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DEVELOPING AND TEACHING A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY
OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT PINE GROVE CHURCH,
OPELIKA, ALABAMA

A Project
Presented to
the Faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
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December 2014

APPROVAL SHEET

DEVELOPING AND TEACHING A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY
OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT PINE GROVE CHURCH,
OPELIKA, ALABAMA

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PREFACE

I gratefully and humbly give all glory to God for enabling me to complete this project. The ability and guidance needed to reach this point of culmination can only be the result of the One who renewed my strength so that I ran and did not grow weary, I walked and did not become faint. Thank you, God.

I want to thank my beautiful wife, Debbie. What a blessed man I am to be married to my best friend and to be an heir with you of the grace of life. Truly you are far more precious than jewels. I love you.

I also want to give thanks to my church family at Pine Grove. How thankful I am to be a pastor of such wonderful, godly people. Thank you for being patient with me as I completed this project and for upholding your pastor through your prayers, love, and encouragement.

Finally, I want to thank Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for its commitment to the word of God and the excellence constantly displayed in teaching and equipping students. My ministry will forever be shaped by the integrity, reverence and devotion I have witnessed at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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Opelika, Alabama

December 2014

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to develop and implement a curriculum for teaching a biblical theology¹ of church membership to adults at Pine Grove Church in Opelika, Alabama.

Goals

Four goals determined the success of this project. The first goal was to develop a curriculum on church membership to be used in Pine Grove's new member class. This goal was measured by a panel of pastoral peers who evaluated the curriculum using an evaluation rubric (see Appendix 2). The panel consisted of four pastors from Lakeview Baptist Church in Auburn, Alabama. This expert panel evaluated the curriculum on biblical accuracy and clarity. This goal was successfully accomplished when each member of the expert panel rated at least 90 percent of the evaluation markers as "sufficient" or "exemplary."

The second goal was to teach a biblical theology of church membership to the elders who serve at Pine Grove Church. This teaching was presented over the course of

¹By stating that the goal of this project is to develop and implement a biblical theology of church membership, I intend to unfold within the curriculum an understanding of church membership which is in accord with that of the biblical authors.

three monthly meetings. The curriculum developed during the first goal was used in teaching the elders. The elders grew in their knowledge of the mandate and practical benefits of church membership based upon the teaching of the Bible regarding this vital doctrine. The goal was measured by a questionnaire that the elders filled out both before and after the teaching of the curriculum (see Appendix 4). Because a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant change between participants' scores on the first and second questionnaire, the goal was deemed successful.²

The third goal was to present a biblical theology of church membership to the congregation of Pine Grove Church. This was done by means of a sermon series that was preached for three consecutive weeks. The congregation was presented with a clear, biblical theology of church membership through which they grew in their understanding of the importance of the local church and the biblical reasons for becoming a member of a local church. This goal was measured by the same questionnaire used for the Pine Grove elders. Participating in the questionnaire were 15 members of the Pine Grove congregation. These 15 members filled out this questionnaire both before and after the sermon series. Because a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant change between participants scores on the first and second questionnaire, the goal was deemed successful.

The fourth goal was to present a biblical theology of church membership to the participants of Pine Grove's new member class. This class is offered four times per

²Neil J. Salkind, *Statistics for People Who Think They Hate Statistics* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010), 189.

year at Pine Grove Church. A biblical theology of church membership was presented over the course of four consecutive Sundays during this class, using the curriculum developed through the first goal. The participants of the new member class learned the importance of the local church, the Bible's teaching on church membership, and the biblical mandate to become a member of a local church. This goal was measured by the same questionnaire used for the sermon series and for the elders. The questionnaire was given both before and after the teaching of the curriculum. Because a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant change between the participants' scores on the first and second questionnaires, the goal was successfully accomplished.

Ministry Context

From the time of Pine Grove Church's inception in 1875, it addressed membership matters according to the polity of the Methodist or the United Methodist church. The specifics of this membership process and the theology behind these specifics were always set in place by committees beyond the local church. Therefore, for almost the entirety of Pine Grove's existence, there was little or no in-depth discussion regarding the biblical foundations of the membership process. The church simply followed the membership guidelines received from the denomination.

The membership process that Pine Grove Church followed was interrelated to other significant areas of the church. For example, the membership process being practiced at Pine Grove Church had significant implications upon the way this church viewed the sacraments. People who had been baptized as infants were regularly received into membership at Pine Grove Church. Concerning the Lord's Supper, Pine Grove Church allowed persons to partake of Holy Communion whether they were members of

Pine Grove Church or any other church. The church's view of membership was not an isolated matter.

In March 2011, the congregation of Pine Grove Church voted to withdraw from the United Methodist Church. The vote was over 96 percent in favor of such a move. Coinciding with this vote, the senior pastor of Pine Grove Church surrendered his credentials as an ordained United Methodist pastor. The reason for such a drastic decision was the irreconcilable differences in polity, theology, and ethics.

Pine Grove Church now found itself in the position of being a brand new church that was 136 years old. Issues that had long been taken for granted now had to be reevaluated with wise, careful discernment. One such issue was that of membership.

In addition to the above context, Pine Grove Church was also facing other concerns related to church membership. These concerns were three-fold. First, a significant number of people whose names were on the membership list of the church, but who were inactive in attendance and participation. Second, the church had a significant number of people who regularly attended, yet had never joined the church or evidenced any desire to join. Rather, those in this category appeared content to experience the benefits of attending Pine Grove Church without making any type of formal commitment to the church and its congregation. Third, another group at Pine Grove demonstrated a minimal level of commitment to the church. Those in this category were mostly members of the church. However, they were not involved in any type of ministry or service, nor did they evidence any real commitment to investing in the

lives of their fellow members. A low view of church membership, or an unbiblical view of church membership, was playing a part in each of these three issues.

The place that Pine Grove Church now finds itself now—being an established church that is all at once a non-denominational church—provides it with an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity is that it has the freedom to search the Scriptures and put in place a membership process that is biblical, one that communicates the blessing and importance of church membership to the congregation. The challenge it faces is that it must embrace a new membership process even though it is a 138-year-old congregation.

Ultimately, this project presents a theology of church membership so that Pine Grove Church can embrace a membership process that is true to Scripture and promotes greater levels of commitment from the congregation.

Rationale for the Project

The rationale for the need to teach a biblical theology of church membership at Pine Grove Church is the focus of this section. First, Pine Grove Church has never placed any significant emphasis upon church membership, either through the teaching of a class or through preaching. Though persons have been received into membership at Pine Grove throughout its history, the biblical significance of this commitment has not been emphasized from the perspective of the congregation or the perspective of the persons joining the church. Second, the unbiblical views of church membership held by some in the congregation is reflected in the unwillingness of many attendees to join the church, the inactivity of some of the members of the church, and the low level of commitment demonstrated by some. Third, our recent withdrawal from a denomination

is forcing our church to define what we believe about church membership, rather than following a church membership process given to us from a denomination.

By teaching a biblical theology of church membership to the elders, the congregation, and in the new member class, several important benefits will result. The first benefit is a congregation that better understands the biblical mandate for church membership and, of course, understands more fully the word of God. The second benefit is a higher level of commitment to the church and to one another, as the people of Pine Grove Church see from Scripture what God expects from those who are members of his church. A third benefit is that Pine Grove Church can have a church membership process that is true to the Bible. As seen above, church membership is so important to the life of the church that it impacts other vital areas as well.

Definitions, Limitations and Delimitations

Church membership. Jonathan Leeman offers this definition of church membership: “Church membership is a formal relationship between a church and a Christian characterized by the church’s affirmation and oversight of a Christian’s discipleship and the Christian’s submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.”³ As Leeman points out, church membership goes beyond merely attending a church. It involves a formal relationship that includes the oversight of the leadership and submission on behalf of the church member.

Local church. This term marks a distinction between the universal church and the local church. Mark Dever defines the local church in the following manner:

³Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 64.

“The Bible presents the local church as an entity made up of multiple individuals yet so highly integrated they are identifiable as a unit.”⁴ The local church is a part of the universal body of Christ, yet it is itself the body of Christ in its own particular locality.

One limitation that this project faced was that each of the four goals was conducted within a fifteen-week time frame. Thus, the biblical teaching on church membership continues well beyond the time period of this project.

One delimitation for this project is that it addressed only the adult members or member candidates of the church. Though Pine Grove Church does have adolescent members, this project only focused upon adult members 18 years of age and older.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this project included a peer review and a questionnaire (see Appendix 4). As stated above, four goals determined the effectiveness of this project. The first goal was to develop a curriculum to be used in Pine Grove’s new member class. Prior to the implementation of the curriculum, it was evaluated by a panel of pastoral peers selected from the staff of Lakeview Baptist Church in Auburn, Alabama, who used an evaluation rubric in order to assess the curriculum’s biblical integrity and clarity in presentation (see Appendix 2). The evaluation rubric allowed the panel of pastoral peers to rate various aspects of the curriculum as either insufficient, requires attention, sufficient, or exemplary. This goal was successfully accomplished in that each member of the panel rated 90 percent of the curriculum as either sufficient or exemplary (see Appendix 3). The development and

⁴Mark Dever, “The Church,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 791.

evaluation of the curriculum took place during the first three weeks of the project. The second goal was to teach a biblical theology of church membership to the elders who serve at Pine Grove Church. This teaching was conducted over the course of three monthly meetings and took place from Week 3 through Week 12 of the project. Prior to the first monthly meeting, the elders completed a questionnaire that provided insight into their understanding of biblical church membership (see Appendix 2). The questionnaire included forced response questions, using the Likert scale. The questionnaire assessed the elders' biblical knowledge and understanding of church membership. The elders completed the same questionnaire at the conclusion of the third monthly meeting. A t-test for dependent samples was used to determine if there was a positive, statistical difference between the first and second questionnaires taken by the elders. Because the t-test demonstrated a positive, statistically significant change between the first and second questionnaire, the goal was deemed successful (see Appendix 5).

The third goal was to present a biblical theology of church membership to the congregation of Pine Grove Church. This presentation was accomplished by means of a three-week sermon series. Fifteen members of Pine Grove Church were selected to complete a questionnaire that assessed their understanding of biblical church membership. This questionnaire was identical to the one used in Goal 2. The 15 church members who participated in the questionnaire identified themselves by means of a personal code term, which they themselves selected. At the conclusion of the three-week sermons series, the same group of 15 church members completed an identical questionnaire. A t-test for dependent samples was used to determine if there was a

positive, statistically significant change between the two sets of participant questionnaires. This third goal, which took place during Weeks 9 through 13 of the project, was deemed successful due to the results of this t-test (see Appendix 6).

The fourth goal was to present a biblical theology of church membership to the participants of Pine Grove's new member class. This took place during Weeks 10 through 15 of the project. This four-week class is offered four times per year. Participants in the new member class were taught the biblical reasoning for church membership and discovered the biblical expectations for healthy church members. Participants in the new member class completed a pretest and posttest questionnaire on church membership. This questionnaire was identical to the questionnaire used in Goals 2 and 3. A t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive, statistically significant change between the first and second questionnaires, thus proving the successful accomplishment of this goal (see Appendix 7).

All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to the use in the ministry project.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress, is separated from the promises of the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger; he is profane; he is an enemy. He can no longer have God for his Father who has not the Church for his mother. If any one could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside of the Church.¹

Now, I know, there are some who say, “Well, I hope I have given myself to the Lord, but I do not intend to give myself to any church, because.” Now, why not? “Because I can be a Christian without it.” Now are you quite clear upon that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord’s commands as by being obedient? Well, suppose everybody else did the same, suppose all Christians in the world said, “I shall not join the Church.” Why there would be no visible Church, there would be no ordinances. That would be a very bad thing, and yet, one doing it—what is right for one is right for all—why should not all of us do it? Then you believe that if you were to do an act which has a tendency to destroy the visible Church of God, you would be as good a Christian as if you did your best to build up that church? I do not believe it, sir. Nor do you either.²

The above quotes, one from a church father of the third century, and one from a pastor and church leader of the nineteenth century, both set forth a high view of the church. Cyprian equates an attempt to be saved apart from the church with an attempt by a person of Noah’s generation to be saved while being outside the ark. Spurgeon’s strong

¹Cyprian, *The Treatises of Cyprian*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of The Writings of the Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 423.

²Charles H. Spurgeon, “Joining the Church,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Containing Sermons Preached and Revised* (Pasadena, CA: Pilgrim, 1979), 60: 295.

rebuke states that refusal to join a church “has a tendency to destroy the visible church of God,” and is “disobedience to your Lord’s commands.”

But is commitment to a local church, and particularly membership in a local church, truly necessary? If a Christian does not become a member of a church, is it an act of disobedience to the Lord’s commands? According to some who name the name of Jesus, the answer to these questions is no. After interviewing multiple people who had left the church, William Hendricks, in his book *Exit Interviews*, makes the following comments:

Tradition holds that you cannot grow apart from a church. . . . A few of the people I have interviewed have moved forward by standing tradition on its head and taking spiritual sustenance wherever they can find it – from books, magazines, television and radio ministries, a sympathetic friend or two, perhaps the arts and music, maybe volunteer work. Over time, they’ve become quite resourceful at finding ways to meet God apart from a local church.³

The belief that God can be met apart from a local church is likewise shared by George Barna, as evidenced when he writes, “Scripture teaches us that devoting your life to loving God with all your heart, mind, strength and soul is what honors Him. Being part of a local church may facilitate that. Or it might not.”⁴

What does the Bible say about church membership? Are there actually believers in the NT who facilitate their walk with God outside of a local church? Is church membership even present in the NT? The thesis of this chapter is that formal church membership in a local church is presented in the NT as normative for all believers. In order to support the thesis, this first section focuses upon the term *ekklesia* and the NT’s emphasis on the local church.

³William Hendricks, *Exit Interviews* (Chicago: Moody, 1993), 295.

⁴George Barna, *Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2005), 37.

The New Testament and the Local Church

What value does the NT place upon the local church? Do the concluding twenty-seven books of the Bible view the church as optional in regard to facilitating a believer's love for God? And what does a study of the local church in the NT reveal about church membership? A careful reading of this portion of Scripture will reveal that the local church is the spiritual home for all believers and that the NT does not expect any Christian to be spiritually homeless.

The word "church" in the NT is from the Greek term *ekklesia*, which means an assembly, a religious congregation, or an assembled church.⁵ Of the 114 times that this term appears in the NT, 3 refer to a secular assembly and 2 are quotations from the OT. The remaining 109 usages are references to the church. Of these 109 usages, 16 are references to the universal church, while 90 are references to a local, identifiable church. The universal church is that entity that all true believers throughout history who belong to Christ become a part of at the point of their conversion. Jesus speaks of the universal church in Matthew 16:18 when he says, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (cf. 1 Cor 10:32, 12:28, 15:9; Gal 1:13; Eph 1:22, 3:10, 3:21, 5:23-32; Col 1:18, 1:24).⁶ But the NT authors write with much greater frequency about specific, identifiable, local churches. Many of these were house churches. For example, Paul sends greetings to the church that met in the house of Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:5). In Colossians 4:15, Paul sends his

⁵George V. Wigram and Jay P. Green, Sr., *The New Englishman's Greek Concordance and Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1982), 253.

⁶Unless otherwise noted, this project will use the English Standard Version of the Bible.

greetings to Nympha and “the church in her house.” Other uses of *ekklesia* refer to city churches. Acts 8:1 speaks of the “church in Jerusalem.” In Revelation 2-3, the glorified Christ addresses seven local city churches in Asia. Also, the term *ekklesia* can refer to an identifiable, local church within a region (Acts 9:31). Thus, the way in which the biblical authors use the term *ekklesia* points to the importance that the local church had in the early days of Christianity.

It is also highly significant to note that when *ekklesia* is used to refer to a local church, the NT does not see that local church as only a portion of the church, but rather as the whole of the church in that particular locality. For example, the first epistle to the Corinthians begins with this greeting from Paul: “Paul, called by the will of God to be an Apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church [the term *ekklesia*, used 22 times in this letter] of God that is in Corinth.” Throughout this epistle, Paul addresses the Corinthian believers as “the church” (see, for example, 1 Cor 11:18) and the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-31), not merely as a fraction of the church or a segment of Christ’s body. For these reasons, C. K. Barrett writes,

That which exists in Corinth is, so far as Corinth is concerned, the church of God, wanting in nothing save numbers. It cannot afford to neglect other similar manifestations of the whole church (thus Paul will urge the Corinthians to join in charitable service to the Palestinian Christians – xvi. 1-4), and must take note of universal Christian beliefs and practices (iv. 17; vii. 17; xi. 33-6), but it is the church, and not simply a fraction of it.⁷

⁷C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Harper’s New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 32.

