

Is Church Membership “Biblical”?

Rev. Chuck Price
pastor@fbcsterling.org

Over my years in ministry I've had more conversations than I can count about “church membership”. Recently our church had a discussion about that same topic. I followed that discussion with thought, prayer and study about the subject over the last week or so, and what follows is some of what's come to mind.

First, as many are quick to note, “church membership” is never explicitly addressed in the New Testament. That is indeed the case. The specific term is not found. However, I believe that there are found in the New Testament many principles which, when taken together, express the concept which we have come to know as “church membership”. Said a different way, it is my firm conviction that the concept which we have come to know as “church membership” is strongly implied within the scriptures.

Taken in a logical sequence, my study reminded me of the following truths, which I share briefly and simply:

1. The church was instituted by Jesus (Mt. 16:18), and although the noun is singular (ekklesia) it refers to a collected group (assembly, congregation).
2. We are reminded that the individual Christian does not live out the life of faith alone, but as a part of that much larger Body (Acts 2:41).
3. Although originally birthed in Jerusalem at Pentecost as a result of the Holy Spirit's work following Peter's sermon, the church quickly spread to additional cities as believers returned to their homes and continued meeting together in Jesus' name (Acts 8:1; Acts 13:1; Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; etc.). The single Body which was first seen in Jerusalem soon multiplied into local manifestations found in numerous cities. And while initially there may have been only one church in a city, today we have multiple churches in numerous localities. The natural, automatic relationship between the individual and “the” church in his city has now evolved into a choice the believer must make as to which of many churches in his locale he will choose to associate with and make himself accountable to.
4. There is an expressed expectation that each individual believer will maintain an ongoing relationship with the congregation of believers with which he or she normally associates (Heb 10:23-25).
5. There appears to be a mutual responsibility of commitment between believers within each local Body, whether through the use of spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12: 7, 12, 18, 27) or in the application of church discipline (Mt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:11-13). This mutual responsibility demands some sort of ongoing, mutually accountable relationship between individual believers.
6. Lastly, the New Testament clearly states the responsibilities of leaders to the believers they serve (Acts 20:28), as well as the responsibilities of individual believers to those who lead them (Hebrews 13:17). These passages express the required stewardship of leadership and the expected submission of followers. I am at a loss to understand how such responsibilities could be expected to be fulfilled outside of the committed relationship among believers which we describe by “church membership.”

Can a person be a believer in Christ without being a member of a local church? Absolutely! However, I believe that the richest expression of the Christian faith is found through the individual believer's committed union with a local body of believers. And the term which we use today to describe that committed, ongoing union between an individual believer and their local church is “membership.” Is it a term found in the Bible? Not so much; but it accurately expresses the “concepts” we find in the Bible.

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