

Just to remind you of the schedule for the next few weeks:

Next Wednesday night, the 14th, we have our second class during K4T.

Then, the following Wednesday, the 21st, we have membership interviews. You'll each meet with an elder to go over your testimony and be able to ask any questions that you didn't want to ask in this context.

Then on Saturday, the 24th, we have our final group class in the fellowship hall. That will be with Pastor Marc where he will go over the history of the church, vision for the future, and open it up for questions.

So that's the map of where we are heading over the next few weeks together.

The purpose of tonight is to bring clarity to some common areas of confusion we've observed during the membership process in the past.

One of those is church membership itself. What is it, why is it necessary? What are the benefits of being a member as opposed to not being a member? Who leads the church, what does elder-rule mean?

So those are the topics we're going to be looking at tonight. And then next week we'll look at baptism and a few other issues.

So, tonight we are going to narrow in on church membership.

The ministry I was converted in would actually boast about the fact they didn't have a membership.

They would kind of wear it like a badge of honor as if they were doing something noble and righteous by deviating from history and tradition and not having any kind of membership process at their church.

And I remember as a new believer just naively jumping on that bandwagon with them because after all, as I read through the NT I didn't see any verse *commanding me* to become a member of a local church.

So I bought into the *caricature* of church membership and therefore I just assumed that membership was a way that more conservative or traditional churches were going beyond Scripture and trying to manipulate and control people and ensure that they were committed to the ministry financially.

Or perhaps even so that they could pad their numbers in reporting back to their denomination. "Look at how many members we have."

And I have no doubt that may be the motivation in some ministries. Church membership could

very well be a tradition that is done because “we’ve always done it this way.”

In some cases, it could very well be motivated by a desire to ensure financial support from members.

It could very well be a way to control people and exercise authority in a way that God hasn’t granted church leaders in the NT.

There are abuses out there certainly. But that is no different than any biblical doctrine or practice. There are always abuses. There are also wrong applications from right doctrine.

So the fact that church membership is done poorly in certain contexts or motivated by impure desires is no reason to reject it nor assume that those ministries represent all ministries when it comes to church membership.

As I have grown in my understanding of the Scriptures over the years, here is how I think about and like to articulate the idea of church membership now:

It is not explicitly commanded in the NT *but it is undeniably implied.*

In other words, there is no actual command to become a member of any local church in the NT. But it is assumed, implied that believers will be committed members of local churches.

And so, in our time together tonight my goal is to demonstrate to you that the Scriptures do indeed operate under this assumption.

And I’m actually going to borrow an outline from a pastor friend of mine, he got it from another pastor, I don’t know of any way to improve on it.

We’re going to look at 5 evidences in the NT for local church membership.

I’ll give them to you up front and then we’ll briefly walk through each one. And I will repeat them as we go through them so you don’t need to worry about catching all of them right now.

- 1) *The Example* of the early church,
- 2) *The Existence* of church government
- 3) *The Exercise* of church discipline
- 4) *The Exhortations* to mutual edification
- 5) *The Explanation* of the church as a body

Let’s first look at first evidence in the NT for local church membership: Namely, the example of the early church.

As we read through the book of Acts it becomes clear that in the early church, coming to Christ meant becoming a part of Christ’s body (the church).

In the book of Acts when individuals repented of their sin & believed in Jesus Christ for salvation, they were baptized & added to the church.

Turn to Acts 2:41 and we can see an example of this: **“So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.”**

Added to what? Let’s keep reading and see if that question is answered. Notice verse 42, **“They [that is, the individuals who were added] were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship [that is, to gathering together corporately as a body to share spiritual & physical resources], to the breaking of bread and to prayer....⁴⁴ And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common.....⁴⁶ Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number [that is, to the number of the Jerusalem church] day by day those who were being saved.”**

We obviously can’t talk about all of the details there. But what I’m wanting us to focus on is that their conversion immediately added them to a local context of believers who were in close fellowship with one another.

Gathering together and sharing regularly in body life.

What were they added to? The local church there in Jerusalem.

Skip ahead to Acts 5:14: **“And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to *their number*”**

Acts 16:5 says, **“So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.”**

In these passages, it’s clear that the believers were being added not merely to the universal church, which exists of all believers in every place, but also were added to a specific local expression of that universal church.

Furthermore, as you’re aware, many of the epistles of the NT were written to local churches. One of those epistles, Romans, contains an interesting reference as it relates to our topic.