The NT authors recognized the place and importance of the universal church, yet they did not view each local church as merely a portion of the universal church, but rather as representing fully the church of God in that particular place.

In the book of Acts, the term *ekklesia* first occurs at the conclusion of the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), where following their deaths, “great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things (v. 11). Luke’s mention of the whole church is a reference to the city church in Jerusalem. What is worthy of attention in verse 11 is that the phrase “whole church” is synonymous with all the believers in Jerusalem. When Luke states that fear came upon the whole church, he is equally saying that fear came upon all the believers in Jerusalem. At this point in church history, to be a disciple was to be a member of the church. That is Luke’s assumption in the book of Acts. The whole church included every believer, and every believer was part of the whole church. The NT assumes that the local church is to be the spiritual residence for all believers.

The implication from this brief study of the use of *ekklesia* in the NT is simply to note the importance that the biblical authors give to the local church, both through frequency and through usage. This emphasis upon the local church also suggests that the NT authors saw believers as related to an identifiable, local church as well as being members of the universal church. These truths regarding the local church will provide an important groundwork for the following sections as they relate to the church and particularly the NT’s expectation of membership in the local church. The next section will focus on the NT subject of church discipline and the understanding that it brings to the issue of the church and membership therein.

The Necessity of Membership for Church Discipline

Few topics in the NT speak as clearly to the early church's understanding of membership as does church discipline. While there are multiple passages dealing with corrective church discipline (Matt 18:15-18, 2 Cor 2:6-7, 1 Thess 5:14, 2 Thess 3:6-15, Titus 3:10-11, 2 John 7-10, 3 John 9-12), this section focuses upon a particular example of church discipline found in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.

The situation that Paul addresses in chapter 5 is summarized in verse 1: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife." Here, Paul reminds the church in Corinth that this sin (specifically addressed in the OT in Lev 18:8 and 20:11) is of such a perverse nature that it "is not tolerated even among pagans." What this passage also reveals is that the man involved in this sexual immorality was a member of the church in Corinth (he bears the name of brother in verse 11), but the woman was not a member (notice that no mention of action is directed toward her).

Interestingly, the focus of Paul's sharp words in this chapter are aimed not at the individual man involved in the immoral relationship, but rather at the church. In verse 2, Paul writes, "And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you." Note here Paul's astonishment that the church, in the context of this tolerated sin, is not mourning, but rather is arrogant. The themes of arrogance and boasting saturates the first portion of 1 Corinthians (e.g., 1:29, 1:31, 3:21, 4:7, 4:19). Hans Conzelmann rightly observes that the mourning Paul desires is not simply a feeling "but likewise a judgment – a judgment on sin."⁸ Paul rebukes the

⁸Hans Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 96.

church because they have not already had this offender “removed from among you” (v. 2), that they have not cleansed “the old leaven” (v. 7), and that they have not purged “the evil person from among you” (v. 13). The apostle’s rebuke is aimed squarely at the church, as Gordon Fee notes in the following: “Neither the man himself nor his sin is directly addressed. Paul’s own revulsion toward the matter underlies the whole and surfaces often; but the argument is addressed almost entirely to the church and its arrogance. What is at stake is not simply a low view of sin; rather, it is the church itself.”⁹

Paul is very careful to remind the church that this action of purging the evil person is to be done because he is an insider rather than an outsider (see vv. 9-13). If the immoral man mentioned in this chapter did not claim to be a brother and was not a member of the church in Corinth, then the church would have no authority to pass judgment, as the apostle clearly states in verse 12, “For what have I to do with judging outsiders?” It is God’s place to judge “those outside” the church (v. 13).

Although church membership is not specifically mentioned in this passage, the concept of it undergirds the very logic of Paul’s reasoning in chapter 5. The very flow of the passage points to a distinct and clearly defined line between those who are church members in Corinth and those who are not. This line of distinction is manifested in three ways throughout the chapter.

First, Paul’s admonition to have this man removed from the church implies a move from membership to non-membership. The Corinthian believers were to be God’s temple in that city (1 Cor 3:16), consisting of people who are sanctified in Christ Jesus

⁹Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 197.

(1 Cor 1:2). If they had had an attitude of mourning over this sin, rather than an attitude of arrogance, then the church's reaction in this matter would have been much different. As Fee points out, "Mourning is the proper response to such sin in their midst, not pride; and true mourning of this kind would have as its concomitant result that the man would have been 'put out of your fellowship.'"¹⁰ Paul's admonishment to the Corinthians to put this man out of the fellowship is the same as telling the Corinthians to move this man out of membership in the church.

Second, the distinction that Paul makes between the man and the woman involved in this sexual immorality also points to the existence of church membership. Paul's exhortation to the Corinthian church regarding how it is to respond to this immoral man is clear: "Purge the evil person from among you" (1 Cor 5:13; see also Deut 17:7). However, there is a noticeable absence of instruction concerning the woman in the immoral relationship. Why are there such strong words regarding the man, yet no remarks at all regarding the woman? The answer is that the man "bears the name of a brother" and is a person who is among them, thus implying membership in the local church at Corinth. The woman, however, is an outsider and a non-member of the church. Therefore, the church cannot judge her, for Paul states, "For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church who you are to judge?" (v. 12). The man in this immoral relationship is a member of the church and is dealt with differently than the woman who is not a member of the church. Fee highlights this truth when he writes, "The fact that the woman herself is not mentioned, especially since women are

¹⁰Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 202-03.

more often condemned for sexual sins than men, is a sure indication that only the man was a member of the Christian community.”¹¹

Third, Paul’s language of insiders and outsiders is strong evidence for the existence of church membership in the NT. Paul uses these important terms in 5:12-13 when he writes, “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you.” In a context which deals with putting a man out of the church, the terms “outsiders” and “those inside” clearly refer to church membership. In using the image of outsiders and insiders, Benjamin Merkle notes that “Paul is distinguishing non-Christians from those who are professing Christians and therefore members of the church. Apparently, there was a clear division . . . between those who were inside the church and those who were outside the church.”¹²

The Pauline designation for non-church members as outsiders also occurs in 1 Thessalonians 4:12 and Colossians 4:5, where in both instances, Paul’s concern is for the church to live carefully and with wisdom toward persons outside the church membership. The concept of designating people as either inside or outside the membership of the church can likewise be found in 1 Thessalonians 3:12, where Paul prays that God will make this young church increase and abound in their love to one another (that is, toward insiders) and to all (that is, toward outsiders).¹³ G. K. Beale

¹¹Ibid., 201.

¹²Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), 43.

¹³Other biblical examples of references to insiders and outsiders can be found in 1 Thess 5:15, Rom 12:14-21, and Gal 6:10.

confirms this interpretation when he writes, “This [Paul’s use of the designations “one another” and “to all”] may be a reference to loving believers within the church and unbelievers outside the church.”¹⁴ What these multiple scriptural references suggest is that church membership was practiced and assumed within the churches to which the apostle Paul wrote. Interestingly, the word outsiders, the term that Paul uses for those who are not members of the church, is used in Revelation 22:14-15 in an eschatological sense where John writes, “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.” Like Paul with the church, John likewise speaks of insiders and outsiders. The insiders are those who are granted the right to enter the gates into the New Jerusalem, while the outsiders are those who have not been granted this blessed right. It seems odd that anyone wanting to be an insider in regards to the New Jerusalem would be hesitant or unwilling to be an insider in regards to the church.

First Corinthians 5 offers an example of a particular, local church in the NT addressing the difficult matter of corrective discipline. The existence of a formal church membership in this chapter is evidenced by the call of the apostle to remove the unrepentant offender from among the community of believers. For as James M. Hamilton notes, the very act of church discipline “means they are no longer considered

¹⁴G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, ed. Grant R. Osborne, vol. 13 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 109.

members of the believing remnant.”¹⁵ The storyline found in 1 Corinthians 5 demonstrates that membership was normative in the early church.

Ecclesiastical Leaders and Church Membership

“My child, remember night and day the one who preaches God’s word to you, and honor him as though he were the Lord. For wherever the Lord’s nature is preached, there the Lord is. Moreover, you shall seek out daily the presence of the saints, so that you may find support in their words.”¹⁶ These instructions, taken from *The Didache*, highlight the emphasis that the early church placed upon the relationship between believers and their leaders. This emphasis is drawn from the very teaching of the NT itself and is two-fold. First the Bible speaks frequently and directly about the type of lifestyle and ministry that God expects from those in leadership within his church (see Tim 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, 1 Pet 5:1-4). Second, the Bible speaks just as directly to believers about their attitude and response to leaders in the church (1 Thess 5:12-13, Heb 13:7-17). The purpose of this section is to highlight what these passages reveal about church leadership and its strong connection to the subject of membership in the household of God.

The two references to leaders in Hebrews 13:7-17 (vv. 7 and 17) serve as bookends to this passage, which offers closing instructions to the congregation addressed in this epistle. The term “leaders” in this passage is a translation of the Greek word *hegeomai*, which means to lead or rule. Within the NT, the term refers to a political

¹⁵James M. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 375.

¹⁶“Didache,” In *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 351.

leader (Acts 7:10), a chief speaker (Acts 14:12) and a leader among the disciples of Jesus (Luke 22:26). In Hebrews 13, the leaders are identified as “those who spoke to you the word of God” (v. 7) and those who are “keeping watch over your souls (v. 17). In the verse 7 reference to leaders, the author of Hebrews tells his readers to remember them, whereas in the verse 17 reference to leaders, the recipients of this epistle are told to obey and submit to them. Therefore, it seems apparent that verse 7 is an exhortation to remember those leaders who spoke the word of God but since have died, while verse 17 is an exhortation to obey and submit to those who are presently leading the congregation. Verse 7b confirms this interpretation: “Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” The term “outcome” is from the Greek word *ekbasis*, which means an end or exit. Thus, the leaders mentioned in verse 7 have already completed the race set before them (Heb 12:1) and are now set forth as worthy examples to be followed. These former leaders are likely the same ones referred to in Hebrews 2:2-4, who attested to the congregation the message initially declared by the Lord.

Concerning those who are currently leading the congregation, the readers of Hebrews are told to “obey” them and to “submit” to them (v. 17). The word “obey” in the ESV is the term *peinaow*. It means to “convince or to persuade.”¹⁷ In Hebrews 2:13, the same word is translated “trust” as in “I will trust in him.” The intended message of the author, therefore, is to see the readers “put their confidence”¹⁸ in their leaders and likewise submit to their authority. The reason for this exhortation is

¹⁷Wigram and Green, *The New Englishman’s Greek Concordance and Lexicon*, 696.

¹⁸Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 529.

then stated in verse 17b: “[F]or they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” The weightiness of the leader’s responsibility is highlighted in that they are watching over “souls.” As Leon Morris notes, “In view of the . . . use of *psyche* . . . , it may well be that we are to see here a reference to spiritual well-being. The leaders are concerned for the deep needs of their people, not simply for what lies on the surface.”¹⁹ A second reason for the exhortation to “obey” and “submit” to leaders appears in verse 17c, “Let them do this with joy (that is, keep watch over your souls) and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” The work of the leaders will be a joyful one when the members of the church respond to their leaders with trust, submission, and obedience.

First Thessalonians 5:12-13 also addresses the relationship between believers and the leaders of the church. In these two verses, Paul writes, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.” Verse 12 mentions three duties of church leaders. First, leaders are those who labor among the church’s members. Second, leaders are over the people in the Lord. Third, leaders admonish the people. The term “over” in verse 12 is a translation of the Greek term *proistamenous*, which means to stand before, to rule, to direct, or to maintain.²⁰ What Paul envisages in these two verse are ecclesiastical leaders “who are

¹⁹Leon Morris, *Hebrews*, in vol. 12 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. J. D. Douglas and Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 153.

²⁰Wigram and Green, *The New Englishman’s Greek Concordance and Lexicon*, 748.

over the congregation in the Lord, to whom has been entrusted their pastoral oversight and care, including admonition, and who are expected to work hard in serving them.”²¹

Paul uses this same word in his first letter to Timothy, as he instructs the younger pastor on the qualifications of an overseer. One notable qualification is that an overseer “must manage his own household well” (1 Tim 3:4). The term *manage* is the same term translated “over” in 1 Thessalonians 5:12. An overseer was to rule and direct his own household with all dignity, keeping his children submissive. In order to do this, an overseer had to have a clear understanding of who was in his household and who was not. In other words, the overseer’s family had clearly understood lines between members and non-members.

As in 1 Corinthians 5, church membership is not specifically mentioned in either of these two passages (Heb 13:7-17 or 1 Thess 5:12-13). However, church membership is present in both passages and provides the key to properly understanding the God-given responsibility to leaders. Without a formal church membership in place, how are leaders to know who they are to lead? As Thabiti Anyabwile correctly observes, “If there is no identifiable membership, there is no one for leaders to lead. Submission to their authority . . . becomes nonsense if the leaders are not responsible for a group, and that group is not attached to them in some way.”²² Just as overseers have households with a distinct membership to which they give rule and direction, in like manner church leaders can only fulfill their duties effectively when there is a distinct identification of

²¹John R. W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Thessalonians* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1991), 121.

²²Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 65.

who they are to rule and have authority over. This distinct identification is made possible by means of a formal church membership. Once again, the Bible evidences that membership in a local church was normative for the first century believers.

Church Membership: Members of the Body

In order to bring understanding to God's people regarding the nature and purpose of the church, the NT uses a rich array of images and metaphors to describe the assembly of God's people. For example, the Bible speaks of the church as the bride of Christ (Eph 5:22-33), as the pillar and buttress of the truth (1 Tim 3:15), as a building (1 Cor 3:9), as a field (1 Cor 3:9), as the household of God (Eph 2:19), and as God's temple (1 Cor 3:16).²³ An unbalanced emphasis upon any one image to the exclusion of the rest can result in an incomplete understanding of what God's intention for the church truly is. As Wayne Grudem wisely observes, "The wide range of metaphors used for the church in the New Testament should remind us not to focus exclusively on any one. . . . Each of the metaphors used for the church can help us to appreciate more of the richness of privilege that God has given us by incorporating us into the church."²⁴ Perhaps the most familiar image in the Pauline epistles is that of the church as the body of Christ. Within the writings of Paul, the church is presented as the body of Christ in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians.

There is diversity of opinion as to the origin of the Pauline concept of the church as the body of Christ. Various options include the body image of the church

²³This brief listing of biblical images for the church is not intended to be exhaustive.

²⁴Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 2000), 859.

deriving from Adam Christology, from the tradition of the Lord's supper, or from Gnostic thought.²⁵ However, Peter O'Brien offers this insightful suggestion: "The Pauline concept of 'the body of Christ' may have come from Paul's encounter with the exalted Christ on the Damascus road, where the risen Christ identified with his followers: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'"²⁶

There are several important truths to be drawn from the biblical image of the church as the body of Christ. These include the significance of unity within the church, of diversity within the church, the role of spiritual gifts in the church, and the connectedness that should exist among God's people. The purpose of this section is to observe how these truths uphold this chapter's thesis that formal church membership is present in the NT and thus is normative for all believers.

In the epistle to the Ephesians, Paul uses the image of the church as a body on nine occasions (1:23, 2:16, 3:6, 4:4, 4:12, 4:16 twice, 5:23, 5:30). In Ephesians 4:15-16, Paul writes, "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." When Paul addresses the subject of growth in these two verses, he is not dealing with individual growth, as necessary as that is. His purpose, rather, is to promote the growth of "the whole body" (v. 16). The aim of the apostle in this passage is to see the growth and building up of the local church, which is

²⁵Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 654.

²⁶Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 148.

Christ's body. This is not only evidenced by Paul's use of the phrase "the whole body" in verse 16a but also his statement that when each part is working properly, then the body will build itself up in love (v. 16c).

Significantly, the whole body can only grow and build itself up in love as "each part is working properly." The role of each part in the building up of the body picks up on Paul's teaching in Ephesian 4:7, where he writes, "But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift." As each part works properly, the result is that we (note the plural pronoun here, referencing the "whole body") grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. The growing up spoken of here is the church's growth to maturity, a growth that is so comprehensive that Paul speaks of growing up "in every way" (v. 15). Christ is unquestionably the source of the church's growth. What Paul desires to make clear in these verses is that Christ works through the members of his body to bring about growth to the whole. O'Brien notes this point when he writes, "While the empowering for growth comes from above, members of the body themselves are fully involved in the process."²⁷

The role of "each one" (Eph 4:7) and "each part" (Eph 4:16) in the overall growth of the body is significant for a proper understanding of church membership. On this matter, O'Brien notes that "each member has a distinctive service to render for the effective functioning of the whole. The ability to perform this service is due to the grace given by the ascended Christ to each one."²⁸ Benjamin Merkle rightly observes that the grace that has been given to each member of the body requires a community for

²⁷Ibid., 314.

