

The Church and Membership

Introduction

Is there any biblical basis for the practice of Church membership, or is this just a novel and unnecessary addition to the Scriptures? After all, Church membership is never explicitly mentioned in the New Testament. So why do we do what we do? We must begin with the biblical distinction between the invisible and the visible Church.

The Invisible Church

How many invisible churches are there? There is only one. Where is this one church? It is throughout the whole earth and even in heaven! Who is included in this church? All true believers, past, present, and future. There is only one church because there is only one bride of Christ, there is only one temple, one flock, and only one body of Christ.

- ✓ Ephesians 4:3-6 – There is *one body* and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith... one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

The believers in America are one with the believers in Libya. The true believers in the independent churches are one with the true believers in the Presbyterian and Lutheran churches (etc.). The believers on earth (the church militant) are one with the believers in heaven (the church triumphant; cf. Heb. 12:22-24). Since the one invisible and universal church is a purely living and spiritual organism, it includes only those, and all those who have been truly born again. To be part of this one invisible church is to be saved. To be outside of this one invisible church is to be judged and condemned. We can see a vision of the glories and beauties of this one, universal church in Revelation 21 when the holy city, new Jerusalem, comes down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (21:2). John writes:

- ✓ Revelation 21:9-11 – Then came one of the seven angels... and spoke to me, saying, ‘Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.

If this doesn't make us catch our breath in wonder and delight, then we need to pray to God for an increased sensitivity and a change of heart! This is the one, universal, pure, and invisible church. But is the church only invisible?

The Visible Church

The Scriptures also speak of many different churches (not just one). These churches are local (not universal), and these churches *may* include those who are not born again (Acts 5; 1 Jn. 2:19). We read in the Bible about multiple “Churches of God” (1 Cor. 11:16), “Churches of Christ” (Rom. 16:16), and “Churches of the Gentiles” (Rom. 16:4). Sometimes the churches are

addressed according to their *province*: “John to the seven churches that are in Asia...” (Rev. 1:4), “Churches of Macedonia” (2 Cor. 8:1), Churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:1-2), “Churches of Judea...” (Gal. 1:22). Sometimes the churches are more specifically addressed according to the *city* in which they are located: “The church in Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1), “The church in Ephesus” (Rev. 2:1), “The church in Smyrna” (Rev. 2:8), “The church in Pergamum” (Rev. 2:12), “The church in Thyatira” (Rev. 2:18), “The church in Sardis” (Rev. 3:1), The church in Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7), “The church in Laodicea” (Rev. 3:14). And sometimes the church is identified by the place that it *meets*:

- ✓ Romans 16:3, 5 – Greet Prisca and Aquila... Greet also the church in their house.
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 16:19 – Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.
- ✓ Colossians 4:15 – Give my greetings... to Nympha and the church in her house.
- ✓ Philemon 1-2 – To Philemon our beloved fellow worker... and the church in your house...
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 14:19, 20, 34-35 – [Here Paul speaks about what ought to happen “in church”.]

We know what the invisible church is. So what is the visible church? We can start by saying that the visible church is the *gathered* church – like we have here (here I’m assuming churches that preach the true Gospel). But if the invisible church is only made up of true believers, can we really call the gathered congregation a church, since it may include unbelievers? It is certainly possible for us to unintentionally baptize an unbeliever and even to allow an unbeliever to regularly partake of the Lord’s Supper. So is the gathered congregation really the church, or is the church just present somewhere *invisibly* in the congregation? We also have to remember that the gathered congregation is a local church. It doesn’t include every believer throughout all time and history. So is the gathered congregation a church, or is it just a part of the church? If we think only about the *one invisible and universal* church, then we’ll end up with something like this: The “church” in Nympha’s house is a toe, the whole church in Colossae is a foot, and all the churches in Asia make up an entire leg. Living Word Bible Church is just the mouth, while the rest of the Gospel-preaching churches in Morris are the eyes, ears, and nose, and when all the churches in Grundy County are put together, they could be compared to the head. Do you see what happens when we fail to *distinguish* between the invisible and visible Church? We end up with no churches! **We end up with incomplete parts and pieces of the one church invisibly present in each individual congregation.** So what exactly are we participating in when we gather together each Lord’s Day? Can we call this the church, or not? Praise the Lord, we can! We are not just one detached and isolated *part* of the body of Christ. In a very real and biblical sense, this *is* the body of Christ, *complete* with its own individual members.

