

Church Membership Class

Agenda:

1. Explain Biblical Church membership
2. Vision Statement
3. Confession of Faith
4. Read Church Covenant
5. Constitution / Polity – elder led, congregationally affirmed
6. Service Questionnaire
7. Elders hear testimonies & answer questions

Christ Builds His Church

Christ gave us the promise, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). What is Jesus talking about when He speaks of His church?

Church Universal and Church Local

Theologically, we can define the church in two ways: the church universal and the church local. The church universal is that Body of believers from all times that will be gathered when Jesus comes again at the marriage supper of the Lamb – when people of every tribe, tongue, people and nation will be gathered as one Body in Christ. That’s the church universal. We call it the family of God, or the elect of all the ages. But most of the commands in the New Testament are for a local church context.

It tells us to:

1. Submit to elders – but this does not mean I submit to elders of all churches at all times. That would be impossible. It says “submit to those who have the rule over you” (Heb. 13:17; Acts 20:29-30). They are going to give an account. They care for your souls. So this is clearly referring to a local church at a certain location at a certain time in history. A specific council of elders is watching for your soul and going to give an account.
2. In at least 35 places the Bible gives us the one another commands –
 - exhort one another,
 - encourage one another,
 - edify one another,
 - love one another,
 - submit to one another,
 - tolerate one another,
 - outdo one another in good works,
 - be kind one to another,
 - bear one another’s burdens,
 - be hospitable toward one another
 - etc.

All of these things are in a local church context. All of these demonstrate that we are to be living in community with one another in a covenant relationship.

Acts 2:41–47 (ESV) — “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. 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.”

These were the first members of the New Testament church. They demonstrated their membership to one another through baptism. The apostles and eventually pastors and elders watched for their souls. We see that there is a numerical record of those who have professed Christ and been filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 41) and an acknowledgement that the church was tracking the growth (v. 47).

What I want to demonstrate this morning is that to be rooted in Christ, the New Testament teaches and implies in many places that we are to have a membership in a local church.

Binding and Loosing

Also, in Matthew 18, there is a command to leaders in the church to bind and lose members in the church, as they did in the synagogue. I want to demonstrate to you from the Scriptures that church membership is biblical and necessary.

With that in mind, let’s consider why I believe this kind of structure is not only good and healthy for your spiritual life, but I believe it is biblical and necessary to have formal church membership in the local church. The three reasons are as follows:

We ought to be rooted as members of the local church for:

1. Spiritual Protection
2. Simple Obedience
3. Sanctifying Purpose for Living

Our vision statement says this: “Living Hope Bible Church **exists to glorify God by bringing people to Jesus and membership in His family**, helping them to grow and change in Christlike maturity, and equipping them for **service to God in the local church** and in mission to the world.”

When we say “membership in His family” we not only mean the universal church, but that each of us should be in a covenantal relationship with each other to care for each other’s spiritual welfare and well being.

I. Reason #1: Spiritual Protection

A. The worst thing that can happen to a Christian is not persecution, physical injury, or death.

In many respects, these are the best things that can happen to us. Jesus said that we are blessed when we are “persecuted for righteousness' sake” (Matthew 5:10). Paul said he would “take pleasure in infirmities . . . for Christ's sake . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). Jesus said to His followers, “My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do” (Luke 12:4). This makes perfect sense, because for the believer, “to be absent from the body” is “to be present with the Lord.” None of these earthly threats should hold any sway over us whatsoever.

B. But there is one thing that should make us tremble, and that is the prospect of being overtaken by sin.

- Sin is what Christ suffered for on the cross. He became sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21)!
- Sin grieves the Holy Spirit of God (Ephesians 4:30).
- Sin in the life of a true believer invites the discipline of the Father (Hebrews 12:5-8).
- And sin, if it characterizes the life of a professing Christian, may indicate that the profession of faith is false (Titus 1:16; 1 John 2:3-4, chapter 3). Even as those whose sins have been forgiven, we must never forget that sin is the one thing that sends people to eternal torment in hell.

C. We are called in the New Testament to covenant together in localities to care for one another's soul as **believers**.

