

Healthy church 9: Church membership

Introduction

Previously in this series we thought a lot about being faithful church members. We saw that:

- The church is the “gathering” together of God’s people, in all its diversity.
- The local church reveals the glory of the Gospel in its relationships, as diverse people are made one in Christ Jesus.
- Every member of the local church is to be committed to the spiritual growth of the church and of other members...
- Men and women in the church do that as we together listen to the Bible and pray together, build upon a healthy Reformed theology, pursue godly relationships, and speak the truth in love to one another.

What we’re considering today – the specific topic of Church Membership – builds upon those earlier sessions.

We’re showing, from the Bible, how those God-given relationships and deep commitments need the exo-skeleton of formal commitment in order to take shape and to grow.

We have two headings:

1. Church membership is unavoidable
2. Church membership is identifiable

1. Church membership is unavoidable

Or put it another way, if you are joined to Jesus, then you are joined to His body. One place we see that is in 1 Corinthians 12:26-27,

“If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

The apostle Paul is talking here about the reality of the local church. The Church is the body of Christ. Just as my arms, legs, lungs and bones form one body under the control of my head, so too it is with the church of Jesus Christ. God has made all the different members of the local church into one single body – under the control of its head who is Jesus Christ. Put really simply: *The church is Jesus’ body.*

Of course, you CAN live apart from the body of Christ. How? If you’re not yet joined in union to Jesus. If you’re not in a living relationship with Jesus Christ then the church will not and cannot save you. But if you are a Christian, then you are joined to his body.

There's a wonderful Bible illustration of this from Paul's own experience. On the Damascus Road he hears a voice from heaven. In Acts 9:4, we do not read, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Christians". Rather, Jesus says "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me." Jesus and his people are joined together. And if you're joined to Jesus, then you are joined to the body of Christ as well.

Consider the DEPTH of this union. We read in 1 Cor. 12:26 that, if one member of the body suffers, all suffer. If one is honoured, all rejoice. This is real: bereavement, tragedy and joy affect the whole body. You feel it, when things happen within the body of Christ.

Consider the SIGNIFICANCE of this union. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 we're told this: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." The bond between Christian brothers and sisters is worked by the Spirit of God, is established in union with the Lord Jesus Christ, and is therefore everlasting and unchangeable.

Some applications:

There is therefore a more permanent bond of unity between a Christian and members of the body of Christ than between a Christian and any other person in the world. I wonder if we think of the body of Christ in that way?

As you consider your relationship with other members of Immanuel remember that there is a Spirit-worked bond between you and your brethren. As you look through and pray through that list of "Immanuel people" you're not just praying for names on page – but for other members of the body.

We're not saved for solitude, but saved together into a body – in which our relationships display the supernatural power of God.

That's true whether or not we feel like it is true. Sometimes in the body Mr Nose turns round to Miss Elbow and says, "I just don't feel like I belong here." Worse still, Mr Mouth might give the impression that he's the most important member of the body. Sometimes it feels like bodily unity has disappeared. There's been a kind of nerve damage. Different bits of the body behave like they're disunited and even at war with each other. That was the case in the proud and divided church of Corinth.

But, my head and my liver and my toenails ARE all part of one body. Every single Christian man, woman or child – if they are connected to Jesus by faith in Him – are together joined with him, and indispensable to the unity and the life of the body.

As we've said before in this series, the body of Christ is precious and deeply significant. God is gathering a united people to Himself.

Our second big heading is really an implication or consequence that follows on...

2. Church membership is identifiable

That's a rather clunky heading! Another way of putting it would be to say that *Christians ought to be Members – with a capital “M” – of a local church.*

What we're talking about here is a formal and identifiable church membership...

One very important question is this: “Is Church Membership a Biblical idea?” Mark Dever – who is a firm advocate of church membership – makes this helpful observation:

“In one sense, no. Open up the New Testament, and you won't find a story about, say, Priscilla and Aquila moving to the city of Rome, checking out one church, then another, and finally deciding to join a third. From what we can tell, nobody went ‘church shopping’ because there was only one church in each community. In that sense, you won't find a list of church members in the New Testament.” (Mark Dever, *What is healthy church*, p93).

But there are several New Testament passages which strongly suggest that churches DID and SHOULD encourage formal church membership. They knew who belonged to their congregations and who did not. Belonging to the body of Christ was *expressed*, made *visible and identifiable*.

Let me give you five Bible reasons pointing towards a formal and identifiable church membership. We'll start in 1 Corinthians and widen out a little...

(a) Illustrations that are used to describe local churches

The Bible says that *the local church is like a body*. That's the image in 1 Corinthians 12. It's possible to work out whether a limb is attached to the rest of the body!

