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DEVELOPING CHURCH MEMBERSHIP
AT ROCK VALLEY BIBLE CHURCH
IN LOVES PARK, ILLINOIS

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DEVELOPING CHURCH MEMBERSHIP
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I dedicate this dissertation to the dear saints at Rock Valley Bible Church, who have done well in practicing the “one anothers” and have given me great joy in shepherding them (Heb 13:17). I also dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Yvonne, who has demonstrated much patience to me during the completion of this project.

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PREFACE

I want to express my thankfulness to God for the dear saints at Rock Valley Bible Church. You have made this project possible. You have financed my studies. You have been willing subjects of my study. You have been an encouragement to me in more ways than you know. You have made my pastoring work a joy (Heb 13:17). I am numbered among the most fortunate pastors in the world.

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Finally, all praise to Jesus, who promised to build his church (Matt 16:18).

Steve Brandon

Rockford, Illinois

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

All believers in Jesus Christ are members of the universal church, of which Christ is the head (Col 1:18). The clear call of the New Testament is for those believers to identify themselves with a local congregation, where they can assemble regularly (Heb 10:24-25) and serve one another with their gifts (1 Pet 4:10-11). This is the responsibility of every member of the church. This ministry project developed an understanding of church membership at Rock Valley Bible Church (RVBC) in Loves Park, Illinois.

Context

The ministry project took place in the context of Rock Valley Bible Church in Loves Park, Illinois. RVBC is a non-denominational church, which was planted by Kishwaukee Bible Church in DeKalb, Illinois. RVBC began in 1988 as a home Bible study, launched publicly in 2001, moved to a few rental facilities, and finally purchased a building of its own in 2010.

Within the first few years of the church, we experienced steady numerical growth, becoming financially independent of our mother church less than two years after our public launch. After nine years of renting facilities and saving for the future, we were able to purchase our current facility with cash on hand. As a result, the church has no debt. Furthermore, approximately twenty percent of our annual budget goes to missions (both locally and globally). Our vision is for this percentage to increase to fifty percent. All of this demonstrates the financial stability of the church.

RVBC is a young church, both in terms of history and in terms of demographics. Approximately 120 people are regular attenders each Sunday morning,

half of whom are children. The median age of the church is only eighteen years-old. This is a sign of health as children are the future of the church.

For the most part, those at Rock Valley Bible Church are involved in the body life of the church. About two-thirds of the families make the effort to be involved in a small group of the church. Furthermore, many are making attempts at family worship in their homes, demonstrating that their faith goes beyond Sunday morning church attendance. This is a sign of the maturity of those who attend the church.

However, for all of the strengths of RVBC, we have not experienced long-term growth. Attendance has remained more or less constant for the past decade. By 2006, we had grown to our current 30-35 families. About half of those families have been at the church during all of those years, but the other half has been turnover.

Rationale

This project has grown out of two objectives. The first objective is to break through the attendance plateau that we have experienced at RVBC. The second objective is to improve the organizational structure of our church regarding our membership procedures. These objectives may be related.

Currently, we do not have any official church membership or membership process. In a typical experience, a family visits our church and is welcomed by those at the church. After a few weeks of visiting, my wife and I will have them over to our house for lunch or dinner. During that time, we have an opportunity to meet the new family and share a little about the church and ways to be involved. We quickly place them on our church-wide email list so that they may understand what is happening at the church. Eventually, those who hang around are included in our directory and become a part of our church. This process is very organic and does not quite happen the same way for everyone who comes. Our church operates like acquaintances who become friends without thinking through the process.

While this assimilation process has some benefits, it also has some drawbacks. We have no systems in place to communicate with clarity the vision, mission, and culture of our church. People need to feel their way through the process. Also, there is not any specific point in time when people are officially recognized as members of the church. This leaves some to feel as if they are not quite a part of the church. A good portion of these people tend to leave the church as easily as they have come.

Without a formal membership process, it is difficult for new people to be assimilated into the life of RVBC. The leadership of the church has identified this as one of our greatest pressing needs. It would be greatly beneficial for RVBC to increase our understanding of church membership.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to implement an organized church membership process into the life of Rock Valley Bible Church in Loves Park, Illinois.

Goals

Several necessary goals were applicable for the purpose of this ministry project. Each goal built upon the other to implement an organized church membership process into the life of Rock Valley Bible Church.

1. The first goal was to develop a membership training program.
2. The second goal was to assess the current understanding of church membership among those at RVBC.
3. The third goal was to implement the membership training program.
4. The fourth goal was to increase knowledge of church membership among those at RVBC.
5. The fifth goal was to persuade those in the church to embrace the changes that an official church membership will bring.

Definitive research methodology measured when these four goals were accomplished.¹ The research methodology and instruments used to measure the success of each goal are detailed in the following section.

Research Methodology

Five goals determined the effectiveness of this project. The first goal was to develop a membership training program. This goal was measured by an expert panel consisting of two RVBC elders and two local pastors. This panel utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, scope, teaching methodology, and applicability of the training program.² This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of ninety percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The second goal was to assess the current understanding of church membership among those at RVBC. This goal was measured by administering the Church Membership and Involvement Survey (CMIS) to those who attend RVBC.³ This survey included questions regarding the understanding of church membership and the level of involvement in the life of the church. This goal was considered successfully met when thirty families completed the CMIS and the survey was analyzed yielding a clearer picture of the understanding of church membership and involvement in the life of the church.

The third goal was to implement the membership training program through a Sunday morning preaching series. This goal was measured by the number of those who listened to the sermons, either live or via recording. This goal was considered

¹All 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 use in the ministry project.

²See appendix 1.

³See appendix 2. Our current attendance is thirty-five families.

successfully met when seventy percent of the adults who completed the CMIS listened to the sermons.

The fourth goal was to increase knowledge of church membership among those at RVBC. This goal was measured by administering the CMIS survey a second time, which was used to measure the change in knowledge about church membership.⁴ This goal was considered successfully met when the *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant improvement in the pre-survey and post-survey scores.⁵

The fifth goal was to persuade those in the church to embrace the changes that a formal church membership brings. This goal was measured by the number of those who commit themselves to being a member. This goal was considered successfully met when three-fourths of the adults who completed the CMIS sign up to become a formal member of the church.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms were used in the ministry project:

Church. The church is a local assembly of believers in Jesus Christ. Gregg Allison provides a more detailed definition of the church, “The church is the people of God who have been saved through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and have been incorporated into his body through baptism with the Holy Spirit.”⁶

Church Membership. Church membership is the identification of believers in Jesus Christ who have united themselves to a local church. Jonathan Leeman expands this

⁴See appendix 2.

⁵Neil J. Salkind, *Statistics for People Who (Think They) Hate Statistics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 189-191.

⁶Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 29.

definition by defining church membership as “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.”⁷

One limitation applied to this project. The effectiveness of the training was limited by the willingness of those at RVBC to embrace the changes that an official church membership brought. To mitigate this limitation, I met personally with each family in the church who objected to the changes to clarify any misunderstandings and to understand their reasons for objecting.

One delimitation was placed on the project. The project was confined to a twenty-week timeframe. This gave adequate time to implement the membership training program and elicit a response from those at RVBC to embrace the program.

Conclusion

God has greatly blessed the congregation of RVBC with a body of believers who love and serve one another. However, we lacked an official church membership process to help assimilate people into the life of the church. Providing such a process was a pressing need of the church. The following chapters will provide a biblical and theological foundation of church membership.

⁷Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 64.

CHAPTER 2
THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS
FOR CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

“I will build my church,” Jesus said to his disciples (Matt 16:18).¹ It was impossible for these disciples to know precisely what Jesus envisioned. They were Jews, who were born into the nation of Israel, knowing nothing other than life under the Old Covenant, with priests and sacrifices and religious festivals. They had read the Scriptures, which told of the story Israel, an ethnic people from the line of Abraham, who were blessed by God. But the nature of this “church” of which Jesus spoke was unknown to them. Indeed, it was a “mystery” that was “hidden for ages in God who created all things” (Eph 3:9).

The disciples displayed their ignorance in their final question to Jesus before his ascension. They asked, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Their question exposed some remnants of their Old Covenant mindset still lingering in their understanding. First, they were looking for the old kingdom to be “restored.” That is, they were looking for the kingdom to be returned back to the way that the kingdom once was, a theocracy under the rule of God with prophets and kings. They didn’t realize that Jesus was bringing a new kingdom, the church, under the headship of Jesus, governed by local pastors, not national kings. Second, they were looking for an ethnic, political kingdom, “the kingdom of Israel.” They did not realize that the kingdom Jesus was bringing was a spiritual kingdom, the church, comprised of believers from

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the English Standard Version.

“every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9). Finally, they were looking for the kingdom “at this time.” That is, they wanted it immediately; they wanted the victory before the battle. They didn’t realize that the final, eschatological kingdom Jesus was bringing would come later, only after a long battle of suffering and tears, endured by the church (Acts 14:22).

Over time, the disciples’ understanding of the church would become clearer as Jesus built his church through the leading of the Holy Spirit. Ten days after the disciples questioned Jesus about the restoration of the kingdom (Acts 1:6), they witnessed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church during the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). They saw the effects of the Spirit firsthand in the transformed lives and hearts of many thousands of people (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37). This was just what Ezekiel had promised would come in the New Covenant (Ezek 36:22-38; also Jer 31:31-34). Later, the Holy Spirit told Peter to go to Caesarea and preach to Gentiles in Joppa (Acts 11:12). As Peter was preaching, the Spirit fell on the Gentiles, demonstrating that “to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18). Later still, the Holy Spirit directed Barnabas and Saul to head out on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3), where many Gentiles came to faith and many churches were established (Acts 14:23).

Through these events, the Holy Spirit guided these disciples to understand the universality of the church that Jesus was building. Its membership went far beyond ethnic Israel. Under the Old Covenant, people entered the community through birth, the boys were circumcised on the eighth day, and all lived under the law of Moses. But in the New Testament church, people entered through repentance and faith, symbolized in baptism, regardless of their background. Community life was covered in grace.

As the revelation of the New Testament completed, it became clear that the call of all believers in Jesus Christ is to identify themselves with a local church. In a congregation, they can be shepherded by God-given leaders, join in gospel-advancing work, assemble with other believers for mutual encouragement, to which the leaders of

the church will give account to God. An exegesis of Matthew 18:15-17 supports this thesis by showing how Jesus differentiates those who are identified with the church and those who are not. An exegesis of Acts 20:28 supports this thesis by showing that the Holy Spirit appoints overseers to shepherd those in the church. An exegesis of Philippians 1:5 supports this thesis by showing how those in the church partner together for gospel-advancing work. An exegesis of Hebrews 10:24-25 supports this thesis by showing how believers in Jesus Christ should assemble together regularly for mutual encouragement. An exegesis of Hebrews 13:17 supports this thesis by showing how leaders in the church will give account for those who have joined them in the work.

Matthew 18:15-17

Jesus mentioned the church (*ἐκκλησία*) on two separate occasions. The first is recorded in Matthew 16:18, where Jesus promises to build his church. This is a global promise that has endured for two millennia as the church has spread throughout the world. The second mention of the church is recorded in Matthew 18:17, where Jesus gives instructions regarding the purity of the local church. This instruction is as applicable today as it was in the days of Jesus. Jesus calls those in the church to be his representatives, following in his ways. For those who fail and refuse to repent, Jesus calls those in the church to treat them as outsiders. In doing so, the church makes clear who are identified with the church and those who are not.

In the life of any church, it is inevitable that some of its members will stray away from God. In some cases, members stray because another comes along and causes them to stumble (Matt 18:6-7). In other cases, it is their own lusts that have led them astray (Matt 18:8-9). Jesus tells us what to do when people go astray:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Matt 18:15-17).

Jesus begins with the situation of another believer sinning. Initially, the sinning brother is confronted individually and called to repentance. If the brother repents, then forgiveness is freely extended. However, if the brother fails to repent, then others are brought into the process. This time, a group of people come to confront this individual. If the brother repents, then forgiveness is freely extended. However, if the brother fails to repent, then it should be told to the church. Those in the church should call the brother to repentance. If the brother repents, then forgiveness is freely extended, and fellowship within the body is enjoyed once again. However, if the brother fails to repent, then he should be treated as an unbeliever, outside of the fold of the church.

How easy this sounds, and yet, how difficult it is to practice. Many individuals find confronting the sin of another person to be difficult. Furthermore, many leaders of churches would never dare to bring such an open accusation of sin to the entire church body. Yet, Jesus calls the church to this practice regardless of the difficulties to demonstrate who are the members of the church and who are outside the church. Jesus outlines four steps to this process.

Step One: Go by yourself (verse 15)

In verse 15, we read, “If your brother sins against you.” Seemingly, Jesus is talking about a personal offense. However, some ancient Greek manuscripts do not include the words, εἰς σέ (against you).² This exclusion extends the application to any sin. Whether or not the εἰς σέ is original to Matthew, Osborne is correct in noting that “the basic teaching covers any type of sin committed.”³ For instance, if one observes a brother

²The Sinaiticus (Ⲁ) and Vaticanus (B) are the two most prominent manuscripts that drop this phrase. The lack of this phrase in these two prominent manuscripts casts a strong doubt on the authenticity of these words.

³Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 685.

staggering down the street in a drunken state, these words should be followed, even if the sin is not technically “against you.” This might also apply to a sin against a child who lacks the maturity to engage in confrontation.

So, if one sees or experience such a sin, Jesus instructs an individual to “go [to the sinning party] and tell him his fault [ἐλεγξον], between you and him alone.” The NASB translates ἐλεγξον as “rebuke.” Hagner rightly points out the spirit of this confrontation: “the meaning here is not to scold someone or to abuse them verbally for their conduct but rather to bring the offensive matter to their attention in the hope that they will repent of their actions and be restored to the community.”⁴ Paul gives a similar spirit in Galatians 6:1, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”

Jesus continues, “If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” “Listening” implies that your brother understands the confrontation, embraces the truth, admits the sin, and repents. Hendriksen points out the kingdom significance of these events with these words, “you will have been an instrument in God’s hand in saving your brother for the kingdom.”⁵ That is, the brother will be restored as a visible member of the church. If there is no repentance, Jesus instructs his disciples to continue with the second step.

⁴Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 531.

⁵William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 699.

Step two: Go with one or two more (verse 16)

The reason for bringing one or two along with you has several purposes. First of all, it “is calculated to underline the gravity of the problem.”⁶ The presence of more people causes the situation to grow more serious. A second purpose is provide outside wisdom to the situation.⁷ There are times when a mediator is helpful to resolve conflicts. A third purpose is for confirming the sin. Jesus says that others join in the confrontation “that every charge may be established.”⁸ Sin has a way of distorting our perspective. Sin will attempt to confront the speck in a brother’s eye, when he has a log in his own (Matt 7:3-4). It makes mountains out of molehills. It makes molehills out of mountains. The role of the one or two who join the meeting “is to back up the concern of the initiator and to endorse their assessment that the matter raised is really ‘sin.’”⁹

Again, like step #1, the purpose is to see repentance and reconciliation and restoration back into the church community. If the wayward brother hears the rebuke and turns from his sin, “you have gained your brother” (Matt 18:15) and the matter should go no further. But if the hardness of heart continues, “containment is no longer possible; now the whole church must be involved.”¹⁰

⁶David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 445.

⁷Turner, *Matthew*, 445.

⁸This idea of bringing others is not original to Jesus. He pulls the idea from Deuteronomy 19:15, in which Moses demands two or three witnesses to establish any charge. The subtle difference in context is that Moses required the witnesses to be actual eye-witnesses of the crime, whereas this condition isn’t necessary in the situation described by Jesus.

⁹R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 693.

¹⁰John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005),

Step Three: Tell it to the church (verse 17a)

In this step we see intensification of the pressure upon the wayward brother by widening the social circle of concern. That which began in step #1 with a confrontation between two individuals, continued on to include a small group of people in step #2. Now, the matter comes before the entire congregation of the church.¹¹ This process is “not to punish the offender, but to add further weight to the effort of reconciliation.”¹²

Certainly, this process must be handled very carefully and prayerfully.¹³ Wisdom would involve the leaders of the church in this process, rather than some member standing up and the end of some meeting to make an announcement about this situation. France points out that this is “a public statement when the community is gathered (rather than a whispering campaign).”¹⁴

The communication is not made for the purpose of public knowledge. Rather, those in the church are called upon to speak to this individual and urge him to return. This is what Jesus assumes in verse 17, “and if he refuses to listen even to the church.”¹⁵ The only way that the sinning party can listen to the church is if those in the church are going

747.

¹¹There is also a subtle intensification in the reaction of the sinning member. In verse 16, the brother “does not listen” (μὴ ἀκούη), but in verse 17, the brother “refuses to listen” (παρακούση).

¹²Larry Chouinard, *The College Press NIV Commentary* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1997), 328.

¹³It is certainly no accident that Jesus follows up this teaching with an emphasis upon prayer (verses 18-20).

¹⁴France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 693.

¹⁵We see yet another indication of the increasing pressure with Jesus’ usage of καί (“even”). Even the testimony of all the entire church isn’t enough to turn this one from the error of his ways.

to this brother and pleading with him to repent and come back into the fold.

Unfortunately, in the deceitfulness of sin, some will continue to justify themselves and continue in their sin.

Step Four: Cast him out (verse 17b)

At the end of verse 17, we read, “let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” In Matthew 5:46-47, Jesus used these two terms were used together as illustrations of those who are “at the bottom of the moral scale.”¹⁶ Hagner points out that he should be “categorized as among the worst sort of persons.”¹⁷ Some may object to such to such a harsh verdict by appealing to passages in Matthew where Jesus identified “Gentiles and tax collectors” as those who are to be treated compassionately.¹⁸ Yet, this is a case of “poor exegesis.”¹⁹

Thus, the one who has refused all calls to repent “has no place among the holy people of God, and ... is to be shunned.”²⁰ In other words, he should be kept out of the covenant community and “excluded from the fellowship”²¹ of the church. Furthermore, on an individual level, “each member of the church is to abide by the corporate judgment.”²²

¹⁶France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 694.

¹⁷Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 532.

¹⁸See Matt 8:1-11; 9:9-13; 15:21-28.

¹⁹D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 403.

²⁰France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 694.

²¹Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), 204.

²²Carson, *Matthew*, 403.

Ultimately, this process works to differentiate those who are in the church and those who are outside of the church. Those who are inside the church are the ones who trust in Christ and are seeking to follow in his ways. Those who rebel against the rule of the Lord should be expelled from his church, as they neither represent Christ or the church that he is building. Church membership is the method for identifying those in the church. In the next section we see the how God gives leaders to shepherd the church.

Acts 20:28

One of the most tender scenes in all of the Scriptures is recorded in Acts 20, where the apostle Paul bids farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus.²³ Paul dearly loved these men, having spent three years with them in ministry (Acts 20:31). He believed that he would never see them again (Acts 20:25, 38),²⁴ which is why they departed with prayers and tears (Acts 20:36-37). Paul gave these Spirit-appointed leaders the advice they needed to shepherd the church in Ephesus without him. His counsel is applicable to all of those who shepherd local churches.

Paul's counsel to these elders begins with a review of his ministry (Acts 20:18-21). He tells the elders how he served them and taught them during his days in Ephesus. Paul, then, looks forward to his own destiny (Acts 20:22-24), saying that "imprisonment and afflictions await me" (Acts 20:23). Next, Paul turns to his expectations for what the elders will face (Acts 20:25-31). They will face danger in the church and defection from

²³The meeting took place in Miletus, some 30 miles south of Ephesus (Acts 20:17). Paul dared not to travel to Ephesus, because of his temptation to stay too long with the people that he loved. If so, his travel to Jerusalem for Pentecost would have been placed in jeopardy (Acts 20:16).

²⁴F. F. Bruce rightly points out that "whether or not the Ephesians ever did see him again is not of primary relevance to the exegesis of these words, but Luke would not have reported and repeated them so emphatically if he had known that, in the event, they were falsified." See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 392.

among the elders. Finally, Paul points the elders to their only source of security, God himself (Acts 20:32-35).

The heart of Paul's words is his fundamental exhortation²⁵ to the elders: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). These words describe the work of shepherds. They must watch themselves and the specific flock under their care.²⁶

Pay Attention to Yourselves

Paul's first exhortation to the Ephesian elders is to "pay careful attention to yourselves." That is, they are to keep watch over their conduct "to maintain the quality and integrity of their own Christian life."²⁷ The reason is simple: "they cannot care adequately for others if they neglect the care and culture of their own souls."²⁸

²⁵C. K. Barrett identifies this verse as "both the practical and the theological centre of the speech: the practical centre, because Paul's primary intention is to urge the Ephesian elders to do their duty effectively, ... and the theological centre, because here only in Acts is there an attempt to state the significance of the death of Christ at the same time to bring out the ground of the church's ministry in the work of the Holy Spirit." C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 974. Bock calls this verse, "the key exhortation to the elders." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 629. John Polhill claims that this verse is "the most discussed part of the entire speech." John Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 426.

²⁶The similarity of these words to 1 Tim 4:16 is striking, "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching."

²⁷Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 974.

²⁸John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 326.

Furthermore, “it is only as the leaders themselves remain faithful to God that they can expect the church to do so likewise.”²⁹

Paul was fully aware of the dangers these elders would face in their lives. They would face “persecution from outside and apostasy within.”³⁰ Paul predicted that some of these very same elders would turn away and “draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:30).³¹ Spurgeon commented that “no place is so assailed with temptation as the ministry.”³² It is with no exaggeration, then, that Ajith Fernando points out that “the biggest battle the Christian leader has is to ensure that his or her life is in order.”³³

In exhorting them to self-watchfulness, Paul repeatedly refers to his own life as an example. Prior to giving this counsel, Paul gives his own testimony of integrity and commitment to the Lord. He said, “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:24). Furthermore, after this exhortation, Paul again puts forth himself an example of how to serve as a gospel minister. “For three years I did not cease night and day to admonish every one with tears” (Acts 20:31). He added, “I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel” (Acts 20:33), but was ready to give to those in need (Acts 20:35).

²⁹I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 333.

³⁰Richard N. Longenecker, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 513.

³¹Barrett admits that ἐξ ὑμῶν αὐτῶν “strictly ... should refer to the Ephesian elders.” However, inexplicably, he conjectures that “Luke is probably ... thinking of the church at large.” Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 979.

³²Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 15.

³³Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 540.

Indeed, Paul was a model of integrity for these elders to follow in ministry (1 Cor 11:1).

Richard Baxter exhorts his fellow ministers with the following words:

Content not yourselves with being in a state of grace, but be also careful that your graces are kept in vigorous and lively exercise, and that you preach to yourselves the sermons which you study, before you preach them to others. If you did this for your own sakes, it would not be lost labour; but I am speaking to you upon the public account, that you would do it for the sake of the Church, When your minds are in a holy, heavenly frame, your people are like to partake of the fruits of it. Your prayers, and praises, and doctrine will be sweet and heavenly to them.³⁴

Pay Attention to the Flock

The next task given to the elders of the church is to “pay careful attention ... to all the flock” (Acts 20:28). The verb, *προσέχετε*, carries over from the previous exhortation to “pay careful attention to yourselves.” It brings the idea of focusing one’s mind upon a message (Luke 12:1; Acts 8:6) or a task to be done (Acts 5:35). In this case, it carries the “sense of caring or providing for.”³⁵ Just as the elders of the church were called to care for their own spiritual condition, so also were they instructed to care for the spiritual needs of their local flock in Ephesus.³⁶

We see several nuances of this spiritual oversight in the titles of these men and the tasks given to them. First of all, they are identified as “elders” (Acts 20:17). Paul’s custom was to appoint elders in the churches he established (Acts 14:23). Where there were no elders in place, he exhorted Titus to “appoint elders in every town” in the island of Crete (Titus 1:5). Bock rightly assumes that “the presence of elders in Ephesus shows

³⁴Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 61.

³⁵Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburg: T. & T Clark, 1986), 385.

³⁶Note the interchangeability of the words, “flock” and “church” in verse 28, “Pay careful attention ... to all the flock, ... care for the church of God.”

that Paul structured the church and its leadership before departing [Ephesus].³⁷ The structure of this church consisted of the identifiable congregation, with elders who were “the official leaders of the congregation.”³⁸

The second nuance of spiritual leadership is seen in Paul’s reference to these elders as “overseers” (Acts 20:28). Schnabel notes that “the two designations of ‘elder’ and ‘overseer’ refer to the same office.”³⁹ He further adds, “While ‘elder’ connotes the age, experience, and wisdom of the leaders of the Christian communities, ‘overseer’ underlies ‘the more active side of their work in managing affairs, guarding the group, and directing activities.’”⁴⁰ This managing activity is not merely programmatic and pragmatic. It is deeply spiritual. Jesus is identified as “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Pet 2:25). Jesus cares for the souls of his people by guarding them and guiding them. Likewise, overseers guard and guide the souls within the congregation.

A third nuance of the spiritual oversight of these elders is seen in the shepherding metaphor that Paul uses. Paul exhorts them “to care for the church of God.” The verb in this exhortation, ποιμαίνειν (“to care for”), is often translated “to shepherd.”⁴¹

³⁷Bock, *Acts*, 626.

³⁸Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 838.

³⁹Schnabel, *Acts*, 845. One can see the two titles used interchangeably in 1 Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. In both contexts, Paul’s focus is upon the qualifications necessary to be a spiritual leader of a church. He gives practically identical lists. In one passage, he identifies the men as “overseers” (1 Tim 3:1-7) and in the other as “elders” (Titus 1:5-9). Further confirmation of their equivalence is seen in 1 Pet 5:1-4, where Peter addresses the “elders” and charges them to the work of “exercising oversight.”

⁴⁰Schnabel, *Acts*, 845. Schnabel’s quotation comes from Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 323.

⁴¹Common English Bible (CEB), Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB), New American Standard Bible (NASB), New English Translation (NET), New

Such a translation is helpful as it is etymologically connected to the noun, ποιμνίω (“flock”), which occurs earlier in the verse. Indeed, the primary activity of these elders/overseers is shepherding the flock. Just as a literal shepherd is responsible to care for the flock of sheep under his care, so also are these spiritual shepherds responsible to care for the flock of people under their care.

Derek Thomas gives an excellent summary of these three terms:

These terms [elders, shepherds, and overseers] are used interchangeably in the New Testament and do not suggest a hierarchy of offices. Paul had ensured that a plurality of elders were appointed in the churches he planted (Acts 14:23), men who would look after the people as shepherds look after sheep. They were to be led by example (1 Peter 5:3). As presbyters or elders, they were to function as “shepherds” or “pastors” as well as “overseers” or “bishops.” Uppermost in this collection of terms, all describing different aspects of the same office, was the care and concern to be shown to the congregations over which they had been set as examples of servant leadership. Their task was not primarily administrative and bureaucratic, nor was it one of stifling authoritarianism. They were to be gentle shepherds like the Great Shepherd of the sheep himself, the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 13:20). They were to feed and nourish, love and protect their flock.⁴²

Appointed by the Holy Spirit

Furthermore, Paul mentions how the elders/overseers/shepherds were appointed by the Holy Spirit. From an earthly perspective, Paul appointed elders (Acts 14:23). Yet, he clearly told the elders in Ephesus that it was “the Holy Spirit [who] has made you overseers.”⁴³ Luke, the author, is silent on how exactly this took place. It is possible that the Holy Spirit spoke directly to those in Ephesus as he did in Antioch, identifying each of the elders in Ephesus by name.⁴⁴ More likely, however, is that Paul

International Version (NIV), and New King James Version (NKJV).

⁴²Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing Company, 2011), 576.

⁴³Barrett points out that although ἔθετο (from τίθημι, “to appoint”) is in the middle voice, it doesn’t differ in meaning from the active voice. Barrett, *Acts*, 974.

⁴⁴Acts 13:2, “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit

appointed “only those whom the Holy Spirit has already singled out and has thus himself appointed.”⁴⁵ Either way, it means that “ultimately the decisions for leaders are based on the prior appointment by the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁶

The active involvement of the Holy Spirit in appointing leaders is evidence of the Lord’s active role in the building of his church. The church is not an institution created, designed or sustained by human effort. Jesus promised to build his church (Matt 16:18). He “obtained [the church] with his blood” (Acts 20:28).⁴⁷ The Holy Spirit is supernaturally involved in designing the needed structure for the church: Spirit-appointed shepherds who care for those in the congregation. These shepherds are sustained by “God and ... the word of his grace” (Acts 20:32). It is no wonder, then, that Paul calls it, “the church of God” (Acts 20:28).

God’s design for local churches is straightforward. Each church should have a structure, with Spirit-appointed shepherds and an identifiable congregation. The shepherds are responsible to care for the spiritual needs of those in the congregation. The congregation needs the oversight and protection of the leaders. Church membership provides the structure needed for elders and congregation to interact. In the next section we see how local congregations can work together by partnering with others in gospel-advancing work.

said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’”

⁴⁵Barrett, *Acts*, 974.

⁴⁶Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 425.

⁴⁷The NASB translates περιποιέω as “purchased,” reflecting upon the redemptive work of Jesus in obtaining the church.

Philippians 1:5

Paul's time in Philippi was short, yet the Philippian church never forgot him. When Paul left Philippi, he first traveled to Thessalonica, where he remained for three Sabbaths before moving on to Berea (Acts 17:2, 10). During Paul's few weeks in Thessalonica, the church in Philippi partnered financially with him, sending him a gift on more than one occasion (Phil 4:15-16). For the next few years, the church continued to have a concern for Paul, though they lacked opportunity to help him (Phil 4:10). However, the church was able to send another gift to Paul. In response to this gift, Paul penned the letter to the Philippians (Phil 4:10, 18). The church's relationship with Paul shows how believers in a local church can partner together with others for gospel-advancing work in obedience to the great commission (Matt 28:18-20).

Thankful for the Gift

Paul begins his letter to those in Philippi as he begins many of his epistles, with a salutation and an expression of thanks (Phil 1:1-11). Of all of his epistles "this is the most lengthy of Paul's εὐχαριστέω-periods."⁴⁸ In verse 5 Paul shares "a foundational reason for his thankful, joyful prayer to God on their behalf—the assembly's protracted partnership in the gospel."⁴⁹ Paul writes, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil 1:3-5). A portion of their partnership with Paul, though not all of it, is the financial support that this church sent to Paul.

⁴⁸G. W. Peterman, *Paul's Gift from Philippi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 93.

⁴⁹Todd D. Still, *Philippians & Philemon*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2011), 30.

