

CHURCH

MEMBERSHIP



Greg Nichols

Church Membership

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Church Membership

Chapter 1: The Biblical Warrant for Church Membership

Possibly, fifty years ago it would not have been necessary to demonstrate the biblical basis and propriety of church membership. But times have changed. Many today question whether the Bible even mentions church membership. Thus, to establish the biblical grounds for church membership, I first survey the biblical testimony, then summarize the biblical teaching.

I. Survey of Biblical Testimony

Consider now with me a sample of ten passages in which Scripture discloses and enforces the biblical warrant and grounds for church membership.

A. Acts 2:41-42, 44, 46-47¹

The composition of the church rests on its identity. The church in Jerusalem was Christ's redeemed assembly on earth, Messianic Israel under the new covenant. Those that received the gospel "were baptized." They "were added" to the community of Christ's disciples with the obligations and privileges of discipleship. Thus, church membership involves accountability to live as a disciple of Christ in open identification with the community of His disciples. This passage also reveals, in conjunction with church growth, who should belong to the church. The church grows when God saves sinners by supernatural power and adds them to His redeemed assembly. Thus, only those who believe the gospel,

¹ *Act 2:41-42, 44, 46-47*: Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. 42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers... 44 And all that believed were together, and had all things common...46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, 47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

whom God has saved from their sins, should constitute the membership of the church.

B. Acts 5:11-14²

When the Lord judges the hypocrisy of two church members, the whole city is afraid. Thus, this text distinguishes church members from the rest of those who live in Jerusalem. Further, that church feels fear because of false brothers hidden in their midst. Thus, local assemblies experience moral tension. They can't infallibly judge the spiritual state of their members. Some hear the gospel, profess faith credibly, and join churches; yet they're hypocrites, who aren't truly converted. Scripture presents church membership realistically, not ideally. This passage also confirms that churches grow when God adds believing men and women to their memberships. Thus, the universal standard for church membership has spiritual and social requirements. Churches should receive only true believers who are men and women.

C. Acts 6:2-3, 5-6³

The church in Jerusalem is composed of "the multitude of the disciples." Thus, membership involves commitment and accountability. It also involves the privilege of participation in church business—specifically, the privilege of "looking out" those qualified to serve in a diaconal ministry of benevolence.

D. Acts 9:26-28⁴

Becoming a church member involves voluntarily joining the community of Christ's disciples. Paul tries to join, but "they were all afraid

² *Act 5:11-14*: And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things. 12 And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. 13 And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them. 14 And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.)

³ *Act 6:2-3, 5-6*: Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. 3 Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business...5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen...6 Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.

⁴ *Act 9:26-28*: And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a

of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.” This unveils the apostolic polity of admission to membership. Churches should evaluate the spiritual state of those who apply for membership. They must regard those they receive into membership as genuine disciples of Christ, saved by grace.

E. Acts 14:21-23⁵

In obedience to Christ’s commission, the apostles preach the gospel, make and baptize disciples, and organize them into local churches. Thus, the commitment of discipleship supports membership. Further, the apostles commend these church members to the Lord “on whom they believed.” Thus, churches should receive as members only those who truly believe in Christ.

F. 1 Corinthians 5:12-13⁶

The church in Corinth is responsible to assess the spiritual state of “them that are within,” who belong to their church. Paul distinguishes “them that are without,” whom God judges, from church members, who are liable to church censure and discipline. Accordingly, he exhorts that church to remove a wicked person from membership. He unfolds Christ’s due process for removing unconverted persons, when discovered, from membership in a local assembly of the saved.

G. 1 Corinthians 14:23-25⁷

Paul exhorts the church in Corinth to conduct public assemblies in an orderly way. He envisions the whole church assembled for worship. He

disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. 28 And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.

⁵ *Act 14:21-23*: And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, 22 Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. 23 And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

⁶ *1Co 5:12-13*: For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? 13 But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

⁷ *1Co 14:23-25*: If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? 24 But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is

envisions unbelieving visitors attending a public worship service. He distinguishes these unbelieving visitors, who are not disciples of Christ, from the church. Unsaved visitors are not members. They have no right to join any branch of Christ's redeemed assembly simply because they attend its worship services.

*H. 1 Corinthians 1:2; 14:33*⁸

The apostle denotes the churches of Christ in terms of the spiritual state of their members. All true churches, like the church in Corinth, are "churches of the saints." Saints are believing sinners, sanctified in Christ. By His Word and Spirit, God regenerates them, separates them from the world, and unites them to Christ. Thus, local churches should receive as members only those who believe in Christ, those whom God has saved from their sins.

*I. 2 Corinthians 6:14-16*⁹

The apostle identifies the church in Corinth as God's temple, the place of His special presence, where He dwells by His Spirit. Accordingly, he exhorts them to keep their church free from the fellowship and influence of the wicked. Unbelievers have no portion in Christ's redeemed assembly and no right to membership in it.

*J. Ephesians 4:25*¹⁰

The apostle calls the church in Ephesus to honesty and transparency. He roots this call in the nature of the church as a living spiritual

judged of all: 25 And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth.

⁸ *1Co 1:1-2, 14:33*: Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, 2 Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours...14:33: For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.

⁹ *2Co 6:14-16*: Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? 15 And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? 16 And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

¹⁰ *Eph 4:25*: Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another.

organism. Those who belong to Christ belong to each other spiritually. Church membership involves more than the commitment and accountability of discipleship. It involves the communion and connection of mutual spiritual life, in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, Who dwells in every genuine believer.

II. Summary of the Biblical Teaching

Scripture supports church membership in several ways. First, it explicitly affirms the existence of church membership. It plainly distinguishes church members from those who simply attend church meetings.¹¹ Second, it records the fact, grounds, and process of addition to church membership.¹² Third, it identifies those who are, and have a right to be, church members, with a wide variety of terms and expressions: disciples, believers, brothers, called, elect, saved, sons of God, saints, and faithful.¹³ Fourth, it defines the privileges and liabilities of church membership.¹⁴ Fifth, it records the fact, grounds, and process of removal from church membership.¹⁵

This testimony demonstrates that Scripture supports church membership with a solid foundation that consists of four pillars: voluntary commitment, corporate accountability, pastoral care, and spiritual union.

A. Voluntary Commitment: joining a church

The biblical concept of “joining a church” mandates church membership. When Paul returns to Jerusalem as a saved man, he tries to join that local church. At first, they refuse. They won’t allow him to be a church member until they consider him to be a true disciple, not a spy come to infiltrate them. That church has membership that it guards carefully and conscientiously. Further, all the residents of Jerusalem aren’t members of that church. Most in the city are afraid to join it. Yet, God adds many believers to it.¹⁶ In his comments on Acts 5:13, Alexander asserts that “to join” means to be glued or stuck fast.¹⁷ He says further

¹¹ 1Co 14:23; Eph 4:25.

¹² Act 2:47, 5:12-14, 9:26.

¹³ Act 2:47, 5:14, 9:26; 1Co 1:2, 14:33: In Topic 3, I catalogue comprehensively the biblical testimony to these descriptions.

¹⁴ Act 6:2-3; 1Co 5:12-13.

¹⁵ Mat 18:15-18; 1Co 1:1-13; 3Jo 1:9-10.

¹⁶ Act 5:13: And of the rest durst no man join himself to them.

¹⁷ “The word translated “*join themselves*” originally means to be glued or stuck fast; then as a neuter verb, to cleave or adhere to any thing or person.” Joseph

that joining involves adherence and conjunction.¹⁸ Again, Paul distinguishes those who attend church meetings from church members.¹⁹ Attending a church and joining it aren't the same thing. Simply attending a church doesn't oblige visitors to the accountability of discipleship. Thus, church membership rests on the solid pillar of voluntary commitment.

B. Corporate Accountability: church discipline/removal from a church

Corporate accountability and the liability that goes with it also necessitate church membership. The Lord Jesus addresses this liability (Mat 18:15-18). He says that if a brother sins, you should show him his fault between you and him alone. If he doesn't get right, then you should take with you two or three others to establish the facts. If he still doesn't listen, you should "tell it unto the church." If he doesn't listen to the church, you should regard and treat him as a hypocrite professing falsely to be a Christian. You are no longer to receive him as a brother in Christ. It isn't possible to implement Christ's due process of church discipline without accountability. How can a person be accountable to a church and liable to its discipline without membership? Don't think that people don't know it! People know very well that they aren't liable to church discipline as long as they don't become church members. Possibly, much of the antipathy to church membership stems from this fact. Again, church discipline involves putting away from among yourselves the wicked person.²⁰ This makes no sense without church membership. How can a church exclude someone it never included? Again, Scripture condemns the abuse of church discipline. John opposes a wicked leader who casts innocent Christians "out of the church."²¹ How could he remove from a church those who never belonged to it? Thus, the practice and abuse of church discipline solidly support the reality and necessity of church membership.

Addison Alexander, *The Acts of the Apostles* (2 Vols.; New York: Charles Scribner, 1857), 1:203.

¹⁸ "We are bound to explain it here, not merely of association or familiar intercourse, but of conjunction and adhesion, either in the literal and local sense of personal contact, or in the metaphorical and moral sense of joint profession and organic union." Ibid.

¹⁹ 1Co 14:23-25.

