

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Is church membership necessary?

On Sunday I explained that church membership is the day-to-day commitment to living as a covenant (or promise/pledge) community. Considering this, if we take this question and apply it to other covenant communities, such as marriage, I think it becomes very clear that it is a vitally important part of maintaining a healthy church life. Try and imagine a marriage where there were no promises and no security and no separateness from others? That would *not* be a healthy marriage! Why? Because healthy marriages are based upon the clearly articulated commitment and promises (*for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part*) that are being outworked in the hundreds of everyday situations that make up daily married life.

If you are committed to God, aren't you automatically committed to the church?

No! Just a simple reading of the New Testament letters shows that it is very possible to *not* be committed to a local expression of this universal church (and biblically, that's not a good thing). For example, in Hebrews 10:25 the writer *warns* about the danger of neglecting to meet together. In fact, when you step back and look at the 34 or so 'one-another' passages (such as, love one another and pray for another and prefer one another) they show us that *nothing* is automatic when it comes to belonging to a church community. Again, like any covenant relationship, it takes ongoing commitment to be actively part of *this* community of people in *this* locality.

If you disagree with 1 or 2 of the core beliefs of membership, can you still be a member?

This is a great question, but also quite an involved one. For example, if the disagreement is that you have come to believe that Jesus is *not* God, then we have a major issue, because our whole faith rises and falls on that fact!

However, if, for example, after lots of careful examination of scripture and heart searching, you still can't see the need for believer's baptism, but rather believe that your infant 'baptism' *was* the appropriate act; in *that* case, as long as you are able to joyfully submit to being part of a church that will wholeheartedly preach and teach believer's baptism, and that the church will continue to try and persuade you that you need to be baptised, and you are willing to encourage others to pursue believer's baptism – If you can do all that with a joyful and committed heart (and I've known people who have been able to do that!), then yes, you can most certainly be a member!

Who decides on the criteria for membership?

Clearly one of the roles of elders in a church (see Acts 20) is to guide and guard the flock in whom the Holy Spirit has made them overseers. As a result, part of the eldership role is to carefully examine scripture and to endeavour to shape membership as closely to biblical principles as possible. In addition, part of an elder's role is to help individuals work out if *this* local church is the right place for them. For example, someone who is deeply uncomfortable with the gift of speaking in tongues (see 1 Cor 12 and 14), is going to struggle at Kingsgate! Part of the process of membership would be to help them really work out if this is going to be so uncomfortable for them that it may be better to worship in another local church community. These are important but delicate conversations.

Do we need to have a list?

Yes. Using the comparison to marriage again helps to clarify this issue. Do you really need a list (a list of two, i.e. the husband and wife), why can't you just leave things blurred, loose or open in the marriage? Covenant relationships are not only vertical relationships (me and God) but also horizontal relationships (me and those who are agreeing to live together in *this* church community). As a result, it is important to know who is part of *this* church community.

Is it going to be hard work?

Again, marriage is helpful in answering this question. Is marriage hard work? Yes – most definitely! However, marriage is *also* meant to be wonderfully joyous! Any

meaningful relationship, based upon promise (a covenant), will be both rich with joy and tough with commitment.

What does membership look like for non-believers?

If we get this wrong, it could look like a cliquey club (not what we want). If we get this right, it should look like a surprising and intriguing community of people who are living in a counter-cultural way (e.g. loving and preferring one another rather than self). Also, and most importantly, true biblical membership has one overarching goal: “*we exist to make much of Jesus*”. As a result, my hope is that when non-Christians get close to a community of people who are making that their goal, they will encounter our greatest joy and greatest satisfaction – Jesus himself!

What areas of church can you serve in that you can't serve in as a non-member?

This is a good question, but one that we haven't yet fully worked out. However, what I would say is that, we really want membership to be much more than a list of things you can and can't do. Rather we are attempting to recover membership as something that is *integral* in helping shape the overall direction of the church and to be actively involved (through prayer, discussion and consultation) on major decisions in the church.

What happens if I don't want to be a member?

I'm not totally sure what is meant by this question. On the one hand, if through the course of exploring membership *here* you think 'this is not the church for me', then as leaders, we would want to help you find a local church family where you can fully 'jump in' and be part of what God is doing *there* (that really is ok). Another understanding of this question is that you just need time to work out, 'is this the church that I want to be part of?' If that is the case, I would want to encourage you to take as much time as possible! However, if you are happy being here at Kingsgate on a Sunday but don't want to commit to those around you in this church family (which is essentially what membership is all about), then I think that probably needs working through because healthy church life (again like marriage) is rooted in an expressed and clear commitment.

How long does it take to become a member?

For anyone coming through the door for the first time on a Sunday, we would want to encourage them to not rush the process because they are committing themselves to a group of people, and a very specific mission. It takes time to get to know other people and to really understand the mission. Also, it is vital that you are able to see how you can belong to *this* church. As a result, I think a good rule of thumb would be from walking through the door for the first time to then becoming a member, could take somewhere in the region of 6-12 months.

Do you have to be Spirit-filled to be a member?

No, but we would want to encourage all of us to be pursuing a thoroughly Spirit-filled life!

Can you be a member of more than one church?

Can you be married to more than one person at the same time? Now in reality, there may be the odd occasion where you are moving from one location to the next, and 'technically' you are a member of two churches for a short overlapping period. However, if membership means anything, it means that you have committed yourself to *this* group of people to worship and serve together in *this* location.

Do you have to go on a membership course?

