

Is Church Membership Biblical?

Acts 2:42-47

Anyone who has attended this church for any length of time or watched online knows that our regular habit on a Sunday morning is to be working through a book of the bible verse by verse and chapter by chapter.

There are a number of reasons for that.

First and foremost is that it puts the emphasis of our preaching on the word of God rather than the preacher.

Anything that is said from this pulpit is only of value in as much as it is rightly explaining and applying what God Almighty has said.

Secondly, working through books verse by verse and chapter by chapter compels the preacher to preach the whole counsel of God.

Speaking for myself, I know I am by nature a fearful and weak man, so if I were picking topics week in and week out I would likely avoid difficult subjects, I would be inclined to think more about what people want to hear instead of what God has said.

Working through books helps me fight against avoiding difficult things.

Verse by verse preaching also helps me avoid making myself and editor of the Bible.

It is very easy when preaching on topics to pull verses out of context for the purpose of supporting an idea.

Some of the best advice I have ever received came to me many years ago from my friend and mentor Byron Wheaton.

He said to me, "Mike you have to be a hearer of the word of God. You don't come to the bible with an idea looking for that idea in the text because you will try to reshape the bible according to your thinking. Instead, he said, you must come to the bible as a listener seeking to hear from the living God and have His word shape your heart and mind."

Working through books of the Bible helps to encourage listening rather than editing.

Those are some of the reasons it is our habit to go chapter by chapter and verse by verse through the Bible, but there are occasions when we deal with subjects rather than books.

That is going to be the case over the next few weeks, we are going to be looking at the subject of church membership.

We are going to do that by asking three questions. First, is church membership biblical? Second, what is the purpose of church membership? And third, what is required for church membership?

Even though we are looking at a subject rather than an entire book of the bible, we will still look to a main passage of scripture to answer each question for all the same reasons why we normally work through a book chapter by chapter and verse by verse.

Now some might be asking why raise the subject of church membership?

The answer is because over the course of the last couple of years I've been asked about it a number of times and so it seemed to me to be a subject worth addressing from the pulpit.

My hope for this short series in **not** to convince anyone to be a member of this church.

I'll leave that between you and the LORD. My goal is to help us all to think biblically about church membership.

[That brings us to the first question on this subject. Is church membership biblical? To answer this question we are going to go back to the early days of the church in the book of **Acts 2:42-47**. These verses describe for us what the first church was like and how people viewed belonging to the church. This is the church that was pastored by the apostles. Those men whom our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ gave authority to lay the theological foundations for the church throughout every age. Because that is so it seems best to see what we read here as a pattern to be followed. In these verses we can see three important lessons about the gathering of the church that say somethings to us about the idea of church membership. Lesson number one is this...]

Point #1 – The first church was a distinct gathering of people. (Verses 42-44)

From the description of the meetings that took place in Jerusalem following Peter's Pentecost sermon it seems very clear that the believers were seen by others and saw themselves as belonging to a particular group.

One of the reasons it is important for us to consider this particular text when thinking about church membership is because some people have dismissed the idea of membership in the local church and instead focus on the idea of belonging to the universal church.

A local church is a regular tangible gathering of people in an actual place like we are doing here this morning.

The universal church is made up of every believer throughout all of history.

Some would say that the universal church is what is really important because all you need to belong to that is to rightly believe in the Person and work of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and the hope of eternal life.

I wholeheartedly agree that faith alone in Christ makes a person a part of the universal church, where I would disagree is that being part of the universal church makes membership in the local church unimportant.

That is why this text is important to answering this morning's question because here the universal church and the local church are one and the same.

It is wrongheaded to think that the two ideas are opposed to one another.

Verse 42 gives us a description of the believers.

'They' here refers to the 3000 people who believed the gospel in verse 41 and got baptized and joined the church.

It says here that they 'devoted themselves' to some things.

The ESV here does a particularly good job of translating the original language.

Notice the word 'the' before each one of the four things mentioned here.

These things are more than just some religious things these people may or may not participate in.

These are THE things that defined them as a group.

They bound themselves to an essential aspect of the foundation of the church, the teaching of the apostles.

We have that in the New Testament.