²⁰ 1Co 5:13.

²¹ 3Jo 1:9-11: This disciplinary removal could be either by exclusion or excommunication.

C. Pastoral Care

Pastoral care also supports church membership. Pastoral oversight marks the apostolic churches.²² Accordingly, Paul exhorts the elders in Ephesus to shepherd the church of God (Act 20:28-32). How can pastors care for their sheep if they don't know who "belongs to" their church and who doesn't? Without membership, it's impossible to identify those under pastoral care. Again, Scripture calls church members to defer to their pastors.²³ If it is hard to tell church members to "obey them that have the rule over you," it's preposterous to require this from non-members. Thus, pastoral care mandates and supports church membership.

D. Spiritual Union: communion in the Holy Spirit

Scripture speaks explicitly of the spiritual connection that genuine Christians have to Christ and to each other by the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:25). It affirms explicitly that church membership means being attached to, or being a part of, the mystical body of Jesus Christ.²⁴ God's Word reveals this repeatedly.²⁵ Spiritual unity is the ultimate ground and basis for church membership. Those who share spiritual life in Christ, who belong to the church universal as a living spiritual organism, should, with due diligence, join the church as a covenant organization. Thus, church leaders didn't invent membership to control people. Rather, it rests on spiritual union with Christ by the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 2: The Universal Standard of Church Membership

Scripture discloses a threefold standard that pertains to every church. This standard has spiritual, social, and ceremonial aspects.

I. The Spiritual Standard for Church Membership: genuine conversion

Churches should receive in membership only those who are truly saved from sin. I first present biblical support. Then I consider the human

²² Act 14:21-23.

²³ Heb 13:17; 1Pe 5:1-2, 5.

²⁴ *Eph 5:29-30*: For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: 30 For we are members of his body.

²⁵ Rom 12:4-5; 1Co 12:12-27; Eph 2:19-22.

discernment of this spiritual requirement and the moral tension associated with it.

A. Biblical Support for this Spiritual Requirement

I summarize five lines of biblical support for this evangelical and spiritual standard of church membership.

1. The identity and commission of the church

The church is Christ's redeemed assembly, purchased with His blood. As such, it is God's new creation, His new covenant community, and Christ's theocratic kingdom. Therefore, its identity mandates that it receive into its membership only those who are truly saved from sin, the spiritual children of Abraham, Christ, and God, who are in Christ and united to Christ spiritually.²⁶

Accordingly, Christ commissions His church to display the gospel integration of saved Gentiles and Jews in one society. This society is the pillar and ground of gospel truth.²⁷ This mandates an evangelical membership. How can any society composed by right of unconverted persons either display accurately gospel integration or serve adequately as the pillar and ground of the truth?

2. The biblical description and vocation of church members

Scripture identifies the membership of the churches in a manner that mandates an evangelical membership. It affirms that the churches are composed of saints,²⁸ believers,²⁹ firstborn ones enrolled in heaven,³⁰ God's elect,³¹ and in other ways that confirm an evangelical membership.

Further, the apostles called on all the church members to take part in discerning qualified leaders.³² This also mandates an evangelical membership.

3. The biblical description of church growth

Scripture affirms that God added to the membership of the church such as were being saved, and that "believers were the more added to the

²⁶ Gal 1:1, 3:29.

²⁷ Eph 3:6-10; 1Ti 3:15.

²⁸ *1Co 14:33*: As in all churches of the saints.

²⁹ *Act 14:23*: And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

³⁰ Heb 12:23.

³¹ 1Th 1:1, 4-5.

³² Act 6:1-7.

Lord.”³³ This also confirms and mandates evangelical church membership.

4. The apostolic command to exclude unbelievers

Paul called the Corinthian church to “put away from among yourselves that wicked person.”³⁴ He required this purging because no wicked man has any right to belong to the church. Again, he exhorted the Corinthians never to be yoked in church fellowship with unbelievers.³⁵ Thus, he explicitly mandates an evangelical standard of church membership.

5. The scrutiny of Paul’s professed conversion

The apostles would not at first allow Paul to join their church because they did not believe he was truly a disciple of Christ.³⁶ Thus, they had an evangelical membership, composed by right only of those truly saved from sin. Their scrutiny of Paul’s profession of faith leads to the next aspect of this topic.

B. Human Discernment of this Spiritual Requirement: credible profession of faith

The apostles evaluated Paul’s religious experience. At first, their evaluation was incorrect. When they had corroborating evidence from a reliable source, Barnabas, they assessed his spiritual state correctly and received him into membership.³⁷ Christian leaders can discern conversion; but no human can discern conversion infallibly. At times, some appear to be converted who in fact turn out to be apostates³⁸ or

³³ Act 2:47, 5:14.

³⁴ 1Co 5:13.

³⁵ *2Co 6:14-16*: Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? 15 And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? 16 And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

³⁶ Act 9:26.

³⁷ *Act 9:26-28*: And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. 28 And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.

³⁸ Luk 8:13; Heb 6:4-6; 1Jo 2:19.

hypocrites.³⁹ Thus, a biblical understanding of true conversion is vital to the wellbeing of the churches. True conversion has three marks: doctrinal, moral, and experiential. These marks distinguish genuine believers from heretics,⁴⁰ hypocrites, and formalists.

1. The doctrinal evidence of genuine conversion: no heretic is truly saved

Scripture plainly affirms that no heretic is truly saved.⁴¹ Therefore, no heretic should be received or retained in church membership.⁴²

2. The moral evidence of genuine conversion: no hypocrite is truly saved

Scripture warns pointedly that no person who lives an immoral life marked by reigning sin is truly saved.⁴³ Accordingly, no hypocrite should be received or retained in church membership.⁴⁴

3. The experiential evidence of genuine conversion: no formalist is truly saved

Scripture also discloses experiential evidence of genuine conversion. Those who are truly saved know the Lord. A *formalist* is someone who has orthodox doctrine and an outwardly decent life, and yet, who does not know the Lord. The church is the community of the new covenant. Thus, its distinguishing trait as a community is that its members know the Lord.⁴⁵ Therefore, no formalist should be admitted to or retained in church membership.⁴⁶ How can we discern if someone knows the Lord? By His Spirit Who dwells in their hearts, those who know the Lord commune with their Father in prayer, seek Christ in His Word, labor to keep a good conscience, and experience the comfort of hope.

Therefore, when a person has a credible profession of faith, they confess sound doctrine, live a moral life, and display experiential evidence of their saving knowledge of God. Yet, some may have a credible profession of faith, who in fact are not truly saved. This leads to a moral tension.

³⁹ Luk 8:14; Act 5:1-11; 8:13, 20-23.

⁴⁰ **heretics** – people who deny orthodox, foundational biblical truths, such as the Trinity or the deity of Christ.

⁴¹ Gal 1:6-9; 2Ti 2:16-18; 2Jo 1:9.

⁴² 1Ti 1:19-20; Ti 3:10; 2Jo 1:10-11.

⁴³ Rom 8:12-13; 1Co 6:9-11; Gal 5:19-21; Eph 5:5-8.

⁴⁴ 1Co 5:11-13.

⁴⁵ Heb 8:10-12.

⁴⁶ Gal 1:21; 4:9.

C. Moral Tension with this Spiritual Requirement: genuine/professing believers

1. Statement of this tension

Every genuine church is a visible society of a spiritual posterity. By right, only genuine believers should belong to it. Yet, even the most conscientious churchmen, with the most biblical doctrine of conversion, cannot infallibly discern true conversion and saving faith. Sometimes, through this human limitation, false brothers, who profess faith with what appears to be a credible profession, can be admitted to church membership. Thus, Jesus distinguished professing believers from those who were “*truly*” His disciples. Thus, Paul spoke of peril from “*false brethren*.”⁴⁷ This creates moral tension. A church as a new covenant *organization* consists of professing believers; as a living spiritual *organism*, only of true believers.

2. Recognition of this tension

Reformed theology acknowledges this moral tension. Bannerman concludes that Scripture discloses an “*invisible*” church composed of true believers and a “*visible*” church composed of professed believers.⁴⁸ Again, LCF confesses this tension (LCF 26:1-2). It affirms that the church may be *called* invisible “with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace” (LCF 26:1). It defines “*visible saints*” as those who profess faith credibly. It affirms that all particular churches should be composed of such (LCF 26:2). Thus, LCF calls us to evaluate professions of faith biblically and to receive only visible saints into local churches. Yet, LCF concedes that “the internal work of the Spirit” cannot be discerned infallibly, so that *invisibility* pertains in this respect even to churches composed of visible saints.

3. Resolution of this tension

Scripture doesn’t rip asunder an invisible church, purchased with Christ’s blood, composed only of true believers, from visible churches of professing believers, pastored by elders. Rather, Paul exhorts the elders of the church in Ephesus to “feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Act 20:28). Pastors don’t shepherd invisible churches. Rather, that local church pastored by elders was Christ’s redeemed assembly, purchased with His blood. Therefore, I suggest that we work toward resolving this tension by distinguishing the

⁴⁷ Joh 8:30-31; 2Co 11:26.