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 12:27 (cf. Rom. 16:23) – Now you [members of a specific visible and gathered assembly in Corinth] are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

In a very real and biblical sense, we are not just a strand of hair on the bride of Christ, we *are* the bride of Christ.

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 11:2 – For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you [a specific visible assembly] to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

In a very real and biblical sense, we are not just an isolated collection of sheep from the one flock of the invisible church, rather, every gathered congregation is truly the flock of Jesus Christ (Acts 20:17, 28).

- ✓ Acts 20:17, 28 – [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him... Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all *the flock* [a specific visible assembly], in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for *the church of God*.

In a very real and biblical sense, we are not just one wall of one room in the temple, this gathered congregation actually *is* the temple of God.

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 3:16 – Do you not know that you [the gathered congregation in Corinth] are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you [the gathered congregation]?

The church is not just present invisibly in our midst. This *visible* assembly *is* the church! How do we know this? Well, can the invisible church ever be destroyed? By no means! And yet Paul writes to the church in Corinth:

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 3:17 – If anyone destroys God’s temple [the gathered church], God will destroy him.

Can the invisible church ever come to an end? Not at all! And yet listen to these words of Jesus:

- ✓ Revelation 2:2-5 – To the angel of the church in Ephesus write... “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance... But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place [cf. “the seven lampstands are the seven churches”; 1:20)].

We see, then, that each individual congregation is a *true* and *complete* church and can be called *on its own* the flock, the temple, the body, and the bride of Jesus Christ. What a wonderful and gracious gift is the visible church! To neglect the local, visible, and organized Church is ultimately to *disdain* the flock, the temple, the body, and the bride of Jesus Christ which He purchased with His own blood. We must not so separate between the invisible and the visible church as to think that we can claim membership in the invisible church without the duty and obligation to commit ourselves to the local church. Each local and visible church is a complete and detailed miniature of the universal and invisible church.

And yet this visible and local assembly is *not* at all identical with the one universal, and invisible church. This is a tension! And yet there are many who have tried to get rid of this tension for something simpler. On the one hand, the Roman Catholic Church so emphasizes the visible church as to make it *the same thing* as the invisible church. All those within the visible organization of the Roman Catholic church are truly saved and all those outside of the visible organization of the Roman Catholic church are unsaved. The Roman Catholics have failed to maintain the biblical distinction between the church visible and the church invisible and so the main focus is on the visible institution with the visible hierarchy and the visible sacraments. On

the other hand, there are many Protestants who so emphasize the invisible church that their understanding of the visible church is very deficient and distorted. They don't see any contradiction in claiming membership in the invisible church while neglecting the visible church. There are some who would say that it is impossible to "go to church". After all, how can you go to the church that is purely invisible, and universal, and spiritual? You might just as easily say that the church exists in your house every day of the week. Whenever I hear a family say that they had church at home, it makes me very sad. Not only are they speaking unbiblically, but they are being robbed of the truly glorious vision of Christ's church. Of course, now we have to ask about the definition of a visible church. Why can't a family of Christians be a church?

LBC – "A *particular* church, *gathered* and completely *organized* according to the mind of Christ, consists of *officers* and *members*; and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church... for the peculiar *administration of ordinances*, and *execution of [authority] or duty*... are bishops or elders, and deacons."

- ✓ Ephesians 4:11-12 (cf. Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet. 5:2, 4) – [Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers [elders/overseers], to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.
- ✓ Titus 1:5 – This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you [before these churches had elders, they were under Paul's apostolic authority administered through Titus].
- ✓ 1 Timothy 3:1, 8 – If anyone aspires to the *office* of overseer, he desires a noble task... Deacons likewise must be dignified...
- ✓ Philippians 1:1 – To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons...
- ✓ Hebrews 13:17 (cf. 7, 24) – Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.
- ✓ 1 Timothy 5:17 – Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.
- ✓ 1 Timothy 3:14-15 – I am writing these things to you so that... you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God.

