



Reflection on Church Membership

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INTRODUCTION

For some people, the topic of church membership is like asking them to eat a bowl of *brussels sprouts* or *spinach*! Unlike so many other subjects to do with church life (e.g. leadership), this is not something that gets that much 'air time' and as a result, most of us will still be carrying around in our heads *some kind of image of membership*, even if it's *just* the local coffee shop reward card! It is entirely possible that we've not given much time to biblically reflect upon the idea of church membership. As a result, when I use the term 'membership', there are probably a thousand and one different images, ideas and emotions that could be stirred up in you as you start to read this document.

The only approach I really know, is to take us back to scripture and allow it to speak, challenge, shape and inform our understanding and practice of church membership. So, come with me on *that* journey of exploration.

THE BIRTH OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Let me start with a slightly odd question, because I think it will help us 'get into' this subject. Imagine for a moment that you are living in the days just before the book of Acts was written. God drops you a line and says, "*Hey, I need some help and advice*" (now we know that God doesn't need any help or advice, but stick with the story). So, you pop down to the local coffee shop and God tells you that in the very next chapter (chapter 2 of Acts) he is going to take hold of this small band of Jesus-followers and he is going to empower them with the very presence of *his* Holy Spirit. He then explains that this is going to be a dramatic and world changing moment. Finally, he asks, "*What should I instruct this new group of empowered people to do?*"

What would you say? Some may answer, 'Set up a conference called Pentecost and invite people to come and experience this empowering that God is about to pour out. It could even have a website called *www.pentecosthascome.Jerusalem*'. For others, they might say, 'Let the people set up some ministries such as *www.caringforthelepersofJersulam.com* or *www.feedingthewidows.net* or *www.powerhealing.info* or maybe even raise up a superstar such as *www.peterwhousedtoputhisfootinhismouthalotministries.com* or *www.myministrymyway.com* Then again, maybe we should monetise what happens and set up a YouTube channel called *Pentecost Now* with product recommendations at the start of every clip!'

Now of course I'm being sarcastic, but I hope that you can see that although I've over-exaggerated the examples, much of what I've just described happens *all the time today*. But none of these examples reflect God's planned approach. So, what was God's plan for the local church? The answer is found ***In Acts 2: the Holy Spirit birthed a community (local church) of people who were empowered and commissioned to take the glorious message of Jesus and wherever they went, they changed the world by starting other new (local) church communities.***

However, this church community that was birthed in this glorious Spirit-empowered awakening was not some 'wishy-washy liquid' church where people came and went as they pleased, it wasn't *just* 'relational'.

Amazingly in the charismatic awakening that was taking place in Jerusalem, we immediately see signs that the church was starting to get a **definable shape** and had clearly **definable edges**. Let me give you some examples. In **Acts 2:41** and **47** and **5:14** we see believers being "added to" the local church. And these are not small numbers that we're talking about: 3000 on the day of Pentecost, plus *daily* additions! Then in **5:14** we're told that multitudes were being added. I would not have been the best guy to be put in charge of keeping count (but clearly there was enough clarity to know *who* to count)! It is amazing that the New Testament gives us lots of accounts of numerical growth being recorded. In order for this to happen, there had to be a clearly **defined line** for someone to cross and thus be counted.

Records were also kept of a **subset of the overall** church membership. We looked at this in **Acts 6** where the **widows** (a very specific group) were being neglected. Later in **1 Tim 5:9** Paul clearly states there is a 'list' of widows and he even gives some advice on how and when to add a widow to *this* list (there was much more involved than just being a widow). Jumping back to Acts 6 again, when the Apostles turn to the church community in Jerusalem and ask them to **pick out some capable and qualified deacons** to serve the most vulnerable within the church community, the church was clearly able to know from which **'pool' of people** they could choose ('we can pick from these people, but not these people'), which again, undermines the wishy-washy, "I'll float between this community and that community" idea. In the New Testament, elders or pastors (as the term is used interchangeably) have been given specific responsibility to "*pay careful attention ... to all the flock*". A task unmanageable without a clearly defined group of people who **belong** to *this* local church. The challenging and painful teaching in the New Testament on church discipline makes no sense without the clearly defined edges of a church community. The metaphor of the church family being like a body, loses clarity without some form of **"we belong together"**. Finally, the New Testament encourages members of a local church to edify, encourage, strengthen, pray for and prefer one another. These commands 'lose their bite' when there is not a clearly defined community in which to practise them and to continually evaluate how well they are being followed through!