They committed themselves to 'THE fellowship'.

Commentator Richard Longenecker rightly says that phrase describes a 'distinctive recognizable gathering.'

In other words this is a clearly defined group of people to which you clearly belonged or did not belong.

They were devoted to 'the breaking of bread' likely referring to the Lord's Table and to 'the prayers' likely meaning distinctive Christian prayers.

Luke's description goes on **verses 43-44**.

They **all** experienced the awe of the ministry of the apostles.

All who believed were 'together' that is part of the group and they had '**all**' things in common.

The only way that description is possible is if they were a recognizable group made up of people who made a conscious decision to belong to the group.

[Over the years my children have been involved in baseball. Something that has happened a time or two is that we show up at the diamonds and we are not sure which diamond to go to. Do you know what we start looking for? The team uniform, but sometimes the shirts from different teams look similar. In that case we look for people we recognize. You know who is on the team because they joined the team and they come to the practices and games.]

That is the picture the first believers in Jerusalem give us.

It is a picture of a recognizable group of people made up of people who made a decision to belong to the group.

That is what membership in the local church is.

Membership is a formal declaration of belonging and being committed to a local church for the purpose of growing in Christ, loving other Christians, and serving the LORD's glorious purpose of redeeming a people to Himself who will enjoy Him in the light of His presence forever.

Now I know full well that we fail to live up to the picture of the early church.

I know there are many divisions across denominations that have created somewhat of a barrier between the local church and the universal church, but even that does not diminish the importance of membership in the local church.

[Being a member of a church does not save you; however, what it is supposed to do is give us the opportunity to work out the reality of our salvation among a group of likeminded believers which results in a distinct gathering of people. Here is a second lesson from the early church...]

Point #2 – The first church was committed to in person relationships. (Verses 45-47a)

Every believer in the early days of the apostle's ministry believed in a joyful obligation to be with and care for those that gathered in Jesus' name.

We can see their uncommon care for one another here in verse 45.

Admittedly the word 'all' near the end of the verse is somewhat vague.

Is that a reference to anybody and everybody or is it a reference to all within the church.

Without a doubt the bible calls us to be generous to all people and meet needs where we can, but in this case it is likely members of the church that are particularly in view here as they are the clear focus of these verses.

If that is the case then it speaks to the early believers having a strong commitment to meet the needs of actual people who they knew belonged to the church.

Notice here that there is no mention of the apostles or anyone else commanding the believers to do this.

They are not doing this because of a guilt trip or against their will, they are doing this because they have a genuine desire for the good of their fellow church members.

The description goes on in verse 46-47a.

They went to the temple ‘together’.

It’s likely they gathered in the temple because that was the place where they could fit the most people for the purpose of listening to the teaching of the Apostles.

The word ‘together’ likely means they were gathering together in a particular part of the temple courts as a distinctive group.

They also met in smaller groups in the homes of those that belonged to the church.

They shared food together with ‘glad and generous hearts’.

That is saying something more than they were happy with the food, it is saying they enjoyed the fellowship with one another.

Along with their fellowship it says they were “praising God” meaning worship was part of their meeting together even in their homes.

The description ends by saying that ‘they’ had ‘favor will all the people.’

Their uncommon desire to meet with one another and care for one another is noticed by the people outside the church.

In these days of the early church the believers were living out the reality of what Jesus had told His disciples in **John 13:35** where He says, “*By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*”

How would that be possible if they did not gather together?

How would that be possible if they were not a distinctive group that could be recognized?

It is not. The only way this works is if you have people that have clearly committed themselves to being a part of the visible local church.

[In the first few years of being pastor here it was pretty common to have people on our membership list who did not come to church and who had not come for many years. Not because they were physically unable, but simply because they didn’t want to come. They treated being a member of the church like having a library card. You can have the card but never have to actually go to the library. Worse than that some folks viewed it as a ticket to heaven. As long as they had their name on a list they were good.]

That’s not church membership.

That might work at Costco, but it doesn’t work in the kingdom of heaven.

When you belong to a local church it is supposed to be a commitment to the regular gathering of believers to worship God and love one another.

Are local churches perfect? Not a chance in the world, but that does not diminish the importance of participating in the local church.