⁴⁸ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, (2 Vols.; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 1:7, 8

church “*de jure*,” what the church should be by right, from the church “*de facto*,” what the church is in fact. The church *by right* should be composed only of true believers. In pursuit of this, churches should receive and retain only “visible saints,” who profess faith credibly. Heretics, hypocrites, and formalists don’t have a *credible* profession of faith. LCF confesses that visible saints don’t believe heresy, “not destroying their own profession by any errors everting the foundation,” or live in hypocrisy, “or unholiness of conversation.” Thus, the church “*de jure*” always has an *invisible* aspect, since churchmen can’t discern genuine conversion infallibly.

The church “*de facto*,” as it exists *in fact*, consists of *professing believers*. Churches vary in their extent of conformity with the biblical standard. Some genuine churches have a truncated understanding of conversion. Thus, some true churches in fact wrongly admit to their membership formalists, hypocrites, or heretics who profess faith. Other genuine churches have a faulty understanding of the identity of the church. Such churches wrongly admit to their membership all the minor children of professing Christians. Thankfully, many of these churches compensate with a two-tiered membership. This consists of a communicant membership that includes only visible saints and a baptized membership that also includes all their minor children. In some respects, this amounts to a Baptist church of visible saints within a paedobaptist church. Thus, the communicant membership of a paedobaptist church experiences the same moral tension as a Baptist church. If only visible saints may take communion, then the church must assess the conversion of its communicants. Yet, no man, Baptist or paedobaptist, can do this infallibly.

Thus, the membership *de facto* of a true church that has Baptist polity consists of professing believers. The membership *de facto* of a true church that has paedobaptist polity consists of professing believers and their minor children. Yet the membership *de jure* of every church consists only of true believers who are visible saints, assessed using a biblical standard of conversion.

D. Practical Applications of this Spiritual Requirement

Note three practical applications of this spiritual requirement. This spiritual standard calls us to charity, realism, and responsibility.

1. Charity

Charity sees the good that reigns in the church, not only the sin and fault that remain in it. Thus, the apostle addressed the churches in terms

of the righteousness that reigned in them: “Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God” (1Th 1:1, 4-5). This doesn’t mean that no false brother could ever infiltrate the church in Thessalonica. Rather, it means that Paul evaluated that church with charity. Thus, the church is fundamentally what it ought to be, and yet, no church is yet perfectly what it ought to be. Righteousness reigns in the churches, even though sin remains. No church, Baptist or paedobaptist, is without remaining sin. Therefore, we should judge the genuineness of the churches of Christ with charity. It is judgmental to say that no paedobaptist church can be a true church because there is remaining sin in its membership. As much sin, if not more, remains in the membership of many genuine Baptist churches that receive formalists, hypocrites, and heretics.

2. Realism

We should view the church realistically. We can never attain a perfectly pure church, because we cannot infallibly judge genuine conversion. We should not refuse to identify with a church because it is not yet perfect. We should not be shattered when we discover that some unconverted persons have infiltrated the membership or leadership of our church. We should appreciate and highly value the church as it is, a visible society of Christ’s spiritual posterity, in which righteousness reigns and sin remains.

3. Responsibility

Charity and realism do not justify irresponsibility or complacency. Churches are responsible to receive and retain only visible saints with a credible profession of faith. This calls for conscientious application of the biblical standard of membership. We can be responsible without being uncharitable. We must recognize with humility the limits of our ability to discern genuine conversion. Yet, at the same time, we must set up and enforce biblical standards both for admission to the church and for removal from the church. We should labor diligently to maintain a membership that includes only visible saints, who are genuine believers. We should so labor with realism and love.

II. The Social Standard for Church Membership: adulthood

As Christ has established a spiritual requirement for membership in the society of His disciples, so also, He has established a social requirement. Scripture teaches that little children can be saved from sin. Yet, the apostles did not impose on little boys and girls who believe the responsibilities and liabilities of church membership. Now consider with

me the biblical support for, human evaluation of, and biblical tension associated with this social requirement.

A. Biblical Support for this Social Requirement

God sometimes regenerates and saves little children. Jesus received little children into His arms, prayed for them, and blessed them. Little children should be included in church meetings and ministries. The church should instruct them in God's Word. Pastors and teachers should apply gospel truth to them personally and evangelically. Does this mean that the churches should receive little children into membership, with its responsibilities, privileges, and liabilities? Scripture does not answer this question directly or explicitly, but in a more general way. It defines the identity, responsibilities, and privileges of church members in a manner that does not support the membership of little boys and little girls in the church.

1. The biblical testimony to the identity of church members

The biblical description of church members supports adult only membership. When the gospel comes in power by the Holy Spirit, sinners turn from sin and believe Christ. Then believers are "added to the Lord" and join themselves to the other disciples. In Acts 5:13-14, Luke describes gospel success and a large addition of believers to the church in Jerusalem. He describes these believers as "men" and "women."⁴⁹ He uses terms that distinguish adult males and females from children (Mat 14:21; 15:38). It stretches credulity to think that so many adults could come to faith without a single little child believing in Jesus along with its parents. That just can't be the right explanation of the fact that no minors were added to the church. Again, when the Samaritans received the gospel, Luke says that adult men and adult women believed and were baptized; but he doesn't mention any minor children being baptized with them.⁵⁰ Again, it stretches credulity to think that so many adults would believe, but not a single little child. If little boys and girls were baptized and added to church membership, why would Luke repeatedly leave them out of his account? Rather, it is more cogent to say that no little boys and girls were either baptized or added to church membership because the apostolic

⁴⁹ *Act 5:14*: And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men [*aner*] and women [*gune*].

⁵⁰ *Act 8:12*: But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men [*aner*] and women [*gune*].

churches didn't baptize little children or have such in church membership.

2. The biblical testimony to the responsibilities of church members

Scripture defines the obligation of all church members in a manner that supports adult only membership. In church discipline, the members "judge them that are within" (1Co 5:12). They adjudicate allegations of aggravated sins that have been privately reproved and yet have not been put away: "if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church." The whole church is responsible to "put away from among yourselves that wicked person."⁵¹ Now is it right to impose such obligations on little children who love and believe in Jesus? How can little children be obligated to judge moral issues when their minds and consciences are still being formed, and when they have no adult experience? How could little boys and girls be expected to adjudicate a case of gross sexual sin like the one faced by the church in Corinth? Would it be just to expose little children to the scandalous sins that the church must sometimes face and judge? Would it be wise or prudent to impose such burdens on little boys and girls? For these reasons, the responsibilities of membership do not support, but rather strongly discourage, the membership of little children.

3. The biblical testimony to the privileges of church members

Scripture defines the privileges of membership in a manner that supports adult only membership. All church members in the apostolic churches enjoyed the privilege of having a voice in church business. No segment of those apostolic churches was excluded. The entire

⁵¹ *Mat 18:15-17*: Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 16 But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. 17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. *1 Cor. 5: 3-5, 12-13*: For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, 4 In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 5 To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus...12 For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? 13 But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

membership selected church officers⁵² and took part in resolving the controversy over the circumcision of Gentile believers.⁵³ This participation is incompatible with undeveloped mental faculties. Little children do not have the experience necessary to take part in such decisions. It is quite possible that little children have been regenerated and love Jesus. But little boys and girls do not have the mental development and life experience to voice an opinion in such matters. The apostolic churches did not have an entire segment of members that was excluded from the privilege of taking part in these corporate decisions. Thus, the biblical testimony supports adult only membership.

B. Human Evaluation of this Social Requirement: traits of little children

Introduction: To evaluate this social requirement biblically, churches must know the characteristics of minor children revealed in Scripture. The New Testament uses three primary terms for minors: βρεφος (brephos), νηπιος (nepios), and παιδιον (paidion). Several passages epitomize the biblical testimony.⁵⁴ Scripture clearly distinguishes minor children from adult males and females.⁵⁵ It presents three distinguishing characteristics of minor children. It presents them as *vulnerable, developing, and dependent*.

1. Minor children are vulnerable.

Babies enter this world defenseless and helpless. They could not survive without adult care. Because they are vulnerable, God has ordained

⁵² *Act 6:2-3, 5-6:* Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. 3 Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business...5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen...6 whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.

⁵³ *Act 15:22:* Then pleased it the apostles and elders with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

⁵⁴ *Mat 7:9, 11, 11:25, 14:21, 15:18, 18:2-6, 10, 14, 19:13-14; Luk 1:80, 2:40, 43, 52; Joh 9:21, 23; 1Co 13:11, 14:20; Gal 4:1-2; Eph 4:14, 6:1, 4; Heb 5:13-14, 11:24, 12:7-8; 1Jo 2:13, 18.*

⁵⁵ *Mat 14:21, 15:38:* And they that had eaten were about five thousand men [*aner*], beside women [*gune*] and children [*paidion*]...15:38: And they that did eat were four thousand men [*aner*], beside women [*gune*] and children [*paidion*].

that their parents should provide for them,⁵⁶ protect them,⁵⁷ and supervise them⁵⁸ until they come of age. Parental supervision also includes education, moral instruction, and religious training.