Indeed, Paul closes his epistle with a lengthy treatment of the gift they sent (Phil 4:10-20). Several modern translations title this section with a focus upon thankfulness and appreciation.⁵⁰ Furthermore, many commentators agree.⁵¹ Remarkably, however, Paul does not use εὐχαριστέω (or any equivalent words) in this entire section. Peterman points out that this has led some to believe that “Paul’s thanks are thankless.”⁵²

While Paul may not explicitly express his thanks in this section, he has a greater purpose: “Paul took the opportunity, not only to respond personally to the gift, but to teach the Philippians the spiritual significance of their financial sharing.”⁵³ This is why Paul rejoices in the gift they sent (Phil 4:10), calling their giving a good thing (Phil 4:14). Paul likens their gift to a sacrifice that is pleasing to God (Phil 4:18), which will increase their account (Phil 4:17). Indeed, just as the Philippians provided for Paul, so also will God supply their every need (Phil 4:19). Such commendation is why many would identify this section as Paul’s expression of thanks. However, “with regard to Paul’s commendation, the chief issue is partnership.”⁵⁴ The gift was a tangible expression of the church’s partnership with the apostle Paul for the spread of the gospel.

⁵⁰The New International Version (NIV) labels Phil 4:10-20, “Thanks for Their Gifts.” The New American Standard Bible (NASB) labels it, “Philippian Generosity.” The Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) and the Christians Standard Bible (CSB) label it, “Appreciation of Support.”

⁵¹For instance, Homer Kent notes that Philippians 4:10ff is a “note of thanks” (Kent, *Philippians*, 154). William Hendriksen labels this section as a “Thank-you Note” in *Exposition of Philippians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1962), 203. Richard R. Melick, Jr. titles this section as an “expression of thanks for the Philippians’ support” in *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, The New American Commentary, vol. 32 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 152.

⁵²Peterman, *Paul’s Gift from Philippi*, 122.

⁵³Peterman, *Paul’s Gift from Philippi*, 122.

⁵⁴Peterman, *Paul’s Gift from Philippi*, 158.

The commendations given to the church in Philippi are available to every church today. It is a good thing to sacrifice by supporting those spreading the gospel. The Lord is pleased with such sacrifices and will supply every need of the church. Notice here that no mention is given of any particular individuals who gave to Paul's work. The Philippian church supported Paul together as a whole. The entire church received the blessings that Paul laid out. So also should churches today partner together with those engaged in gospel-advancing work.⁵⁵

Thankful for the Partnership

Fundamentally, Paul saw the financial gifts the Philippians sent as an expression of their “partnership in the gospel” (Phil 1:5). Indeed, these gifts were a means to help Paul spread the gospel. When Paul was facing financial hardship, the gifts helped to relieve the pressure he experienced. The Philippians were thereby “sharing” in his trouble and helping him so that he could spread the gospel further (Phil 4:14). This is why Paul considered their giving and receiving as “entering into partnership” (Phil 4:15).

In the above three instances from Philippians (1:5; 4:14, 15), a similar cognate of *κοινωνία* is used.⁵⁶ This word is often translated, “fellowship,” which often carries the idea of sharing life together (Acts 2:42) or having possessions in common (Acts 2:44). However, Vincent points out that Paul says, “your fellowship,” not “fellowship with you.”⁵⁷ That is, Paul's emphasis here is not upon sharing one's life or possessions, but

⁵⁵This is not to say that individual giving for gospel work is wrong. Jesus and his disciples were supported by individuals (Luke 8:1-3). Furthermore, all indications point to Paul being supported by individuals while in Corinth (Acts 18:1-5).

⁵⁶In Phil 1:5, the noun form is used, *Κοινωνία εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον*. In Phil 4:14, a compound verb form is used, *Συνκοινωνέω*. In Phil 4:15, the simple verb form is used, *Κοινωνέω*.

⁵⁷Marvin R. Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh:

upon sharing together in the mission of spreading the gospel.⁵⁸ This is made clear by Paul's use of the preposition εἰς in Philippians 1:5, which gives the sense of "unto." Fee explains that εἰς "is telic pure and simple; the advance of the gospel—not a gift to Paul—is the goal of their 'participation.'"⁵⁹ Stephen Fowl further clarifies by saying, "it is 'the gospel' rather than financial gifts which governs the understanding of the Philippians' participation with Paul."⁶⁰ In other words, Paul's joy is in their participation "unto the furtherance of the gospel."⁶¹

Paul and the church in Philippi shared the same heartbeat for the progress of the gospel at home and abroad. This is why Paul shared his story of the advance of the gospel in his imprisonment in Rome (Phil 1:12-17). This is why Paul rejoiced whenever anyone (despite their motives) preached the gospel (Phil 1:18). This is why Paul exhorted the Philippians in Philippi to be "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" (Phil 1:27). This is why Timothy was commended so highly, because he "served with me in the gospel" (Phil 2:22) during Paul's missionary

T. & T. Clark, 1979), 7.

⁵⁸Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 82.

⁵⁹Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 83.

⁶⁰Stephen F. Fowl, *Philippians*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 23.

⁶¹This comes out in the various translations of εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον in Philippians 1:5: "in furtherance of the gospel" (American Standard Version); "in the ministry of the gospel" (Common English Bible); "in the work of the gospel" (Good News Translation); "in spreading the Good News" (New Living Translation). Similar translations of εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον also occur in Philippians 2:22: "in the furtherance of the gospel" (American Standard Version; New American Standard Bible); "in advancing the gospel" (New English Translation); "in the work of the gospel" (New International Version); "in preaching the Good News" (New Living Translation).

journeys. Paul knew that the believers in Philippi had a “shared commitment to and a common concern for the expansion of the gospel.”⁶²

Thus, this partnership with Paul and the Philippians includes more than the mere financial support of a missionary. It “extends to various aspects of Christian service at different levels.”⁶³ It includes praying (Phil 1:19). It includes encouragement (Phil 2:1). It includes shining “as lights in the world” (Phil 1:15). It includes an entire manner of life that is “worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil 1:27). As Martin puts it, “In its fullest extent *κοινωνία* means whole-hearted, active participation in every imaginable way with Paul in the ‘labor and suffering’ that was necessary to spread the good news.”⁶⁴

Paul’s focus is not upon the effort of the individuals in the church. It is upon a collective body of believers who are “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil 1:27). Just as the church in Philippi was on mission together with Paul for the advance of the gospel, so also should the heartbeat of every local church be centered around the progress of the gospel. Everyone in the church should be united together as partners in gospel-advancing work. Church membership helps to organize churches together for these missions efforts. In the next section we see how believers in Jesus Christ should assemble together regularly for mutual encouragement.

⁶²Todd Still, *Philippians & Philemon*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 30.

⁶³Peterman, *Paul’s Gift from Philippi*, 99.

⁶⁴Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 43 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 22.

Hebrews 10:24-25

The New Testament contains a hundred occurrences of the word, ἀλλήλων (“one another”). Half of those occurrences appear in the context of commands.⁶⁵ These commands are always directed toward the mutual love and care that believers in Jesus Christ should have toward one another.⁶⁶ Appropriately, these are often called the “One Another” commands. One of these commands occurs in Hebrews 10:24-25, where believers in Jesus Christ are called to assemble together regularly for mutual encouragement:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb 10:24-25).

Jesus is Better, So Press On!

Hebrews 10:24-25 is best understood in light of its historical context. These words were written in the first century A. D. by an unknown author to an audience of Jews. These Jews had heard about Jesus and had come into the church, but were in danger of falling away. To persuade them back, the author shows how much better Jesus is than the Old Covenant.⁶⁷ Thus, he exhorts them to continue on in the ways of Jesus.

The writer calls his readers, “holy brothers” (Heb 3:1), “beloved” (Heb 6:9), and “brothers” (Heb 10:19; 13:22), all typical titles of church members. He told them that they “share in a heavenly calling” (Heb 3:1). They had heard much of the word of God

⁶⁵The other half of the occurrences of ἀλλήλων occur in descriptive contexts. For instance, “And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another” (Matt 24:10).

⁶⁶Jeffrey Kranz, “All the ‘One Another’ Commands in the NT [infographic],” accessed March 8, 2017, <http://overviewbible.com/one-another-infographic/>.

⁶⁷The author uses κρείσσων (“better”) in Hebrews 11 times (compared with 8 times in the rest of the New Testament). Thus explains the careful use of the word, “better,” in my section title, “Jesus is Better, So Press On!”

(Heb 5:12); they had been enlightened (Heb 6:4); they had tasted the heavenly gift (Heb 6:4); they had come to share in the Holy Spirit (Heb 6:4); they had tasted the good word of God (Heb 6:4); they had experienced the powers of the age to come (Heb 6:5); they had labored in the work of God (Heb 6:10); and they had ministered to the saints (Heb 6:10).

Yet, they were in danger. They were in danger of falling away from these things (Heb 6:6). They were in danger of drifting from the great salvation that had been extended to them (Heb 2:1). They were in danger of having an unbelieving heart (Heb 3:12). They were in danger of turning away from the truth that they had heard (Heb 10:26). They were in danger of coming short of the grace of God (Heb 12:15, 25).

So, the author exhorts his readers to “Press on to maturity!” (Heb 6:1, NASB). “Pay much closer attention to what [you] have heard” (Heb 2:1). “[Do not] be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb 3:13). “Strive to enter [God’s] rest” (Heb 4:11). “Draw near” to Jesus (Heb 4:16; 10:22). “Hold fast the confession” (Heb 10:23). “[Do not neglect] to meet together” (Heb 10:25). “Do not throw away your confidence” (Heb 10:35). “Run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb 12:1).

The basis for all of these commands is the superiority of Jesus and his promises compared to the ways of the Old Covenant. Jesus is better than the angels (Heb 1:4). He has more glory than Moses (Heb 3:3-6) and is better than any of the high priests (Heb 4:14-15; 5:9-10). Jesus is better than Abraham (Heb 7:4-10) and all of the priests of Aaron (Heb 7:18-25). Jesus has a better covenant (Heb 8:6-7) with a better tabernacle (Heb 9:8-12). Finally, Jesus offered up a better sacrifice (Heb 10:10, 14, 18). The conclusion is obvious: “Jesus is Better, So Press On!”

However, Christians are tempted to forget this reality. So, the author to the Hebrews calls those in the Christian community to encourage one another to press on. He writes, “Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb 3:13). A similar point is made in

Hebrews 10:24-25: Christians are called to meet together regularly to encourage each other to press on in their Christian life, especially “as you see the Day drawing near.”

Love and Good Deeds

The exhortation in Hebrews 10:24-25 is a call to love and good works.⁶⁸ More precisely, it is a call to encourage other believers in this pursuit. One can see this in the main thought of this exhortation: “consider how to stir up one another” (Heb 10:24). In other words, it is not enough for a follower of Christ to be engaged in love and good works on his own. God’s call upon all Christians is to stimulate other believers toward love and good deeds in the local church community. As Leon Morris put it, “one may practice faith or hope alone, but not love.”⁶⁹

In a context where some people are being drawn away from the faith, one can see the importance of the believing community engaging in this ministry of encouragement toward one another. F. F. Bruce points out the beneficial effect that this encouragement will have on others: “The readers will be the more apt to confess their hope courageously and unhesitatingly if they encourage one another. Christian faith and witness will flourish the more vigorously in an atmosphere of Christian fellowship.”⁷⁰ Cockerill puts forth a similar thought, “It is most appropriate for those who draw near through Christ in anticipation of receiving God’s promised reward to encourage one

⁶⁸This is the third exhortation in the near context. The first appears in verse 22, “Let us draw near.” The second appears in verse 23, “Let us hold fast the confession.” Both of these commands deal with one’s relationship with the Lord. The third exhortation (in verse 25) deals with one’s relationship with other believers.

⁶⁹Leon Morris, *Hebrews*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 105.

⁷⁰F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 256.

another in the life of love. ... Such mutual concern, in turn, creates and sustains a community conducive to perseverance in a hostile world.”⁷¹

Considering and Stirring Up

The word translated “consider,” is *κατανοέω*, which means “to take note of, perceive, consider carefully.”⁷² It “conveys the concept of careful consideration, thoughtful attention and deep concern.”⁷³ The object of one’s attention is upon others in the community, carefully observing how they are doing in their walk of faith. Guthrie points out how “believers are to rivet their attention on the need for conscious activities of encouragement among those in the Christian community.”⁷⁴ Ellingworth, considering the overall context of Hebrews, posits that “there may be a suggestion of watching out for possible failures or weaknesses in the community.”⁷⁵

The word translated “stir up,” is *παροξυσμός*.⁷⁶ Its verbal root appears in the New Testament only four times, twice in noun form and twice in verb form. Three of the four occurrences are in a negative sense of provoking to disagreement (Acts 15:39),

⁷¹Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 478.

⁷²G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual of the Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 236.

⁷³David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 517.

⁷⁴George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 345.

⁷⁵Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 526.

⁷⁶Although *παροξυσμός* is a noun, a literal translation will make clear how it is translated as a verb: “And let us consider one another toward the provoking of love and good words” (*καὶ κατανοῶμεν ἀλλήλους εἰς παροξυσμὸς ἀγάπης καὶ καλῶν ἔργων*).

provoking to anger (Acts 17:16), or irritating (1 Cor 13:5). In the Hebrews 10:24 context, however, the provoking is positive, provoking “to love and good works.” To emphasize the positive sense, the ESV translates this word “stir up.”

Both of these words together (consider and stir up) demonstrate the care that members of the church are to have for one another. They are to observe and study their fellow believers (i.e. consider). They are to understand their strengths and weaknesses and giftedness and temptations. They are to notice where they flourish and where they flounder. Where there is something commendable, they are to encourage one another in the activity (i.e. stir up). The encouragement may be the very truth they need to help them strive, press on, and hold fast (Heb 4:11; 6:1; 10:23). Where there is a struggle, they are to provoke a change. This may come through a simple rebuke or it may require some creativity, like bringing others along in a serving opportunity.⁷⁷

It is helpful to point out that these words are not issued to the leaders of the church. Rather, they are directed toward everyone in the believing community. The writer to the Hebrews calls all the people of the church to be involved in each others’ lives to such an extent that they know each other well enough to urge one another on to love and good works. This requires investing time and effort into building appropriate relationships within the Biblical community.

Not Neglecting to Meet Together

It follows logically, then, for the author to exhort his readers not to neglect meeting together (Heb 10:25), because such gatherings provide the needed environment to cultivate relationships which are deep enough to encourage one another to love and good works. Attridge rightly points out the likelihood that “the author has particularly in

⁷⁷For some practical suggestions on how to do this, check out my sermon on this passage, “Stimulate to Love and Good Deeds,” accessed March 22, 2017, <http://www.rvbc.cc/sermons/2010-033>.

mind the assembly of his addressees as a worshipping community.”⁷⁸ However, this is far more than an exhortation to attend a church service. It is an exhortation to gather with other believers in community with the aim to love one another, to serve one another, and to help one another continue on in the faith.

When Christians fail to assemble regularly for mutual encouragement, they place themselves in a place of danger, as isolation is likely to lead to being discouraged and drifting away. “Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment” (Prov 18:1). Sadly, some of the original readers were in the habit of not assembling together regularly.⁷⁹

The clear call for all Christians is to avoid the dangers of drifting (Heb 2:1) by being joined to a local covenant community where believers encourage each other to continue on in the faith. The command to “stir up one another to love and good deeds” (Heb 10:24) necessitates a community in which Christians regularly gather together. “Members of the community cannot hold on to their confession alone”⁸⁰ Church membership facilitates the mutual commitment of those in the church to encourage one another. In the next section we see the role of the leaders in the church to lead those in the church who have joined them in the work as members of the church.

Hebrews 13:17

After twelve chapters of carefully laid out theological argumentation with minimal admonitions, the writer to the Hebrews finishes his letter with more than twenty commands for his readers.⁸¹ Several of these commands address how church members

⁷⁸Harold W. Attridge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 290.

⁷⁹καθὼς ἔθος τισίν, “as is the habit of some” (Heb 10:25).

⁸⁰James W. Thompson, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 205.

⁸¹This difference of chapter 13 from the other chapters has led some to believe

are to interact with their leaders (verses 7, 17, 24). In each instance, the author uses ἡγουμένοι to identify these leaders. This term “is not technical but broadly descriptive of the role that certain men played in the life of the community from its formative period.”⁸² The term is broad enough to refer to any sort of leader, whether or not one is officially designated as a church officer (elder or deacon).⁸³ McKnight and Church point out that “no titles are used and no indication given as to how leaders assumed their roles of leadership.”⁸⁴ Yet, these leaders were “men with divinely given pastoral authority and responsibility ... [for the care of] the other members of the community.”⁸⁵

In verse 7, the author exhorts his readers to “remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith” (NASB). These were former leaders who had finished their course and were probably deceased.⁸⁶ In verse 17, the exhortation is to “obey” and “submit” to their

that chapter 13 was written by a different author. However, in examining the key themes of chapter 13, Filson concludes, that chapter 13 “is vitally linked with the preceding chapters 1-12.” Floyd V. Filson, *“Yesterday”: A Study of Hebrews in Light of Chapter 13*, Studies in Biblical Theology (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1967), 12.

⁸²William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47 (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 526.

⁸³In Acts 15:22, ἡγουμένους is used of Barsabbas and Silas, who were simply “leading men among the brothers.” In Luke 22:26, ὁ ἡγούμενος is parallel to ὁ διακονῶν, which is certainly applicable to church deacons. In Heb 13:7, it describes “those who spoke to you the word of God,” which Guthrie identifies as “a focal role of early Christian elders” (Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 442).

⁸⁴Edgar McKnight & Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2004), 312.

⁸⁵Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 555.

⁸⁶Describing the phrase, “the result of their conduct” (in verse 7), Attridge notes that “it frequently refers to the end of life and it probably has that connotation here” (Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 392).

current leaders, who “are very much alive.”⁸⁷ Finally, verse 24 is a call to greet “all your leaders and all the saints.”

These admonitions fit well into the overall context of Hebrews, which encourages perseverance. Cockerill notes that “perseverance in this life of faith is founded on emulation of the community’s past leaders (v. 7) and sustained by submission to its present leaders (v. 17).”⁸⁸ Members of the church are accountable to the leaders of the congregation. The leaders of the congregation are accountable to the Lord.

Obeying and Submitting

The author writes, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” (Heb 13:17). The commands are twofold: obey (πειθεσθε) and submit (υπεικτε). Neither of these two words is the usual verb calling Christians to obey authorities (υποτασσεσθαι).⁸⁹ Yet, as Cockerill notes, “the combination of these two terms stresses the need for faithful, thorough adherence of the oversight offered by their leaders.”⁹⁰

Both of these commands are in the present tense, which carries the iterative sense of “continue to obey/submit” or “obey/submit on a regular basis.”⁹¹ These words

⁸⁷Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 401.

⁸⁸Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 707.

⁸⁹Both Ellingworth and Lane cite multiple examples of υποτασσεσθαι: Rom 13:1-7; 1 Cor 14:33-36; 16:16; Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:22-69; Phil 2:12; 2 Thess 3:14; 1 Pet 2:13-3:7. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 723; Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 554.

⁹⁰Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 708.

⁹¹Allen, *Hebrews*, 624.

are practical synonyms and one must be careful not to press their differences too far.⁹² However, the subtle differences are helpful to understand the author's intent.

While *πείθεσθε* implies a submission to the established authorities, it also brings in the element of "persuasion."⁹³ Lane brings this out by saying that "the specific quality of the obedience for which *πείθεσθε* asks is not primarily derived from a respect for constituted structures of authority. It is rather the obedience that is won through persuasive conversation."⁹⁴ Leaders must work hard to persuade others to follow their leadership.

The second command given to the readers is an *ἄπαξ λεγόμενον*.⁹⁵ "It is used frequently in secular Greek in the sense of submission to a person of authority."⁹⁶ Allen calls it "a stronger and more specific word than the preceding 'obey' and carries with it the implication that one is to yield when the leader's rule is at variance with the reader's wishes."⁹⁷ The call to submission comes in response to "the writer's fear of false teaching (v. 9)."⁹⁸ It also is consistent with the emphasis of the entire epistle: "the peril of apostasy to which the members of the community were exposed."⁹⁹

⁹²Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 708.

⁹³Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 350-51.

⁹⁴Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 554.

⁹⁵That is, a word used only once in the Greek New Testament.

⁹⁶Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 554.

⁹⁷Allen, *Hebrews*, 624.

⁹⁸Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 722.

⁹⁹Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 555.

Keeping Watch

The reason why the readers are to obey and submit to their leaders is given at the end of verse 17, “for they (αὐτοί) are keeping watch (ἀγρυπνοῦσιν) over your souls (ψυχῶν), as those who will have to give an account.” The opening pronoun, αὐτοί, “is used in the initial position for emphasis.”¹⁰⁰ It holds the connotation of “they and no one else”¹⁰¹ and points to the responsibility of those who lead congregations. It also “serves to place emphasis on the authority of the leaders.”¹⁰²

The significance of the main verb, ἀγρυπνοῦσιν, gives an emphasis upon the vigilance with which the leaders are to exercise their oversight. This verb occurs three other times in the New Testament: Mark 13:33; Luke 21:36; and Ephesians 6:18. In each of these instances, it is used in the context of prayer, with an emphasis upon watchfulness. “The verb describes an absence of sleep due to an alert mind.”¹⁰³ In this context, it points to the tireless attentiveness that shepherds of the flock must give to their task of oversight.

The pastoral imagery of a shepherd “seems to be implied in this verb.”¹⁰⁴ Lane brings out the usage of the synonym, γρηγορεῖν, in Acts 20:28-31 as a parallel meaning.¹⁰⁵ The leaders of the congregation “are charged with ‘watching over ... souls,’

¹⁰⁰Allen, *Hebrews*, 624.

¹⁰¹Morris, *Hebrews*, 152.

¹⁰²Allen, *Hebrews*, 624. Note the NIV translation, “Submit to their authority.”

¹⁰³Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 427.

¹⁰⁴Allen, *Hebrews*, 624.

¹⁰⁵Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 555. (See above discussion of Acts 20:28).

and thus guarding them from danger.”¹⁰⁶ Allen notes the reference to Jesus as “the great shepherd of the sheep” (verse 20) as further proof of “the shepherding aspect of pastoral duty.”¹⁰⁷

By mentioning the souls (ψυχῶν) of the readers, the author to the Hebrews “clearly refers to the leader’s concern for the eternal welfare of those in their charge as immortal, spiritual beings.”¹⁰⁸ Yet, Ellingworth rightly points out that “no separation of soul and body is implied.”¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, it is the “spiritual well-being of those placed in their care,”¹¹⁰ which is to be the concern of spiritual leaders.

Giving Account

Keeping watch over the souls of others is a solemn, God-given task for those who lead God’s people. Those leaders will give account for their work. Although not explicitly mentioned in verse 17, this accountability is surely before the Lord, “to whom we must give an account” (Heb 4:13).¹¹¹ This phrase, λόγον ἀποδώσοντες, is used to describe “something required of anyone in the face of higher authorities, and of all on the day of final judgment.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁶Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 708.

¹⁰⁷Allen, *Hebrews*, 624-25.

¹⁰⁸Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 708.

¹⁰⁹Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 723.

¹¹⁰Bruce, *Hebrews*, 285.

¹¹¹Ellingworth says that the accountability is “absolutely, by implication to God.” (Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 723).

¹¹²Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 402. Attridge gives the following examples as reference for his claim: Dan 6:2; Luke 16:2; Acts 19:40 for earthly accountability, and Matt 12:36; 1 Pet 4:5 for divine accountability.

The particle, ὡς (“as”), is “not a comparison, but introducing something which is entailed by the very fact of leadership.”¹¹³ That is, leaders fully “intend to give an account of their service to God.”¹¹⁴ In other words, just as a manager expects to give account to his superiors for how he has done in managing assets entrusted to him (Luke 16:2), so also will shepherds of God’s people expect to give account to the Lord for how they have managed his flock.

The stakes are high. This is why James says, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (Jas 3:1). Not only will leaders be judged for their own walk with the Lord, but also with how they led God’s people (1 Tim 4:16; Acts 20:28).

The clear implication here is that the congregation is well-defined. Spiritual leaders will not be accountable for those outside their congregation. Instead, leaders will be held responsible for their oversight of those who have willingly submitted themselves to their care. This is a clear call for church membership, where those in the church are easily identified and under the care of the elders of the church.

All of the passages presented in this chapter combine together to show the need for church membership. In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus speaks of the church as an identifiable group of people who should work together to maintain the purity of its members. In Acts 20:28, Paul exhorts the elders of the church to oversee the well-being of the members. In Philippians 1:5, Paul shows how the members of the church are able to unite I supporting those engaged in gospel ministry. In Hebrews 10:24-25, the writer describes the importance of the members of the church regular gathering together.

¹¹³Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 723.

¹¹⁴Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 556.

Finally, Hebrews 13:17 addresses the divine accountability of the leaders of the church in shepherding its members.

CHAPTER 3
HISTORICAL/PRACTICAL/THEOLOGICAL ISSUES
RELATED TO CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Church membership has been practiced in many different ways throughout the history of the church. At times there were rigorous requirements to be a church member. At other times there was very little demanded of a church member. Today, sentiments about church membership vary. Some believe that church membership is necessary, while others think it is optional. The varying practices and beliefs, however, do not negate the need for church membership today.

At the most fundamental level, church membership is the local expression of the universal church. It is the means by which believers in Jesus are identified as genuine. Furthermore, today's litigious society supports the need for documented expectations of church members and church leaders. This comes through church membership.

**Throughout the History of the Church,
Membership Has Been Practiced
in Many Different Ways**

Shortly after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, the early church experienced explosive growth. On the day of Pentecost, three thousand people heard the message of salvation, repented of their sins, were baptized and added to the church (Acts 2:41). A short time later, the number of the believers in Jesus numbered more than five thousand (Acts 4:4). After the martyrdom of Stephen, "a great persecution" arose, which scattered believers "throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1).

Within a few decades, the gospel message spread quickly throughout all of Asia Minor and as far as Rome (more than 1,000 miles from Jerusalem). The church experienced rapid growth.

The Apostolic Church - Rapid Membership

As the gospel spread, these baptized believers began gathering together in local churches for worship and for edification (Heb 10:24-25). The New Testament identifies dozens of these churches.¹ Furthermore, Paul identifies those in these churches as “members.” He writes, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor 12:27). However, one will search the Bible in vain to find details concerning the *process* by which believers joined these churches. The New Testament contains no indication of “New Members” classes or church covenants or voting in church members. Believers simply united themselves with other believers. The reason for this rapid membership process was due, in part, to the newness of the church. Organizational structures of the church (i.e. membership and leadership) would develop over time.

For instance, more than a decade after the resurrection, Acts 15 records the conflict at the Jerusalem counsel between the Judiazers and the apostles concerning the

¹The Interactive Bible (<http://www.bible.ca>) finds thirty-three churches mentioned in the New Testament: Antioch, Pisidia (Acts 13:14; Gal 1:2); Antioch, Syria (Acts 11:26); Athens (Acts 17:34); Babylon (1 Peter 5:13; Acts 2:9); Berea (Acts 17:11); Caesarea (Acts 10:1,48); Cenchrea (Rom 16:1); Colossae (Col 1:2); Corinth (Acts 18:1); Crete (Titus 1:5); Cyrene (Acts 11:20); Damascus (Acts 9:19); Derbe (Acts 14:20; Gal 1:2); Ephesus (Acts 18:19); Hierapolis Col 4:13); Iconium (Acts 14:1; Gal 1:2); Jerusalem (Acts 2:5); Joppa (Acts 9:36, 38); Laodicea (Rev 1:11, Col 4:15); Lydda (Acts 9:32); Lystra (Acts 14:6; Gal 1:2); Pergamum (Rev 1:11); Philadelphia (Rev 1:11); Philippi (Acts 16:12); Puteoli, Italy (Acts 28:13-14); Rome (Rom 1:7); Sardis (Rev 1:11); Sharon (Acts 9:35); Smyrna (Rev 1:11); Tarsus (Acts 9:30); Thessalonica (Acts 17:1); Thyatira (Rev 1:11; Acts 16:14); Troas (Acts 20:6-7). Furthermore, the New Testament mentions regions where churches existed. Region of Phoenicia (Acts 11:19); Region of Samaria (Acts 8:14, 25); Churches of Judea (Gal 1:22); Churches of Galatia (Gal 1:2); Churches of Asia (1 Cor 16:19); Churches of Macedonia (2 Cor 8:1). See “Directory of Churches Mentioned in the Bible 33-100 AD,” accessed December 27, 2017, <http://www.bible.ca/ntx-directory-of-churches-in-bible.htm>.

requirements to be placed upon those who believe in Jesus. John Levack points out that “the first considerable dispute within the ranks of the Church was concerned with this very issue of Church membership—who is inside the Church and who is outside.”²

Furthermore, the New Testament records the budding of organizational structures in these churches. Paul “appointed elders ... in every church” (Acts 14:23), and he encouraged Titus to do the same (Titus 1:5). The clear implication of both of these passages is that churches initially formed without any formal leadership structure in place. Similarly, first century churches formed without formally organized church membership procedures in place.³

Without a clear process of church membership outlined in the New Testament, church membership has been practiced in many different ways throughout the history of the church. Nathan Finn has observed, “During the past 2,000 years, ... church membership has been abdicated, recovered, and/or adapted by various groups of churches. Factors influencing church membership practices include theological convictions, political and social context, and pragmatic considerations.”⁴

The Post-Apostolic Church - Rigorous Membership

After the death of the apostles, we begin to see catechumens, that is, Christian converts who were carefully instructed over a long period of time in the ways of the faith

²John G. Levack, *The Potential Church: Lectures on the Meaning of Church Membership under the Terms of the Chalmers Lectureship Trust* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrews Press, 1982), 23.

³Gerald Bray admits that “the evidence of the New Testament is not sufficiently detailed to allow us to re-create an authentically ‘biblical’ church. ... We should ... have the humility to admit that it is impossible on the basis of what we know, to build a complete church structure out of the evidence we have.” Gerald Bray, *The Church: A Theological and Historical Account* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

⁴Nathan A. Finn, “A Historical Analysis of Church Membership,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, ed. John S. Hammett & Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2012), 53.

before baptism and membership.⁵ Peter Toon writes, “In the early church there was a very thorough preparation before entrance into the privileges of church membership.”⁶ During this process of becoming members of the church, “the catechumens or hearers were regarded not as unbelievers, but as half-Christians, and were accordingly allowed to attend all the exercises of worship, except the celebration of the sacraments.”⁷ This lengthy process served as “a bulwark of the church against unworthy members.”⁸ It was not an easy process, but it enabled those interested in the church to weigh their decision to follow Christ. It also allowed the leaders of the church to discern the character and genuineness of those wishing to join the church.