²⁸Ibid., 287.

its proper functioning. He writes, “Without being joined to a local body, a Christian is not able to use properly the gifts God has generously given.”²⁹ When a believer is disconnected from the local church, their part in building up the whole body becomes limited, if not altogether impossible. The whole body can only be built up when each part is connected to and fully joined to the body, which is the local church. This passage further evidences that membership in a local church is normative in the NT.

In both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, Paul points out to his readers that the body has many members (Rom 12:4 and 1 Cor 12:12). The term for members in both passages is the Greek word *melos*, which means body part, limb or member.³⁰ As tempting as it might be to equate this term with members of the church, Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner are correct to point out that “member in this case would mean a part or organ of the human body and not member in the sense of a member of a social organization or church member.”³¹ This interpretation is verified by the use of this term throughout the NT. This fact, however, does not diminish the weight of proof that Paul’s discussion of the body of Christ brings to the issue of church membership.

In both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses the image of the church as the body of Christ to (among other issues) deal with the matter of pride and arrogance. In Romans 12, the discussion of the church as a body begins with the admonition to not think of yourself more highly than you ought to (v. 3). In the midst of the teaching in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul reminds his readers that it can never be said to a fellow church

²⁹Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” 44.

³⁰Wigram and Green, *The New Englishman’s Greek Concordance and Lexicon*, 550.

³¹Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 590.

member that “I have no need of you” (v. 21). In Romans 12, Paul reminds his readers that, though there is a diversity of gifts (vv. 6-8) and thus a diversity of functions within the body of Christ, the individual members of the church are still “one body in Christ” (v. 4). As Douglas Moo notes, “Paul, working from the assumption of the unity of the body, argues for the need to recognize a healthy diversity within that one body.”³²

Likewise, the importance of diversity in the midst of unity is highlighted by Gordon Fee as he makes the following comments on 1 Corinthians 12:12-14:

Paul’s primary concern with this imagery is not that the body is one even though it has many members, thus arguing for their need for unity despite their diversity. Rather, his concern is expressed in v. 14, that even though the body is one, it does not consist of one member but of many, thus arguing for their need for diversity, since they are in fact one body.³³

The diversity within the body, as evidenced by the multiplicity of gifts listed in both Romans and 1 Corinthians, is a beautiful part of God’s design for the church. One of Paul’s key points in both passages is that this diversity, rather than taking away from the unity which is so important, instead enhances the unity of the body of Christ.

The two issues of unity and diversity in the local church, which are so central to the message of both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, lose much of their logic and meaning if an assumed church membership is not present. Discussions about diversity and unity within the body of Christ are rendered irrelevant when an individual believer is disconnected and separated from the membership of the church. This is because unity and diversity are corporate, not individual matters. For there to be discussions regarding unity and diversity in the church (as are found in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12), there

³²Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 763.

³³Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 601.

must be a formal connection of believers who are unified, yet exhibit diversity. Like the human body itself, Paul's discussion of the body of Christ assumes a church with clearly defined members who are formally connected with one another, a church that displays both unity and diversity among its members. This is why Leon Morris, in commenting on Romans 12, speaks of the "interrelatedness of Christians."³⁴ Just as a body must have parts that are interrelated, so must the church have members that are joined together. Mark Dever summarizes well this point when he writes, "The Bible presents the local Church as an entity made up of multiple individuals yet so highly integrated they are identifiable as a unit."³⁵ Formal church membership is one of the Bible's keys to help make believers become a highly integrated unit. The Bible's teaching regarding the church as the body of Christ demonstrates once again that formal church membership permeates the pages of the NT and that the expectations of the biblical authors was that church membership is the expectation for all believers.

New Testament Rolls and Church Membership

It is only natural that, if a church has a defined membership, that same membership would be recorded in some manner. For example, if the church in Corinth did indeed recognize its members as insiders and non-members as outsiders (1 Cor 5), then it seems more than reasonable to assume that the Corinthian church had a written list of who exactly were insiders and members. Likewise, since a church leader had the responsibility of watching over the souls of the members of that congregation (Heb

³⁴Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 439.

³⁵Mark Dever, "The Church," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2007), 791.

13:17), then surely the local churches kept a written record of who its members were who the leaders needed to watch over.

The NT offers multiple examples of lists and records that were used in the local church. In 1 Timothy 5:9, Paul instructs Timothy to “let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age.” Based upon this verse, it is apparent that the Ephesian church had a written record of widows who were eligible for some type of assistance from the church. In 2 Corinthians 2:6, Paul speaks of a punishment “by the majority.” This verse implies some type of vote by the members of the church and a count or recording of that vote. The numerical references in the book of Acts also point to the keeping of records or lists. On the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:41 celebrates that there were “added that day about three thousand souls.” Later in Acts 4:4, Luke notes that this number “came to about five thousand.” Merkle observes that “the new converts were added to an already existing number. . . . Thus, a known quantity was added to an already known amount.”³⁶ There are examples of these types of lists or records in the early church also. In the letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans, the soon-to-be-martyr gives counsel to the church concerning those who refuse to confess that Jesus was clothed in flesh. Ignatius writes, “Given that they are unbelievers, it did not seem worthwhile to me to record their names.”³⁷ The words of Ignatius give evidence of a written record of those who were members of the church over against those who were not.

The church’s history of keeping records of names is not a human invention, but rather is drawn from the example of heaven itself. Describing the heavenly city of God,

³⁶Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” 46-47.

³⁷Ignatius, “The Letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans,” in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 253.

the author of Hebrews notes that we have come to “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb 12:23a). The word “enrolled” in this verse is from the Greek term *apographo*, which means to enroll or register.³⁸ William L. Lane observes that the word *enrolled* suggests that “the names of the firstborn are permanently inscribed.”³⁹ That the firstborn in Hebrews 12:23 is referencing humans and not angels is confirmed by the fact that the NT only refers to humans as being enrolled in a heavenly book (Luke 10:20, Phil 4:3, Rev 21:27).⁴⁰

Jesus tells his disciples to “rejoice that your names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20). Paul writes to the Philippian church about his fellow workers “whose names are in the book of life” (Phil 4:3). In the closing book of the NT, John states that “only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” will enter into the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:27). Each of these references to a heavenly record is a strong and encouraging reminder to the church that “the Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim 2:19), even down to each individual’s name and position in Christ! There is a record in heaven itself of those whose names are written down and enrolled in the book of life.

This brief study of earthly and heavenly records and lists in the NT does not by itself support this chapter’s thesis that formal membership was normative in the early church. However, when combined with each of the above sections (the NT’s emphasis upon the local church, insiders and outsiders in 1 Corinthians 5, the biblical relationship between believers and church leaders, and the biblical image of the church as the body of

³⁸Wigram and Green, *The New Englishman’s Greek Concordance and Lexicon*, 76.

³⁹William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47B (Dallas: Word, 1991), 469.

⁴⁰O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 485.

Christ), the multiple references to lists and records in the NT only serve to supplement the already strong and compelling evidence that formal church membership was indeed normative in the early church.

Conclusion

The Bible states that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). Jesus himself proclaimed, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18). According to the word of God, the church is no small or insignificant matter; Christ loves the church and so should his followers. The church belongs to Christ and he himself will build it. Commenting on Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:18, Edmund Clowney writes, “To ignore his purpose (that Jesus will build his church) is to deny his lordship. The good news of Christ’s coming includes the good news of what he came to do: to join us to himself and to one another as his body, the new people of God.”⁴¹ As Clowney rightly observes, Christ came not only to join us to himself, but also to join us to one another. To resist Christ’s purpose of joining us to his body is indeed to ignore his purpose and deny his lordship. The church is important!

Unfortunately, there are many who claim the name Christian who do not share this biblical view of the church. Jonathan Leeman is discerning when he writes, “If you are a Christian living in a Western democracy, chances are that you need to change the way you think about your church and how you are connected to it. Most likely, you underestimate your church. You belittle it. You misshape it in a way that misshapes your Christianity.”⁴² There is no portion of God’s word that underestimates or belittles the church. The church is important, and Jesus wants his

⁴¹Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 15.

followers joined to it. Proverbs 18:1 says, “A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; He rages against all wise judgment.” It is indeed true that when a Christian isolates himself from the church, he rages against all wise judgment.

The church is important, and therefore it is important to have a true and biblical theology of all areas pertaining to the church, including membership. A diligent examination of the Scriptures points to membership in a local church as being normative for believers. This fact can be seen through the following five areas of biblical study, addressed above. First, the NT reveals that believers in the first century were members of specific, local churches as well as members of the universal church. There are no instances in the NT of believers who viewed themselves as part of the universal church but not a local church. Second, the apostle Paul’s admonition to the church in Corinth to “purge the evil person from among you” and to thus treat him no longer as an insider but rather as an outsider provides strong evidence that the early church saw all people as either inside the membership of the church or outside the membership of the church. Third, the biblical directive for believers to submit to and obey their leaders, and for leaders to watch over the souls of those entrusted to them, is further evidence that church membership was normative in the NT. Church membership was the means for leaders to know who precisely they were to watch over and the means for believers to know which leaders to submit to. Fourth, the biblical image of the church as the body of Christ highlights the connectedness that Christ intends to exist within his church. The Bible teaches that the goal of the church is to see the whole body grow so that it is built up in love. Fifth, the multiple references to the keeping of lists and records, both in

⁴²Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 22.

heaven and on earth, adds weight to the evidence that similar lists of members was kept in the early church.

Therefore, it is clear that church membership is the counsel and direction given in God's word. Spurgeon was correct in stating that refusal to join the church was at the same time "disobedience to your Lord's commands."⁴³ Likewise, Cyprian was right in stating that he who forsakes the church of Christ cannot attain to the rewards of Christ.⁴⁴ If believers today ignore this wisdom from the Bible and the counsel from church leaders of the past, then they will do so to their own harm and to the hindrance of the advancement of the gospel.

The result of believers who are committed to church membership will be a church that is biblically positioned to fulfill the Great Commission. As Bruce Riley Ashford and Danny Akin write, "Church membership . . . [is] part of God's intention to shape or structure the church in such a way that it complements the gospel. . . Meaningful membership . . . [gives] reasonable assurance that our church's members can and will give testimony to Christ."⁴⁵ The relationship between church membership and the mission of the church will be the focus of the following chapter.

⁴³Spurgeon, "Joining the Church," 60: 295.

⁴⁴Cyprian, "The Treatises of Cyprian," 423.

⁴⁵Bruce Riley Ashford and Danny Akin, "The Missional Implications of Church Membership and Church Discipline," in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), 194, 201.

CHAPTER 3
THE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES
OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Genesis 3 records the account of the fall, as Adam and Eve disobediently partake of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As a result of this creation-altering event, the subsequent chapters of Genesis reveal the hideous consequences of sin. The earth is now filled with murder (Gen 4:8), wickedness (Gen 6:5), violence (Gen 6:11), and rebellion (Gen 11:1-9). Genesis 12, however, begins the story of a man named Abram, through whom God's redemptive purpose would be fulfilled. In Genesis 12:3, the Lord promises Abram that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Sin had caused the earth to be filled with violence, yet God promises that in Abram all the families of the earth shall be blessed. A significant step in the fulfillment of this promise to Abram is found in the words spoken by the risen Christ to the eleven disciples prior to his ascension: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:18-19). Jesus' command in Matthew 28, historically referred to as the Great Commission, seems to be an allusion to the prophecy found in Daniel 7:14: "And to him (the Son of Man) was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him."¹

¹G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 423.

Thus, a significant element within the storyline of the Scriptures is God’s intent that the nations, though fallen into sin, be redeemed and blessed.

Having received the above command from its risen Lord, the church now “has the responsibility of preaching the good news to the entire world.”² Following the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the early church demonstrated an unwavering commitment to the Great Commission. When persecution broke out following the stoning of Stephen, the believers who were scattered “went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). The church in Antioch, in response to the Holy Spirit, sent off two of its leaders for the purpose of making disciples of all nations (Acts 13:1-4). In fact, the book of Acts chronicles the church’s commitment to the Great Commission, beginning in Jerusalem and expanding into Judea, Samaria, and ultimately the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The Great Commission is the constant thread running throughout the book of Acts.

The purpose of this chapter is to address connections between a church’s view of membership and its effectiveness in fulfilling the Great Commission. Will a congregation that does hold to biblical church membership³ be more or less successful in its efforts to obey the Great Commission than a church which does not hold to biblical church membership?

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch use the titles “bounded set” and “centered set” to describe the two approaches to church membership mentioned above.⁴ Regarding

²Kenneth Keathley, “The Work of God: Salvation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2007), 763.

³The phrase “biblical church membership” is defined by the contents of chap. 2 in this project, the thesis of that chapter being that church membership is normative in the New Testament.

⁴Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovations and Mission for*

the issue of church membership, Frost and Hirsch define bounded set as “the church’s propensity to develop laws or prescriptions for determining who is in the church and who is out.”⁵ In contrast, Frost and Hirsch states, “When we refer to the . . . church as a centered set, we are saying that the church’s membership should not be defined by some artificial set of criteria, but by proximity to Jesus.”⁶ Frost and Hirsch further elaborate on the distinct variance between abounded set church and a centered set church:

The attractional church is a bounded set. That is, it is a set of people clearly marked off from those who do not belong to it. Churches thus mark themselves in a variety of ways. Having a church membership is an obvious one. This mechanism determines who’s in and who’s out. The missional-incarnational church, though is a centered set. This means that rather than drawing a border to determine who belongs and who doesn’t, a centered set is defined by its core values, and people are not seen as in or out, but as closer or further away from its center. In that sense, everyone is in and no one is out.⁷

Will a bounded set church have any advantages over a centered set church in regards to its fulfillment of the Great Commission? The thesis of this chapter is that congregations that hold to biblical church membership are best positioned for effective fulfillment of the Great Commission due to the practical advantages that church membership provides. The first issue this chapter addresses will be the distinction created by church membership between the church and the world, and its impact upon the church carrying out the Great Commission.

the 21st Century Church (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 68.

⁵Ibid., 274.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 68.

The Distinction between the Church and the World

What precisely is involved in being a member of a local church? Jonathan Leeman offers the following definition of church membership: “Church membership is a formal relationship between a church and a Christian characterized by the church’s affirmation and oversight of a Christian’s discipleship and the Christian’s submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.”⁸ When this type of church membership is practiced, a membership characterized by a relationship between a Christian and the church, a relationship in which there is joyful submission and loving oversight, the result is “robust boundaries”⁹ between the church and the world. It is this type of robust boundary that the apostle Paul himself references as he distinguishes between the church and the world. For example, Paul’s exhortation to “live in harmony with one another” (Rom 12:16) is a reference to members of the church, while his exhortation to “do what is honorable in the sight of all” (Rom 12:17) is a reference to the church’s non-members. Likewise, the apostle Paul references church members when he tells the Thessalonian church to “do good to one another” (1 Thess 5:15), while he references non-church members when he tells this same church to “do good . . . to everyone” (1 Thess 5:15).¹⁰ The biblical distinction between church members and non-church members, between insiders and outsiders, between one another and all others is

⁸Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 64.

⁹Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2009), 217.

¹⁰Further examples of Paul’s distinguishing between church members and non-church members in his letters include 1 Cor 5:12-13, Gal 6:10, Col 4:5, 1 Thess 3:12, and 1 Thess 4:12.

the means through which a robust boundary is maintained between the church and the world.

But does this type of robust distinction provide the church with the greatest advantage in advancing the Great Commission? In his article “The Category Christian in the Mission Task,” Paul G. Hiebert shares concerns regarding churches that view Christians as a bounded set. He notes that in a bounded set church, “We need carefully defined membership lists in church, and a distancing from those in the world.”¹¹ Thus, according to Hiebert, a bounded set church necessitates “an excluded middle.”¹² By “excluded middle,” Hiebert infers that a church with a bounded set viewpoint would place a great deal of effort into maintaining a distinction between the church and the world, thus creating this excluded middle. Therefore, according to Hiebert, a bounded set church will be distanced from the world in its attempt to maintain its boundary, resulting in a church that is poorly positioned for fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Roger E. Olson, in his discussion of bounded set and centered set churches, describes evangelicalism as currently as two-party system, consisting of traditionalists and reformists.¹³ Olson defines evangelical traditionalists as those who value “traditional interpretations and formulations as binding and normative and looks with suspicion upon doctrinal revisions and new proposals arising out of theological reflection.”¹⁴ In contrast, Olson defines reformists as evangelicals who value “the

¹¹Paul G. Hiebert, “The Category Christian in the Mission Task,” *International Review of Mission* 72 (1983): 422.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Roger E. Olson, “The Future of Evangelical Theology,” *Christianity Today*, February 1998, 41.

