

Church Membership

IS IT BIBLICAL?

by PHILLIP KAYSER, Ph.D.



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Church Membership: Is it Biblical?

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Introduction

The Biblical pattern is to be "numbered" or "added to" the rolls of a local church (Acts 1:41,47; 4:4; 6:1,7; 16:5; 1 Tim. 5:9), to be committed to that local body (1 Cor. 12:12-28; Rom. 12:4,5; Eph. 4:25) and under the rule and oversight of shepherds who know each sheep (Heb. 13:7,17-18; 1 Cor. 16:16; 1 Thes. 5:11-14). The Old Testament prophesied that in the New Covenant time "the LORD will record, when He registers the peoples" (Psalm 87:6). When moves or transfers were necessary, the Biblical method was to use a letter of transfer or commendation (Acts 18:27; Rom. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 3:1; 8:23-24; Philemon; 3 John 6-9,12). Indeed, any inter-church business was conducted by people with reference letters (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:3; 2 Cor. 8:16-24). Also, it is logically impossible to reconcile the doctrine of discipline with a belief that membership is not necessary. How can an excommunicated person be "taken away from among you" (1 Cor. 5:2) if there is no roll from which the person can be removed? It is not sufficient to say that he is physically barred from the church since even unbelievers could be present (1 Cor. 14:23). Furthermore, if people simply circulated from church to church it would be impossible for the eldership to recognize and bar from the building all who were under discipline. Membership rolls are both Biblically and logically necessary for the maintenance of a holy church.

Detailed Support

Visible/Invisible Church

The doctrine of the church in both Old and New Testaments always included the concept of a visible assembly or congregation.¹ While there is an invisible church known only to God, composed of all the elect, the normal Biblical usage of the terms church, assembly, congregation, and body refer to the visible manifestation of the church. If people are using the doctrine of the invisible church as an excuse to be invisible and never show up or have any commitment, then they are misusing the doctrine.

The word “congregation” implies people who congregate. Just as the Old Covenant visible church was numbered (Ex. 38:25; Numb. 1:2,18; 4; etc), the new covenant congregation was numbered (Acts 1:15; 4:4; 16:5). And just as the “great congregation” of the Old Testament was simply the gathering of all the the myriad local “congregations” (Ps. 26:12; 68:26) or synagogues which were scattered in every hamlet of Israel,² the New Covenant worship

¹ See Appendix A for Scriptural proof of continuity between the Old Testament synagogue system and the New Covenant church system.

² Many people have tried to deny that God instituted the synagogue in the Old Testament, and they say that the synagogue arose out of necessity for worship when the Jews were in exile in Babylon. The following Scriptures show that belief to be false:

- a. Acts 15:21 "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath." This verse establishes that synagogues are a Mosaic institution, and that synagogues were in every city.
- b. Psalm 74:8 "They said in their hearts, 'Let us destroy them altogether.' They have burned up all the meeting places [Hebrew hd;[e and Greek Septuagint sunagwghv] of God in the land." Already in Asaph's day there were synagogues everywhere.
- c. Lev. 23:3 "Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation [NIV translates it

occurred in both the church gathered (Acts 2:46:a – “in the temple”) and the church local (Acts 2:46b - “house to house”). There is nothing invisible about an Old Testament congregation that had leaders who led (Numb. 1:16; 4:34; 16:2; 27:2,17; 31:13; 32:2). Both the Jews and the older Presbyterians saw Exodus 18 as the establishment of the visible church/synagogue system from the great assembly down to the local synagogues where people were commanded to meet in “sacred assembly” every Sabbath (Lev. 23:3).

Likewise, the word “assembly” implies people who assemble. The Sabbath “sacred assembly” happened not only on the local synagogue level (Lev. 23:3), but wherever the church visible was formally gathered under authorized leadership (2 Chron. 29:28; Neh. 5:13; Ps. 22:22,25; 35:18; 107:32; etc). It is not possible to have a new covenant “assembly” (Heb. 2:12) that does not assemble.