The *Didache*⁹ is an example of an early church curriculum that was taught to prospective church members before their baptism and membership. It is a brief document,¹⁰ consisting mostly of instructions for holy living. It was only after learning the Christian morality presented in the *Didache* that one was considered ready for baptism.¹¹

Another example of curriculum used to teach catechumens is the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus.¹² It requires a three-year instruction period for the catechumens,

⁵We see no such delay in the New Testament (Acts 2:41; 8:35-39; 10:47-48).

⁶Peter Toon, “Catechumens” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 201.

⁷Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, Ante-Nicene Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 256.

⁸Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 256.

⁹Dating of the *Didache* is debated, but most scholars date it to the late first or early second century.

¹⁰It is approximately the same size as Paul’s epistle to the Galatians (~2300 words).

¹¹*Didache* 7:1, ταῦτα πάντα πρῆπιόντες, “having set forth all these things.”

¹²The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus is about twice as long as the *Didache*.

yet leaves room for exceptions. “Let catechumens spend three years as hearers of the word. But if a man is zealous and perseveres well in the work, it is not the time but his character that is decisive.”¹³ The *Apostolic Tradition* is aware of the reality of persecution and potential martyrdom. “If a catechumen should be arrested for the name of the Lord, let him not hesitate about bearing his testimony; for if it should happen that they treat him shamefully and kill him, he will be justified, for he has been baptized in his own blood.”¹⁴

This persecution brought another challenge to membership in the days following the apostles. Some members in the church denied their faith to beatings, imprisonment or death. During these days, “the great question before the church was what to do about the ‘lapsed’—those who, in one way or another, had weakened during the persecution.”¹⁵ Those who wanted to be received back into the fellowship of the church were identified as “penitents.” They went through a similar process as the catechumens, “only still more severe, ... to prove the sincerity of their penitence.”¹⁶ Like their initial membership into the church, this process would often take three to four years. This question of the “lapsed” served to make membership into the church more rigorous.

Most scholars date it to the early third century, about a hundred years after the *Didache*. It records further development in the tradition of church teaching.

¹³Burton Scott Easton, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* (Ann Arbor, MI: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 43. This quote is Easton’s translation of *Apostolic Tradition* 17:1-2.

¹⁴Easton, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, 44. This quote is Easton’s translation of *Apostolic Tradition* 19:1.

¹⁵Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2, *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 1:88.

¹⁶Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, 188.

Constantine and Beyond - Relaxed Membership

The best way to understand “Relaxed Church Membership” is to understand Constantine the Great (272-337). He did much during his reign to further the cause of Christianity. First of all, he played an active role in issuing the Edit of Milan (313 AD), which gave Christians legal status and helped to end the centuries of persecution. Second, he called for the counsel of Nicaea in 325 AD, where the Nicene Creed was developed, which helped to unite Christians world-wide. Finally, his death-bed conversion led to the wide-spread acceptance of Christianity. Philip Schaff notes that Constantine “was the chief instrument for raising the church from the low estate of oppression and persecution to well deserved honor and power.”¹⁷

Through the influence of Constantine, Christianity became the default religion of the Roman Empire. This had implications upon church membership, making it easier and easier for people to become church members. Jeremy Kimble well describes the slide from rigorous membership to relaxed membership:

As infant baptism became increasingly popular, less emphasis was placed on teaching adults prior to baptism. Instead, increasingly churches sought to baptize infants and prepare those children, through confirmation, for full membership. As the church spread into the west, it became a common pattern to baptize and allow someone into membership with no catechetical instruction. In many cases, the only requirements were renunciation of the pagan gods and a willingness to be baptized. As such, church membership, whether initiated through infant baptism or adult confession, had lost its meaning in terms of separating the regenerate from the rest of the world.¹⁸

This all had implications upon church membership. Membership requirements were relaxed. Gone was the fundamental distinction between those who were genuine in their faith and those who had none, as the culture made it easy for nominal believers to

¹⁷Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 12.

¹⁸Jeremy M. Kimble, *40 Questions About Church Membership and Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2017), 59.

join the church. In fact, “infant baptism was a sign tantamount to both church membership and citizenship. This made church membership not a free decision based on conversion, but rather part and parcel of merely living in a certain geographical locale.”¹⁹ The result of this was many regions where everyone in the community was baptized as infants because of cultural norms. This filled the churches with unbelievers.

The Reformation and Beyond - Regenerate Membership

With the Reformation’s rediscovery of the sole authority of the Scriptures and the grace of God in salvation, many in the heritage of the Reformation have rethought church membership. Their responses have been varied. Some sought to redeem existing structures; others sought a fresh start; others sought a middle ground. This variety is a demonstration of the thesis of this section of my paper: church membership practices have varied widely throughout church history.

Among those who sought to redeem the existing practices of church membership were the Lutherans, the Reformed churches, and the Church of England. They continued in the ways of the Roman Catholic Church by continuing the practice of infant baptism. However, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, they did not rely upon any saving power in baptism. So, they sought to elevate the importance of a confirmation process, whereby people can be taught the fundamentals of the faith (like the catechumens of the first centuries). Only upon a credible confession of faith after their training, were people “confirmed” as believers and brought into full membership of the church. This practice continues today among many evangelical Paedobaptists.

Among those who sought a fresh start in church membership practices were the Anabaptists. They rejected infant baptism and practiced believer’s baptism, which became the initiatory rite into full church membership. This brought about a voluntary

¹⁹Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 59.

membership of the committed. The fruit of this was a strong emphasis on community life as well as a practice of church discipline in order to protect the purity of the church. This is the policy of the majority of Baptist churches today.

Among those seeking middle ground were some Congregationalists (Paedobaptists) in America during the 1600's. With the opportunity to begin afresh in the New World, they sought, as much as possible, to include only those who had a credible profession of faith into church membership. However, this practice came into conflict with centrality of the church in the life of the early settlements. In 1646, Massachusetts law required all citizens, saints and sinners alike, to attend church, but only church members could baptize their infants.²⁰ This conflict was the origin of the "Half-Way Covenant,"²¹ which allowed unregenerate (but moral) people to be accepted into church membership with partial privileges. These "Half-Way" members could present their infants for baptism and were subject to church discipline. However, they were prohibited from taking part in the Lord's Supper and from voting on church matters. In this way, they were partial members of the church. Within a few generations, the practice ceased.²²

A further group seeking middle ground were those who practiced "Open Membership." They prioritized regenerate church membership over doctrinal positions. In particular, "They did not require credobaptism as a prerequisite to church membership

²⁰Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 4, 6.

²¹Pope points out that the "Half-Way Covenant" was the derisive label placed upon them by their critics (Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant*, 8).

²²Barry York writes, "Baptists and Presbyterians can agree regarding one application of child baptism in church history. What was known as the Half-way Covenant was a bad idea." See "The Half-Way Covenant & Whole-Hearted Youth Ministry," accessed February 17, 2019, <https://gentlereformation.com/2017/09/18/the-half-way-covenant-whole-hearted-youth-ministry/>.

or Communion.”²³ John Bunyan was one of their chief advocates. George Offor, editor of *The Works of John Bunyan*, offers a summary of Bunyan’s position:

[Bunyan] was satisfied that baptism is a personal duty, in respect of which every individual must be satisfied, in his own mind, and over which no church had any control; and that the only enquiry as to the fitness of a candidate for church fellowship should be, whether the regenerating powers of the Holy Ghost had baptized the spirit of the proposed member into newness of life.²⁴

This position continues to be advocated today. The Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) accepts both Paedobaptists and Credobaptists into membership. Greg Strand writes of the EFCA, “We are baptist with a small ‘b’ in that what is critical for membership in a local church is true salvation. The fact that both credo and paedo baptism are allowed is a ‘significance of silence’ issue, i.e. we will debate it but not divide over it.”²⁵ John Piper also has advocated for open membership.²⁶

The above examples of church membership practices are only a sample of how the church has operated throughout her history. No mention has been made of age-related questions of membership (or baptismal) candidates. No discussion has been offered of those who require membership classes or of the extent of catechetical instruction. Furthermore, nothing has been stated about “community membership” or “discipleship membership” or “covenant membership” or “renewable church membership.” Yet,

²³Nathan A Finn, “A Historical Analysis of Church Membership,” 67.

²⁴John Bunyan, *The Whole Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 2, ed. George Offor (London: Blackie and Son, 1854), 592.

²⁵Greg Strand, “Baptism: Infant and Believer,” Evangelical Free Church of America, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.efca.org/blog/understanding-scripture/baptism-infant-and-believer>. It is worthy to point out that Strand speaks with some authority regarding the Evangelical Free Church of America, having written *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Free Church of America*.

²⁶However, Bethlehem Baptist Church (where he was a pastor) never adopted his view. Resources are available at Desiring God, accessed April 28, 2018, <https://www.desiringgod.org/topics/baptism-membership>.

enough has been said to affirm Nathan Finn's statement: "In two millennia of Christian history, there has been considerable diversity in the prerequisites for and practice of church membership."²⁷ This diversity can be seen in the various modern sentiments toward church membership today.

Modern Sentiments about Church Membership Span the Spectrum from Optional to Necessary

Church membership is not a requirement for entrance into heaven. The Scripture is clear: we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (Eph 2:8-9), not by church membership. This has led many to regard church membership as optional. Wayne Mack shares the common reasoning of many:

In my over forty years of ministry, I've had many people say to me, "I'm not saved by church membership; I'm saved by the grace of God through faith. When I get to heaven, I'm not going to be there because I joined a church, but because I repented of my sins and believed on Jesus Christ. So what difference does it make whether I'm a member of a local church or not?"²⁸

Nevertheless, Mark Dever (who agrees that church membership is not a prerequisite for salvation) confesses that he often begins his talks with college students with the following jolting words, "If you call yourself a Christian but you are not a member of the church you regularly attend, I worry that you might be going to hell."²⁹ Obviously, Dever holds that church membership is not optional. It does matter. He claims that is necessary. His assessment of the problem is that Christians often tend to view their Christianity as "a personal relationship with God and not much else."³⁰ Dever is concerned "that many Christians don't realize how this most important relationship with

²⁷Nathan A Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership," 75.

²⁸Wayne Mack, *To Be or Not to Be a Church Member, That Is the Question!* (Greenville, SC: Calvary Press Publishing, 2004), 15.

²⁹Mark Dever, *What Is a Healthy Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 21.

³⁰Dever, *What Is a Healthy Church*, 21-22.

God necessitates a number of secondary personal relationships—the relationships that Christ establishes between us and his body, the Church.”³¹

The reasons for these two extremes (church membership as optional and church membership as necessary) are vast and broad. For those who consider church membership to be optional, some have never considered being a member at a church. Others have tried church membership, but were hurt and never returned to the church. Others place such a high priority on their own personal spirituality that church membership is simply a question of whether or not it will be usefulness to one’s spiritual growth. For those who consider church membership to be necessary, most have derived their convictions from the Scriptural teaching about the nature of the church.

Church Membership is Optional

For some who consider church membership to be optional, it may be due to ignorance. In 2012 Grey Matter Research Consulting conducted a study among American adults who attend a place of worship once a month or more. Their conclusion is that there is a “widespread confusion and ignorance on the subject of official membership in a place of worship.”³² The survey asked if their place of worship offers “any kind of official membership in the organization, or not.” The study found that “Among all worship-goers, 48% say such official membership is offered, 33% believe it is not, and 19% are not sure.” Statistics are a bit better among professing evangelicals, with 72% saying that such official membership is offered, 14% believing it is not, and 14% being unsure.

Others may view church membership as optional because of their own, personal experience. William Hendricks observed that “more and more Christians in

³¹Dever, *What Is a Healthy Church*, 21-22.

³²Grey Matter Research and Consulting, “Study Shows Widespread Confusion and Ignorance on the Subject of Official Membership in a Place of Worship,” accessed May 3, 2018, http://www.greymatterresearch.com/index_files/Membership.htm.

North America are feeling *disillusioned* with the church and other formal, institutional expressions of Christianity.”³³ So he interviewed in depth more than a dozen disillusioned Christians who have left the church for various reasons. By relating their stories of disappointment and hurt, he points out that many of these “have remarkably vibrant spiritual lives and touchingly close friendships with a kindred spirit or two. But in the main, they tend to nurture their relationship with God apart from the traditional means of church and parachurch.”³⁴ He concludes by saying, “In the end, ... what matters when it comes to the church is neither membership nor attendance but *spirituality*—one’s relationship with God and the implications of that relationship for day-to-day life.”³⁵ In other words, one’s personal relationship with God is often considered to be so important that it trumps membership in a local church.³⁶

For many, the optional nature of church membership often begins with the understanding that Christianity is simply a “personal relationship with Jesus.” Even though this phrase is never found in the Bible, Trevin Wax says that “No phrase is more characteristic of evangelical lingo than this one.”³⁷ While the emphasis upon

³³William D. Hendricks, *Exit Interviews* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 17, italics his.

³⁴Hendricks, *Exit Interviews*, 17.

³⁵Hendricks, *Exit Interviews*, 252, italics his.

³⁶It is helpful to point out here that Hendricks and Dever identify the same core issue: the all-important priority of one’s personal relationship with God. Hendricks would see this priority as a reason why church membership is optional for some. He would sympathize with those whose church experience has been harmful, believing that genuine spiritual growth can come apart from the church. Dever, on the other hand, sees this same priority as troublesome. He would argue that one’s personal experience (hurtful though it be) can never be an excuse to forsake the Biblical exhortations to life together in the community.

³⁷Trevin Wax, “‘Personal Relationship with Jesus’ – Helpful or Not?,” accessed May 4, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/personal->

“relationship” may be helpful to distance Christianity from the rituals and rules of “religion,” it has some consequences. It can create a self-centered Christianity. This is illustrated in the lyrics of “Personal Jesus,” by Depeche Mode (a secular band), “Your own personal Jesus. Someone to hear your prayers. Someone who cares.”³⁸ Nothing in the song speaks of the glory of Christ or of our duty to serve him. It is all about Jesus who is ready to hear us and help us.³⁹ With this perspective, it is no surprise, then, that some Christians are consumers, viewing church membership on their own terms through the lens of whether it will be a help or hindrance to their relationship with God. Joshua Harris relates a personal example of such an attitude:

Take my friend Nathan. He attended *two* churches on Sundays—one because he liked their music, the other because he liked the preaching. And his involvement in both went no deeper. At the first church he’d slip out just before the last song wound down and drive to the other church five minutes away. He even factored in time to stop by McDonald’s for an Egg McMuffin. He timed it so that he’d be walking into the second church just as the pastor started to preach.⁴⁰

Finally, there are those who would advocate against any sort of official church membership. This is especially the case when any sort of membership contract or church covenant is involved. Wade Burleson argues that who sign such a document are “handing over the authority of Jesus Christ ... to mere men.”⁴¹

relationship-with-jesus-helpful-or-not/.

³⁸Depeche Mode, “Personal Jesus” accessed April 17, 2019, <http://archives.depechemode.com/lyrics/personaljesus.html>.

³⁹It is worthy to note that this song is one of the most successful of all time. In 2011, Rolling Stone named it as one of the 500 greatest songs of all time. See “500 Greatest Songs of All Time,” accessed May 4, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/the-500-greatest-songs-of-all-time-20110407/depeche-mode-personal-jesus-20110526>. People love the idea of Jesus being our ever-ready servant.

⁴⁰Joshua Harris, *Stop Dating the Church* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), 17, italics his.

⁴¹Wade Burleson, *Fraudulent Authority* (Enid, OK: Istorina Ministries, 2017),

Church Membership is Necessary

On the other side of the spectrum are those who consider church membership to be necessary. Mark Dever lists church membership as one of his “Nine Marks of a Healthy Church.” He views membership as necessary because “membership in a local church is intended as a testimony to our membership in the universal church. Church membership does not save, but it is a reflection of salvation.”⁴² In this way, church membership can be seen as a fruit of salvation, where God gives a desire to a believer in Jesus to unite with a visible assembly of believers.

Jonathan Leeman brings in another dimension to argue why church membership is necessary. He contends that those who argue that “church membership” is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible are looking at it wrong. He points out that “*membership* is a club word.”⁴³ But the church is not a club. Rather, Leeman likens it to an embassy, a place where one nation has a presence inside of another nation. So, he argues, “When you open your Bible, stop looking for signs of a club with its voluntary members. Look instead for a Lord and his bound-together people.”⁴⁴ More Biblical arguments for the necessity of church membership can be seen in chapter 2 of this paper.

Modern Membership Practices are Varied

With the variety of beliefs on church membership, there also come a variety of ways that churches practice church membership. Some churches have no formal church membership process. They simply affirm that all regular attenders are members. One

53.

⁴²Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 152.

⁴³Leeman, *Church Membership*, 26, italics his.

⁴⁴Leeman, *Church Membership*, 26.

example of this is Valley Bible Church in Lancaster, California. The church explains their position with these words:

We do not have a two-tier group attending our church. We consider all who attend our church to be members. There are no tests to take or forms to sign. The reason for this is that our elders feel a responsibility for all who involve themselves with Valley Bible. Since our church is elder ruled, the congregation does not vote and therefore the stability of the church is not threatened by this approach.⁴⁵

Another example of a church with no formal church membership is Mountain View Community Church in Fort Collins, Colorado. They press the definition of members beyond simply attendance in a worship service to active involvement in the life of the church. The church explains it this way:

Mountain View Community Church does not have formalized membership. We do, however, believe the Bible speaks clearly and directly about what it means to be a member of the body of Christ. ...

For the purposes of defining those who are members of Mountain View, the commitment of membership is expressed through:

- Regular attendance and participation in the corporate worship gathering
- Involvement in an intimate shepherding community (LifeGroups)
- Actively serving in the church
- Having completed the Biblical Distinctives class and are in agreement with MVC's doctrinal statements.⁴⁶

Other churches formally embrace those who simply come forward near the end of a worship service, profess their faith, and express a desire to join their church. One instance of this is Hayes Barton Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. The following is their response to the question, "When should I join the church?":

1. Are you a Christian, or if not, are you ready to profess your faith in Christ?
2. Are you in need of a church home?
3. Do you believe that the Lord has led you to this church?

⁴⁵"Valley Bible Church Distinctives," Valley Bible Church, accessed August 27, 2020, <https://www.valleybible.net/distinctives>.

⁴⁶"What We Believe," Mountain View Community Church, accessed November 27, 2018, <https://www.mvcchurch.org/ourbeliefs/>.

If you answered “Yes” to these questions, then wait no longer. Join Hayes Barton Baptist Church this Sunday.⁴⁷

Many churches will embrace members only after some sort of membership class (or classes), followed by various other assignments. For instance, Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, holds a series of eight membership classes to help potential members to know about the church and the church to know about them. Surprisingly, at the end of the process, there is only one requirement for joining the church, “There is only one requirement for joining Tenth, which is to demonstrate an understanding and acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. You are not required to hold to all of Tenth’s doctrinal stances.”⁴⁸

Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, requires attendance at three membership classes (offered the first three Sundays of the month), reading various documents pertaining to Grace Church, listening to a sermon on baptism, submitting to believer’s baptism, and a written testimony of salvation. When all of this is completed, a pastoral interview is required. The final step is an official welcome into the church when the congregation extends the “Right Hand of Fellowship.”⁴⁹ The Village Church in the Dallas/Fort Worth area (with multi-sites), requires attendance at one (3 hour) class. In

⁴⁷“How to become a member of HBBC,” Hayes Barton Baptist Church, accessed August 22, 2018, <http://www.hbbc.org/raleigh-church-visitors/become-a-member-of-hbbc/>. This church outlines three ways to become a member: by profession of faith, by transfer of letter, or by reaffirmation of faith. One simply needs to speak with a minister about their decision to join.

⁴⁸“Membership Class,” Tenth Presbyterian Church, accessed November 28, 2018, <https://www.tenth.org/ministries/learning/membership-class>. It must be noted that such minimal membership commitments doesn’t reflect a lack of doctrinal interest or integrity on behalf of the church. Faithful theologians like Donald Grey Barnhouse, James Montgomery Boice, and Philip Graham Ryken have been among the pastors of Tenth Presbyterian Church.

⁴⁹“Membership,” Grace Community Church, accessed November 27, 2018, <https://www.gracechurch.org/membership>.

addition to this, they require completion of some reading and video assignments before entering into their “Covenant Membership.”⁵⁰

Most churches with membership have some sort of membership covenant. These vary greatly, from a few affirmations to several pages of requirements of church members. Heartland Community Church in Rockford, Illinois simply states that “When you become a member, you are agreeing to support this ministry with your finances, time, and gifts and talents. You are also agreeing to live a lifestyle that reflects a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and allow yourself to be held accountable to the spiritual oversight of Heartland’s Elders.”⁵¹ On the other hand, Trinity Baptist Church in Montville, New Jersey gives more than three pages of requirements of their members under the following heads:

- A. Godly Churchmanship.
 - (1) Attendance at Stated Meetings.
 - (2) Commitment to Our Corporate Standards.
 - (3) Financial Support.
 - (4) Promotion of Edification and Peace.
 - (5) Support of and Submission to the Leadership.
- B. A Godly Christian Life
 - (1) Personal Devotion to God.
 - (2) Family Life.
 - (3) Personal Evangelism.
 - (4) Christian Liberty.
 - (5) Separation from the World.⁵²

⁵⁰“Covenant Membership,” Village Church, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://thevillagechurch.net/connect/membership/>. The covenant membership is a written agreement between elders and members to express their mutual expectations of one another. The elders are to shepherd the church with care. The members are to serve the church in love.

⁵¹“Membership,” Heartland Community Church, accessed February 27, 2019, <https://heartland.cc/ministries/membership/3/>.

⁵²“The Constitution of the Trinity Baptist Church of Montville,” Trinity Baptist Church, accessed February 20, 2019, https://s3.amazonaws.com/churchplantmedia-cms/trinity_baptist_montville/tbc-constitution.pdf.

Modern sentiments about church membership varies from optional to necessary. Furthermore, there are many different ways that churches implement their membership process. It seems as if these methods are constantly changing. Thom Rainer notes that in a 1997, only 17% of churches required a new member class. This is in contrast to another (non-scientific Twitter poll) he conducted, which indicated that 86% of responders said that their church requires a membership class. Even taking into account the variance in survey methodology, this is still a significant change. However, this does not mean that there is agreement of opinion on church membership and its practices. Rather, Rainer notes, “some church leaders and members view such a requirement as legalistic and/or unbiblical. The issue still evokes strong emotions.”⁵³ These emotional responses are a call to examine the biblical purpose for church membership, which is the subject of the next section.

Church Membership is the Visible Expression of the Universal Church

The Biblical writers use the term, “church,” to many different-sized groups of believers. Paul refers to believers gathering in a home as a “church” (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19). A “church” may include an entire city, such as Jerusalem or Antioch (Acts 8:1; 13:1). The word, “church,” can describe believers throughout an entire region, such as Judea and Galilee and Samaria (Acts 9:31). This term may even be used to describe all of the believers throughout the world throughout all time (Eph 5:25). Wayne Grudem summarizes the scope of the usage of “church” in the Bible with these words, “The community of God’s people considered at any level can be rightly called a church.”⁵⁴

⁵³Thom Rainer, “Seven Trends in Church New Member Classes,” accessed August 27, 2020, <https://churchanswers.com/blog/seven-trends-in-church-new-member-classes/>.

⁵⁴Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 858.

On the simplest level, a church is easily identifiable. It is a group of professing believers confined to one locale. This has often been called the “local” church. On the largest level, the church is innumerable. It consists of all those who genuinely believe in Jesus. This has often been called the “universal” church. These terms, “local” and “universal” are helpful in understanding church membership. Church membership should locally identify those who are members of the universal church.

Two other terms that are useful in addressing church membership are the “invisible church” and the “visible church.”⁵⁵ These terms help to describe the nature of the church. The invisible church “consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof.”⁵⁶ This means all genuine Christians everywhere for all time. The visible church “consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion.”⁵⁷ This means all professing Christians, which may include those who are not genuine in their faith. Grudem simplifies these terms in this way: “The visible church is the church as Christians on earth see it. . . . The invisible church is the church as God sees it.”⁵⁸

Louis Berkhof points out how these two terms are not commensurate:

It is possible that some who belong to the invisible Church never become members of the visible organization, as missionary subjects who are converted on their

⁵⁵This distinction had seeds with Augustine, who made a distinction between the “true body” of Christ and the “mixed body” of Christ. The terms “visible” and “invisible” were introduced during the Protestant Reformation as the Reformers battled with the Roman Catholic Church, who insisted that it were the one true church, though filled with idolatry and corruption. John Calvin insisted that “judgment must be used to ascertain which is the true Church, and what is the nature of its unity.” He willingly embraced the terms “visible” and “invisible.” His usage of these terms passed into several of the Reformed Confessions. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7, Modern Christianity. The Swiss Reformation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 454-60.

⁵⁶Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 25, paragraph 1.

⁵⁷Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 25, paragraph 2.

⁵⁸Grudem, 855-6.

deathbeds, and that others are temporarily excluded from it, as erring believers who are for a time shut out from the communion of the visible Church. On the other hand there may be unregenerated children and adults who, while professing Christ, have no true faith in Him, in the Church as an external institution; and these, as long as they are in that condition, do not belong to the invisible Church.⁵⁹

Church membership should aim, as much as possible, to align these two aspects of the church. This is done by including into church membership those who are in the invisible church (i.e. genuine believers), and excluding from church membership those who are not in the invisible church. In other words, church membership should be the visible expression of the invisible church.

Church Membership is Local and Visible

As mentioned above, true, genuine believers in Jesus are members of the universal church (Eph 2:19; 3:6). They become so, not because of any rite of initiation or written covenant, but solely through faith in Jesus Christ. But this is different than membership in the local church. When the Bible uses the term, “member,” to refer to those in the church, it usually uses the illustration of a physical body.

The most extensive passage that uses this metaphor is found in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, where Paul describes the church as a body with physical parts like feet and hands and eyes and ears. All of these parts belong to the body (1 Cor 12:14-19); all of these parts need each other (1 Cor 12:21-22); and all of these parts are bound together (1 Cor 12:23-25). He concludes with these words: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor 12:26-27). This is most clearly manifested on the local level, as fellow believers interact so closely with one another that they share the joys and sorrows of life with each other.

⁵⁹Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 566.

Another passage describing the church as a body made up of members, or parts, is Ephesians 4:11-16. In this passage, Paul shows how the responsibility of the God-given leadership of the church is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph 4:12). The ministry of the saints will build up the church in maturity (Eph 4:12-13), which will protect the church from heresy (Eph 4:14). Paul concludes with the picture of a united body, “the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part⁶⁰ is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph 4:16). Again, this is most fully applied in the local setting.

Finally, Romans 12:4-8 describes the local church as a unified body. “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom 12:4-5). In this context, Paul places strong emphasis upon the differing gifts of those in the body. Some have gifts of prophesy; others have gifts of service; and others have gifts of teaching or exhortation or giving or leadership or mercy. With all of the differences, Paul calls members of the church to use their gifts (Rom 12:6). Again, the primary place for the exercise of these gifts to occur is in the context of the local church.

These three passages demonstrate the essence of local church membership, namely that members are important, valued parts of a local body of believers. In this way, it is different than a club membership, where members join because of the benefits they receive. Rather, the Bible describes members as serving vital roles in a local, visible body of Christians.

Church Membership Expresses Universal Membership

Church membership is more than simply providing a place where people can belong to a assembly of believers. It is also a way to make known the universal body of

⁶⁰These “parts” are church members.

Christ to all. When Jonathan Leeman wrote his book entitled, “Church Membership,” he subtitled it, “How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus.” He says that when a church receives a new member into the fellowship, it is like sending a press release to the world, informing the nations that the new member is “an official Jesus representative.”⁶¹

Leeman examines the only two instances where Jesus uses the word, “church” (Matt 16:18; 18:17). In both contexts, Jesus says, “whatever you bind on *earth* shall be bound in *heaven*, and whatever you loose on *earth* shall be loosed in *heaven*” (Matt 16:19; 18:18).⁶² Leeman points out that in Matthew 16, the Father revealed confessional truth to Peter (Matt 16:17), which shows Jesus speaking *on earth* on behalf of *heaven*. Jesus, then, gives Peter similar authority. He says that Peter has the authority *on earth* to judge a *heavenly* reality. Leeman writes,

Jesus essentially gave the apostles this kind of authority: the authority to stand in front of a confessor, to consider his or her confession, to consider his or her life, and to announce an official judgment on heaven’s behalf. Is that a right confession? Is that a true confessor? In other words, *the apostles had heaven’s authority for declaring who on earth is a kingdom citizen and therefore represents heaven.*⁶³

Leeman shows the parallel of Matthew 18:18 and concludes that the same authority has been given to the church. He writes, “the local church has *heaven’s* authority for declaring who on *earth* is a kingdom citizen and therefore represents *heaven.*”⁶⁴ Leeman admits that the church will exercise this authority imperfectly, as does

⁶¹Leeman, *Church Membership*, 85.

⁶²Although the wording in the ESV is exactly same in these two texts (Matt 16:19 and Matt 18:18), it is helpful to point out that the Greek texts have slight differences. Some of the differences are insignificant, such as the presence (or absence) of an article or usage of a slightly different relative pronoun. However, one pertinent difference is in the Greek verb (which is difficult to convey in the English text). Matthew 16:19 is in the second person, singular, while Matthew 18:18 is in the second person, plural. The first passage is speaking about the authority of Peter. The second passage is speaking about the authority of the church.

⁶³Leeman, *Church Membership*, 59, italics his.

⁶⁴Leeman, *Church Membership*, 61, italics mine.

any other human institution. However, this doesn't change its responsibility and authority to recognize legitimate kingdom citizens.⁶⁵ In this way, church membership has the ability to visibly express universal church membership.

Dennis Bills expresses the same idea in his book entitled, "A Church You Can See." He writes, "The church is in the business of accrediting claims to salvation, ... to certify that Christians are what they say they are and do what they say they do."⁶⁶ Church membership, then, is the church's declaration of confidence in the authenticity of one's profession of faith in Christ. But when a member is unrepentant and removed from church membership, it "is the means by which the church withdraws that confidence."⁶⁷ Removing a person's membership from the visible church is the church's way to recognize illegitimate kingdom citizens, who are, in reality, not members of the invisible church.