¹⁴Ibid.

continuing process of constructive theology seeking new light breaking forth from God's Word."¹⁵ Concerning the issue of boundaries, Olson states that traditionalists "tend to specify who is 'in' and who is 'out' of the community, while reformists risk ambiguity about boundaries and insist on keeping the boundaries open and relatively undefined."¹⁶

Upon initial observation, it could easily appear that an open and relatively undefined boundary would create the most advantageous condition for the church to reach the world. Would not an open boundary make it easier for an unbeliever to enter the fellowship of the church as opposed to a well defined boundary, thus furthering the fulfillment of the Great Commission?

According to Mark Dever, a church with an undefined and open boundary runs contrary to the biblical blueprint, thus handicapping the body of Christ in its endeavors to obey the risen Lord's commission. Dever writes,

The idea of a clearly defined community of people is central to God's action in both the Old and New Testaments. As demonstrated with Noah and his family, Abraham and his descendants, the nation of Israel, and the New Testament church, God has chosen to maintain a distinct and separate people for the purpose of displaying his character. God has always intended for a sharp, bright line to distinguish those who trust in him from those who do not. The lives of Christians together display the gospel they proclaim audibly.¹⁷

It is highly significant that while Dever speaks of a church that is distinct and separate, its distinctiveness and separateness is for the purpose of displaying God's character.

Rather than hindering the church's witness, biblical church membership and robust

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., 41-42.

¹⁷Mark Dever, "The Church," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 792.

boundaries between God’s people and the world position the church for the fulfillment of that very purpose. When unbelievers and outsiders see a distinct church membership displaying Christ-like love and unity (both in the assembly and in the marketplace), this will serve as a “helpful preview of the life they will be called to live should the Lord bring them to repentance and saving faith.”¹⁸

God’s purposes throughout the NT was to establish a distinct and separate people, known as the church, so that his manifold wisdom might now be known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Eph 3:10). When everyone is in and no one is out, the church’s ability to fulfill the Great Commission becomes severely compromised, if not all together impossible. Michael McKinley affirms this interpretation of the church when he writes,

The people of God are not called the people of God for their own sake. They exist as the people of God to please and glorify God. In other words, the distinction between them and the world is not simply ontological (though it is not less than that), it is also ethical and teleological. Christ calls the church to be salt and light in a dark and decaying world (Matt 5:13). . . . As such, a clear line of membership helps to make these ethical and teleological goals a reality in the life of the church. It marks out these people as a display of his mercy and kindness to the surrounding world – all to his glory.¹⁹

No one was more compassionate toward unbelievers than Jesus. This is why tax collectors and sinners drew near to hear him (Luke 15:1). In Matthew 11:19, Jesus himself states that he is called “a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” Yet this same Jesus is also described as “holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners (Heb 7:26).

¹⁸Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What is a Healthy Church Member?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 61.

¹⁹Michael McKinley, “Separating Insiders and Outsiders,” accessed January 2014, <http://www.9marks.org/journal/separating-insiders-and-outsiders>.

It is noteworthy, and an example to today's church, that the same Jesus who is separated from sinners is also the same Jesus who is a friend of sinners. The pattern for ministry set forth by the church's Lord is that, if the church is to reach sinners, then the church must be separate from sinners. One practical way that the church is to be separated from sinners is through meaningful and biblical church membership. Rather than distancing the people of God from a lost world needing the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name (Luke 24:47), biblical church membership ideally positions the church to manifest the manifold wisdom of God (Eph 3:10) and be as a city set on a hill to the surrounding world (Matt 5:14). Biblical church membership helps clarify the distinction between the church and the world, thus making the conditions for furthering the Great Commission more conducive for success.

Church Membership and Making Disciples

At the heart of the closing commission spoken by the risen Christ in Matthew 28:18-20 is the imperative to "make disciples." That the mandate to make disciples is, indeed, the heart of the Great Commission can be seen by the fact that it is "the only imperative verbal form in the entire paragraph beginning with verse 16."²⁰ Surrounding the main verb (make disciples) are three participles: go (v. 19), baptizing (v. 19) and teaching (v. 20). There are scholars who understand the term "go" to likewise be an imperative as is the imperative to make disciples.²¹ Others, however, interpret the term "go" to be viewed, not as an imperative, but rather to be understood in the participial

²⁰Robert D. Culver, "What is the Church's Commission?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125, no. 499 (1968): 244.

²¹Cleon Rogers, Jr., for example, states that "the imperative idea is to be preferred" as it relates to the term "go" in Matt 28:19. See Cleon Rogers, Jr., "The Great Commission," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130 (1973): 259.

sense of “having gone or as ye go.”²² Either way, it is clear that making disciples is accomplished through “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” and by “teaching them to observe all that I (Jesus) have commanded you.”

It is worthy to note that the gospel of Matthew seems to lay out a didactic paradigm for how the church is to make disciples. This didactic paradigm is seen through the five didactic discourses taught by Jesus in this gospel. These discourses are as follows: the sermon on the mount (Matt 5-7), the missionary discourse (Matt 10), the parables of the kingdom (Matt 13), the teachings on the church (Matt 18), and the eschatological teachings (Matt 24-25).²³ Thus, the gospel of Matthew itself presents the outline for how the church is to teach believers how to observe all that Jesus has commanded. Therefore, Arias is correct to observe, “To understand the Gospel of Matthew we must decipher this ‘last commission,’ and, conversely, to understand the ‘last commission’ we must comprehend the totality of Matthew.”²⁴

Thus, the church’s marching orders, its mandate, its mission, is to make disciples. The key to the church’s success in fulfilling the Great Commission is found in the empowering promise given by Christ to his church at the conclusion of the Great Commission, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). Cleon Rogers summarizes Jesus’ command to make disciples well when he writes,

²²Culver, “What is the Church’s Commission?” 244.

²³Mortimer Arias, “Church in the World: Rethinking the Great Commission,” *Theology Today* 47 (January 1991): 411

²⁴*Ibid.*, 410.

The command to go and make disciples, which is based on His authority, is filled with many aspects. It indicates that Jesus Himself is the Teacher. It calls for a complete submission to Him with total devotion and service. It means living daily in putting His teaching into practice, and letting His life be manifest in daily life. It also means proclaiming His Word and seeking to bring others into this relationship who in turn are to win others. The baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, is the sign or symbol that the old life and its connections have been broken and the person has entered into a new life and a new fellowship with Jesus as Master. The teaching is instructing the new disciples in the Word of the Master Teacher. They are to learn, put into practice, guard, and pass on, that which Jesus commanded.²⁵

The heart of the Great Commission is not only to make disciples, but to make disciples of all nations. As highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, this aspect of the Great Commission is a fulfillment of the promise given to Abram in Genesis 12:3, “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” This emphasis upon all nations runs throughout the gospel of Matthew, and climaxes in the words of the Great Commission. In the genealogy of Matthew 1, there is the noticeable inclusion of Gentiles (Tamar, the Canaanite daughter-in-law of Judah, Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho, Ruth, the wife of Boaz from Moab). In Matthew 2, wise men from the east come to Bethlehem and worship Christ. In Matthew 8, Jesus commends the faith of the Centurion, a Gentile. Following the crucifixion of Jesus, another Centurion exclaims, “Truly this was the Son of God” (Matt 27:54). The Great Commission’s emphasis upon all nations finally reaches its ultimate fulfillment in Revelation 7:9 when John sees a multitude standing before the throne “from every nation.” Because of the promise within the Great Commission, and the prophecies connected to the Great Commission, the church has the assurance that the risen Lord’s command to make disciples of all nations will be accomplished.

²⁵Rogers, “The Great Commission,” 265-66.

Will a church's stance on membership have any effect upon its ability and success in carrying out the commission to make disciples of all nations? Will a church that seeks to establish the kind of robust boundaries indicated in the writings of Paul be better positioned to fulfill the Great Commission, as opposed to a church that does not? What this section seeks to address is the theoretical and practical dimensions of church membership as it relates to making disciples.

In their book "The Shaping of Things to Come," Frost and Hirsch, while advocating a church where "everyone is in and no one is out,"²⁶ likewise advocate a church that is highly missional and incarnational. In their chapter entitled "The Missional Church," Frost and Hirsch describe the ideal missional church in this way:

It will place a high value on communal life, more open leadership structures, and the contribution of all the people of God. It will be radical in its attempts to embrace biblical mandates for the life of locally based faith communities without feeling as though it has to reconstruct the first-century church in every detail. We believe the missional church will be adventurous, playful, and surprising.²⁷

This type of missional church, according to Frost and Hirsch, "will be willing to leave its own comfortable religious zones and live in direct contact with non-churchgoers, seeping into the host culture like salt and light."²⁸ Frost and Hirsch, therefore, are envisioning a church that embraces both open boundaries and a strong commitment to engaging non-churchgoers, thus fulfilling the Great Commission.

This joining together of open boundaries and strong missional commitment can also be seen in the writings of Michael Yoder, Michael Lee, Jonathan Ro and Robert

²⁶Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 68.

²⁷Ibid., 39.

²⁸Ibid., 48.

Priest. Their contrast of bounded sets and centered sets, and their relationship to church membership, can be seen in the following quote: “Missionaries under centered-set thinking will baptize new believers relatively quickly and will be less preoccupied with maintaining strict membership rolls than will missionaries under bounded-set thinking.”²⁹ The priority that these four authors give to the church’s mission of reaching unbelievers is highlighted when they state, “The task of theology is not simply to protect defensively from any cultural influence, but is to serve positively the mission of the church in reaching the world.”³⁰ Like Frost and Hirsch, these centered set proponents suggest that the church not focus upon boundaries and well-defined memberships if it desires to effectively fulfill the Great Commission.

It must be remembered, however, that the church’s goal and mandate is to reach the world in order to make disciples (Matt 28:20). As seen above, it is necessary to comprehend the totality of the gospel of Matthew in order to understand the Great Commission. Thus, a significant element within the commission to make disciples of all nations includes Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 18:15-20 regarding how to respond to a person who “sins against you” (Matt 18:15). In other words, a disciple making church will observe what Jesus taught in this passage regarding a brother who sins. This portion of Jesus’ teaching cannot be ignored if mature disciples are the goal of the church. This type of maturing discipleship requires the church to provide ongoing discipline, both “formative” and “corrective.”³¹ Thomas Schreiner defines the formative discipline of the

²⁹Michael L. Yoder, et al., “Understanding Christian Identity in Terms of Bounded and Centered Set Theory in the Writings of Paul G. Hiebert,” *Trinity Journal* 30 (2009): 182.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 184.

³¹Thomas Schreiner, “The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin Merkle (Nashville: B & H Academics, 2012), 105-06.

church as taking place “through teaching, encouragement, correction, exhortation, and reproof, which are given through the loving care of fellow believers.”³² Schreiner notes that the goal of corrective discipline is not “humiliation,” but rather to “restore.”³³

The biblical model for the challenging yet necessary process of corrective discipline demands a local church with a clearly defined membership, as evidenced by the study of 1 Corinthians 5 above. The necessity of church membership is likewise seen in Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 18. If the sinning brother refuses to listen even to the church, then this person, according to Christ, is to be treated as “a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt 18:17). Wayne A. Mack and Dave Swavely’s comments of this verse are helpful:

So Jesus is basically saying to us that those who continue to sin after repeated confrontation should be put out of the fellowship of the church. They should be removed from membership with a public announcement and no longer allowed to participate in the Lord’s Supper. The remaining members should be instructed to treat them as unbelievers by showing them Christ’s love as they are able, but not having spiritual fellowship that would imply that they are right with God.³⁴

Therefore, Benjamin Merkle is correct when he states,

But church discipline cannot be properly carried out if a church does not have an official membership role. . . . how can someone be removed from the church who has not really belonged to it in the first place? In other words, a person cannot be put out of the church if he was never officially in the church.³⁵

³²Ibid., 106.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Wayne A. Mack and Dave Swavely, *Life in the Father’s House: A Member’s Guide to the Local Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2006), 189.

³⁵Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), 40-41.

R. B. Kuiper, commenting on these same words of Jesus, likewise notes that this “can only mean that he is no longer to be regarded a member of the body of Christ.”³⁶

If indeed everyone is in and no one is out, then the biblical mandate to treat an excluded person as an outsider (1 Cor 5) becomes illogical and even impossible. And if the kind of corrective discipline as described in Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5 is rendered helpless by a lack of church membership, then the church’s ability to make disciples of all nations is rendered weak and ineffective. In order for the church to make disciples, it must practice corrective discipline, and for corrective discipline to function correctly and biblically, there must be church membership. Biblical church membership truly positions the church to provide oversight of its members so that disciples are made.

Sanctification and Church Membership

Discipleship is not static. When Jesus commands the church to make disciples, the church is being commissioned to a life-long process of oversight and accountability. Genuine discipleship does not cease after a person has been baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). The image of discipleship in the NT is “radical, for a changed life is fundamentally assumed; and it is dynamic, for progress and development are of the essence.”³⁷

The principle of growth as a central part of discipleship is evident throughout the NT. For example, in the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus states that, though it is the smallest of all seeds, the mustard seed grows and becomes a tree (Matt 13:31-32). Paul

³⁶R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ: A Scriptural Appreciation of the One Holy Church* (London: The Banner of Truth, 1967), 306.

³⁷Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), s.v. “Disciple, Discipleship.”

reminds the church in Corinth that, though he planted and though Apollos watered, it is God who gives the growth (1 Cor 3:6). Peter's closing exhortation in his second epistle is to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:18). A genuine fulfillment of the Great Commission will always be evidenced by growing disciples.

The biblical term for the growth that Christian disciples experience is sanctification. Sanctification is an ongoing work that continues throughout the lifetime of a Christian. The apostle Paul reminds the Thessalonian church that "this is the will of God, your sanctification (1 Thess 4:3). Wayne Grudem defines sanctification as "a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives."³⁸ True disciples will exhibit this progressive work of God and man called sanctification. Therefore, sanctification is a goal of Jesus' commission to teach converts all that he has commanded (Matt 28:20).

Not only is sanctification progressive and not static, it is also a corporate matter and not an individual one. Disciples are not made in isolation. Rather, legitimate NT discipleship always occurs within the context of the body of Christ. The tendency of today's culture toward individualism is a battle the church must continually address. As John Hammett writes,

Part of the Western inheritance from the enlightenment is a strong individualistic impulse . . . The values associated with individualism are antithetical to the type of strong commitment to a group inherent in meaningful church membership and . . . contrary to the much more communal or collectivist mind-set of the culture in which the church was born.³⁹

³⁸Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 746.

³⁹John S. Hammett, "Church Membership, Church Discipline, and the Nature of the Church," in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), 7-8.

Interwoven within the collectivist mindset of the true church is a biblical call to submission. The call to a life of submission is evidenced in Paul's words to the church in Ephesus, where he tells believers to submit "to one another out of reverence to Christ" (Eph 5:21). In Hebrews 13:17, church members are instructed to "obey your leaders and submit to them." A true communal church demands an attitude of submission among its members, thus creating an atmosphere conducive for sanctification to take place. It is for this reason that Leeman writes, "Christians don't join churches; they submit to them."⁴⁰

Biblical church membership promotes the type of progressive growth in sanctification so central to the Great Commission. Church membership promotes this type of growth because it requires members to submit to a local church body, thus planting them into the fertile soil in which sanctification can take place. Jonathan Leeman affirms this truth when he writes that "the local church is the authority on earth that Jesus has instituted to officially affirm and give shape to my Christian life and yours."⁴¹ Whenever a person rebels against the biblical mandate of church membership, they alienate themselves from the God-ordained setting (a local church) in which sanctification may take place. Merkle highlights this important truth in these words,

Those who refuse to put themselves under the authority of leaders in the local church are not being adequately led and admonished. Church membership provides the God-ordained means of providing accountability that all sheep need. . . . By not formally joining a church, a person is essentially communicating to the leadership that they do not want to be held accountable. In contrast, when a Christian becomes a member of a church, he is placing himself under the watch care of the leaders who are given the task of shepherding his soul and are accountable to God for their work.⁴²

⁴⁰Leeman, *Church Membership*, 30.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 24.

⁴²Merkle, "The Biblical Basis for Church Membership," 36-38.

Mack and Swavely echo this biblical call to church membership for the sake of spiritual formation and growth in sanctification when they state that “an unwillingness to join a local church is tantamount to saying we are not interested in divine accountability in our lives.”⁴³ Without this divine accountability that occurs within the context of biblical church membership, persons who refuse to submit to a local church deny themselves the benefits of God’s community and thus greatly endanger their own spiritual progress and sanctification.