2. *Minor children are developing.*

Minor children are not yet fully developed in their souls mentally and morally or in their bodies physically. Their bodies continue to grow taller until they reach their full adult height or stature.⁵⁹ Their souls continue to develop in all their mental and moral faculties until they reach adulthood. They develop knowledge and skill from gaining experience.⁶⁰ Their ability to use what they know for practical ends, wisdom, grows and increases.⁶¹ Their ability to understand grows along with their ability to use logic and reason.⁶² Their capacity to form and maintain firm convictions develops.⁶³ Even their conscience develops. They develop the capacity to know right from wrong and to choose good and evil.⁶⁴ The Old Testament underscores this moral development of little children.⁶⁵

⁵⁶ *Mat 7:9, 11*: Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?...11 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?

⁵⁷ *Eph 6:1, 4*: Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right...4 And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

⁵⁸ *Heb 12:7-8*: If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? 8 But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.

⁵⁹ *Luk 2:52*: And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.

⁶⁰ *Mat 11:25*: At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.

⁶¹ *Luk 2:52*.

⁶² *1Co 13:11*: When I was a child [*nepios*], I spake as a child [*nepios*], I understood as a child [*nepios*], I thought as a child [*nepios*]: but when I became a man [*aner*], I put away childish [*katargeo*] things: *1 Cor. 14:20*: Brethren, be not children [*paidion*] in understanding: howbeit in malice be children [*nepiazos*], but in understanding be men [*teleios*].

⁶³ *Eph 4:14*: That we henceforth be no more children [*nepios*], tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.

⁶⁴ *Heb 5:13-14*: For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe [*nepios*]. 14 But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age [*teleios*], even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

⁶⁵ *Deu 1:39*: Moreover your little ones [*taph*], which ye said should be a prey, and

3. *Minor children are dependent.*

Minors cannot yet speak for themselves in legal matters.⁶⁶ They have not yet attained the “age of majority” and received their adult rights. They are wards under *guardians*, “someone legally entrusted to manage their affairs,” and *trustees*, “someone who has the legal authority to manage their money.”⁶⁷ Usually their parents have *custody* over them, that is, have “the legal right and responsibility for raising and personally supervising their upbringing.” Thus, parents ordinarily serve as the guardians and trustees of their minor children. Their legal status as dependents comes from their vulnerability and from the fact that their mental faculties are not yet fully developed. Thus, they need a guardian to protect them in life decisions, such as marrying or using alcohol; and they need a trustee to protect them financially.

Summary and Conclusion: The evaluation of attaining adulthood

Puberty founds the physical transition from childhood to adulthood. The social transition to adulthood involves a process with cultural aspects. In our society in 21st century America, this social process begins after puberty and culminates at twenty-one. It includes attaining the right to drive a car, the right to vote, the right to manage your life and money without a guardian or trustee, the right to marry without parental consent, and the right to drink alcohol. Depending on the state, the right to drive on public roads is attained between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. The right to vote is attained at eighteen. The right to drink alcohol is usually attained at twenty-one. The right to manage your own affairs is usually attained at eighteen, but “emancipation” may be attained at an earlier age under some circumstances. The age for attaining the right to marry without parental permission varies from state to state. The age of legal liability to be tried as an adult for criminal behavior also varies. No state confers any of these rights on minor children under the age of puberty. Thus, in our society, young men and women, ages fourteen to

your children [bēn], which in that day had no knowledge [yada’] between good and evil, they shall go in thither, and unto them will I give it, and they shall possess it.

⁶⁶ *Joh 9:21, 23:* But by what means he now seeth, we know not; or who hath opened his eyes, we know not: he is of age [*helikia*]; ask him: he shall speak for himself. . . 23 Therefore said his parents, He is of age [*helikia*]; ask him. *Heb 11:24:* By faith Moses, when he was come to years [*megas*], refused to be called the son [*huios*] of Pharaoh’s daughter.

⁶⁷ *Gal 4:1-2:* Now I say, That the heir, as long as he is a child [*nepios*], differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; 2 but is under tutors [*epitropos*] and governors [*oikononos*] until the time appointed of the father.

eighteen, are still legally “minors,” gradually attaining adult rights and privileges. Scripture does not specify an age of transition to adulthood. It provides general principles and leaves it to churches to apply these principles with discernment to individuals in their culture.

C. Biblical Tensions Associated with this Social Requirement

The church is the convening society of the saved. It is rightly composed only of those who have saving faith in Christ. Little children can have saving faith in Christ and please God. Thus, all little children who believe in Christ belong to the church universal as a living spiritual organism. Yet, these little children who believe should only join the church as a covenant organization when they reach adulthood. This introduces tension. This tension stems from the relation of redemption to creation and common grace. Jesus will resolve this tension in the age to come. Consider how this social requirement relates to common grace, saving grace, and gospel ministry.

1. This social requirement is compatible with common grace.

Jesus loved, received, and blessed little children.⁶⁸ Matthew records that some parents were bringing small children to Jesus.⁶⁹ Luke adds that some of them were infants.⁷⁰ These parents wanted Jesus to hold and bless their minor children and infants. The disciples reprovved them and would have prevented them from having this kind of access to Jesus.

This incident takes place in the latter part of Jesus’ earthly ministry. He has now completed His ministry in Galilee. He is near the border of Judea, on the other side of the Jordan (Mat 19:1), journeying for the final time to Jerusalem (Mat 20:17). When this incident occurs, Jesus has already been practicing baptism for more than two years. He had introduced baptism in Judea even before He began to minister in Galilee (Joh 4:1-3). For a long time, Jesus “made and baptized more disciples than John.” He had instructed His disciples about whom to baptize: “though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples.” Clearly then, Jesus’ disciples weren’t practicing infant or toddler baptism. They were *forbidding* these

⁶⁸ *Mar 10:16*: And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them.

⁶⁹ *Mat 19:13-14*: Then were there brought unto him little children [*paidion*], that he should put his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. 14 But Jesus said, Suffer little children [*paidion*], and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

⁷⁰ *Luk 18:15*: And they brought unto him also infants [*brepchos*], that he would touch them: but when his disciples saw it, they rebuked them.

parents to bring their little children and babies to Jesus. These parents weren't disciples. So plainly, these passages aren't about the baptism of the infants of the disciples. They aren't about Jesus imposing on infants and small children the burdens, responsibilities, and liabilities of discipleship or church membership. Jesus didn't require anything of the infants and minor children that these Jewish parents brought to Him.

Rather, these texts are about Jesus' love and kindness to infants and small children. They are about Jesus receiving, holding, and blessing infants and small children. Jesus loves little children with compassion, grace, and goodwill. He displays this goodwill in His common grace and in His free and benevolent call of the gospel. He expresses His goodwill by holding the babies and little children in His arms. He cuddles them in His kindness. Then He prays for God's blessing on their lives while He places His hands on them, symbolically conveying His disposition to do them good (Mar 10:16). Surely then, in these passages there is ample ground to love, cuddle, and pray for babies and small children.

Suppose on a Sunday morning a young couple brings their newborn infant to church for the first time. Then suppose they say to their pastor, Would you this morning, in front of all the disciples, hold our baby in your arms and pray for God's blessing on his life? Possibly some disciples would refuse these parents and forbid them. Surely there is in these texts ample ground for that pastor to cuddle such babies and bless them like Jesus did, by praying for God's blessing on their lives.⁷¹ But should the church impose on those little children the responsibilities of discipleship and the liabilities of membership? Jesus did no such thing. Thus, these texts do not furnish grounds for any church to do so.

2. This social requirement is compatible with saving grace.

God sometimes saves little children. The experience of John the Baptist is special. Yet, his remarkable filling with the Holy Spirit as a baby in his mother's womb demonstrates that God can, and sometimes does,

⁷¹ Baptist churches differ regarding whether the public blessing of infants should be included in the public worship of God. Some would argue that such a practice violates the regulative principle of worship as it does not have the explicit warrant of Scripture. Others consider it reasonable to publicly pray for the infant for the encouragement of the church to support the family in raising the little one in God's way.—*Editor*

regenerate and save a very small child.⁷² The Old Testament confirms that God sometimes works grace from infancy.⁷³

How does this correlate with the moral development of minor children? God regenerated John the Baptist and filled him with the Holy Spirit as an infant, before his mind and conscience developed.⁷⁴ John had a new heart before he could understand right and wrong. God usually regenerates by means of His Word (Jam 1:18; 1Pe 1:23), but he regenerated John before he could read or understand Scripture. This is astonishing. When God regenerates an adult, the adult immediately believes, for his mind and conscience have already been formed. John, however, came to faith when his mind and conscience developed. He came to faith as a little boy, as soon as he could understand God's Word. This displays spiritual mystery. It cautions us. It calls for great delicacy in ministering the Word to small children. It would have been wrong to treat little John as an unregenerate person at age one simply because his mind was yet incapable of understanding the Scriptures. We must acknowledge with humility that we simply can't know what work God does in the hearts of very small children. We shouldn't form an opinion of their spiritual condition until we see how they speak and act as their minds and consciences develop with age. We should therefore judge them with charity and speak to them with hope. This introduces a seeming tension that does not exist with adults. We should never speak of a regenerate adult who has not yet believed. But John was a regenerate infant who had not yet believed. We should never speak of a saved adult who has not yet confessed faith. But John was a saved infant who had not yet confessed faith. An infant regeneration, coupled to the nature of human development, gives rise to this seeming contradiction. We must simply face and embrace it.