We see this illustrated in the church in Corinth. When Paul heard that the Corinthian church was tolerating a sexually immoral man in their midst, he exhorted them to have him "removed from among you" (1 Cor 5:2). He explained, "Do not be deceived: ... the sexually immoral, ... will [not] inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6:9, 10). Paul was instructing the church to remove the man from the church because the church had no confidence that this man was a genuine believer (i.e. he was not a member of the invisible church). Inaction in this instance would "mislead sheep, and ... mislead the world about Christianity."⁶⁸ The sheep would be misled to think that they should

⁶⁵Leeman, *Church Membership*, 62.

⁶⁶Dennis Bills, *A Church You Can See* (New Martinsville, WV: Reforming West Virginia Publications, 2017), 19.

⁶⁷Bills, *A Church You Can See*, 21.

⁶⁸Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 319.

tolerate such behavior. The world would be misled to think that such behavior is acceptable conduct within the Christian church.

On the other hand, we see Paul exhorting those in Rome to welcome into their fellowship those who gave evidence of genuine faith (i.e. those who are members of the invisible church). He writes, “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom 15:7). This exhortation comes in the context of weak and strong believers, who had differing opinions of how to live out their Christianity (Rom 14:1-4). Paul encouraged the church to live in harmony despite cultural differences. If God had welcomed a believer into his kingdom, Paul exhorts the Romans to welcome him into their fellowship. In other words, Paul is seeking to align the visible church with the invisible church.

These two passages (1 Cor 5-6 and Rom 14-15) demonstrate how church membership in the local church should be the visible expression of the universal church. When wayward members show signs that they are not believing, they are to be removed from the fellowship. But if Christ welcomes believers into his kingdom, the church is to welcome them into their fellowship. The principle is clear: local church membership is the visible expression of the universal church. In today’s litigious society, this requires documented expectations of church members and church leaders.

Today’s Litigious Society Supports the Need for Church Membership

Many have stated that America is the most litigious society in the world.⁶⁹

While some might object to the technicalities of such a claim,⁷⁰ few will argue against the

⁶⁹Kurt Holzer mentions this statement as common, but seeks to prove otherwise in his article, “Personal Responsibility Verses the Myth of Litigiousness in America,” accessed December 18, 2018, <http://holzeredwardsinjurylawyers.com/2011/12/personal-responsibility-versus-the-myth-of-litigiousness-in-america/>.

⁷⁰Ruhollah Alizadeh, “The Most Litigious Countries in the World,” Clements

fact that our society is highly litigious.⁷¹ Many people seek to resolve their differences through the courts rather than through personal mediation. This has increased the vulnerability of the church to lawsuits. Karl Pansler describes the liability this way:

Today we live in an unrestrained, unruly, unashamed, and undisciplined world. Even in the church, members defiantly break biblically based rules of conduct. If the church tries to discipline a disobedient member, he is often unrepentant and outraged. Instead of crying out for forgiveness, he may cry out, “See you in court.”⁷²

A lawsuit against the church may come in a variety of ways. It may come as a result of clergy malpractice while counseling others.⁷³ It may come as a result of refusing usage of church buildings to certain organizations that ask.⁷⁴ Pertinent to the topic of this

Worldwide, accessed December 18, 2018, <https://www.clements.com/sites/default/files/resources/The-Most-Litigious-Countries-in-the-World.pdf>. This article points out that America has the highest number of lawyers per capita (1 lawyer for every 300 people). Yet, this doesn't translate to having the highest litigious rate in the world. According to a study by Christian Wollschlager, Germany tops the list of the most litigious country with a rate of 123.2 cases per 1,000 people. America ranks fifth with a rate of 74.5 cases per 1,000 people.

⁷¹Eisenberg, Robinson, and Kalantry argue that growing rates of litigation is a sign of prosperity. They claim that litigation rates “consistently report that lawsuit filings per capita increase with economic prosperity, thus suggesting that litigation rates are a natural consequence of prosperity and not necessarily evidence of an overly litigious populace.” Eisenberg, Theodore and Robinson, Nick and Kalantry, Sital, *Litigation as a Measure of Well-Being* (April 8, 2012). Cornell Legal Studies Research Paper No. 12-28, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2036194> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2036194>. Thus, it is only reasonable to see the prosperity of America coinciding with the high litigation rates.

⁷²Karl Pansler, “Church Discipline and the Right of Privacy,” in *Christian Ministries and the Law*, ed. H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 65.

⁷³*Nally v. Grace Community Church of the Valley* (1988). This case was brought by Walter and Maria Nally against Grace Community Church for the wrongful death of their son, Kenneth Nally, who committed suicide. The plaintiffs argued that the counselors of the church failed to deal appropriately with their son, who had suicidal inclinations. Instead of referring him to appropriate professionals, they claim that the counselors of the church inflicted emotional distress upon him, thereby being responsible for his death.

⁷⁴*Ambridge Event Center v. Holy Rosary Church in Portland, Oregon* (2018). This case was brought by Abridge Event Center against Holy Rosary Church for their refusal to rent out the church facilities to members or groups affiliated with the LGBTQ community. The plaintiffs argue that this brought damage to their image with their

paper, litigation may be brought against a church for their conduct during a church discipline case (Matt 18:15-17). Pansler describes the possible peril: “Church discipline is a potential litigation nightmare for churches, pastors, church officers, and other church leaders.”⁷⁵

Two Governments

Litigation over matters concerning church discipline must be understood in the context of the “Two Governments” established in the New Testament: the church and the civil authorities. The church derives her authority from Jesus Christ, her head (Eph 4:15). Jesus has given her “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 16:19). These keys are a representation of authority and jurisdiction over the church, including the authority to discipline wayward members.⁷⁶ The civil authority also derives its authority from God. “For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom 13:1). Unlike the authorities within the church, however, God has given the authority of the “sword”⁷⁷ to the civil authorities, “[The one who is in authority] does not

clientele and to their relationship with the LGBTQ community. The lawsuit seeks \$2,375,000 in damages. See “Ambridge Event Center v. Holy Rosary Church,” The Oregonian, accessed December 18, 2018, https://media.oregonlive.com/portland_impact/other/holy-rosary-church-suit.pdf.

⁷⁵Karl Pansler, “Church Discipline and the Right of Privacy,” 65.

⁷⁶Interpretations of Matthew 16:19 break along Roman Catholic and Protestant lines. Roman Catholics (in general) see these keys as given to Peter and the papal succession after him. Protestants, on the other hand, see these keys given to all churches, irrespective of their link to Rome. Regardless of how you interpret this verse, the point still stands: Jesus gave authority to those leading the church, including authority to discipline.

⁷⁷The “sword” is a symbol of force. It represents the government’s ability to force people into submission by punishing crimes, including capital punishment. The use of the sword is often used in the New Testament to refer to those who are put to death (Matt 26:52; Luke 21:24; Acts 12:2; 16:27; Heb 11:34; Rev 13:10).

bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:4).

Jesus identified both of these governments in his famous statement, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt 22:21). Jesus assigned each of these governments with their own jurisdictional boundaries.

Renaud and Weinberger explain:

... [these two governments] were administered by men, but both were ordained by God and under His ultimate authority. Both were created with different spheres of authority. In Romans 13:4, the "sword" represents the civil government's power. The church does not have the power of the sword, but it does have the power of church discipline. The reformers called this the power of the "keys" after Christ's reference in Matthew 16:19 to the "keys of the kingdom." Neither had sovereignty over the other, and both were equally ultimate in their own spheres.⁷⁸

During the days of his incarnation, Jesus demonstrated his unwillingness to cross the jurisdictional boundaries of the civil authorities. While being arrested, he said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).⁷⁹ His example is the model for the church today: Christians are to submit to the civil authorities (Rom 13:1).

Legal Issues

In America, the idea of "Two Governments," each with separate spheres of jurisdiction, is grounded in the First Amendment, which begins with these words, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the

⁷⁸Robert J. Renaud and Lael D. Weinberger, *A Tale of Two Governments* (St. Louis, MO: Dunrobin Publishing, 2012), 14.

⁷⁹This was true only during the days of his incarnation. At his return, Jesus will judge all the nations and rule over them. One passage (among many) that demonstrate this is Matt 25:31-46, where Jesus describes how he will sit on his glorious throne and judge all the nations.

free exercise thereof.”⁸⁰ The original intent of this amendment was to prevent the civil government from exercising its authority over the affairs of church governance. Michael McConnell concurs, “The two-kingdom view of competing authorities is a the heart of our First Amendment.”⁸¹

The First Amendment grants churches autonomy to govern the matters of their church in accordance with their beliefs, free from governmental interference. In 1872, a case regarding church autonomy reached the Supreme Court of the United States for the first time in *Watson v. Jones* (1872).⁸² The court affirmed church autonomy by ruling that civil courts must defer to the church authorities (in this case the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church) whenever “questions of discipline, or of faith, or ecclesiastical rule” were involved.”⁸³

Church autonomy was reaffirmed in *Kedroff v. St. Nicholas Cathedral* (1952).⁸⁴ The Supreme Court recognized the “power [of churches] to decide for

⁸⁰These two clauses are known as “The Religion Clauses.” They provide two provisions regarding the relationship between the church and state. They are known as “The Establishment Clause” and the “Free Exercise Clause.” The First Amendment continues with these words, “or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” These clauses guarantee freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and petition. In this paper, we are focusing upon the first two clauses.

⁸¹Michael W. McConnell, “Religion and Constitutional Rights: Why is Religious Liberty the ‘First Freedom’?,” *Cardozo Law Review* 21 (2000): 1246, as quoted by Renaud and Weinberger, *A Tale of Two Governments*, 16.

⁸²This case was brought shortly after the Civil War by factions within the Walnut Street Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. The church was divided over the issues of slavery and secession. This sides were arguing over the control of the church property.

⁸³*Watson v. Jones*, 80 U.S. 679, 727 (1872) as quoted by Renaud and Weinberger, *A Tale of Two Governments*, 77.

⁸⁴This case was brought when a law in New York would have forced the Russian Orthodox Church to transfer control of church property on United States soil from Russian control to American control. This would have resulted in forcing the Russian Orthodox Church in America to sever ties with the Russian Orthodox Church in

themselves, free from state interference, matters of church government as well as those of faith and doctrine.”⁸⁵ Shortly after the ruling, Mark DeWolfe Howe identified the key issue in the ruling, noting that “government must recognize that it is not the sole possessor of sovereignty.”⁸⁶ Appropriately, Richard Garnett called this a case of identifying the “things that are not Caesar’s.”⁸⁷

The cases above demonstrate that “the legal basis for church autonomy doctrine is as solid as anything gets in the law—grounded in two clauses of the U. S. Constitution.”⁸⁸ Pertinent to this paper, this legal protection includes litigation over matters regarding church discipline. One recent example of church discipline in the courts is *Westbrook v. Penley* (Texas 2007).⁸⁹ The Texas Supreme Court noted, “the autonomy of a church in managing its affairs and deciding matters of ‘church discipline’ ... has long been afforded broad constitutional protection.”⁹⁰

Moscow.

⁸⁵*Kedroff v. St. Nicholas Cathedral*, 344 U.S. 94, 116 (1952) as quoted by Renaud and Weinberger, *A Tale of Two Governments*, 80.

⁸⁶Mark DeWolfe Howe, “Foreword: Political Theory and the Nature of Liberty,” *Harvard Law Review* 67 (1953): 91.

⁸⁷Richard W. Garnett, “‘Things That Are Not Caesar’s’: The Story of *Kedroff v. St. Nicholas Cathedral*,” in *First Amendment Stories*, ed. Richard W. Garnett and Andrew Koppelman (New York: Foundation Press, 2011).

⁸⁸Renaud and Weinberger, *A Tale of Two Governments*, 79.

⁸⁹This case was brought by Peggy Penley against Pastor C. L. “Buddy” Westbrook, pastor of Crossland Community Bible Church outside of Dallas, Texas. Pastor Westbrook led the church in publicly disciplining Penley for her sinful, extramarital relationship.

⁹⁰*Westbrook v. Penley*, as quoted by Renaud and Weinberger, *A Tale of Two Governments*, 89.

Practical Advice

Regardless of the legal precedent of the above cases, the threat of litigation against a church is very real. In 1984 a jury awarded a \$390,000 settlement to Marian Guinn against the Collinsville Church of Christ and three of its elders for publicly denouncing her for the “sin of fornication.”⁹¹ However, this judgment was reversed by the Supreme Court of Oklahoma in 1989 and remanded for retrial.⁹² Yet, the church still paid a price. Ken Sande rightly observes,

Even when a church wins in court, it usually pays an enormous price in terms of legal fees, lost time and energy, damaged reputation, distraction from ministry, and congregational confusion and dissension. Therefore, it is not good enough for a church to behave so well that it will prevail in a lawsuit. Instead, churches must act with such wisdom and integrity that will prevent people from filing lawsuits in the first place.⁹³

Sande adds, “Many of these judgments occur because churches have not clearly established and communicated how they will minister to members who are caught in conflict and sin.”⁹⁴ Thus, it is wise for churches to take some preventative actions to prevent the filing of lawsuits against them in the first place. Many have given their recommendations for exact steps to take.⁹⁵ Here is an attempted summary: (1) cultivate a

⁹¹“Award in a Church Privacy Suit,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1984, accessed February 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/03/16/us/award-in-a-church-privacy-suit.html>.

⁹²*Guinn v. Church of Christ of Collinsville*, 1989 OK 8, accessed February 13, 2019, <https://law.justia.com/cases/oklahoma/supreme-court/1989/10494.html>. Of particular note in this case is that the Supreme Court of Oklahoma considered the actions of the elders after Guinn requested to remove her membership to be “outside the purview of the first amendment protection and were the proper subject of state regulation.” However, it must also be noted that their decision was not unanimous.

⁹³Ken Sande, “Avoiding the Legal Pitfalls of Conflict, Mediation, and Discipline in the Church,” accessed February 13, 2019, http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201002/201002_048_Ch%20mediation.cfm.

⁹⁴Ken Sande, “Informed Consent: Biblical and Legal Protection for Church Discipline,” accessed February 13, 2019, <https://www.9marks.org/article/informed-consent-biblical-and-legal-protection-church-discipline/>.

⁹⁵Ken Sande, “Avoiding the Legal Pitfalls of Conflict, Mediation, and

culture of peace and love in the church;⁹⁶ (2) make membership beliefs and practices clear to all members;⁹⁷ and (3) obtain signed documents detailing membership expectations.

Church members and church leaders must clearly understand their roles and expectations in any church membership agreement. This is especially true in today's litigious society. Furthermore church members should understand the purpose of their membership in a local church in the first place. Church membership is the local expression of the universal church.

Discipline in the Church," accessed February 13, 2019, http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201002/201002_048_Ch%20mediation.cfm; Karl Pansler, "Church Discipline and the Right of Privacy," 76-78; "Protecting Your Ministry," Alliance Defending Freedom, accessed February 13, 2019, <https://adflegal.org/forms/download-protect-your-ministry>.

⁹⁶ Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

⁹⁷It is helpful to point out that in *Guinn v. Church of Christ*, 1989, the church had clear membership policies that were followed dutifully. *Guinn v. Church of Christ of Collinsville*, 1989 OK 8, accessed February 13, 2019, <https://law.justia.com/cases/oklahoma/supreme-court/1989/10494.html>.

CHAPTER 4
DETAILS OF THE PROJECT

Selecting the Topic

This project began with a leadership meeting of the elders and deacons of Rock Valley Bible Church (RVBC). The leadership team (and our families) regularly gather for lunch after church every fifth Sunday of the month. After lunch on one of these Sunday afternoons, I lead a brainstorming session among the husbands and wives regarding the strengths and weaknesses of RVBC.

I set up a whiteboard at the end of the table and asked everyone what they considered to be the strengths of our church. The following items below were mentioned and written on the whiteboard.

1. Genuine love toward everyone
2. Communications - openness
3. Finances
4. Level-headed
5. Response to needs
6. Facilities (3 acres of land)
7. Number of children
8. Relationships with other churches
9. Missions involvement
10. Preaching
11. Well-trained congregation
12. Small groups
13. Teachability
14. Unity

I believe that these things provide a fair representation of the strengths of the church. Next, I asked everyone what they considered to be the weaknesses of our church. The following items were mentioned and written on the whiteboard:

1. Assimilation Process - Membership
2. Organization/Administrative process
3. Pre-planning
4. Little racial diversity

5. Counseling
6. Facilities (needs some remodeling)
7. Stagnate numbers
8. Evangelism
9. Few 20-somethings
10. Recognizing and utilizing the giftedness of people
11. Lack of a welcome packet
12. First impressions
13. Perceived identity
14. No Sunday school
15. No avenue for novices
16. Lack of staff

Again, I believe that this list provides a fair representation of some of our weaknesses. At this point, I passed out some sticky notes to everyone around the table. I asked everyone to select two weaknesses of the church that are the most glaring and in need of the most attention. I asked them to write them down on their sticky notes and then come to the whiteboard and place them on the whiteboard. We ended up with the following whiteboard:

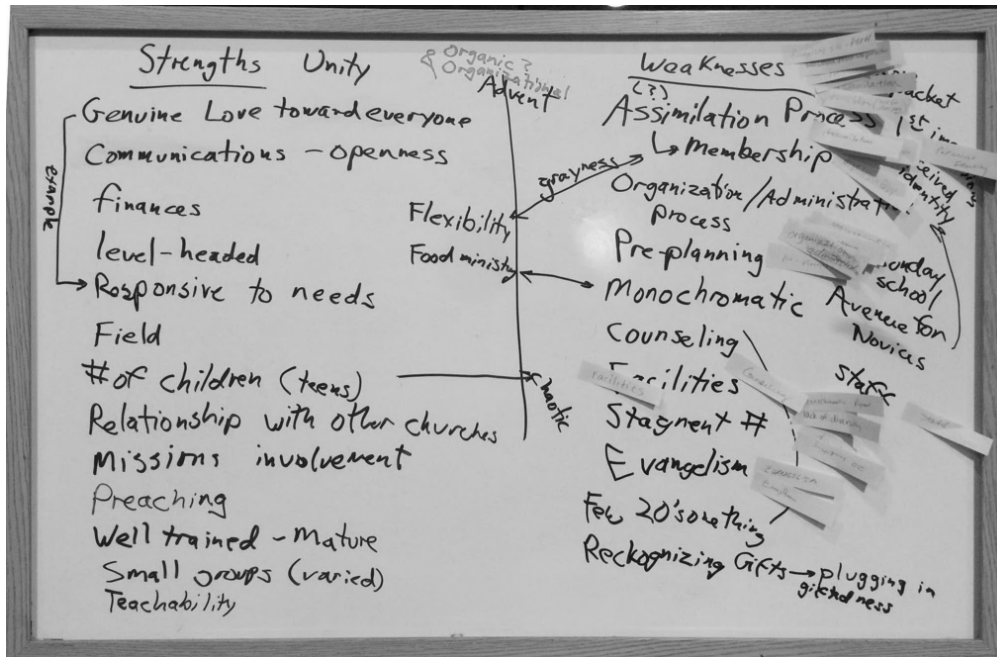


Figure 1. Whiteboard after leadership brainstorming session

Table 1. Tabulation of results from leadership brainstorming session

Weaknesses of RVBC	Votes for needing attention
Assimilation Process - Membership	10
Organization/Administrative process	5
Few 20-somethings	4
Evangelism	2
Counseling	1
Facilities	1
Staff	1

Of the twelve people who went through this exercise, the overwhelming majority (eighty-three percent) identified the lack of an assimilation process (and membership) at Rock Valley Bible Church as the area of the church needing the most attention. No other topic even reached half of the votes. It was clear to all of us that day which topic I should pursue in my Doctor of Ministry studies.

I am thankful to God for this process we went through as a leadership team. Not only did it provide a focus for my study, but it also received buy-in from the leadership of the church. This was especially helpful in guiding the church through my project.

As I worked with the faculty at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS), I honed in on the particular topic of “Church Membership,” which would result in improving our assimilation process. Eventually, the title of my thesis was brought forth: “Developing Church Membership at Rock Valley Bible Church in Loves Park, Illinois.”

Developing the Sermon Series

With a topic in place, I set out to study church membership with the aim of eventually developing a training program to share with those at Rock Valley Bible Church. The training program would be written as a four-part sermon series preached in

our worship services on four consecutive Sunday mornings. The content of this study is shown in chapters 2 and 3 of this paper.

In chapter 2, I set forth a detailed exegesis of five texts of Scripture that shed light on church membership. The most interesting aspect of this study to me is how the practice of church discipline requires a clear church membership. To discipline a wayward member “out” of the church implies that he (or she) must have been “in” the church to begin with. Since RVBC had practiced church discipline on a couple of occasions, it became clear to me that we had a membership at RVBC. However, our membership was informal. So, in my sermon series, I strongly emphasized the idea of how RVBC is transitioning from “informal church membership” to “formal church membership.”

In chapter 3 of this paper, I give several historical, practical, and theological insights on church membership. The most interesting portion of this chapter to me is the historical practice of church membership. It shows how church membership has been practiced in many different ways throughout the history of the church. So, in my sermon series, I pointed out how RVBC is not transitioning from an unbiblical practice of informal church membership to a biblical practice of formal membership, as if we have been in error for twenty years. Rather, I showed how we are aiming to be better at communicating intentionally what is a church member is.¹

With the background study finished, I was ready to write the sermon series. The topics of those sermons bear a strong resemblance to the topics of chapters 2 and 3 of this paper. The first sermon is entitled, “Church Membership in History.” In this sermon I show how the practice of church membership has varied greatly throughout church

¹It is worthy to point out that this intentionality of definition also helps to address the second biggest area of improvement identified by the leadership of the church during our brainstorming session mentioned above: “Organizational/Administrative process” (see table 1).

history. I address the rapid membership of the apostolic era, the rigorous membership during the days of persecution until Constantine, the relaxed membership during the Dark Ages, and the regenerate membership that flowed out of the Reformation. Even today, there is a wide discrepancy in the way that church membership is practiced.

The second sermon is entitled, “Church Membership in the Bible.” In this sermon I put forth Biblical proof that the Bible teaches church membership. This was especially important in our context, as a portion of our congregation were not convinced that church membership is in the Bible. In this sermon I show how the church discipline passages (Matt 18 and 1 Cor 5) are proofs for church membership. I also show how leaders of the church are given the assignment to shepherd a specific, defined group of people (i.e. the members of a church).

The third sermon is entitled, “Church Membership in Practice.” This sermon argues that the “one another” commands of the New Testament are good guidelines for the practices of church members. Rather than addressing all fifty or so of the “one another” commands, I group many of them into the broad categories of love and unity, which are essential characteristics of church members. In the sermon I also focus in on Hebrews 10:24-25, which addresses the need of church members to gather regularly to stimulate others to love and good works.

The fourth sermon is entitled, “Church Membership at Rock Valley Bible Church.” This sermon is very practical, putting forth the history, vision and values of RVBC. This material is quite familiar to many of those at the church. Nevertheless, these things are crucial for future church members to fully embrace. I also talked through the specifics of how the membership process will work, focusing upon the four activities of Acts 2:42, the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer.

These four sermons were written out (in full manuscript form) before any of them were preached to the congregation. They were printed out and given to our elders

and to two local pastors for review and evaluation in accordance with the rubric provided in appendix 1.

I first distributed these sermons to the three elders of RVBC. I distributed the sermons one at a time over a period of a few months as I wrote them. All of the elders read them, but two of the elders were willing and able to take the extra time to evaluate the sermons using the aforementioned rubric. They returned the sermons with helpful comments and edits. In accordance with their suggestions, I lightly edited the sermons and distributed all four of them to two local pastors. These pastors read the sermons, filled out the rubric, and returned them to me. It was a joy to have the local pastors and their wives for dinner a few weeks later to show my appreciation for the time they took to read and evaluate my sermons. It proved to be a profitable time of pastoral fellowship and discussion about church membership.

Administering the Survey

Before preaching the sermons mentioned above, I administered the Church Membership and Involvement Survey (CMIS) as included in appendix 2. This bulk of this survey was written after I had completed the sermons that I was planning to preach. The first part of the survey contains an “agreement to participate” section, which was done in compliance with the Research Ethics Committee at SBTS. The next part contains some general background information about the one filling out the survey. The heart of the survey includes twenty statements, each to be evaluated on a six-point Likert scale. Unknown to the participants, each sermon was represented by five statements.² The final part of the survey includes a section on church involvement and a space for comments. This last section proved useful in shepherding people through the membership process, as

²See table A1 in appendix 2.

people were able to express their opinions and questions about the church, which often went beyond the topic of church membership.

I administered this survey during the Sunday morning worship service one week before I began preaching my sermon series. Our service began with the regular worship songs, Scripture readings and prayers. Then, during the time usually allocated for the sermon, I introduced the survey to the congregation. I began with some background about my studies at SBTS. I proceeded to explain how the leadership of the church had directed me to focus my project on church membership. I then talked about the survey and how it was necessary for me to complete my project and to complete my degree. I explained how it was to be filled out both before and after the sermon series.

After about ten minutes of explanation, surveys were distributed among the people. Since there are many children (under eighteen years-old) in our church, many of the children present that day filled out the survey. I thought it would be inappropriate to exclude any of them who wanted to fill out a survey. I was interested in seeing how much they understood about church membership. Further, some of those under eighteen years-old have demonstrated a credible profession of faith, have been baptized, and are serving the church in the music ministry, the sound ministry, the nursery, and even teaching during children's church. These children are fulfilling the heart of what it means to be a church member.

I tried to make the entire event an enjoyable experience by going up and down the aisles passing out candy to any who would like it. By the time everyone finished, it was about thirty minutes later. It turned out great. I proceeded to preach a short sermon.

The reason for the one-week gap between administering the survey and my first sermon was three-fold. First, I did not want to limit the time of my first message. With thirty minutes taken up in the service administering the survey, I could not preach the full length of my first message. Second, I wanted a gap week to examine the surveys and see if there was anything particular in the answers to the questions that I needed to

emphasize. Third, a gap week was important for trying to get those who had not been there on Sunday morning to fill out the survey before I began my series.

Preaching the Sermons

Preaching the sermons on church membership was one of the greatest joys of the project. Of all of the many sermons I have preached over twenty years of ministry, I have never been able to research any sermons as deeply as these. Furthermore, I have never received the depth of feedback before preaching a series, like I received from elders of RVBC and from two pastors from outside the church. Putting this all together made preaching these sermons very enjoyable.

However, at the same time, there was some trepidation in my heart in preaching these sermons. I knew that I was preaching for change at RVBC. Any time there is a change in the church, I know that it is an opportunity for difficulties to come. Indeed, a family left the church just before I began preaching through the series. The idea of church membership had caused them to think about the direction of the church and their involvement in it. They felt it best if they leave the church.

Yet, overall, the messages were received well. I received much verbal affirmation from the congregation. Also, in the second administration of the CMIS, some positive comments were written in the “comments” section. One person wrote, “I now better understand the need for church membership especially in regard to the Pastor knowing who his flock is.” Another wrote, “I have learned a lot through this teaching. I think the first [sermon] was the most eye opening for me.” Both of these comments came from people who were uncommitted regarding their intentions to be members before the sermon series began (i.e. question #22 of the survey), but afterwards expressed their intention to be members.

Upon finishing my sermon series, I asked those who filled out the CMIS before the sermon series began to listen to any of the sermons they missed and fill out a

second CMIS.³ I did not administer the second survey during our morning service for several reasons. First of all, there was no urgency to have them filled out before any strict deadline, unlike the first survey that had to be finished before I began preaching my sermon series. Second, not everyone who heard the final sermon of my series had heard every previous message.

It took several reminders through emails and announcements on Sunday mornings in order to get the surveys back. But over the next few weeks the surveys slowly trickled in, as people took time to listen to the recordings of the sermons they missed. One man, who missed three out of the four sermons, dutifully listened to the recordings before filling out a second survey. When I thanked him for taking time to do so, he said, “Anything for a friend.”

Evaluating the Results

As mentioned above, the heart of the CMIS consists of twenty statements (or questions), each of which are evaluated on a six-point Likert scale. In analyzing the data, numerical values from one to six were assigned to each response received. The most desirable response yielded a score of six points, descending to one point per response to a minimum value of one. My analysis below only includes the data from the adult surveys.

The following graph indicates the average responses to each question in the CMIS before and after listening to the sermon series.

³The sermons of RVBC were made available with CD’s at church. They are also easily available online, both at the church’s website and through the church’s podcast.

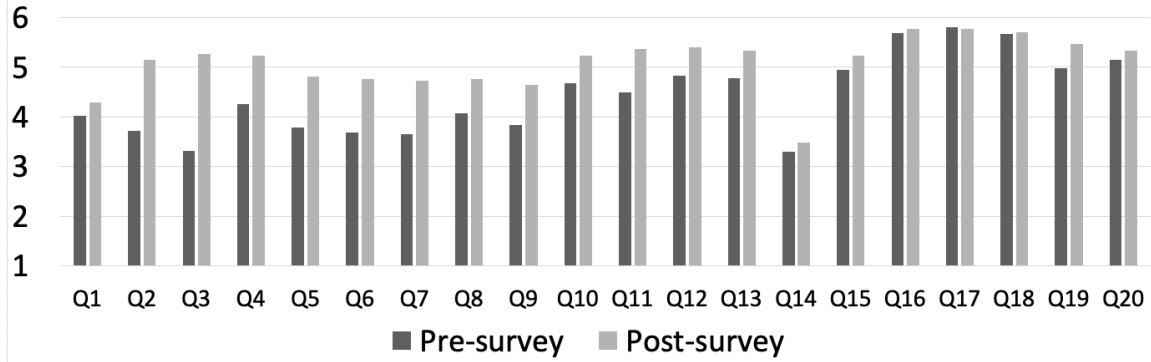


Figure 2. Average adult responses to questions in CMIS

A quick scan of the graph above reveals an anomaly in question #14. The average response to this question is less than every other question, both in the pre-survey and in the post-survey. In reviewing question #14, I believe that the low average response is due to a poorly worded question, which is open for interpretation. The question reads, “Church membership helps to insure that everyone in the church believes the same things.” The original intent of the question was based off of an exposition of Romans 14 and 15, where Paul urges unity in the church, even when people have differing convictions about various matters. However, church membership ought to demand some level of unity of belief, especially as it relates to the gospel. This is why several people who filled out surveys sought to clarify their answers on this question. One wrote, “about fundamental doctrine.” Another wrote, “on core issues.” Yet another clarified the question perfectly, “Yes on foundational items. No on other items.” Looking back, I wish I had worded this question differently.