Here we see that there is a very specific code of conduct that is unique and specific to the gathered Church, and that does not necessarily apply to Christians when they are outside of the Church! We see then that the visible church is not only a spiritual and living organism fitted for heaven (like the invisible church). The visible church is also a formally structured *organization* fitted for life on this *earth*, complete with: Officially appointed officers and recognized members (cf. Acts 12:1); Weekly meetings (1 Cor. 16:1-2; Acts 20:6-7); The visible ordinances of baptism (Mat. 28:18-20), the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-26), and the public preaching of the Word (1 Tim. 4:13; 5:17); Basic standards of church conduct (1 Tim. 3:14-15; 1 Cor. 14); Formal disciplinary procedures (Mat. 18:15-18; 1 Cor. 5:1-5); Official lists of those who qualify for financial aid (1 Tim. 5:9); Sessions for arbitration and the settlement of disputes (1 Cor. 6:1-6); A church treasury for the support of the poor (1 Tim. 5:16), the support of the vocational elders (1 Tim. 5:17-18), the support of missionaries (Phil. 4:15), and undoubtedly whatever else was necessary for the proper and orderly functioning of the church. In so far as the visible church is a

living organism (inhabited by the Spirit and composed of Spirit-filled believers), we can say that it is completely and totally *different* from anything else that you will ever find in the world. *But* in so far as the visible church is an organization and an institution, it will also be *similar* to many other organizations in the secular world. Does this mean that the church is worldly? Not at all! This simply means that even the world operates according to the basic principles of order which are ultimately rooted in God Himself. In other words, the church has more of a right to organizational structure than any secular organization has ever had!

So now we come to the question: What is involved in the official formation of a local Church? Obviously, the invisible church was birthed on the day of Pentecost, and no other invisible churches will ever come into being. But what about church planting? What about the creation of more and more visible churches? You may have ten baptized believers get together one Sunday morning for a Bible Study, but that doesn't make them a Church! They are one with each other in the invisible church, but that spiritual unity is not yet reflected in any visible church. We can see from this that baptism is more the sign of membership in the *universal* church than of membership in any particular *visible* church (Eph. 4:3-6). You don't have a church every time two or more baptized believers get together (Mat. 18:15-20). The last Christian conference you attended was not a Church even if it was composed entirely of baptized believers. So how do ten "random", baptized believers actually become a visible church? I believe the answer is rooted in *covenant* commitment. Boon Sing Poh writes: "By [covenant commitment] is meant that [the individual Christians] *voluntarily bind themselves together* to form a church, *mutually agreeing* to carry out all that is *agreed upon* as *members* of that church." Hezekiah Harvey suggested that "a visible (local) church should consist of believers in Christ who are baptized on a credible profession of faith, and voluntarily associated under special covenant, for the maintenance of worship, the truths, the ordinances, and the discipline, of the gospel" (quoted in Poh; cf. 1 Tim. 3:14-15). These men use the concept of *covenant* because it is such a thoroughly biblical concept.

Someone might say: "We don't need to make any specific or formal commitment to any one visible church." But *wherever* there is a local church, there *must* be believers who have *specifically* committed themselves to that *specific* assembly – even if they don't like to recognize that commitment as membership. And yet I don't know why someone wouldn't want to give formal and official recognition to their formal and official commitment. This basic principle and practice is everywhere in Scripture. In fact, I'm not sure how formal and official your commitment can be apart from the formal and official recognition of that commitment! No, the Bible doesn't specifically command church membership*, but the concept of mutual *covenant* commitment is assumed just by the existence of a *visible* church – formally organized according to the mind of Christ. And especially in our day of church hopping, mere church attendance,

* Practically speaking, I wonder how the New Testament church would have dealt with the issue of baptized believers who were under full church discipline. The disciplined sinner in 2 Corinthians 2 was a baptized believer. Because of the rebellion he led against Paul's apostolic authority, he was excommunicated from the assembly, and then upon his repentance, he was forgiven and "restored" to the assembly (2 Cor. 2:5-11). While this baptized believer was being disciplined with excommunication, what "list" was he on? He wasn't on the "baptized member" list because he was excommunicated! And yet he couldn't just be erased from all of the lists because he was a baptized believer under church discipline! So the practice of church discipline certainly assumes the more specific concept of a list of members in good standing.

individualism, rejection of authority, and the mentality that if I don't like one church I'll just go to another, the covenant commitment of church membership is even more important than ever.