Take a look at Romans 16:1, **“I commend to you [that is, to you believers in the church at Rome] our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea;”**

Phoebe was a known member & servant of particular local church. And if you continue to read Romans 16 you find Paul highlighting name after name after name of faithful servants, many of whom were in the church in Rome.

Why is that important? Because it demonstrates that not only was there a local church in Rome, but the people were identified within that local church by name.

Paul knew specific people who were committed and active in the church in Rome.

Turn over to Colossians 4:12 for another example: **“Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings,”**

One of your number. That implies he is a member, he is among those who are the church in Colossae.

So, the 1st evidence for local church membership in the NT is the example of the early church.

The second evidence in the NT for local church membership is the existence of church government. We’ll actually spend more time on this one than the others.

What we are highlighting here is that church membership is *implied* because the NT requires elders to care for the flock of God allotted to their charge.

Let’s look at a few examples of this: Acts 20:28, Paul is speaking to the elders of the church in Ephesus. And notice what he says to them.

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

Now, notice that in this passage it is clear that the primary responsibility of church leaders is to a particular flock, a particular group of people.

In other words, Paul is clearly not talking about everyone in the world, or even all Christians in every place in the world.

Rather he is talking about a particular group of people, in this case the church in Ephesus.

And so the question is: How do elders know who the flock is that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers of? Who exactly are elders responsible to shepherd?

Is it every single person that just happens to step foot on church property? They visit the ministry once?

What about those who come a few times? What about the people who only come on Christmas & Easter?

What about the person who comes every other week when they have nothing more important to do?

As we ask these questions you can see the importance of church membership. Because practically speaking the only way to know who the flock is would be some kind of church membership process. Where a commitment has been made to a particular body of believers.

Now, the *process* of what that looks like is silent in the Scriptures. How formalized it is. What kind of process new members go through. Do they stand in front of the congregation and take an oath. Do they fill out an application? Do they attend a class like this?

Certainly, the *process* may look different ministry to ministry. But the *concept* of membership is implied in the existence of church government.

Now, one might potentially object to this by saying, “We don’t need an actual membership for the elders to know who they are accountable to shepherd, rather we simply identify those who are in the church by their regular, consistent attendance.”

But there are difficulties with that. First, how do we define what is regular and consistent?—4 times a month on Sundays. What about any mid-week meetings?

Is it 3 times a month on Sundays and most of the mid-week meetings? Is it once a month?

So you can see the first problem with that is the subjective and ambiguous nature of “regular attendance.”

The second problem with automatically including all regular attenders as “in the church” is that you would inevitably include unbelievers.

It could be unbelievers who *know* they are unbelievers but they are attending because they are curious about the Bible or the Christian message.

They could be attending because a friend or family member has encouraged them to do so. But they are not a Christian and know they are not a Christian.

You would also include unbelievers who *think* they are believers but they are self-deceived.

They aren’t able to articulate the gospel and it is clear after interacting with them that they are not trusting in Christ.

So, based on these potential difficulties, someone might say, “Ok, the elders know who they are responsible to shepherd because someone regularly comes and they communicate to the leadership that they are a believer and they are making this church their home church.”

To which I would say, “you just demonstrated the process of church membership.” So there’s a stated commitment to the leaders that I am committing myself to this body.

And then we would ask, how do the rest of the people know? How does the rest of the church know that you are committing yourself to the body? The leaders communicate it to them. That’s what church membership is.

Let’s look at another passage: Hebrews 13:17, “**Obey your leaders and submit to them (and then the writer gives the reason why we must obey our leaders & submit to them), for they**

are keeping watch over your souls and will have to give an account [they will give an account specifically for your soul.]”

Now the question for each believer is, “Who are my leaders? Who are the leaders that I must obey and submit to?”

If you are not a committed member of a church, I don’t see how someone can possibly obey this passage.

Believers are responsible to obey and submit to their leaders, and the leaders are responsible to keep watch over their souls. To shepherd them.

And this is impossible without some form of church membership.

Let’s look at another passage. 1 Peter 5:2-3. Peter writing to the elders: **“shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness 3 nor yet as lording it over those [watch this] allotted to your charge”**

Again we see the same idea: God has sovereignly allotted to your charge a group of people for you to shepherd and care for.

The obvious implication is that the elders have to know who that is.

The elders of a church are NOT responsible for the spiritual well-being of the people at the church down the road or for every individual who just happens to visit the church or who happens to attend sporadically.