This is remarkable and something we should underline, not lose sight of, and grasp with both hands! When the Holy Spirit was poured out upon a small band of believers who were hiding in an upstairs room, the result of this great spiritual transformation was that wherever the gospel spread, **local and definable church communities were established! The pattern of the New Testament is that gospel advance always goes hand-in-hand with the establishing of thriving local church communities where people worship together in a defined community (or using a more modern word - membership)!**

WHY?

Now for the big question: **WHY?** Why was it automatic and inevitable that wherever the gospel spread in these heady evangelistic days, local churches with defined edges and a defined community became established? **Why?**

1. A HOLY GOD WITH A HOLY PEOPLE

I'm going to try and answer this big "why" but in order to do so, we need to jump right back into the Old Testament and see how **church life always reflects the character and nature of God.**

In **Lev 19:1** we read a really important phrase that is picked up repeatedly by the New Testament writers to help us understand what it means to be the people of God or a church community together. It says, "The Lord spoke to Moses: 'Speak to the **entire Israelite community** and tell them: **Be holy** because I, the Lord your God, **am Holy.**'"

Now when we hear the word 'Holy' we often only think in terms of **purity and free from every stain.** *Holy is often seen as another way of saying pure and perfect.* Interestingly, the Bible clearly does always use Holy in *that* sense. Take for example the story of Isaiah encountering the Lord God in the year that King Uzziah dies. It's found in **chapter 6** of Isaiah and the prophet's response to hearing and seeing the Lord is to say, "woe is me for I am ruined because I am a man of unclean lips." Here Isaiah is experiencing the purity and perfection of God made manifest and it forces him to see the uncleanness and ugliness of his own heart.

However, Holy is **not always used in that way.** In fact, I think **Holy is more often used to describe God's "separateness" or 'distinctiveness'.** You see it comes from the ancient word meaning "to cut" or "to separate" It's a picture word that shows us very vividly that there are aspects of the nature and character of God that make him totally separate, different and distinct from the world he created! Some people like to use the word *transcendence* to try and describe this. We see again and again throughout scripture, when people encounter God, they realise that he is not like the handcrafted gods that surrounded them in other nations. He isn't even like the gods of nature (wind, fire, or mother earth) that were worshipped by the peoples around them. No, *this God*, is utterly separate and distinct from his creation! Later in **Isaiah** we see God clearly marking out his separateness or 'otherness'. He says this:

*"I am the Lord, and there is no other; [that's pretty clear]
Apart from me there is no God. [Ok even clearer]
I will strengthen you [King Cyrus],
Though you have not acknowledged me [ok that's a bit weird],
So that from the rising of the sun
To the place of its setting
Men may know that there is none beside me."*

Here we see an example of the Holy God using King Cyrus so that the whole world would come to know that there is no other like him, that he is totally distinct and separate from everything that was and is created! He and he alone is the one true God.

The word Holy is a constant challenge and reminder that we must never **domesticate** or make God into our little cuddly friend! No, he is awesome and beyond our ability to *fully* understand, to *fully* describe and to *fully* quantify.

We could get the best artists, the best wordsmiths and the best mathematicians together and give them 1000 years to focus on just trying to describe who God is and they would never complete the task! Why? Because there is a holy separateness that means God will never be fully understood – there will always be mystery in his nature. This is the God of the Bible! This is why when we come together on a Sunday and start to sing, we should allow our hearts to be opened again and again, because none of us will ever get to the end of knowing God. ***If you're bored with God, then you are not bored with the God of the Bible; you are bored with some diminished and dehydrated version of him!*** God is holy, God is other, God is separate, God is distinct, God is magnificent and utterly dazzling!

However, the term *Holy*, meaning to *separate* or to *be distinct*, was also used and applied to the ground (a physical patch of earth), a specific day (the sabbath), a place (you could get the GPS coordinates for it), a linen coat (fashion designers, eat your heart out!), a house (number 114 Holy St), a tithe (imagine the line in the accounts 'Holy money'), bread (holybakers.com), seed (holyfarmers.net), nation (you get the idea), anointing oil (I wonder if any perfume maker has followed suit and called their new fragrance 'Holy'), a field, water, a city, the ark, and even a word. Wow!

