

INTRODUCTION: Since moving here I have had a couple of people inquire about what they should do to place membership with this congregation. In my inquiries about the matter I learned that there are several others who need to become members. It was also suggested that it might be good if we developed a standard procedure to follow so we always accept people into our fellowship in the best possible way. This morning's lesson is devoted to all these ends. I hope it glorifies God and proves a blessing to all.

The word "church" is used three ways in scripture. First, it is used of all the saved wherever they may be, or the "universal" church. Matthew 16:18; Hebrews 12:22-24. The saved do not add themselves to the universal church. God adds them to the universal church when they are saved. Acts 2:47B. "And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (NKJV).

Second, it is used of the saved who have chosen to work and worship together in a particular locale, or a "local" church. 1 Corinthians 1:2A. There are no members at large in the universal church. The saved must seek to add themselves to, or place their membership with, a faithful local church.

Third, it is used of the assembly of a local church. 1 Corinthians 14:18-19, 34-35. The members of a local church must attend the assemblies of their local church. Hebrews 10:24-25.

Some people in the universal church seem to be apathetic if not antagonistic towards the whole concept of local church membership. Why? Some ... do not know it is necessary, do not think it is necessary, think they have done it, prefer church hopping to putting down roots, want to receive the benefits of church membership without having to fulfill the obligations of church membership, do not want to be held accountable for their actions, do not think they would be members long enough to require it, want to remain members of their "home" church even though they are no longer at home regularly assembling with that congregation, think they could avoid church discipline if they quit being members, have had bad experiences with church membership in the past, etc.

In this morning's lesson, I want to establish two things from scripture. First, that Christians must be members of a local church. Second, how Christians become members of a local church. We will leave the discussion of how members of a local church cease to be members to another day.

DISCUSSION: Please allow me to admit several things up front. First, there may be times when circumstances force us to be between memberships in a local church, but that should be a temporary condition and one that seldom occurs.

Second, some people don't like the phrase, "place membership." Admittedly, the scriptures do not use that exact phrase, but it aptly describes the Biblical concept. Perhaps "associate with" is better. (Acts 9:26). "Join" or "identify with" also work.

Third, I understand that God does not directly command Christians to place membership with a local church. But why? It is such a given that it did not need to be said. Without a word, example and necessary inference quietly but definitively establish the necessity of local church membership.

Please consider the following:

1. Acts 9:26-28. An approved apostolic example!
2. Hebrews 10:24-25; 13:17; 3:12-13; etc. Refusing to place membership is not a loophole that frees us from our obligations to a local church, but a precept of men that invalidates the direct commands of God!
3. Ephesians 4:7-8, 11-13. Elders and teachers are gifts of God, but so is the local church in which they operate. But membership does not depend on the existence of an eldership. Acts 14:21-23. See also Titus 1:5; Acts 6:1-6; 1 Peter 5:1-3. Christians have local church responsibilities even if they do not have elders. And in the absence of elders their fulfillment is, if anything, even more vital. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, 14-15. We must not refuse the gifts of God!
4. Philippians 1:27; Romans 12:4-8; etc.
 - A. God created marriage so husbands and wives can be greater than the sum of their parts. In like manner, God created local churches so their members can achieve together far more than they ever could apart. I realize that there may come a time when it's best to withdraw our membership from one congregation and join another, but I think most brethren do this far too soon. As many spouses divorce to run away from their marriage problems instead of sticking it out, working them out, and coming out stronger than ever, so many local brethren "divorce" one another to run away from their local church problems. Instead of putting up with each other and putting in whatever it takes to put out real solutions and put on real peace, they settle for quick fixes which temporarily alleviates symptoms but make the real problems worse than ever.
 - B. When it comes to local church membership, we desperately need to remember that it's not about what is easiest or what we prefer. Rather, it's about what's truly best for Jesus, other people, and ourselves.
5. Acts 20:35B. Do you really think Jesus just wants you to be a member in the universal church and not also be a member of a local church? Acts 20:25-35.

How do Christians become members of a local church? It takes both parties, the prospective member and the local church, to begin the relationship. Acts 9:26-28.

What should the prospective member do? John 4:24. Christians should be just as careful about putting themselves under the oversight of an existing eldership as they are about appointing new elders to the office. I understand that being new to a group limits what we can know and that we have to walk by a little more faith, but important questions must still be asked and answered. The same certainly goes for joining a church that has no elders.

“Does this mean that I must agree with every member of the group on every issue before I can ‘join’ that group? Certainly not! [Ephesians 4:13] But it does mean that we must agree in the things we do together. There are many groups who practice what I believe the Bible teaches, but probably none of them would agree with every belief that I hold. Since I fellowship that in which I participate, I should find a group where I can ‘join up,’ and ‘join in’ the doing of those things that God authorizes me to do” (F. Jamerson).

After careful examination, prospective members should express their desire to become members of a local church.

What should the local church do? A local church should encourage those who have long attended without placing membership to do so and attempt to overcome any reasons for their hesitation.

When prospective members express their desire to become members of a local church, the local church should:

1. Verify that the prospective members:
 - A. Have obeyed God’s first law of pardon, i.e. that they heard the gospel, chose to believe it, confessed their faith, repented of their sins, and were baptized for the remission of their sins.
 - B. Are obeying God’s second law of pardon, i.e. that they are confessing their sins of ignorance and weakness, repenting of these sins, and praying daily that they will be forgiven of these sins as they forgive others.
2. Verify these things by directly questioning the prospective members and by independent confirmation. Acts 9:26-28; Acts 18:27; Romans 16:1-2. Then assume the best unless there are red flags. But investigate red flags, do not ignore them! Given the world we live in, in my opinion it is best to verify that prospective members are scripturally married or divorced as a matter of course. In my experience, MDR issues are best addressed earlier than later.
3. Explain to the prospective members:
 - A. That they fully expect and constantly encourage their members to remain faithful to God and that they hold them accountable for their sins. After all, these are the primary reasons why God created local churches and why He fully expects Christians to place membership with a local church.
 - B. The unique character of their local church and the obligations it creates for its members.
 - 1) Every local church is unique because every local church is made up of a unique combination of people who agree on some fundamental things but not on everything.
 - 2) These differences do not doom local churches to endless divisions because God has a plan which, if followed, allows members of local churches to work together until they come to the unity of the faith. Eph 4:7-8, 11-16.
 - 3) Given this plan, we at Upper West Manhattan would generally and specifically explain to prospective members our conservative (careful, cautious) approach relative to many other congregations and our reasons for it.
 - 4) We would explain that we do not require prospective members to decide their convictions on such matters before they become members, but that they should be aware that such differences exist, that they will occasionally hear lessons about them, and that they must be willing to do without certain things for the greater good of unity.
 - 5) When they do decide their convictions on such matters they will either agree and stay, disagree and leave, or disagree and still stay because when a local church fully focuses on doing what everyone agrees a local church should do these other things will not be missed.
4. If the local church verifies the faithfulness of a prospective member and the prospective member accepts the terms of membership, the local church should accept them as members. See the principle in Galatians 2:7-10.

CONCLUSION: The local church is a great gift of God given to the saved that by it they might help each other stay saved and help the lost become saved in one of the most effective ways possible. See the principle in 1 Corinthians 14:23-25.

Do not neglect this gift! Become a devoted member of a local church and help make it a slice of heaven on earth so its members are content with nothing less than the whole pie which awaits them in heaven.