

Church Membership

Committing To The Local Church In Community

Church Membership; Committing To Each Other In Community

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Introduction

To be a member of a church is to make a public promise to live according to the Word and to support the work of the congregation. In the Bible this is called a covenant. Every believer is part of the church as organism (the Spiritual Body of Christ), but only by a public promise can you be part of the church as organization. A public promise, or covenant, is the basis for all society, according to the Bible: marriage, employment, citizenship, church membership, etc., are all relationships of accountability.

Membership in a church is not like membership in a social club or other organizations. Most organization members are consumers; the organization exists to serve them. The Church of Christ is a completely different community – membership means ministry and service, going from being a consumer to becoming a provider of God’s love and care to others. At Cornerstone, we take seriously that we are a church not for ourselves, but for others. For these reasons, every serious Christian should become a member of the local church.

(Used by permission: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, N.Y.)

The Place & Importance of 'Church' in the Christian Believer's Life

When we come to true faith in Christ, we are brought into spiritual fellowship with him and his body, the Church. Given this spiritual reality, Christians are obligated to give temporal expression to this union by taking membership in the local church. It is in the fellowship of the local church that Christians gather to be 'discipled' in Christian understanding and encouraged in faithful Christian living. It is in the local church that Christians come under the care of Pastors who are commissioned to 'watch over their souls' (Heb. 13:17). The local church is indispensable to the Christian's life because it is the primary instrument God uses to edify his people and organize them to serve one another. The local church has been entrusted with the 'means of grace' and the 'keys to the Kingdom'

which are the preaching of God's Word, the administration of the Sacraments and the exercising of church discipline.

Every Christian needs the local church in order to grow properly in faith and to utilize their spiritual gifts for the benefit of other members of Christ's body. As Christians we should love the church Christ died for and become official members of it. This sense of need and obligation has been lost by many (if not most) modern Christians. But, this is not our Reformation heritage. Our 'Confession' states clearly and forcefully the conviction we are trying to recapture and promote at Cornerstone. *'The Belgic Confession of Faith' (Article 28)*

“We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation [sanctification – growth in grace], that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them.

And that this may be the more effectually observed, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the Church, and to join themselves to this congregation, wheresoever God has established it, even though the magistrates and

edicts of princes were against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment. Therefore all those who separate themselves from the same or do not join themselves to it act contrary to the ordinance of God.”

Church Membership is a Christian Norm

The witness of Scripture is that taking membership in the church is the expected norm for all who desire to officially identify themselves with God's people. In this way, those who are officially 'inside' the church are distinguished from those who are 'outside', and the expectations and obligations of Pastors and parishioners can be more appropriately applied and carried-out. There are statements made in the Apostolic writings that logically infer official membership in the church. For example, in First Corinthians Paul writes - *"If, therefore, the whole church comes together...(I Cor. 14:23)."* If there was no official membership in the church, how would the leaders know if the whole church was gathered? Also, the Corinthians were instructed to expel the incestuous man from the church and treat him as an unbeliever (*I Cor. 5*). Since unbelievers are welcome to attend the church's worship services, restricting a professing Christian's participation in the life of the church and treating them as you would an unbeliever, clearly demonstrates a distinct and serious change in their official standing within the church. Throughout the New Testament's description of church life, there is evidence that the local church knew its members. People joined the church (*Acts 5:13*), and many of the women were added to the 'widows' list (*Acts 6, 1 Tim. 5*). Even though we are not given a description of how church membership was formalized in the first century, apart from baptism, it is quite clear that the local church knew its own in some official way. Obviously, believer's publicly and officially joined the church and made commitments to it. An impor-

tant observation is made in Dr. Donald Whitney's book, 'Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church' - "In the New Testament there is no such person as a Christian who is not a church member. Conversion was described as 'the Lord adding to the church' (*Acts 2:47*). There was no spiritual drifting (*Donald Whitney, 'Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church, 1996*).” Church membership was and still should be a Christian norm.