“By [covenant commitment] is meant that [the individual Christians] voluntarily bind themselves together to form a church, *mutually agreeing to carry out all that is agreed upon as members of that church.*” What, then, are these special duties and obligations of membership in a specific local church? They are cheerful and generous financial giving in order to meet the requirements of the church treasury/budget, commitment to fellowship and mutual edification, making the meetings of the church an absolute and essential priority, using one's talents and spiritual gifts for the edification of the body, diligently seeking to maintain the unity of the church[†], submission to the spiritual authority of the elders in so far as the elders are in submission to Christ, and confirmation of the direction of the elders (Church budget; appointment of church officers; etc.). This then leads us to the important issue of voting.

In the New Testament church, it was assumed that all the members would have a voice in confirming and consenting to the rule of the elders in their directions and decisions (*Acts 1:15, 21-23; 6:2-3; 15:22; 2 Cor. 8:19; 1 Cor. 5:4-5*). This biblical principle of congregational consent is practically manifested today in the church vote. The point of a church vote is not a simple majority (51%), but a general consensus (80% at LWBC) that still guards against a small minority that would frustrate the things that are agreeable to the rest of the church. Obviously, there must be some ability to limit the number of those who are permitted to have a voice in the affairs of a specific local church. Otherwise, if you didn't like the elder candidate who is about to gain congregational approval, you could just invite all of your baptized family and friends to the church vote! Only the *members* of a specific, visible church (not simply all baptized attendees) should have any voice in confirming the direction of the elders of that church. This is why if you are not a member, you cannot have a voice in something so incredibly important as the election and confirmation of the elders and deacons, or in how the money's of the church treasury are spent, etc. Those who take lightly their right to have a voice in consenting to the rule of the elders are guilty of the *neglect* of their privileged duties and obligations to the body and bride of Christ.

Conclusion

LBC – The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men. ***Nevertheless, we acknowledge... that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.***

[†] Here is where the elders and the church's doctrinal statement (articles of faith) become very important. The point here is not that members must agree with every single thing in the articles of faith or even with every belief of the elders. The point is that the members of the church must not undermine the unity of the church by *divisively promoting* their own interpretations of the Bible.

We believe that in light of what we can learn from nature itself, in light of Christian prudence, and in light of the clear principles of God's Word, church membership is a beautiful and *important* recognition of our covenantal commitment to one another in the *visible* church – which is the flock, the temple, the body, and the bride of Christ. Brothers and sisters, let us be diligent to display in every possible way our love for, and our commitment to the glorious church of Jesus Christ. To Him alone be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

Teaching our Children

Q. What are the differences between the invisible church and the visible church (besides the fact that one is invisible and the other is visible☺)?

A. ~ There is only one invisible church, but there are many visible churches.

~ The invisible church is universal (includes all the saints in heaven and on earth), but the visible church is local.

~ The invisible church includes *only* true believers, but the visible church may (unintentionally) include unbelievers.

~ When we are saved, we automatically become a member of the invisible church (but not of the visible church).

Q. Can we be a member of God's invisible church without the duty and obligation to commit ourselves to a visible church?

A. No. Membership in the invisible church (salvation) means that we are *privileged and obligated* to formally and officially commit ourselves to a visible (Gospel preaching) church. (Rejoice in the Scriptures on the bottom of page 2 and top of page 3; end with 1 Cor. 3:16)

Q. What are our responsibilities and duties as members of the visible church?

A. See and discuss the 1st and 2nd paragraphs on page 6

Parents: Pray that God will give to your children—and actively seek to instill in your children—a deep love for and commitment to the visible Church. May we ourselves be faithful to model this love and commitment to our children!