

Church Membership

I. Jesus requires it

- Being a Christian means you must go public with your faith.
 - Matt 10:32–33: “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”
 - See Mark 8:38; Rom 10:9–10 (“confess with your mouth”).
 - Victorinus (new Christian) said to Simplicianus (veteran Christian): “Know that I am a Christian.” Simplicianus’ reply: “I will not believe it, nor will I rank you among the Christians unless I see you in the Church of Christ.” (Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.2.4).
- Church leaders are responsible for *particular* Christians.
 - “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, *as those who will have to give an account*” (Heb 13:17).
 - Leaders are overseers of God’s household (1 Tim 3:5). But we only must give an account for certain members, just as parents need to account for their own children, not those of others.
 - Elders must shepherd people, “not domineering over those *in your charge*, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:3; see 1 Thess 5:12).
 - This verse assumes that there are *certain* people (i.e., a concrete list) who are under the charge of *certain* elders.
 - Other verses that imply a visible distinction between members and non-members; a concrete “membership list” (Gal 6:10; 1 Tim 5:3–16).
- Remember one of the purposes of the sacraments: to visibly mark those who are part of the body and those who are outside (WCF 27.1).
 - Baptism is not merely a sacrament of entering the universal church. It also marks someone’s admittance into a *particular* local church!
- To have church discipline, you need to have church membership. The elders cannot say someone is forbidden to take the supper (marked as “out”) when that person never was marked as “in” in the first place!
- Membership is a two-way commitment: members commit to following Jesus and worshiping and serving at a local congregation, and leaders (on behalf of Jesus) commit to shepherding the member.
- Membership says: I am now in a formal covenant relationship with God.

II. Who may be a member?

- WCF 25.2 “The visible Church ... consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children.”
- We are looking for disciples of Jesus (Matt 28:18); a credible profession of faith:
 - Belief in the true God, hope in Christ alone for salvation, submission to the Bible and to Christ’s lordship.
 - “Credible” means there is true understanding (they are not just saying the vows for some disingenuous reason), and there is nothing in their life that contradicts their profession (1 Cor 5:11; 1 Tim 5:8; Tit 1:16).
 - Mature and immature (even very sinful!), simple and learned alike may join (Luke 23:43; Acts 20:35; Rom 14:1; 15:1; 1 Cor 8:11; 1 Thess 5:14).
 - NO distinctions across gender, class, or ethnicity (Gal 3:28)!!
- Also the children of professing Christians (see next lesson).

III. Implications and applications

- Leaders need to be very careful in handing off the care and responsibility for members from one church to another.
 - We must not admit someone from another church without checking first that they are in good standing and not fleeing discipline.
 - If we are to receive them from a church that has disciplined them, we need to make sure that the previous church has erred in their judgment, or that the member has repented and been reconciled.
 - Members need to care about membership and tell their leaders when they will be absent or moving to another church.
- Leaders need to know and care for their members: noticing when they are absent, or when they are hurting.
- Members are accountable to their leaders for their faith. You can't go around saying you are saved when the church refuses to recognize your faith as legitimate (see Jer 7:9–10).
 - Being a Christian is not a private matter between “me and Jesus.” Jesus takes us rotten branches, makes us new, and engrafts us *into his people* (Rom 11:17–24). To be united to Christ is to be united to his people.
 - John Calvin: “those to whom [God] is a Father, the Church must also be a mother” (Institutes, 4.1.1).
 - WCF 25.2: “The visible Church ... is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”
- Who has the authority to say that so-and-so is a Christian?
 - It's not the individual! The keys of the kingdom are entrusted to the church, “to bind and to loose” (Matt 18:18; the context is church discipline: see 18:17).
 - The shepherds of the church wield these keys on behalf of Jesus the king. They are the stewards of his household (1 Cor 4:1; Tit 1:7; cf. Isa 22:22).
 - Note #1: this does not mean that the church has some magical ability to determine whether someone is a true Christian (regenerate).
 - Note #2: this does not mean that when the church recognizes someone as a Christian, that they are automatically saved (see 1 Jn 2:19; Rom 9:6).
 - But it does mean that baptism has a real effect: this person is now publicly recognized as a Christian! Helps us with assurance!
 - And excommunication has a real effect: this person can no longer claim to be a Christian until they repent and are restored by the shepherds!
- If someone is a church member, we are not permitted to say, “Yeah, but they're not really a Christian.” We may call them to be more faithful to their baptism, but not question their salvation. (Note: that includes little baptized kids!)
- If someone is not a church member, they may not take the Lord's Supper or be recognized formally as a Christian (e.g., a member ought not to marry someone who is not a member of a church; 2 Cor 6:14). (This gets tricky when churches don't practice church membership...)
- The heart of membership: a commitment to serving Christ in a local community of believers, and being accountable to leaders for our profession of faith.