Further observations of figure 2 reveal that the average scores of every question increased from pre-survey to post-survey with the exception of question #17, which only went down slightly, less than one percentage point (0.67 percent). Other than this question, every single other question saw an increase from pre-survey to post-survey. Some of the increases were quite large. For instance, question #3 shows an increase of eighty-four percent. A careful study of figure 2 will reveal a trend in the increases of

these scores. The increase becomes less and less as you move progress through the survey. When coupled with the correlation of the questions with the sermons preached, the following graph emerges.

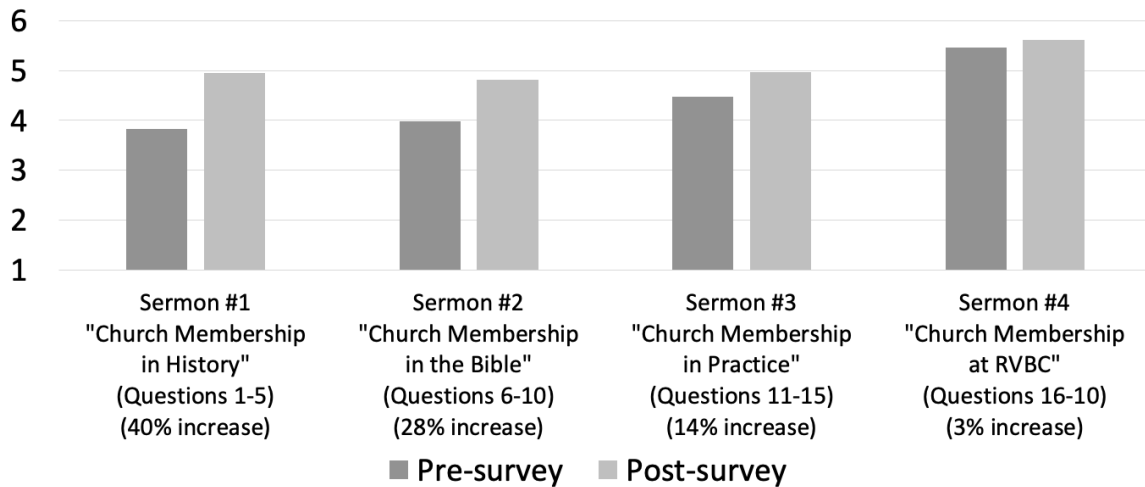


Figure 3. Average adult responses to questions in the CMIS by message

This trending decrease in post-survey scores is certainly a reflection of how familiar those in the church were with the teaching. As I mentioned earlier in the “Administrating the Survey” section above, I noticed the lack of knowledge in the area of church membership in history before I had done any teaching. But I did not notice a lack of knowledge in the area of church membership in the Bible with a cursory look at the surveys. Yet, the above figure quantifies the lack of knowledge in this area as well.

The progression of the increase in knowledge in each of these sermons is understandable. In the first sermon, “Church Membership in History,” I covered material that was new for many people in the church. Most of those in the church regularly read their Bibles. Some read theology. But few read church history. One person commented on the survey, “I have learned a lot through this teaching. I think the first [sermon] was

the most eye opening for me.” Hopefully, I whet an appetite at the church for the importance of understanding church history.

The second sermon I preached was entitled, “Church Membership in the Bible.” Again, there was a demonstrable increase in knowledge in this area. I think this is due to the nature of how church membership is presented in the Bible. Jonathan Leeman asks the question, “Is church membership in the Bible?” He responds, “If you’re looking for the right thing, it’s everywhere.”⁴ By answering in this way, Leeman implies that if you are looking for the wrong thing, you will not find church membership in the Bible. In other words, seeing church membership in the Bible requires some instruction. Thus, it is no surprise that people were helped in their knowledge of finding church membership in the Bible through my second sermon.

The third sermon I preached was entitled, “Church Membership in Practice.” In that message, I argued that the “one anothers” in the New Testament provide a template of how church members are called to interact with each other. This idea is familiar to those at RVBC. In 2016, I preached a series of ten sermons on the “one anothers,” expanding topically on one of them each week.⁵ Perhaps the slight increase in knowledge has to do with the connection of the “one anothers” to church membership.

The fourth sermon I preached was entitled, “Church Membership at Rock Valley Bible Church.” In this message, I presented the history, the vision, and the values of our church. These things are very familiar to people at RVBC, so the sermon was simply a review for many. It is encouraging for me to see how many in our congregation needed very little reminding with these things.

⁴Leeman, *Church Membership*, 26-27.

⁵Rock Valley Bible Church, “Sermon Series: One Another,” accessed March 10, 2020, <http://sermons.rvbc.cc/sermons/series/56>.

Implementing Membership

The ultimate goal of my project is to implement a formal membership at Rock Valley Bible Church. Question #22 of my survey addresses this issue. It reads, “I plan to be a formal member of Rock Valley Bible Church.” The average response to this question in the pre-survey was 5.0. The average response to the question in the post-survey was 5.16, a mere increase of four percent. The following figure shows this graphically.

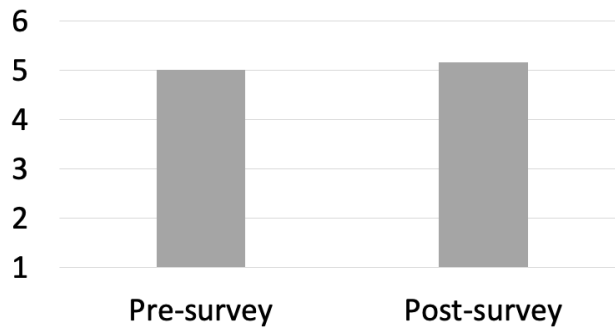


Figure 4. Average response of adults to question #22, “I plan to be a formal member of RVBC”

This shows the overall positive acceptance of the idea of church membership, both in the pre-survey and in the post-survey. Of more significance for this project, however, is not the average response, but the number of positive responses in the post-survey. This is demonstrated in the following table:

Table 2. Responses of adults in the post-survey to question #22, “I plan to be a formal member of RVBC.”

strongly disagree SD	disagree D	disagree somewhat DS	(Uncommitted)	agree somewhat AS	agree A	strongly agree SA
1	2	2	6	3	14	34

The above table shows strong support for embracing the changes at Rock Valley Bible Church that a formal membership would bring. To be precise, 51 of the 62 adults (82 percent) who filled out the post-survey are favorable towards becoming formal members.

The process by which those in the church become formal members involves several steps. The first step is filling out the “Expression of Commitment” membership form found in appendix 8. This form includes a signed commitment to practice the tenets of Acts 2:42, “The Apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer.” On the back of the form, it includes a space for a short, written testimony of salvation, a space to express areas of interest to serve in the church, and a question about baptism. Although the form is short, it takes some time and thought for someone to fill it out.

The next step to membership involves an interview with one of the elders. For this ministry project, I conducted all of these interviews. This required conversations with every family unit in the church. This amounted to forty-eight conversations. Some of these conversations were easy and enjoyable. This was the case with people who were eager to formally join the church. Other conversations were difficult. This was the case with those who were very committed to the church, but had some particular reason why they did not want to sign up for “formal membership.” Some of the conversations were short, lasting only a few minutes. This was because of my friendship and familiarity with those who had been at the church for over a decade. I was familiar with them and their testimonies. Other conversations took much longer, for several hours over several days. This was especially the case for those who were newer to the faith and needed help working through a written testimony, having never written one before.

The final two steps to membership are simple. The other elders need to review the membership forms and sign them to indicate their willingness to shepherd the new members. Finally, celebrate our first members at RVBD during a Sunday morning service.

In the providence of God, these interviews were conducted April-May in 2020. This was in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, when, by executive order of the government, our nation was shut down in hopes of curtailing the spread of the virus. This meant that (almost) all of these interviews were done through the computer through Zoom. In the few cases of those who do not have computer access, the interviews took place via phone.

These interviews were also conducted under a strict time-frame. They needed to be completed by the second week in May, for that is when I planned to take a three month sabbatical from the church. This deadline proved useful, as deadlines often are. It motivated many people to complete the process of filling out the membership form and having an interview with me to become formal members.

In all, of the forty-eight family units interviewed, thirty-five of them signed up to become members. However, there were five involved families of the church who requested more time to think about membership. Rather than pressing for a decision at the deadline, they were considered to be “on pause” with their membership status. Finally, eight family units have no plans of becoming formal members of Rock Valley Bible Church. For the most part, these family units are not very involved with the church, so their decision not to become formal members of the church is reasonable.

We had hoped to celebrate our first members at a Sunday morning service upon my return from my sabbatical. However, due to COVID-19, our Sunday morning attendance has been reduced to about sixty percent of what it was. Several families who signed up to be members have not been at a Sunday morning service since the stay at home orders came in March due to their health concerns (though they have been watching online). Furthermore, on any given Sunday, we seem to have several faithful families not in attendance because of symptoms or exposure to COVID-19. It does not seem to make sense for us to have a celebration Sunday with our first members when there will be many who are absent from church for health reasons.

When our church returns to “normal,” we plan to have our celebration Sunday service. In the weeks leading up to that Sunday, the elders and I will follow up with all who signed up, confirming their commitments. We will also follow up with the five families who are “on pause,” all of which have demonstrated faithful attendance through the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, it should be noted that as of this writing (November 2019), of the eight families who were not planning to become formal members, none have been in attendance at our church services since COVID-19 began in March 2019. The COVID-19 crisis has been enough to keep them away from church. This has been a verification their lack of commitment to become formal members of RVBC.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was to develop church membership at Rock Valley Bible Church (RVBC). With full confidence, I can say that this was a helpful project for our church. I say this because of the way that the project was chosen. It was not chosen by me alone, based upon my interests. Rather, it was chosen by the leaders of the church (and their wives). They identified the lack of a formal church membership as the greatest weakness of our church. Furthermore, the project was well-received by the church. Very few were opposed to becoming formal members of RVBC.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

Five goals were established at the beginning of this project to determine the effectiveness of this project. Each of these goals contained measurable criteria to determine the success or failure of these goals. In the following section of this paper, I will discuss each of these goals and will present the measurements taken to show the success or failure of each goal.

The first goal of my project was to develop a membership training program. This came in the form of four sermons. The success of this goal was measured by the feedback received from the rubric filled out by two elders and two local pastors (i.e. “experts”). Areas of evaluation include the following: Biblical Faithfulness, Scope, Methodology, and Practicality. Each of these areas were evaluated using the following criteria scale: insufficient = 1; requires attention = 2; sufficient = 3; and exemplary = 4. A copy of the evaluation form is found in appendix 1. Below is a summary of the feedback.

Table 3. Expert feedback on church membership sermons

Criteria (4 sermons evaluated by 4 experts)	Insufficient	Requires Attention	Sufficient	Exemplary	“Sufficient” or “Exemplary”
Biblical Faithfulness					
Theologically sound				16	16/16 = 100%
Proper use of Scripture				16	16/16 = 100%
Scope					
Covers RVBC			3	13	16/16 = 100%
Covers church membership			1	15	16/16 = 100%
Methodology					
Material is clear		1		15	15/16 = 94%
Could be retaught by another				16	16/16 = 100%
Practicality					
Contains applications		1	6	9	15/16 = 94%
Leads to a desire to be a church member			6	10	16/16 = 100%
Final Average:					126/128 = 98%

I received only two responses that were not “sufficient” or “exemplary.” The first was from an elder, who noticed a major typographical error in the third sermon of the series. I had accidentally duplicated several paragraphs in my manuscript. This was corrected before it was printed and sent to the two local pastors for review. The second response not being “sufficient” or “exemplary” was from the same elder for lack of practical application in my first sermon, “Church Membership in History.” Admittedly, the sermon was more informational and foundational than practical in its design. Nevertheless, I did add some emphasis upon the importance of understanding the historical context of church membership in order to embrace church membership at RVBC.

The first goal of my project was considered to be successfully met when a minimum of ninety percent of the evaluation criterion meet or exceed the sufficient level. The above table indicates that ninety-eight percent of the feedback exceeded the sufficient level. Thus, my first goal was successful.

The second goal of my project was to assess the current understanding of church membership among those at RVBC. This goal was measured by administering the Church Membership and Involvement Survey (CMIS) to those who attend RVBC. At the time the survey was administered, there were 85 adults and 75 children who regularly attended RVBC. These people come from 46 different families. Below is a table that represents the number of surveys that I received before beginning the four-week sermon series.

Table 3. Surveys received from those in the congregation

	Adults	Children (under 18)	Total surveys received	Total families represented
Initial Sunday	59	32	91	32
Before beginning the sermon series	14	1	15	9
Total:	73	33	106	41

On the initial Sunday when I administered the CMIS, I received 91 surveys, with 59 of them from adults, and 32 from children under 18. The next week, I contacted another 14 families who were not able to be at church on the Sunday when I administered the survey. A little more than half of these families responded and were able to fill out a survey before they heard any teaching from series. So, a good majority of the church was willing and able to fill out surveys (73 of the 85 adults).

With all of the surveys in hand, I was eager to evaluate them and see what the people of the church understood about church membership. The most glaring observation I made was the lack of understanding about church membership in history (i.e. the first five questions of the survey). This is to be expected. Those in our church are familiar with their Bibles, as we preach from it week by week, and year by year. But they do not hear as much about the history of the church. This increased my level of anticipation in preaching my first sermon, “Church Membership in History,” as I knew that much of this would be new information for many in the church.

The second goal of my project was considered to be successfully met when thirty families complete the CMIS and the survey has been analyzed yielding a clearer picture of the current understanding of church membership and involvement in the life of the church. In all I obtained surveys from forty-one different families. This is more than the thirty families that the goal required. Furthermore, I did analyze these surveys before I began my sermon series by looking them over carefully. Thus, my second goal was successful.

The third goal of my project was to implement the membership training program. In my case, this meant preaching a four-week sermon series on church membership. This goal was to be measured in the number of adults who filled out a second survey.

Below is a graph to indicate the time it took to receive the second (post-test) surveys from the adults. The dates below indicate when the surveys were filled out. The first “Sunday” on the chart represents the date of my last sermon (February 9, 2020).

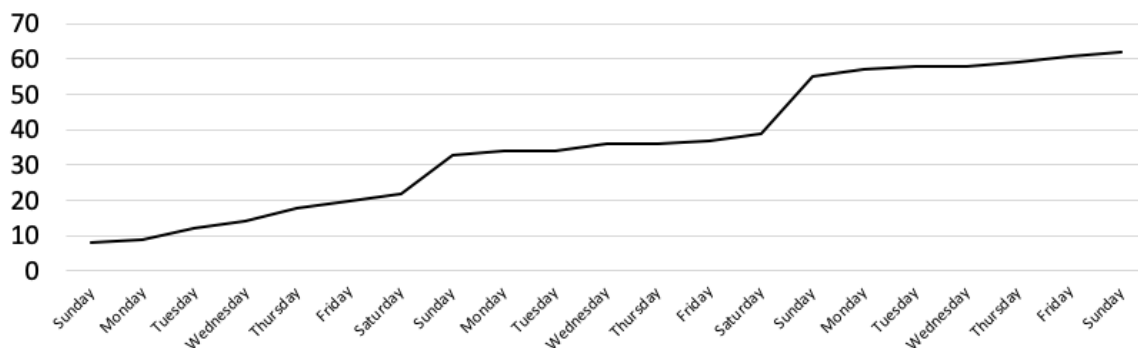


Figure 5. Total adult post-surveys received by date

As one can tell by the graph in figure 5, spikes occurred every Sunday. This is because people were at church and were reminded to fill out the surveys. Additionally, the surveys were readily accessible at the church building. Many people simply took a survey and filled it out after the end of one of our worship services.

The third goal of my project was to be considered successfully met when seventy percent of the adults who completed the CMIS attend the training program, which means listening to the sermons live or by recording. Since I received 73 initial survey from adults, I needed 52 adult surveys to be returned to me for my goal to be successful. This threshold was crossed two weeks after I finished my sermon series. However, I continued to collect surveys for another week to increase the size of my final data set. My final data set contains 62 adult surveys (and 14 surveys filled out by those under eighteen). Thus, my third goal was successful.

The fourth goal of my project was to increase the knowledge of church membership among those at RVBC. This has been observed through a graphical presentation of the data collected in the CMIS in chapter 4, figures 3 and 4. This increase can also be demonstrated through a numerical analysis by performing a *t*-test on the data set.

The fourth goal of my project was considered to be successfully met when the *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrates a positive statistically significant improvement in the pre-survey and post-survey scores. In performing a *t*-test using paired two samples for means with a null hypothesis, the result yields a p-value of 4.76×10^{-14} . This miniscule number is far less than the standard significance level of 0.05 used in social sciences. We can be certain that the sermons preached at RVBC increased the knowledge of church membership at RVBC. This shows that statistical significant improvement has been met. Thus, my fourth goal was successful.¹

The fifth goal of my project was to persuade those in the church to embrace the changes that an official church membership will bring. This involved talking with every family unit in the church to determine who was willing to pursuing church membership and who was not. For those who were willing, they must fill out and sign the “Expression of Commitment” form,² which includes several commitments, a testimony, and an interview with me.

The fifth goal was measured by the number of those who committed themselves to being a member. This goal was considered to be successfully met when at least three-fourths of the adults who completed the CMIS sign up to become a member of the church and complete an interview with me. Since 62 adults completed both the pre-survey and post-survey, this translates to 47 (or more) adults. During the implementation of church membership, 50 of these adults signed up to become formal members. Thus, my fifth goal was successful.

¹I also ran a *t*-test on the 14 surveys I received from those under eighteen years of age. The result yields a p-value of 3.37×10^{-3} . This is also less than the standard significance level of 0.05 used in social sciences. It is encouraging to me to know that my teaching was effective enough that even children grew in their understanding of church membership.

²See appendix 8.

Strengths of the Project

The primary strength of this project was the full support of the church in pursuing this project. The church paid for all tuition and books. I was reimbursed for all travel expenses occurred during my trips to SBTS in Louisville. I was permitted to work on this project during my regular working hours. Furthermore, the leadership of the church encouraged me on several occasions to prioritize the next step of this project over my regular pastoral responsibilities. Without this support, I doubt whether this project would ever have been completed.

Another strength of this project was the thorough process required to implement a formal church membership. I was able to study the topic of church membership intensely to gain a strong depth of understanding. I read many books and articles on the subject. I had countless conversations with people in the church as well as fellow pastor friends about church membership. My deep study resulted in a sermon series that was well researched and well prepared. Because of this deep preparation, the leadership of the church was able to understand and fully embrace the changes that would come. The congregation was also prepared to embrace the changes that would come because they knew that this project was conducted with oversight of our elders and faculty of SBTS.

A third strength to this project was the first sermon I preached, “Church Membership in History.” This sermon was key in leading the congregation through the changes that were coming to our church. It helped people to understand that there are many ways to practice church membership. So, our transition from informal membership to formal membership was not a transition from an unbiblical practice to biblical one. Rather, it was part of the growth of our church in administrating matters of the church better than before. This thought helped people to embrace more easily the change that formal membership will bring to our church.

Weaknesses of the Project

The greatest weakness of this project is that everybody in the church did not fill out a form become formal members of the church. While this is almost to be expected, it was my hope that we could see everyone come on board with the changes we brought to the church. As a result, it has brought a new type of division in the church between those who have chosen to “sign up” and those who did not. In most of the cases, this division was simply clarifying the status of those who are fully committed to the church and those who want to keep their church commitment on their own terms. However, this was not always the case. Some, who are deeply committed to the church, chose not to “sign up” as formal members. Their reasons are varied. But this has created a new type of division in the life of the church that never existed before. It is a new dynamic that our church needs to deal with now.

Another weakness of this project is the challenge of bringing in so many new members all at once. This required a large push for people to fill out forms. It required much effort to meet with every family in the church in a short period of time to work through the matters of membership with them. But this weakness is intrinsic to the nature of the project. Going forward, these forms and meetings will not be so hurried, as we will bring in new families one at a time, rather than the whole church at once.

A final weakness of this project is that it did not create any sort of curriculum moving forward with new people that join the church in membership. This project was rightly focused upon transitioning our church from practicing informal membership to practicing formal membership. This required a little bit different focus than is required for bringing new members into the church. New members will not be wrestling with the transition in the practices of membership. Rather, their focus will be upon understanding what membership is and what our church’s vision and focus are. This will require a little more work moving forward. However, my third and fourth sermons form a good start of

a future curriculum, as they deal with expectations of members and with the vision and values of RVBC.

What I Would Do Differently

One of the greatest difficulties I found during this life of this project was the multi-tasking effort that it took to complete. I found it very difficult to preach and to write at the same time on different subjects. I spoke with a pastor friend who received his Doctor of Ministry from SBTS about this phenomenon and he expressed a similar difficulty. He told me, “The gospel of Matthew received the short end of the stick during my doctoral work.” In my case, it was Romans that received the short end of the stick. Looking back, I would have put in more effort to get away from the weekly responsibility of preaching to have some study sabbaticals to finish the project sooner.

Another change I would make to my project is the scope of the research I completed in chapter 2. Early in my project, I selected five passages of Scripture to research in depth, each of which have bearing upon church membership. I do not regret any of the study that I put forth in these passages. However, when it came time to preach my sermons to lead our congregation from informal membership to formal church membership, my focus was broader than these five passages alone. Looking back, I would have increased the number of passages of Scripture to focus on in chapter 2, looking at each of them with a bit less depth. I would have found some in-depth study on the following verses to be helpful: Acts 2:42; Rom 15:7; 1 Cor 5:9-13; 1 Cor 12:12-31; Titus 1:5 and 1 Pet 4:10-11.

Theological Reflections

When I decided to pursue a Doctor of Ministry degree, one of the first choices confronting me was the concentration of study that I would pursue. As a pastor who preaches weekly, it would have been natural for me to focus upon preaching. I am sure that this would have proved profitable. However, after some counsel from the elders and

deacons of our church, I chose to focus upon a perceived area of weakness in my ministry: leadership. Little did I understand how leadership-intensive this project would prove to be. Whenever you bring change in a church, leadership is demanded. When this change confronts decades of practice, this requires even more leadership. When the change touches everyone in the church, the leadership demands are still greater.

This project brought about such a change. Rock Valley Bible Church transitioned from practicing informal church membership to practicing formal church membership. This transition confronted a change in practice from what had been in place since the inception of the church two decades ago. Further, this change caused everyone in the church to determine whether or not they were willing to become a formal member of the church. The leadership demands of guiding such a process were great. They involved mobilizing support for the change, presenting the change to the entire congregation, and working with everyone in the congregation on an individual level to bring about the change. It has stretched my leadership skills, which is exactly the area of concentration that my studies helped equip me to do.

Regarding the church, this change of membership practices will not be inconsequential to the life of RVBC. It has changed a culture of a church. This change will continue on for years to come.

Personal Reflections

I found this project to be very challenging. I have told many people who asked how my Doctor of Ministry project is going, “This is one of the most difficult things I have ever done.” The pressure to finish this project hung over my head for several years. Of course, now that I have finished the project, I have found the effort to be worth it. I remember hearing an author questioned about whether he enjoys writing. He said, “I enjoy having written.” This is my sentiment as well.

I am thankful to God that this project was fully supported by the church. From the beginning, I had the full encouragement of the leadership of the church to continue on. I had complete financial backing. Without this support, I fear that I may not have completed this project. It would have been too easy for me to quit. But the pressure of the church's direction and vision for this project kept pressing me forward to completion.

The timing of this project a gift from the Lord. I preached the four membership sermons in January and February of 2020. I determined that March 1, 2020, was the final deadline for receiving surveys back from the congregation. I spent the month of March writing the majority of chapters 4 and 5 above with the results from the surveys. During this time, people were given time to consider membership and fill out their membership forms. I conducted my first membership interview on April 1, 2020. The membership interviews had to be finished before my summer sabbatical began on May 18, 2020. So, I spent a month and a half connecting with every family in the church. I did not realize until half-way through the interviews of what a great blessing this was. I was able to talk one-on-one with every family in the church in the six weeks prior to leaving for the entire summer. I would highly recommend this sort of personal engagement with any pastor prior to a sabbatical.

Conclusion

As I reflect upon the end of a long road traveled with this project, I realize that this was far more than an academic exercise. It will have tangible results in the life of the church. Rock Valley Bible Church will never be the same. I trust in the Lord that it will all prove to be for the benefit of the church that he is building (Matt 16:18).

I am thankful to God for the abundance of his steadfast love to help me through this project. I am grateful for the people that the Lord has gathered at Rock Valley Bible Church. They show me far more love and support than I deserve.

APPENDIX 1

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAM EVALUATION

The following evaluation was sent to an expert panel of two RVBC elders and two local pastors. The panel evaluated the program to ensure it is biblically faithful, sufficiently thorough, and practically applicable.

Church Membership Training Program Evaluation					
1 = insufficient; 2 = requires attention; 3 = sufficient; 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Biblical Faithfulness					
The material is theologically sound.					
All Scripture is properly interpreted, explained, and applied.					
Scope					
The material sufficiently covers the history/vision/mission of Rock Valley Bible Church.					
The material sufficiently covers church membership.					
Methodology					
The material is clear.					
The material could be re-taught by another person.					
Practicality					
The material contains practical applications.					
The material leads the participant to desire church membership.					

Please include any additional comments on the other side of this form.

Name of evaluator: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 2

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND INVOLVEMENT SURVEY (CMIS)

The following instrument is the Church Membership and Involvement Survey (CMIS). Some general questions are followed by a twenty question survey with a six point Likert scale. The final five questions (21-25) are intended to measure church involvement. The instrument's purpose is to assess one's theological understanding of church membership and one's involvement in the life of the church.

The following table shows the correlation between the material included in the sermons and the questions on the survey.

Table A1. Correlation of material from the sermons and the survey questions

Sermon Title	Survey Questions
"Church Membership in History"	#1-5
"Church Membership in the Bible"	#6-10
"Church Membership in Practice"	#11-15
"Church Membership at Rock Valley Bible Church"	#16-20

Below is the actual text used in the CMIS. For participants under 18 years-old, a permission slip by a parent or guardian was required in compliance with the Research Ethics Committee at SBTS. This is included in appendix 3.

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND
INVOLVEMENT SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the current understanding of church membership and involvement at Rock Valley Bible Church. This research is being conducted by Steve Brandon for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research you will answer questions before the project and 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 completing this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Date: _____

Name (please print): _____

Age (if under 18): _____ (A parent/guardian must give permission for anyone under 18 to participate in this research)

Part 1: General Questions:

1. How long have you been attending Rock Valley Bible Church? _____
(Give your best guess)

2. Describe your current relationship with Rock Valley Bible Church:

____ I am a member of Rock Valley Bible Church

____ I am a regular attender of Rock Valley Bible Church

____ I am not a regular attender of Rock Valley Bible Church

3. Have you been a member of a church in the past?

If so, list the churches.

Directions: The questions in this section 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; please circle the appropriate answer.

Part 2: Historical Perspective

- | | |
|---|-----------------|
| 1. Churches in the New Testament era grew rapidly with formal structures of church membership in place. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 2. After the New Testament, during the time of persecution (circa 70-313 A. D.), church membership standards were more rigorous than before. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 3. From the legalization of Christianity to the Reformation (circa 313-1517 A. D.), when persecution was minimal, church membership standards were relaxed. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 4. During the Reformation, churches required church members to be regenerate. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 5. Today, most churches practice membership the same way. | SD D DS AS A SA |

Part 3: Biblical Foundations

- | | |
|---|-----------------|
| 6. Church membership is mentioned in the Bible. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 7. Rock Valley Bible Church has church members. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 8. The practice of church discipline assumes the practice of church membership. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 9. Jesus wants the membership of the church to be clearly defined. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 10. Church membership helps church leaders to know who they are responsible to care for and to shepherd. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 11. The “one another” commands in the New Testament provide expectations of what is required of church members. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 12. One third of the “one another” commands in the New Testament are commands to love one another. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 13. One third of the “one another” commands in the New Testament relate to the importance of unity of the church. | SD D DS AS A SA |

- | | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 14. Church membership helps to insure that everyone in the church believes the same things. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 15. Church members are commanded to meet together regularly. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 16. The vision of Rock Valley Bible Church is to “Enjoy His Grace and Extend His Glory.” | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 17. Rock Valley Bible Church values the word of God, the power of God, and the grace of God. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 18. Believers need to hear the gospel. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 19. Acts 2:42 provides a good template of core commitments for those in the church to practice. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 20. Church membership is an opportunity for believers to identify the local church where they are committed to serve. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

Part 4: Church Involvement

- | | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 21. I am very involved at Rock Valley Bible Church | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 22. I plan to be a formal member of Rock Valley Bible Church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

Directions: Give your best numerical estimate to the following statements:

23. In a typical month (with the exception of vacation or sickness or holidays), I usually attend _____ events/meetings of Rock Valley Bible Church (at the building or in homes).
24. In a typical week (with the exception of vacation or sickness or holidays), I connect socially with _____ families from Rock Valley Bible Church outside of official events/meetings of the church included above.
25. In a typical year, I visit _____ different homes of those who attend Rock Valley Bible Church.

Part 5: Comments

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

APPENDIX 3

PARENT/GUARDIAN PERMISSION FOR
CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND
INVOLVEMENT SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

You are being requested to give permission for a minor or member of a vulnerable population under your legal supervision to participate in a study designed to identify the current understanding of church membership and involvement at Rock Valley Bible Church. This research is being conducted by Steve Brandon for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research, a person will answer questions before a sermon series on church membership and will answer the same questions at the conclusion of the sermon series. Any information provided will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will a person's name be reported, or a person's name identified with his or her responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary, and the person you are giving approval to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By signing your name below, you are giving informed consent for the designated minor or member of a vulnerable population to participate in this research if he or she desires.

Date: _____

Participant Name: _____

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

APPENDIX 4

SERMON #1: CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN HISTORY

As most all of you know, we are beginning a series of messages on church membership, because, at Rock Valley Bible Church, we are working toward implementing a formalized church membership. Until this point in time at Rock Valley Bible Church, we have practiced informal church membership. People have come to church. Those who have stayed around have become “members.” But the process in which has been very informal.