Speaking about these 'holy things', the late **R.C. Sproul** said "*in every case (many that I've just listed above) the word holy is used to express something other than a moral or ethical quality. The things that are holy are things that are set apart, separated from the rest. They have been separated from the commonplace, consecrated to the Lord and to His service.*"

"Be Holy because I, the Lord your God, am Holy."

A. HOW DID THIS 'HOLY SEPARATE OR DISTINCT' CALLING UPON THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT GET OUTWORKED?

It got outworked in ***every aspect of their shared life together being shaped and defined by their holy (or separate) calling! There was no divide between the sacred and secular*** – no, all of life was caught up in this holy (or distinct) calling. There was the obvious outward marker of ***circumcision*** (so that even your ***sex life*** and ***procreation*** was caught up in this holy separateness) and there were the ***food regulations*** (don't eat that, but you can eat this). However, this understanding that they are *not* like the rest of the people of this earth, got

embedded into their practice of harvesting and caring for those marginalised within society, by leaving the edges of the field for the poor to reap. This holy calling got embedded into the *how* of thanking God in worship. This holy calling impacted *how* they interacted with and related to their *neighbours*. ***This holy calling clearly defined them as separate and distinct from the world around them. They were different – they were a holy / separate / distinct people.***

When you look at the laws laid out in the Old Testament, they show very practically that ‘*this people*’ are different and they live by a different set of motivations, because they’ve been called to live as a ‘holy people’ that belongs to God. When I stand back and look at the grand sweep of the Old Testament and see this Holy God calling a people out for himself to be a Holy (separate/distinct) people who would live by a different set of priorities and would reflect his glory in this earth – ***I’m amazed that God would entrust that responsibility to anyone. Aren’t you?***

However, when we turn to the New Testament, we see that this Holy (separate/distinct) calling is not done away with. In fact, I would suggest it is intensified! In **1 Pet 2:9–10** we read these words “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a **holy nation**, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*”

These verses drip with the Old Testament imagery of a people who were holy, separate and distinct. These verses show us that the church is just as much a holy or separate or distinct people as the children of Israel were in the Old Testament .

When this ‘penny’ of a holy or separate or distinct people drops in our hearts, suddenly so much of the teaching of the New Testament makes sense! For example, you cannot be, as Jesus said, a city set on a hill, without the underlying assumption that there is something we need to be **distinct from** – the darkness of much of the world and culture around us. The great I AM statements of Jesus and their implications for us, suddenly take on new meaning – Jesus said, *I am the light, the gate, the door, and the way*: all of these showing us a separateness and distinctiveness from the world around.

In **Ephesians 2**, Paul, speaking of Christ’s great salvation work, speaks in similar terms of a **shocking separation**. Once we were **dead** in our trespasses and sins, **ensnared** and **enslaved** by the ways of this world and by **nature** we were children under wrath. This is the awful news that precedes the good news because that’s not the end of the story. We’re told, because of his great love and mercy he made us who were once dead **alive with Christ**, he also **raised us up** and seated us with Jesus in the heavens (here we have the language of separateness coming in again). Now in Christ we’ve been **brought near**, made fellow **citizens** with the saints, and **members of God’s household**. This is remarkable and shows us that this holy/separate/distinct

attribute of God is something to be enjoyed and embraced! Why? Because at the cross, Jesus died so that everything that separated us from him might be done away with and we who were far off might be brought near to this holy and separate and distinct God. That is just so amazing and should cause us to raise a shout of praise and thanks!

Then moving on to **1 Peter 1:16**, we read very familiar words “*Be holy, because I am holy.*” However, when you look at the context that this Old Testament quote is used in, it is *firstly* showing in practical ways that being a distinct or separate or holy church community, like in the Old Testament, impacts *how you think and act and speak*. However secondly, it also underlines for us that *being distinct is a community thing*. For example, Peter’s command to “show brotherly love for each other, from a pure heart love one another” is not disconnected from this call to be a holy or distinct people. In fact, I want to argue that it is the natural outworking of being a distinct or holy people!