The assembly did very concrete visible things such as:

1. jointly killing a Passover lamb (Ex 12:6)
2. committing a sin (Lev. 4:13)

"sacred assembly]." The Sabbath was to be a day of corporate worship in the land, and if the temple was the only place to do that, then most in Israel would have no place to worship since they could not travel to Jerusalem every week or they would spend all their time in travel. Compare 2 Kings 4:23.

- d. 2 Chronicles 17:9; Deut. 18:6-8; Nehemiah 10:37-39 Levites went throughout the land teaching and came to be known as scribes. They were distinguished from the other sons of Levi (the priests) who ministered in the temple. Interestingly, the tithe went to the synagogues (Neh. 10:37-39) and the Levites in the synagogues in turn tithed by giving 10% of that tithe to the temple. So the synagogue was the basic institution of the church, though all of life including the church was in turn subject to the temple since the temple represented God's throne room. When Israel was in exile, the synagogue was the only manifestation of the church on earth.

3. offering a bull (Lev. 4:14)
4. gathering for worship every Sabbath (Lev. 23:36).
5. Being called to worship, with “all the assembly” blessing God and bowing their heads or prostrating themselves before God (1 Chron. 29:20)

To be “cut off from among the assembly” was something tangible, not invisible (Lev. 19:20a). Likewise being restored to the assembly was tangible and visible and required a specific process (Lev. 19:20b).

Of course, the Bible makes a distinction between “the great assembly” (Psalm 22:25; 35:18; etc) or great congregation (Ex 16:2; Numb. 8:9; etc) and the myriad local “congregations” (Ps. 26:12; 68:26) which were scattered in every hamlet of Israel.³

³ Many people have tried to deny that God instituted the synagogue in the Old Testament, and they say that the synagogue arose out of necessity for worship when the Jews were in exile in Babylon. The following Scriptures show that belief to be false:

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Worship occurred in both the church gathered (Acts 2:46:a – “in the temple”) and the church local (Acts 2:46b - “house to house”).

As C. H. Frendenburg says,

"If you admit the visible church, then why do you exalt your imaginary church over it to destroy its doctrine, its discipline, its organization, its authority, in fact, everything God has entrusted to it? Paul says: 'Ye are the body of Christ . . .' (1 Cor. 12:27) and that body is one (Romans 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 4:4). . . There are not two bodies, one visible and one invisible . . . Any man should take his own medicine. If he will not, he is dishonest. Now let the invisible church preacher have an invisible church to preach to with an invisible membership and an invisible salary, and see how he would like it! Too many of our members are invisible at the services now, but if they were all invisible there would be no services. God's cause would be wiped out and Satan would have full possession." In *The Invisible Church Theory*, tract, n.d.

If a person spurns the visible church and says he merely intends to be part of the invisible church, he has excommunicated himself and is like unto the heathen and the publicans (cf. Matt. 18:17), for there is no concept of a church where people are not bound to each other in one body.

V.C. Mayes writes,

“Although it may be true that there exists in the mind or eyes of God an invisible, universal church which only He can see

(the priests) who ministered in the temple. Interestingly, the tithe went to the synagogues (Neh. 10:37-39) and the Levites in the synagogues in turn tithed by giving 10% of that tithe to the temple. So the synagogue was the basic institution of the church, though all of life including the church was in turn subject to the temple since the temple represented God's throne room. When Israel was in exile, the synagogue was the only manifestation of the church on earth.

assembled at some future date; consisting of all the elect who shall make up that assembly, having been members of a local assembly on earth; it cannot be conceded that there is now an assembly that does not assemble, a congregation that does not congregate, a body that is not yet a body of which all the redeemed of all ages are members. The Bible teaches that sinners HEARD and RECEIVED the word, were BAPTIZED... and ADDED to the church --- assembly --- at Jerusalem --- Acts 2:41-47 --- a local, visible assembly." from tract *The Invisible Church Theory*.

Old and New Testament Witness

Thus church membership has always been important (contrary to the teachings of the Brethren and other Independent groups). The Concept of a Church roll is seen in both Old and New Testaments.