I like to compare our process with acquaintances who become friends without thinking much about their friendship. You meet someone for the first time. You like the person, so you begin spend more time with him or her. And then more time. And eventually you become friends. You become good friends. All this takes place without much thinking about it or talking about it. You simply know that you like your friend’s company, and so you seek it out. This is what happens at Rock Valley Bible Church.

In a typical experience, a family visits our church and is welcomed by those at the church. After a few weeks of visiting, they like what they see. They like what they hear. I will often initiate a conversation. I may call on the phone. I may meet with them at church. We may have them over for dinner or dessert at our house. During that time, I have an opportunity to meet the new family and share a little about the church and ways to be involved. We place them on our church-wide email list so that they may understand what is happening at the church. Eventually, those who hang around are included in our directory and become a part of our church. This process is very organic and doesn’t quite happen the same way for everyone who comes.

Now, with formal church membership, we are going to initiate a process to formalize our relationship. It’s like a boyfriend and girlfriend who have a DTR discussion (that is a “Define the Relationship” discussion). And that’s really what we are seeking to do at Rock Valley Bible Church. We are seeking to define our relationships with each other at Rock Valley Bible Church. We are seeking to clarify question like, “How does the church work?” “What does the church believe?” “What is expected of you?” “What can you expect from others?” “What can you expect from the leaders of the church?” With church membership, we are seeking to define what it means to be a member of Rock Valley Bible Church.

At this point, there may be questions in your mind, “Why are you doing this?” “Why are you doing this now?” “Is it because what you weren’t Biblical before? And now you are seeking to be Biblical?” “What does this say about what we have practiced?” “Have we been doing it all wrong before?”

Regarding my message today, here’s my argument: the Bible is silent on how exactly to practice church membership. It can be practiced in many different ways. The title of my message is, “Church Membership in History.” I want to show you how church membership has been practiced in history. We will find is that church membership has

been practiced in many different ways throughout the history of the church.

At times in history believers became members of a church very quickly after they came to faith. At other times of history, there were rigorous requirements to be a church member, which required extensive seasons of teaching and testing and examinations before becoming a member of a church. At other times there was very little demanded of a church member. Today, sentiments about church membership vary. Some believe that church membership is necessary, while others think it is optional.

There has never been agreement in the church as to why or how we should practice church membership. Now, that doesn't mean that church membership isn't important. It's simply to say that there are many ways that people have looked at the issue. And the point is this: our current membership process at Rock Valley Bible Church isn't unique to history. Others have practiced membership how we have done. We (as elders) simply think that there is a better way for us to go in the future. Over the next few weeks, I trust that you will see this.

Let's begin with Church Membership during the days of the Bible. During those days, we see the following:

1. Rapid Membership

Let's start at the beginning. So, open your Bibles to Acts, chapter 2. For all intents and purposes, Acts 2 records the beginning of the church. Before the coming of Jesus to earth, the nation of Israel was the people of God. The center place of worship was Jerusalem. At the heart of Jerusalem was the temple. With the coming of Jesus, all of that changed. The church has become the people of God. Local churches have been scattered across the entire world.

And it all began on the day of Pentecost, as told in Acts, chapter 2. On this day, Jews from all around the world came to worship in Jerusalem. Let's pick it up in verse 1,

Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Here we see the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. They were supernaturally empowered to speak in other languages that were previously unknown to them. That's the testimony of those who were in Jerusalem.

Acts 2:5-13

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."

And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

There was massive confusion from the people as to what all of the meant. The people were bewildered. Some claimed that the disciples were drunk. So Peter stood up and delivered his famous sermon to clarify what was happening.

Peter began by addressing the confusion of the people. The people weren't drunk. But their languages were a fulfillment of the prophet Joel. Peter then continued to tell about Jesus. That the Jews in Jerusalem delivered him up to Pilate and had him crucified. But Jesus was raised from the dead, in fulfillment of Psalm 16. Peter's conclusion comes in verse 36.

Acts 2:36

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

The people were cut to the heart (Acts 2:37). Peter commanded them to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38). And then, in verse 41 we see what happened.

Acts 2:41

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Here we see the beginning of the church. Some three thousand people joined the first day! Regarding membership in the church, this is what I call “Rapid Membership.”

Now, as we are thinking about church membership, I want for you to consider how these people were incorporated into the church. What sort of “church membership” program did they have? They didn't have an eight-week class introducing new members into the church, with a formal recognition at the end. There were simply too many coming into the church at the same time to do this.

Furthermore, at this time, the church had very little established by way of formal structure. The only leaders in the church were the apostles. And you had thousands of people believing! It was simply impossible to have any church membership program developed. People were rapidly brought into the membership of the church.

This is compounded by the fact that verse 47 indicates that “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” In other words, every day, more and more people were being added to the church. Only a short time later we read,

Acts 4:4

But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

So within a few weeks or months, you had 5,000 believers in the church, with little structural leadership of the church in place.

As you trace through the history of the New Testament, you see how the structural leadership of the church developed. It often developed in response to the number of people in the churches. In Acts 6, you see some men appointed to help the apostles in the serving of tables. They were appointed because the burden of service was too great. They needed help.

In Acts 14:23, you see Paul appointing elders in every church. In other words, the church formed first, without any formal leadership in place. Believers in Christ simply gathered together for worship and edification. Then, the leaders were established afterwards in efforts to shepherd the people. Any formal church membership must have come after this.

In fact, it is curious to note that Acts 15 records a major conflict at Jerusalem between the Judaizers and the apostles concerning the requirements to be placed upon those who believe in Jesus. The major question was this: “Do believers in Jesus have to be circumcised to be saved?” The Judaizers were saying, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). The apostles were arguing that you come into the church through faith alone and that circumcision was not necessary.

John LeVack points out that “the first considerable dispute within the ranks of the Church was concerned with this very issue of Church membership—who is inside the Church and who is outside.”¹ And as it comes to church membership, this is the issue. Who is inside the church? Who is outside the church? And this is what we are seeking to do with a formal church membership. We are seeking to make it clear who is inside the church, and who is outside the church.

Over the next few decades, the gospel message spread quickly throughout all of Asia Minor and as far as Rome (more than 1,000 miles from Jerusalem). The church experienced rapid growth. As the gospel spread, these baptized believers began gathering together in local churches for worship and for edification (Heb 10:24-25). The New Testament identifies dozens of these churches. Paul identifies those in these churches as “members.” He writes,

1 Corinthians 12:27

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

However, one will search the Bible in vain to find details concerning the process by which believers joined these churches. The New Testament contains no indication of “New Members” classes or church covenants or voting in church members. Believers simply united themselves with other believers.

The reason for this rapid membership process was due, in part, to the newness of the church. Organizational structures of the church (i.e. membership and leadership) would develop over time. As a result, the New Testament doesn’t outline a clear process of how church membership was practiced (or should be practiced). As history progressed beyond the apostles, we see the development of “Rigorous Membership.”

2. Rigorous Membership

This is seen during the post-apostolic church, the time after the apostles (circa 100AD - 325AD). During this time, we begin to see a large gap of time between faith in Christ and membership into the church. People were not accepted rapidly into the membership of the church simply on the basis of their profession of faith in Christ. There began to be a time of rigorous instruction and examination between faith and membership.

This delay is due, in part, to the lapse of time after the apostles. The time gave those in

the post-apostolic church to think through church structures, like leadership and membership. The post-apostolic church took great care to verify (as much as humanly possible) that professing believers were genuine before allowing them into membership of the church.

Another factor for the delay in membership was the persecution that the church experienced during this time. In fact, this was one of the greatest eras of persecution in the entire history of the church. And the church had seen many professing believers join the church and then fall away when the persecution proved to be too difficult.

Faced with beatings, imprisonment, or death, many church members denied the faith they once professed. But later, they wanted to be received back into church membership. This was a huge issue in the church. These people were even given names. They were called “penitents.” They were not received back into the church quickly. They were given years of time to prove the sincerity of their repentance.

In light of these factors, the post-apostolic church developed a lengthy “screening” period before membership. Those who came to faith in Christ and had expressed a desire to be included in the membership of the church were called, “catechumens.” We get the word, “catechism” from this word. It denotes those who need to be taught. In the church today, we “catechize” our children. That is, we teach them the “catechism.”

These catechumens, “... were regarded not as unbelievers, but as half-Christians, and were accordingly allowed to attend all the exercises of worship, except the celebration of the sacraments.”² That is, they were brought into the church and were able to hear the teaching of the church and enjoy the fellowship of the church, but they just weren’t able to fully participate in the life of the church. They first needed to be examined.

These catechumens were carefully instructed over a long period of time in the ways of the faith before baptism and membership. This is in remarkable contrast to the days of the New Testament in which no such delay was experienced. The Ethiopian Eunuch was baptized immediately upon his profession of faith (Acts 8:35-39). Friends and family of Cornelius were likewise baptized immediately upon believing. But this was not permitted in the post-apostolic era. Instead, there was “a very thorough preparation before entrance into the privileges of church membership” according to Peter Toon.³

This lengthy preparation served as “a bulwark of the church against unworthy members.”⁴ The entire membership process was not easy, but it enabled those interested in the church to weigh their decision to follow Christ. It also allowed the leaders of the church to discern the character and genuineness of those wishing to join the church.

We have several documents from church history that give us examples of the early church curriculum that was taught to prospective church members. One example is the “Didache.” It is a brief document, about the length of Paul’s epistle to the Galatians. Most scholars date the document to the late first or early second century, somewhere near 100 A.D give or take a few decades. So, it was written close to the time of the apostles. The Didache consists mostly of instructions for holy living. It was only after learning the Christian morality presented in the Didache that one was considered ready for baptism.

Another example of documents from this era is called, “The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus.” It is about twice as long as the Didache. It is dated about a hundred years later than the Didache. The “Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus” requires a three-year instruction period for the catechumens, yet leaves room for exceptions. It reads, “Let catechumens spend three years as hearers of the word. But if a man is zealous and

perseveres well in the work, it is not the time but his character that is decisive.”

The Apostolic Tradition is aware of the reality of persecution and potential martyrdom. It reads, “If a catechumen should be arrested for the name of the Lord, let him not hesitate about bearing his testimony; for if it should happen that they treat him shamefully and kill him, he will be justified, for he has been baptized in his own blood.”

Under persecution, this is how the church practiced membership. It rigorously guarded the door of entrance into membership. The church knew that church members would all be tested. And the church wanted to do all it could to insure that those in the church were genuine believers. So, they took their time, and demanded much proving of church members. The times of persecution required it!

However, as Christianity prevailed in the world, and the number of churches increased, and persecution from the governing authorities was reduced, the church transitioned from “Rigorous Membership” to “Relaxed Membership.”

3. Relaxed Membership

That is, requirements of church membership were made easier. This was a process from the legalization of Christianity to the time of the Reformation. The best way to understand “Relaxed Church Membership” is to understand Constantine the Great (272-337). He did much during his reign to further the cause of Christianity. First of all, he played an active role in issuing the Edit of Milan (313 AD), which gave Christians legal status and helped to end the centuries of persecution. Second, he called for the counsel of Nicaea in 325 AD, where the Nicene Creed was developed, which helped to unite Christians world-wide. Finally, his death-bed conversion led to the wide-spread acceptance of Christianity.

Philip Schaff notes that Constantine “was the chief instrument for raising the church from the low estate of oppression and persecution to well-deserved honor and power.”⁵ Through the influence of Constantine, Christianity became the default religion of the Roman Empire. This had huge implications upon church membership.

With the absence of persecution, it was made easier and easier for people to become church members. In fact, there was great cultural pressure to be members of the church. It took more fortitude not to be a member of the church than to be a member of the church, as you had to go against the culture of the day.

After the days of Constantine, people born into the Roman Empire were essentially born into the church. Thus arose the predominance of the practice of infant baptism. In fact, church records of baptisms often became the official records of citizenship in some regions. Jeremy Kimble well describes the slide from rigorous membership to relaxed membership. He writes,

As infant baptism became increasingly popular, less emphasis was placed on teaching adults prior to baptism. Instead, increasingly churches sought to baptize infants and prepare those children, through confirmation, for full membership. As the church spread into the west, it became a common pattern to baptize and allow someone into membership with no catechetical instruction. In many cases, the only requirements were renunciation of the pagan gods and a willingness to be baptized. As such, church membership, whether initiated through infant baptism

or adult confession, had lost its meaning in terms of separating the regenerate from the rest of the world.⁶

In other words, as Christianity came to be the dominant religion across the Roman Empire, it became easier and easier to become a church members. Any membership requirements were relaxed. Gone was the fundamental distinction between those who were genuine in their faith and those who had none, as the culture made it easy for nominal believers to join the church. In fact, (as Jeremy Kimble continues), “infant baptism was a sign tantamount to both church membership and citizenship. This made church membership not a free decision based on conversion, but rather part and parcel of merely living in a certain geographical locale.”⁷

The result of this was many regions where everyone in the community was baptized as infants because of cultural norms., because everyone is a member of the church. The result of this “relaxed membership” is that it filled the churches with unbelievers. This was the way of the church for a thousand years, until the days of the Reformation, when the church began to practice (once again) “Regenerate Membership.”

4. Regenerate Membership

The days of the Reformation were marked by the rediscovery of the sole authority of the Scriptures and the grace of God in salvation. The cries of the Reformation were “Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Solus Christus, and Soli Deo Gloria.” That is, we look to Scripture alone as our spiritual authority. We are saved by God’s grace, not by our works. We are saved through faith in Christ, not by our own righteousness. We are saved by Christ alone, not the church or any sacrament. Our lives are to be lived for the glory of God alone. These are the things we embrace entirely at Rock Valley Bible Church.

Now, with the rediscovery of these things, many in the heritage of the Reformation have rethought church membership. Their responses have been varied. Some sought to redeem existing membership structures. Others sought a fresh start at what church membership is. Others sought a middle ground.

Among those who sought to redeem the existing practices of church membership were the Lutherans, the Reformed churches, and the Church of England. They continued in the ways of the Roman Catholic Church by continuing the practice of infant baptism. However, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, they didn’t rely upon any saving power in baptism. As a result, they elevated the importance of a confirmation process, whereby people can be taught the fundamentals of the faith (like the catechumens of the first centuries). Only upon a credible confession of faith after their training, were people “confirmed” as believers and brought into full membership of the church. This practice continues today among many evangelical Paedobaptists.

Among those who sought a fresh start in church membership practices were the Anabaptists. They rejected infant baptism and practiced believer’s baptism, which became the initiatory rite into full church membership. This brought about a voluntary membership of the committed. The fruit of this was a strong emphasis on community life as well as a practice of church discipline in order to protect the purity of the church. This

is the policy of the majority of Baptist churches today.

Among those seeking middle ground were those who practiced “Open Membership.” They were primarily Baptists who prioritized regenerate church membership over doctrinal positions. In particular, “They did not require credobaptism as a prerequisite to church membership or Communion.”

John Bunyan was one of their chief advocates. George Offor, editor of *The Works of John Bunyan*, offers a summary of Bunyan’s position,

[Bunyan] was satisfied that baptism is a personal duty, in respect of which every individual must be satisfied, in his own mind, and over which no church had any control; and that the only enquiry as to the fitness of a candidate for church fellowship should be, whether the regenerating powers of the Holy Ghost had baptized the spirit of the proposed member into newness of life.⁹

This position continues to be advocated today. The Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) accepts both Paedobaptists and Credobaptists into membership. Greg Strand writes of the EFCA, “We are baptist with a small ‘b’ in that what is critical for membership in a local church is true salvation. The fact that both credo and paedobaptism are allowed is a ‘significance of silence’ issue, i.e. we will debate it but not divide over it.”¹⁰ John Piper also has advocated for open membership.

Now, this survey of church history is only a sample of how the church has practiced church membership throughout her history. We have looked only at the largest, broadest strokes of church history. These strokes have progressed from “Rapid Membership” in the times of the New Testament to “Rigorous Membership” in the post-apostolic era to “Relaxed Membership” in the thousand years after Constantine to “Regenerate Membership” since the days of the Reformation. But no mention has been made of age-related questions of membership (or baptismal) candidates. No discussion has been offered of those who require membership classes or of the extent of catechetical instruction. Furthermore, nothing has been stated about “community membership” or “discipleship membership” or “covenant membership” or “renewable church membership.” Yet, enough has been said to affirm Nathan Finn’s statement, “In two millennia of Christian history, there has been considerable diversity in the prerequisites for and practice of church membership.”¹¹

This diversity continues into church membership practices today. We see this in my final point:

5. Recent Membership

By “Recent Membership,” I mean the current practice of church membership in the church today. First of all, opinions about its importance span the spectrum. Some view church membership as completely optional. Some view church membership as necessary. Wayne Mack summarizes the common reasoning of many:

In my over forty years of ministry, I’ve had many people say to me, ‘I’m not saved by church membership; I’m saved by the grace of God through faith. When I get to heaven, I’m not going to be there because I joined a church, but because I

repented of my sins and believed on Jesus Christ. So what difference does it make whether I'm a member of a local church or not?"¹²

Mark Dever holds that it makes a big difference. He claims that church membership is necessary. He says that the core of the issue is that Christians often tend to view their Christianity as "A personal relationship with God and not much else. ... Many Christians don't realize how this most important relationship with God necessitates a number of secondary personal relationships—the relationships that Christ establishes between us and his body, the Church."¹³

The reasons for these two extremes (church membership as optional and church membership as necessary) are vast and broad. Let's consider why some Christians consider church membership to be optional.

First of all, some have never even considered being a member at a church. They are ignorant of what the Bible says about church membership. They are ignorant of what their church teaches about church membership. In 2012 Grey Matter Research Consulting conducted a study among American adults who attend a place of worship once a month or more. Their conclusion is that there is a "widespread confusion and ignorance on the subject of official membership in a place of worship." The survey asked if their place of worship offers "any kind of official membership in the organization, or not." The study found that "Among all worship- goers,

48% say that such official membership is offered,
33% believe it is not, and
19% are not sure.

Statistics are a bit better among professing evangelicals. Among this group,

72% say that such official membership is offered,
14% believe it is not, and
14% are not sure.¹⁴

Second, some have come to view church membership as optional because of their own, personal experience. William Hendricks observed that "More and more Christians in North America are feeling disillusioned with the church and other formal, institutional expressions of Christianity." He wrote a book entitled, "Exit Interviews" in which he interviewed in depth more than a dozen disillusioned Christians who have left the church for various reasons. By relating their stories of disappointment and hurt, he points out that many of these "have remarkably vibrant spiritual lives and touchingly close friendships with a kindred spirit or two. But in the main, they tend to nurture their relationship with God apart from the traditional means of church and parachurch." He concludes by saying, "In the end, ... what matters when it comes to the church is neither membership nor attendance but spirituality—one's relationship with God and the implications of that relationship for day-to-day life."¹⁵ In other words, one's personal relationship with God is often considered to be so important that it trumps membership in a local church.

This leads us into a third reason why many consider church membership to be optional. Many believe that Christianity is simply a "personal relationship with Jesus." Did you know that this phrase a "personal relationship with Jesus" is not even in the Bible? Yet, as Trevan Wax says, "No phrase is more characteristic of evangelical lingo than this one."¹⁶

I will admit that emphasis upon "relationship" may be helpful to distance Christianity

from the rituals and rules of “religion.” However, it has some consequences. It can create a self-centered Christianity. This is illustrated in the lyrics of “Personal Jesus,” by Depeche Mode (a secular band):

Your own personal Jesus.
Someone to hear your prayers.
Someone who cares.¹⁷

Nothing in the song speaks of the glory of Christ or of our duty to serve him. It is all about Jesus who is ready to hear us and help us. This song is one of the most successful hits of all time. People love the idea of Jesus being our ever-ready servant.

With this perspective, it is no surprise, then, that some Christians are consumers, viewing church membership on their own terms through the lens of whether it will be a help or hindrance to their relationship with God. One man had a helpful story:

Take my friend Nathan. He attended *two* churches on Sundays—one because he liked their music, the other because he liked the preaching. And his involvement in both went no deeper. At the first church he’s slip out just before the last song wound down and drive to the other church five minutes away. He even factored in time to stop by McDonald’s for an Egg McMuffin. He timed it so that he’d be walking into the second church just as the pastor started to preach.¹⁸

Finally, there are those who would advocate against any sort of official church membership. This is especially the case when any sort of membership contract or church covenant is involved. Wade Burleson argues that who sign such a document are “handing over the authority of Jesus Christ ... to mere men.”¹⁹

On the other side of the spectrum are those who consider church membership to be necessary. Mark Dever lists church membership as one of his “Nine Marks of a Healthy Church.” He views membership as necessary because “membership in a local church is intended as a testimony to our membership in the universal church. Church membership does not save, but it is a reflection of salvation.”²⁰ In this way, church membership can be seen as a fruit of salvation, where God gives a desire to a believer in Jesus to unite with a visible assembly of believers.

Jonathan Leeman brings in another dimension to argue why church membership is necessary. He contends that those who argue that “church membership” is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible are looking at it wrong. He points out that membership is a “club word,” But the church is not a club. Rather, Leeman likens it to an embassy, a place where one nation has a presence inside of another nation. So, he argues, “When you open your Bible, stop looking for signs of a club with its voluntary members. Look instead for a Lord and his bound-together people.”²¹ Thus, Leeman and Dever argue: Church membership is necessary.

So, not only has church history demonstrated an array of church membership practices, but today, people are equally divided as to the importance of church membership today. In fact, even today, churches are across the spectrum when it comes to the practice of church membership.

Some churches (like Rock Valley Bible Church) have no formal church membership process. We simply affirm that all regular attenders are members. One church expresses it with these words,

We do not have a two-tier group attending our church. We consider all who attend our church to be members. There are no tests to take or forms to sign. The reason for this is that our elders feel a responsibility for all who involve themselves with [our church]. Since our church is elder ruled, the congregation does not vote and therefore the stability of the church is not threatened by this approach.²²

Other churches will formally accept anyone who comes forward near the end of a worship service, professes faith in Christ, and a desire to join their church. Most churches will embrace members only after some sort of membership class (or classes), followed by various other assignments. Some require one class. Others require four classes. Others require eight classes.

Most churches with membership have some sort of membership covenant. But the content of these covenants vary greatly. For instance, one church simply states that, “When you become a member, you are agreeing to support this ministry with your finances, time, and gifts and talents. You are also agreeing to live a lifestyle that reflects a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and allow yourself to be held accountable to the spiritual oversight of [the] Elders.”²³ On the other hand, I know of a church where the membership covenant is more than three pages long! It’s filled with a detailed description of commitments that a member of a church will make. It contains commitments to attendance at meetings, morality standards of the church, financial support, maintaining peace in the body, and support and submission to the leadership. It contains commitments of one’s personal devotion to God, family life, evangelism, Christian liberty and separation from the world.

All of this is my point: there is no historical agreement on why and how to practice church membership. Which means that we, at Rock Valley Bible Church, have great liberty in choosing how it is that we practice our church membership. And as you all know, it has always been my heart to submit our church to what the Bible says.

Next week, we will look at the issue of church membership in the Bible.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church
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For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

¹John G. Levack, *The Potential Church: Lectures on the Meaning of Church Membership under the Terms of the Chalmers Lectureship Trust* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrews Press, 1982), 23.

²Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, Ante-Nicene Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 256.

³Peter Toon, “Catechumens” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 201.

⁴Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol 2, 256.

⁵Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 12.

⁶Jeremy M. Kimble, *40 Questions About Church Membership and Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2017), 59.

⁷Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 59.

⁸Nathan A. Finn, “A Historical Analysis of Church Membership,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, ed. John S. Hammett & Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2012), 53.

⁹John Bunyan, *The Whole Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 2, ed. George Offor (London: Blackie and Son, 1854), 592.

¹⁰Greg Strand, “Baptism: Infant and Believer,” Evangelical Free Church of America, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.efca.org/blog/understanding-scripture/baptism-infant-and-believer>. It is worthy to point out that Strand speaks with some authority regarding the Evangelical Free Church of America, having written *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Free Church of America*.

¹¹Nathan A Finn, “A Historical Analysis of Church Membership,” 75.

¹²Wayne Mack, *To Be or Not to Be a Church Member, That Is the Question!* (Greenville, SC: Calvary Press Publishing, 2004), 15.

¹³Mark Dever, *What Is a Healthy Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 21-22.

¹⁴Grey Matter Research and Consulting, “Study Shows Widespread Confusion and Ignorance on the Subject of Official Membership in a Place of Worship,” accessed May 3, 2018, http://www.greymatterresearch.com/index_files/Membership.htm.

¹⁵William D. Hendricks, *Exit Interviews* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 17, 252, italics his.

¹⁶Trevin Wax, “‘Personal Relationship with Jesus’ – Helpful or Not?,” accessed May 4, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/personal-relationship-with-jesus-helpful-or-not/>.

¹⁷Depeche Mode, “Personal Jesus” accessed April 17, 2019, <http://archives.depechemode.com/lyrics/personaljesus.html>.

¹⁸Joshua Harris, *Stop Dating the Church* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), 17, italics his.

¹⁹Wade Burleson, *Fraudulent Authority* (Enid, OK: Istorina Ministries, 2017), 53.

²⁰Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 152.

²¹Jonathan Leeman. *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 26.

²²“Valley Bible Church Distinctives,” Valley Bible Church, accessed November 27, 2018, https://valleybible.net/church_distinctives.php.

²³“Membership,” Heartland Community Church, accessed February 27, 2019, <https://heartland.cc/ministries/membership/3/>.

APPENDIX 5

SERMON #2: CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN THE BIBLE

As most all of you know, we are in the midst of a series on church membership. This is because at Rock Valley Bible Church, we are working toward implementing a formalized church membership. Last week, we saw how church membership has been practiced in many different ways throughout the history of the church.

In the early church, we saw **rapid membership**. As the church grew rapidly, so did its membership, without much form or structure. Leaders were often set in place only after a group of people were gathering together for worship. In the post-apostolic church, we saw **rigorous membership**. As the church settled into organizational structures, there began to be a lapse of time between faith and membership. This was done, in part, because of the persecution they faced. It was important that prospective members be tested before they were accepted into membership. In the church after Constantine, we saw **relaxed membership**. As the default religion in the empire was Christianity, those born into the empire were assumed to be Christians and baptized as children. This continued for 1,000 years. In the church after the Reformation, we saw **regenerate membership**. That is, churches sought to accept only genuine believers into membership in their churches.

And when it comes to church membership in recent history, sentiments span the spectrum from optional to necessary. Some think that church membership is totally optional. “If church membership suits your fancy, that’s fine, you can become a member of a church. But you think that it’s better for you not to be a church member, that’s fine as well, whatever works best for you.” That’s what some people think. Others think that church membership is necessary, though not necessary for your eternal salvation. These people see church membership as a fruit of salvation. That is, actively engaging in loving and serving other believers in a covenant community gives evidence to your salvation.

Even churches that practice church membership do it differently. In some churches, you can become a member simply by coming forward at the end of the service, confessing faith in Jesus, and expressing your desire to be a member. In other churches, it takes several months and many classes and pages of application and several interviews and a final vote before you can become members of a church.

The reason why there is a discrepancy in the various attitudes toward church membership is because the Bible is silent on exactly how church membership should be practiced. But that doesn’t mean that church membership isn’t Biblical.

A pastor friend of mine said it this way, “Church membership is assumed in the Bible.” That is, there isn’t any command in the Bible for you to be a member of the church. Because, when you come to faith, you are brought into the church. Paul writes to those in Corinth,

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

Paul is talking about spiritual baptism that comes to all who believe in Jesus. And “we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:13). That is, we have all been baptized into the church. All believers in Jesus have been brought into the church as members of the church. And that’s why you don’t see any verse in the Bible that says, “You must be a member of the church,” or, “You must join a church.” This is because when you believe, you are placed into the church by the Spirit.

Now, exactly how this membership is expressed is a matter of freedom. The Bible give no direction on how church membership is to be practiced. As a result, church membership is practiced in different ways in different churches.

At Rock Valley Bible Church, we have practiced “informal church membership.” That is, we have not added a formal process by which you officially “join” the church. The way that people join Rock Valley Bible Church is much more natural.

In a typical experience, a family visits our church on Sunday morning and is welcomed by those at the church. After a few weeks of visiting, I will often make some more personal contact and visit the family in their home, or, we might have them over to our house for dinner. During that time, I have an opportunity to meet the new family, to hear of their faith journey and to share a little about the church and ways to be involved. We place them on our church-wide email list so that they may understand what is happening at the church. Eventually, those who hang around are included in our directory and become a part of our church. This process is very organic and doesn’t quite happen the same way for everyone who comes. But it gives you a bit of what our “membership” process looks like. It’s very informal.

Our church operates like acquaintances who become friends without thinking much about the process or what exactly it means that they are “friends.” Now, as it comes to church membership at Rock Valley Bible Church, we are seeking to make a bit of a change. And for the most part, the change is going to be like a dating couple who has a DTR discussion. DTR stands for “Define the Relationship.”

In other words, the change we are seeking isn’t so much in how membership works at Rock Valley Bible Church, as it is in how we are seeking to be clear in defining the relationship. We want to answer questions like, What does it mean to be a “member” of Rock Valley Bible Church? What are expected of members? What can members expect of one another? What can members expect of the leaders of the church?

In this series, I want to clarify the answers to some of these questions. I want to work on “Defining the Relationship.” To be clear, we have a membership at Rock Valley Bible Church. Many of you are members of Rock Valley Bible Church. You have attended here for years. You are involved in the life of the body. You consider me to be your pastor. You consider the elders to be your elders. You think Biblically about your commitment to the church and are all in regarding loving one another.

We just haven’t been very clear of what’s expected of members. Nor have we been very clear of what’s expected of church leaders. We have not done well at “Defining the Relationship.” It’s because we have practiced “informal membership” We are simply

working towards making our relationship “formal.”

Well, this morning, I want to present what the Bible says about church membership. I want to show what the Bible says about church membership. I want to show what the Bible doesn't say about church membership. First of all, let's point out that,

1. Membership is Mentioned (1 Cor 12)

“Membership” a Biblical word. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul compares the church to a body. Just as a body has many “members,” so also does the church have many “members.” Paul writes,

1 Corinthians 12:14-27

For the body does not consist of one **member** but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the **members** in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single **member**, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. 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.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the **members** may have the same care for one another. If one **member** suffers, all suffer together; if one **member** is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually **members** of it.