Looking again in **1 Peter 2:9–10**, we see how these verses never speaks in individual terms. This Holy separateness or distinctiveness is something *we together (as a holy nation/people), as the family of God* have been called to express and live in. *At its core, church membership is the outworking of this glorious reality. Neither the Old or the New Testament conceives individuals carving their own track as holy, separate or distinct people – we’ve always been called to be a holy community, a holy nation, a holy people, a holy family that belong to God.*

Let me say this again, ***church membership is primarily a heart commitment to live as a holy or distinct community, where every area of life is an opportunity to reflect the distinctive nature of our new-found relationship to our holy God.***

Putting it another way ***~ church membership is the heart commitment to live as a distinct or separate people who belong to a distinct or separate God.***

B. THREE OBSTACLES TO LIVING AS THIS HOLY, SEPARATE OR DISTINCT PEOPLE

I want to suggest to you that there are three particularly large obstacles to embracing and enjoying this distinct calling to be a separate community that belongs to a holy God.

i. INDIVIDUALISM

I cannot overestimate the powerfully ingrained nature of individualism within our culture. The mantras of individualism in our day are “*you be you*”, “*be true to yourself*”, “*follow your heart*”, “*find yourself*”. From the very opening pages of scripture, community, not individualism, is shown to be inherent in how God works. Adam and Eve were ‘*together*’ commissioned and entrusted with the ***good stewardship*** of this planet, which by the way has not been rescinded and gives us as significant mandate to be environmentally and ethically conscientious people. When we then look at Jesus (the ***second Adam***), we don’t see someone living in blissful isolation, but

rather someone who modelled sacrificial and other-person preferring love. ***The cross, needs to stand tall in both our hearts and imagination showing us that individualism is not the way of Jesus!***

You and I will never be able to find an easy or comfortable 'fit' in a church community whilst living with a worldview that is focused on *me* and *my gifts* and *my rights* and *my need for opportunity*. In fact, one of the things that concerns me most, is when I meet someone and within a few minutes they are filling me in on all the things they can do and that they have been called to do. I sometimes want to call a time-out and say, "*Hey - what about Jesus and his bride?*" *What about Jesus' challenge "if you want to be great in this kingdom, do whatever is needed in that moment to help the whole body mature?"* *What about the Psalmist's cry "I want to be a door keeper in the house of the Lord"?* *In other words, let me serve in whatever way possible so that many will find a way to knowing the Lord.* Rugged individualism always lurks very close to an overly intense focus on "*well this is my calling*".

ii. CYNICISM

I think it is important to draw attention to this because it is frequently manifested by people who have been hurt and let down in the past, either in a church setting or in other environments that have really mattered to them. In that kind of context with that type of experience in your past, ***cynicism, which manifests itself as disillusionment, distrust and frustration, often directed towards those who have been given leadership responsibility, is a massive danger.*** However, it's important to emphasise here that ***the opposite of cynicism is not naivety!***

The opposite of cynicism is cross-soaked trust. We take our cynicism to the cross and there we choose to die to it. And when the voice pops into our heads '*I bet I'll get let down again*', we look into the eyes of Jesus and see one who was abandoned by all, and yet *he still committed and embraced the road that his Father had for him.* And when the voice in our heart says "*this is too painful*" we look again to the cross and cry out in thanks and praise that Jesus didn't say that about us, but rather, he loved us to the point of death. And when we feel the seeds of distrust growing in our hearts, we look to the cross and recognise that often 'new life' is found on the other side of a death and we choose to die to our own justification of how we feel, and we ask God for fresh cross-soaked trust.

iii. AN OVERLY OPTIMISTIC VIEW OF THE CHURCH

The final obstacle to actively being part of a church community (holy and distinct), is when we have an overly optimistic view of church. Some people imagine church as being a community where everyone is always loving and kind, where everyone has 'besties' that they hang out with all the time! However, this is not a biblical view of church! Church life ***is*** glorious and wonderful, but it can at times be hard. Love is not always easy, in fact sometimes it is downright hard!

