

Making the Case for formal church membership
January 2023

1. Preamble
2. Prayer for illumination
3. Introduction
 - a. Consider five individuals...
 - i. Jake says he loves Jesus, but he is not really into organized religion. He feels closest to God when he is out in nature hiking, skiing, or riding his bike. He rarely gathers with the saints on Sunday mornings.
 - ii. Rebecca is a church hopper. She spends a few months at First Baptist Church, then a few months at First Nazarene Church, then a few months at First Presbyterian Church. She has not stayed at any church for more than five months. But she always makes sure to be at a church on Sunday.
 - iii. Seth found a great singles group on Sunday evenings. He shows up every Sunday evening, especially when Sarah is there. He only shows up Sunday morning when the sermon topic interests him.
 - iv. Naomi loves the preaching at her church but usually slips out right afterward the sermon. She does not know anyone and has never really considered joining.
 - v. Phil comes to church about half the time, the other half of the time he is either at the lake or at a child's sporting event.
 - b. What do all these people have in common?
 - i. They all claim to be Christians.
 - ii. But none of them understand the benefits of formal church membership.
 - iii. Sadly, many American Christians don't understand the benefits of formal church membership.
 - iv. As a result, they are missing out on all that God has for them.
 - c. In light of this reality, I'm taking a break from our gospel of John series to make a biblical case for formal church membership.
 - i. Why now? GCF is growing, which means there are lots of new people.
 - ii. Many of the new people have never been to a church that practices formal church membership.
 - iii. As a result, there are lots of people who have little interest in the membership class. I get it ... Membership is new to many of you.
 - iv. This sermon is designed to gently nudge you towards taking the membership class.
 - v. Why this morning? There is a membership class in two weeks, and we want you to sign up for it.
 - d. Where are we going this morning? Four points-
 - i. Defining church**

- ii. **Defending membership**
- iii. **Dealing with objections**
- iv. **Doing application**

1. Defining the church

a. Why start here? We can't join a church unless we know what the church is.

b. What is the church?

- i. The New Testament word for church is the word ecclesia, which means the gathering, or the assembling of a group of people. It is used 114 times in the New Testament.
- ii. One scholar writes,
 - 1. "The church is the body of people called by God's grace through faith in Christ to glorify Him together by serving Him in his world." (Mark Dever)

c. What are the biblical marks of the church?

- i. How do we spot one?
- ii. For 500 years, since the Protestant Reformation, all Protestants have agreed that there are three essential marks of a church.
 - 1. The right preaching of the gospel
 - 2. The proper observance of the sacraments (baptism and communion)
 - 3. The practice of church discipline
- iii. Without these things, you can't have a church. Which means that...
 - 1. Path of Life is not the church
 - 2. UGM is not the church
 - 3. Campus Crusade for Christ is not the church
 - 4. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association is not the church
 - 5. Watching a preacher online with your family or roommates is not the church
- iv. The local church is a group of Christians who gather to hear God's word preached, celebrate the sacraments, and exercise church discipline when appropriate.

d. *You may be thinking, "I understand what the church is, but why should I join one?" That brings us to the next point.*

e. *First, defining church*

2. Defending membership

a. *How does one defend formal church membership?*

b. *Formal church membership seems to be the assumed context of some many aspects of NT life that it is hard to ignore.*

c. *What do I mean? Consider four assumptions...*

d. First, church membership is the assumed context of church history.

i. Acts 2:47 (ESV) — Praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

1. Converts were “added” to a specific group of fellow believers.

ii. Acts 5:13 (ESV) — None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.

1. Believers were a discernable group of people to whom other believers “joined” themselves.

iii. These texts imply that it was normal for new converts to formally join themselves to the body of Christ, devoting themselves to the apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42ff).

iv. Furthermore, the following New Testament phrases indicate that the church was a recognizable group.

1. “The whole congregation” (Acts 6:5)

2. “The church in Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1)

3. “The disciples in Jerusalem” (Acts 9:26)

4. “The whole church” (Acts 15:22)

v. These phrases suggest that the early church had a recognizable membership with well-defined boundaries.

vi. One scholar writes,

1. “Unless one knows who the members of the church are, one cannot say whether the ‘whole church’ is present.” (MacArthur, 798, Sys. Theo.)

vii. Some type of church membership seemed to be the practice of the early church.

viii. Illustration-

1. Not just the early church, but ever since then...

2. Every Protestant denomination I know of in church history has practiced formal church membership.

a. List denominations...