Again, Paul calls minor children who attend church and sit under gospel preaching to obey their parents in the Lord, in order to be well

⁷² *Luk 1:15*: For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. *Luk 1:41, 44*: And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost...⁴⁴ For lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.

⁷³ *Jer 1:5*: Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.

⁷⁴ John the Baptist's particular case could be argued to be a case of Holy Spirit anointing for empowerment and equipping rather than regeneration.—*Editor*

pleasing to God.⁷⁵ He cannot mean that children can please God apart from union with Christ by faith, for “they that are in the flesh cannot please God,” and, “without faith it is impossible to please him” (Rom 8:8; Heb 11:6). So then, he must mean that children please God when by faith in Christ they walk in gospel obedience to their parents. Thus, he calls on minor children to live in evangelical obedience to Christ. He encourages minors with the hope that as little children they can please God by a life of faith in Christ. Little children can be saved and please God.

Again, Paul reminds Timothy that God used religious nurture in his life. Timothy had a Greek father. For this reason, he was not circumcised or identified with Hebrew Israel. Yet, by means of his mother and grandmother, he had the privilege of exposure to Scripture from his infancy. God created saving faith in Timothy by His Spirit. This saving faith “dwelt first in” his mother and grandmother. By grace God blessed Timothy’s religious nurture so that he came to share in his mother’s faith.⁷⁶ Yet, Paul does not say exactly when God regenerated and saved Timothy.

The dependence of minor children calls for religious nurture. Parental protection and supervision extend to religious training. The Old Testament underscores this. Abraham commands his children to keep the way of the LORD.⁷⁷ Joshua, as head of his household, says, “we will serve the LORD.”⁷⁸ Those nurtured in true religion may publicly confess the faith of their fathers when they can speak for themselves. While they are still minors, their fathers speak for them and expect them to walk in the ways of the LORD. Whether or not they walk in God’s ways as minors is not their decision; it is their parents’ decision. In this decision, the parents are not adversarial, but loving teachers and molders. When God

⁷⁵ *Col 3:20*: Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well-pleasing unto the Lord.

⁷⁶ *2Ti 1:5, 3:15*: When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also... *3:15*: And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

⁷⁷ *Gen 18:19*: For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.

⁷⁸ *Jos 24:15*: And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

regenerates children and they believe in Christ, they willingly walk in glad compliance with their religious nurture.

Some, like John and Jeremiah, experience regenerating grace from infancy. Others, like Samuel, come to know the LORD and experience His salvation as minor children.⁷⁹ How can we tell if and when God regenerates and saves minor children? The evidence of saving grace is a child's testimony and manner of life.⁸⁰ Due to the process of development of a child's mind and conscience, it is more difficult for us to discern a work of grace in minor children. Nevertheless, even a child makes grace in his heart evident by the way he acts and speaks.

3. *This social requirement is compatible with gospel ministry to minors.*

The church should cooperate with parents by ministering with love to children being raised in their midst. When Paul wrote to the churches in Ephesus and Colossae, he addressed husbands, wives, masters, servants, parents, and children.⁸¹ He assumed that minor children would attend church and hear his letters read and explained. He suited his ministry to the needs of all his hearers. He applied the gospel to parents and their minor children. Similarly, pastors should address gospel truth to little children raised under their ministry.

In Acts 20:9-12, Scripture records the experience of a young man who attended a meeting in which Paul spoke.⁸² As he prolonged his message until midnight, this young man fell asleep. Paul didn't wake him up and rebuke him for sleeping in his sermon. Then the sleepy young man fell out of an open window and died. Through Paul, God restored his life. No one sued Paul, the homeowner, or the church. Rather, they were "not a little comforted."

⁷⁹ *1Sa 3:7, 10*: Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, neither was the word of the LORD yet revealed unto him... 10 And the LORD came, and stood, and called as at other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak; for thy servant heareth.

⁸⁰ *Pro 20:11*: Even a child is known by his doings, whether his work be pure, and whether it be right.

⁸¹ *Eph 6:1-3*: Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. 2 Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; 3 That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth. *Col. 3:20*: Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord.

⁸² *Act 20:9, 12*: And there sat in a window a certain young man [*neanios*] named Eutychus, being fallen into a deep sleep: and as Paul was long preaching, he sunk down with sleep, and fell down from the third loft, and was taken up dead... 12 And they brought the young man [*pais*] alive, and were not a little comforted.

D. Practical Application of this Social Requirement

Churches should honor at least five principles: *imitation* of Christ, *support* of parents, *protection and encouragement* of little children, *adaptation* regarding culture, and *toleration* of other Christians.

1. Churches should imitate Christ's loving embrace of little children.

Jesus' heart is full of love and kindness toward little children. He is our example. Christians, pastors, and churches should imitate the way our Lord embraced and blessed little children. We should really care about children raised in our midst. We should pray for God to bless their lives in every way.

2. Churches should be supportive of parental nurture of little children.

Paul suited his ministry of the Word to his hearers. Accordingly, churches should be supportive of parents in their effort to nurture their children in true religion.⁸³ Such supportive ministries could include nursery, Sunday school classes for children, Vacation Bible School, after school ministries, youth groups and retreats, assisting Christian education, youth mission trips, etc. Churches should realize the tremendous value of every child raised in their midst. Such support is a vital aspect of giving glory to God in the church.

3. Churches should both protect and encourage little children.

a. Protection: physical and spiritual

Physically, churches are responsible to protect minors on their premises. Churches should use all due diligence to ensure the physical safety of every little child in their facilities and ministries, not only from bodily harm, but also from predators. Safeguards should be implemented such that no little child is ever harmed in any church ministry or facility.

Spiritually, churches should protect little children from the burden, responsibilities, and liabilities of membership. Jesus does not command children to be baptized and join the church until they are of sufficient age to handle adult obligations. In this way, He protects little children who believe. This protection allows them to walk with Jesus by faith and please God without carrying the burdens of church membership.

What if a ten-year-old wants to join the Marines? Should the Marines impose on him the rigors of military service? Should he be exposed to the

⁸³ Churches should minister to children recognizing that the primary responsibility for training children in the Christian home rests on the father, who partners in this work with his wife: "Ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). See *The Duties of Parents* by J. C. Ryle; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.—*Editor*

dangers of the battlefield? What if he argues that he loves his country and wants to defend freedom? Preventing him from joining the marines is not challenging or doubting his patriotism. It is protecting him from unreasonable burdens.

Again, Scripture says that to prevent lust each man should have his own wife (1Co 7:1-5). Suppose a lad of thirteen reaches puberty and struggles with lust. Should we press on his conscience his *immediate* duty to marry? For one thing, most lads that age couldn't provide for a wife. But suppose he could and had the consent of his financial trustee. He still wouldn't have the legal right to marry without the consent of his parents or legal guardian. These limitations are for his protection. Similarly, we should apply the command to join the church with due concern to protect minor children from obligations and liabilities that they are not yet ready to bear. Similarly, the command to believers to be baptized no more applies *immediately* to a three-year-old than the command to marry applies *immediately* to a thirteen-year-old. As a thirteen-year-old can't make that decision on his own and shouldn't marry until he is ready for the responsibilities of marriage, so a three-year-old can't decide religious matters on his own and shouldn't be added to the church until he is ready for the responsibilities and liabilities of membership.

b. Encouragement

Churches should relate to little children that have faith in Christ in a manner that would both protect and encourage them. The apostles didn't baptize little children who believe or add them to church membership, with its obligations and liabilities. However, this does not preclude allowing believing minors to have, with parental permission and supervision, some kind of encouragement from the church. Little children who believe could be encouraged as believers without burdening them with the responsibilities or liabilities of membership until they come of age. Churches, with parental consent and *supervision*, could give a measure of pastoral care to little children who believe. Yet, these little believers should neither be liable to church discipline nor required to take part in church business.

4. *Churches should adapt membership polity culturally and developmentally.*

The baptism of the eunuch teaches us to avoid overly rigid attitudes about church ordinances.⁸⁴ It commends adapting church polity to culture and to each person's social development. Not so long ago in rural

⁸⁴ Mat 28:19-20; Act 8:38-39.

America, it was not uncommon for young women to marry at age fifteen. But in our society, young men and women, who have attained puberty, are still legally “minors” in some respects until twenty-one, and in almost all respects until eighteen. Accordingly, churches could design an associate membership for young adult believers who are still legal minors, fitted both to encourage and protect them, in accord with their assessment of the personal maturity of each, with parental consent and *supervision*, until they attain legal majority. Upon legal majority, these believers could apply for regular membership in their church with its duties and liabilities.

5. Churches should show toleration regarding minor membership.

We should follow the golden rule and tone down the rhetoric on this topic. We should be kind to those with a different polity of minor membership. It is not right to use emotional arguments that vilify other Christians simply because their practices on this matter differ from ours. For example, at times those who don't receive small children into church membership have heard something like: “You are *depriving* children.” The implication of this emotional pressure is that you are heartless because you don't make little children church members. Would those who use this kind of emotional pressure want it to be used on them? Would they want to be accused of being *abusive* to little children because they “*cruelly impose*” on them burdens of membership that they're not old enough to handle? I think not.

