

Meaningful Church Membership

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

INTRODUCTION

Way-Off Predictions of Life in 2020

- Flying cars
- People on Mars
- In 1911, there was a surgeon in England who, in a lecture given at the Royal College of Surgeons, predicted that by the year 2020, the human foot would become one big toe. The “useless outer toes” will become used less and less, so that “man might become a one-toed race.”

We may still have all of our toes, but the reality is that 2020 was quite a difficult year. Some have said it was the hardest year since 1968. And we are entering 2021:

- Socially Distanced
- Technologically Drowned
- Politically Dazed
- Racially Divided
- All in all, just Done

FCF: One of the more dangerous effects this may have had on all of us is how we interact with one another as church members. It has become very easy for us to be:

- Less engaged
- More distracted
- More suspicious of others

Church membership during a global pandemic has certainly looked different, but...

Big Question: What does it look like for the church to survive all of this and still be a healthy gospel community?

- We have to ask this question because there a lot of ideas about what the church should be doing to maintain our gospel witness, to love our neighbors, to best serve one another.
- Furthermore, COVID has not stopped Jesus from building and sanctifying his church.

Revisiting a **biblical vision** for church membership.

- Behold the grandeur of what God has accomplished through his Son by his Spirit in creating church membership.

Big Idea: The Bible describes church membership as a spiritually united, functionally diverse, mutually interdependent body of believers in Jesus Christ.

Roadmap:

- Understand what this passage says about church membership.
- Call attention to two dangers that threaten the biblical vision for church membership.
- Exhortation to five duties/delights of church membership.

#1. The Doctrine of Church Membership (v. 12-13, 27)

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”

And in verse 27, *“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”*

If you were to flip through the pages of the NT, you would find several images that describe the church. In fact, one author identifies 96 of them in the NT.

- Household of God
- Bride of Christ
- Temple of the Holy Spirit

But the most prominent image for the church in Paul’s writings is the body of Christ.

- 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, Ephesians 4, Ephesians 5, Colossians 1, Hebrews 13...
 - All talk about the body of Christ (each with their own emphases) and what it means to be a member in the body.

There are a few things we ought to understand when we talk about the body of Christ...

First, church membership IS in the Bible.

- You may often hear the arguments that the *idea* of church membership is in the Bible but it’s never explicitly taught. Well, here it is.
- I’m saying that the very words are in the Bible.

But we need to understand what is meant by membership.

- Not country club membership. Thom Rainer, **“Not about paying your dues and getting the perks.”**
- Not just organizational membership (name on a roll)

Membership is about being connected to other Christians in the same way that your arm is connected to your body. It's about relationships. It's about mutual fellowship in the gospel.

- If you understand church membership in that way, then it's all over the pages of the NT.

Second, church membership is the default status of every Christian.

Illustration of the body in verse 12

- How is it that a multiplicity of members composes one body of Christ?

Explanation in verse 13

Spiritual baptism – Paul is not talking about a post-conversion, second-blessing type spiritual experience. He's not talking about a milestone in the Christian life. In Paul's mind, spiritual baptism marks the beginning of the Christian life.

- *Galatians 3:2-3 on Salvation by Faith, "Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?"*
- So when Paul speaks of this spiritual baptism, he's talking about becoming a Christian.
- If you are a Christian, then you have been baptized into the body of Christ by the Spirit of Christ.

- Some of you got some cool new tech gadgets for Christmas. When you take it out of the box and you turn it on, often times you're given a choice of rolling with the default settings, or customizing them to your own preferences. **When it comes to church membership, there is no custom setting.** Every Christian is made a member of Christ's church right out of the box.
- Grant Gilbert: "Church membership is a biblical reality born out of the spiritual union between Christ and his followers."

So, if Paul is talking about the Holy Spirit's work in salvation, to explain his illustration of membership in the body of Christ, then church membership must be a deeply soteriological idea, and therefore a deeply Christological idea.

- **What you believe about Christ and the way he saves people, will in large part determine what you believe about church membership.**
 - Do you think Jesus is simply concerned with saving individuals? Or in saving those individuals, is he redeeming and uniting a people for himself, over which he presides as the Head?
 - We don't talk about church membership at IDC because we want to have our theological T's crossed and ecclesiastical I's dotted. We're not just interested in numerical growth. There will be no reward in heaven for having a long list of church members. No, we talk about church membership because we love Jesus. And Jesus loves his

church – so much that he made “church member” the default status of every one of his followers.

Third, church membership is rooted in spiritual unity.

The fact that you and I have each been baptized in the same Spirit, united to the same Christ, sharing a common faith, means there is an objective unity that exists between us.

- We may not look alike, we may not like the same things, we may even speak a different language. But we share a common identity in Christ.
- You and I have more in common with a Christian from 3rd century Asia Minor than we do with our unbelieving neighbors.
- This spiritual unity is more foundational than all of the differences we have with one another, and all of the commonalities we share with non-Christians.