3. 21st century American Evangelicals are the exception...

4. This does not make church membership right, but wow, we must ask ourselves what all our forbearers saw in Scripture that we don’t see?

5. Why has church membership fallen on hard times in America in the last few decades?

a. Fierce independence (no one tells the self what to do).

- b. Seeker church movement (which reached its crescendo in the late 90s).
- c. The seeker movement was scared to turn people off with high levels of commitment and church discipline.
- d. As a result, they did not do membership, so they could not do discipline.

ix. *First, church membership is the assumed context of church history.*

e. Second, church membership is the assumed context of careful pastoring.

i. Church membership enables pastors to care well for the flock. How? They know which Christians they will give an account for on the day of judgment.

ii. 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.

- 1. Are we supposed to obey every Christian leader that comes along? No. We only obey the leaders of our local church, the ones we have formally agreed to submit to through a membership process.
- 2. Will church leaders give an account for every Christian who shows up for a few weeks or months? No, they will only give an account for those who have voluntarily recognized them as their leaders (through membership).
- 3. BTW... the elders are not exempt from submitting to the other elders.

iii. Acts 20:28 (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.

- 1. This verse (written to the pastors in Ephesus) indicates that pastors are responsible for caring for an identifiable group of people, and they will give an account for those committed to their care.

iv. Illustration:

- 1. Sometimes I meet people who claim to be Christians but who don't attend church anywhere or attend very sporadically.
- 2. When I'm feeling especially bold and snarky, I ask them, "How are you obeying Heb. 13:17?"
- 3. I then ask them if the elders of the church they attend once a month or eight times a year know if they are giving an account for their souls?
- 4. Or are they making easy for these pastors to give an account for their souls someday?

- v. Application:
 1. If you are not a member here, we love you.
 2. We will do our best to care for you.
 3. But we are going to prioritize caring for the members of this church because they have formally committed to be under the care of the church.
 4. This is who the pastors will give an account for on the day of judgment.
 5. Nothing personal, this is simply a practical necessity.

- vi. *Church membership*
 1. *Is the assumed context of church history.*
 2. *Is the assumed context of careful pastoring.*

f. Third, church membership is the assumed context of church discipline.

- i. This subject requires all kinds of nuance, which we provide in the membership class. In the meantime, let me read the key text...

- ii. **Matthew 18:15-17 (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. 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. 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.**
 1. This verse (Matthew 18:15-17) and 1 Corinthians 5 teach that believers must confront other believers who persist in unrepentant sin. If they remain unrepentant, they must be removed from the church.
 2. This action is only possible when Christians are joined together in an identifiable membership committed to living a godly lifestyle distinct from the world.
 3. Removing someone from membership is not possible if they were never members in the first place.
 4. Without church membership, it is nearly impossible to practice church discipline.

- iii. Wow.... Church discipline, what is that?
 1. Church discipline is designed to restore a straying brother or sister in Christ.
 2. It is an act of love, not an act of shunning.
 3. It is practiced in rare circumstances when someone is behaving in such a sinful way that the elders and members of the church have good reason to question the salvation.
 4. In my twenty years at GCF we have done this five times, and it works...

- iv. Application
 1. Matt Gray's conversation with me in college...

- v. *Church membership is the assumed context of*
 - 1. *church history.*
 - 2. *careful pastoring.*
 - 3. *church discipline.*

g. Fourth, Church membership is the assumed context of church ministry.

i. *How do we decide who serves in the ministries of GCF?*

- ii. Practically speaking, many of the serving opportunities at GCF involve working with kids (nursery, security, youth ministry, etc...).
- 1. Anyone working with a minor, needs to be background checked, interviewed, and approved by the elders.
- 2. The membership process allows us to do both.
- 3. Furthermore, data shows that most predators are not willing to go through a membership class and a membership interview to work with children. (See Depaak Reju's book *On Guard*, Chapter 1)
- 4. The membership process helps us protect our kids.

iii. *How about the other ministries?*

- 1. The other ministries of GCF use complicated scheduling software.
- 2. We schedule people months in advance.
- 3. We are reluctant to schedule non-members months in advance because we have no assurances that they will be around in nine weeks when they are scheduled to serve.
- 4. Plus, many of our ministries require extensive training (production, security, and sound). Again, we are reluctant to spend hours training people when they are not formally committed to us.

iv. *What about our brand-new membership directory?*

- 1. Why members only???
- 2. This is for very practical reasons.
 - a. We are reluctant to share our members personal information with people who are not committed to us.
 - b. What about the person who has been attending for six months?
 - c. We would rather draw the line at membership than attending six months, nine months, or twelve months.
 - d. Making exceptions to this rule gets very complicated...

