

## “Membership Matters”

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Brian Watson

*1 Corinthians 12:12–20*

<sup>12</sup> *The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.*

<sup>14</sup> *Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup> But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. <sup>19</sup> If they were all one part, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts, but one body<sup>1</sup>.*

What do you think of when hear the word “membership”? Perhaps you think of that old American Express slogan: “Membership has its privileges.” Maybe you think of membership in a club, or a gym. If you Google the word “membership,” one of the first results is a link to Costco. Think about what membership means at Costco. If you want to be a member of Costco, you pay an annual fee. Once you pay that fee, you get a Costco account and a card with your name on it. That card gives you access to the store. You can now go into the local Costco and shop. You can buy 9-gallon bottles of olive oil.

If you’re a member of Costco, you have no obligation to Costco, other than paying that annual fee. You can become a member of Costco and never shop there. Even if you shop at Costco, you really don’t have any obligation to the store, other than paying for the items in your cart. You don’t need to get to know the people who work there. You don’t have to worry about their lives. You don’t have to serve them. After all, you’re giving them your money. They are there to serve you. The customer is always right.

A gym membership works the same way. You can join a gym as long as you’re willing to pay the membership fee. You can show up or not. But if you show up, you don’t need to interact with the other members or the people who work at the gym. You don’t need to serve anyone.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (1984).

Churches have members, too. But membership in a church is not like membership at a warehouse store or a gym. Membership in a church means you are a part of this local manifestation of the body of Christ.

In the passage that was just read, 1 Corinthians 12:12-20, Paul says that Christians are “parts” of the body of Christ. That’s how the New International Version translates the Greek word μέλος. The English Standard Version translates that word “member.” So that’s what we mean when we talk about membership of a church. We’re talking about being a part of the body of Christ. Paul says that all Christians are a part of the body of Christ. This is certainly true of all people who have been born again of the Holy Spirit. But Paul is also writing to a particular church, the church in Corinth, a city located in what is now known as Greece. He’s encouraging particular Christians in a particular local church to use their spiritual gifts in a way that builds up the entire body of Christ.

Throughout the New Testament, the church is described in various ways. It is the body of Christ (Eph. 4:4, 12). In that metaphor, Christians are members, or body parts. The church is also described as a temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21) or a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5). In that metaphor, Christians are living stones. The church is sometimes described as a flock (John 10:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). In that metaphor, Christians are sheep. The church is also described as the family or “household” of God (Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 4:17).<sup>2</sup> In that metaphor, each Christian is a child of God. The point in each metaphor is that Christians not only belong to God, but they belong to each other. Christians belong to something larger than themselves. They belong to something that includes other Christians.

I think that’s an important point to make, especially in our individualistic culture. It’s not uncommon to hear people talk about their faith in Jesus as if it’s just Jesus and them. You know, they come to the garden alone and walk with him and talk with him. But God’s word, the Bible, clearly indicates that though each of us must have our own individual faith in Jesus, we do not live the Christian life alone. We have an obligation to love God with everything—heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mark 12:30). But we also have an obligation to love each other. We are supposed to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:31). And the love that we have for each other in the church should be even greater than our love for just anyone.

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<sup>2</sup> There are also many examples of Christians being called “brothers” (with the intended meaning “brothers and sisters”) or “children.”

Think about all of these commandments that are given to Christians. Most of these come from Paul and nearly every one of them comes from a letter written to a specific church. These are some of the many “one another” passages in the New Testament.

Romans 12:10

*Be devoted to one another* in brotherly love. *Honor one another* above yourselves.

Romans 12:16

*Live in harmony with one another*. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Galatians 5:13

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, *serve one another* in love.

Galatians 6:2

*Carry each other's burdens*, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Ephesians 4:2

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, *bearing with one another in love*.

Ephesians 4:32

*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other*, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 5:19

*Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs*. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.

Ephesians 5:21

*Submit to one another* out of reverence for Christ.

Colossians 3:13

*Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another*. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Colossians 3:16

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you *teach and admonish one another* with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

1 Thessalonians 4:18 (see also 5:11)

Therefore *encourage each other* with these words.

1 Thessalonians 5:15

Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always *try to be kind to each other* and to everyone else.

Hebrews 3:13

But *encourage one another* daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Hebrews 10:24–25

<sup>24</sup> And let us consider how we may *spur one another on toward love and good deeds*. <sup>25</sup> 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.

James 5:16

Therefore confess *your sins to each other and pray for each other* so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

1 Peter 4:9

*Offer hospitality to one another* without grumbling.

