

Direction & Devotion
Belonging and Committing: Church Membership (Romans 12:1-6a)
1/9/22

Intro

Demonstrating church membership to be biblical, logical, and practical, is not a challenge.

I wasn't always able to make such a bold statement. I was skeptical of such claims and suspicious of those making them. However, I was forced to wrestle with them when I lived in the South. Having spent roughly twelve years living there, including nine years in various ministry positions, revealed my own skepticism. To not be a member of a church was like being canceled and so it seemed like everyone you met was a proud "member" of a church. What I often saw lived and practiced led me to be skeptical and confused about church membership. What I read in Scripture led me to rejoice that my skepticism and confusion were not barriers to God, His Word, and His Spirit. What I read in Scripture convinced and comforted me that church membership was a good gift of God.

Preaching and teaching about church membership in the PNW has been a challenge to communicate in ways that help people overcome various misunderstandings, unhelpful experiences, or resistant attitudes. One of the challenges is communicating a biblical and practical process for individuals to be recognized as a member of Christ's body and communicating the Bible's attractive and compelling vision for life together as members of the same unique church. A process for individuals and a vision for life together are distinct and yet harmonious. You can't really talk about one without the other which itself is a challenge.

I have somewhat of a sense of relief that other pastors, particularly in the PNW, encounter the same challenges. In a journal article entitled: *How to Talk about Membership on the West Coast*, **Kyle Schwahn**, who pastors in Spokane, WA [writes](#):

"I've lived in the Pacific Northwest my whole life. I've never pastored in any other region of the country. But as I've had the opportunity to cross paths with pastors from different locations, I see distinct cultural elements of the PNW which may indicate trends on the West Coast generally. Our **pioneering spirit** can become suspicious of authority. Our passion for **personal expression** can morph into a **commitment to personal preference**. Our **willingness to break tradition** sometimes turns into an **unwillingness to recognize or affiliate with any tradition**. Like an unseen river current, these trends subtly tug people away from a biblical commitment to the local church."¹

¹ Schwahn, Kyle, *How to Talk about Membership on the West Coast*, 9Marks Journal: Church Membership, 5/7/2019, <https://www.9marks.org/article/how-to-talk-about-membership-on-the-west-coast/> accessed 1/6/2022.

Personally, I have heard statements, statements such as:

“I don’t need to submit to a church body; my relationship with God is personal and private.”

[pioneering spirit, suspicious of authority]

“I connect better with God out in nature when it’s just me, my bible, and the Holy Spirit” **[personal expression]**

“Church membership? Organized religion is about control and it’s not in the bible. I don’t need to belong to a church, I belong to God.” **[willingness to break tradition, unwillingness to recognize or affiliate with any tradition]**

I think those statements, in some ways can be traced to the general cultural elements of the PNW, but they are not just simply cultural, they are spiritual. They may be more unique to this area of the country, but they are not unique to mankind.

Perhaps you would make statements like these or upon hearing them, resonate with them. If so, I want you to consider possible assumptions and beliefs underlying those statements. I want you to test those statements, assumptions, and beliefs against the clarity of words and truth found in the Scripture.

Consider the possibility that you have **formed beliefs about church membership not rooted in biblical truth**, but false assumptions.

Consider the possibility that **the passion for personal expression could be a blind spot** that prevents you from seeing the value of committing to anyone or anything that doesn’t match your preference.

Consider the possibility that **belonging and committing to Christ and belonging and committing to a church is in many ways, one in the same.**

Consider the possibility that **this too is the tender care and loving protection** God creatively ordered for your good and for your joy.

Like all of God’s gifts, our adversary wants us to reject God’s goodness and scorn at His means of care and protection by deceiving us. If he can cast doubt on God’s character, if he can get us to believe that God is holding something back, if he can question what God has clearly said and distort it, If he can present us with an alternative, then we become easier targets for death and destruction OR at the very least, he attempts to keep us under the weight of guilt and shame instead of the freedom found in Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Jesus has overcome death and destruction. He has borne the full weight of our guilt and our shame. He says: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. **Luke 12:32 (ESV).**

My intent is not to present an apologetic of church membership. Instead, I’m starting from the premise that church membership is a biblical doctrine. My intent is not to describe or defend a process of being recognized as an individual member Christ’s body. Instead, I think the truths in our text will address, warn, and exhort us accordingly.

Renewed Worship (vv.1-2)—A Transformed Mind

Romans 12:1–2 (ESV) ¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Wherever we are and whatever we do, a presentation is taking place. A presentation of what? A presentation of worship. We present ourselves, our bodies in worship all the time. How we view our physical body and the type of care we give our bodies is a matter of worship. Everyone cares for their physical body.

We care for our bodies by eating and drinking certain things, not eating, and drinking certain things. If we eat the wrong things, or too much of good things, our bodies, which includes our emotions, are affected in ways that can be good or bad, helpful and unhelpful. If we do not get the proper rest, our bodies will let us know by struggling to effectively respond to what our minds are telling us to do.

As you know, a new year for many brings a renewed effort to care for their bodies. Money will be spent on exercise equipment and food. There will be a renewed attention to choices and routines that reinforce values and goals. If we were to ask the simple questions: **Why will you care for your body and what will you do to care for it? Multiple choice answer** might look something like:

- A) I want to feel better
- B) Shed fat, build muscle
- C) Improve my overall health. OR
- D) All of the above.

We can probably resonate with or even validate each of those reasons through human experience. However, why we care for our bodies and what we will do it is really a matter of “Who?” If we ask another question: **Who are you doing this for? Multiple choice answer** might look something like:

- A) Myself
- B) Loved ones, OR
- C) All of the above.

