

What Is Required For Church Membership?

Romans 12:1-13

Most of us likely realize the importance of various organizations having standards for those that belong to them.

Take fire fighters for example.

I looked up what the physical fitness test is for firefighters in Ontario and according to 'Firefighter Services of Ontario' the test consists of eight events and the candidates have to wear some weighted gear and clothing throughout the tests to simulate firefighting gear.

The first event is the stair climb. With 12.5lbs and weight on each shoulder the person must go onto a 'step mill' and after 20 second warm up period at a rate of 50 steps per minute they must stay on the machine for 3 minutes maintaining their balance at a rate of 60 steps per minute.

Event two is the hose drag where the person grabs the end of a 200' foot fire hose and begins stretching it out 75' to a drum then turns 90 degrees and goes another 25' at which point they get down on one knee and pull the hose another 40'.

Next up is the equipment carry. This requires going to a cabinet getting out two heavy saws and carrying them 150'.

After that is the ladder raise and extension. A 24' extension ladder is raised from the ground and placed against a wall. Then the ladder is extended and retracted.

Event number five is the forcible entry test. This might be my favourite of all the tests. The person takes a 10lb sledge hammer and must hit a target with enough force to activate a buzzer.

Next up is the search where the person has to crawl through a tunnel maze while getting around various obstacles until they locate the exit.

After that it is on the 'rescue'. In this event the candidate is required to grab a 165lb mannequin (Personally I wish it was closer to 220lbs) drag it 35 feet go around a barrel and return to the beginning.

Lastly there is the 'Ceiling breach and pull'. In this test a pike pole is used the lift and 60lb hinged door three times followed by using the pole to pull down a ceiling device requiring 80lbs of force five times.

Complete all of that and you make it past the physical requirements to be a firefighter.

I for one am glad there are at least some requirements to be a firefighter because when they show up to an actual fire they actually need to be able to do the job.

It seems to me that logic should apply to any job or organization of importance.

I know that some would say that membership in a local church isn't that important or that there shouldn't be any sort of requirements for membership, but to say such things is to say that the visible church is itself unimportant.

Considering that the church is called to glorify God by being a faithful witness to the good news of what He has done for His people through His precious Son Jesus Christ, it would be utterly foolish to say that the church is unimportant.

Since that is true it would also be foolish to have no standard for who can formally belong to a local church.

It is true there is some difficulty in establishing exactly what those requirements should be.

There is no passage in the Bible that begins with the words, "Here are the requirements for church membership."

Human beings are far from perfect and so it is possible to miss things that should be requirements and have things that should not.

I admit the difficulty, but I am also firmly convinced from the Scriptures that the failure of imperfect people to perfectly implement the organization of the visible church does NOT in any way diminish the importance of the local church or belonging to the local church for the purpose of striving for all that Jesus calls the church to be and do.

[There are several passages in the New Testament that give us important direction on this subject. After considering a number of them I landed on **Romans 12:1-13**. I would not say this passage provides us with an exhaustive list, but rather I would say it gives us several essential requirements that any local church concerned about a faithful gospel witness should expect of its members. As I said a couple of weeks ago, my goal here is not to convince you to become a member of this church. Instead my goal is that we would all think biblically about church membership for our good and the glory of Jesus. These verses point us to at least five basic requirements for belonging to a biblically faithful church. Number 1...]

Point #1 – Salvation. (Verse 1a)

It is impossible to be part of the church without understanding and rightly believing in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Therefore, local churches should do what they can to ensure everyone on the membership roll is a genuine believer.

It is important to remind ourselves that the book of Romans is a letter written by the apostle Paul to a local church in Rome.

Paul opens chapter twelve with these words (**Verse 1a**).

The word 'appeal' here implies a deep desire on the part of the apostle.

Look at who he is addressing! He says his appeal is to "you...brothers".

The plural here carries through these verses. He is never addressing an individual in these verses but the group as a whole.

The fact that he calls them ‘brothers’ means that he considers them fellow believers.

Now look at the basis of the ‘appeal’. He says he is making this appeal, “by the mercies of God.”

That phrase is pointing back to the first 11 chapters of the book.

In those chapters the apostle lays out what God has done for believers.

He makes clear the problem. That human beings have rebelled against God, pursued evil without ceasing, and only deserve God’s eternal wrath. (Rom 3:23)

That is why the word ‘mercies’ is used here, because what the LORD has done is not something we deserve.

Instead He has given a gift, the worth of which is impossible to capture with words.

He has given the gift of His One and Only Son. (Rom 6:23)

Why Jesus, because He paid the wages of our sin, that is why He died and because He is completely without sin and infinitely worthy of glory He completely satisfied God’s wrath on our behalf.