- Deuteronomy 23:2-3 indicates that though certain people were excluded from the membership of the congregation, they were not excluded from salvation. Interestingly, those with leprosy were allowed to attend synagogue, though there was a partition between them. (Citizenship & Church membership were distinct.)
- Discipline in the Old Covenant was removal from membership in the church (synagogue). (Gen. 17:14; Ex. 12:15; Ezra 10:7; John 9:22,34; 16:2).
- The Old Testament people went to great lengths to keep records of people. See Ezra chapters 2 & 8 (compare with 10:7); Nehemiah, etc.
- The Old Testament anticipated a time when the Gentiles would come into the church: “The LORD will record, when He registers the peoples...” (Ps. 87:6). People didn’t just show up at church. They made profession of faith and signed that they belonged to the Lord: “They... will say, ‘I am the LORD’s... [and] will write with his hand, ‘The LORD’s.’” (Isa. 44:5)*
- Church membership is supposed to reflect as closely as possible membership in heaven (Matt. 16:19; 18:17,18). That God has a membership roll in heaven can be clearly seen from the following passages: Exodus 32:32,33[Book of Life]; Daniel 12:1[Book of Life]; Luke 10:20 [names written in heaven] Rev. 13:8; 20:12,15; Phil. 4:3[Book of Life]. So there are rolls both in heaven and on earth.
- There was a widows roll for welfare purposes (1 Tim. 5:9)

* See our *Church Membership Covenant* for more details on this concept of signing a covenant to become a member.

- The method of membership was making a vow of commitment to the Lord and His word. Examples: Isaiah 19:21 is a prophecy of Egypt becoming Christian by making a vow to the Lord; Isaiah 44:5 is a similar prophecy and speaks of individuals who commit themselves to God's people by vow ("shall subscribe with his hand unto the LORD"); Ezekiel 44:6-9 (provided proof of being in the covenant and walking a holy life); Deut. 6:13-14 ("serve Him only and take oaths in His name" - these oaths distinguished them from the heathen and publicans that Christ refers to); Deut. 10:19-20 shows much the same. Many Scriptures decry an unwillingness to affirm the covenant. Lev. 22:3; 23:29; Numb 15:30; Ps. 78:10; Heb. 3:12-13; 4:1,14; 5:12-14; 6:1-6,9,12; 10:23-25,35-39; 12:1-2. Though children are in covenant based on their relationship with their "fathers" (Deut. 5:3; 8:18), God expects the children to lay hold of it⁴ for their own generation (Deut. 5:3; Ps. 48:13; 78:6) and to not "forget the covenant" (Deut. 4:23; 8:18; 2 Chron. 15:12; 34:32; Acts 3:25-26; Heb. 4:1,14). It is not just the "sons of the foreigner" and the "outcasts of Israel" who must reaffirm the covenant (Is. 56:3-8), but all the "children of Israel... [and] Judah" must personally make "a perpetual covenant that will not be forgotten" (Jer. 50:5). All adult males and females were responsible to "make a sure covenant and write it." (Neh. 9:38). Certainly it is appropriate for those who have grown up in the faith to "write with his hand" his covenant commitment (Isaiah 44:5 in context). LSEP

⁴ An example of an ecumenical Reformed creed that makes this explicit would be the Reformed Belgic Confession (1566), which states, "Those who have become adults cannot remain baptized members. They cannot, in this respect, continue to be considered in their parents. When a person is come to years of discretion, he or she is placed before a choice. The membership by virtue of birth and baptism can either be broken off, or continued by confession. However, when we do the first, we do this against God's ordinances." (See Article 28, Belgic Confession of Faith)

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- In the New Testament people are
 - added after baptism and confession of faith (Acts 2:41,47). It is only after being added (v. 41) that they were able to partake of communion (v. 42).
 - could be counted - so this was not talking about the invisible church (Acts 1:15; 4:4)
 - are removed from the church (Matt. 18:15-17)
 - are reinstated (2 Cor 2:6-7 they were not supposed to suspend them indefinitely, but where there was repentance, there could be restoration.)