If the “Why” we care for our bodies and the “What” we do to care for them is really a matter of “**Who?**” then it is really a matter of worship. How do we know this? Paul uses the language of worship.

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, [**this is the why**]
to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, [**what**]
holy and acceptable to God, [**who**] which is your spiritual worship.

Paul uses the language of worship because it directs us to “belonging.” You are not your own, you belong to God. You are not God. You cannot do anything you put your mind to. You are limited in every respect: by knowledge and energy, by your gender and age, by skills and abilities, by your shape and height. Why? Because God created you, you didn’t create you. You don’t belong to yourself, you belong to God.

He uses the language of worship because it directs us to “belonging” but His ownership of us is not about being property. His ownership of you is about setting His love towards you. We know this to be the heart of God because God, in Christ Jesus, demonstrated His love for us, by giving Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 5:2). We have been united with Christ forever, we are His body, we have been made holy and acceptable.

As His body, God expects that we will not only **taste and see** that He is good, but that we will **test and see** that His will and ways are good, acceptable, and perfect. As we present our bodies to him as a living sacrifice, we are charged with two things: transformation and non-conformity.

Transformation and non-conformity to the world takes place by having our minds renewed by Christ and His Word. If you belong to God, transformation and non-conformity to the world will take place. Why? Because Christ loves and cares for His body. More specifically, he loves and cares for you, the individual members of His body.

As he loves and cares for us, we no longer present ourselves as **self-determining** but are transformed by **Scripture Alone**;

we no longer present ourselves as **self-sufficient** but are transformed through **Faith Alone**;

no longer conforming to the world’s standard of **self-righteous** but transformed by **Grace Alone**;

no longer conforming to the world through **self-improvement** but transformed through **Christ Alone**;

no longer conforming to the world through **self-promotion** or by seeking to increase **self-esteem**, but transformed by seeking **God’s glory Alone**.

Transition: Wouldn’t it be wonderful if those statements were always true of us. Now, they are not always true of us, but they are always true of Christ. Because we belong to Him, one day, they will be true of us. But until then...

Realistic Danger (v.3)—An Inflated Mind

³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

As an apostle, Paul is not giving his opinion or advice. He is speaking as one who has received grace. One, who before being united to Christ, thought highly of himself. He belonged to the right country, clan, and family with the birth-certificate to prove it. He was committed and zealous with the diplomas and resume to show it. But God, being rich in mercy, one day on the road, humbled him and began to transform him.

Instead of testifying about himself, he would testify of Christ. Instead of advancing in his religion, he would advance the gospel. Instead of standing ovations he would suffer greatly for the sake of Jesus' name.

It wasn't as though Paul no longer had a great mind. It wasn't as though his former training and experience were useless. No. Being blinded by the glory of Christ caused him to see himself as he really was. He was a man in great need and in continued need.

[BARRIERS IN PNW]: The temptation in all of us is to think of ourselves as people who currently possess faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ and because we have the indwelling Spirit of God and the Scriptures, we are no longer in need. It is true that in Christ we have all we need. The indwelling Spirit of God is our helper, and the Scriptures are sufficient.

Our text proves we need frequent reminding that the temptation to think wrongly about ourselves is ever present. The **temptation to think more highly about ourselves** is because **we think too lowly of Christ and His body**. Christ, as head of His body, ministers to His own body in different geographic locations. In and through these local churches, He tenderly cares and lovingly protects us by having the members of his body care for and protect us.

Transition: How can I say that?

Relational Care (vv.4-5)—A Servant Mindset

⁴For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and **individually members one of another**. ⁶Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...

You, your body and soul belong to Christ, and you have been united with Him. To be in Christ is to be a member (a part) of His body—that's membership.

You, your body and soul belong to one another, and you have been united with the other members. To be in Christ is to not just be known and to belong as one of His members, but to be known and belong to the other members—that's membership.

To say church membership isn't biblical, to believe you do not need the rest of the body of Christ because you have His Spirit and the Scriptures, to be more committed to the personal expression of your own faith than committed to expression of Christ in His collective body, is the same error Paul confronted with the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 12:21 (ESV) ²¹The 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."

To believe that you do not need to **place yourself under the care and protection of Christ** through other members gathered in a particular location, to believe **the measure of faith and gifts of grace assigned to you is all you need**, is to deny that it is God who has assigned your measure of faith and to deny the **purpose of God in giving gifts of grace to you**. There not for you only, but for me and for everyone else gathered here called Redeemer Fellowship.

Conclusion

What is church membership? Church membership is one reminder that I am not my own. I have been purchased by and belong to Jesus Christ. It is also the reality that I belong to others whom Christ has purchased, my brothers and sisters. Because I have been made one with Him and with you, means that we have a specific, unique, mutual claim on one another. This mutual claim is a good gift from God intended to cultivate persevering faith that grows in the love Christ, demonstrates joyful obedience to Him, and cares humbly for the body by serving the members.

I'm not ashamed to declare that Jesus Christ is my Lord, my treasure. Because we are gathered as the household of faith, those of you who would say the same, I'm not ashamed to call you brother and sister. I want you to know, my aim is to know more of Him and to love Him more as an individual member. I want you to know, my aim is the same in my public life, so I'm exhorting you, as your brother, love the Lord Jesus Christ with all your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor as yourself. Love Him more today than yesterday. Take pleasure in obeying His commands. Care for and protect one another—as Christ cares for and protects you.