So it says in Romans 10:9 that if “you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

In order to be saved you have to know your problem, know God’s solution, and believe in God’s solution.

Without that you cannot be a Christian and if you are not a Christian you should not be admitted into church membership.

You are certainly welcome to attend. We want that because we want every opportunity to show you the goodness of the gospel that you might believe it and be saved, but until that happens it is impossible for you to partner with the church for the glory of Jesus.

It is impossible to belong and be truly committed to the church when you are still dead in your sins. That would be like trying to mix oil and water it doesn’t work.

That is why we have baptism as one of the requirements for membership. Not because Baptism saves in and of itself, but because it is a public confession of faith in Christ.

That is why in the membership interview we ask you about what you believe the gospel to be and how you came to know Jesus as your saviour.

If you talk about good works or religious ceremony or anything other than faith alone in Jesus Christ then we

can't accept you into membership until you understand and believe the gospel.

[Now we can't know your heart, only God knows that, but we want to make an effort to assess whether or not you know the truth and whether or not you are willing to confess it. That is square one of membership in the local church. Here is the second requirement this text points us to.]

Point #2 – A desire to belong. (Verse 1b)

Taking formal membership in a local church ought to be driven by a clear conviction that you have found a place where you can give yourself to the service of the LORD.

With the gospel as his foundation for the 'appeal', he gets to the appeal itself in the second half of verse 1.

Paul is using the image of a sacrifice to make his point here.

In the Old Testament God commanded that His people bring sacrifices to the Tabernacle and Temple in order to maintain their relationship with Him.

If his readers were familiar with the Old Testament, and the number of times he quotes the Old Testament in Romans makes it pretty certain they were, then they would know that there is more to offering a sacrifice that pleases God than simply offering the sacrifice.

In a few places God actually says He hated the sacrifices that were being offered because the people had divorced the action of worship from their heart attitude.

Now in the New Testament Jesus' sacrifice for sin happens once for all. We do not come to a tabernacle or temple to offer an animal for sin because Jesus paid it all!

Our sacrifice, he says, is a living one it is our own bodies. That means that we offer ourselves to the LORD to be used in this world as He sees fit.

Just like the heart attitude mattered in Old Testament sacrifices so too it matters in this.

This is to be a willful choice, a desire to be set apart for God and pleasing to Him.

Now you might say, "Ok. I see that, but what does that have to do with church membership? Isn't he talking about all of life?"

Absolutely, he is talking about the whole of life, but it is pretty plain in the verses that follow that his focus is on how that gets lived out in the church.

You have to want to belong for this to mean anything.

I'm no salesman. I have no desire to try and manipulate you into becoming a member.

You have to want it. You have to be convinced that this is a place where you can offer yourself to the LORD.

[Don't become a member of a church because you feel like you have to! That will do you no good and it won't do us any good either. You have want to belong. That's not enough though. People may want to belong to the church for all kinds of bad reasons which is why we need this third requirement for church membership...]

Point #3 – Theological discernment. (Verse 2)

Serious and thoughtful consideration must be given with regards to what a local church believes and you must be convinced that it is in line with God's will.

For some reason the ESV here omits the word 'and' at the beginning of verse 2. If you are reading the NASB or the NKJV you will see it there.

It's important because it connects verse 2 to the 'appeal' that Paul is making in verse 1.

His appeal is for believers to offer themselves as 'living sacrifices' and **verse 2**.

Whether we like it or not how we think is shaped by what we immerse our minds in.

Before knowing Jesus as our saviour our thinking is shaped by the 'world' rather than God.

When the LORD makes us into a new creature in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit that has to change.

Now notice that he is appealing to the church members to do this which means that there is an expectation that believers are to be doing some things in order for the 'renewal' of our minds to be taking place.

To understand what that might be we simply need to ask, "What has God given to the world so that people can know Who He is and what He wants?"

He has given His written word the Bible.

It is through prayerfully listening to the preaching, teaching, and reading of the Bible that our minds are renewed and we are transformed.

And what is the goal of all of that?

It is the discernment of God's will.

Not meaning what job you will do, or who you will marry, or what house you will live in.

But meaning how you will go about whatever job you happen to have, how you will be a godly husband or wife, and how you will manage the household you have.

It means knowing what is true about Who God is and who we are and how we should live in light of that truth.

In other words it is having good theology.

That is exactly what we have sought to do in our statement of faith as a church.

We have sought to plainly and clearly say what we believe.

We have tried to be careful and focus on essential issues.

You should NOT believe what we believe simply because we say so. That is NOT the renewing of your mind but rather the numbing of your mind.

That is why we ask everyone who wants to be a member to carefully work through what we believe and be convinced for yourself that it is important to believe it.

