

THE BELLEVILLE MESSENGER

February 4

2024

MEMBERSHIP IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

When one obeys the gospel, the Lord adds him to the church (Acts 2: 47). He is a member of the church in the universal sense. However, that within itself does not necessarily identify one with a local church. What does the Bible say about membership in the local church? What does it mean to be a member? Does the fact that one attends mean that he is a member? What about those whose names are in the directory, but seldom darken the door? Should they be considered as members?

Let's see what the Bible says in answer to these questions and try to clarify some misconceptions about local church membership.

Local Church Membership Is Necessary

1. Without members there would be no local church. Local churches consist of members. The saints at Philippi were the church (Phil. 1: 1). The Christians at Corinth were the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1: 2). The same was true at Antioch (Acts 13: 1). Thus, local church membership is essential to a local church. To argue that local church membership is not essential is to do away with the local church.

2. Without local church membership elders cannot have the oversight that the Bible describes. Elders are to shepherd the flock of God which is among them (1 Pet. 5: 1-2). Elders have rule and authority among those in the local church (Acts 20: 28; Heb. 13: 17). Without local church membership, elders would not have this oversight. The sphere of their authority obviously is not just to Christians living in a general area. If so, could elders in areas like Athens, AL, Louisville, KY or Tampa, FL (where there are a number of churches) have authority and oversight over any and all the Christians living in their area? Of course not. In light of 1 Pet. 5: 1-2, elders only have the oversight of those who are members of the local church where they are members. Thus, to argue that local church membership is non-essential is to eliminate the authority and oversight of the elders.

3. Without local church membership disciplinary action cannot be carried out. The church at Corinth was instructed to "put away from yourselves that wicked person" (1 Cor. 5: 13). This, obviously, is not barring him from attendance, for one could be disciplined and still attend the worship services. This "putting away" refers to (or at least includes) removing him as a member of the local church. The church at Thessalonica was told to "withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly..." (2 Thess. 3: 6). This cannot be done without local church membership. How can we put away "from among us" a wicked brother who is not a member? We must be careful not to draw the wrong conclusion. This does not mean that there is never a time when he/ she may not be identified with a local church for a short period. For example, one may move into an area where there are a number of churches and spend four to six weeks visiting around until they decide where they want to be members. However, if I conclude from this that I don't ever have to be a member of a local church, then I can also conclude that no one else does either. Thus, away with the local church, its elders and discipline.

Identifying Or "Placing Membership"

Though the phrase "placing membership" is not found in the text, the concept of identifying with a local congregation is justified by the text. There are examples of Christians seeking to identify with local congregations where they went.

1. Paul sought to join himself to the disciples at Jerusalem (Acts 9: 26-28). At first, they were afraid and would not receive him for they did not believe he was a disciple. Yet, after Barnabas declared that he was a child of God and had boldly preach the gospel, they received him.

2. Paul and Barnabas were identified with the church at Antioch (Acts 13: 1). Luke tells us that they assembled with the church there for a whole year (Acts 11: 25-26). But, they were more than mere visitors in the assembly, for the same writer says that Barnabas and Saul were among those teachers "in the church" at Antioch (Acts 13: 1). Thus, they must have identified with the local church.

3. Apollos sought to be received by the brethren in Achaia (Acts 18: 27). When Apollos left Ephesus, the brethren there thought it necessary to write and encourage the brethren in Achaia to receive him. The same verse indicates that the brethren at Corinth did receive him. Again, we have a Christian being identified with a local church.

Accepting And Rejecting Members

A local church has a right to accept or reject people as members of that church. Obviously, this is not some type of arbitrary decision as Diotrephes tried (3 Jno.).

1. 1 Cor. 5: 1-13 instructs the church at Corinth to reject the fornicator who was in

their midst. They were to do this because he was guilty of wickedness that would corrupt the church (vs. 6, 13).

2. 2 Thess. 3: 6-14 directs the church at Thessalonica to reject any who walked "disorderly." That included the lazy man and the busybody. From these passages we conclude that any rejection is based on whether that person lives according to the word or walks disorderly. Churches have a right and duty to know who they are accepting. The church at Jerusalem would not accept Paul until they knew more about him (Acts 9: 26-28). The Ephesians saw a need to encourage the brethren in Achaia to receive Apollos (Acts 18: 27). That tells me that the church at Corinth would not have received him until they knew who he was and the things for which he stood. Brethren are wise to ask a few questions of those who come desiring to place membership.

It is just as bad to accept anyone without question as it is to fail to discipline those who should be rejected.

What Does It Mean To Be A Member?

1. It is not an honorary club. There is nothing to be gained by having our names on the church roll or in a directory in and of itself. Each member is a functioning unit (1 Cor. 12).

2. It means work, duty and responsibility. It's somewhat like being a member of the armed forces. We have witnessed in recent months that it involves more than a rank and paycheck. It means work when the call is given.

Being a member means that I have a responsibility to attend the assemblies of the church where I am a member (Heb. 10: 25). It means contributing into the local treasury (1 Cor. 16: 1-2), teaching as one's ability allows (Acts 13: 1; Heb. 5: 12), restoring the erring (Gal. 6: 1), working together harmoniously (Rom. 14: 19), supporting disciplinary action (1 Cor. 5) and worshiping together (Acts 20: 7; 1 Cor. 11).

So, when you announce that you want to be a member of a certain congregation, you are saying that you want to be active and be a part of the work. You are willing to participate and involve yourself in the work that the church is doing. I am amused at people who want to be considered as members and have their names in the directory, yet, they are not willing to attend all of the services, not to mention the other work.

Misconceptions About Being A Member In A Local Church

1. "Being a member of a local church of Christ puts me with those who are going to heaven. "The idea is that we will be judged as a congregation. Since this church is going to heaven, then I am too, because I am a member. This ignores the fact that we will be judged individually (Rom. 14: 12).

2. "I'm still a member where my letter" is. I've been worshiping here for five years, but I'm still a member where we used to live since I never 'moved my letter.'" This doesn't fit the examples in the New Testament. In Paul's journeys, he identified with churches where he traveled. The Bible doesn't talk about one being a member where he doesn't attend, contribute and work.

3. "There is no need to be members of this congregation. We just want to attend." The fact that Paul identified with the church at Jerusalem (Acts 9: 26) indicates a need. The fact that we are to submit to elders (Heb. 13: 17) also suggest the need to be members. Any passage that speaks of the local church and its work speaks of the need to be a member.

4. "Anyone who is considered a member is approved of God and the brethren." This is not necessarily so. Members may behave in unbecoming and ungodly ways that other brethren may never see. Just because a person is a member where I am doesn't mean that I approve of all they do. They may be guilty of things that I never know. Furthermore, there may be suspicion of wrongdoing. But, without evidence, action cannot be taken.

On the other hand, when the sin is obvious and the evidence is not lacking, action is demanded by the authority of Christ (1 Cor. 5).

✍ Donnie V. Rader

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Schedule of Services

Sunday Bible Study	9:30 a.m.
Sunday Morning Worship	10:30 a.m.
Sunday Evening Worship	4:00 p.m.
Wednesday Bible Study	7:00 p.m.

Evangelist

Brad Phillips	(765) 720-2816
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