3. We have a very simple solution to this problem... become a member!

4. Membership has its privileges.

v. To summarize, we want to know people and make sure they know us before we entrust them with church leadership, information, and responsibility. Serving is a privilege reserved for our members.

h. I defended church membership by looking at four assumptions. You may have some objections. This brings us to the third point.

i. Defining church

ii. Defending membership

3. Dealing with objections

a. Let me deal with the three most common objections to membership.

b. Objection one- Isn't being a member of the universal church enough?

i. The New Testament has no category for a universal church member who is not actively involved in a local church.

ii. All the commands in the Bible given to the church are given to the local church, not the universal church.

iii. It is nearly impossible to obey vast portions of the New Testament if you are not actively involved in a local church.

1. If you are not actively involved in a local church, how are you obeying the "one another" commands?

2. Which elders are you submitting to?

3. Which saints are you caring for?

c. Objection two- You can't chapter and verse membership!

i. Your right...

ii. But we can't chapter on verse the trinity or the fact that Jesus exists as two natures in one person. We build a case for both things by synthesizing several texts.

iii. We do the same thing for formal church membership.

d. Objection three- Why do I have to sign a sheet of paper?

i. We are not primarily concerned about getting you to sign a sheet of paper. We are concerned about your heart. We want you to love the church. If you love the church, what do you have to lose by signing membership paperwork? Furthermore, we often express our heart commitments by signing something (i.e., marriage documents).

ii. Furthermore, most people have no problem signing up for a Costco or athletic club membership.

- iii. Think about Christian marriage. People often say, "Why can't we just live together? We love each other. Where does the Bible say we have to have a wedding ceremony and sign marriage paperwork?"
- iv. The Bible does not mandate these formalities. But the Bible does require people to get married before they live together. The process of getting married varies from culture to culture. In our culture, we get married by having a wedding ceremony and signing paperwork.
- v. In a similar sense, the Bible does not require you to take a membership class and sign membership paperwork. But the Bible does require you to be committed to a local church. The formal membership process is one way for you to express your commitment to a local church in our culture of church hopping and church dating.
- vi. What does all this mean for us? This brings us to the last point.
 - 1. *Defining church*
 - 2. *Defending membership*
 - 3. *Dealing with objections*

4. Doing some application

a. What if I'm not a member?

i. Let me describe what we are **not** saying...

- 1. We are not saying that you are not a Christian.
- 2. We are not saying that you are an immature Christian.
- 3. We are not saying that you must join right now!!! If you are new, you may want to check us out for several months first.
- 4. We are not saying that you must join this church, there may be another church that is a better fit for you down the road or across town. We are surely not the only good church in north Spokane.

ii. But... we are saying...

- 1. Church membership has been the practice of Protestant churches for 500 years.
- 2. Furthermore, there are really compelling biblical and practical reasons to join a church.
- 3. But, don't wait until you have found the perfect church before you join one. It does not exist, especially after you join it.

- a. "If I had never joined a church until I had found one that was perfect, I should never have joined one at all. And the moment I did join it, if I had found one, I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us." —Charles Spurgeon

iii. Let me speak to college students for a moment.

- 1. Should I join for seven months? Yes...
- 2. Then we will send you on your way with our blessing.

- b. What if I am a member?
 - i. Take some time this week to review the membership agreement that you signed when you became a member.
 - ii. Pray through it and ask God for grace to fulfill it.
 - iii. Our elders have a few goals for our members... (every member evangelizing, discipling, serving, and involved in intentional community).
 - iv. Furthermore, consider praying for the other members by utilizing the new pictorial directory.

5. Conclusion:

- a. In conclusion, let me give you one more reason to consider joining a church.
- b. You should join the church because Jesus loves the church.

i. Ephesians 5:25 (ESV) — 25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

- c. Jesus loved the church so much that he suffered and died on a Roman cross so that the church, his bride, could be forgiven of all her sins.
- d. He was very committed...
- e. We often talk about wanting to have Christ's heart for the lost, the poor, and the vulnerable.
- f. How about imitating Christ's heart for the church?
- g. We can express our love for the church by committing to her through formal membership.
- h. Let's pray...