So then, let's follow the golden rule. Let's refrain from such attacks. Let's treat each other with respect and grace. Let's judge motives with charity. Let's acknowledge that those who spare little children from the liabilities of membership are not cruel, but rather, *want to protect* them. Let's admit that those who bring little children into membership do not intend to abuse them spiritually, but rather, *aim to encourage* them. Let's find ways both to encourage and protect them. Let's think the best of each other. Thus, all will know that we are Christ's disciples, because we love each other.

III. The Ceremonial Standard for Church Membership: Baptism

As Christ institutes spiritual and social standards, so also, He ordains a ceremonial standard. He requires commitment to discipleship, openly confessed in His ordinance of baptism, to enter the membership of His global church universal. Consider with me biblical support and practical implementation of this ceremonial standard.

A. Biblical Support for this Ceremonial Requirement

Christ Himself institutes⁸⁵ and perpetuates⁸⁶ baptism as a religious ordinance associated with becoming a disciple and joining His disciples. The apostles implement Christ's ordinance when they preach the gospel and make disciples among Jews⁸⁷ and Gentiles.⁸⁸ Gospel commitment to discipleship is voluntary and should be conscientious. It involves public confession of faith in baptism (Act 22:16), commitment to receive comprehensive instruction (Mat 28:20), and supreme loyalty to Christ (Luk 14:25-35). Thus, baptism inducts a disciple into the global assembly of Christ's disciples.

B. Practical Implementation of this Ceremonial Requirement

As a rule, baptism corresponds with joining a local church. Yet, Philip baptizes a eunuch, who can't attend church in Jerusalem because he lives far away.⁸⁹ Yet, the great commission mandates that the church instruct all disciples comprehensively in the Christian faith: "teaching them to observe all things." How do they apply the great commission to the Ethiopian eunuch? How does the eunuch relate to the church in Jerusalem? Since God leads Philip to the eunuch, and since he baptizes him, that church is responsible to ground him in the faith. Since he can't move to Jerusalem, they probably send a delegation to his location to plant a church and care for his soul. This is consistent with early translations of Scripture into the Coptic language then spoken in Egypt. Thus, the baptism of this eunuch discloses that baptism inducts into the global

⁸⁵ *Joh 4:1-2*: When therefore the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, 2 (Though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples)...

⁸⁶ *Mat 28:19-20*: Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: 20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

⁸⁷ *Act 2:41-42*: Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. 42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

⁸⁸ *Act 10:47-48*: Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days.

⁸⁹ *Act 8:38-39*: And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. 39 And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.

universal church, not exclusively to one local church. Thus, a disciple doesn't need to be rebaptized every time he transfers membership from one local church to another. Finally, the thief on the cross teaches us that faith in Christ, not baptism, is essential to entering heaven.

Chapter 3: A Practical Polity of Local Church Membership

I consider admission to membership, the terms of membership, and the termination of membership in a local church. I conclude with practical applications of local church membership.

I. Admission to Local Church Membership

I unfold the standard and procedures for admission to membership.

A. The Standard for Admission to Local Church Membership

Each local church should honor the standard for admission to the church universal. These spiritual, social, and sacramental requirements pertain equally to every church. Each local church should honor them. Local churches have two additional standards, *circumstantial* and *organizational*.

I. A circumstantial standard: residency

Paul refers to the church in Thessalonica as a church of “*Thessalonians*.”⁹⁰ That local church was composed of persons that resided in Thessalonica. Thus, the practical requirement for membership in that church in Thessalonica was to reside in Thessalonica. Only residents can participate regularly in the worship, fellowship, and ministries of a local church. This logistical requirement occasions various types of membership.

Temporary membership: As there may be permanent and temporary residents, so there may be regular and temporary members. For example, sometimes college students, with permanent residency elsewhere, reside temporarily in Grand Rapids. While students, they may have temporary membership in a church in Grand Rapids, while maintaining membership in their home church. Again, we have “snowbirds” that spend several months of every year in Florida. These can have temporary membership in a church in Florida, and permanent membership in a church in Michigan. Thus, churches may grant a temporary membership to college

⁹⁰ 1Th 1:1; 2Th 1:1.

students, military personnel, those on special work assignments, and others who reside temporarily in their area.

Associate membership: Sometimes members move to places where there is no church to join. This occasions *associate membership*. The Ethiopian eunuch became a disciple through Philip, a deacon in the church in Jerusalem. Due to the great commission, the eunuch had an *associate* membership with that church.⁹¹ Thus, associate membership pertains to believers whose relationship to the church involves unusual circumstances of some kind. It could apply to a believer on military service in a foreign land, or to a believer who can't attend church for medical reasons, or possibly to a believer with low mental capacity, or possibly, to a believing young man or woman who is a legal minor.

2. An organizational standard: voluntary compliance

Scripture calls on church members to give diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.⁹² It exhorts church members to walk in deference to the spiritual leadership of the church.⁹³ Thus, those admitted to membership in a church must voluntarily comply with its polity. Thus, the members of a local church should conscientiously honor its doctrinal standards.⁹⁴ Thus also, those admitted to membership should be committed to live in peace, without fomenting divisiveness over doctrinal differences. Accordingly, Scripture exhorts local churches to receive into membership those who are weak regarding the faith,⁹⁵ as long as they do not divide the church with doctrinal disputes and a divisive spirit.⁹⁶

B. Procedures for Admission to Local Church Membership

In Acts 9:26-28,⁹⁷ Scripture sets forth a process that involves application, evaluation, and reception.

⁹¹ Mat 28:19-20; Act 8:27-40. This statement is a possible assumption based upon these passages, though not directly taught by them.

⁹² Eph 4:1-3.

⁹³ Heb 13:17; 1Pe 5:5.

⁹⁴ Act 16:4.

⁹⁵ Rom 14:1.

⁹⁶ Rom 16:17-20.

⁹⁷ Act 9:26-28: And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. 28 And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.

1. Personal application

The process begins when a person is converted and voluntarily requests to join a church. Thus, Paul tried to join the church in Jerusalem.

2. Pastoral evaluation

This rests on the biblical teaching that spiritual leaders should watch out for and protect their flock. When Paul applied for membership, the whole church was afraid of him. Yet the apostles met with Paul and evaluated his conversion. This involved examination and investigation. When the apostles met with Paul, they no doubt heard his testimony regarding his conversion. They also investigated his story and obtained corroborating evidence from Barnabas. Accordingly, the spiritual leaders of the church should meet with prospective members and evaluate their suitability for membership. They should assess their conversion, social maturity, need for baptism, residency, and their willingness to comply with the doctrinal standards and polity of the church. If the person applying for membership has been a member of another church, they should try to determine that person's standing in his former church and his reasons for leaving. Where possible, the pastors should corroborate this account with spiritual leaders from the former church. These are the general principles by which the apostles handled Paul's application for membership. In Paul's case, Barnabas corroborated his story. But if there are conflicting accounts, or if a former church raises an objection, then the pastors should conduct a further investigation before the person is received. They should aim to maintain or restore the unity of the Spirit.

3. Congregational reception

The whole congregation was afraid of Paul. The apostles took into account the concern of many that Paul was a deceiver trying to infiltrate their membership. After the apostles evaluated him as a genuinely converted man, the whole church received him. Similarly, when a person applies for membership, the pastors should inform the congregation and give them time to raise concerns about the person's life or doctrine. The pastors should resolve any concerns before a new convert is baptized and added to the church, in order to maintain the unity of the Spirit. Since the whole church receives new members,⁹⁸ it is desirable to find some way for the church members to express their love and acceptance to each new member.

⁹⁸ *Rom 15:7*: Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.

II. Terms of Local Church Membership

Church membership involves privileges, responsibilities, and liabilities.

A. Privileges of Local Church Membership

Observe the plenary privileges of all members and supplementary privileges for men and women.

1. Plenary privileges of all members

Christ has granted many gracious privileges that pertain to every member in good standing in the church. Some of these privileges may be revoked if a member behaves scandalously and comes under the discipline of the church. Note these seven privileges of all church members in good standing:

- (1) Recognition and reception as a Christian (Mat 18:15; Rom 15:7; 1Co 5:11)
- (2) Protection by Christ's due process (Mat 18:15-18)
- (3) Partaking in the Lord's Supper (1Co 10:16-17; 11:20-22, 26)
- (4) Pastoral and congregational care and protection (Act 2:44-45; Eph 4:11-13; Col 1:28; 1Th 2:11; Heb 3:12-14)
- (5) Attendance at congregational meetings (Act 6:2)
- (6) Suffrage in congregational business (Act 6:3)
- (7) Service in church ministries (Rom 12:5-7; 16:1-2; Ti 2:3-5; 1Pe 4:9-11)

2. Supplementary privileges of male members

- (1) Church office: elder and deacon (1Ti 2:11-16; 3:1-13)
- (2) Spiritual leadership in the church (1Ti 2:12; 1Co 14:33-36)

3. Supplementary privileges of female members

- (1) Public service in diaconal ministries (Rom 16:1-2; 1Ti 3:11)
- (2) Leadership in women's ministries (Ti 2:3-5)

Thus, church membership is a great blessing. The body of Christ gives Christian recognition, personal care, emotional sympathy, and spiritual protection to each member. All members cooperate to worship God, spread the gospel, and love one another unto God's glory (1Co 12:18-28).