Marks of a True Church

If church membership is a Christian norm, what are the distinguishing characteristics of a true church that we should join? Again, our 'Confessional Standards' help us. '*The Belgic Confession of Faith*' (*Article 29*)

“The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.”

The three particular things we should look for in a church to join is not its size, or the programs it offers, or the convenience and style of its worship services. What is most important, and what should shape the church's life, is the ministry of the preached Word, the administration of the sacraments and the careful application of church discipline in order to restore the weak and wayward. When we find a church defined by these features we are obligated to not separate ourselves from it.

Church Membership is an Expression of Christian Obedience

Jesus made a straight-forward pronouncement as to the purpose of his coming, and that was to “*build my church*” and entrust to it the ‘*keys of the Kingdom of heaven*’ (Matt. 16:18-19). The ‘keys of the Kingdom’ are understood to be the preaching of the gospel and church discipline (see ‘*The Heidelberg Catechism*’, Q 83-85). Since these ‘keys’ have been invested in the ministry of the church as an institution, the church is essential to the Christian’s growth in faith. For this reason, church membership should be a priority, and understood to be a matter of Christian obedience. The ‘Belgic Confession’ (Art. 28) states this very forcefully - “...since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation [growth in salvation, sanctification], ...no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are duty bound to join and unite themselves with it;...” This emphasis on duty and Christian obligation, challenges our strong sense of independence and individualism, as well as our consumer approach to most everything in life. The church encourages community, mutual dependence and accountability. Church life calls us to embrace the ‘mind of Christ’ and serve others. Also, church membership brings us under the care of Pastors and draws us intentionally into a community of learners and fellow disciples who will help us grow in Christian understanding and faithfulness.

Church Membership is Indispensable to Christian Discipleship

We cannot fulfill our covenant obligations (our vows and promises) to other Christians and church leaders without joining the local church. Also, fellow Christians and church leaders cannot fulfill their obligations to us if we remain ‘outside’ the church. Simply assuming church membership without making public vows and promises, is both misleading and an understanding of membership that has no

defined meaning or substance. We cannot keep promises that we have never made. The Scripture says that we are to maintain the unity of the church, submit to instruction and discipline (take Christ's yoke upon us) and serve to build one another up in the faith. All of these activities are commanded to take place 'inside' the church. These activities form the substance of church life and are inherent to the discipleship called for in the 'Great Commission' - "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you (Matt. 28:19,20).*" Christian discipleship is built around baptism and Christian instruction. In baptism we affirm the trustworthiness of God's redemptive promise and are publicly initiated into the church. And, it is within the life of the local church that we are taught the Faith. So, Christian discipleship calls for a public and official form of taking church membership in which we submit to Christ by submitting ourselves to his lawfully called and ordained 'under-shepherds', as well as to fellow church members. Christian discipleship takes place in the context of church membership; Jesus gives us no other way.

Important Distinctions

1. *Joining the church is not the same as being a Christian.* It should be understood that becoming a true Christian is the sovereign work of God who regenerates elect sinners by the gracious work of his Spirit and brings them to faith in Christ. This is an invisible work of grace that brings us into the spiritual fellowship of the 'body of Christ'. But, this spiritual fellowship is to be expressed visibly in the fellowship of the local church. This being understood, all professing Christians are to join the church. The language of our 'Confession' is clear on this point (*Belgic, Art. 28*) - "...it is the duty of

all believers,...to join themselves to this congregation, wheresoever God has established it". The church being the visible gathering of professing Christians and their children is distinguished from him who is "...content to be by himself". Given the fact that the Apostle Paul instructed the Corinthians to put the immoral man out of the church, and our 'Confession' speaks of individuals withdrawing from the church, it is obvious that the visible, local church is what is being referenced. There is an underlying assumption that can be made here; and that is that one has to be officially received into the membership of the church in order to officially withdraw or be expelled from it. So, being a professing Christian does not automatically make you a member of the local church. It has to be officially joined. And by joining the local church, your Christian profession is affirmed and validated by the church's officers, which is a source of great reassurance and encouragement. It, also, counters our natural tendency to remain as an island unto ourselves and resist entering into accountable relationships in a self-conscious way.