Rather, they are responsible to shepherd those who have committed themselves to their particular church.

Now, before we move on to the next evidence of church membership, while we are on this topic of church government, let’s talk about who leads the church.

We believe the NT teaches that a plurality of elders have been given the responsibility for oversight, leadership in the church.

And I first want to demonstrate the plurality that is emphasized in the NT, before we talk about what the office actually entails.

If you were to study the NT word for “elder” you would find that in the book of Acts, it is always used in the plural when referring to office of elder in the church.

I’ll just give you a couple of references on that:

Acts 14:23, **“When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”**

Acts 15:4, **“When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them**

This remains consistent throughout the New Testament:

Titus 1:5, **“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you.”**

James 5:14, **“Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him,”**

1 Peter 5:1, **“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you...”**

1 Peter 5:5, **“You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders.”**

Every church should have a plurality of elders. Granted, there may be a time early on in its history, where a ministry has only one elder because it is a recent church plant.

But even in those cases, that man should be in the process of identifying and raising up more elders. And also welcoming the oversight of the elders who sent him out to plant that church.

So a plurality of elders. Now, what does an elder do?

There are 3 different Greek words, all used interchangeably to speak of this 1 office of elder. The first word “presbuteros,” which is translated “elder” in our NT.

This is the word we just traced out in those references. The term “elders” refers to seasoned maturity and wisdom of those in leadership. Also, the honor and dignity of the office.

This term emphasizes the man’s spiritual maturity necessary for the task.

Secondly, you have the Greek word (episkopos), which is translated “overseer or bishop” in our NT.

It is emphasizing the general responsibility of guardianship, the ministry of oversight and governing matters in the church.

This would include the responsibility to protect, guard, oversee the flock. This is the leadership responsibility.

Watching over the whole of the congregation, not only to protect the church as a whole but also to guard the purpose and mission of the church.

And then thirdly you have the Greek word (poimēn), which is translated pastor or shepherd.

The only time this noun is used to refer to those in church leadership is Ephesians 4:11, “And He

gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors (shepherds) and teachers.”

This word emphasizes care and love for the people. A shepherd provides food and care for the sheep. This emphasizes the task of full range care of the flock (through spiritually feeding, leading, protecting & caring for the flock.

Now, I want to show you a few passages where all three terms come together. So you can see that the NT uses all three of these terms to refer to the same office.

Acts 20:17, **“17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders (presbuteros) of the church...”**

Now look at verse 28, **“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (episkopos), to shepherd (ποιμαίνω) the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.**

Elders are overseers who do the work of shepherding.

Look at Titus 1:5, Paul again uses two of these terms interchangeably: **“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders (presbuteros) in every city as I directed you, 6 namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. 7 For the [d]overseer (episkopos) must be above reproach as God’s steward,**

He uses elder and overseer interchangeably to talk about the same man.

All three terms show up again to refer to the same office in 1 Peter 5:1-2, **“Therefore, I exhort the elders [presbuteros]...2 [to] shepherd [poimaino] the flock of God among you, exercising oversight [episcopos].”**

Again, elders shepherd and give oversight. These are the three terms the NT uses to refer to the same office, emphasizing different aspects of that same office.

So that’s the office. Now, who qualifies for this office?

Let’s look at 1 Timothy 3:1, **“It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of [a]overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.**

First, then, it is a man who has a continual craving for the work. He is not urged into it against his will. He is not manipulated into the role.

Rather he has an internal, continual desire, notice, for the *work*. not a title, not influence, not significance.

No, he desires the *work* of ministering to the people of God. So first, a continual craving.

Next, a character commensurate with the office. Verses 2-7, **“An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not addicted to wine [c]or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money.**

An irreproachable life. Not a sinless life, but a godly life with no glaring blemishes. Any accusations that are raised do not stick to the man.

This is not talking about being free from sin, it’s not talking about perfection. This is really stressing that he has a clean moral and spiritual reputation.

Concerning the patterns and habits of his life, he must be above legitimate questions.

It’s not that he doesn’t sin, but he cannot be known as a man who has a pattern of ignoring something sinful in his life.

There can’t be anything in his life to which people can point and say, “that’s an obvious area of neglect, that’s an obvious area of persistent sin.”

He can’t have anything in his life that would prevent him from being a model for the congregation to follow.

So, a continual craving, a character commensurate with the office, next, a capacity to teach and lead. We see this at the end of verse 2, “able to teach.”