Although the term sanctification is not used in her article, Amy Frykholm stresses the positive benefits of church membership by noting several results of belonging to a group such as the local church. She writes,

Belonging is good for people . . . people who belong to institutions tend to increase their contributions to society in other areas. Regular churchgoers are more likely to vote, to volunteer their time and to take an active role in civic life. . . . That is the secret gift that unfolds as you become integrated into something that is larger than yourself. You find yourself saying yes to possibilities that you would never otherwise imagine.⁴⁴

Frykholm’s quote highlights the affirmation that the progressive sanctification that is so central to the Christian life is best accomplished when a person belongs to something larger than themselves, that is, the local church. The above quote is also a reminder that belonging to something larger than yourself is a catalyst for the fulfillment of Jesus’ teaching that Christians are to be “the salt of the earth” (Matt 5:13) and “the light of the world” (Matt 5:14). For when believers volunteer their time and take an active role in civic life, they are letting their light shine before others (Matt 5:16). Church membership

⁴³Mack and Swavely, *Life in the Father’s House*, 51.

⁴⁴Amy Grykholm, “Loose Connections: What’s Happening to Church Membership,” *The Christian Century* 128 (May 31, 2011): 22-23.

best positions a person to move beyond the initial conversion experience toward having life and having it abundantly (John 10:10).

Despite the overwhelming advantage that formal church membership offers to a church in its pursuit of obeying the Great Commission, many church leaders place little or no emphasis upon it. According to an interview with Ken Sande of Peacemaker Ministries, membership is not all that important to many church leaders. Sande offers two reasons for this de-emphasis upon membership in the local church. He says,

First, we've given in to our culture's antagonism toward commitment and accountability. Like parents who are afraid to discipline their teenagers, church leaders are afraid they will be unpopular for emphasizing commitment and accountability. Secondly, there is a concern that if we create a barrier at the front door of the church, not as many people will enter, and the pressure leaders feel to grow the church is enormous today. But what we don't realize is that by not emphasizing membership we may have a wide-open front door, but we also have a wide-open back door. Numerical growth is really not helped by deemphasizing membership.⁴⁵

This de-emphasis upon church membership is evidenced by a "Leadership Weekly" poll, in which 34 percent of respondents stated that their church only occasionally gave an appeal to membership in the church, while 28 percent stated that their church placed little or no emphasis upon membership.⁴⁶ Further evidence of the church's resistance to uphold formal membership is seen in these words from John Buchanan in "The Christian Century" entitled "To Join or Not To Join." Regarding membership, the Buchanan notes that "the notion of church membership is increasingly called into question. In many

⁴⁵Ken Sande, "Taking Church Membership Seriously: Why It's Time to Raise the Bar," accessed February 17, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2005/april-online-only/cln50418.html>.

⁴⁶Ibid.

congregations, it's possible to serve in almost all leadership roles without formally becoming a member. So what's the point of membership?"⁴⁷

The point of membership, within the context of this current discussion, is that it provides the structure in which the local church can best promote the ongoing growth and sanctification of its members. Formal church membership promotes the growth in sanctification through the biblical call for its members to submit to a local church body, in which care, accountability and nurture can be provided. Like a chrysalis outside of its cocoon, a believer who is outside of the membership of a local church will find the glorious work of sanctification to be stunted at best. When a person refuses to submit to a local church, they rob themselves of the spiritual growth that can ideally be experienced through the love, oversight and accountability of a local church. A strong commitment to membership positions the church to obey this aspect of the Great Commission.

Conclusion

The trend toward the abolition of church membership should not be seen as merely a minor shift in the church's attempt to reach an emerging culture. It is entirely possible for the church to reach large numbers of people, yet never truly make disciples. This principle is clearly seen in Jesus' strong remarks to the scribes and Pharisees: "For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves" (Matt 23:15). If the church persists in undermining the biblical norm of membership, it will be removing a pivotal piece of the archway of the Great Commission.

⁴⁷John Buchanan, "To Join or Not to Join," *The Christian Century* 128 (May 31, 2011): 7.

First, church membership positions the church to fulfill the Great Commission by clarifying the distinction between the church and the world. Like Jesus himself, the church can best be a friend to sinners when it is biblically separated from sinners. God's character is best displayed through a people who are clearly set apart, thus enhancing the witness of the church. Second, church membership positions the people of God to fulfill the Great Commission by marking out who is to submit to the leadership of the church and who is to be held accountable, thus ensuring the ongoing process of discipleship and the purity of the church. Without membership, the local church cannot fulfill the corrective dimension of church discipline so necessary in the ongoing work of the Great Commission. Third, biblical church membership best enables local congregations to promote sanctification among its members. When Christians submit to a local church, they place themselves under the care, oversight, teaching and accountability so needed for sanctification to take place.

The Great Commission is a "together" task. It is for this reason that Ignatius writes the following exhortation: "Train together with one another: compete together, run together, suffer together, rest together, get up together, as God's managers, assistants, and servants. Please the one whom you serve as soldiers, from whom you receive your wages. Let none of you be found a deserter."⁴⁸ If the tendency toward deserting church membership continues, the body of Christ will surely lose the battle in regards to the Great Commission. Rather, the battle will best be fought, as Ignatius reminds us, together, and the church is best held together through the formal church membership described in the NT.

⁴⁸Ignatius, "The Letter of Ignatius to Polycarp," in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 267, 269.

CHAPTER 4

IMPLEMENTING A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT PINE GROVE CHURCH

Due to the drastic change that the congregation of Pine Grove Church has experienced in transitioning from a denominational church to an independent church, the need to re-examine our doctrine of church membership was great. The process of implementing a biblical theology of church membership focused upon three vital areas of our church: our elders, the pulpit ministry, and our new member class. This doctrinal journey which we have embarked upon, rather than being a peripheral or insignificant task, has, in reality, become an opportunity to deepen our understanding of God's design for the church, which in turn is resulting in the members of Pine Grove Church learning to love the church more like Jesus himself does (Eph 5:25).

The implementation of a biblical theology of church membership at Pine Grove was accomplished through the successful completion of four goals.¹ The first goal was to develop a curriculum to be used in our church's new member class, a curriculum that provided a biblical foundation for a correct understanding of church membership. The second goal was to present and teach this curriculum to the elders at Pine Grove Church. The third goal was to preach a three-week sermon series on church membership to the congregation at Pine Grove Church. The fourth and final goal was to teach the curriculum to the participants of Pine Grove's new member class. By

¹These four goals are expounded in detail in chap. 1 of this project.

successfully meeting these four goals, our church would thereby be positioned to teach what accords with sound doctrine regarding church membership and thus establish a firm foundation of commitment to church membership among the congregants of our church.

Development of the Curriculum

During the first three weeks of this project, I developed a curriculum focusing on the church and church membership. The curriculum is intended to be used in Pine Grove's new member's class. The reason we take the time and effort to put forth an excellent new member's class is because, in the words of Church Lawless, "Strong church membership begins with the front door process."² The curriculum is entitled "Members of the Household of God: What It Means to Be a Member of the Body of Christ at Pine Grove Church" (see Appendix 1). The curriculum consists of four lessons. The first lesson is entitled "What is the Church: A Biblical Definition," the purpose of this lesson being to provide a biblical overview of the church, noting the biblical images of the church, the marks of a true church, and the mission and purpose of the local church. The second and third lessons are entitled "Is Church Membership Biblical: Part 1 and 2," the purpose of these lessons being to explore the NT in order to determine whether church membership is present in the Bible. The fourth and final lesson is entitled "Being a Healthy Member of Pine Grove Church," the purpose of this lesson being to learn what the biblical expectations are for members of Christ's church.

²Chuck Lawless, *Membership Matters: Insights from Effective Churches on New Member Classes and Assimilation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), Kindle e-book, 410.

My aim in developing this curriculum was that it would be thoroughly biblical, and in this way provide an initial step for the participants to learn how to study the Bible for themselves. Dan Dumas is on target when he makes the following observation: “Preachers aren’t teaching the Bible, and they’re not teaching their people how to read it and study it for themselves. Not surprisingly, people grow disinterested in the Bible. . . . People don’t see the immediate impact that the Bible has on their lives because preachers are too busy trying to chase the bankrupt idol that is relevance.”³ In order to provide a safeguard against this common error, I sought to write a curriculum that would communicate to new members that Pine Grove Church is committed to the authority of the Scriptures. To achieve this aim, the curriculum was written in such a way that almost all of the curriculum’s questions are drawn directly from the Bible, with the format of the curriculum requiring the participants to look up Bible verses and then write down the answers. In doing this, the participants of the new member class would begin learning how to navigate through their own Bibles, as well how to focus upon the actual text of Scripture.

To ensure the biblical integrity and coherency of the curriculum, a panel of pastoral peers studied and evaluated it. This panel consisted of the senior pastor at Lakeview Baptist Church in Auburn, Alabama, along with three of his pastoral staff members (see Appendix 2). In order for the curriculum to be approved by this panel of pastoral peers, each evaluator needed to rate at least 90 percent of the evaluation markers as either

³Dan Dumas, *A Guide to Expository Preaching* (Louisville: SBTS Press, 2012), 11.

exemplary or sufficient (see Appendix 3). Following a detailed study of the curriculum, three of the evaluators marked 100 percent of the curriculum as exemplary or sufficient, while a fourth evaluator marked 91.6 percent of the curriculum as exemplary or sufficient. Once the curriculum was completed and evaluated, it was ready to be taught to the elders at Pine Grove Church.

Presentation of the Curriculum to the Pine Grove Elders

During the third through the twelfth weeks of this project, I presented and taught the new member's class curriculum to the elders at Pine Grove Church. The purpose of pursuing this step following the completion of the curriculum was so that the leadership of the church could be of the same mind (Phil 2:2) and communicate the same biblical truth to the entirety of our congregation in regards to membership in the church. My desire as a pastor is for Pine Grove's elders to be in unity on this matter and together uphold the biblical significance of church membership. Like the precious oil running down on Aaron's beard, or the dew falling on the mountains of Zion (Ps 133), unity among the leaders of a church has a way of beautifully flowing down throughout an entire congregation. Therefore, in order to weave into the very fabric of this church a high view of membership, a thorough and fully biblical conviction of church membership first needed to be seeded into the hearts and minds of those who have such influence within the congregation.

The elders of Pine Grove meet on a monthly basis. Due to the absence of time restraints in these meetings, the elders were able to cover all four of the lessons within the curriculum during the span of three monthly meetings. Prior to the teaching of the curriculum, the elders each filled out a questionnaire that focused upon their

understanding of the church and church membership (see Appendix 4). The questionnaire consisted of 17 questions dealing directly with the participants' understanding of church and church membership (there are 23 total responses on the questionnaire—5 dealing with the participant's general information and the final response providing space for comments). This same questionnaire was completed by the elders at the conclusion of the presentation of the curriculum in order to determine if there was a positive statistically significant change between the participants' scores on the first and the second questionnaire (see Appendix 5).

Although the elders had never received in-depth teaching specifically addressing the subject of church membership, the expectations were that their comprehension of church membership, as reflected on the initial questionnaire, would be fairly on target with the teaching of the Bible. One of the primary reasons for this expectation was that the elders emphasize the doctrine of the Bible on a consistent basis in the elders' meetings. What was surprising though, was that during all of this teaching on the church, the elders had never specifically addressed the matter of church membership. They had mistakenly assumed that a correct view of membership was already in place among the elders. However, Mark Dever is on target in asserting that “pastors today cannot assume that Christians understand either church membership or its importance.”⁴ The accuracy of this statement was verified by the wide diversity of answers contained in the elders' first questionnaire. While some of the men strongly agreed that church membership was biblical, there were others whose answers reflected a

⁹Mark Dever, “The Church,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2007), 91.

¹⁰Of the 17 total responses dealing with church membership, 7 were selected as indicators of

degree of uncertainty concerning the question of whether church membership was actually taught in the Scriptures.

During the three elders' meetings in which the new member curriculum was presented, each of the men demonstrated a Berean type of attitude (Acts 17:10-15), in that they were each open and eager to examine the Scriptures in order to see for themselves if indeed membership was found therein. Each lesson was covered in full detail, so that the elders had the same experience that the participants of the new member class would have. Each question was thoroughly covered, each quote was read out loud, and sufficient time was allowed for questions and discussion. Interestingly, there did not appear to be any one elder who viewed the time spent on this curriculum as elementary or as a waste of time. Rather, the elders seemed to appreciate the opportunity to dig deeper into a biblical subject that they had never studied in depth.

At the conclusion of the fourth lesson of the curriculum, the elders filled out the same questionnaire that was filled out prior to the first lesson. Significantly, every elder but one had a higher posttest score than a pretest score.⁵ One elder had the same score both before and after covering the curriculum, and his pretest score indicated an already high view of church membership. It is also interesting to note that the response in which the greatest positive difference was recorded was the following: "The Bible categorizes people as either 'inside' the membership of the church or 'outside' the membership of the church." The posttest thus indicated that the presentation of the curriculum resulted in a positive difference in the elders' understanding of church membership. Perhaps even more importantly, the elders were now positioned to teach

the elders' understanding of this subject. See Appendix 5 to view these 7 questions.

and uphold biblical church membership to the congregation of Pine Grove Church. Therefore, the goal of teaching a biblical theology of church membership to the elders of Pine Grove was deemed successful.

Preaching Church Membership at Pine Grove

The third goal of this project was to present a biblical theology of church membership to the congregation of Pine Grove Church. In order to accomplish this goal, a three-week sermon series was presented to the church during the ninth through the thirteenth weeks of the project. Prior to the sermon series, 15 members of Pine Grove's congregation were selected to complete a questionnaire intended to reflect each individual's understanding of the church and church membership. At the completion of the sermon series, these same 15 individuals volunteered to complete the same questionnaire in order to determine the impact of the three sermon series upon the individuals' understanding of the church and church membership.

The title of the first sermon within the series was "The Biblical Importance of the Local Church." The title of the second sermon was "Church Membership: Insiders and Outsiders." The title of the third sermon was "Church Membership: Sheep and Shepherds." The purpose of the first sermon was to present before the congregation the biblical significance of the local church and to enable the members of this flock to distinguish the difference between the universal and local church. The aim of this sermon is summarized well by Wayne A. Mack and Dave Swavely when they write,

Is it possible to have a vibrant spiritual life and successfully nurture our relationship with God apart from the local church? Is it just "conventional wisdom" that tells us we must be a part of one? Is it possible to move closer to God and farther away from the church? . . . The answer to all those questions, according to Scripture, is a resounding no? Far from being only one of many options for the Christian, the

church is the primary means through which God accomplishes His plan in the world.⁶

Drawing heavily from the biblical material contained in Lesson 1 of the new member's curriculum, this first sermon drew the attention of the congregation to the biblical images of the church, the church's mission and purpose, as well as Luke's use of the term *church* in the book of Acts. The purpose of the second sermon was to walk the congregation through the multiple passages that distinguish members of the church from non-members of the church. Highlighting Paul's references to insiders and outsiders, the congregation was able to see in their Bibles and hear in the words of the sermon that the Scriptures indeed differentiate those who are members of the household of God from those who are not. Knowing from the beginning that there was not unanimous agreement regarding the thesis of this sermon (that church membership was practiced in the early church and that church membership is clearly presented in the NT), I intentionally did not stray from the text of Scripture. By preaching in this manner, whenever anyone had questions or disagreements regarding the sermon, I could simply go back to the word of God to show that it stood in agreement with that which had been proclaimed from the pulpit. The purpose of the third sermon was to examine the biblical texts regarding church leaders in order to show that church membership, though not mentioned specifically in these verses, is nevertheless found therein by the very logic of these passages. The primary passages addressed in this third sermon were Hebrews 13:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 and 1 Peter 5:1-3. The main point of this final sermon was that the kind of relationship between believers and church leaders described in these

⁶Wayne A. Mack and Dave Swavely. *Life in the Father's House: A Member's Guide to the Local Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2006), 21.

passages would be difficult, if not entirely impossible, without a formal church membership.

As is the case with most any Sunday worship gathering, Pine Grove Church had a diverse mixture of unchurched visitors, visitors from other congregations, new believers, along with mature and seasoned Christians during the three Sundays of this sermon series. During two of the three Sundays of this series, I enquired of the people in attendance if anyone had ever heard a sermon entirely devoted to the subject of membership in the church. Amazingly, no one in attendance had ever heard even one sermon on the topic of church membership. If Benjamin L. Merkle is correct when he states that “church membership is not only biblical but also vital to the health of the local church,”⁷ then it is not an exaggeration to state that the faithful proclamation of biblical church membership could truly be a necessary ingredient in the renewal of Christ’s church today! In doing so, ecclesiastical leaders encourage the church’s members to abide in and devote themselves to that blessed fellowship in which they “stir up one another to love and good works” (Heb 10:24).