Paul explicitly uses the word, “member” seven times in these fourteen verses to identify members in the church. The analogy here is of a body. Just as your eyes and ears are members of your body, so also are there members of the church. We may not often identify our hand as a “member” of our body, but nevertheless, the word works. Your hand is a member of your body, as is also your eye and ear and foot. And just as each of these members of your body plays a crucial role in the functioning of your body, so also do members of churches play important roles in the life of every church. This was Paul's point earlier in the chapter.

1 Corinthians 12:4-11

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

The Holy Spirit is actively involved in placing the members of the church together, each with their own gifts, to be used “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). Note here that membership here in the church is local. In other words, when Paul describes us as “members” of the body of Christ, he isn’t simply referring to the universal church, as if all who believe in Jesus are members of the church at large. No, Paul describes membership in relationship with others, each one doing their part for the common good.

So, “membership” is a Biblical word. Notice how they became “members.” It wasn’t by signing up to receive all of the benefits that “membership” brings, but by being placed into the church by the Holy Spirit with their gifts that they might be used “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). And that’s why an informal membership can work, because “membership” in a church isn’t about “signing up.” Membership in a church is fundamentally about believing in Christ and being engaged in the life of the church. This leads to being involved with others in the church, and serving others with your gifts, and giving, and helping, and encouraging.

Next, I want to look at a several passages of Scripture that mention the church as a specific, identifiable, quantifiable group of people. This is my point:

2. Membership is for Clarity (Matt 18; 1 Cor 5)

In other words, churches in the Bible consisted of a clearly defined group of people. Those in the group we call, “members.”

Let’s begin with Matthew 18:15-17. Many of you are familiar with this passage. It’s often called the passage about “Church discipline,” which is true. Jesus instructs the church on how to “discipline” a wayward member, by removing him from your midst. However, this passage is far more about “Church restoration” than it is about “Church discipline.” Jesus instructs the church how to restore a sinning believer by bringing him back into the church. It’s all about calling those straying from God to turn back from their false ways. It’s only at the end, after multiple attempts at restoration have failed that the church enters into formal “discipline.”

Beginning in verse 15, Jesus tells us what to do when people go astray. He says,

Matthew 18:15-17

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Jesus begins with the situation of another believer sinning. Initially, the sinning brother is confronted individually and called to repentance. If the brother repents, then forgiveness is freely extended. However, if the brother fails to repent, then others are brought into the process. This time, a group of people come to confront this individual. If the brother repents, then forgiveness is freely extended. However, if the brother fails to repent, then it should be told to the church. Those in the church should call the brother to repentance. If the brother repents, then forgiveness is freely extended, and fellowship within the body is enjoyed once again. However, if the brother fails to repent, then he should be treated as an unbeliever, outside of the fold of the church.

How easy this sounds, and yet, how difficult it is to practice. Many individuals find confronting the sin of another person to be difficult. Furthermore, many leaders of churches would never dare to bring such an open accusation of sin to the entire church body. Yet, Jesus calls the church to this practice regardless of the difficulties.

Now, the main point for us today is this: Jesus wants the church to be clear about who is inside the church and who is outside of the church. Or, you might say it this way: Jesus wants the membership of the church to be clear. You see this best in the last step of the process of dealing with an unrepentant person. At the end of verse 17, we read, “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” The terms, “Gentiles” and “tax collectors”, were terms used by Jesus as illustrations of those who are “at the bottom of the moral scale.”¹ In Matthew 5:46-47, Jesus uses these terms to indicate those of lowest morality. One commentator points out that these terms described “the worst sort of persons.”²

To be sure, Jesus told us to treat “Gentiles and tax collectors” with compassion (see Matt 8:1-11; 9:9-13; 15:21-28). But the point here is that they have been treated with compassion, with multiple people coming in grace and calling them to repentance. And in the end, the one who has refused all calls to repent “has no place among the holy people of God, and ... is to be shunned.”³ He should be kept out of the covenant community and not welcomed into the fellowship of the church.

Ultimately, this four-step process works to differentiate those who are in the church and those who are outside of the church. Those who are inside the church are the ones who trust in Christ and are seeking to follow in his ways. They are “church members.” Those who rebel against the rule of the Lord should be expelled from his church, as they neither represent Christ or the church that he is building. They are not “members” of the church. Somehow, and in some way, it must be clear who is in the church and who is not. The method for identifying those in the church is called, “church membership.”

Now, Jesus doesn’t tell us how to make this distinction, only that this distinction needs to be made. Until this point in the life of Rock Valley Bible Church, we have made this distinction naturally. That is, those who attend are involved are “members” and those who aren’t involved or listed in the directory are “not members.”

However, it has been clear enough for our church to follow through with the words of Jesus. On two occasions in this church, we have done this. We approached sinning “members” of the church, individually first, then as a small group. We have told the entire church. We have considered them to be like “Gentiles and tax collectors” (Matt 18:17).

In each of these cases, it has been clear that the sinning individuals were “members” of the church. They attended our church services regularly. They were involved in the lives of others. They attended events of the church. They invited others to their homes. They were in the homes of others at church. In these cases, it was clear that they were “members.”

But sometimes, this boundary is a bit fuzzy and not quite so clear. It’s fuzzy when people sometimes come to church and are sort-of involved in the life of the church. It’s not quite so clear when people aren’t even listed in the directory.

At Rock Valley Bible Church, as we formalize our membership practices, we are simply looking to clear up the line, to make it clear who is inside the church and who is outside.

We are doing this because Jesus wanted that to be clear. In the case of an unrepentant sinning member, Jesus commands us to make it clear that such a one is outside the church. In the case of communicating such things, Jesus commands us to make it clear that everyone else is inside the church. That's what Jesus taught about church membership.

Paul has a similar mention of church membership in 1 Corinthians 5. In this chapter, Paul is talking about an unrepentant sinner in the church of Corinth. Paul wants the church to be clear about this man's status. That such a one is not a part of the church in Corinth. He writes,

1 Corinthians 5:1-2

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. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

Paul is telling the church to "remove" such a man. That is, "Remove him from the church. He cannot be one of your members. Remove him from your membership." In other words, the church is to be a place of purity. Overtly, unrepentant sinners have no part in the church. It should be clear who is in the church and who is outside the church. In verses 9-13, Paul clarifies his thoughts.

1 Corinthians 5:9-13

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler— not even to eat with such a one. 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 other words, it is expected that those outside the church are living immoral lives. It's perfectly fine to associate with them to bring the gospel to them. However, it is not acceptable for those in blatant immorality to be inside the church.

Notice how Paul speaks about those "outside" and those "inside the church." God judges those outside the church. We must judge those inside the church. We must "purge the evil person from among you." This is what church membership represents. It represents who is inside the church and who is outside the church. Church membership is the way to bring clarity in these matters. Let's move on to my third point.

3. Membership is for Care (Acts 20).

Thirdly, I want to show you a few passages where the leaders of the church are given the task of caring for a specific group of people. Membership helps to clarify exactly who these people are. So, turn to Acts 20.

This passage is one of the most tender scenes in all of the Scriptures. This is where the apostle Paul bids farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus. Paul dearly loved these

men, having spent three years with them in ministry together (Acts 20:31). He believed that he would never see them again (Acts 20:25, 38), which is why they departed with prayers and tears (Acts 20:36-37). Paul gave these Spirit-appointed leaders the advice they needed to shepherd the church in Ephesus without him. His counsel is applicable to all of those who shepherd local churches. His counsel is applicable to leaders of Rock Valley Bible Church.

Paul's counsel to these elders begins with a review of his ministry (Acts 20:18-21). He tells the elders how he served them and taught them during his days in Ephesus. Paul, then, looks forward to his own destiny (Acts 20:22-24), saying that "imprisonment and afflictions await me" (Acts 20:23). Next, Paul turns to his expectations for what the elders will face (Acts 20:25-31). They will face danger in the church and defection from among the elders. Finally, Paul points the elders to their only source of security, God himself (Acts 20:32-35). The heart of Paul's words is his fundamental exhortation to the elders, found in verse 28.

Acts 20:28

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

One commentator identifies verse 28 as "both the practical and the theological centre of the speech."⁴ Another calls it, "the key exhortation to the elders."⁵ Another claims that this verse is "the most discussed part of the entire speech."⁶ It is where we will focus our attention as it pertains to church membership.

Verse 28 describes the work of shepherds. They must watch themselves and the flock under their care. This defines the shepherding work: caring for the flock. Just as the elders of the church were called to care for their own spiritual condition, so also were they instructed to care for the spiritual needs of their local flock in Ephesus.

Notice the role of the Lord in this spiritual work of the church. These elders were appointed by the Holy Spirit. From an earthly perspective, Paul appointed the elders (Acts 14:23). Yet, equally clear is the Lord's appointment of those in the church. Paul told the elders in Ephesus that it was "the Holy Spirit [who] has made you overseers." The church is not an institution created, designed or sustained by human effort. Jesus promised to build his church (Matt 16:18). He "obtained [the church of God] with his blood" (Acts 20:28).

God's design for local churches is straightforward. Each church should have a structure, with Spirit-appointed shepherds and an identifiable congregation. The shepherds are responsible to care for the spiritual needs of those in the congregation. The congregation receives the oversight and protection of the leaders.

We see Peter telling some elders similar things.

1 Peter 5:1-3

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion,

but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Again, we see the shepherd imagery in these verses. It is the elders of the church who are given the task of shepherding the flock. I love the way that Peter describes how this should be done. Pastors and elders should shepherd the flock willingly and sacrificially and lovingly.

- Willingly: “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you;” (1 Pet 5:2).
- Sacrificially: “not for shameful gain, but eagerly;” (1 Pet 5:2).
- Lovingly, “not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock (1 Pet 5:3).

This is the sort of leadership that I have sought to provide at Rock Valley Bible Church. This is the sort of leadership that all of us elders have sought to carry out: willing, sacrificial, and loving leadership. Any failings in doing so has been our sin. It’s what we are striving to do. We are striving to care for all of you like a shepherd would care for his sheep.

And so, as we institute a formal membership at Rock Valley Bible Church, please know that it’s not a power thing. It’s not an authority thing, which sometimes church membership can be. There are plenty of examples of those who have been shepherds of churches for their own gain, using and abusing those in the church for their own good. Please know, that we, as elders, aren’t seeking to use our position as a place of power and authority to gain control over you or use you in any way. Our heart is to care for you. Church membership will help this.

Now, I don’t know if this has ever crossed your mind, but it has crossed my mind (and the minds of the other elders): Who is a part of the flock? Who is a part of Rock Valley Bible Church? Who is the object of our oversight and spiritual care?

Now, for the most part, this is obvious. Those of you who regularly attend our services on Sunday. Those who receive the Weekly Word. Those who are listed in the directory. Those of you who are involved in a small group. Those who are involved in the lives of the people of the church, calling them, emailing them, and texting them. Those who are supporting the church financially. Gladly, this is the case with most of you. You are members of the church. And when there is a need in your life, we are fully committed to helping you and serving you and guiding you in whatever way we can.

However, there have been times when people are clearly on the fringe. They come sporadically. But not really involved. They have been around for a little while, but not a real long time. We don’t know them very well. They don’t know us very well. What about them? Are they part of the flock? Are we under divine obligation to care for them? If they have needs, how committed are we to help them with our limited resources? How much can we ask them to serve, if they haven’t even made any sort of commitment to the church.

And then, there are another category of people. They have been attending our church for a long time. But they have never gotten involved in the church. They leave quickly after our service ends. They have very little contact with those at church during the week. I think they would call Rock Valley Bible Church their church. Yet, they have been on the fringe for so long, that I’m not quite sure. What about them? Are they part of the flock? Are we under divine obligation to care for them? Do they even want for us to be a part of

their lives? Do they expect us to pursue them when they have been gone for a few weeks? What is their status as a part of Rock Valley Bible Church?

Now, you may never have thought about these sorts of questions, but the leaders of the church sure have. We have thought about these things because God will hold the leadership of the church responsible for how well they shepherded those in the church. This is my final point:

4. Membership is for Accountability (Heb 13:17).

Turn to Hebrews 13. I simply want for us to consider one verse: Hebrews 13:17.

This book was written to Jewish people, who had embraced Jesus and come into the church. But they were in danger. They were in danger of turning from Jesus and returning to their Jewish roots. The author of the book spends the entire letter seeking to persuade them to continue on in following Jesus.

His argumentation comes along two lines. The first is the supremacy of Jesus. Jesus is better than the angels (Heb 1:4). Jesus is better than Moses (Heb 3:3). Jesus is better than Abraham (Heb 7:7-9). Jesus is better than Aaron, as He has brought in a new priesthood (Heb 7:23-24). Jesus has inaugurated a New Covenant, which is better than the Old (Heb 8:6). Jesus has cleansed a holy place that is better than the Old Testament tabernacle (Heb 9:24). The sacrifice of Jesus was better than any of the Old Testament sacrifices (Heb 10:14). As a result, we should follow after Jesus in faith (Heb 12:1-3). We should press on to maturity (Heb 6:3).

The second line of argumentation comes through his strong warnings to the people if they would ever forsake Jesus. These warnings are sprinkled throughout the whole book (Heb 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29). They are summed up in Hebrews 10:31, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." In these warning passages, there is encouragement to stay on the path of following Jesus. One of his final exhortations comes in chapter 13 and verse 17.

Hebrews 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

In this verse we see that members of the church are accountable to the leaders of the congregation. And the leaders of the congregation are accountable to the Lord.

The commands in this verse are two: obey (πειθεσθε) and submit (υπεικετε). The first command carries with it the idea of persuasion. As those in the church are persuaded by the trustworthiness of their leaders, they obey them out of respect for the leadership they provide. The second command carries with it the implication of yielding. As those in the church understand the importance of the unity of the church, they submit to them for the greater good. The weight of both of these commands describe how church should respond to the authorities of the church: They should obey them and submit to them.

Now, again, this can easily be abused by church leaders, when they wield their power to control people. But if the leadership of the church is reasonable, and where they are leading is Biblical, and how they are leading is with humility, people in the church should yield to them. Those in the congregation should follow after the course they have laid out. This is true even in ways that are not explicitly mentioned in the Bible. Think about the number of ways that you all willingly submit to the leadership of our church for the sake of unity. The leadership of the church has determined where our church will meet. We have determined what day and time our worship services will be. None of these particulars are prescribed in the Bible. Yet, in coming this morning, you all are demonstrating your submission to the elders of the church.

And there are many other things as well like this that we have chosen to do things are our church that aren't commanded in the Bible. We use an offering box, rather than passing a plate. We have fellowship dinners on the first Sundays of the month. We have a youth group that meets on Wednesday evenings. We have a prayer meeting on Sunday mornings. We celebrate the Lord's Supper every 4-6 weeks. We celebrate Christmas and Easter in ways peculiar to our church. We choose to have Christmas Eve services and Good Friday services. We have small groups twice a month. We choose to communicate to the church primarily with emails which you get twice each week. One email is visionary. The other email is administrative. And as you attend these services, and make use of the offering box to give to the church, and read the various emails we send out, you demonstrate your submission to the leadership of the church. That's some of the ways that you can fulfill Hebrews 13:17. Formal church membership is in the same category.

As I said earlier, the Bible is silent on exactly how church membership should be practiced. We, as a church, are simply making a change, from informal church membership to formal church membership. And we are asking you to submit to our leadership in this area for the sake of unity in the church. But we are also asking for the sake of helping us to know who we are accountable to shepherd, because the leaders of this church are accountable to the Lord, as to how we lead, and how we keep watch over the souls given to us (Heb 13:17). Keeping watch over the souls of others is a solemn, God-given task for those who lead God's people. Leaders will give account for their work. Although not explicitly mentioned in verse 17, this accountability is surely before the Lord, "to whom we must give an account" (Heb 4:13). Just as a manager expects to give account to his superiors for how he has done in managing assets entrusted to him (Luke 16:2), so also will shepherds of God's people expect to give account to the Lord for how they have managed his flock.

The stakes are high. This is why James says, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (Jas 3:1). Not only will leaders be judged for their own walk with the Lord, but also with how they led God's people (see 1 Tim 4:16; Acts 20:28). This accounting will come on judgment day, when leaders will give account to those who have been appointed under their care. And we believe that one of the ways that we can do this is with a formal church membership. So we know who we will be accountable for.

The clear implication here is that the congregation is well-defined. Spiritual leaders won't be accountable for those outside their congregation. Instead, leaders will be held responsible for their oversight of those who have willingly submitted themselves to their care. This is the need for church membership. Church membership helps define for the leaders those who are under their care, for whom they will give an account.

Now, the author of Hebrews continues on in verse 17 to talk about how to help the

leaders in their task. He writes, “Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” I love this idea. I love how it puts forth the blessing that comes to the congregation who support and encourage their leaders so that they serve with joy. A grumpy and burdened pastor is of no advantage to a congregation. But a happy, joyful, and energized pastor is of great benefit to a congregation. Christopher Ash has some helpful comments to other church members about this verse.

Unless there is at least some whisper of joy in [the hearts of pastors] as they do their work, some spring of gladness in their step, they will never persevere to the end. And—and this is the point—it is we who will suffer. Instead of being well taught—faithfully preached to with insight and depth—instead of being patiently prayed for, instead of having our souls guarded from evil, instead of being lovingly equipped, instead of being well led in our churches, we will be harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, at the mercy of all kinds of destructive evil. And our churches will be places of shallow immaturity and instability, at the mercy of every whim of cultural pressure or theological oddity.

It is therefore in our own interests, to say nothing of love for the pastor, that we should make their work a joy and not simply a heavy and gloomy burden. If you and I truly grasp the extent to which healthy pastoral oversight is a team effort—a two-way dynamic in which we, as church members, play as critical a part as our pastors—then, and only then, will we be urgently motivated to learn the better to care for them. You and I have it in our power to demotivate our pastors, so that they gradually ground down into a slough of despond from which they will be utterly unable to do us any good at all. But we also have it in our power so to cheer them, so to put a spring in their step, that they will gladly do for us all that we hope and pray.⁷

It has been my joy to shepherd this congregation for 20 years. You have responded well to God’s word. You have responded to my leadership. You have followed my lead. Those who have rebelled and resisted are the exception, rather than the rule. For the most part, it has been a great joy to shepherd all of you. One way to help this shepherding process is to identify clearly those who are members of the church, that we might care for your spiritual needs.

Next week, we will talk about what it means to be a healthy church member.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church
on January 26, 2020 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

¹R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 694.

²Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 532.

³France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 694.

⁴C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 974

⁵Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 629

⁶John Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 426.

⁷Christopher Ash, *The Book Your Pastor Wishes You Would Read (But Is Too Embarrassed to Ask)* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2019), 32-33.

APPENDIX 6

SERMON #3: CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN PRACTICE

For the past two weeks at Rock Valley Bible Church, we have been considering the topic of church membership, because we are transitioning our church from practicing an informal church membership to a formal church membership. This simply means that we are looking for some definition to our relationships with one another.

Two weeks ago, we looked at “Church Membership in History.” We looked at how church membership has been practiced throughout history of the church. And we saw that church membership has been practiced many different ways.

In the early church, we saw **rapid membership**. As the church grew rapidly, so did its membership. Acts 2:41 describes what took place on the day of Pentecost, “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” So many people were added so quickly, that they were added without much form or structure. Furthermore, leaders of churches were often set in place only after a group of people were gathering together for worship.

In the post-apostolic church, we saw **rigorous membership**. As the church settled into organizational structures, there began to be a lapse of time between faith and membership. This was done, in part, because of the persecution they faced. It was important that prospective members be tested before they were accepted into membership, lest they fall away when the persecution comes.

In the church after Constantine, we saw **relaxed membership**. As the default religion in the empire was Christianity, those born into the empire were assumed to be Christians. Thus, they were baptized as children and joined to the church. This practice continued for 1,000 years.

In the church after the Reformation, we saw **regenerate membership**. As churches sought to accept only genuine believers into membership in their churches. And when it comes to church membership in recent history, sentiments span the spectrum from optional to necessary. Some think that church membership is totally optional. If church membership suits your fancy, that’s fine. You can become a member of a church. But if you think that it’s better for you not to be a church member, that’s fine as well. The thought is, “Whatever works best for you.” That’s what some people think. Others think that church membership is necessary, though not for salvation. Rather, it is necessary as an evidence of fruit of your salvation. Actively engaging in loving and serving other believers in a covenant community gives evidence to your salvation.

Even churches that practice church membership do it differently. In some churches, you can become a member simply by coming forward at the end of the service, confessing faith in Jesus, and expressing your desire to be a member. In other churches, it takes several months and many classes and pages of application and several interviews and a

final vote before you can become members of a church.

The reason why there is a discrepancy in the various attitudes toward church membership is because the Bible is silent on exactly how church membership should be practiced. It means that there are many ways that church membership can be practiced.

Last week we considered “Church Membership in the Bible.” We saw that “church membership is assumed in the Bible.” That is, there is no command for you to be a member of a church, because, when you come to faith in Jesus Christ, you are brought into the church.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

We saw last week how **“membership” is a Biblical word.** In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul mentions “members” in the church and compares them with members of your own body. “For the body does not consist of one member but of many” (1 Cor 12:14). So, “membership” is a Biblical word.

Furthermore, we saw that church **membership is for clarity.** That is, the Bible speaks of the church as a defined group of people. In the Bible, someone is clearly a member of the church, or clearly not a member of a church. We see this when the church needs to remove one of its members due to his or her sin. After confronting the wayward member individually, then by a few more, then by the entire church, Jesus says, “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt 18:17). That is, outside the church. Jesus wants the church to be clear about who is inside the church and who is outside of the church. Or, you might say it this way: Jesus wants the membership of the church to be clear.

The same is true of Paul when dealing with a sinful member of the congregation. He tells the church in Corinth,

1 Corinthians 5:12-13

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 Paul’s mind, there are “insiders” (i.e. those “in” the church) and “outsiders” (i.e. those “out” of the church). And membership is a mechanism to make this clear.

Membership is also for care. When Paul spoke to the elders of the church in Ephesus, he told them to “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). The Holy Spirit appoints leaders over a group of people, called the church, to care for them. That is, the leaders of the church are to help them and teach them and lead them and support them. Church membership is simply a way to help identify who the leaders are to care for.

Last week I mentioned a question that you may not have thought of before. But I (and every leader of the church) has thought about it. Who is in the church? Who am I to care for? Do I care for people who are at the church every week? What about people who are

only at the church each week, but never involved in any of the life of the church? Or people who just come on occasion? How many times do people need to come before I am responsible to care for them? Three times? Five times? A year? Of course, as people come and visit the church, we have an empathy for them. We want to see everyone coming here to flourish in Christ. But what if they experience trouble in their lives? Who are the leaders responsible to care for?

In most circumstances, it has been clear as to who is a member at our church. But there have been a few occasions when this hasn't been so clear. A formal church membership will help to answer these questions as we work to define our relationships with one another. And this is an important questions because the leaders of the church will be held accountable for how they cared for those in the church. "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." Formal church membership helps to identify those for whom the leaders are accountable. **Membership is for accountability.**

Well, this morning we are going to look at "Church Membership in Practice." That is, "What does church membership look like?" And so, this morning I want to paint a picture of what it means to be a church member. Because, many people have differing understandings of this.

Some think that church membership is similar to being a member of a political party. Whether it's the Republican Party or the Democratic Party, political parties have fundamental beliefs. And being a member of that party simply means that you identify with those beliefs. One may easily say, "I'm a member of the Republican party. I hold their values to be my values. I will support them with my vote. I may give them some dollars to support them in their election efforts, so that my mission carries on!"

Many think of church membership to be the same. Being a member of a church is identifying with the beliefs of that church. One might say, "I'm a member of Rock Valley Bible Church because I believe in the goals and visions and aspirations of that church. I support their cause. So, I will support them with my attendance at church and my financial contributions. So that what I believe will be carried on through the mission of the church." But that's not church membership, either. Church membership isn't simply identifying with the church that best lines up with your own beliefs.

Some think that church membership is similar to being a member of a country club. The membership of the club carries with it certain benefits. "I'm a member of the Rock Valley Country Club. I pay my dues every year. This lets me hang around the upper class of our city. I get to go to all of the events they sponsor: like the Easter Egg Hunt, and the Fireworks show every year. I can golf at the club. My family has access to the swimming pool. And if ever we hold a big family event, such as a reunion or a wedding, I have the opportunity to use their club house."

Many think of the church as a membership with benefits. "I'm a member of Rock Valley Bible church. I pay my tithes every week. This lets me hang around the great people of church. The picnics and potlucks are very enjoyable. I'm super excited about the Chili Cookoff next Sunday! I love the events and watching the children during the Christmas Eve service. Youth group and all of their activities are really good for my children. It's also nice that I can use the church building for my big family events." But that's not church membership, either. Church membership isn't some transaction between you and the organization.

Church membership is the working out of what it means to be a member of the body of

Christ. Just as the eyes help the body know where it needs to walk; just as the feet help the body to move, just as the stomach gives energy to the body to live, just as the lungs and heart work together to deliver needed oxygen to the body, so also do church members serve one another, so that the whole body functions properly.

This is what it means to be a church member. It means that you are committed to fulfilling your role within the body of Christ. In other words, church membership is less about using the church because it is beneficial to you, than it is about being a member of the body. That's doing your part in the body to serve the whole. Because, in reality, we need each other. We need each other in crisis. We need each other for encouragement. We need each other for strength. We need each other to help in our weaknesses. We need each other to carry our burdens.

Nowhere in Scripture is this idea more clearly demonstrated than in the "one another" commands of the Bible. There are about fifty such commands in the Bible.¹

- We are commanded to "love one another" (John 13:34-35; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12).
- We are told to "serve one another" (Gal 5:13; 1 Pet 4:10).
- We are told to "accept one another" (Rom 15:7).
- We are told to "be kind and compassionate to one another" (Eph 4:32).
- We are told to "forgive one another" (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13).
- We are told to "instruct one another" (Rom 15:14).
- We are told to "greet one another" (Rom 16:16).
- We are told to "confess our sins to each other" (Jas 5:16).
- We are told to "pray for each other" (Jas 5:16).
- We are told to "show hospitality to one another" (1 Pet 4:9).
- We are told to "clothe ourselves with humility toward one another" (1 Pet 5:5).

See, the church membership isn't about "me." But neither is it about "you." It's about "us." It's about each of us, doing our part to love and serve and help one another. And so, this morning, I want to describe for you what church membership looks like.

My message is entitled, "Church Membership in Practice." Essentially, I want to preach through the "one anothers." Now, this is practically impossible if we look at each and every one of the "one another" commands in the Bible. I can't have a message with 50 points, one for each of the "one another" commands. I would have to deal with each one so superficially, and you would not remember much. So, I want to group them together. And fortunately, we can do so, because about a third of these "one another" commands instruct Christians to love one another.¹

1. Church Members Love Each Other

This command to "love one another" occurs exactly like that in eleven instances in the New Testament (John 13:34, 15:12, 17; Rom 13:8; 1 Thess 3:12, 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:11, 4:7, 11; 2 John 5). It comes from all sources. Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another" (John 15:12). Paul wrote, "Owe no one anything, except to love each other" (Rom 13:8). Peter wrote, "Love one another earnestly from a pure heart" (1 Pet 1:22). John wrote, "Beloved, let us love one another" (1 John 4:7).

And there are a few other commands in the New Testament that don't say "love one another," but definitely it means just that. For instance, Galatians 5:13, "Through love serve one another." Although the main verb here has to do with service, love is the sphere

in which this service is to take place. You can easily take this command under the umbrella of love.

Another example comes in Ephesians 4:2, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.” The main idea here is that of tolerating each other and enduring one another. And yet, it all is to be done in love. Again, you can easily understand this command as a command to love one another (See also 1 Pet 5:14; Rom 12:10).

If you add up all of these commands in the New Testament, you find that they encompass almost one third of the “one another” commands in the New Testament. This is the call upon all church members: love one another.

The prominence of love only makes sense when you remember that the command to love is the greatest of all commandments. Remember when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is? He responded with these famous words,

Matthew 22:37-40

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Jesus said that you can take all of the commandments of the Law and the Prophets, and you can boil them down to two: love God and love others. In other words, you show me a command in the Bible, and I’ll bet you, dollars to donuts, that I’ll be able to trace the command back to either an expression of love to God or to an expression of love for others. It really is that simple.

Perhaps the best place to illustrate the sort of love that the New Testament is describing comes from the life of Jesus. So, turn in your Bible to John 13. This chapter begins “The Upper Room Discourse,” where Jesus gives his final instructions to his disciples before his crucifixion. It begins with Jesus washing the disciples’ feet (John 13). It ends with Jesus praying his high priestly prayer (John 17). After Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, he says this, ...

John 13:34-35

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Here is Jesus giving to his disciples, “a new commandment.” Now, the command to love wasn’t anything new. What was new was the standard of that love, the depth of that love. Jesus call us to love in the same way that he loved. And how deeply did Jesus love? Here in John 13, we see his example of washing the disciples’ feet, even the feet of Judas (John 13:2-3). In this act, he showed great love.

But beyond John 13, there are plenty of examples of how Jesus loved us. The gospels describe his deeds of love. He touched the unclean when he healed the leper. He healed the paralytic by the pool (John 5). He feed the five thousand (John 6). He gave sight to the blind (John 9). He raised the dead (John 11). All of these acts were acts of love.

The gospels describe how incredibly patient he was with his disciples. He was teaching them of his death, and they argued about who was the greatest (Matt 20:17-28). They

slept in his hour of greatest need. They all deserted him. But Jesus loved them. He loved them to the end (or uttermost) (John 13:1).

The gospels describe how Jesus gave his life as a sacrifice. A little later in John 15, Jesus said this, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). And, of course, that’s what Jesus did. He laid down his life for his friends. He laid down his life for us. He died in our place that we might live. He bore the punishment that was due to us.

And that’s what he calls us to do. We are to love one another in the same way that Jesus did, “as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (John 13:34).

Now, of course, we can’t do everything like Jesus did. We can’t heal like Jesus healed. We can’t multiply food to feed the thousands like Jesus did. We can’t raise the dead. And we can’t die for each other’s sins. But we can hold the hands of the hurting. We can sacrifice of what we have to give to others. We can sympathize with those who have lost loved ones. We can be patient with those who see things differently than we do. We can give of our time to serve others.

Such love is required of all church members.

