



## Ecclesiology: The Study of the Church

### Lesson 13: The Mandate and Need for Church Membership

---

#### INTRODUCTION

1. What are some reasons Christians give for not becoming a member of a local church? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### MAIN IDEA

Is church membership biblical? Yes! We see church membership in several passages in the New Testament which teach that:

- Churches have an “inside” and an “outside.”
- Church members are expected to know who does and does not belong to the church.
- Christians are under the authority of the church, such that if they persist in unrepentant sin, they are to be excluded from it.
- Christians are told to submit to their leaders, which means giving up our autonomy and putting ourselves under the church’s authority.
- Leaders will give an account for those entrusted to their care, which means that they have to know who those people are.

Christians need to be members of a local church so that, through a church’s accountability and exhortation, we are protected from sin’s deceiving, hardening effects. In this lesson, we are going to see the mandate and the need for membership in the local church.

#### I. The Mandate for Membership

One reason some people don’t join a church is because they think church membership is not in the New Testament. And some churches don’t have formal membership because they don’t see it in the New Testament. This, then, is the million-dollar question. We can say all we want about the benefits of church membership, or our need for church membership, but we can only say that Christians must be members of local churches if that’s what Scripture teaches. So, we must consider the question, “Is church membership biblical?”

Many people claim that church membership is not taught in the New Testament. So, we are going to test that claim by seeing how it stacks up to a few New Testament passages.

#### 1 Corinthians 5:1–13

1. If the Corinthian church didn't practice church membership, could they exclude someone from their fellowship, as Paul instructs them to (vv. 4–5, 11–13; see also Matt. 18:15–20)? Keep in mind that Paul assumes that “outsiders” will be present in the church’s meetings (1 Cor. 14:23–25). \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Notice that Paul gives very different instructions about how the Corinthians are to treat those who are inside the church and those who are outside (vv. 9–13). If the Corinthian church didn't practice membership, how could they have known who was “inside” and who was “outside” the church? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Hebrews 13:17**

3. Who does the author instruct Christians to submit to? Does this mean that all Christians must submit to all church leaders everywhere? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. Imagine a situation in which an elder of a local church is faithfully preaching God’s Word, and he confronts a sin in your life that you just don't want to address. How is this situation different for you if you're a member of the church versus a nonmember? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. Summarize the relationship between membership and submission to the church’s leaders? Can a Christian truly submit to a church’s leaders without joining the church? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. Let’s look at the question from another angle: Who are church leaders to give an account for? How are church leaders supposed to know who they are to give an account for? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

We see church membership in the New Testament in that:

- Churches have an “inside” and an “outside.” (1 Cor. 5:12)
- Christians are expected to know who does and does not belong to the church. (1 Cor. 5:9–12)
- Christians are under the authority of the church, such that if they persist in unrepentant sin, they are to be excluded from it. (1 Cor. 5:4–5, 13)
- Christians are told to submit to their leaders, which means giving up our autonomy and putting ourselves under the church’s authority. (Heb. 13:17)
- Leaders will give an account for those entrusted to their care, which means that they have to know who those people are. (Heb. 13:17)

7. After what we have studied, is every Christian biblically obligated to join a local church? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
8. If a church does or doesn't practice church membership, how will that affect:
- a) A church's attempts to practice church discipline? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- b) The church's ability to hold each other accountable to live holy lives? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- c) Leaders' relationships to those who are in the church? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- c) The level of trust and depth of community that will develop in the church? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

## II. The Need for Church Membership

When we say, "Church membership is biblical," we don't claim to find an exact copy of any church's membership practices (which may include a membership class, an interview, and so on) in the New Testament. Rather, the New Testament clearly shows that churches are to have this kind of formal belonging and that all Christians are to commit themselves to local churches in this way.

The book of Hebrews is a "word of exhortation" (Heb. 13:22) addressed to professing Christians who are in danger of giving up their faith under the relentless pressure of persecution. In Hebrews chapter 3, the author specifically warns his readers not to be hardened by sin's deceitfulness:

### Hebrews 3:7–14.

**Note:** After the introductory remark, "Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says," verses 7 through 11 are an extended quotation from Psalm 95, which itself refers back to earlier incidents recorded in Exodus 17 and Numbers 14.

1. What does the Holy Spirit exhort us not to do (vv. 7–8)? What does that mean? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
2. What negative example does the author hold up for us? (Read Exodus 17:1–7) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
3. What happened to the Israelites who hardened their hearts and disobeyed God (vv. 10–11)? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

4. What does the author of Hebrews tell us to make sure doesn't happen to us (vv. 12–13)? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What does this passage tell us to do in order to make sure that we don't fall away from the living God (v. 13)? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. In verse 13, the author warns us not to be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. What does this teach us about sin? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. How is someone who is not a member of a church especially susceptible to being hardened by sin's deceitfulness? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. How do we know that we share in Christ (v. 14)? What effect should this have on how we live as Christians? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. In light of this passage, how would you respond to someone who said, "I don't need to join a church. I can grow as a Christian just fine by coming to church whenever I want to, wherever I want to"?<sup>1</sup>  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

After looking at the passages above, let's define church membership:

"Church membership is a formal commitment to an identifiable, local body of believers where (1) the church is committed to each member's discipleship through teaching, preaching, elder oversight, and mutual edification toward holy living; and (2) the members are committed to assemble with the regular gathering of the church and submit to the care and authority of biblically qualified elders that God has placed in that local church in order that the church may be built up and God may be glorified."

---

<sup>1</sup> Bobby Jamieson, [Committing to One Another: Church Membership](#), ed. Mark Dever, 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 17–20.