

MAKING MEMBERSHIP MEANINGFUL

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Casey Benjamin Hough

B.A., Louisiana Tech University, 2006

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Introduction

Does membership matter? Though it may seem foolish to even ask such a question, the disparaging statistics regarding church attendance versus church membership must cause one to stop and wonder: Has the church gotten membership all wrong? The purpose of this paper will be to provide a biblical basis for meaningful church membership as the only acceptable type of the church membership in light of the nature of the church and its mission. After establishing this proposition, the paper will conclude with some brief suggestions regarding how the church can recapture a vision for membership for the sake of the glory of Christ.

Biblical Basis for Meaningful Church Membership

Before there can be a thorough examination of meaningful church membership, one must first define the nature of the church. The word "church" is the predominant translation in the Bible of the Greek word *ekklēsia*, which is a compound form of the two words *ek* (meaning "out" or "from") and *kaleō* (meaning "to call"). Hence, the word "church" is used to denote those who are the "called out." John S. Hammett notes, however, that "over the years, the element of being called out became less prominent, and an *ekklēsia* was regarded as just an assembly of people."¹ Etymologically speaking, then, at the very least, the word "church" designates a particular people in contrast to another group. Whereas there is a group that is still considered "in" a particular state, the church is a group that has been "called out" of a previous state. They are marked out and assembled with others of a similar calling.

Having briefly considered the etymology of the word "church," one must now consider its usage in the Bible to provide a more narrow definition for the purpose of this paper. The word *ekklēsia* is used 114 times in the New Testament with 109 of those usages referring to the New

¹ John S Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2005), 26.

Testament church.² Furthermore, of these 109 usages, there have been at least two historically significant senses regarding the church, namely, a local sense and a universal sense. At the heart of these two senses is the desire to grapple with the language of the New Testament that at some points would seem to suggest both a local aspect of the church and a universal aspect of the church. The local aspect of the church is by far the predominant usage in the New Testament. However, some would interpret the more "universal" texts (See Ephesians 5:23-27 for example) as still being a "local" gathering of the "called out" in heaven as opposed to on earth. Regarding this issues, Mark Dever writes, "A few passages in the New Testament seem to refer to the church in the abstract, or universally, but the overwhelming majority of references to the church are to a local, living, and loving collection of people who are committed to Christ and committed to each other. That's what the word means again and again in the New Testament."³ Granted that there are various opinions on how one defines the marks of a true church, it seems rather untenable to speak of a "universal church" that does not have formal leaders, observe the ordinances, or practice church discipline. Earl Blackburn is helpful in this regard when he quotes John Murray, who writes, "It is important to bear in mind that the church of God is an institution. It may never be conceived of apart from the organization of the people of God in visible expression and in discharge of the ordinances instituted by Christ."⁴ Furthermore, if there is a truly "universal sense" to the church, it is not necessarily present or exegetically required in any text of the New Testament. Hence, almost all, if not all, references to the church in the New Testament can be understood to refer to an assembly of those who have been "called out," with the local nature of the assembly being relative to intended audience.

² Ibid., 28.

³ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2004), 149.

⁴ Earl M Blackburn, *Jesus Loves The Church And So Should You: Studies in Biblical Churchmanship* (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2010), 19.

Therefore, having briefly argued for a local understanding of the church as an assembly of the "called out," one must consider the organizing principles and purpose of the church. As far as organizing principles go, there are multiple "images" of the church in the New Testament that suggest and help to clarify its distinct nature as an assembled people.⁵ The first image is that of the "People of God." In 1 Peter 2:9-10, Peter clearly uses Old Testament language to describe the present reality of the New Testament church. Interestingly enough, language that was exclusively used to refer to Israel under the Old Covenant is now applied to multi-ethnic assembly of followers of Christ. For whatever the debates may be between Covenantal and Dispensational theologians, Hammett rightly affirms that there are elements of discontinuity and continuity that allow both traditions to affirm this true.⁶ On page 34 of his book of Baptist ecclesiology, Hammett lists the following as implications of this particular image:

- It gives the church a connection to the Old Testament and God's great purpose of calling to himself a people
- It underscores the nature of the church as called—called by God to be his people.
- The church is a people, not a collection of isolated individuals.
- The church is God's people, not a human institution.
 - As God's people, the church is called to be holy and loving.
 - As God the Father's people, the church is a family.
 - As God the Son's people, the church is those who believe in Christ.
 - As God the Spirit's people, the church is those who experience fellowship.

The second image is that of the body of Christ. As the body of Christ, the church receives nourishment from Christ and serves as the body of God (Ephesians 4:11-16). Furthermore, with

⁵ The following information is a synthesis of material found in Hammett, *Biblical foundations for Baptist churches*, 31–50; Blackburn, *Jesus loves the church and so should you*, 20–31.

⁶ See Hammett, *Biblical foundations for Baptist churches*, 33 for specifics.

Christ as the head of His body, the church is ultimately under the leadership of Christ who gives others as "gifts" to his body for the purpose of serving as under-shepherds to the Great Shepherd of the sheep (Hebrews 13:20). As with the previous image, Hammett also provides a list of implications that are related to image of the "body of Christ." The list is as follows:

- The image of the body of points to the church's unity, seen especially in the Lord's Supper and baptism.
- The image of the body aptly illustrates how the church may be one, while its members are diverse.
- The body image reflects how the members of the church should show a mutuality of love and care to one another.
- Christ, as the head of the body, is the ultimate authority for the church.
- As head, Christ also provides for the needs of the church.
- Christlikeness is the goal of the church's growth; all the members of the church contribute to the growth and unity of the church as all perform their own particular ministries.

The third and final image of the church in the New Testament is that of the "Temple of the Spirit." In fulfillment of the promised blessings of the New Covenant, Jesus Christ has sent the Spirit into the hearts of those who have trusted in Him and empowered them for the work of the ministry that He has purposed for them (Acts 1:8). Hence, the Spirit not only mediates the presence of Christ in the believer, but He also empowers the believer with the power of the resurrection. In this sense, believers are already partaking in the power of the kingdom in an "already-not yet" sense that enables them to fulfill the Great Commission, which is directly related to Christ's promise to "build His church" (Matthew 16:18). Therefore, the giving of the Spirit is in part a fulfillment of Christ's promise to "build His church," in which the Spirit of God

dwells. In conclusion to the three images that Hammett recognized in the New Testament regarding the church, the following list summarizes the implications of the church being the Temple of the Spirit:

- Because it is God's temple, the church must be a worshiping community.
- In God's temple, all believers form the priesthood; all are involved in the church's ministry.
- The temple is also the place of relationship.
 - The Spirit mediates our relationship with God, communicating his presence and power and sanctifying us.
 - The Spirit joins together believers as the stones in God's temple through his creation of fellowship.

Having briefly considered the etymology and usage of the word *ekklēsia* along with the descriptive images of the *ekklēsia* in the New Testament, one may now proceed with an articulation of a working definition of church:

The church is a Gospel-centered assembly of Spirit-filled believers in Jesus Christ who have organized themselves according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit under the authority of Scripture as a local expression of the body of Christ for the purpose of making known the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.⁷

With a working definition of the church in place, the topic of church membership may now be explored. When considering the topic of church membership, one of the main concerns from critics is whether or not it is a biblical concept. Neither time nor space is available to provide an exhaustive defense of church membership,⁸ however, a brief examination of

⁷ Casey Hough, “The Church: An Introduction to First Timothy” (Bible Study presented at the College and Career Bible Study, Heritage Baptist Church, March 23, 2009).