B. Responsibilities of Local Church Membership

Responsibilities go hand in hand with privileges. Church membership is voluntary. Thus, when Christians join a church, they

voluntarily commit to fulfill the responsibilities of membership. I collate these in five categories: attendance, financial support, love, deference, and a good testimony.

1. Attendance

Scripture connects the spiritual health of Christians to participation in the spiritual life of the church (Act 9:31). Regular church attendance promotes unity and peace.⁹⁹ Thus, church attendance should be a priority for every church member, unless they are providentially hindered by illness, unusual working conditions, or other such circumstances.¹⁰⁰ Thus, only those who regularly take part in the spiritual life of a church should participate in its suffrage.¹⁰¹ Accordingly, the members of a church should be committed to attend its regular meetings for prayer,¹⁰² for worship,¹⁰³ for Bible instruction,¹⁰⁴ and for church business.¹⁰⁵

2. Financial support

Church members should support the church financially.¹⁰⁶ Their contributions should go to a common purse disbursed to fulfill the ministries of the church.¹⁰⁷

3. Love

Each member should walk in love and promote the spiritual health of the church. Thus, members should give diligence to maintain spiritual unity and peace in the church.¹⁰⁸ They should practice transparency and honesty,¹⁰⁹ faithfully admonish and encourage each other,¹¹⁰ keep confidences, refrain from backbiting and gossip,¹¹¹ and use their spiritual gifts as good stewards.¹¹²

⁹⁹ Act 4:24; Eph 4:11-16; 1Ti 2:8.

¹⁰⁰ Act 2:42-47; Heb 10:25-26.

¹⁰¹ Act 6:1-7.

¹⁰² Act 4:23-31, 12:5,12; 1Ti 2:1-8.

¹⁰³ Act 20:7, 11; 1Co 16:2.

¹⁰⁴ Mat 28:20; Act 11:26.

¹⁰⁵ Mat 18:15-18; Act 6:2, 14:27, 15:22.

¹⁰⁶ Gal 6:7.

¹⁰⁷ Act 15:3; 1Ti 5:16-17.

¹⁰⁸ Eph 4:1-3.

¹⁰⁹ Eph 4:25.

¹¹⁰ 1Th 5:14; Heb 3:12-13.

¹¹¹ Psa 15:3; Pro 11:13, 16:28.

¹¹² 1Pe 4:8-11.

4. Deference

Scripture requires the members of a church to submit in gospel deference to its spiritual leaders. This rests on a responsibility to know them, pray for them, and esteem them highly for their work's sake.¹¹³ Submission involves a teachable spirit and deference to decisions regarding church polity that do not contradict Scripture. It does not mean that members should make a pastor the lord of their consciences.¹¹⁴

5. Good testimony

Each member is responsible to preserve, rather than damage, the good name of the church. Thus, church members should walk worthily of their Christian calling.¹¹⁵ This involves living in personal communion with God, in growing conformity to Christ, and in hope of eternal life. Accordingly, their testimony should adorn God's gospel, rather than cause it to be blasphemed.¹¹⁶ A good testimony includes conscientiousness,¹¹⁷ domestic piety,¹¹⁸ good citizenship,¹¹⁹ compassion, and separation from the sins of the world.¹²⁰

C. Liabilities of Local Church Membership

Along with privileges, membership also has two primary liabilities.

1. Church members are liable to heavier divine judgment

Any who grossly misuse sacred things are subject to divine chastening, even unto premature death.¹²¹ Any who live in gross hypocrisy are subject to divine judgment unto death.¹²² Any who renounce faith in Christ, and return to the world, are liable to heavier judgment than other unconverted persons.¹²³

2. Church members are liable to church discipline

Church members, unlike those that are without the church, are liable to church discipline, if they live in sin scandalously and

¹¹³ 1Th 5:12-13; Heb 13:17.

¹¹⁴ 2Co 1:24.

¹¹⁵ Eph 4:1.

¹¹⁶ Ti 2:5, 10.

¹¹⁷ Act 24:16.

¹¹⁸ Ti 2:4-5.

¹¹⁹ 1Pe 2:13-15; 4:15.

¹²⁰ Mat 5:16; Jam 1:27.

¹²¹ 1Co 11:28-34.

¹²² Act 5:1-11.

¹²³ Heb 10:28-31.

impenitently. Church discipline involves both revocation of privileges and imposition of social strictures.¹²⁴

III. Termination of Local Church Membership

Consider with me five ways and implications of terminating membership.

A. *Death*

Death removes genuine Christians from the church on earth and unites them with the glorified spirits in heaven. Even after death they still belong to Zion, the wife of the Lamb, the cosmic church universal.¹²⁵

B. *Transfer*

Transfer rests on the spiritual union and communion of local churches in the church universal.¹²⁶ Thus, a Christian may transfer membership. The process includes a request for transfer, commendation from the present church, and reception by the prospective church. In a similar way, Paul commended Phoebe to the Romans,¹²⁷ and the brothers in Ephesus commended Apollos to the Corinthians.¹²⁸

C. *Excommunication*

Scripture requires churches to remove from membership and its privileges any members who live in scandalous sin without repentance or persist in believing heretical doctrines.¹²⁹

D. *Resignation*

Membership in a local church is voluntary. Thus, no one should be forced to remain in membership against his will. Therefore, as a general rule, if and when members so request, they should be dismissed from church membership. Resignation pertains to situations where members

¹²⁴ 1Co 5:11-13; 2Co 2:6.

¹²⁵ Heb 12:22-24.

¹²⁶ Act 14:21-23, 16:5.

¹²⁷ *Rom 16:1-2*: I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea: 2 That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also.

¹²⁸ *Act 18:27*: And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace.

¹²⁹ Mat 18:15-20; Rom 16:17-20; 1Co 5:1-13; Ti 3:10-11.

can no longer with good conscience voluntarily comply with the polity of their church or defer to its spiritual leaders. However, a resignation offered by a person guilty of sinful behavior that warrants church discipline is not valid. In such cases, the church may proceed with appropriate disciplinary action. For example, when Judaizers went out of the Jerusalem church and spread heresy, the apostles censured them for their false doctrine and divisive behavior.¹³⁰ In ideal church life, there would never need to be resignation, only transfer, death, and excommunication. However, in real church life, with remaining sin, charity pleads with idealistic churchmen to allow people to resign peaceably if they are not guilty of heresy or scandalous immorality. It is better, if possible, to help a member who wants to resign to find another church. However, sometimes Christians don't want oversight from their former church in that relocation process. In such cases, charity pleads, "Let them go in peace." Don't excommunicate Christians and label them as unconverted people simply because they no longer want to be under your pastoral care and don't want you to oversee their efforts to join another church.

E. Exclusion

Again, in an ideal world, there would be no need for exclusion. Exclusion is similar to resignation; only a church initiates it rather than a church member. For example, exclusion could pertain to instances where members relocate without communication. In such cases, the pastors should try to contact the person to clarify and resolve the situation.¹³¹ When these efforts are ineffective, such persons may be excluded on the ground that they are no longer willing to comply with the polity of the church. In such cases, that much is certain. It is better to proceed based on what is clear, than to assume the worst and excommunicate such people, or to take no action at all, and leave the matter indefinitely up in the air.¹³²

Conclusion: implications of terminating membership

Since each local church belongs to the universal church, church leaders may, when necessary, disclose to other churches the

¹³⁰ *Act 15:24*: Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment.

¹³¹ *Eze 34:4*: Neither have ye sought that which was lost.

¹³² *Rom 12:8*: He that ruleth, with diligence.

circumstances under which a person's membership terminated.¹³³ Again, each church has a moral obligation to society at large to act with integrity. Thus, church leaders may, when necessary, inform civil authorities of the circumstances under which a person's membership ended.¹³⁴ Further, termination of membership does not give former members the right to sow discord or spread false teaching. Therefore, when it is established as fact that a former member is behaving divisively, the spiritual leaders of the church may and should endeavor to preserve the unity of the Spirit among the churches. This could involve written warnings¹³⁵ and meetings for inter-church advice and counsel.¹³⁶

Conclusion to Chapter 3: Practical Applications of Local Church Membership

I conclude with practical counsels regarding the priority of membership, reception to membership, the privileges and responsibilities of membership, and the termination of membership.

A. The Priority of Membership

Church membership should be a priority for every Christian man and woman. LCF says that Christ commands men and women who believe in Christ to walk together in local churches.¹³⁷ The confession appeals for support to Matthew 18:15-18, which calls for accountability among those who profess Christ. Peter also calls Christians to be accountable. He says that accountability to pastoral authority displays humility.¹³⁸ Scripture says explicitly that some people didn't want to join a church because they were afraid to be accountable to God (Act 5:13-14). Therefore, Scripture indeed declares that Christian men and women should join a local church. It says that each should be accountable to the society of Christ's disciples

¹³³ Act 15:24; *ITi 1:19-20*: Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: 20 Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.

¹³⁴ 2Co 8:21; 1Pe 4:15.

¹³⁵ 1Jo 2:18-19.

¹³⁶ Act 15:24.

¹³⁷ *LCF 26:5*: those thus called he commands to walk together in particular societies, or churches, for their mutual edification and for the due performance of that public worship, which he requires of them in the world.

