

The Case for Church Membership

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, during the words of preparation, one of the pastors will explain, because we are required to by our denominational standards (Book of Church Order 58-4), that communion is for those who know Christ personally, AND that only those who are members in good standing of any evangelical church may participate. You don't have to be members of Redeemer, but, as we say, "of any church that takes the bible seriously."

Really—you *have* to be a member? Some of you struggle with that. I know of one couple several years ago that was exploring Redeemer until they heard that said, and chose to leave. Most of us understand that you must be in solidarity or union with Christ in order to take communion because that is part of what it signifies, our union with him spiritually, but the other requirement is more puzzling.

It may leave you feeling unnecessarily disadvantaged because you grew up in a bible believing church that did not stress membership, maybe didn't even have it. Or you feel strongly that church membership is artificial. Those exact words do not appear in the bible, so why should we even embrace such a concept?

Let's be crystal clear that in no way do we want to put off any one. We want every kind of person welcome at Redeemer, from those hostile to or very skeptical of Christianity, to those who are searching, struggling, or thriving in faith. The point is not to unnecessarily place any distance between any of us, but to understand what Jesus says about how he loves us and what it means to belong to him.

Let's start there.

1. Can you belong to Jesus and not be a church member?

Yes!

In fact, you can be a church member and *not* belong to Jesus. Going to church no more makes you a Christian than sleeping in a garage makes you a car. There are far too many people in churches who apparently have no interest in a vital connection to Jesus Christ. I know preachers who have been told by church members to "quick talking so much about Jesus". That's as silly as going to a restaurant where the server says, why are you ordering food?

Belonging to Jesus is not first and foremost about being a church member. It is about solidarity or oneness with Christ by faith. You need what Christ has; when you are one with him, what's true of him is true of you. He is perfectly righteous, so are you in solidarity with him. He paid the death penalty for sin, so have you. In Christ we have everything necessary for complete acceptance before God.

So, yes, eternal life is not predicated upon joining a church. When you meet God at judgment day, the issue will be whether your soul is completely cleansed from sin, and do you have the perfect righteousness without which no one will see God. We receive both of those as promises of his love: gifts of grace by mercy, not the church, by grace, not human effort.

2. Should those who belong to Jesus belong to a church?

Obviously we believe the bible teaches so. Let's see why from the nature of things:

A) The Nature of God

What is God like, and how does He enter into relationship with people?

God loves his people so much that he makes binding agreements with them. In love He initiates covenants. The essence of the covenant is, “I will be your God, and you will be my people”. (Genesis 17:7; Exodus 6:7; Leviticus 26:12)

For God’s part, He always keeps covenant; He is faithful to preserve His people and to never forsake them. He loves them! (Isaiah 43:1; 49:14-16; John 10:27-28)

God binds himself in love with promises, and so should we. On our part, we trust his love and promises, and become His people; we become members of the community of faith. In the OT, if you refuse the community, the sign (Genesis 17:14), the meal (Exodus 12:15), or the day (Exodus 31:14) of the covenant, you were “cut off”. Either you trusted his love and participated in the life of the covenant community, publicly swearing allegiance to it, or you had no access to the means of life in God.

B) The Nature of a Disciple

A disciple is “one who follows.” Jesus said, “Die to yourself and follow Me, or you have no life (cut off)”. (Matthew 16:24) When we see how much he loves us we trust Christ, we put our faith in him. By his kindness this unites us to Christ. Several things happen: First, there is a switch in ownership. Jesus is Lord of your life. He is your new Master. You exchange loyalty rights. He loves me better than I could ever love myself. You belong to Christ (1 Corinthians 6:20; 3:23).