Added to the Church

Back in Acts 2, we see a hundred twenty were gathered in the upper room, and God adds 3000 souls to them. In Acts 4:4, another four thousand men, plus women and children were added to the assembly. Now here we have some indication that they kept rolls, the fact that they knew how many they were responsible for. They evidently knew who was a part of the church by a profession of faith and by baptism. And this is really the precedent of keeping membership rolls in a church. The apostles and later pastors are able to keep track of who has committed himself to Christ and for whom they are responsible in the life of the church.

Metaphors for the Church

There are several metaphors for the church, and each of them implies a responsibility for each member.

- **Together we are called a Flock – Acts 20:28**, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” A flock is not a random collection of lambs. Jesus says, “My sheep know my voice and they follow me”. Sheep belong to

specific flocks. A shepherd missing a sheep is going to do all he can to find his sheep. He doesn't go looking for the sheep of other flocks, but his own sheep.

- **Together we are called God's Temple.** **Ephesians 2:21**, "in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." God's Temple should not have any loose bricks. If so something is wrong. The structure is unsound. If you are missing a brick, the building is in disrepair.
- **Together we are called Christ's Body.** **1 Corinthians 12:24**, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." A body cannot just rip off an arm or a leg. You cannot just add a limb to a body. It is a living organism. Your body isn't a collection of random and loose parts. A body missing an arm is a sad thing. So it is with the Body of Christ.
- **Together we are called God's household (family).** **Ephesians 2:19**, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." In a family, you are either a member or not. Membership is important!

It wasn't just anyone who was baptized. It was "those who gladly received" what Peter had preached. They were converted. They covenanted to meet together, to break bread together. They were accountable to one another.

- That is why we are told in **Hebrews 3:13** to "exhort one another daily . . . lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13). We are told in Romans 15 to "admonish" or counsel "one another" (Romans 15:14).
- **1 Corinthians 12:12–25** – Every member has an important place in the Body

Notice Paul is talking about real people that we see all the time. We are to experience life depending on one another. We are to care for one another. We are to give honor to one another.

- Each member has his or her own place in the Body, designated by God who sovereignly gives spiritual gifts.

D. Elders and pastors are commanded to care for believers in certain locations. They are placed their sovereignly by God.

- **Acts 20:28-31** (ESV) — "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. . ."
- **Hebrews 13:17** (ESV) — "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

Why should we join a local church as believers? Because your spiritual survival depends on it. In those churches where the fellowship always seems positive and upbeat, but no membership procedure is established, there may be a willingness to confront sin in a biblical manner, but there is no authority to take Christian accountability to its final degree when necessary. That kind of authority—the ability to properly and consistently exercise such loving accountability—is the subject of the next section.

II. Reason #2: Scriptural Obedience

Membership is never directly commanded in the New Testament. In other words, there is no verse that says, “thou shalt be a member of a church”. But while it is never directly commanded, it is most definitely implied and also taught by example almost everywhere in the New Testament.

A. It is commanded to the **leaders** of the church to bind and loose members in the Church.

Elders and pastors are given the responsibility, the best they know how, to make sure there is a regenerate church membership. We are to carefully examine each candidate that comes for church membership to make sure they are born again. We are also to loose anyone in the church membership who is continuing in unrepentant sin. This is commanded in the New Testament in at least two places: Matthew 18 and 1 Cor. 5.

The Synagogue and Binding and Loosing

I do believe there eventually would have been a members list of some kind because the model for the New Testament church comes from the synagogue from Jesus day.

Look over at **Matthew 18:15-19** (ESV) — “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 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 collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, **and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.** 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

It is very important to note that in this context, the binding and loosing was for membership in the synagogue. The witnesses were prescribed by the Mosaic law. And to be loosed meant to be excommunicated as a member. To be bound meant to be brought in or retained as a member. The “two or three” that needed to be in agreement was very likely the elder council of the synagogue.

Church Discipline in 1 Corinthians: Inside and Outside

Paul uses even stronger language to describe the removal of an unrepentant "brother" from the church. In 1 Corinthians chapter 5, regarding a professing Christian who was leading a grossly

immoral life, he tells that church congregation to act as one Body together, and in love, to remove this man from the church's membership so that God might discipline him and bring him back. And that's what happened.