So too with other illustrations used of the church. The church is said to be like a *flock of sheep*, like a *building*, and like a *household* (Acts 20:28, Ephesians 2:21, 1 Timothy 3:15).

Each of these pictures implies that you can distinguish those who are church members from those who aren't. For example, if you're a sheep farmer you know which animals are in your flock.

(b) The meaning of “the whole church”

In 1 Corinthians 14:23 we read this sentence: “If, therefore, the whole church comes together...”. If you can talk about the “whole church”, presumably you could work out if the whole church was indeed there or not!

(c) Instructions for pastoral care

Leaders of New Testament churches must have had some listing of believers to whose spiritual care they were specially committed. Pastors are to care for “all the flock” (e.g. Acts 20:28, Philippians 1:1, Hebrews 13:17).

(d) The meaning of the word “join”

After the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:13) we're told that no non-Christians “dared join” the church. The word for *join* is very strong. The same word is used both of sexual relationships and of

joining to the Lord (1 Corinthians 6:16, 17). It speaks of deep commitment. It is the very opposite of casual association.

(e) Instructions for church discipline

We read in 1 Corinthians 5:1 of a man in the Corinthian church who was living in immorality of a kind “not tolerated even among pagans.” And so Paul wrote to tell them to exclude him from the assembly. At the end of 5:2 he gives the most serious command: “Let him who has done this be removed from among you.”

Now stop and think: You cannot formally *exclude* someone if he or she is not formally *included* in the first place.

In verses 12-13 Paul makes the same point again: “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.”

There is a line separating the “inside” and the “outside” of the church. Jesus himself said very similar words:

Matthew 18:15-18, “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. ¹⁶ 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. 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. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

All these passages assume in different ways a pattern of formal church membership. You can work out who has actually joined the church. Or rather, the church knows who she has admitted

3. Common questions and problems...

Question: Is it possible to stick with Jesus – but have a non-formal or even casual relationship to a local church?

It’s a surprising common question among Christian people. Some folk actually say things like this: “I love the universal church, and I’m a member of the universal church. I’m joined with all Christians everywhere.”

How do we respond? Lovingly, we need to point that that it is easy to say that you love the universal church, because you don’t live right next door to it! It’s much harder to love people that you know and who have hurt you and have let you down, and who you have hurt and let down.

But God’s word says, “That’s exactly where I want discipleship to happen: where people who have hurt one another have to forgive one another; where people who have let one another down have to ask forgiveness and repent and be restored and reconciled in their relationship. Because Christians are grown as members of a local body of Christ.”

Someone else might say, “But what’s the problem with being committed to church, but not formally committed?” To which I’d gently want to respond: “If your church practices church membership, why would you *not* want to commit yourself in that way?”

Think about those Bible passages that speak of a body (and not of disjointed limbs). How will you be a part of the body? Or those texts that speak of “joining” the church and of the “whole flock.” How will you obey those parts of God’s word.

Some Christians, sadly, have an attitude to church that’s a bit like co-habitation. You want benefits, without commitment! I don’t know if you’ve ever had cause to say to someone who’s co-habiting, “Why don’t you want to stick a ring on her finger?” Equally, the Christian can say to another brother or sister, “Why don’t you want to be as committed as possible to your church family?”

But **what if you’ve been burned by a church before?** Maybe you’ve been the victim of a church every bit as dysfunctional as the one in Corinth.

Jesus knows that hurt. Sin is horrendous. And the sin of Christian people is the most outrageous sin that there is.

But to live the Christian life as a Lone Ranger Christian because of past hurts is not what the Lord wants for you. It deprives you of the benefits of proper body membership... AND it deprives a body of you.

One simple application before we close...

4. Application: With God’s help be a faithful church member.

(a) Church membership at Immanuel

In common with many churches Immanuel has a short and simple membership covenant.

Our practical requirements are those of the wider Church of England: that you are **baptized, aged 16 or over**, and have been **attending regularly** at Immanuel for 6 months. (Please ask if you’ve got questions about our baptism practice at Immanuel.)

Spiritual commitments are summed up in three short statements. These are listed below, together with some practical implications.

Every honest Christian knows that they fall short of God’s standards. But we believe these statements – which are both simple and searching – sum up the Lord’s plan of salvation, holiness and church commitment.