I think it is really important that for new people, coming into the church, we have a responsibility to serve them well by giving them as much information about the church as possible. Why? Because belonging to a church is about putting roots down into a community which, as we've said earlier, is costly. As a result, we want to ensure that people are able to wholeheartedly commit themselves to who we are (beliefs) and where we are going (vision). It would be really destructive if two years into someone being a member, they find out that we are committed to x or y and they have a major problem with that. As a result, a membership course is a helpful tool to ensure that people have all the information they need to carefully work out if this is the church that they want to belong to. However, in addition, one-

on-one conversations will also be helpful, because some people will want to discuss things that can't be shared in a group setting (pastoral situations). In short, we want to do things in a way that cares for and handles people well and I think a membership course can really serve many people well.

Do we need to sign a document?

Let's look again to the example of marriage to answer this question. The signing of the register, in marriage, is the legal (UK law) aspect of marriage. The covenant aspect of marriage is enacted in the promises that are made before God and others. As church membership is not a legal act but rather, a covenant (or promise) then my answer would be that you don't need to sign a document. However, we do want to create periodic moments where together, we make fresh promises to God and each other to live as a covenant people!

Should membership be a democracy?

This is a big question that touches on what theologians call ecclesiology. My short answer is no, because in Acts 20, we're told that Elders are very specifically called to guide and guard the church. There is a specific leadership role that it entrusted to elders. However, that does not mean membership is pointless. Members are committing to pray for one another and the church as a whole. Members will be involved in helping shape future direction. Members will be enacting all of the 'one-another' passages that turn membership from a dead administrative tool to a living and dynamic community. We're also members of a Spirit-filled community and so we are looking for the Spirit's leading and direction when it comes to the future. As a result, membership may not be a democracy, but it is a fully involved and vital part of ensuring we have a healthy and dynamic future!

Are there some ethical/moral requirements for membership?

This is an important question but again touches on the huge subject of the state of our hearts. All of us sin. All of us stumble. However, the key is how do we respond when this happens? Are we soft and quick to repent and seek to repair things if we have damaged a relationship or, are we hard and prideful, resisting the careful encouragements of our brothers and sisters? In Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Cor 5:1-13

and the 'warning passages in Hebrews, we are shown that part of the life of a church is to help (and sometimes plead) with people to not allow their hearts to harden towards the convicting light of scripture (the gospel). However, if someone consistently and repeatedly ignores the heartfelt pleas of brothers and sisters, then sometimes the only thing left is to visibly show them the hardness of their hearts by saying "*we can't really see any evidence of you following Jesus*" and so we will treat you like a non-believer. Let me explain what I mean by this. It means sharing the gospel with them. It means lovingly pleading with them to turn around from the direction they are headed. Because membership in a local church is a covenant relationship between brothers and sisters in Christ, in extreme circumstances (and in 16 years I've never had to lead a church through this) there is a place for removing someone's membership (a heart-breaking moment!).

Does someone need to be baptised to be a member?

This is a really important question! As a leadership team we've discussed this at length! Many churches will have many different answers to this question. The short answer is **baptism is really important** but there are some complexities that we want to handle well. Let me try and explain why:

- If someone has **not** been baptised (and won't be baptised), then I do believe they shouldn't be given membership, as baptism is the **first sign** and **step** of discipleship (see Matthew 28). To ask for membership whilst willingly choosing to ignore Jesus' words makes this a fundamental discipleship issue (will you listen and obey Jesus or not?)
- If someone has been 'baptised' as a child, and after lengthy conversations we are convinced that this is a well thought through and biblically argued conviction (even though we disagree with it), for the sake of (a) their conscience and (b) the gravity of withholding membership from a genuine believer, I would want us to allow them into membership in the church with the following understanding:
 - That we will teach Believers' Baptism and at times, look to humbly persuade them that they need to be baptised.
 - We would not want them to teach, in any context, Paedobaptism in the church family.
 - They would not be able to become an Elder in the church, because one of the primary roles of eldership is the teaching and protection of doctrine (1 Timothy 4:16)

- o If they became a small group leader, we would want them to wholeheartedly encourage those who have not yet been baptised in their group to consider it.

For further information on why this is such a key question, then read the following from John Piper:

The issue was: How should our church relate to those who are born again, and deeply committed to the Bible and to Christ, but are not yet persuaded that their infant baptism is unbiblical and invalid? Should such believers be admitted in some cases to membership at Bethlehem? Or to put the question in the larger general way: Should the front door of the local church be roughly the same size as the door to the universal body of Christ? In other words, should we say to any person: We know you have truly entered into membership in the universal body of Christ, but you may not enter into membership in this local expression of the body of Christ?

Or another way to put the issue is: How does the seriousness of exclusion from local church membership compare with the seriousness of not being baptised even though after studying the Scriptures and trying to be obedient, the unbaptised person believes that he is baptised? In the real world where genuine, Bible-believing, gospel-loving, Christ-exalting, missions-minded Christians do not agree on the meaning of baptism in the New Testament, how should we relate to each other?

On the one hand, if we say, "You may be a member of this church even though you are not biblically baptised," that seems to undermine the importance that the New Testament puts on baptism. All Christians we know about in the early church were baptised (except the thief on the cross). That is how you expressed your faith publicly and became part of the visible church.

On the other hand, if we say, "Even though you are born again and a member of Christ, you may not be a member of this church," that seems to undermine the person's faith and the meaning of the local church. It seems to undermine faith because from one angle, exclusion from membership is like front-end ex-communication before membership has happened. When you excommunicate a member from the church, according to Matthew 18:17, you "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." In other words, you love him and try to win him as an unbeliever. That sounds really serious. Are we saying to those we exclude from membership that they are in the category of an unbeliever?

And saying no to a genuine believer who is part of the universal body of Christ seems to undermine the meaning of the local church as an expression of that universal church."