Paul fills this out a little more in the parallel passage in Titus 1:9, **“9 holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.”**

So there’s the capacity to teach. And next a capacity to lead: back in 1 Timothy 3:4, **“He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity 5 (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?),**

What does his leadership produce in the lives of those closest to him, his family, his children?

And then lastly, confirmation after a season of testing.

6 and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation [d]incurred by the devil. 7 And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.”

The church, including the leaders and the congregation, acknowledge, they confirm this man’s character and gifting.

As we look at the responsibilities of elders, we can just note a few examples:

They are to live a life of exemplary godliness – 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:6-9

To determine church policy – Acts 15:22

Know and defend the truth – 1 Timothy 3:9

Ordain others – 1 Timothy 4:14

To preach and teach – 1 Timothy 5:17

To provide spiritual oversight – 1 Peter 5:1

They equip the saints for the work of ministry – Ephesians 4:12

Now, just a quick note on why congregationalism is so popular and attractive in our day. That is a church that is led by the congregation, not by elders.

That form of church government is not a result of strong biblical evidence, but rather a reaction to the catastrophic effects it has on the church when men who aren't qualified to lead are in positions of oversight.

If elders were held to the standard that we just covered, and if elders exercised their authority not as untouchable and unaccountable lords over the congregation, but rather as godly, humble servants, no one would resist their leadership.

In the same way that a wife will joyfully come under a husband when he is leading the way he is called do, but she will resist his leadership when he is negligent or abusive in his leadership.

I saw an article this week depicting the sad testimony of what has become common at the leadership level in so many churches: And I was reading it I couldn't help but think: No wonder people are so afraid of male leadership in the church.

Here are the common tendencies and characteristics of men in church leadership today:
They rarely demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit.

They seek a minimalist structure of accountability. Indeed, if they could get away with it, they would operate in a totally autocratic fashion, with heavy, top down leadership.

They expect behavior of others they don't expect of themselves. Hypocrisy. They preach a standard that they are unwilling to live.

They exhibit spiritual pride, seeing almost everyone as inferior to themselves, simply because of their position. Criticizing others frequently, even other leaders.

They show favoritism. It is clear that they have a favored few while they marginalize the rest. They are constantly defensive when criticized.

They have frequent anger outbursts when they don't get their way, especially when their leadership is resisted.

They are duplicitous in speech, say one thing to some people, but a different thing to others. They are liars. They can't be trusted, talk out of both sides of their mouth.

They seek to dismiss or marginalize people before they attempt to develop them. People are means to their ends; they see them as projects, not God's people who need mentoring and developing.

They are manipulative. Their most common tactic is using partial truths to get their way.

They lack transparency. Autocratic leaders are rarely transparent.

They do not allow for pushback or disagreement. When someone does disagree, he or she becomes the victim of the leader's anger and marginalization.

They surround themselves with "yes men." Their inner circle often includes close friends and family members, who would be on their side no matter what.

They communicate poorly. In essence, any clarity of communication would reveal their autocratic behavior, so they keep their communications unintelligible and obtuse.

They are self-absorbed. In fact, they would unlikely see themselves in any of these symptoms.

But the fact that these men are in positions of leadership with known character flaws like these, is demonstrating the church at large has abandoned God's design for men in leadership.

The church is to be governed and led by a plurality of elders; who are morally, doctrinally and spiritually qualified men from within each local church.

Any elder, any pastor, which is a vocational elder, should be appointed by other qualified elders.

That includes each individual church, and that includes when sending a man out to establish a church.

So, the second evidence of local church membership in the NT is the existence of church government.

That brings us to the third evidence of local church membership in the NT. The exercise of church discipline.

Let's turn to Matthew 18:15, **"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. 16 "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. 17 "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."**

Here Jesus outlines the way the church is to seek the restoration of a believer who has fallen into sin and will not respond to rebuke.

And it is clear in this text that church membership is implied in the way that the church is supposed to discipline its unrepentant members.

Notice verse 17 again: If there is no actual church membership, who is this group of people called “the church” in verse 17?

It’s clearly not the invisible, universal church made up of all believers everywhere. How would you possibly “tell it to the church” if this was referring to all believers everywhere?

Rather this is a definable group of people who participate in this process and hold one another accountable.

Furthermore, church membership is also implied by the simple fact that excommunication even exists.

How you can put someone out of something if they were never in something? What does it mean to be in the church?

Look over at 1 Cor. 5:12-13, where Paul deals with the necessity of putting someone out of the church.