The visible church is the community in which professing Christians gather for public worship, mutual edification and instruction in the gospel. It is the 'earthly' expression of the 'spiritual' fellowship we have as the 'body of Christ' living under Christ's Lordship. The church we are compelled to join is an earthly institution that has recognized officers (Elders & Deacons) who have met specific biblical qualifications (*1Tim. 3*), and are authorized to oversee the ministry and life of the local church. This is the church God wills us to intentionally and officially join, and not withdraw from (*Heb. 10:25*).

2. *Attending the church is not the same as joining the church.* Professing Christians, as well as non-Christians, are welcome and encouraged to attend the church's public worship services. But, simply attending church services and activities does not make you a member; just as a couple living together does not make them a married couple. Membership in the local church is more openly intentional than this. It involves making a public commitment to submit to the instruction and discipline of fellow church members and the church's officers (pastors and deacons). When a professing Christian submits to official church membership they are acknowledging their need for the encouragement, instruction and accountability that the other members of the church will bring to them. These are obligations that all Christians have to one another; but, in order to particularize these obligations official membership in the local church should be taken. By doing this we move Christian obligation from the general and theoretical to the specific and practical. In taking membership in the local church we are publicly submitting to the authority of *particular* church leaders and committing ourselves to the mutual edification of a *particular* group of Christians. Just as in marriage where public vows of submission and commitment are made to a specific person, the same is true in church membership (*Eph. 5:32*). This is what distinguishes church members from those who simply attend church services and activities.

Given this understanding, when we take official church membership we are publicly received into the church. We are formally brought 'inside' the local church to receive care, protection, instruction and discipline from

its members and leaders. As a result, members are held to a different standard than 'attendees'. Members have obligations to one another that do not necessarily apply to those who simply attend. In a culture where public 'vow-taking' in relationships is not appreciated or considered important, this kind of talk may seem meaningless and inconsequential. But, ask most married couples if their public 'vow-taking' was meaningful and consequential, and the majority will say 'yes'. This is being lost in the secular culture, and it is affecting and weakening the church as well. As Christians, we are obligated to join the local church, not just associate ourselves with it.

The Requirements of Church Membership

For adults, church membership requires a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, baptism and the public taking of membership vows. The 'minor' children of church members are also considered to be members of the church. 'Minor' children of believers are set apart (I Cor. 7:14) and live under the redemptive promise of God that if and when they come to true faith in Christ they will be saved. The public vows required for church membership at Cornerstone may differ from those of other churches, but they essentially say - "I will live by faith in Jesus Christ and for his glory, and I will strive to walk in Christian love and preserve the *'unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'*. I will, also, submit to the instruction and discipline of the church."

What Does A Vow of Membership Mean?

A vow of membership indicates your commitment to Cornerstone Christian Church as a local expression of the 'body of Christ'. As a member, you are affirming your baptism and your faith in the saving work of Christ. You are, also, publicly declaring your agreement with the essentials of Cornerstone's doctrinal statement and indicating

your willingness to receive instruction and grow in Christian understanding. As you participate in the life of the church, you promise to preserve its unity and peace. In addition, you are committed to supporting the church in its worship (*by regularly attending its public worship services*), in its financial strength (*through generous and joyful giving*) and in its ministry (*by serving in ways compatible with your spiritual gifts*).

Most importantly, you are making a commitment to live in a way that reflects well on the Lord you serve; and to, also, love and serve your brothers and sisters in Christ. By taking membership in the church, you are saying that you recognize your need for pastoral oversight and instruction, as well as the mutual encouragement of other believers.