Many times, love does not feel like love, it *feels* like a determined effort – just like the cross! The church community is a pulling together of people from every different walk of life, people with very different political and social views. Yet at the cross, we learn how to prefer one another. At the cross, we learn how to live as a distinct community because we don't allow those differences to be the **deal breakers**, but rather we choose to live under and in the shadow of the cross!

TIME TO REFLECT

- **Are** you willing to freshly commit yourself to being God's holy or distinct people?
- **Are** you willing to allow this reality to run down into every nook and cranny **of how you** choose to live together as a community?
- Are you willing to fight rugged individualism and the painful tentacles of cynicism and the dangerous overly optimistic view of church life?
- **Are** you willing **instead, to** heed the call of Lev 19:1 and 1 Peter 1 **to** "be holy" – **to** not just talk about **it**, **but to actually** live it and live it to the **max**?

*Let's be a distinct and separate community where the radical message of the gospel can be seen enacted a thousand times a week as we live together in **genuine** community!*

2. A COVENANT PEOPLE WHO BELONG TO A COVENANT-KEEPING GOD.

For the second part of this Reflection on Church Membership, I want now to turn to what is meant by being a covenant people who belong to a covenant-keeping God and attempt to answer some of the questions you may now be asking.

A. WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A COVENANT PEOPLE WHO BELONG TO A COVENANT-KEEPING GOD

How you view something really does have a massive impact upon your subsequent response and engagement with it. Take for example, the medical nightmare that took place a few years ago here in the UK, when just one single, isolated scientist proposed with what was at best, some very dubious data that there *may* be some kind of link between the MMR jab and autism. Suddenly, a vital and important immunisation was being avoided by many anxious parents and a major health risk started to appear on the horizon as levels of immunity dipped below the safe levels. **What happened?** Through the soundbite culture, someone's explorative research got squeezed into a cast iron link between a good thing and something not so good and so many people changed their view of the MMR jab and its application.

So then, how do you view church membership? *Is it a good thing? Is it a necessary but dull administrative tool that has little relevance to everyday church life? Is it something worse than that – maybe a tool for control?* How you view church membership will have a massive impact upon how you respond to it.

I want to suggest to you that church membership is a natural outworking of the gospel (or good news). Putting it another way, to view church membership as irrelevant or unimportant is probably an indication that you have a gap in your understanding of the good news of Jesus! **I know that is a big and provocative thing to say!**

Let's explore the painfully difficult passage of **1 Corinthians 11 v 17–26 (NIV)**

17 In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. 18 In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. 19 No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. 20 So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21 for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. 22 Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of

God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

So, what's going on here? Firstly, look at the context. Paul is writing to a **local** church community (not to Christians in general). Actually, he is writing into a very specific and messy situation. When the church in Corinth was gathering together, and food was involved, some people were turning up and stuffing themselves to excess whilst sat right next to someone who hadn't eaten for a week! Paul is saying, "*Friends this should not happen*". However, he **doesn't** rely upon compassion or mercy as his reasoning for changing their attitude. No – he points them to the Lord's Supper (Communion) and shows them how eating and drinking it is a sign of something much greater. It signified **that they belonged to this new covenant people**. Listen to Paul quoting the very words of Jesus:

"This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me"

To be absolutely clear, Paul is essentially saying this: **'how you relate to one another, or in this case how you are neglecting and dishonouring one another, gets dealt with by examining afresh that you are all people of the new covenant that Jesus purchased with his very own blood!'** That seems to me a pretty big deal!

Or put more simply – how we relate together within a church community, just like the Corinthians, is directly related to the work of Jesus on the cross! Now suddenly, church membership takes on a whole new feel and weight! Church membership is **really an outworking of our understanding of the gospel!**

A **covenant** (Jesus used that word when describing the cup of wine used in Communion) is another word for an **agreement, promise or pledge**. However, in biblical language there is something **solemn and serious** about a covenant and importantly, **relationships shift and alter as a result of that promise, agreement or pledge**.

Take for example, **marriage**, which is a covenant relationship. In **Genesis**, where we see God's creation of marriage, we read these words:

“This is why a man leaves his father and mother and bonds with his wife, and they become one flesh. Both the man and the wife were naked, yet felt no shame.”

