Lord's Supper is the symbolic appearance of the church as the gathering of those who are feeding by faith on Christ. Being a member of a church should mean regularly being present at public meetings. Attendance is perhaps our most basic ministry to each other. As the oft-quoted Hebrews 10:25 says "*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.*"

If the New Testament uses the image of the church as a building, then we must be bricks in it; if the church is a body, then we are its members; if the church is the household of faith, it presumes we are part of that household. Sheep are in a flock, and branches on a vine. Biblically, if one is a Christian he must be a member of a church. And this membership is not simply the record of a statement we once made or of affection toward a familiar place. It must be the reflection of a living commitment, a regular attendance, or it is worthless, and worse than worthless, it is dangerous. Uninvolved "members" confuse both real members and non-Christians about what it means to be a Christian. And we "active" members do the voluntarily "inactive" members no service when we allow them to remain members of the church; for membership is the church's corporate endorsement of a person's salvation. We need to understand this: membership in a church is that church's corporate testimony to the individual member's salvation. Yet how can a congregation honestly testify that someone invisible to it is faithfully running the race? In our own church, we are constantly trying to notice those who have simply slipped away from attending, and we try to either bring them back, or care for them specially (if they're in the military or in college, or unable to leave their home due to illness). If someone is able to attend a church, our intent is that they should as soon as possible be taken out of membership here, so that they are encouraged to join where they can regularly attend.

Another clear aspect of membership in a church is one I've just mentioned—discipline. From Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 to Paul's in I Corinthians 5 and Galatians 6, it is indisputable that one of the functions of a local church family is to draw boundaries which will exclude people who are themselves unwilling to be excluded from membership in the church. For more information on this vital but neglected

topic, see the work of Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Zondervan, 1986) and Mark Dever ed., *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (Center for Church Reform, 2001). Adams approaches the subject from a Presbyterian viewpoint, while the second book is a compilation of ten volumes from early Baptists. Although the two books approach the topic of discipline from different church polities, there is substantial agreement between them. Both works should be useful to any pastor or church leader.

Love must be seen in those who are members of the church. In John 13 Jesus told His disciples, “*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another,*” (John 13:35). Should someone decide that they can appropriately call themselves a Christian without being in committed loving relationships with other Christians, they should carefully consider what we read in I John 4:20, “*If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.*” Given our propensity to deceive ourselves, to over-estimate our own goodness, thank God that He has given us such checks on our own pride and blindness! Giving and receiving Christian love is clearly part of what the Bible teaches that it means to be a member of a church, and we do this in every way from tithing our income for the support of the ministry, to warmly greeting those whom we don’t know.

Many, many other things flow out of this in a local church. For example, we ask members of our church to sign a statement of faith and a covenant—a statement of how that one will act among us. We expect that members will pray for the church, that they will give financially to support the church, and that they will be involved in ministries of the church. Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, Attendance, Discipline, and Love are something of the heart of local church membership.

So, my Christian friend, do not merely attend a church (though you should attend), but join a church. Link arms with other Christians. Find a church you can join, and do it so that non-Christians will hear and see the gospel, so that weak Christians will be cared for, so that strong Christians will channel their energies in a good way, so that church leaders will be encouraged and helped, so that God will be glorified.

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