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Membership & Church Practice

Given the fact that Christ came to build his church (Matt. 16:18), and that his church is not strictly a spiritual fellowship (*an organism*), but also a visible community (*an organization/institution*) bearing witness to the world, it is expected that Christian believers will self-consciously and publicly join themselves to it. In a culture that highly values individualism, independence and private commitments without public display, the idea of joining the church through public ceremony and vow taking is foreign to most of us and seems unnecessary. And yet, when the church is understood to be a community shaped and enlivened by covenant the appropriateness and importance of being received into the community through public ceremony becomes more understandable. The 'Covenant of Grace' that provides redemption and defines our relationship with God through Christ, also brings us into a covenant relationship with other Christian believers. These covenant realities are affirmed publicly by formally joining the local church. In this way we are set apart from the world as members of Christ's church (we self-identify

with God's 'called-out' people), and we commit ourselves to participate in the life of the church. Taking membership in the local church becomes an open public event rather than a private decision made public through regular church attendance over an extended period of time. By self-consciously requesting membership and being officially received into the church, we enter into the practices of church life with integrity. For example, the Lord's Supper is a meal of 'covenant renewal'; it reminds us that God has graciously brought us into fellowship with himself and with each other. And this fellowship is characterized by devotion and commitment to Christ and the people of his church. To engage in 'covenant renewal' Sunday after Sunday, having never intentionally and publicly committed ourselves to the church, makes participation in the sacrament hollow and less meaningful. The sacraments have been given to the church by Christ and are intended for the use of church members. By baptism we are initiated into the life of the local church, and through participation in the Lord's Supper we renew our covenant understanding and commitments.

Church Membership & Children

Baptized children of church members are considered to be members of the church as well. They are under the care of the church, and are to be instructed and nurtured in the Faith. Children are invited to participate in the life of the church in age-appropriate ways. At or after the age of twelve years old as they grow in their understanding of church and covenant responsibilities they will be encouraged to formalize their membership by presenting themselves to the church and taking membership vows.

Church Membership & the Lord's Supper

Cornerstone Christian Church practices an 'open communion'. Baptized believers who are visiting with us, but worship regularly in a gospel believing church, are invited to take communion with us. In this way we acknowledge the universal nature of the Church

and affirm our shared confidence in God's grace and the salvation he has provided for us in Christ alone. Also, members of Cornerstone and baptized believers who are considering church membership at Cornerstone are welcomed to share with us in the Lord's Supper.

As we grow in our understanding of church as a 'covenant-community', and the implications of the Lord's Supper as it relates to this understanding, the place and importance of church membership will become more apparent. Communion as a meal of 'covenant-renewal' will become more meaningful, and those who are committed church members will be more identifiable. Church membership is no longer simply a matter of association, it is a self-conscious commitment to a covenantal relationship. Our desire and long-term goal is that all regular attendees of Cornerstone will come to faith in Christ, be baptized and become official members of the church.

Children & the Lord's Supper

Baptized children who have been instructed in the Faith, and have come to a basic level of Christian understanding and sufficient maturity, will be encouraged to confess their faith in Jesus Christ. They will be catechized to the satisfaction of the Elders concerning doctrine and life, and be encouraged to make a profession of faith in a public worship service; and also, take covenant vows of church membership. Thereby, baptized covenant children will be accepted into full communion in the congregation and will be encouraged to persevere in the fellowship of the church. They are also expected to carry out all other covenant duties required by God's Word, including participation in the Lord's Supper. The baptized children of believers will be encouraged to complete catechism instruction, preparing them to take vows of church membership and receive the Lord's Supper no earlier than the age of 12 years. This is in keeping with the pattern given in the New Testament by our Lord Jesus Himself (*Luke 2:42*).

Adults & the Lord's Supper

Adults who are baptized believers and members of a gospel believing church or are considering taking membership at Cornerstone are invited to the Lord's Table.