Second, you are also made a part of His body, the church, and become members of all the other parts (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12:4-5). Your solidarity with Christ *spiritually/invisibly*, is reflected in your solidarity with His people *visibly*. Public declaration of belonging to Christ (joining a local body) expresses your allegiance to Christ and to His people. (Matthew 10:32) If you refuse to visibly identify with Christ, you are a walking contradiction. Why would you not? The only reason can be – ultimately – that at some time in the future you may want to disassociate yourself visibly, and maybe for the wrong reason.

A disciple follows Jesus. He seeks to submit to the rule of Jesus. He loves us enough to tell us: **You cannot do it alone.** *You aren’t strong enough, or wise enough, or spiritual enough.*

It is a wisdom issue in that Proverbs 18:1 says:

He who separates himself seeks his own desire, he quarrels against all sound wisdom.

You were never meant to do it alone! If a Christian can be a part of the people of God as a “lone ranger”, then the Biblical pictures of the church (body, building, family, temple-each depicting interdependent, organic unity) make no sense to us!

C) The Nature of the Church

What is the church? It is the church (gathering, called out ones) of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is his. He is its king and head.

Now here is a very important question:

How does Jesus Christ love his own? He provides for all their needs, and he exercises His leadership, His rightful Kingship, over His people.

What does that look like?

At the *individual level*, through the Holy Spirit using the Word of God. But as we have seen you're not just an individual Christian. You're a member of the body of Christ. You can't be your own man simply because you *are not* your own man. You belong to the members of the Body of Jesus Christ. Romans 12:5 "*So we are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.*"

So at the *corporate level*, Jesus Christ rules you in love for your good and for His glory through appointed leaders in His Church. If he loves you he will never leave you to yourself!

Matthew 16:18 "*And I say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church: and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...*" The term, keys of the kingdom, is a metaphor of the teaching authority of the apostles. The apostles laid the foundation of the church by giving us the completed canon of the Word of God – the New Testament. By God's design and appointment, individual Christians are to be governed in their local church, by elders, who faithfully expound the law of God.

Acts 14:21-23 "*And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*"

What are elders for? To do the visible shepherding of the invisible Good Shepherd.

Acts 20:17 "*And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.*" v. 28 "*Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*"

What does shepherding imply?

1 Timothy 5:17 "*Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.*" The elders rule well. Rule what? The people of God.

Here is a truism: *You can't rule someone who doesn't submit to you.* Membership is necessary in order for any structure to have authority.

Children obey their parents because they belong to them.

You obey the police because you are responsible as a citizen.

But I will never pay dues in the Garden Club because I don't belong to it.

Now you can say, "I am not a member of the church, but I attend faithfully!" In that situation, you are not able to be held accountable and you can walk away whenever you want without consequence.

Painful case study: A woman and her husband attend church. She is a member, he is not. He leaves her for an adulterous relationship. She pleads with the church leaders to do something.

What authority do the leaders have over the man? None, he hasn't given it. The most they can say is, "we implore you by Christ and his word to repent and do what is godly." But while they can do no more, there is more to be done. Church discipline is ordained by God to bring sinners to a sense of their treachery. Without that, neither party involved in this example is well-off.

Hebrews 13:17 *"Obey your leaders, and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."* Does this sound oppressive and heavy-handed? Not in the least – it is for your good!

James 5:14 *"Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church..."* They are not your elders if you haven't submitted to them – formally.

1 Peter 5:2 *"(Elders should) shepherd the flock of God among you..."* You are in the flock. You must belong to the pack. If you can simply stray from the flock, without formal restraint, capriciously to pursue your own sinful choices, then you really don't belong to the flock.

The New Testament is soberly realistic about the tendency of our hearts to drift from the Lord. Because Christ knows this, in love he establishes an accountable system. It is a Blessing to be under, it is a Safeguard, and it is a Spiritual privilege and necessity. Church membership is a commitment to a local church, your giving to its leadership permission to lovingly confront sin when sin lies to your hearts.