⁸ See Blackburn, *Jesus loves the church and so should you*; John K. Davies, *The Local Church: A Living Body* (Great Britain: CPD Wales, 2001); Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*; Hammett, *Biblical foundations for Baptist churches*; John S Hammett and Mark Dever, “On Church Membership,” in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist*

following passages of scripture will more than suffice to establish the biblical basis for church membership.

Acts 2:42-47

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

In this passage, church membership is seen in the fact that there is a particular number that the Lord added to "day by day," which was made up of those who were being saved. Interestingly enough, those who were "being saved" were being added to a number of people who had "devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Without being anachronistic, this passage clearly teaches a numerical identifiable group that is committed to a common doctrine and practice of worship. There should be no doubts that this is the church that Jesus had promised to build through the empowering work of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 5:1-11

¹ But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." ⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. ⁷ After an interval of about

churches (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008); Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and The Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing The Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2010) for a detailed defence of church membership.

three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." ⁹ But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

In this passage, Luke records the first instance of church discipline, which is unique because of the divine punishment of concealed sin in the context of the church. Though the text is primarily about the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, verse 11 explicitly mentions the fact that "great fear came upon the whole church" *and* upon all who heard of these things. A simple reading of this text reveals that there are two groups being considered, namely, those who saw (i.e. – the whole church) and those who heard (i.e. – those outside of the church). Without a definable membership, Luke's delineations would be senseless.

Acts 6:1-6

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

In this passage, church membership is clearly discernable when Luke records how the apostles commissioned the church with the responsibility to "pick out from among you." If there was not a demarcation between those who are among those addressed and those outside of them, then how would the church ever be able to find adequate servant to meet the needs of widows.

Furthermore, which widows were these newly selected servants to be responsible for caring for, if it were not for those who were part of the common fellowship that is described in Acts 2?

These passages, along with a host of others,⁹ make it clear that the church of the New Testament was a church with a discernable membership. To suggest otherwise is to ignore both the descriptive and prescriptive material of the New Testament.

With the nature of the church and its membership firmly rooted in scripture, this section will conclude by considering the relationship between the church and its membership in the purpose of God in Ephesians 3:7-21, 4:11-16, and 1 Peter 2:9-10. These concluding comments will solidify the biblical basis for meaningful membership and allow the paper to move forward with practical suggestions regarding how to convey and lead people into a biblical understanding of the church and its membership.

Ephesians 3:7-21

⁷ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. ¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. ¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

⁹ Matthew 18:15-17, Acts 15:22-31, 18:27, 1 Corinthians 15:1-13, 2 Corinthians 8:18-24, 1 Timothy 3:1-15, 2 Timothy 5:9-16, Titus 1:4-9, Hebrews 13:7,17, James 5:14, 1 Peter 5:1-4, 3 John 9-10)

In this extended passage, Paul discusses his ministry as a minister of the gospel, which is ultimately defined as a ministry to preach "to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to bring to light for everyone what is plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God" *so that* the church might serve as the mechanism through which the manifold wisdom of God is revealed. Specifically, the manifold wisdom is said to be revealed to the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places," but in the most practical terms, an immediate context of revelation is among the sons of men. The point is that the gospel message that Paul preaches is building a church that includes both Jew and Gentile as those united through the gospel. The manifold wisdom of God is seen in the gospel that transcends and ultimately destroys the hostility that sin has created not only between man and God, but also between man and man. For Paul, the church will confound the "wisdom of the world" by virtue of its diverse makeup of people in its membership. The result of this reality is doxological to the praise of Christ Jesus who is glorified in such an institution as the church of the living God. For Paul, membership in the church is about the manifestation of the manifold wisdom of God. To not be vitally connected to a church is to live in disobedience to this gospel imperative.