When God unites marriages partners, all other significant relationships shift and adjust because of the *promise, agreement or covenant that has been made*. Mothers and Fathers are no longer the key relationship. At the same time, these two people are now bonded/welded/grafted together in a beautiful relationship of trust. Can you see how a relationship based upon promise or covenant adjusts other relationships around? **You cannot have the same level of relationship with everyone in the world** –That’s impossible and to try is unhealthy! God made us for ‘circles’ of relationships where **trust** and **promise hold us together**.

Let me give you another example of a covenant relationship. When God chose Abraham to be the father of this new people that he was going to make for Himself, what did God say to Abraham? He said this:

“Go out from your land, your relatives, and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing...”

It’s the same outworking of covenant – as with Adam & Eve, other relationships needed to adjust around this new relationship based upon promise, pledge and agreement. Here, Abraham is leaving **all the securities of city, culture, family and support networks** and is entrusting his future into the hands of this new covenant-making God.

Here’s just one more example of covenant being outworked. In **Luke 14:26** Jesus says:

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brother and sisters –yes, and even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.”

Gulp should be your first response! Here, Jesus is saying that if you were to set up a spectrum, your love and devotion to me should be of such a magnitude that it makes your love and devotion to Father, Mother, Wife, Child, Brother, Sister, and even your own life, **seem like hate!** **Jesus is showing us the practical outworking of this new covenant relationship which we call ‘becoming a Christian’**. He is being honest, saying, **‘friends, don’t try and add or squeeze me onto the list of significant relationships, no, if you want to follow me, all other relationships need to adjust around this new covenant relationship’**.

Wherever we see covenant relationships they always have an adjusting influence on other relationships around. Why? Because we are pledging ourselves to this God, and not that god, this person in marriage and not those people and this community of people and not that community of people!

Church membership at its core is the idea that together, we are pledging to God and each other, to live as God’s people here in this locality. As a result, this group of people will have a

more significant pull on my time, talents and treasure than on other Christians around the world. Why? Because, as in Corinth, how we live together as people of promise, is an expression and outworking of our understanding of the good news!

Let me tell you about a lovely couple at church called Mike and Pauline. Many years ago, Mike and Pauline had been members of a sect (a non-Christian sect) and in God's wonderful grace, he had revealed his love to them! As a result, they left this sect and in so doing, a little like Abraham, it came at a great cost! Friends disowned them! Following Jesus can at times cost us dearly. Yet, dear Mike and Pauline were holding onto their new-found relationship with Jesus, but as Mike told me, *"even so, we were really lonely"*. When they were invited to come to the front of the church on a Sunday and be welcomed into membership, they suddenly experienced and came to understand in a profound way that **now they belonged. They had a family!** Friends, in a world where people are desperately lonely and desperately needing to find community, **it's the church that is the answer and church membership is a very powerful expression of that!**

B. PRIVILEGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

So, if church membership is an outworking of our shared covenant relationship together. What does that look like practically? I think one of the most helpful ways of talking about membership in a local church setting is to talk in terms of *privileges* and *responsibilities*:

i. The privileges

Firstly, you are part of a local expression of the body of Christ. Isn't that amazing! "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Cor 12:27). This world gets to see the good news enacted in how *together, we choose not to fragment or live like ships passing in the night but rather, we choose to live as a living and dynamic community that prefer one another and care for one another and pray for one another and learn from one another!*

Secondly, church membership means you are in God's place of spiritual protection and sustenance. In Acts 20:28, Paul is talking to the elders or pastors of the church in Ephesus and says. *"Pay careful attention to yourself 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."* Church membership is a way of acknowledging that I cannot be who God wants me to be on my own. In fact, I *need* spiritual protection and I *need* spiritual food that only others can provide for me. That takes a degree of humility to acknowledge!