1 Corinthians 5:11–13 (ESV) — “But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. 12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those **inside** the church whom you are to judge? 13 God judges those **outside**. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

The membership here is described as those “inside the church”. The whole church is to participate in the process to disaffirm this person who continues in sin. He's no longer a member. And if there is a way to disaffirm someone in the church as a member, there must have been some system by which they affirmed one another as Christians—as members of that church. In what other way could these people have obediently followed Paul's instructions in verse 13 when he said, "Therefore 'put away from yourselves the evil person?'"? If a person were never affirmed or accepted as a member of that particular group, there would be no way to obey the command to remove him from that group.

B. It is commanded to elders to **shepherd** a certain group of people.

Consider Paul's command in Acts chapter 20 when he passionately implored those in Ephesus to "shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood"? How would those Ephesian elders have known who in particular was under their care as a shepherd if not for some system of membership? For a moment, put yourself in the position of an elder. How else could you know which people comprise the group that Peter referred to as "those in your charge" (1 Peter 5:3)? **1 Peter 5:3** (ESV) — “not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”

C. It is commanded to the **believers** of the church to join in a covenant community in the local assembly of believers.

What other way could you have of knowing those for whom you will be held accountable (cf. Hebrews 13:17)?

Reasons for Church Membership

- **You stop being an independent Christian.** Elders are commanded to bind and loose and therefore believers are implicitly commanded to be bound to a local assembly. You are no longer on your own, but willfully submitted to the accountability of the elders and the entire church – Matthew 18:15-18. You are either bound or loosed from the local church.
- **You use your spiritual gift to build up the local body.** 1 Cor. 12, Romans 12, Eph. 4.
- **The local churches cannot grow or function properly with wayward members.** Ephesians 4:11-16.

- **You demonstrate your commitment to specific individual parts.** Eph. 4:16, “from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each [individual] part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” See also the “one anothers” sheet.

*** It is not a clique but an amalgamation of various different parts, with different age groups, ethnicities, etc. We should minister to all the various parts, not just what we are comfortable with.

- **You have the responsibility to encourage the local church and be faithful to it until the Lord comes.** You are to love those for whom Christ died.

Hebrews 10:24-25, “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

III. Reason #3: Sanctifying Purpose for Living

Back in Acts 2, the Scripture says they were doing four things together on a regular basis.

Verse 42 – “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayer.”

Together they gave themselves to DOCTRINE, FELLOWSHIP, THE LORD’S TABLE, AND PRAYER.

They did life together! God promises in many places to sanctify us. Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, instructing them to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling . . . ” (Philippians 2:12). In using the term “work out,” Paul was not telling those Christians to come up with their own plan for salvation (work out your own arrangement). He was also not telling them to work off a debt (like paying off a credit card) after it seemed that they had gotten something for free. Paul’s meaning here comes from a single Greek word that is translated by the two English words, “work out.” It means, in simple terms, to fulfill your purpose—to accomplish that which you were meant to accomplish.

Understanding, then, that every Christian was created by God for a purpose, we must ask ourselves what that purpose is.

Philippians 2:12–13 (ESV) — “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

We are created to please God and do His will. We don’t do this perfectly, but God promises to bring it to full completion. Listen to His promises:

Romans 8:28–29 (ESV) — 28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son”.

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24-25).

He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6).

God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10).

God will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Corinthians 1:8-9).

The New Testament speaks of the church as the context where biblical love should be given and experienced in its highest form. And most biblical references to the church are to the local church. When the New Testament writers speak of love, they use language that brings to mind unity among members and reliance upon one another. Nowhere do we find language that would encourage or affirm individuality.

How does all this work out? Ephesians 4:15–16 (ESV) — “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.”

When Paul describes the church as a body in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, he consistently refers to the individual Christians as members of that body (vv. 12, 14, 18, 19, 20, 23, 25, 26, 27). Never does Paul, or any other biblical author describe a Christian as one who functions or exists in **isolation** from the whole. Paul closes 1 Corinthians chapter 12 by mentioning spiritual gifts given to individuals as the Holy Spirit wills. But then, in his very last sentence he writes, "And yet I show you a more excellent way" (v. 31). The entire next chapter speaks of the perfection of love—a thing that exceeds even faith and hope in greatness (1 Corinthians 13:13). "Without love," Paul writes, "I am nothing" (13:2).

Why should you join a church? Because by committing yourself in that way you will help to fulfill your purpose as a Christian. You cannot do it without the rest of the members of the Body.