

Church Membership

The Scriptural pattern
of local church membership



Scriptural Warrant

Although there is no explicit command regarding the establishment of church membership in the Scriptures, the Biblical warrant for its practice is one that is set before us in the example of the New Testament church.

In Acts 9:26-28, we find that Paul, after his conversion, returned to Jerusalem and sought to 'join himself to the disciples'. The word here translated 'join' is a word meaning 'to glue'. It speaks of a very close and permanent attachment and not a loose association. Significantly, we find that at first he was unable to join the disciples. They did not believe that he was a disciple until Barnabas spoke on his behalf. Clearly this 'joining' was to be for believers only and was not merely an attendance at their gatherings. Unbelievers were of course welcome to attend the church services and 1 Cor 14:23 speaks of unbelievers doing just that.

This same church at Jerusalem was the church which shortly before had seen the judgment upon Ananias and Saphira for their attempted deceit regarding the sale of their property (Acts chapter 5). After this solemn event, we read in verse 13 that 'of the rest durst (dared) no man join himself to them'. This same glue word is used here and indicates that to join the church was a serious commitment that some were afraid to undertake.

Just as we see that to join the church was a serious undertaking and for true believers only, so we see that the preservation of that membership requires the putting out of membership of those whose profession proves to be empty or who persist in leading sinful lives. In 1 Corinthians chapter 5 we read of Paul's instruction to the Corinthian church regarding the dealing with one who persisted in open sin. They are instructed to "purge out the old leaven" (1Cor 5:7) and to "put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (1Cor5:13). Again, they would not forbid the attendance on the preaching of God's word but there is evidently a membership that was to be kept pure and some were therefore put out of membership.

The duties and responsibilities of membership

Having established the warrant for local church membership we consider the duties of those who come into church membership.

The Scriptures set before us a number of duties as a consequence of the believer's relationships within the local church.

1. The local church in Scripture is likened to a family in that elders must demonstrate an ability to take care of the church by having ruled well their own families (1 Tim 3:4,5). To join a local church therefore, is to join the visible family of the Lord's people gathered in a locality. There must be loyalty shown to that family before an unsaved world and the family bond

must be evident in their love to one another (1Peter 1:22) and in not forsaking their assembling together (Heb 10:25).

2. There must be commitment by members to support the local church as well as the church worldwide. (For example, in Acts 6 we find the church at Jerusalem caring for their widows and in Acts 11:29,30 the church at Antioch giving to the needy believers in Judea).
3. Members are to obey and submit to the authority of the elders (Hebrews 13:17). Members are also to respect and esteem highly those in authority over them (1Thess 5:12,13) and to remember them in prayer and in thanksgiving (Hebrews 13:7).
4. Members are to assist the elders in their calling to give themselves “continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:4) by taking the burden of other duties within the church that would otherwise cause them to neglect their calling. Acts 6 sets before us the example of the church at Jerusalem which was directed by the apostles to appoint officers to care for the widows so that they might give themselves more fully to the work to which God had called them. How often church elders are distracted from the spiritual needs of the church to deal with matters that ought not to have been brought before them or left for them to do!
5. Members have a special responsibility to discern the spiritual gifts given by God amongst them and to take part in electing those whom the elders may prayerfully recommend for office (Acts 6:3, 14:23).

The privileges and blessings of church membership

There are blessings uniquely associated with fulfilling the pattern of coming into church membership.

1. The exercise of the family bond of love and mutual care described above, evidently brings mutual blessing upon the members of the church.
2. Joining a local church brings a believer under the care and oversight of elders who must give account to God because they “watch for your souls” (Heb 13:17). God has ordained that elders in the church have a prayerful care and concern for the flock that has been entrusted to them and are to be a means of blessing to their flock (1Tim 3:4,5). There is then, a particular care for ‘family’ members that is not extended to adherents.
3. In 1 Peter 5:3 we read that the elders are to be ‘ensamples to the flock’ and in Hebrews 13:7 the believers are urged to consider those in authority in the church “whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation”. Faithful and Godly elders in the church are therefore provided as an example to believers to consider and follow and clearly such elders are to present themselves in such a way that their flock can indeed see their example.

Finally, the passage in Acts chapter 6 presents us with a particular example of blessing to the church when the members of the church are faithful in all their

responsibilities. Following the appointment of ‘the seven’ to the work of ministering to the needs of the widows, we immediately read “and the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly” (Acts 6:7). The apostles had been enabled to give themselves “continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word”. The faithfulness of church members undoubtedly brings great blessing to the church and our Saviour’s Name is glorified.

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For further reading.

“The Baptist Confession of Faith 1689”

“Church Membership in the New Testament”
Sword and Trowel Supplement of March 1981
Published by The Metropolitan Tabernacle

“God’s Plan for the Local Church” by Nigel Lacey
Published by Grace Publications.