Following the completion of the second questionnaire at the conclusion of the sermon series, it was encouraging to see that every participant’s score increased except two, and those both recorded maximum scores on both the first and second questionnaire (see Appendix 6). Thus, the third goal was deemed successful in that there was a positive change between the participant’s scores on the first and second

⁷Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), 31.

questionnaire. Having reached this point, the final step in this project was to teach the newly developed curriculum to the participants in Pine Grove's new member class.

Teaching Membership in the New Member Class

The fourth and final goal of this project was to present a biblical theology of church membership to the participants of Pine Grove's new member class. This goal was accomplished through the teaching of the curriculum initially evaluated by the panel of pastoral peers from Lakeview Baptist Church and then presented to the elders of Pine Grove Church. The fulfillment of this goal took place during the tenth through the fifteenth weeks of the project.

The same questionnaire used with the elders and with the congregational members during the sermon series was likewise used for the participants of the new member class. These participants responded to the questionnaire both before and after the new member class.

On the first Sunday of this particular new member class, there seemed to be a sense of surprise among the participants that the primary subject during the next four weeks would be church membership. During conversations with various participants, the feedback received indicated that the expectation of the participants was that the class would focus upon subjects such as the primary doctrinal beliefs of our church, a review of the programs of the church, or perhaps the opportunities for involvement within the congregation. Similar to those who were present during the three-week sermon series on church membership, the participants of the new member class indicated that they had never given the matter of church membership much thought. These responses verify this observation made by Jonathan Leeman:

There are a few people who say that church membership is necessary, and a few who say that it's optional. But the majority of Christian folk, I assume, are somewhere in between. They have a vague sense that Christians should be involved with a local church. But they would also say it's not the most important thing in the world, so we shouldn't make too big a deal about it. If Christians spend several years hopping from church to church, or if they decide to attend one church indefinitely without joining, that's okay too.⁸

Therefore, by teaching a biblical theology of church membership in Pine Grove's new member class, I sought to correct from the outset the types of unbiblical attitudes and actions that Leeman mentions in the above quote. By teaching this oft-neglected biblical doctrine, the church would prevent new and young believers from just "hopping from church to church" and instead show them that God desires for his people to be "planted in the house of the Lord" (Ps 92:13).

As mentioned above, the curriculum used in this class was developed in such a way to help believers learn how to study the Bible and become assured of its authority. As the class progressed through each section of the curriculum, the necessary time was allowed for the participants to find each verse or passage of Scripture, read the verse, and then see the portion of the text that addressed the question being asked. By spending this type of unhurried time in God's word, coupled with careful observation of what the biblical text was saying, class members began to develop a hunger for more of God's word and the confidence that they could study and understand the glorious truths residing within God's word. By making this type of Bible study a significant step in the introduction into the church, I intentionally sought to offset the ungodly mindset, which reduces "the Bible to a disparate set of human religious testimonies that bear no particular

⁸Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 18.

authority for faith and practice.”⁹ Rather than allowing this cancerous type of wrong thinking to go unaddressed in the hearts and minds of those entering the membership of our church, an attempt was made to establish the vital conviction, embraced by the church from its conception, that “to believe and obey the Bible is to believe and obey God’ himself.”¹⁰ That is, when a member of our church reads the Bible, they are reading that which God himself has spoken (Matt 22:31).

At the conclusion of the fourth week of our new members class, the participants responded a second time to the questionnaire. Their responses demonstrated a stronger apprehension of the biblical teaching on church membership than when they initially started the class (see Appendix 7). Correct doctrine, however, is not an end in itself. The conviction behind the development of this curriculum was that right doctrine is foundational to right living. Paul’s letter to Titus confirms this when the apostle exhorts Titus to “teach what accords with sound doctrine (Titus 2:1). Following this exhortation, Paul then instructs Titus on how various groups within the church are to live. The obvious implication from this passage is that sound doctrine cannot be divorced from sound living. Thus, by laying this theological groundwork in the new members class, the church paved the way for its newest members to “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior” (Titus 2:10) through the manner in which they lived.

Since the questionnaire demonstrated a positive change between the participants’ first and second scores, the fourth goal of this project was deemed successful.

⁹David S. Dockery and David P. Nelson, “Special Revelation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2007), 139.

¹⁰Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 79.

Conclusion

There were three strategic areas of concentration during the implementation of a biblical theology of church membership at Pine Grove Church. Those three areas of concentration were the elders, the congregation, and the new members class. The elders were carefully taken through each section of the curriculum and then unanimously approved its use in our new member class. The congregation heard three sermons that each presented the biblical basis and arguments for church membership. Finally, the participants of the new member class were taught the church membership curriculum, thus laying the foundation for Pine Grove's newest members to be healthy, fruit-bearing members. By means of the questionnaire, each of these three groups (the elders, the congregation, and the participants of the new member class) evidenced a more accurate understanding of church membership as revealed in the Scriptures.

There are seemingly endless options as to what could be presented in a church's new member class. To have the participants of a new member class spend four weeks studying a biblical theology of church membership could seem to be a poor selection to some, in that the topic appears a bit heavy or uninteresting for persons initially entering the membership of a church. However, the wise observations of Michael Lawrence are relevant to this matter when he writes,

If we are to faithfully give witness to Christ, the Lord of life, in this age, then we must recover not simply the ability to think theologically, but the commitment to do so together in the life of the local church. Until we recover theological vision in the church, the nerve that gives rich and profound biblical life to our worship and mission will remain cut. . . . Without theological vision, a vision that wrestles with what it means to be God's people, in God's world, under God's rule, the church inevitably loses both its identity as God's possession and its purpose as the people

and place where God's glory is displayed in the gospel and God's praise is declared.¹¹

The implementation of this curriculum is an intentional step in seeking to restore theological vision within the household of faith at Pine Grove Church. It is this same commitment to theological vision that the apostles sought to impart to the new believers at Pentecost, when the three thousand were instructed to devote themselves to “the fellowship” (Acts 2:42). By grounding these brand new converts in theological vision from the outset, they were then positioned to eventually turn “the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). And by restoring theological vision, we truly help Pine Grove's members to apprehend what it means to be God's people, in God's world, under God's rule.

¹¹Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 110.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

This chapter addresses the success and effectiveness of this project, focusing on the stated goals of the project, the impact of the project upon the congregation of Pine Grove Church, the strengths and weaknesses of the project, along with theological and personal reflections.

Introduction

The overall purpose of this project was to develop and teach a biblical theology of church membership at Pine Grove Church. The motive behind this purpose was the desire to establish a thoroughly biblical understanding of church membership within this congregation and to ensure that new members entering the congregation, as well as already existing members of the church, would be doctrinally grounded as to what it means to be a healthy member of a local church. There were four goals that made up the body of this project. The first goal was to develop the curriculum to be used in the new members class. The second goal was to teach this newly developed curriculum to the elders of our church. The third goal was to preach a three-week sermon series on church membership to the congregation of Pine Grove Church. The fourth goal was to teach the newly developed curriculum to the participants in the new member class.

The implementation of these four goals intentionally focused upon three key groups or areas of the church. The first key group was the elders. The second area of

focus was the pulpit ministry and the congregation receiving these sermons. The third key group was the participants of the new member class (not only this initial class, but also each subsequent class in the future).

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was to develop and teach a biblical theology of church membership at Pine Grove Church. The biblical undergirding for this project came from the evidence found in the Scriptures that membership in a local church was normative during the first century and that the NT authors knew nothing of a Christian who was not a member of a local church. Therefore, the phrase “biblical theology of church membership” is central, not only to the name of this project, but more importantly, to the truthfulness and biblical accuracy of this subject. When church membership is accurately taught from the text of the Bible, then biblical theology will be taking place.

The purpose of this project ultimately came down to a matter of identity. When a Christian is unclear about the nature of the church and the meaning of membership within the church, the result is ambiguity regarding one's own identity as a redeemed child of God as well as ambiguity regarding one's own purpose within the context of the people of God. And when identity is blurred for a Christian, then assurance becomes a difficult and elusive blessing to attain.

One portion of the project's purpose was the development of the curriculum. This development stage provided me with the opportunity to dig deep into Scripture and solidify my beliefs about the church and specifically membership. As a result, I not only firmly believe in church membership, but more importantly, I know with deep conviction

why I believe in church membership. I am convinced that this deep conviction will be a paradigm shaping part of my ministry from this point forward.

Another portion of the project's purpose was the teaching of the curriculum. The curriculum was taught first to the church elders and then to the participants of the new member class. The congregation of Pine Grove Church heard the contents of the curriculum in sermon form through a three-week sermon series. By presenting this material in three very different settings (among the leaders of Pine Grove Church, to the congregation of Pine Grove Church through preaching, and in a small group setting in the new members class), the contents of the curriculum was set forth before a high percentage of the church. Each of these three groups heard teaching on the significance of the local church, the biblical evidence for church membership, and what the Scriptures reveal about God's expectations for those who are members of the church.

Because the curriculum was developed and approved by both the panel of pastoral peers and the elders and because the curriculum was taught to each of these three groups, as well as the questionnaires evidencing a positive and significant impact as a result of this teaching, it can be stated that the project, indeed, fulfilled its purpose.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

This project consisted of four goals that were set in place to meet the project's purpose of developing and teaching a biblical theology of church membership at Pine Grove Church. The first goal was the development of a curriculum that would clearly and biblically present to participants a sound understanding of the church and, particularly, church membership. In order to objectively evaluate the success of this goal, a panel of pastoral peers from Lakeview Baptist Church in Auburn, Alabama

carefully studied the entirety of the curriculum and then filled out an evaluation rubric (see Appendix 3). Three of the pastoral peers marked 100 percent of the curriculum at either sufficient or exemplary, while the fourth pastoral peer marked 91.6 percent of the curriculum at either sufficient or exemplary. Using the space for additional comments within the evaluation rubric, one evaluator commented that the curriculum was “a Bible-based, practical inductive study which any church would find helpful.”

The second goal of this project was to teach a biblical theology of church membership to the elders at Pine Grove Church. Through this teaching, which took place over the course of three monthly meetings, the elders of Pine Grove Church were presented with the biblical arguments and evidence for church membership, as well as the high importance that the Bible places upon the local church.

As a result of the receiving this teaching, the elders became rooted in their conviction that church membership was normative in the book of Acts and remains as God’s expectation for his people today. Because of the elders’ influence through shepherding the flock and through their teaching ministry, this conviction should have a far-reaching impact upon the congregation of Pine Grove.

The impact of the teaching of this curriculum on the Pine Grove elders was tangibly measured by the pretest questionnaire and the posttest questionnaire taken by these church leaders. Based upon the seven selected questions from the questionnaire, there was a 17.3 percent increase in the elders’ scores on the posttest as opposed to the initial pretest (see Appendix 5).

The third goal of this project was to preach a three-week sermon series on the church and church membership to the congregation of Pine Grove Church. In

contrast with the second and fourth goals, in which the curriculum was presented to a very specific target audience (the elders and the participants of the new member class), this goal focused upon a very wide audience. Although the setting in which this goal took place (the gathering of the congregational community of Pine Grove Church) did not allow for the type of discussion and interaction that the second and fourth goals did, it was vital that the church 's pulpit be deeply involved in the fulfillment of the project's purpose.

The three sermons that were part of the series unfolded the importance that the Bible places upon the local church and set before the congregation the biblical expectation for all Christians to be formally joined to a local church.¹ As a result of these sermons, the 15 congregants who participated in the pretest and posttest questionnaire demonstrated a marked increase in their comprehension of the Bible's teaching on the church and church membership (see Appendix 6). As the figures in appendix 6 indicate, there was a 20.8 percent increase between the pretest and posttest scores. Significantly, the questionnaire statement in which there was the greatest difference between the pre-test and posttest scores was statement 5: "There is no evidence in the New Testament that believers ever 'joined' a local church." The posttest score from this question indicated an increase of 43.1 percent from the same question taken during the pretest.

The fourth goal of this project was to teach the developed curriculum to the participants of Pine Grove's new member class. There were five participants in this class. The participants were presented with a biblical theology of church membership through the teaching of the curriculum first approved by the pastoral peers and then

¹See chap. 4 for a description of the three sermons.

taught to the elders. The participants in the new member class participated in a pretest questionnaire and a posttest questionnaire, which indicated a dramatic 35.7 percent increase from the first to the second questionnaire (see Appendix 7). It was interesting to note that the one question that the new member class participants responded to that did not show any increase at all was the following: “The New Testament teaches that believers should definitely obey their church leaders.” Based upon this evaluation of the project’s four goals, each of the goals were successfully met.

Strengths of the Project

Looking back on the implementation of this project’s goals, there are several strengths that emerge. First, the fulfillment of the second, third and fourth goals (teaching the curriculum to the elders, preaching the sermon series to the congregation, and teaching the curriculum to the participants of the new member class) allowed for the curriculum to be presented to a very large portion of the church. Not only did the goals target a large portion of the church, but they also targeted groups that, once grounded in this pivotal ecclesiastical doctrine, could play a key role in helping this biblical truth become assimilated into the very fabric of the church. The implementation of these goals made it possible for a biblical theology of church membership to be taught to the leaders of the church (the elders), the congregation, as well as the newest members of the church (the participants of the new member class). Therefore, the all-encompassing nature of the goals was definitely a strength of the project.

A second strength of the project is its durability. That is, even though the fifteen weeks of carrying out the project’s goals have concluded, the influence and impact of this study of church membership will continue to be felt within the

congregation for years to come. This ongoing influence will be seen through the teaching of this curriculum to each new group in the new members class. Every time a person joins Pine Grove Church from this point forward, they will have spent a month being immersed in the biblical theology of church membership. The project's durability will also be seen through the continued teaching of the curriculum to the church's elders. Therefore, this is not a "one and done" type project. Rather, this is a project that has the potential to shape the thinking of this church for years to come.

A third strength of this project is its timeliness. That is, biblical church membership has always been God's will and expectation for his people. From the inception of the church until today, the head of the church, Jesus himself, wills for his redeemed people to be joined together within the fellowship of a local church in order that they may show forth his glory. However, from the vantage point of the author, the need to emphasize biblical church membership seems greater and more needful now than ever before. In the midst of a generation in which the church is often made light of or related to in less than biblical terms, the need to stand up and boldly proclaim the biblical teaching on the church and church membership is perhaps greater now than ever before. Therefore, the timing of this project in light of current attitudes and trends is noteworthy.

A fourth strength of this project is that it shed light upon a doctrine of the church that had formerly remained in the dark for many in the congregation. Throughout the implementation of the second, third, and fourth goals, there was not one participant who had previously heard any form of teaching on church membership. As a result, the opinions and beliefs residing in the congregation regarding church membership were

extremely diverse. This, in turn, resulted in uncertainty concerning how the church should approach membership, as well as uncertainty regarding what it truly means to be a member of the church. The teaching of this curriculum helped clarify what Pine Grove Church believes about membership and how this church understand its congregation as members of the household of God.

A fifth strength of the project was its biblical integrity. In each of the teaching and preaching goals, the aim was to present material that was drawn straight from the text of the Bible. And by fulfilling this aim, the church would thereby be taught what accords with sound doctrine. Through the suggestions and accountability provided by the pastoral peer group, assurance was provided that this aim was indeed met.

Weaknesses of the Project

Reflecting upon the entirety of the project, there are several weaknesses that should be addressed. First, in the content of chapter 2 and in the content of the curriculum, there is no reference to the OT background of the church. As Mark Dever correctly observes, “In order to understand the church in the full richness of God’s revealed truth, both Old and New Testaments must be examined.”² If the above statement is correct, then the full richness of biblical content set forth in this project is lessened by the absence of a study of the OT in relation to the church. The project would have been more comprehensively complete had there been an inclusion in chapter 2 and in the curriculum of the OT term “assembly” and the implications of its meaning for the NT understanding of the church.

²Mark Dever, “The Church,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2007), 768.

A second weakness of this project was its lack of data in chapter 3. If this chapter (which addressed the connection between church membership and the Great Commission) had included statistics that verified the thesis, then greater weight and conviction would have accompanied it. Chapter 3 contained strong biblical and logical arguments for church membership as it relates to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. If data had been included demonstrating a connection between strong church membership and effectiveness in fulfilling the Great Commission, then the thesis of that chapter would have been even more convincing. The lack of data in this chapter limited the thesis from being as compelling and convincing as it might have been.

What I Would Do Differently

Regarding aspects of this project that I would do differently, obviously the above section draws attention to two items that, if done differently, would have enhanced the overall effectiveness of the project. Grounding the roots of a biblical theology of church membership in the rich soil of the OT and including specific data highlighting the correlation between church membership and the Great Commission would definitely be two areas that I would do differently if given the opportunity to do the project again.