Membership & Church Discipline

Church discipline is necessary to the care and instruction of church members. It should always be approached in a spirit of humility, and with the intention of bringing the wayward to repentance and encouraging church members in Christian faithfulness (Gal.6:1,2). The proper use of church discipline promotes the glory of God, protects the purity of the church and encourages godly living. The fundamental framework for exercising discipline in the church is given to us in Matthew 18:15-20. The following disciplinary principles should be followed:

- Biblical instruction
- Individual's graciously confronting and admonishing each other (Matt.18:15; Gal.6:1)
- If reconciliation isn't accomplished, one or more witnesses should be brought into the process(Matt.18:16)
- When these attempts at reconciliation are rejected, then the Elders of the church will intervene (Matt.18:17)
- If all efforts to correct and restore the offending party are unsuccessful the Elders of the church are authorized to excommunicate (bar the offender from the Lord's Table) or, in extreme cases, expel the individual from the fellowship of the church

- If there is true repentance expressed by the person under discipline they should be forgiven and restored to full fellowship in the life of the church (2 Cor. 5:16).

Note: *These principles and patterns of church discipline apply primarily to relational offenses. Matters of moral failure and theological error will be addressed directly by the Elders of the church.*

Membership & Serving the Church

Membership and full agreement with the church's 'Confessional Standards' are required of church office bearers. All other ministry needs and opportunities (children's ministry, ushers & greeters, etc.) are expected to be filled by church members.

Church Membership Expectations

- What's expected of church members? - [See - 'Church Membership - Position Statement', Section - 'What Does A Vow of Membership Mean?']
- What members can expect of the church? - Church members can expect the Pastors of the church to faithfully preach the gospel, teach the whole council of God and conform to the church's 'Confessional Standards'. They can also expect that the Church Council (comprised of the Elders & Deacons) will be good stewards of the church's resources, maintain the facility well and manage the church's finances in an open and responsible way (financial statements are always available upon request). Members can expect to receive proper pastoral care which includes encouragement, instruction, admonition and correction. Even though Cornerstone is not governed by a voting congregation, the Church Council looks to the membership of the

church for input and advise concerning major church decisions such as the selection of Elders and Deacons. All members, as committed and 'received' participants in the life of Cornerstone as a 'Covenant-Community' are welcome to the Lord's Supper which is understood to be a meal of 'covenant-renewal'.

The Process of Taking Membership at Cornerstone

1. Talk to a Pastor.
2. Attend a series of membership classes (offered in the Spring & Fall of each year).
3. Schedule and complete an interview with a church Elder. *This gives us the opportunity to get personally acquainted with you and answer any questions you may have.*
4. Public notification - *notification will be given to the congregation two weeks prior to the Sunday that you are to be received into membership.*
5. You will take your membership vows and be received as an official member of the church during a Sunday morning worship service.

Membership Vows

1. Are you trusting Christ alone for your salvation and desiring to follow Him in the fellowship of His Church?
2. Do you acknowledge the doctrine contained in the Old and New Testaments, and taught in this church, to be the true and complete doctrine of salvation?

3. Do you promise, by the grace of God, to continue steadfast in the profession of this doctrine?
4. Do you promise at all times to conduct yourself conformably to this doctrine, desiring to serve the Lord, according to his Word, mortifying your old nature and living a godly life?
5. Do you promise to submit to the government of the church and also, if you should become delinquent in doctrine or life, to submit to its admonition and discipline?

Additional Reading:

- Leeman, Jonathan, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*, (Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 2012).
- DeYoung, Kevin & Kluck, Ted, *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion*, (Moody Publishers, Chicago, Illinois, 2009).
- Way, Stan, *Clarifying Our Call: The Role of the Church in Contemporary Culture*, (A Cornerstone Publication, Medford, Oregon; Second edition, 2013).
- Way, Stan, *Core Convictions: Reformation Solas Doctrines of Grace Word & Sacrament*, (A Cornerstone Publication, Medford, Oregon, 2013).