The word “members” is explicitly used of both the Old Covenant church (Lev. 4:27; Acts 6:9) and of the New Covenant church (Eph. 2:19; 3:6; 4:25; 5:30; Col. 3:15; 1 Cor. 12:12-28).

Oversight of Elders

God has entrusted the entire membership roll to the oversight of the elders. Without membership rolls they do not know whom they are responsible to oversee.

- 1 Peter 5:3 exhorts elders, “nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge.” The Greek word κληροῖ is defined by Arndt & Gingrich as “that which has been assigned by lot, portion, share.” Commenting on 1Peter 5:3 they say it refers to “the various parts of the congregation which have been assigned portions to the individual presbyters or shepherds.” The verbal form means “to appoint by lot.” If each sheep were apportioned by lot to a particular elder, then there was by definition a roll in the mind of the elders (if not in writing).
- Acts 20 has several verses dealing with this. v. 28-29 take heed to all the flock over whom you were made overseers and shepherds. A shepherd better know how many sheep he has or if one is lost, has been eaten by wolves, etc. or he is not a good shepherd. In verse 31 Paul said that he warned “everyone” in the church. How could Paul know who “everyone” was if there was not an official or unofficial roll?
- Heb. 13:17 says elders are held accountable for all those entrusted to them, and those under the elders are to be submissive.

Dealing with Unknown People

Before travelers were welcomed into church fellowship they had to carry a letter of commendation.

- Paul's status should have been well enough known so that he did not need a letter of commendation (he had after all planted the church!), but he implies that "some others" did "need" such letters (2 Cor. 3:1)
- 3 John is a reference letter for certain missionaries (vv. 5-9). Earlier letters had been rejected by Diotrephes (3 John 9). 3 John also serves as a letter of reference for Demetrius (v. 12)
- Philemon is a letter of recommendation to Philemon of Onesimus good character and the request to forgive him for running away, but also a letter to the church to receive him as a brother in the Lord in good standing.
- Aquilla & Priscilla were received based upon a letter of transfer and commendation (Acts 18:27).
- Romans 16:1-2 serves the same purpose for Phoebe. Paul gives her credentials as being "our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea" and urges "that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints."
- Even a prominent man like Titus was subject to approval by a local congregation (2 Cor. 8:16-24). Paul said, "If anyone inquires about Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker concerning you. Or if our brethren are inquired about, they are messengers of the churches. Therefore show to them, and before the churches, the proof of your love..."

Summary

Just as the Great Over-Shepherd “calls his own sheep by name” (John 10:3), shepherds of the church must know “those allotted to” their “charge” (1 Pet. 5:3) “by name” 3 John 14 with vv. 1,4,5,9,10,12). Just as the Chief-Shepherd has a register in heaven (Heb. 12:23), under-shepherds are called upon to keep statistics of the sheep they care for (Acts 1:15; 2:41,47; 4:4; 16:5), to which some are “added” (Acts 2:47) and from which some are “taken away” (1 Cor. 14:23). Membership is a commitment of the people to each other and it is a commitment of the shepherds to the sheep. May it be seen as a testimony that we are “friends” (3 John 14) and not “strangers” (3 John 5). May being “members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19) be seen as a blessing and not a burden. Amen

Resources Available from the Publisher

- Cummings, Tim. *Ministerial Training: The Bible's Normative Pattern*.
- Davis, Andrew. *Written on Your Heart: An Approach to Extended Memorization of Scripture*.
- Elliot, Michael (Ed.). *Bible Acrostic: An Aid to Memorizing the Content of Every Chapter of the Bible*.
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Founder and President of Biblical Blueprints, **Phillip Kayser** has degrees in education, theology, and philosophy. Ordained in 1987, he currently serves as Senior Pastor of Dominion Covenant Church, a conservative Presbyterian (CPC) church in Omaha, NE. He also serves as Professor of Ethics at Whitefield Theological Seminary and President of the Providential History Festival. He and his wife Kathy have 5 children and 9 grandchildren.



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