In addition to these two aspects of the project, another dimension of the project that I would do differently would be to include some type of teaching handout in conjunction with the sermon series. The inclusion of such a handout in partnership with the sermon series would have better enabled the congregants to meditate upon God's word day and night (Ps 1:2) and prohibit the birds of the air from devouring the precious seed of the word of God (Matt 13:3-4). The presentation of the curriculum to the elders and to the participants of the new member class had this element built in because in

addition to hearing the teaching of the biblical doctrine, they also had actual copies of the curriculum, which they were encouraged to read and study.

Another aspect of this project that I would do differently would be to address, especially with the elders, the biblical importance of regenerate church membership. Within a biblical theology of church membership, this is a vital piece that, if neglected, can result in the blurring of the robust type of boundaries that should exist between the church and the world. This, in turn, weakens the church's witness and effectiveness in carrying out the Great Commission. If I had the opportunity to do this project again, I would definitely include in chapter 2 and in the curriculum a study of what the Bible teaches regarding regenerate church membership.

Theological Reflections

There are multiple areas of interest that make up the study of biblical ecclesiology. These areas include the Lord's Supper, baptism, the mission of the church, the offices of the church, types of church government, and church discipline, just to list a few. A sound understanding of ecclesiological membership is imperative in that it will impact and even shape each of these other areas of interest. For example, church membership relates to the mission of the church because it helps define who the church is seeking to reach and what the church hopes to accomplish in those who are saved by grace through faith. Likewise, church membership relates to the offices of the church in that it clarifies the relationship between church leaders and those to whom they provide oversight. And obviously, church membership relates to church discipline in that, as highlighted in chapter 2, the act of discipline becomes difficult, if not impossible, when

a formal church membership is absent. A sound understanding of biblical church membership is necessary if a sound and biblical ecclesiology is to be attained.

Having spent the past year and a half wrestling with this subject, there are several theological reflections that emerged. First, my regard for the local church sky-rocketed as a result of this project. As a pastor, I have always sought to hold the church in high esteem. The local church is none other than the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of God. As a pastor, I strive to keep the church's identity ever before me. Yet by digging deep into the biblical teaching of church membership, I am reminded of the astounding love tht God has for the members of the church, as evidenced when he says that he will be a father to them, and they will be his sons and daughters (2 Cor 6:18). And because of who we are as the church, God calls his people to come out and be separate (2 Cor 6:17). Church membership is one of the tangible ways in which we as God's people come out and separate ourselves from all that is unclean.

A second theological reflection from this project is that the authority of Scripture must be applied to all aspects of the church. There are ecclesiastical issues in which there exists a wide variance of opinions. These issues include, but are not limited to, the biblical roles of men and women, the proper purpose of baptism, church government, and the matter of church autonomy. Within these diverse opinions, all Christians should still strive for love and unity. However, the striving for love and unity does not imply that Christians, especially church leaders, should not diligently search the Scriptures in order to know the will of God. For example, the Bible does reveal the will of God regarding the roles of men and women. Likewise, the Bible also reveals the will of God regarding the place and purpose of Christian baptism. In other words, a church's

commitment to love and unity should not lead to doctrinal fuzziness and ambiguity. This is especially true in regards to church membership. Like other ecclesiastical issues, there currently exists diversity of opinions concerning the matter of church membership. As a pastor, my desire is to love these fellow believers and exhibit a heart of unity toward them. But the Bible's teaching on church membership is abundant and clear. Therefore, my responsibility as a pastor serving under the authority of the "Chief Shepherd" (1 Pet 5:4) is to lead the church in obedience to the will of God as revealed in his holy word. The implication of this responsibility is that I will be a pastor who is committed to upholding biblical church membership.

A third theological reflection relates to the significance of historical theology. As I studied and researched the subject of church membership, I was struck by the importance that church leaders in centuries past placed upon the church and membership therein. For so many of these great men of God, church membership was a doctrine worth fighting for. It was a doctrine that these great examples of faith and leadership considered vital to the health of those claiming the name Christian. And when these men of faith encountered a person who made light of the church or church membership, a loving but strong rebuke was sure to be delivered. For anyone today who thinks that the kind of robust boundaries created by biblical church membership is hurtful to the mission of the church, wisdom suggests that they revisit the historical practice and the belief of the church on this vital doctrine.

Personal Reflections

There are several personal reflections that resulted from this project and are deserving of attention. First, proceeding through the goals of this project reminded me

that patience and gentleness are much-needed virtues in the life of a pastor. As I taught a biblical theology of church membership through the various settings described above, I, at times, encountered dear people who did not share my view of church membership. A few of these were open to hearing what the Bible reveals about church membership. Others were quietly resistant to truthful persuasion. And some were openly vocal about their opposition to church membership. This experience became a fresh reminder to me of the counsel given to Timothy by Paul, which states that “the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness” (2 Tim 2:24-25). I have never encountered a believer who was renewed in the spirit of their mind overnight (Eph 4:23). Rather, this kind of biblical renewal requires sound biblical teaching, abundant grace and patience, and the kind of gentleness spoken of by Paul.

A second personal reflection springing forth from this project is obvious and apparent, yet it deserves to be mentioned. By the grace of God, I will never, as a pastor, approach the matter of church membership in the same way again. Regrettably, there have been times in my pastoral ministry when I communicated (whether intentionally or not—it does not matter) that church membership was a relatively unimportant aspect of life in the church. As a result of this project, I know that I cannot ever revert back to that approach. Church membership is taught in the Bible. The divine author of the Bible expects it. Church membership is a vital part of every Christian’s growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, as a pastor, I am committing myself to teach and preach church membership, uphold church membership within the

congregation that I am called to watch over, and make much of it with every born-again person who joins our church.

A third personal reflection from this project relates to the biblical call to rightly handle the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15). Particularly in regard to the writing of chapter 2, I had to dig deep and study at length the word of God in order to set forth truthful and accurate content. The time I spent living in various passages of Scripture became seasons of refreshing and life-giving nourishment for my soul. During these times, my own preaching paralleled that of the disciples as they distributed the food to the multitudes (Mk 6:41). By this, I mean that the sermons that I preached during these times were messages that had first been given to me by the Lord himself through his word. To live in a biblical passage in such a manner that you come to apprehend the mind of Christ and the author's intent adds authority and power to any preacher's message. As a result of this reflection, I am seeking, like the twelve in Acts 6, to continue being a pastor who is devoted to the word of God and to prayer (Acts 6:4).

Conclusion

As the concluding portion of this project draws near, I am filled with anticipation about where this experience will lead me as a pastor and where it will lead our church as we continue implementing a biblical theology of church membership. Specifically, I am anticipating within our congregation a greater reverence and appreciation for church membership. I am anticipating a church that is better positioned to fulfill the Great Commission. I am also anticipating a church that is, in the truest sense, salt and light to the world around us. But in order to turn these anticipations into

realities, this biblical doctrine will surely need to be kept before our church through wise teaching and preaching.

The persistent, courageous proclamation of this biblical doctrine is necessary because our church resides in the midst of a culture that is highly individualistic and highly anti-committal. Also, the church is ministering at a time when people love self, money and pleasure (2 Tim 3:1-4), and, therefore, people desire to “accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” (2 Tim 4:3). If the brave pastor does not constantly steer his sermons in the direction of biblical truth, the result will be a church that drifts into the ditches of worldly attitudes and ungodly thinking. The disregard for biblical church membership surely suits the kinds of sinful attitudes mentioned above, but it does not line up with the will of God for his church.

Gordon Fee is surely on target when he writes, “In most Protestant circles one tends to take the local parish altogether too lightly. Seldom does one sense that it is, or can be, experienced as a community that is so powerfully indwelt by the Spirit that it functions as a genuine alternative to the pagan world in which it is found.”³ In order for the church to function as a genuine alternative to the pagan world, it must be separate and distinguished from the pagan world. One of the key ways in which this separation and distinction is established is by means of a biblical church membership. Of course, church membership by itself does not create the kind of separation needed. Church membership must be joined together with biblical church discipline and a commitment to regenerate church membership. Church membership must also be coupled with the kind of bible teaching and preaching that promotes growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord

³Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 149-50.

Jesus Christ. Church membership alone will not produce the kind of church that functions as a true alternative to a pagan world. But without biblical church membership, the church loses the kind of distinction needed to effectively impact a Christ-less world.

The biblical expectation of church membership saturates the pages of the NT. Any shift from this biblical norm, regardless of the reason or argument, is a falling away from the will of God for his people and for his church. Gregg Allison summarizes the theme of this project when he writes that “all who are ‘in Christ’ are *de facto* ‘in the church’ and constitute its members.”⁴ That is, the sovereign Lord of the church has, in his wisdom, joined together being “in Christ” and being united to his church. Any attempt to divide these two does violence to the effectiveness and advance of the gospel. Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate (Matt 19:6).

⁴Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 30.

APPENDIX 1

NEW MEMBERS CLASS CURRICULUM

Members of the Household of God

What it Means to Be a Member of the Body of Christ at Pine Grove Church

Lesson 1: What Is the Church – A Biblical Definition

The purpose of Lesson 1 is to provide a biblical overview of the church, noting the Biblical images of the church, the marks of a true church, and the mission and purpose of the local church.

1. BIBLICAL IMAGES OF THE CHURCH: God has inspired multiple images of the church, each offering a different perspective so as to provide a depth of understanding and appreciation for the true nature of the church. These are six of the major images found in the New Testament.
 - a) The Church is the _____. 1 Peter 2:9-10; Romans 9:25-26.
 - b) The Church is the _____. 1 Corinthians 10:17; Acts 9:4; Colossians 1:18.
 - c) The Church is the _____.
Ephesians 2:19; 1 Timothy 5:1-2.
 - d) The Church is a _____. 1 Corinthians 3:9c-17; Ephesians 2:21.
 - e) The Church is the _____. Revelation 19-20.

Each of the images used for the church can help us appreciate more of the richness of privilege that God has given us by incorporating us into the church.

Wayne Grudem

2. MARKS OF THE CHURCH

What are the distinguishing marks of the true church? We live in a time when we are surrounded by multitudes of sects and false religions, many using the term “church.” How are sincere followers of Christ to differentiate between that which is true and that which is false?

Historically, a true church is identified by two marks. These two marks are:

- a. The Right _____ of the Word of God.

Concerning the right preaching of the Word of God, Martin Luther wrote that “the holy Christian people are recognized by their possession of the holy Word of God.” The right preaching of the Word of God is the means through which the church is generated and created, and it is the “fountain of God’s truth that gives life to His people.” (Mark Dever, The Church, 778-779).

- b. The Right Administration of _____ and the _____.

“Jesus Christ has given two visible signs of His special presence to His people. These signs are baptism and the Lord’s Supper. . . . When a church practices baptism and the Lord’s Supper, it obeys Christ’s teaching and example.” (Dever, 783)

Pine Grove Church practices **baptism** by immersing in water persons who profess and evidence conversion. “Baptism is the initiation rite into the Christian church.” (Thomas Schreiner)

The **Lord’s Supper** is recorded in all four gospels (Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-26, Luke 22:7-38, John 13:1-17). Each

time the church comes to the Lord's table, it is a perpetual reminder to them of the crucified and risen Christ, so that the church may not live for themselves but for Him who died for them and rose again (Basil of Caesarea). The Lord's Supper not only looks back to the cross, but it is also forward looking, as the supper points the church ahead to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9).

The preaching of the Word and the observance of the sacraments cannot happen anywhere without producing fruit and prospering because of God's blessing.

John Calvin

3. THE CHURCH'S MISSION AND PURPOSE

The **purpose** for which any local church exists is to glorify God.

Look up 1 Peter 4:11. In what things is God to be glorified?

_____.

Look up Ephesians 3:21. Who is to receive glory in the church?

_____. For how long? _____.

The local church exists to glorify God. The church glorifies God as it faithfully carries out its mission as revealed in God's Word. What is the church's **mission**?

Read John 4:23-24. What is the Father seeking?

_____.

Read Matthew 28:18-20. What does Jesus commission the church to do?

_____.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:11. What two things are church members commanded to do for fellow church members?

_____.

The church's purpose is to glorify God in all things. The church's mission is

- 1) The worship of God, 2) The evangelization of the world, and 3) The building up of other believers.

The local church enables the world to look upon the canvas of God's people and see an authentic painting of Christ's love and holiness.

Jonathan Leeman

Members of the Household of God

What it Means to Be a Member of the Body of Christ at Pine Grove Church

Lesson 2: Is Church Membership Biblical? Part I

The purpose of Lesson 2 is to explore the New Testament in order determine whether church membership is taught in the Bible.

1. Insiders and Outsiders: The Apostle Paul makes numerous references in his letters to those who are members of a local church and those who are not.

Verse	Reference of Church Members	Reference to Non-Church Members
1 Corinthians 5:12-13		
1 Thessalonians 3:12		
1 Thessalonians 5:15		
Galatians 6:10		
Colossians 4:5		
1 Thessalonians 4:12		

When Paul refers to insiders, one another, and those of the household of faith, he is speaking of members of a specific, local church. When Paul refers to outsiders, all, and everyone, he is speaking of people who are not members of a local church.

God expects a commitment to the Church from everyone who claims to know Him.

Wayne Mack & Dave Swavely

2. WHERE DOES THE BIBLE SPEAK OF “JOINING” A CHURCH?

When the Bible mentions church membership, it doesn't use the terminology of “joining” a church. Rather, the Bible speaks of **submitting** to a local church. The Bible uses the language of submission when referring to church membership.

Read Hebrews 13:17. How are Christians to relate to their leaders?

According to Hebrews 13:17, what is the responsibility of the leaders?

Church membership is the means through which leaders know whose souls they are to watch over. Without a formal church membership, it becomes difficult if not impossible for church leaders to know whom they are responsible to lead! Christians are to heed the advice of their leaders by placing themselves under their authority. For this relationship to function in a healthy manner, a formal membership commitment is needed.

Read 1 Peter 5:1-3. What are the responsibilities of an elder toward the flock of God (that is, the church)?

How are church members described according to verse 3?

Notice that elders are not responsible for everyone, but only for those who are “in their charge.” The way that elders know who is and who isn’t in their charge is through church membership.

What is church membership? Church membership is a formal relationship between a church and a Christian characterized by the church’s affirmation and oversight of a Christian’s discipleship and the Christian’s submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.

Jonathan Leeman

Members of the Household of God

What it Means to Be a Member of the Body of Christ at Pine Grove Church

Lesson 3: Is Church Membership Biblical? Part II

The purpose of Lesson 3 is to continue exploring the New Testament in order to determine whether church membership is taught in the Bible.

1. SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. In this verse, Paul refers to spiritual gifts as “the manifestation of the Spirit.” According to verse 7, who among God’s people is given a spiritual gift?

According to verse 7, why are spiritual gifts given?

Read Romans 12:3-8. What does verse 4 say about the function of the members of the body?

What does verse 6 say about the gifts that have been given to the body of Christ?

List the gifts mentioned in Romans 12:7-8.

- | | |
|----------|----------|
| 1. _____ | 5. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 6. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 7. _____ |
| 4. _____ | |

God has given spiritual gifts to the members of the body of Christ in order to be used (Romans 12:6). And in order for spiritual gifts to be fully effective, they must be used within the community of a local church. As Paul teaches, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Corinthians 12:21). Spiritual gifts that are exercised alone just don’t have the kind of impact that God intended. God meant for spiritual gifts to be exercised by people who are joined in membership to a local church.

Different people in the church have different gifts. Some are gifted in one area while others are gifted in another. The point is that we are all dependent on one another and all have something to contribute. Each person is incomplete by himself and needs others to form this one body. It is essential, then, that all Christians are joined to a local church through membership so that they are able to both use their gifts and also to benefit from the gifts of others.

Benjamin L. Merkle

2. CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND THE BIBLICAL “ONE ANOTHERS”

When you were converted, you entered into a relationship with God, and also a relationship with other believers – your brothers and sisters in Christ. The Bible has a lot to say about your relationship with other Christians, what you’re commanded to do and what you’re prohibited from doing. Many of the Bible’s directions on relationships with other Christians are found in the “one another” verses of Scripture. Read the following verses, writing down what the Bible commands us to do for one another:

Read John 13:34-35. _____ one another.

Read Galatians 5:13. _____ one another.

Read Galatians 6:2. _____ of one another.

Read Ephesians 4:32a. _____ to one another.

Read Ephesians 4:32c. _____ one another.

Read Hebrews 3:13. _____ one another.

Read Hebrews 10:24. _____ one another.

Read James 5:16a. _____ to one another.

Read James 5:16b. _____ for one another.