I think the point is clear. Christianity is a “one another” religion. We can't faithfully live our lives as Christians unless we are committed to each other. Christianity is not a solo sport, and it's certainly not a spectator sport.

I think there are a number of reasons why church membership matters and why every Christian should officially join a local church. Here's the first one: **Throughout the Bible, God's people are numbered.** In the Old Testament, the Israelites were numbered. That's why the book of Numbers is called Numbers. It begins with a census (Numbers 1-2). Then another census is given forty years later (Numbers 26). The point of each census was to count the number of men eligible to fight for the nation. But still, the people were numbered.

This is true in the New Testament as well. The book of Acts starts with a group of Christians who number about a hundred and twenty (Acts 1:15). At Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is poured out on the disciples and Peter gives an impassioned sermon, about three thousand people were added to the number of Christians (Acts 2:41). Soon, the number grows to about five thousand (Acts 4:4). The point is that the church was growing. But still, there is a sense that certain people belonged to the church. And those people did life together. Acts 2:42 says, “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” And Acts 2:44-45 says:

<sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

More to the point, in 1 Timothy, Paul tells Timothy that in a church, the widows should be listed. Widows over sixty should be listed so that the church can take care of them (1 Tim. 5:9). But for that to work, the church has to know which widows belong to the church and which widows do not.

And, finally, all of God's people are listed in the "book of life" (Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). The Bible teaches that God has always known his people. From before he made the universe, he had a book of life, and the names of all the people of God throughout the ages are written down in that book.

So the principal is that God knows who his people are, and the church should know who God's people are.

Here's a second reason why church membership matters: **Christ gave the church authority.** Let's look at Matthew 16:13–19.

<sup>13</sup> When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

<sup>14</sup> They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

<sup>15</sup> "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

<sup>17</sup> Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Here, Peter recognizes who Jesus really is. He is the Messiah, the Christ, and the Son of the living God. And after Peter makes that confession, Jesus says, "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." Peter's name is Πέτρος, which is Greek for "rock." So Jesus is doing a bit of wordplay. Peter is the rock upon whom Jesus will build the church. Now, Jesus does not mean that Peter is the first pope, or the bishop of Rome, as the Roman Catholic Church teaches. But Jesus means that he will build his church upon the apostles and their teaching. In Ephesians 2:20, Paul says that the church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."

Jesus says that his church will not be overcome by the gates of Hades. In other words, the church will not die. But here's the really interesting part: the church will have the keys of the

kingdom of heaven. The church is not the kingdom of God, but it's related. The church is the visible representation of the kingdom of God on earth. And the church has the power to admit people into the kingdom. This is done through preaching the gospel, baptizing people, and making disciples. Now, to make this abundantly clear: the church doesn't save anyone. The church doesn't decide who is saved. God is the one who saves. It's his decision and his action. But what is done in heaven should be reflected on earth in the church. The church has the obligation to recognize who are Christians and who are not. It's possible that local churches can get this wrong.<sup>3</sup> Still, the church's duty is to help people understand if they are Christians or not.

So the church has the opportunity to open the doors of the kingdom of God to people by preaching the gospel, by baptizing people, and by making disciples. We see Peter and the other disciples open up the kingdom doors at the beginning of Acts. But we also see Peter guard the door to the kingdom in Acts 8, when a man named Simon tried to pay the disciples to receive the Holy Spirit. He practiced magic and when he saw that others received the Spirit, he wanted in on the action, and he offered the apostles money. This is what we read in Acts 8:20-23:

<sup>20</sup> Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! <sup>21</sup> You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. <sup>22</sup> Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. <sup>23</sup> For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

Peter didn't condemn the man, but he told him he wasn't right with God. He told him to repent. He gave that opportunity to Simon. But since he saw that Simon wasn't bearing the fruit of a Christian, he didn't lay his hands on him so he could receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> In other words, he didn't open up the kingdom gates for Simon. But if Simon repented, those gates would be opened wide.

Jesus also says, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." This refers to forbidding and permitting certain things.

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Leeman (*Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 62) writes, "Will the local church exercise the keys perfectly? No. It will make mistakes just as every other authority established by Jesus makes mistakes. As such, the local church will be an imperfect representation of Christ's end-time gathering. But the fact that it makes mistakes, just as presidents and parents do, does not mean it's without an authoritative mandate."

<sup>4</sup> In case you're wondering, this bit about laying on off hands to receive the Holy Spirit is not normative. In Acts 2, 8, 10, and 19, there are special events in which the Holy Spirit is poured out on new groups of believers. These events indicated that the gospel was spreading to different groups of people and in different lands. Today, a person receives the Holy Spirit when they come to faith in Jesus and are born again.