Hebrews 3:12-13 *"Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called, "Today", lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."*

This is the quality of one-anothering we desire to see in our small groups. But suppose one attender gets in a bad funk: stops everything good for her, going to church, small group. She disconnects herself from the love of Jesus. Group members try to contact her, but to no avail. The small group leader informs the elders. We could try to do something, but we have no authority if it has not been given to the leaders through church membership.

How is this supposed to work? Matthew 18:15f. Jesus says *"And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listen to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And 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-gatherer."*

This case concerns a person who has assumedly placed himself under the discipline and protection of the church and is living like an unbeliever. His refusal to repent is a certain indication of a hardened heart, the state of his spirit that is impervious to the good counsel of Jesus Christ given through his appointed leaders. Note the steps of discipline: 1) dealing one on one, privately 2) taking another witness to collaborate concerns. Note that much grace is given to keep the problem as private as possible. 3) Go to the church membership (or perhaps the leadership). If the person still will not deal with his sin after this warning, then they must be removed from the church and their communion and fellowship with the Body of Christ must cease. This is because their behavior has – dishonored Christ, defiled the purity of the body, and then denounced their own profession. This is ex-communication – or being "out of communion" with the Body. This is the final and extreme means of showing the person their need to repent. You can imagine that it is never pleasant. It is painful, tearful, full of anguish, but necessary.

Some of you may remember the name Paul Hill. In Pensacola FL in July 1994 he murdered in cold blood an abortion doctor and his body guard. He became the first person in the U.S. executed for killing an abortionist. But did he bring shame on his denomination (the OPC, a sister denomination of the PCA)? No. For his radical views he was excommunicated a year earlier. Had the church not done that it stood liable for the sanctioning of his views and actions.

The purpose of discipline is for the glory of God, for the purity of the church, and for the reclaiming of the sinner. *Church discipline is always merciful*. This merciful act is meant to become such a pressure on the heart of the unrepentant that they will eventually repent and return. The alternative action is **worse**: letting sin reign in the heart of the believer unchecked. Therefore, the goal of church discipline is restoration of unrepentant sinners.

The New Testament teaches an accountability system. It is a blessing, it is for love! Don't let it scare you, instead be afraid of what sin might do! The New Testament teaches that there are consequences for unrepentant sin. The offender must be removed as a drastic measure to get them to repent. "Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning." (I Timothy 5:20) For churches to neglect this aspect of ministry is reprehensible. For the Christian to refuse this kind accountability is precarious. It is a denial of Christ's right to rule by his leaders. It is, in effect saying "I want to maintain my autonomy to live as I please without consequence." That posture is as foolish as it is perilous. We ought not to fear God's love through the accountability system, but value it as a lifesaver.

D. The nature of the table

What does all this have to do with the table? The Lord's Table signifies love: Christ's love for you, your solidarity with Him, and because we each belong to him, we therefore belong to each other. We are by definition in solidarity with each other. Taking communion, then says publicly, Jesus loves me so much he gave me a whole family of others to love me- I belong to them and they belong to me.

What, then, makes someone belong? Is it simply because they say so? No. You belong because you say so AND because the elders say so. They are responsible to admit people who say so to the Lord's Table- by securing a credible testimony of saving trust in Jesus (and without which they most definitely should not come to the Table)-, and thus to the membership of the church.

Do you see the point? If you don't belong, you don't belong. You belong when you've given the elders a testimony that you trust Jesus and the authority to shepherd your soul.

What does church discipline have to do with church membership? It simply cannot be practiced on people who aren't members. The Bible teaches church discipline. It must also teach church membership.

What wonderful things happen when you join the church: attitudes change! These are my brothers and sisters. I am responsible for them and they for me. This is *my* church. I love it, support it, care for it. I want to attend. I want to give. I want to pray for it, for the Glory of Jesus Christ.

Other scriptures to study:

Deuteronomy 19:19-20 Romans 16:17
2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14 1 Timothy 1:20
Titus 3:10 1 Corinthians 5:1-7a