2. Church Members Seek Unity

As we have seen, one third of the “one another” commands instruct Christians to love one another. Another third of the “one another” commands deal with the unity of the church. Admittedly, this is a broad umbrella, but I think that it is justified.

Let me read 13 “one another” verses. This is about a third of the 50 “one another” verses. Then, I’ll make a brief comment after each verse to show how it relates to unity.

“Be at peace with one another” (Mark 9:50). Peace is the essence of unity.

“Don’t grumble among one another” (John 6:43). Grumbling creates divisions, which is against unity.

“Be of the same mind with one another” (Rom 12:16, 15:5). This is the essence of unity.

“Accept one another” (Rom 15:7). Bringing others into the group is a unifying activity.

“Wait for one another before beginning the Lord’s Supper” (1 Cor 11:33). You wait that you all might eat together, as a united group.

“Don’t bite, devour, and consume one another” (Gal 5:15). These actions cause harm and division.

“Don’t boastfully challenge or envy one another” (Gal 5:26). These also bring disunity.

“Gently, patiently tolerate one another” (Eph 4:2). This maintains the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3).

“Be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving to one another” (Eph 4:32). Break the bonds of division.

“Bear with and forgive one another (Col 3:13). Mend the causes of division.

“Seek good for one another, and don’t repay evil for evil” (1 Thess 5:15). That is, seek for the betterment of the community, not its destruction.

“Don’t complain against one another” (Jas 4:11; 5:9). Complaints only tears others down and tears down the body apart.

“Confess sins to one another” (Jas 5:16). Deal with those things that threaten disunity.

Now, we don’t have a chance of looking at all of these commands this morning. So let’s simply take one, perhaps the best place to consider this theme of unity: Rom 15:7. So, I encourage you to turn there in your Bibles.

As you are turning there, realize that there are two ways to establish unity in a church. One way is through uniformity, where everyone is the same. Uniformity occurs when everyone believes the same thing, everyone wears the same thing, everyone speaks the same way, and everyone acts the same. Uniformity comes when the church has a position on everything, like music and alcohol and dating and movies and clothing and smoking and gambling and speeding and tattoos and hair length and debt and diet and drugs and drama in the church. And everyone falls into rank. At that point, we really aren’t Christians, we are clones.

Now, obviously, that’s not what the New Testament Church is called to be. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 that there are a variety of gifts in the church. These work themselves out in varieties of service and activities. This is by design. For, “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:4).

And Paul pictures the church as a human body with many members, like hands and feet and eyes and ears. Each of these members serve different functions in the body, but each being no less a part of the body. In other words, God gives different people to the church with differing gifts to make the church a place of unity through diversity.

So, if ever this church, comprised of different people with differing gifts, is going to know and enjoy unity, there must be an acceptance of one another. See, we don’t achieve unity through uniformity. We achieve unity through accepting of one another. This is what we see in the following verse:

Romans 15:7

Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

The New American Standard Version translates this, “Accept one another” (as does the New International Version). The King James Version translates this, “Receive one another.” J. B. Phillips paraphrased it this way, “Open your hearts to one another.” This is the idea of this section of Scripture. It’s a call for us to accept others as they are and welcome them into our lives. Accept them even if they have some opinions that differ with you and even if they have some lifestyle convictions that differ with you.

That’s the entire context in which these words come. In chapter 14, Paul talked about

how those in Rome had differing convictions on diets and days. Now, when Paul brings up this command to “accept one another,” he puts forth two issues that were pertinent to his day. The first deals with diets. The second deals with days. With each of these practices there was a variety of opinion. Some believed that you could only eat those foods prescribed in the law. Others believed that you could eat anything. Some believed that there was a specific day of worship. Others believed that all days were equally holy, so could worship on any day.

In Rome, these practices were causing conflict and disunity. Paul’s counsel is this, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom 14:5). In other words, “Don’t give up what you believe about your dietary habits. Don’t compromise on worshiping on another day. Keep your convictions.” But, with these convictions in your heart, “welcome one another.” The standard for welcoming others is the kingdom. “Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom 15:7). I like to say it this way: If God has welcomed you into his kingdom, we welcome you into our fellowship, even if there are differences of opinion among us.

The issues in Rome were not unlike many issues in the church today. People have convictions today that can easily cause conflict in churches. The schooling choice you have made for your children. Some believe that alcohol or cigarettes are permissible for Christians, while others believe that both are wrong. Some have convictions about the sorts of movies you can or music you can listen to. Others have different standards. Some have convictions about what version of the Bible you should read. Others think that any version of the Bible is permissible.

Certainly, there are times when this causes tension as we see things differently and as we work out our Christianity differently. The solution to resolving these tensions isn’t a forced conformity to the church’s stance on any particular issue. Paul would urge us to maintain our convictions (Rom 14:5). Rather we, as a church, need to work through these things for unity in the body, always asking this question: “Has Christ welcomed you into his kingdom?” Then, we will do all we can to welcome you into our fellowship.”

3. Church Members Meet Together

I get this final point from Hebrews 10:24-25. It’s really a core verse regarding the regular life of those in the church. Here’s the context:

Hebrews 10:19-25

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

In other words, because Jesus brings us to God in a new way that the Old Testament priests were never able to do, “Let us draw near” to God (verse 22), “Let us hold fast” to our confession (verse 23), and “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” (verse 24).

And what is particularly helpful to us about these verses this morning is that the author is telling us that it's not enough simply to draw near to God on your own. It's not enough to "draw near" to God and to "hold fast" to your faith alone. The call of these verses is for you to help others around you to draw near to Jesus and. Isn't that what verse 24 says? "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works."

Notice here, that to fulfill verse 24 requires a relationship. You can't stir up others to love and good works if you don't know them. That's the idea of verse 25, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." In other words, you need to come together regularly for the purpose of encouragement. That's why Christian churches gather together. We gather for encouragement to keep walking in the way.

That's one of our purposes every Sunday morning. Every Sunday, a key purpose of our gathering is to be encouraged through being reminded of the gospel. When we remember that Christ Jesus died for our sins, that we aren't made righteous through our own efforts, but that we are justified through faith in Christ, it comes as a great encouragement into our lives. All of the elements of our service are aimed at this. Our songs are geared to remind us of the realities of our faith. We read the Scriptures to show us where our hope remains. We pray to God to help us in our weaknesses. We preach to open up God's word to our hearts.

But as much as of this public ministry helps, there is still an element that's missing. It's the personal ministry of interaction of "One Another." This is the importance of our fellowship together after church, where we provide a time and a forum for you to talk with other people. This time is important so that you can get to know each other and so that you can encourage one another on a personal level.

This is the importance of our Chili Cookoff next Sunday. Not only is it an enjoyable time, it also provides an opportunity for us to spend time with one another. This is what it means to be a church member, not simply attending a church service (though this is important as verse 25 say), but rubbing with other people in the church and stirring them up to love and good works.

See, it's not merely enough to be engaged in love and good deeds yourself. God's call upon your life is to bring others along in love and good deeds. Isn't this what verse 24 says? "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works." You can't "stir up one another to love and good works," by simply coming to a church service on Sunday morning and leaving quickly after the service is over. This verses requires some level of involvement and engagement in the lives of others.

It requires some effort in the mind. It requires some study, not of doctrine, but of people. It requires you to know people, not people in general, but in specific people. It requires you to know those in the community of faith, other members of the church.

It's done like this. You get to know others at the church. You study them by asking them questions. You find out their strengths. You find out their weaknesses. You discover what their gifts are. You notice what areas of need are in their lives. You observe the areas in which they flourish. You detect the areas in which they are floundering. And then, you think about these things. Then, you do what you can do to encourage them on to love and good deeds.

Sometimes, this can be with a word of encouragement. When you see those who are weary in doing well, you encourage them that you have noticed their work and are

appreciative. This will encourage them to keep going. Sometimes, this comes by matching up the need of one person, with the gifts and abilities of others. When you hear someone struggling with their finances, you tell them of someone in the church who helps with financial counseling. And you match them up. Sometimes, this comes by personally bringing someone with you as you serve someone else in the body. When you hear of someone who needs help with a house repair, you know that you can help. And you bring someone along to help with the project. These are all examples of what it means to “stir up one another to love and good works” (verse 24).

Now, one of the things that I want you to notice here is that it’s not a program issued from the leadership of the church. Rather, it’s a grassroots movement of those in the church, in which the people of the church are involved in each other’s lives to such an extent that they know each other well enough to urge them on to love and good deeds. Certainly, it takes time. And it takes effort. And it’s not easy. Yet, it’s the call of Biblical Christianity. It’s what “church membership” is all about.

And the catalyst for us is our Sunday morning service, when we are all together. Our meetings provide the forum where we can form these connections. That’s why we are exhorted in verse 25, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

I trust that you can see that verse 25 is more than merely attending some church service and thinking that you have fulfilled your God-ordained call in your life. We are called to live in community with one another, to love one another, to serve one another, and to help one another. And if you are off doing your own thing, serving Jesus alone, then you are missing a crucial component to your life of faith: the body. And all of us are called to be functioning members of the body.

Next week, we will look at how that works itself out at Rock Valley Bible Church.

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on February 3, 2020 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

¹The groupings from my message are taken from Jeffrey Kranz, “All the ‘One Another’ Commands in the NT [infographic],” accessed March 8, 2017, <http://overviewbible.com/one-another-infographic/>.

APPENDIX 7

SERMON #4: CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT ROCK VALLEY BIBLE CHURCH

For the past three weeks at Rock Valley Bible Church, we have been considering the topic of church membership. We have been doing so because we are working to transition our church from practicing an informal church membership to a formal church membership. This simply means that we are looking for some formal definition to our relationships with one another.

Three weeks ago, we looked at “Church Membership in History.” We looked at how church membership has been practiced throughout history of the church. And we saw that church membership has been practiced many different ways. In the early church, we saw **rapid membership**. As the church grew rapidly, so did its membership. People came to faith in droves and were quickly added to the church.

In the post-apostolic church, we saw **rigorous membership**. As the church grew, so did the persecution. And it was important to test those becoming members of the church, lest they fall away as the pressure increased in their lives. So, the post-apostolic church made it more rigorous to join.

In the church after Constantine, we saw **relaxed membership**. As the default religion in the empire was Christianity, those born into the empire were assumed to be Christians. So they were baptized as children and added to the church as members.

This continued for 1,000 years, until the Protestant Reformation. In the church after the Reformation, we saw **regenerate membership**. That is, churches sought to accept only genuine believers into membership in their churches.

And when it comes to church membership in recent history, practices and beliefs vary wildly. Some think that church membership is totally optional. Others think that church membership is necessary. Some churches accept new members the very morning they come forward confessing their faith in Christ and their desire to join the church. Other churches take several months and classes and interviews before you become a member.

Here’s the big lesson for us: there has been no consensus over the years of how exactly to practice church membership. This is because the Bible is silent as to how church membership should be practiced.

Two weeks ago, we considered “Church Membership in the Bible.” We saw last week how “**membership**” is a **Biblical word**. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul members in the church and compares them with members of your own body.

We also saw that church **membership is for clarity**. That is, the Bible speaks of the church as a defined group of people. So that someone is clearly a member of the church,

or clearly not a member of a church. This is most clearly demonstrated when the church needs to remove one of its members due to their sin. After confronting the wayward member individually, then by a few more, then by the entire church, Jesus says, “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt 18:17). That is, let him be outside the church. Or you might say it this way: Jesus wants the membership of the church to be clear. Those in the church are his representatives. When someone is not representing Jesus well, Jesus said that it was mandatory for the church to removed him.

Also, **church membership is for care.** When Paul spoke to the elders of the church in Ephesus, he told them to “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). The Holy Spirit appoints leaders over a group of people, called the church, to care for them. That is, to help them and teach them and lead them and support them. Church membership is simply a way to help identify who the leaders are to care for.

Finally, we saw that with membership comes accountability. The leaders will give account to the Lord as to how they have cared for those in the church. The author of Hebrews writes, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” (Heb 13:17). Regarding membership in a church, it is helpful for leaders to know who they are accountable to before the Lord.

Last week, we looked at “Church Membership in Practice.” That is, how church membership works itself out. We looked at what is expected of church members. Church membership is the working out of what it means to be a member of the body of Christ. Paul compares the church to a body. Eyes help a body know where it needs to walk. Feet help the body to move. Stomachs give the energy to the body. Lungs and heart work together to deliver needed oxygen to the body. All of these things take place so that the body can function. Church members serve one another, so that the body functions properly.

This is demonstrated in the “one another” commands of the Bible. There are about 50 such commands in the Bible. Consider a few of these commands:

- “love one another” (John 13:34-35; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12).
- “serve one another” (Gal 5:13; 1 Pet 4:10)
- “accept one another” (Rom 15:7).
- “be kind and compassionate to one another” (Eph 4:32).
- “forgive one another” (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13).
- “instruct one another” (Rom 15:14).
- “greet one another” (Rom 16:16).
- “confess our sins to each other” (Jas 5:16).
- “pray for each other” (Jas 5:16).
- “show hospitality to one another” (1 Pet 4:9).
- “clothe ourselves with humility toward one another (1 Pet 5:5).

The “one another” commands represent well the expectations of church members. Church membership is each of us, doing our part to love and serve and help one another. About a third of these 50 commands are to “love one another.” Another third of these 50 commands can be placed under the umbrella of seeking unity for one another. One of the key “one another” commands is found in Hebrews 10:24-25, ...

Hebrews 10:24-25

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

These verses speak about the importance of church members regularly gathering together. It speaks of how church members should be thinking about others, and stirring them up to love and good works.

Well, this morning, I want to conclude our series on church membership by looking at what church membership looks like at our church. My message is entitled, "Church Membership at Rock Valley Bible Church." In my message this morning, I simply want to describe our church. I want to urge you to become a formal member of our church. I know that for many of you, this will be a review, but it's a good review.

1. Our History

I want to take us down memory lane. You can trace the heritage of our church back to 1984, when a church began in Warrenville, Illinois, called Grace Church of DuPage. In 1993, this church planted a church in DeKalb, called Kishwaukee Bible Church. Yvonne and I were privileged to be a part of that church plant. On July 2, 1998, we began a Thursday evening Bible Study in Rockford with the hope that the Lord would establish a church in Rockford, Illinois. We met in the basement of a home in Rockford.

As our Bible study grew, we began renting out a church building on Sunday evenings. Our first meeting was on July 2, 2000. It was a great evening, as many came from Kishwaukee Bible Church to rejoice with us in what God was doing. In the summer of 2001, I quit my secular job in DeKalb, and was sent and fully supported by Kishwaukee Bible Church to focus all of my attention upon the church in Rockford.

On March 3, 2002, we began renting Rockford Christian High School for our Sunday morning meetings. We rented that building for 8 years. We finally purchased our own building in Loves Park in 2010. Our first meeting in our building was on Sunday morning, December 5, 2010. God has done some great things among us. We are thankful for his grace.

2. Our Vision

Here is our vision statement. It's our purpose for existing: "Rock Valley Bible Church exists to enjoy his grace and to extend his glory."

We have worked hard to promote this. It is written on the wall outside the auditorium. It is on our bulletins every week. It is on our website. It is on the Weekly Word email that I send out every week. We have pens with this written on them. We have mugs with this printed on them.

"Rock Valley Bible Church exists to enjoy his grace and to extend his glory." The first part of this sentence addresses our vertical relationship with God. The second part of the sentence addresses our horizontal relationship with others. Our relationship with the Lord is characterized first and foremost as a relationship of grace. That is, God has been gracious to us in Christ Jesus by dying for our sins upon the cross, based upon nothing that we have done. That's grace. God has created us to enjoy this grace.

Our relationship with others should be characterized by making God's grace known, which extends his glory. That is, the grace of God should so impact us and be so enjoyable to us, that we can do nothing else, but to show it and tell it to others. We see this often in the Bible. One example is what Jesus said to the Gerasene Demoniac who Jesus healed. Jesus told him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19).

"Rock Valley Bible Church exists to enjoy his grace and to extend his glory." And it's my aim that every member of Rock Valley Bible Church knows this clearly. So that if anyone would ask: why does Rock Valley Bible Church exist? Everyone one of us would respond: "to enjoy his grace and extend his glory!"

Before moving on to my next point, I want to spend a few moments reflecting upon the meaning of each of these phrases.

a. Enjoying His Grace

If there is anything that I want to see of Rock Valley Bible Church, it's this flavor of Christianity that is happy and joyful. A frumpy Christianity that worships and serves God out of duty and not delight is dishonoring to the Lord. There's a big difference between saying, "It's Sunday, I have to go to church." Rather than, "It's Sunday, there's no other desire that I want than to go to church." There is a big difference in these things. The one is detached and burdensome. The other is part of our being and communicates with the world around us the source of our joy, God and his people.

God hasn't called us to be a dis-interested people, who obey him because he said that we must obey. Rather, we are called to be joyful worshipers, who serve him from delight. Consider the following Scriptures. Notice how the LORD commands us to be joyful.

Psalm 100:1-2
Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth.
Serve the LORD with gladness;
Come before Him with joyful singing.

Psalm 95:1
Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD.
Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.

Philippians 4:4
Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

And that's what our mission is at Rock Valley Bible Church. We are seeking to be a joyful Christian community. The source of our joy is the grace of God. That's how we come into God's kingdom, by grace.

Ephesians 2:8-9
For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Our salvation is a gift of God's grace to us. Just as a child enjoys his Christmas gift, so are we to enjoy God's gracious gift to us of his salvation. But, it doesn't merely stop

there. God doesn't want for us to have this salvation only to enjoy it for ourselves. Rather, he wants for us to make it known. As we say it,

b. Extending His Glory

If we truly embrace the grace of God, we will proclaim it to others. We see this many times in the Bible. For instance, take the leper that Jesus healed. Jesus told him to say nothing to anyone, but to show himself to the priests. And what happened? You couldn't keep his mouth shut. "But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter" (Mark 1:45). Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut? He experienced the grace of God and couldn't help, but to extend the glory of God to all he met!

Another illustration is of the deaf mute man who Jesus healed. When his ears were opened and his tongue was released and he spoke plainly. Those who saw it were amazed. We read in Mark 7:36 that "Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it." What happened? The crowds witnessed the grace of God and couldn't help, but to extend the glory of God to all who would listen.

And should Jesus tell us not to talk about the salvation that he has brought into our lives, it would be like trying to hold a laugh in during a laughing contest. Sooner or later, we are just going to burst, telling others of God's grace in our lives. And so, likewise, we as a church exist to enjoy his grace (in its fullness), and to extend his glory (to the nations). That's what we mean by "enjoying his grace and extending his glory." Let's move on to our next point.

3. Our Values

By "values," we mean the core beliefs that we hold to. And in some regard, each of these core values help to distinguish us from others churches in the area. The first is this:

a. We believe in the power of the Word of God.

In other words, we believe that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). We believe that "the word of the Lord remains forever" (1 Pet 1:25). We believe that the word of God "is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 119:105). We believe that "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16). We believe in the power of the word of God.

There is a reason why our pattern is to preach through books of the Bible. Because we aren't trusting in our own wisdom, but in the wisdom of God as he has revealed it in the Scriptures. We don't need to go chasing down every relevant topic pertaining to our Christian lives, packaging together in our own way what the Bible says about this or that. We believe this because, we believe in the power of the Word of God. He has given us his word. We want to let God speak in his way.

b. We believe in the power of the God.

Fundamentally, this is why we believe in the power of the word of God, because we serve a powerful God who backs up his word. When he makes a promise, he brings it to pass. When he decrees, it happens. “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” (Ps 115:3). And there is nothing that is too difficult for him. “Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you” (Jer 32:17).

God rules the world, as he created it by the power of his speech. He rules over all of the objects of creation. God rules over the animals. He rules over the spiritual beings. God rules over human beings. He gives us life (Gen 2:7). He determines when and where we live (Acts 17:26). He directs our steps (Prov 16:9). He raises up leaders (Isa 44:28-45:1). He pulls down leaders (Exod 11:1). He buries every king.

God rules over the souls of men. God is the author of our salvation. He is the one who has chosen us from the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4, 5; 2 Tim 1:9). He is the one who “causes us to be born again” (1 Pet 1:3). He is the one who grants us repentance (Acts 11:18; 2 Tim 2:25). He is the one who gives us faith (Eph 2:8-9). He is the one who changes us from those who were dead in our sin to those who are alive in Christ (Eph 2:1-6). He changes us from being blind to the spiritual realities of Jesus Christ to seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of God in the face of Christ. It is the Spirit of life that God blows into our hearts that gives us new life in Christ (John 3:3, 8). We can take as much credit for our spiritual birth as we can take for our natural birth. None. It’s all of grace. That’s the power of God in our lives.

c. We believe in the power of the Gospel.

Consider Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” You can’t get much clearer than Romans 1:16 says it. There is power in the gospel.

The gospel is the greatest story ever told. It’s the greatest news that you will ever hear. “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to [many after his death]” (1 Cor 15:3-5).

There is power in this message. This simple message has turned drunkards into respectable citizens (1 Cor 6:10). This simple message has turned homosexuals into straight men and women (1 Cor 6:10). This simple message has turned idolaters into God-worshipers (1 Thess 1:9). This simple message has turned demon possessed men into spirit-controlled men (Mark 5:1-20). This simple message has turned the worst of sinners into the greatest of saints. The apostle Paul, Augustine, and John Newton are but a few famous examples in church history.

And if this morning finds you entrapped in any sin, this message of Christ crucified is sufficient to give you the strength to overcome sin. The gospel is powerful! This is why we need to hear it often. Paul told those in Rome that he was eager to preach the gospel to them (Rom 1:15). Likewise, we are eager to preach the gospel, because it has power to transform lives.

4. Our Mission

And it is right here that we get very practical. How is it that our vision and values work themselves out? Our vision is to enjoy his grace and to extend his glory. We value the power of God, his word, and the gospel. Here's how it works: we gather together to be strengthened and equipped, by trusting in God, his word, and the gospel, that we might scatter to reach a world that is lost and in need of salvation.

When we gather, we focus our attention upon the same things that the early church focused upon. When the early church was established, there were four characteristics of the church that marked out its activities. They are set forth in Acts 2:42, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." We see here four core activities of the church.

- The apostles teaching
- Fellowship
- Breaking of bread
- Prayer

The early church "devoted themselves" to these things. That is, they gave strong attention given to these activities. And I believe that they are normative for us as well. We, as a church, ought to give "strong attention" to these activities as well. Rather than simply go through each of these characteristics one by one, I would like to show how they relate to our church. We engage in each of these activities on Sunday mornings, here at the church building.

We meet together to pray at 9:00am to **pray** together as a church (Acts 2:42) . We meet to pray in order,

- to plead for God's guidance, strength, and wisdom in the church and in our lives;
- to intercede for others at the throne of grace;
- to share our trials with one another;
- to visibly demonstrate as a church our complete dependence upon God for everything (Ps 123:1);
- to inform those who come with the needs for prayer;
- to train those who come in prayer;
- to express our love for one another in praying for one another;
- to learn more about God;
- to submit to God's will.

We experience **teaching** in our Sunday morning worship service at 10:00am in the auditorium. This corporate worship service allows us to worship God publicly.

- to remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.
- to provide a forum for the public reading of Scripture.
- to instruct the church in godliness.
- to equip the church body for works of service.
- to bring unity to the church (i.e. once a week, all are gathered in one place).
- to give opportunities for service.
- to obey God's counsel to gather together.
- to stimulate one another to love and good deeds.
- to mobilize a group of people to work to promote God's glory.

Every Sunday, we have a **fellowship** time, namely the hour after the service. This usually begins near 11:30am. This is why we have snacks at church.

- to help encourage others to stay after church.
- to connect with others;
- to encourage one another (talking and praying);
- to discover ways to serve one another;
- to stimulate one another to love and good deeds;
- to meet others;
- to strengthen relationships.

And as a church, we have several opportunities to **break bread** together. This may have specific allusions to the Lord's Supper. Or it may also refer generally to eating food together. There is a way in which eating together forms a bond with one another. This happens during various times when we gather together.

- the fellowship time after our church services.
- the Lord's Supper every 4-6 weeks during our weekly services.
- the monthly fellowship dinners we have together.
- the times when you invite families over to your home for dinner.

In all of these ways, we are committed to "the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

All of these activities are very intentional. Our **teaching** on Sunday mornings helps to teach us and unite us in our common faith and purpose. Our **fellowship** after our Sunday service helps to give opportunities to love and serve and encourage one another. Our **eating together** gives opportunity for us to form bonds with each other. Our **praying** together shows visibly that we are dependent upon the Lord for all that we do. But it's not only on Sunday mornings that this happens. It also happens throughout the week. We have various small groups and Bible studies and gatherings, many of which meet informally, all to promote a community that would extend God's glory to the world.

These are all activities in which we gather and enjoy God's grace. But this is only half of our vision. We also have a vision to extend God's glory. We do this by scattering. We do this locally through helping local ministries, such as the Pregnancy Care Center, the Rockford Rescue Mission, ReachOut Jail ministry, Kids Klub, Safe Families or foster agencies. Furthermore, there are ways that we give financially to support outreach, as we support various missions organizations. We support First Love International with their efforts to Nepal and India. We support Farms International, who reaches out to micro-loans to Christians in poorer nations. We support Leadership Resources International, which equips needy pastors overseas.

On top of this, there are many ways in which you can reach out informally. You can reach out to your neighbors or coworkers or friends. You can do this with smiles and handshakes and invites over to your house and offers to serve them in some way or another. You can be involved in the community with a goal to reach others for Jesus. You can be involved in youth activities, reading clubs, pool leagues, bowling leagues, quilting guilds, or musical groups. Really, the opportunities are endless. You simply need to make the effort to discern what you can do with your giftedness and time. Then, you simply make the effort to reach out and extend the glory of God.

All of our church-centered activities are aimed to equip you and encourage you and support you in seeking to extend God's glory to the nations.

5. Our Membership

This is where we have been headed the past four weeks. Until this point in time at Rock Valley Bible Church, we have only practiced informal membership. People have come to church. Those who have stayed around have been members.

With formal church membership, we are going to initiate a process to formalize our relationship. It's really an opportunity for you all to pledge that Rock Valley Bible Church is your church, where you will serve, where you will practice the one anothers, and where you will be shepherded by the elders.

We are simply going to ask you to fill out a form, that we might have a record of those who are formal members of the church.¹ The form is quite simple. It's one page. On the front side, there's an opportunity for you to profess your faith in Jesus, and to express your desire to formally commit yourself to Rock Valley Bible Church. Acts 2:42 forms the guidelines for the commitment. It gives you an opportunity to sign and date the document. Below, there is a place for the elders to make their commitments to care for you.

On the back side, there's an opportunity for you to give an account of your salvation. Then, a place where you can express any desire to serve the church. Finally, there is a question about baptism We ask that you would take this paper home and pray over it. We would ask that you would work through in your own heart whether Acts 2:42 is representative of what you want to devote yourself to. And over the next few months, we, as elders would love to sit down with you and talk with you about this form. We would love to see every one of you make a formal commitment to Rock Valley Bible Church and become formal members of this church.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church
on February 9, 2020 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

¹See appendix 8.

APPENDIX 8

EXPRESSION OF COMMITMENT FORM

The following two pages are representative of a front and back form that is filled out by every future member of the church. On the front, it contains essential commitments that every member makes to the church (based on Acts 2:42). It also contains essential commitments of every elder to the members. On the back side, it includes space for a written testimony of salvation, along with areas of service. Finally, there is a question about baptism.

An Expression of Commitment
to the local assembly of
Rock Valley Bible Church

As a believer in Jesus Christ, I, _____, confess that I'm a sinner and that my only hope for forgiveness is in trusting Jesus Christ and His righteousness. I acknowledge that my desire is to love and obey Him because of what He has accomplished for me on the cross.

As a member of the universal church (i.e. all true Christians), I also understand my responsibility to associate with a local church, where I can gather for encouragement and can serve with my gifts. I sign this document to formally express my commitment to the local assembly of Rock Valley Bible Church. I love the head of the church, Jesus Christ, and devote myself to serve the body of the church, God's people.

“And they were continually devoting themselves
to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”
(Acts 2:42)

It is my desire to continually devote myself to the following:

1. The Apostles' Teaching:

- I will consistently seek to read, understand and obey the Old & New Testaments.
- I will regularly attend the gatherings of Rock Valley Bible Church for instruction and edification.
- I will obey and submit to the biblical exhortations of the leaders of Rock Valley Bible Church.

2. Fellowship:

- I will regularly serve the church with my time, talents (gifts/abilities) and treasures (possessions).
- I will uphold the unity and support the doctrine of Rock Valley Bible Church.
- I will fervently carry out the biblical "one another's" ("love one another," etc.) among this church.

3. The Breaking of Bread:

- I will share meals together and be hospitable with others in the church.
- I will celebrate the Lord's Supper at church gatherings.
- I will examine my life regularly for the purpose of living holy in my relationships with others.

4. Prayer:

- I will commit to regularly personal prayer.
- I will pray for the people and ministries of this church.
- I will pray with the people of this church.

(signature)

(date)

We, the undersigned elders of Rock Valley Bible Church, make the following commitments:

- We will care for the above member, as one purchased by the blood of Jesus (Acts 20:28).
- We will shepherd him/her willingly, sacrificially, lovingly and with humility (1 Peter 5:1-4).
- We will remember that we will give account to the Lord for how we have shepherded him/her (Heb. 13:17).

Here is my account of how God saved me:

I desire to serve the Church through the following ministries:

I have been baptized. When? How?

I have NOT been baptized, but I want to be baptized

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT ROCK VALLEY BIBLE CHURCH IN LOVES PARK, ILLINOIS

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2020
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This project was designed to develop an understanding of church membership at Rock Valley Bible Church in Loves Park, Illinois. Chapter 1 presents the history and ministry context of Rock Valley Bible Church and the goals of this project. Chapter 2 provides exegesis of five passages of Scripture (Matt 18:15-17; Acts 20:28; Phi 1:5; Heb 10:24-25; 13:17). The passages show that the clear call of the New Testament is for believers in Jesus Christ to identify themselves with a local congregation, where they can submit to the leaders, assemble with other believers and serve one another with their gifts. Chapter 3 presents the practices of church membership throughout the history of the church along with an argument that today's litigious context is a clarion call for churches today to have a clear church membership practice. Chapter 4 describes the project itself, recounting the content and teaching methodology of the specific course curriculum. Chapter 5 evaluates the efficacy of the project based on the completion of the specified goals. Ultimately, this project presents a blue-print for implementing a formal church membership.

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