Specifically, it refers to forbidding and allowing certain behaviors of people who have entered into the kingdom. Rabbis used the words of binding and loosing to refer to ethical behavior.<sup>5</sup> Here, it seems that Jesus is saying, “Peter, you and the disciples will be able to say what a citizen of the kingdom of God can and cannot do.” They will do this because they are led by God.

What does this mean for church membership? Jonathan Leeman, who wrote a book on the subject, says that Jesus gave the church “the authority of the keys to continue building itself—effectively to receive and dismiss members. The authority of the keys is the authority to assess a person’s gospel words and deeds and to render a judgment.”<sup>6</sup>

Jesus didn’t limit this authority to Peter. In Matthew 18, Jesus also talks about the church. And this brings me to another reason why membership matters: **The church has the authority to discipline its members.** Let’s turn to Matthew 18:15-20:

<sup>15</sup>“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. <sup>16</sup>But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ <sup>17</sup>If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

<sup>18</sup>“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

<sup>19</sup>“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup>For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

Here, Jesus tells the church how to deal with someone who has sinned. If someone in the church has sinned against you, it’s your responsibility to tell that person about it. The goal is to bring about repentance and reconciliation. But if the person who sinned won’t listen, then you should bring one or two others. In the Old Testament, the principle of having at least two witnesses was established. If the sinner still refuses to listen, then he or she must be brought before the whole church. And it’s in that context that Jesus says, again, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Again, the idea has to do with the behavior that is associated with a Christian. If the church agrees that a person is sinning and isn’t repentant, they have the authority to remove that person from the church. God promises

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<sup>5</sup> According to Leon Morris, “The metaphor of binding and loosing was used by the rabbis for declaring forbidden or permitted.” *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 426.

<sup>6</sup> Leeman, *Church Membership*, 59.

to be in the midst of this difficult decision. That's what Jesus means when he says, "for where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them." That has nothing to do with a worship service or a Bible study or a prayer meeting.

This may all be a bit abstract, so let's think about a hypothetical situation. Say I know someone in the church—let's call him Joe—who is sinning in a very obvious, repeated, and public way. When he is rebelling against God and his word, he's hurting himself. But he's also bringing dishonor on the church and, more importantly, on Jesus himself. Say he's been lying, or he's caught up in some sexual sin, or he gets drunk regularly. So, I go to Joe and I say, "Joe, you have to stop doing that. It's against God's will." And if Joe says, "No, I don't have a problem, and God doesn't care that I do it," then I have to bring him before others. If Joe keeps saying, for example, that cheating on his wife isn't a problem, and when he's confronted he refuses to repent, then we wouldn't have any reason to believe Joe is really a Christian. He may be, but from what we can tell, he doesn't look like it, and he's certainly not living like it. (Remember that the Bible warns about false professions of faith.) You can assume that we approached this issue prayerfully and we confronted Joe with love and care. And if we agree that Joe isn't repentant and must leave the church, then God has affirmed us in our decision.

Now, churches can get these things wrong. There are a lot of churches that call themselves churches but are not. Yet still, God has given the church the authority to carry out such issues, and he has given the church his word, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit to guide them.

If you look at 1 Corinthians 5, we see an example of church discipline. Paul says that a man has been having a sexual relationship with his father's wife—most likely his stepmother—and the church has tolerated this. Paul tells the Corinthians that they should have removed this man from their church (verse 2). Of course, the understanding is that if this man stops doing what he is doing and confesses his sin, the church could readmit him to their fellowship. But Paul's concern is that such sinful activity is like a bit of leaven that works its way through the whole lump of dough (verse 6). Paul's concern is for the holiness of God and the holiness of God's people. And Paul tells the whole church to do this, not just the elders or pastors.

Paul comes back to the issue of church discipline in his second letter to the Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians 2, it's possible that Paul is referring back to this man who committed incest. We don't know for sure. It could be some other case of discipline. But regardless of who the person in error was, Paul writes this in 2 Corinthians 2:5-8:

<sup>5</sup> If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. <sup>6</sup> The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. <sup>7</sup> Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup> I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.

Notice how he refers to “the majority.” It seems that the majority of the church had voted to discipline this person. And now Paul says this punishment has been enough, and the church should forgive him.

Now, why do I bring up this whole business of church authority and church discipline? One reason is that it shows that to be a member of a church is not like joining a gym, or a store, or some club. You don’t join a church. You submit to a church.<sup>7</sup> According to Jonathan Leeman, “the local church is the authority on earth that Jesus has instituted to officially affirm and give shape to my Christian life and yours.”<sup>8</sup> If that’s true, and I think it is based on Jesus’ own teachings, then we should gladly come under the authority of a local church. Doing so helps us become better followers of Christ.