Thirdly, church membership means you have others looking out for you and caring for you – suddenly all of the *'one another'* passages in the New Testament take on life and meaning and shape, *because we've pledged ourselves to pray for one another, care for one another, love one another, protect one another, encourage one another*. This community is a place where you can be built up, strengthened, encouraged, challenged and protected by many fellow church members.

ii. The Responsibilities

However, like marriage or in any covenant relationship, there are also **expectations or responsibilities**:

Firstly, Commitment to regularly meet together. Hebrews 10:24–25 says “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 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.” I’ve had some conversations with people over the years where they’ve said, ‘I don’t think I need to turn up regularly, I’m doing ok dropping in now and again’. Now there’s probably a conversation around whether or not they are actually doing ok; however, the issue here in Hebrews about regularly turning up for things is actually *not about you but rather about how you can have an encouraging impact upon those around you*. If you don’t show up, the person who suffers is the person you could have encouraged and could have prayed for and could have strengthened. Belonging to a local church community places the responsibility upon us all to open our eyes, to look around and see those that I’m in this community with, and to recognise that, ‘to a degree’, they are dependent on me for what I can contribute. This is what makes up the main ingredient of how we define encouragement!

So, what might that look like for us in our church communities? Well how about making sure you are regularly around on Sundays and for any mid-week meetings (and not just dashing in at the last minute unless that’s unavoidable!) How about committing to come to those specially arranged social events, especially when you can invite non-church friends. Now, there will always be some exceptions – work commitments, illness, unexpected life circumstances, etc. However, this is a heart commitment that within the constraints of your life, you *want* to be around, not for yourself but for the sake of others.

Secondly, Commitment to our mission. As a church we are passionate about *making much of Jesus* to those who live around us. This is a massive and challenging commitment and in order for church membership to mean anything, there needs to be a desire and commitment to being part of *this* mission! So, for example, we are going to be a church where the care of the poor and marginalised in society is not just for a few ‘keenies’ but is central to all that we do. This will be inconvenient, it will cost lots of money, at times we will get taken for a ride, and it will have an emotional and physical cost to it! However, this is central to the mission and ministry of the church. If you hear that and think, ‘I don’t want anything to do with that’, then maybe it is not the right church for you. I don’t mean that in an unkind way but my challenge is, *how can you throw yourself, heart and soul, into the mission of a church if you have such a dislike for something that is central to how it is going to express the mission of God?*

Thirdly, you need to be willing to commit yourself, your time, your talents and your treasure to the mission of the church. When new people visit the church, they should first and foremost be made to feel welcome with no pressure to do anything. However, when you make a

commitment to belong to that church, it does come with a cost – just like marriage comes with a cost. What is it that you learn in the early months of marriage? *Oh, there is someone else in this marriage and it's not all about me!* Then you start having kids and you learn it again and again, *that this is not all about me.* It's the same in a church family. God has wonderfully gifted each one of us with different amounts of time, skills, gifts, talents, and financial resources. **The key question is, are you willing to commit them, to helping us fulfil the mission that God has given us as a church? There is a cost involved (I remember taking part in a gift day in our previous church when, as a family, we joyfully but painfully gave all of the money we had saved for a summer holiday that year. We did it joyfully but it did come with a cost)! I think it is a joyful cost, but it is still a cost nonetheless.**

Fourthly, I think one of the greatest things that we can do for each other is to regularly commit ourselves to pray for one another. One of the ways we can do this is to have a list of church members and to commit to praying for 5-6 different people each day. This daily commitment to pray for others in the church is a sign that:

- the family finds its strength and source in God
- we are committed to each other
- it protects us from things getting shoved under the carpet because it is impossible to pray for someone with whom you have a problem
- it's a very practical way of working out who you don't yet know in the family and making an effort to find them and get to know them.

So, church membership is about **enjoying** the **privileges** of belong to the family of God and **fully participating** in the **responsibilities**! Joy and sacrifice. Enjoyment and commitment.

C. WHO CAN BECOME A CHURCH MEMBER?

That is a great question, so let's keep it as simple and clear as possible whilst remaining biblical in our thinking. So, when considering membership of a church, like marriage, **there is the initial commitment and then the ongoing daily commitment.** Let me explain what I mean by this.

i. Initial commitment:

Clear evidence of salvation – When someone is expressing a desire to become a member, we want to ensure that they are followers of Jesus, because clearly, church membership makes **no sense** if you are not already a devoted Jesus follower. This is because we are together, wanting to make much of him, to glorify him, to live for him and to be about his mission. So, we're looking for people who have surrendered their lives to him.

Recognition of and commitment to the leadership and to the vision and values of the church

Now let me break this down a little.