Ephesians 4:11-16

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

In this passage, Paul moves beyond the cosmic purpose of the church to the personal benefits derived by members of the church that fulfill their individual purposes in accordance with their

gifting. According to this passage, Christ has given minister to his body for the purpose of equipping them for the work of ministry. Contrary to the individualism that rampant in modern times, the biblical concept of body life is one that promotes mutual edification and accountability. Drawing on the analogy of the body, Paul seeks to show his audience that true church growth is focused upon maturing in the faith and building one another up through mutual service and discharge of gifting. Clearly, just as is the case with the human body, different parts serve different role with a shared goal of effective and purposeful function. As with everything in the Christian life, Jesus Christ is the ultimate source of sustenance and authority in matters of the body of Christ, yet he has ordained that each individual member play a vital role in the fulfillment of the body ultimate purpose, namely, pursuing a unity of faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ. As with previous mentioned passage, this passage makes clear that member is vital not only for the health of the individual members but for the health of others as well. Hence, church membership is an expression of love not only for Jesus, but also for others, which is a fulfillment of the two greatest commandments.

1 Peter 2:9-10

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

In this final passage regarding the relationship between the church and membership, Peter draws on Old Testament language to speak of the New Testament church. All of Peter's designations are loaded with theological significance. Essentially, Peter takes language that is related to Israel's purposes as God's people and applies it to the mission of the church. Just as Israel was a chosen race among all the other races, a royal priesthood that would serve to mediate that rule of God among the people and hence lead other nations to true worship, a people possessed for a

purpose, so, now, the church is a people that have been born of God and chosen for the purpose of the advancing the kingdom of God as a members of a royal priesthood for the express purpose of proclaiming the excellencies of the Gospel of Christ as those who have been called out of the darkness into marvelous light. The point is that the church, a specific people, a corporate entity, has been chosen by God to fulfill the purposes that Israel temporarily forfeited because of unbelief. Therefore, those that would fulfill this purpose must necessarily be members of the church that has been ordained and equipped for such purposes.

In light of the biblical nature and relationship of the church and its membership, one must conclude that meaningful membership must be a priority of both the leaders and the members of local churches. The fulfillment of divine purposes is at stake in the way that membership is practiced in the local church. Hence, this paper will conclude by briefly considering some of the practical ways that meaningful church membership can be promoted and developed in the local church.

Practical Approaches to Meaningful Church Membership

The first practical way to address meaningful membership is for the church leadership to teach on the matters of the church and church membership. Many in this day and age have never been exposed to sound, biblical teaching on such matters. There are multiple ways that this can be approached. One of the first options would be to teach on these matters in the context of Sunday school or small groups. This type of setting would give people the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the benefits as well as draw backs to church membership.

Another practical way to address meaningful membership is for the church to keep accurate church roles. This means that the church and its leaders must have a constitution and church covenant in place that clearly defines the expectations and requirements for membership

in the church. Interestingly enough, Thom Rainer has written a book¹⁰ on how high expectations in many different areas of church life will help retain members and grow the church.

Specifically, high expectations for members tend to challenge them to work hard and "plug into" the ministry of the church. In this sense, high expectation of member requirements and expectation can help to keep the church roles fresh and accurate if the proper documents are in place.

A third way to encourage meaningful church membership is to implement a new members class that clearly outlines the expectation and vision that the leaders have for the membership in the church. This type of setting will give both parties an opportunity to consider the seriousness of the commitment to church membership.

A fourth and final way to promote and develop meaningful church membership is to implement a thorough shepherding plan to be carried out by the leaders of the church for the sake of the members. A thorough shepherding plan will incorporate most, if not all, of the elements mentioned about, but it will be carried out on a very personal level on a consistent basis by the leaders of the church.¹¹

Conclusion

There is much more that could and should be written regarding meaningful membership for the sake of the glory of God in the church of Jesus Christ. By the grace of God, may the biblical and practical resources found in the report help to prepare others to consider and address this pressing issue in the body of Christ.

¹⁰ Thom S Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999).

¹¹ See Timothy Z Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in Your Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2010) for resources about the implementation of shepherding plans.

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