The second reason I share these passages is that if a person can be removed from a church, it stands to reason that the person belonged to the church in the first place. And if, in at least one case, a majority of the church approved of a man’s discipline, it stands to reason that there was a list of people who were able to vote on such an issue.

All of the above is related to a third reason why church membership matters: **The church makes disciples, baptizes, and cares for the souls of its members.** In the Great Commission, at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus gives his disciples their marching orders.<sup>9</sup> This is Matthew 28:18-20:

<sup>18</sup> Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

The disciples—and the church that is built upon their foundation—were to proclaim the gospel. They were to make disciples. A disciple is literally a student. A disciple is a follower of Jesus.

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<sup>7</sup> This point is made clearly by Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Leeman (*ibid.*, 21): “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, and he gave his church the authority to march on the nations.”

They were to baptize anyone who repented of their sins and put their trust in Jesus. And they were to teach these disciples everything that Jesus taught.

Baptism is an outward sign of a transformation in a person's life. It represents cleansing of sin. It's also a picture of the old person dying and the new person emerging. You'll find that Paul writes about this at the beginning of Romans 6. In that letter, as in all Paul's letters, he's writing to Christians. He assumes that Christians have already been baptized. Baptism is a public way of identifying yourself with Jesus. It's therefore a prerequisite for belonging to a church. If you haven't been baptized yet, we would love to baptize you here.

The church continues to care for those who have come under its authority. You see that in the many "one another" passages I read earlier. We also see this in passages that are written or about pastors. For example, we see that idea in Hebrews 13:7 and 17. Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." The leaders here are obviously church leaders, because they are speaking the word of God. Now look at verse 17: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."

Before I became a pastor, I didn't think that church membership was such a big deal. But after I became a pastor, and I read verses like this one, I came to realize that church membership is very important. After all, I am supposed to keep watch over people and give an account for how I've done that. But how can I watch over your souls, which is what this passage literally says, if I don't know who belongs to the church? I can, in a broad way, care for the souls of people here just by teaching them God's word. But it makes my job far more difficult when people don't really get involved in the life of the church. There's a similar idea in 1 Peter 5:2, which is directed towards pastors. It says, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers." The idea of a defined church membership helps establish who is part of the flock that is under a pastor's care.<sup>10</sup>

A fourth reason why membership matters is that **much of the Christian life is lived out in the life of the church.** How else can you obey all those "one another" commands that I read earlier if you're not plugged into the life of the church? How can you use your spiritual gifts? It is certainly possible to love other Christians who aren't part of your church, and it's possible to

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<sup>10</sup> Acts 20:28 is another verse that stresses the pastor's need to care for the flock.

use spiritual gifts to serve other Christians and even non-Christians who aren't part of your church. But it seems that we can best love and serve each other in the context of a local church. I believe that the way people in a church love and serve one another is a powerful witness to the world. It should make the church an attractive alternative to the selfishness and lack of commitment found in the world. Jesus himself said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

Finally, here's a fifth reason that membership matters: **Your commitment to the local church is an antidote to the selfish, individualistic, commitment-phobic culture that we live in.** Who commits to anything these days? Where can loyalty be found? People don't commit to marriages, families, jobs, or much anything else. But Christians should be different. We belong to a forever family. Think about it: your relationships with other Christians will outlast all other relationships. Your commitment to God and his people will outlast your commitment to your job, your hobbies, your political ideology, and your support of the Red Sox and the Patriots.

Also, Christianity is more about giving and serving than getting. So many people look for churches and think, "What can that church do for me?" They think, "What am I going to get out of it?" That is anti-Christian thinking. It's just incredibly selfish, and it reveals how much we can get caught up in the consumerism around us. Jesus came not to be served, but to be served, and that should be our goal, too.<sup>11</sup> Jesus died for the church (Acts 20:28). The church is his bride (Rev. 19:7; 21:2, 9). How can we not want to commit to Christ's church? We should ask not what our church can do for us, but rather we should ask what we can do for our church.

There's much more to say about church membership, but I'll wrap up things up by saying this: If you're not an official member of this church, please consider becoming one. You can fill out the form in the bulletin and hand it to me. If you are a member of the church, I would ask that you recommit to serving the church. Some of you are already doing that, and I am very thankful for you. Imagine what this church would be like if everyone here became a member and actively served. That's what I would like to see happen here.

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<sup>11</sup> See Matthew 20:28; John 13:14-15; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Philippians 2:1-11.