[A church will never be a healthy church unless its members are thoughtful believers. While that is absolutely true, being a member of a church needs to be more than intellectual agreement to a statement of faith. If what we say we believe has little effect on what we do then it will do little good for us or anyone else. That is what Paul shows us in these next verses which make clear that he is talking about living these things out in the context of the local church and points us to another requirement for church membership which is...]

Point #4 – A humble desire to serve. (Verses 3-8)

Belonging to a church is NOT about finding a place that checks all the boxes in order to meet your own perceived needs. It is about finding a place where you can give of yourself so that the whole church may be built up in Christ.

The word ‘for’ at the beginning of verse 3 is very important.

It is a purpose statement. This is what his ‘appeal by the mercies of God...for believers to offer themselves as living sacrifices...and... to be transformed by the renewing of their minds’ is all about (**Verse 3-8**).

If you do a quick google search you will find more than one source that says the majority of people think of themselves as having above average intelligence.

We like to think of ourselves as better than we are, but the Lord calls us to something different.

He calls us to ‘sober judgement’. Do you know what that takes? It takes humility.

If pride is focusing our attention on ourselves, then the best way to understand humility is taking our focus off ourselves.

That does all sorts of good things for us.

It inclines us towards contentment, it encourages thanksgiving, it makes us teachable, and much more.

What Paul particularly points to here is that humility leads to serving in the church.

The gifts he lists here is not an exhaustive list of every spiritual gift given to God’s people because that is not his point.

What is his point? That just like a physical body is made up of ‘many members’ in order to make the whole, so to the spiritual body of the church in one body made up of many parts.

Again someone will likely say, “Wait a minute, isn’t this about the universal church and not the local church?”

It certainly applies to the universal church, but it actually gets lived out on a regular basis in the local church.

God has given each one that belongs to Christ the capacity to serve in the ministry of the church in some way and if you want to be a formal member you have to want that in humility.

[If we think to ourselves “Man this church sure is lucky to have me around!” or “There is nothing I can do because I am totally useless then we have a problem with pride and are in need of some ‘sober judgment’. Don’t make being a member of a church about you, but instead make it about an opportunity to serve God by serving God’s people. That brings us to one more requirement for church membership this morning. So far we have seen salvation, a desire to belong, theological discernment, a humble desire to serve, and lastly we need...]

Point #5 – A love for believers that is rooted in holiness. (Verses 9-13)

Apart from a tangible tender hearted affection for the highest good of other believers whom we actually know and worship with, church membership makes no sense.

Listen to what is said here in verses 9-13.

Love is something everyone wants but it is also something that is often misunderstood.

In the world today people equate love with affirmation.

That means that if you love someone you have to celebrate/approve of what they do no matter what.

Objective reality and truth must be ignored for the sake of giving people what they want.

It has gotten to the point now where if someone says they identify as a cat or a dog, then people are supposed to go along with that and make accommodations for it.

It is a twisted view of love. In fact, it is not love at all.

We are called to something far better as believers and we are called to live it out in the church.

It says, “Let love be genuine”. The NAS translates this as “Love without hypocrisy.”

Do you know what we need in order to do that? We need objective truth. We need a standard of right and wrong that we strive to apply to ourselves as well as to others.

It is impossible to believe the Bible and separate the idea of love from truth.

It is impossible because the Bible clearly teaches that objective truth exists because God exists and has established not only physical laws in the universe but moral ones as well.

Because God is completely just He upholds His laws and brings judgment on every violation of His law.

That is what we call sin and sin brings death.

So if someone is doing something that is going to hurt them and lead to their eternal death and we celebrate or encourage that how can we possibly say that is a loving thing to do?

That is not love.

Genuine love calls people to turn from things that bring pain and death and towards forgiveness and new life in Christ.

That is what Paul is calling the believers in Rome towards and that is what we are called to in the local church as well.

When we formally commit to being a member of the local church we are committing to being held accountable by the church and participating in holding our fellow members accountable to the word of God.

For the one who wants this kind of love there is a never ending supply of grace of forgiveness among those who belong to Jesus, but there is never an affirmation of evil.

This is some of what it should mean to formally belong to a local church.

In one sense it is something that is open to everyone.

There is no barrier on account of who your family is, or where you grew up, how much money you make, or what kind of clothes you wear.

Belonging to the church depends on no particular skill you may possess, on your level of intelligence, or physical strength.

There is no mistake you have made in your past that prevents you from becoming a member of the church.

To be a member of the church you need to truly know Jesus as your saviour, you need to have a desire to belong, you need to have theological discernment (not a PHD but a willingness to thoughtfully engage with the important truths of the Christian faith), you need to be humble and willing to serve, and you need to love other believers in holiness.

The great theologian Louis Berkhof argued that this is the means by which the 'church becomes visible' in the world.

I believe he is right and I pray that would be true of us to the glory of Jesus' Name.