To write off the local church is to say that the Holy Spirit is not at work anywhere amongst any tangible gathering of people in the name of Jesus.

It seems to me to be rather unwise to hold such a view of the Spirit's work in the world.

[Now someone will say, "Yes that is true, but I can do those things without becoming a member. I can do all those things by simply attending." I agree that people can contribute in many meaningful ways by faithfully attending a church and never becoming a formal member. I will further agree that attending regularly is far better than having your name on a list and never darkening the door. I also appreciate and empathize with people who may be hesitant about membership for good reasons and I think it is good to take your time and examine thoroughly the church you attend before becoming a member. I'm in for all of that, but none of that negates the example of the early believers having a clear commitment to a distinct gathering of fellow believers. The end of verse 47 points us in that direction because we see there that...]

Point #3 – The first church kept track of who belonged to the church. (Verse 47b)

It seems clear that early believers could clearly distinguish between those who belonged to the church and those who did not.

The second half of verse 47 starts with a definitive statement that is powerful rebuke to the pride of any pastor or church leader.

Oh it is possible to gather a group of people together through marketing, charisma, and a good business plan.

It is possible to be viewed as successful, to write and sell books on church growth, to rail against the 'old way' of doing things in favor of a new kind of Christianity.

It is possible to build a brand, but no man or woman has the power to build the church of Christ.

No atmosphere, no fine sounding words, no trend, or technology can transform the heart of the wretched sinner into a new creature.

That is God's work brothers and sisters.

That is why it says what it says here, listen (**Verse 47b**).

Of course the LORD uses means to accomplish that purpose.

In the first church He empowered the preaching of the apostles and did miracles through them, but there is nothing in and of themselves that could make this happen.

It is the power of God at work that is building the first church.

It is the power of God that is still building His church and that is why I am confident that this work will continue until the day of Christ's coming.

It is amazing that anyone still believes the bible as it has been under the assault of godless people for a very long time.

Why is that the case? Why are we here this morning? Because the LORD is still building His church.

No preacher, pastor, church leader, or Christian should ever think to themselves, “Look at what I have done!” Instead we should be amazed at what God has done.

Now, we must ask the question how does Luke know that the “Lord added to their number day by day”?

Presumably the same way they knew how many people were added to the church on the day of Pentecost.

People came expressing their faith in the gospel through the waters of baptism and were formerly welcomed into the church.

In other words they kept track of who belonged to the church.

Of course this tells us nothing of the process or requirements it simply tells us that there was some means by which they knew who wanted to belong.

This also implies that there is something more substantial that standing among the group in the temple to listen to the preaching of the word.

In order for people to be ‘added to their number’ people would have had to hear the preaching of the gospel without yet being a formal part of the church.

There is something more here than merely showing up at a gathering once in a while, there is a clear and conscious choice to belong to the church and the church knew about it.

[Jesus likens believers on a few occasions to sheep. In fact when he reinstates Peter at the end of the book of John He commands Peter to care for His sheep. One thing every good shepherd does is he counts his sheep. He wants to know how many sheep are in the flock.]

The early church did that and so it makes sense to follow their example.

Does that mean you have to be a member for us to care about you?

Of course not! Our goal is to care for as many people as we can.

Does that mean if you are not a formal member that we want you to go somewhere else?

Not at all! You are most welcome here as much as you would like.

My goal is not at all to make you feel guilty or unwelcome.

While I/we fail in many ways, we have a heart desire to serve as many people as possible whether member or not.

My goal is not to argue about particular reasons people may have for refraining from membership.

I have a great deal of empathy and respect for people who have hesitation for a variety of reasons.

I leave that between you and the LORD.

My goal this morning has simply been to ask the question, “Is church membership biblical?”

I believe this text and many others in the New Testament point to the answer being yes it is.

I hope in some small way that all of us would have a clearer picture of that this morning and also a clearer picture of the goodness of membership in the local church.

That we would rightly see that **Membership is a formal declaration of belonging and being committed to a local church for the purpose of growing in Christ, loving other Christians, and serving the LORD’s glorious purpose of redeeming a people to Himself who will enjoy Him in the light of His presence forever.**