“But you’re talking about membership in the universal church – the church composed of Christians of all kinds, in all places, at all times throughout history.”
...Yes

“Then why do we talk about local church membership so much? Isn’t it enough for you that I am a member of the universal church?” ...No

Membership in a local church is how you express membership in the universal church. And it’s how you enjoy all of its benefits.

- There’s a specific group of people for me to serve, and be served by. There’s a specific group of people who are holding me accountable, and who I hold accountable. There’s a specific group of people who receive the benefit of my spiritual gifts, and vice versa. There’s a specific group of pastors to whom I submit and who will give an account for me.
- None of this is available to you in a meaningful way apart from membership in a local expression of the body of Christ.

Membership in a local church is the special provision made by Jesus for worship, fellowship, instruction, discipline, and service.

Otherwise, the rest of this passage doesn’t really make sense...

#2. Two Dangers that Threaten Healthy Church Membership (v. 14-26)

1 Corinthians tells us that the body of Christ in Corinth was fractured in many ways. In chapters 12-14 one of those fractures is with the use of spiritual gifts.

- *1 Cor. 12:4-7, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”*

- The church in Corinth was behaving as though there was a hierarchy of spiritual gifts (the surprise Lexus-in-the-driveway gifts, and the jelly-of-the-month-club gifts), and therefore a hierarchy of those who manifested the right gifts.
 - Those with less prominent gifts were marginalized, and those with the flashier, public gifts were magnified.

Paul addresses both groups...

Don't underestimate your role in the body. (v. 14-20)

“For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.”

Just as the parts of our physical bodies are functionally diverse, so it is with the body of Christ.

- As Christians and church members, the Holy Spirit has gifted us in a particular way so that we can perform a specific function in the body of Christ.

You shouldn't underestimate your role in the body because...

- This hustle and bustle of gifts and services and activities that Paul talks about is both necessary and intentional.

Functional diversity is necessary.

- In order to have a healthy body, all of the parts have to do what they were designed to do, in coordination with the other parts.
- And one part's usefulness is not judged by another part's function.
 - You wouldn't curse your hands because they won't eat.

Functional diversity is intentional. Variety is God's gracious design. “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.”

IDC, just as we are not Christians by accident, we are also not members of this body by accident. Jesus has a vested interest in his churches becoming healthy gospel communities. He shed his blood for that. So we need all kinds of people fulfilling all kinds of roles within the body.

- Just because you can't preach like someone else, or counsel like someone else, or host like someone else, etc, DOES NOT mean you are less of a member of this body.
- Take advantage of every opportunity to serve one another. Be zealous to do good to one another.

- When there is a need, silence is not an option. So don't underestimate your role in the body.

There are no "useless outer toes" in the body of Christ.

Don't underestimate someone else's role in the body. (v. 21-26)

"The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

You are not so gifted that you don't need other Christians in your life.

- A false sense of superiority always breeds a false sense of self-sufficiency. "I am better than you, therefore I have no need of you."

Paul continues, *"On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable."*

- The parts of our bodies that are weaker and less honorable, we take greater care and we show more modesty. So it is with the body of Christ.

Those with the more prominent gifts are to show honor to those with the less prominent gifts, because that's exactly what God has done!

How do we show that kind of protection and modesty within the body of Christ?

- **Be Humble:** Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.
- **Take Initiative:** Be attentive to the needs of others. Consider their needs as more important than your own. Lower the threshold of your own inconvenience so you can serve others.
 - Too many people are not willing to be inconvenienced in order to serve a brother or sister in Christ. That is a threat to a healthy functioning gospel community.

"If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."

A word to non-Christians...

- This is the biblical vision for what the church ought to be. We don't often live up to it. We're still not perfect, but Jesus is. And when Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead, he was securing redemption and forgiveness of sins for you, and he was creating a people for you to belong to. Jesus is the solution to the problem of wandering through life feeling aimless and alone.

#3. Five Duties of Church Membership

C – Cultivate Empathy (v. 26)

O – Outdo One Another in Showing Honor (v. 24-25)

V – Value Every Member (v. 21-24)
I – Implement Your Gifts (v. 14-20)
D – Devote Yourself to Unity (v. 12-13)

Cultivate Empathy

When one member suffers, all suffer with it. Weep with those weep. Rejoice with those who rejoice. These are signs of Christian maturity. So cultivate empathy.

Outdo One Another in Showing Honor

Don't seek honor for yourself. Don't promote yourself. Make it your aim to honor and bless others.

Value Every Member

Be grateful for your fellow members of this church. God has placed them in your life to do you good. And for you to do them good.

Implement Your Gifts

The Holy Spirit has given every single Christian particular gifts for the common good (12:7). Whatever yours is, use it! And thank God that he has designed you in a particular way, for this particular time, to build up this particular body of Christ.

Devote Yourself to Unity

Unity is not something we create or achieve. It is accomplished by the Holy Spirit through the work of Jesus Christ.

- [Bonhoeffer, Life Together](#): "Christian unity is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."

But if we're not careful we can crush and mangle our unity. Just look at the church in Corinth. Devote yourself to maintaining our unity for the sake of the name of Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, family, church members, let's pursue this biblical vision for church membership together in 2021.