1. I am trusting the gospel of grace for my salvation

- I know that I am a sinner in God’s sight. Without Jesus and his death upon the cross I would face His holy judgement. My only hope is God’s sovereign mercy. *See Psalm 51:4*
- I believe that Jesus Christ is both Lord and Saviour. I trust Him alone for my salvation, as He is presented to me in God’s Word the Bible. *See Acts 4:12*

2. With the Holy Spirit’s help I am seeking to grow in godliness

- I want to be devoted to personal Bible reading and prayer. *See 1 Peter 2:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*
- I want to share Christ with unbelievers such as I am able. *See 1 Peter 3:15*
- I want to live a holy life in line with the ethical teaching of the Bible in those different relationships to which God has called me – e.g. in marriage, family, workplace, community, church, etc. *See 1 Thessalonians 4:7*

3. I am committed to the people and work of Immanuel Church Brentwood

- With the Lord’s help I want to love the members of Immanuel as members of my own family. (E.g. God wants us to encourage each other, resolve tensions biblically and respect those who lead the church). *See 1 Peter 4:8, Ephesians 4:2-3, Hebrews 13:17*
- I will be committed to meeting regularly with and praying for my church. (E.g. attending church regularly on Sundays and where possible joining a fellowship group and attending the church prayer meeting). *See Hebrews 10:25*
- Such as I am able I will give regularly to support the work of Immanuel. (The Old Testament pattern of the 10% tithe is a great challenge, but the New Testament doesn’t state a percentage. It simply says that, before the Lord, we should give cheerfully and sacrificially. Obviously, we also encourage giving to other needs outside of Immanuel.) *See 1 Timothy 6:18*
- I want to use the gifts God has given me to help the church family and to aid our outreach to the unconverted. I understand and support the mission of Immanuel, and will seek to be involved in an area of service. *See Ephesians 4:16*

There are some simple practical requirements: that you’re baptized, aged 16 or over, and you’ve been attending regularly at Immanuel for 6 months. Spiritual commitments are summed up in three short statements. These are listed in bold, together with some practical implications.

I am trusting the gospel of grace for my salvation

With the Holy Spirit’s help I am seeking to grow in godliness

I am committed to the people and work of Immanuel Church Brentwood

You can make it even simpler: you’re converted, you’re pursuing holiness, and you’re committed to Immanuel as your church. And for some of us, we might need to have a meeting with one of the elders and *become* a church member.

For most of us, the challenge is to feel the weight of church membership – of what it means to be covenanted together with a particular body of Christ – and be an increasingly *faithful* church member.

(b) With God’s help, be an increasingly faithful church member

In doing that we might be helped by understanding the difference between *comfort-based commitment* and *calling-based commitment*.

It’s easy for a church to start emphasizing that they have no expectations, and they advertise church as a great place to prosper morally, educate your kids, find community, feel safe, comfortable, and catered for. Then you join a small group and meet a few people, who you like. Somewhere along the way you become a member, but membership isn’t important. The point is that a few years in, you’ve become really committed to your church principally because you like it and it’s kinda easy.

That’s comfort-based commitment. It works for consumer products; and can work for churches. It sees commitment as a process. Over time, you see the church meeting your needs and so you become more comfortable there. And as you become more comfortable, you commit more deeply.

We don't want to knock that unfairly. There's something very natural in drifting towards what is comfortable. But the Bible's vision for commitment to the body of Christ is different. Just think of some of the texts we looked at today, or the deep call to "love" one another (1 John 4:19-20).

An interesting diagnostic question to ask yourself is: Why do you come, and keep coming to church? Comfort-Based Commitment might point to social reasons or personal reasons. Calling based commitment has obedience to God and a delight in his church as primary motivators.

And one of the tools that can actually help deep relationships form is by understanding and practicing formal church membership: identifying clearly who is committed to the body, to whom the elders have a particular responsibility, for whom we *all* have a commitment and care – and to do so publicly.

A bit like marriage, it requires commitment up front – one that is *not* largely based on feelings of attachment or belonging, though we pray that those things come eventually. But based upon God *calling* people, not only to Christ, but also into local bodies of Christ.

We decide intentionally that we will *sacrifice, gather, encourage one another, and look to guard one another.*

[*Sacrifice.* Romans 12:13-16 tells us that sacrifice is practical and it is emotional. "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality...Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another."

Gathering. To be a Christian is to join with other Christians on a regular basis. (Hebrews 10:25). The author of Hebrews just doesn't envision another category of Christian.

Encouraging one another. Learning how to strengthen one another's faith, not just pursuing your own spiritual well-being but helping others fight for faith.

Guarding one another. Being real with one another's sin, helping each other to repent and dealing with the consequences if we fail to repent (Matthew 18). That's the topic for next week's session.]

And as we've been learning lately in *many* contexts, that requires us to invest in relationships. To pursue Christian friendships with people who are not like us. To open up with a few – in order to confess sin, speak encouragements, pray honestly.