The “one another” responsibilities that God has given to you apply to your connection with every Christian everywhere (that is, every member of the church universal). But these “one another” responsibilities that God has given to you apply most specifically to your relationship with other believers in your own local church. These one another verses are like “household rules” for each local church, providing direction and boundaries for how church

members are supposed to relate to one another. These “one another” verses paint a picture of what life should look like within the membership of a local church. However, when a person refuses to submit to the membership of a local church, these one another responsibilities lose much of their meaning and significance, for that person is refusing to share life with other Christians in the way God intended.

The idea of membership is nearly everywhere in Scripture.

Thabiti M. Anyabwile

3. OTHER EXAMPLES OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

Read Acts 8:3. What term does the Bible use to describe the people whom Paul was ravaging? _____.

Read Acts 11:22. What term does the Bible use to describe the believers in Jerusalem? _____.

Read Acts 11:26. What term does the Bible use to describe the believers in Antioch whom Barnabas and Saul met with?

_____.

Read Acts 15:4. What term does the Bible use to describe the believers in Jerusalem? _____.

In referring to believers in cities such as Antioch or Jerusalem, the Bible in the above verses simply uses the term “church.” Luke uses the term “church” to designate Christians as they share their lives together. Luke knows nothing of a Christian who is not a member of a local church.

Read Matthew 18:15-20. In this passage, Jesus is instructing the church on how to handle the difficult matter of discipline. According to Jesus, what is to be done to a person who has sinned and refuses to listen even to the church (see verse 17)?

In verse 17, when Jesus says to “tell it to the church”, He is not referring to the universal church, but to a specific, local church. When Jesus speaks of treating this person “as a Gentile and a tax collector”, He is talking about this person no longer being a member of the local church. In order for discipline to take place, church membership must be present. No one can be put out of the church (outside the membership of the church) who has not first been admitted into the church (inside the membership of the church).

CONCLUSION

What Lessons 2 and 3 have demonstrated is that church membership is found throughout the pages of the New Testament. The Bible knows nothing of a “church-less” Christian. To be in Christ is to also be in the body of Christ and a member of Christ’s church.

Church membership does not save anyone. Salvation is the result of the grace of God, freely received by those who have faith in Jesus Christ. Yet once a person has been saved, the biblical expectation is for that person to then join a Bible-believing church. This is the consistent teaching found in God’s Word.

The Scriptural rule is that, while membership in the church is not a prerequisite of salvation, it is a necessary consequence of salvation.

R. B. Kuiper

Members of the Household of God

What it Means to Be a Member of the Body of Christ at Pine Grove Church

Lesson 4: Being a Healthy Member of Pine Grove Church.

The purpose of Lesson 4 is to learn what the Biblical expectations are for members of Christ's church. To do this, we will study several passages of Scripture that shed light upon what God expects from the members of His church.

1. A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER IS A BIBLE SATURATED MEMBER.

Read Colossians 3:16. What should dwell in a believer richly?

Read 1 Peter 2:1-3. What are believers to long for?

What impact does "pure spiritual milk" have in the life of a believer?

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13. In this verse, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his initial visit, in which he delivered the word of God (Acts 17:1-9). According to this verse, how did the Thessalonians receive or accept Paul's preaching?

Read Deuteronomy 8:3. According to this verse, what, besides bread, does man live on?

The words which man should live on, where do they come from?

A healthy church member is a Bible-saturated member. Pine Grove Church members should always long for the nourishment and truth that is found in God's word. Let God's word dwell in you richly!

2. A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER IS A PRAYING MEMBER.
Read Romans 15:30-32. What is Paul's appeal in verse 30?

Read Ephesians 6:16-20. According to verse 18, what are we to do for all the saints?

What does Paul request in verse 19?

Read Psalm 116:1-2. According to verse 1, why does the psalmist love the Lord?

Because the Lord has inclined His ear to him, what does the psalmist say he will do, according to verse 2?

When we survey the activities of the early Church recorded for us in Scripture, we discover that one of the central things early church members devoted themselves to was prayer.

Thabiti Anyabwile

3. A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER IS A DEVOTED MEMBER.

Read Acts 2:42. In addition to the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread, and the prayers, what did these brand new believers devote themselves to?

Read Hebrews 10:24-25. What are we not to neglect or forsake?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:21-26. As members of the body of Christ, what should be our response if one member suffers?

What should be our response if one members rejoices?

The Bible clearly commands every believer to be deeply involved in the lives of other believers.

Wayne Mack & Dave Swavely

4. A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER IS A SUBMITTED MEMBER.

Read Ephesians 5:21. What are we to do in our relationship with fellow church members?

Read Hebrews 13:17. According to this verse, what is the responsibility of the leaders of the church?

What are two ways that church members are to respond to the leaders of the church, according to this verse?

Christians don't join churches, they submit to them.

Jonathan Leeman

5. A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER WELCOMES DISCIPLINE.

In any healthy church, **discipline** is necessary for **discipleship**. In fact, these two words come from the same Latin root word, which means education and order. According to the Scriptures, there are two kinds of discipline present in every healthy church: *formative discipline* and *corrective discipline*. A healthy church member will joyfully welcome biblical discipline, for it is a key ingredient in spiritual growth.

Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17. According to verse 16, in what four ways is Scripture useful or profitable?

1. _____
2. _____

3. _____
4. _____

When Paul states that all Scripture is profitable for teaching and for training in righteousness, he is referring to *formative discipline*. The vast majority of discipline in the church will be this type.

When Paul states that all Scripture is profitable for reproof and for correction, he is referring to *corrective discipline*. If a believer ever strays or gets off course, it is this type of discipline which is needed.

Read Matthew 18:15-20. If your brother sins against you, Jesus says to:

First (verse 15) _____.

If he listens, you have gained your brother. But if he doesn't listen, then . . .

Second (verse 16) _____.

If he listens, you have gained your brother. But if he doesn't listen, then . . .

Third, (verse 17) _____.

If he listens, you have gained your brother. But if he doesn't listen, then

“let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” (Matthew 18:17).

Church discipline is practiced so that members will escape the judgment to come, so that they will enjoy forever the life of the coming age.

Thomas Schreiner

6. A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER IS AN EMPOWERED WITNESS.

Read Acts 1:8. What does Jesus say will happen when the Holy Spirit comes upon you?

_____.

When you receive power, what does Jesus say will be the result?

_____.

Read Matthew 9:36-38. According to verse 37, what is plentiful?

_____. According to verse 37, what is few?

_____. According to verse 38, what does Jesus instruct His disciples to do?

_____.

Read Matthew 5:14-16. What are we, according to Jesus' words in verse 14?

According to verse 15, what is the purpose of a lamp that is lit?

_____.

According to verse 16, what will happen when we let our light shine before others?

_____.

Nothing can be clearer than that God in His Word has designated the organized church as the agency par excellence for evangelism.

R. B. Kuiper

APPENDIX 2

PASTORAL PEER EVALUATION FORM

<p style="text-align: center;">Lesson 1 Evaluation 1 = insufficient 2 = requires attention 3 = sufficient 4 = exemplary</p>					
Does the lesson title clearly describe the lesson's objective?					
Does the lesson's content uphold the integrity of Scripture?					
Are the Scriptures used in this lesson appropriate to the lesson's objective.					
Is the flow of the lesson understandable and logical?					
Does this lesson address the most pertinent issues in light of the objective? Overall, does the lesson meet its objective?					
Additional Comments: Note: The pastoral peers used one evaluation form for each of the four lessons.					

APPENDIX 3

PASTORAL PEER EVALUATION RESULTS

Evaluator #	Insufficient	Requires Attention	Sufficient	Exemplary	% of Marks
1	0	0	1	23	100%
2	0	2	5	17	91.6%
3	0	0	0	24	100%
4	0	0	14	10	100%

APPENDIX 4

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to measure your understanding of church membership. This research is being conducted by Mark McCarty for the purposes of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research, you will answer questions before the project, and then you will answer the same questions at the conclusion of the project. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. By completion of this questionnaire, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

Personal “code” word: _____

Date: _____

Directions: Answer the following questions: (1) Place a check by the multiple-choice questions. (2) Some questions ask you to give your opinion using the following scale: SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, DS = disagree somewhat, AS = agree somewhat, A = agree, SA = Strongly agree. Circle the appropriate answer. (3) Space is provided for any comments or clarifications that you wish to make.

1. Your gender?

- A. Male
- B. Female

2. Your age in years?

- A. 18-24
- B. 25-34
- C. 35-44
- D. 45-54
- E. 55-64
- F. 65 and over

3. Your current marital status?

- A. Single
- B. Married

- C. Divorced
- D. Widowed

4. If you have children, how many do you have?

- A. 1
- B. 2
- C. 3
- D. 4
- E. 5 or more

5. How long have you attended Pine Grove Church?

year(s)

6. Faithful attendance at a local church is commanded in the New Testament.
(circle the answer that most reflects your opinion)

SD D DS AS A SA

7. The Bible teaches that the only person a Christian should submit to is Jesus Christ.

SD D DS AS A SA

8. How I live and conduct myself as a Christian is my own business and not the business of any other Christian in my church.

SD D DS AS A SA

9. The Bible categorizes people as either “inside” the membership of the church or “outside” the membership of the church.

SD D DS AS A SA

10. The New Testament teaches that believers should definitely obey their church leaders.

SD D DS AS A SA

11. A believer in Jesus Christ can live an effective, abundant, fruitful Christian life without being a member of a local church.

SD D DS AS A SA

12. There is no evidence in the New Testament that believers ever “joined” a local church.

SD D DS AS A SA

13. A church is any gathering of believers at any place and at any time.

SD D DS AS A SA

14. It is good for believers to attend multiple churches and not be committed to one single church, so that they can experience a wide array of preaching and worship styles.

SD D DS AS A SA

15. Participating in a church service by means of media (television, internet, radio) does not have the same benefits as physically attending a church service.

SD D DS AS A SA

16. The importance of membership in a local church is taught in the New Testament.

SD D DS AS A SA

17. When a Christian does not become a member of a local church, he or she is being disobedient to Scripture.

SD D DS AS A SA

18. Believers can grow in their faith through means other than the local church.

SD D DS AS A SA

19. As long as a Christian attends a local church, it is not necessary to become a member of a local church.

SD D DS AS A SA

20. A person cannot be a fully-devoted follower of Jesus Christ without being a member of a local church.

SD D DS AS A SA

21. In order for there to be a biblical church, there must be a person designated as a leader/pastor.

SD D DS AS A SA

22. In order for there to be a biblical church, there must be the true observance of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper).

SD D DS AS A SA

23. Please use the space below to record any comments you may have regarding the church and church membership.

APPENDIX 5

PRE-PROJECT AND POST-PROJECT ELDER
QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Possible Responses: 1 = Strongly Disagree
 2 = Disagree
 3 = Disagree Somewhat
 4 = Agree Somewhat
 5 = Agree
 6 = Strongly Agree

Pre-Project Questionnaire

Statements	Responses (expressed in amount of responses)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Faithful attendance at a local church is commanded in the New Testament.	0	0	0	0	3	3
The Bible categorizes people as either “inside” the membership of the church or “outside” the membership of the church.	0	1	0	2	1	2
The New Testament teaches that believers should definitely obey their church leaders.	0	0	0	2	4	0
A believer in Jesus Christ cannot live an effective, fruitful Christian life without being a member of a local church.	0	1	0	0	4	1
There is evidence in the New Testament that believers “joined” a local church.	0	1	0	2	2	1

Statements	Responses (expressed in amount of responses)					
The importance of membership in a local church is taught in the New Testament.	0	1	0	0	4	1
When a Christian does not become a member of a local church, he or she is being disobedient to Scripture.	0	1	1	0	3	1

Post-Project Questionnaire

Statements	Responses (expressed in amount of responses)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Faithful attendance at a local church is commanded in the New Testament.	0	0	0	0	2	4
The Bible categorizes people as either “inside” the membership of the church or “outside” the membership of the church.	0	0	0	0	2	4
The New Testament teaches that believers should definitely obey their church leaders.	0	0	0	1	1	4
A believer in Jesus Christ cannot live an effective, fruitful Christian life without being a member of a local church.	0	0	1	0	0	5
There is evidence in the New Testament that believers “joined” a local church.	0	1	0	0	2	3
The importance of membership in a local church is taught in the New Testament.	0	0	0	0	2	4
When a Christian does not become a member of a local church, he or she is being disobedient to Scripture.	0	0	0	1	3	2

APPENDIX 6

PRE- AND POST-PROJECT CONGREGATIONAL QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Possible Responses: 1 = Strongly Disagree
 2 = Disagree
 3 = Disagree Somewhat
 4 = Agree Somewhat
 5 = Agree
 6 = Strongly Agree

Pre-Project Congregational Questionnaire

Statements	Responses (expressed in amount of responses)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Faithful attendance at a local church is commanded in the New Testament.	0	1	0	0	5	9
The Bible categorizes people as either “inside” the membership of the church or “outside” the membership of the church.	0	4	0	0	7	4
The New Testament teaches that believers should definitely obey their church leaders.	0	0	2	1	7	5
A believer in Jesus Christ cannot live an effective, fruitful Christian life without being a member of a local church.	1	2	1	3	2	6
There is evidence in the New Testament that believers “joined” a local church.	1	3	3	0	6	2
The importance of membership in a local church is taught in the New Testament.	0	2	0	1	8	4

Statements	Responses (expressed in amount of responses)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
When a Christian does not become a member of a local church, he or she is being disobedient to the Scripture.	0	2	1	3	6	3

Post-Project Congregational Questionnaire

Statements	Responses (expressed in amount of responses)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Faithful attendance at a local church is commanded in the New Testament.	0	0	0	0	0	15
The Bible categorizes people as either “inside” the membership of the church or “outside” the membership of the church.	0	0	0	0	5	10
The New Testament teaches that believers should definitely obey their church leaders.	0	0	0	0	8	7
A believer in Jesus Christ cannot live an effective, fruitful Christian life without being a member of a local church.	0	0	0	0	4	11
There is evidence in the New Testament that believer “joined” a local church.	0	0	0	0	7	8
The importance of membership in a local church is taught in the New Testament.	0	0	0	0	7	8
When a Christian does not become a member of a local church, he or she is being disobedient to Scripture.	1	0	0	0	7	7

APPENDIX 7

PRE-PROJECT AND POST-PROJECT NEW MEMBER CLASS PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Possible Responses:

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Disagree Somewhat
- 4 = Agree Somewhat
- 5 = Agree
- 6 = Strongly Agree

Pre-Project Questionnaire

Statements	Responses (expressed in amount of responses)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Faithful attendance at a local church is commanded in the New Testament.	0	0	1	1	1	2
The Bible categorizes people as either “inside” the membership of the church or “outside” the membership of the church.	1	0	1	2	0	1
The New Testament teaches that believers should definitely obey their church leaders.	0	0	1	2	2	0
A believers in Jesus Christ cannot live an Effective, fruitful Christian life without being a member of a local church.	0	0	1	4	0	0
There is evidence in the New Testament that believers “joined” a local church.	0	0	3	0	2	0

Statements	Responses (expressed in amount of responses)					
The importance of membership in a local church is taught in the New Testament.	0	1	2	0	1	1
When a Christian does not become a member of a local church, he or she is being disobedient to Scripture.	0	0	1	3	1	0

Post-Project Questionnaire

Statement	Responses (expressed in amount of responses)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Faithful attendance at a local church is commanded in the New Testament.	0	0	0	0	1	4
The Bible categorizes people as either “inside” the membership of the church or “outside” the membership of the church.	0	0	0	1	0	4
The New Testament teaches that believers should definitely obey their church leaders.	1	0	0	1	2	1
A believer in Jesus Christ cannot live an effective, fruitful Christian life without being a member of a local church.	0	0	1	0	0	4
There is evidence in the New Testament that believers “joined” a local church.	0	0	0	0	2	3
The importance of membership in a local church is taught in the New Testament.	0	0	0	0	1	4
When a Christian does not become a member of a local church, he or she is being disobedient to Scripture.	0	0	0	1	0	4

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING AND TEACHING A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT PINE GROVE CHURCH, OPELIKA, ALABAMA

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014
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The purpose of this project is to develop and teach a biblical theology of church membership. Chapter 1 presents the purpose, goals, context, rationale, definitions, limitations, and research methodology of the project.

Chapter 2 is a study of the biblical and theological basis for church membership. This chapter focuses upon the New Testament's emphasis on the local church, church discipline, church leaders, the church as the body of Christ, and the New Testament's references to lists and records, noting the connection between these subjects and church membership.

Chapter 3 discusses the theoretical and practical issues relating to church membership. Specifically, this chapter addresses the implications of membership as it relates to the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide details of the implementation of this project, as well as various evaluations of the project's success.

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