¹³⁸ *1Pe 5:5*: Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.

and have pastoral care. Indeed, the Great Commission implies accountability, because the person baptized commits to receive comprehensive instruction in the Word of Christ. Scripture also presents the case of a eunuch, who didn't reside in Jerusalem. Even in his case, they no doubt obeyed the Great Commission and found a way to provide him with comprehensive instruction in the faith. Therefore, under ordinary circumstances, Christian men and women should join a local church where they reside. In exceptional circumstances like those of the eunuch, they should try to have some kind of associate relationship with a church.

Yet today, some profess to receive Christ but reject His church. Or, they say that they love Jesus and hate Christians. This ought not to be. No church is perfect now, even as no church was perfect in the first century. Those who say they love Christ and hate Christians are a contradiction in terms. They are self-deceived.¹³⁹ Genuine Christians love Christ and other Christians. Those who love other Christians want to identify with them. They want to be with them for mutual edification and to worship the living God.

Thus, things that often hinder church membership are a fear of accountability, an aversion to being under authority, a lack of affection for God's people, and an unwillingness to be constrained by commitments. A Christian should overcome these sinful tendencies by the power of the Spirit and by the blood of Christ.

B. Reception to Membership

Sometimes, local churches should receive into membership Christians with different views on some issues. As we saw, the organizational requirement for admission to membership in a local church is a voluntary commitment to comply with its polity and defer to its spiritual leaders. What if prospective members differ on some points with the doctrinal standards of that church? What limits should a church set? A church should set limits conducive to the peace and spiritual health of its membership. Is the prospective member teachable and peaceable? Is he willing to honor the doctrinal standards of the church? Is he willing not to foment division and strife over his differences? If so, then he may be received.¹⁴⁰ This is the general principle that Scripture commends.

¹³⁹ *I Jho 4:20*: If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?

¹⁴⁰ Rom 14:1.

Questions arise about how this principle applies to specific issues, like differences over the end times, or differences over spiritual gifts, or differences over the Lord's Day. Again, this general rule covers all these differences. In the case of the end times, a prospective member may be asked not to embroil the church in discussions of his detailed timelines. In the case of spiritual gifts, such as claiming to speak in tongues, a prospective member may be asked only to do so in private, and not to try to get other members to seek for such a gift. In the case of the Lord's Day, a prospective member may be asked—in keeping with the biblical teaching on Christian liberty—to curtail in public any practices that would violate the doctrinal standards of the church and the consciences of the other members.

This leads to a question often debated. Should Baptist churches receive paedobaptists as members? First, I acknowledge that good men differ in their answer to this question. Thus, we should temper dogmatism and err on the side of grace and peace. If a prospective member is a temporary resident, then I think it best for the church to receive him as a temporary member. This would express Christian recognition of his home church and show love among Christians. If a prospective member applies for ordinary membership, the situation is somewhat different. As a general rule, churches are to receive those that are weak in faith, yet not for disputes about doctrines. In this case, the difference is over a ceremonial law. The issue is failure to comply with the ceremonial requirement for membership. Yet, this prospective member conscientiously believes that he is in compliance, because he was christened as a baby.¹⁴¹ Sometimes, it is good and right to violate the letter of a ceremonial law in the interest of keeping God's moral law. For example, Christ cites the incident of David and the showbread. He says that due to necessity, it was morally right to give that bread to David in violation of the ceremonial law.¹⁴² Yet, it would not have been right to violate that ceremonial law under ordinary circumstances, where there was no special necessity. Similarly, baptism is a ritual. The duty of believers to be baptized is a ceremonial law. In this case, God's moral law requires love for this prospective member; His ceremonial law requires his baptism unto membership. Now, all this serves as the foundation of my answer to this question. In many cases,

¹⁴¹ This special situation I am addressing pertains only to paedobaptists who have not been baptized as believers. If they have been baptized as believers, their case follows the same general rule as the other cases already addressed.

¹⁴² Mat 12:2-4; Mar 2:24-28; Luk 6:1-5: The use of these texts *does not* imply that the Sabbath is a ceremonial law.

paedobaptist churches already exist nearby, so that this prospective member could join one of them conscientiously. Thus, rather than violate Christ's ceremonial law, in ordinary cases that brother should join a paedobaptist church in the vicinity, if he can do so with good conscience. However, there may be cases in which joining a paedobaptist church is not feasible due to distance or conscience. In cases of special necessity, a Baptist church should receive him into membership. It should extend to him the "showbread" of pastoral care and congregational love, rather than keep the letter of the ceremonial law, and leave him starving spiritually. In the interest of peacekeeping, the church may ask him not to try to convert other members to his views on baptism. If Baptists and paedobaptists can fellowship in love in pioneer mission works, why can't that same love mark our interactions at home? I believe it can, and should; and thankfully, in many cases it does, to God's glory.

C. The Privileges of Membership

How should local churches dispense the privilege of partaking in the Lord's Supper? Churches should use both grace and discretion. The supper signifies the unity of Christ's body. Christ's body is His church, both local and universal. A polity of *open communion* allows anyone present who wants to partake to do so. It is strong on grace, but it is weak on discretion. A polity of *closed communion* allows only the members of that local church to partake. It is strong on discretion, but it is weak on grace. A polity of *close communion* allows members of any genuine gospel church who are present to partake. Therefore, the polity of close communion seems best suited to express both grace and discretion.

Further, what of the Ethiopian eunuch? If he were to visit Jerusalem, would he be permitted to take the Lord's Supper? I have no doubt that they would have admitted him to the table. Sometimes Christians in special circumstances should be allowed access to the Lord's Table in keeping with the general principles of Scripture. In general, the standard for admission is commitment to be a member in a genuine gospel church, whenever it is logistically feasible. Some Christians may visit when they are between churches, looking to join a new church. In such cases, churches should show them grace.

D. The Responsibilities of Membership

Churches should enforce the responsibilities of membership with grace and diligence. Christians should attend church meetings because they want to attend, not because they are compelled to attend against their will. Nevertheless, if people commit to do something, they should do it.

This pertains to attending school board meetings as much as it does to attending prayer meetings. What if church members, for no compelling reason, stop attending prayer meetings, Sunday school, and evening worship? How should churches handle such situations? Should we pray for revival? Should we turn a blind eye? Should we reprove them for negligence? Should we remove them from membership for non-compliance with the terms of membership to which they agreed when they joined? Should we delete any requirement to attend church meetings from our terms of membership? Should we cancel evening services and prayer meetings? Sad to say, not a few local churches have members with patterns of inconsistent attendance.

First, I acknowledge that I don't have all the answers; but I know one thing. Churches shouldn't abandon the principle that only those actively participating in the spiritual life of the church should have a voice in running the church. In a word: if you pray here, and learn here, and worship here, then, and only then, should you vote here. Churches have endured grievous trials when church members who never attend prayer meetings or worship services come out of the woodwork and wreak havoc in a business meeting. From this I would spare you. If churches would avoid such travesties, they must address this neglect diligently and graciously.

Churches should pray together regularly. Pastors and teachers should ground each member in the Christian faith and labor to present every member complete in Christ. However, this does not equate with saying that prayer meetings can only be held on Wednesday night or only in one location. It does not equate with saying that adult Sunday school classes are the only venue for the spiritual nurture and instruction of each member. Each church should evaluate its situation diligently and commit this matter to God earnestly. Possibly, other times or venues would be more conducive to promoting corporate prayer and Bible instruction.

Therefore, church leaders should pray for wisdom. Pastors should teach the church the importance of corporate prayer and of every member attaining the unity of the faith. Spiritual leaders should communicate with the members to discover the issues that hinder consistent attendance. Possibly, some members should be reprovved for not wanting to come to pray or to learn. Possibly, the church needs to improve the quality of its Bible instruction and prayer meetings. Possibly, the church should instruct its members more personally, rather than primarily in a class on Sunday. Possibly, prayer meetings should be accessible by phone or by other media. We should pray that God would send us His Spirit in

great measure and give us all greater hunger for His Word and His presence.

E. The Termination of Membership

In this fallen world, local churches encounter wrongs and abnormalities regarding the termination of membership. Scripture reveals that such difficulties existed even in the apostolic church.¹⁴³ Diotrephes sinfully removed some Christians from membership in his church. The text does not address whether he *excluded* them (removed them without strictures or censure) or *excommunicated* them (removed them with social strictures and with the censure of being unconverted). In either case, he removed them wickedly, in violation of the Word of God.

In all probability, sooner or later our churches will encounter such difficulties. When we do, we should pray for wisdom and grace. We should address such things graciously. As appropriate, we should seek counsel from other churches. As John did, we should try to find ways to resolve these wrongs biblically. This involves confronting and exposing those who sin and restoring those who have been wronged to membership in a local church.

Finally, churches should face all these things with hope. Churches in every generation encounter such problems. Yet, the church will prevail. Christ will present the church to Himself a glorious church, without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing (Eph 5:27). Even now He is present with us by His Spirit to support and comfort us in all our afflictions. Therefore, by His grace, in the power of His Spirit, let us pursue God's glory in the membership of our churches.



¹⁴³ *3Jo 1:9-10*: I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. 10 Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.