Firstly, Hebrews tells us that part of belonging to a local church is that we've been called to submit to our leaders. It is impossible to do that if (a) you don't really know them or (b) you have some major question marks over them. As a result, part of the process of someone coming and joining the church, is to give them time and space to get to know the leaders. It's important to create opportunities where they can ask questions and see how the leaders' live their lives. This is vital, because so much of leadership in the church is about example-setting and cultivating a safe and trusting environment.

Secondly, you're not just committing yourself to turning up on a Sunday; you are also committing yourself to being part of a community that is on a mission. You need to know that, and you need to know enough about that mission to say, *"yep, I can roll my sleeves up and dig deep into my wallet for that"*. As a result, it's important to give people space and time to understand what the vision is and also some of the important values that undergird it.

ii. The ongoing commitment:

This is really a continued recognition of and commitment to the leadership, vision and core values of the church and a commitment to living and growing in a godly lifestyle. Like marriage, we make a significant one-off commitment "for better or worse" to live together in that marriage. However, healthy marriages are made up of thousands upon thousands of little ongoing commitments to one another. It's the same in a church family. Periodically, it is good to evaluate where the church is going and whether you are still committed to this mission with this group of people. If suddenly, we were to swing the steering wheel of the church over to the left and make major and dramatic changes to the focus of the church and what we are committed to, I think it is only fair that you take time to ask yourself "am I committed to this new mission?" At the same time, if life starts to climb up and over you and consume all of your time and energy and it leaves no space for your active involvement in the church family, I hope that you would want a dear friend in the church to come alongside you and gently challenge you about that!

Church membership therefore involves a ***one-off commitment*** but then an ***ongoing commitment*** to the vision and direction of the church.

D. HOW DO PEOPLE BECOME MEMBERS?

Over the course of this coming season in our own church here, we are going through the process of applying the theory of membership to the practical application. As we anticipate many new people joining the church, the future plan will be to run regular Membership Courses, where those who are interested, can meet together with others in leadership to work through what has been outlined in this Paper.

For those who are already very much a part of the church family here, (and for some of you, this has been for many years) I hope this Paper will have been of great value to you. In the coming weeks, we will be moving towards a specific **Commitment Sunday** where those wanting to be part of the church membership here at Kingsgate, will be invited to stand together to pray a prayer of commitment *to God but also to make a pledge of commitment to each other*. This group of people will then become the membership of the church.

Commitment Sundays will become a regular part of church life (probably annually), because we believe there will be a lot of new people who will become members and so it is *your* opportunity to make a fresh commitment to *them* to live together as the people of God. **So in fact, we're going to have an ongoing, regular process of commitment where we corporately reaffirm our commitment to the Lord, and to each other as members of this church community.**

Interestingly, when we take communion together, this demonstrates a similar type of commitment. We don't take it in blissful isolation of others. In fact, the Apostle Paul shows us that our horizontal relationships matter deeply in the process of taking communion!

E. TO SUMMARISE:

Church membership means that **my** spiritual wellbeing is, to a degree, dependant on **you** playing your full part in this church family and vice versa.

Church membership means that when we see great victories and advance, we can genuinely celebrate them together, even if we've not been directly involved, because we are a body made up of many parts, but all linked together through promises, prayer and commitment.

Church membership means that when someone suffers, we don't turn our back on them or avoid them because we don't know what to say, we suffer with them. We 'gather around' one another as church family, to support those in need.

Church membership means experiencing the cost of giving time and money towards the mission of the church that could have been used in so many other ways.

Church membership means that we experience joys that are not attainable in the world at large. Seeing the slow but beautiful transformation of lives week-in-week-out as people are responding to the gospel is a beautiful thing.

Church membership is one of the greatest joys and one of the great costs here on planet earth. It is not a matter of signing on a dotted line (there won't be anything to sign!) The commitment of church membership is really important and so much more profound than any written agreement.

TIME TO REFLECT

As you pray about membership, ask yourself these questions ~

- *Am I willing to enjoy all the benefits of being a member?*
- *Am I willing to commit to the responsibilities of church membership?*

3. CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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!

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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!

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. 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.

11. 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.

12. 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.

13. 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!

14. 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 is 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!

15. 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!).

16. 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)
 - 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 excommunication 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.”