He says, **“12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within *the church*? 13 But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.”**

Notice that there is a group “in the church” and a group “outside the church.” Again, we see that being in the church is definable.

And such a removal like this would not be possible if there were no such thing as a formal church membership to be removed from.

So, the exercise of church discipline presupposes that the leaders and the members know who is technically part of the church and who isn’t.

They know who they are holding accountable to the standard of the NT. [[see 1 John 2:19 for another example of a departure from the church]]

By the way, have you noticed that there is *typically* a correlation between church membership and church discipline?

When there is no formal church membership in a ministry, a lot of times you will find no practice of church discipline.

In fact, typically, the only time any kind of church discipline happens in those environments is if there is a significant moral failure on the part of the senior pastor.

Other than that, you don't typically see it in ministries that don't have a membership.

It's interesting how those two go together. I would say there is at least one reason accounting for that:

It is very hard to follow through on church discipline when you don't know who is part of your church and who you are holding accountable.

And it does make me wonder if the reason many churches have abandoned membership is because those churches have abandoned biblical shepherding. I think there is often a connection between those two.

I've been asked this question several times through the years by people in our ministry: "I have a friend or family member who doesn't go to our church, professes Christ, and they are living in unrepentant sin."

"I've confronted them and they aren't repenting. What do I do now?"

Well, it's very clear what to do if they are a member in your church. If they are sinning and not responding to you, take someone else with you and talk to them about it. You can see that in the passage we read in Matthew 18.

But it's not clear what to do if they aren't a member of your church.

And the problem being highlighted there is the importance of local church membership. Because you cannot go through the Matthew 18 process unless someone is part of your church.

If they are in a ministry that doesn't practice church discipline, that becomes a much more difficult situation to minister to them in.

So, the exercise of church discipline assumes church membership.

And that brings us to the fourth evidence for local church membership, namely, the exhortations to mutual edification.

As you read the NT it is clear that the church is the body of Christ, and that God has called every member to a life devoted to the growth of the body.

All believers are exhorted to minister to the other members of the body by practicing the "one-another" commands of the NT. [[Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-7; 1 Pet. 4:10-11]].

This ministering to others, this exercising of our spiritual gifts, this building up of the body, can only take place in the context of the local church.

Just think about the command to “Bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2). It’s hard to do that when you don’t even who your one anothers are, and therefore you don’t know what their burdens are either.

The implication of that passage is that you are in close range fellowship with other believers. And you are ministering to one another.

Knowing their burdens, and struggles & how to pray for them & how to exhort them & encourage them in the truth, etc.; and that’s virtually impossible to do if you aren’t part of a church.

Allow me to give you some more references here so we can appreciate the NT’s emphasis on the one anothers being fulfilled in the context of the local church.

By the way, this is just a random sample. It’s the tip of the iceberg when considering all of the one anothers in the NT.

Think about the following commands that are given to each of us as believers & ask yourself: How can a person faithfully fulfill these commands apart from being a committed member of a local church?

And also keep in mind, every single one of these passages was written to a particular local church to be fulfilled in that local church.

Rom. 12:10, “be devoted to one another in brotherly love”;

Rom. 12:16, “be of the same mind toward one another”;

Rom. 15:7, “accept another”;

Rom. 15:14, “admonish one another”;

Rom. 16:16, “greet one another”

Phil. 2:3, “regard one another as more important than ourselves”

Col. 3:13, “bear with one another and forgive each other.” Now think about that. Bearing with one another and forgiving one another implies that we are living in such close proximity and fellowship with one another offense is inevitable.

Sin against one another is inevitable.

1 Thes. 4:18, “comfort one another”

1 Thes. 5:11, “encourage one another”

1 Thes. 5:13, “live at peace with one another”

Heb.10:24-25, “consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds by NOT forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as has become the habit of some but by continually encouraging one another and all the more as we see the day of Christ’s return drawing near”

1 Pet. 4:9, “be hospitable to one another without complaint”

1 Pet. 4:10, “employ your gifts in serving one another”

If someone is not a member of one local church, how can they be obedient to so many passages like these in the NT.

If these commands are not to be carried out in local assemblies they become nonsensical and highly impractical.

Now, before we move on to the fifth evidence, let me read that passage again in 1 Peter 4:10, and we can talk about serving and using one’s gift:

“As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

It is clear from this passage that believers are expected, even commanded, to be using their gifts for the building up of the body of Christ.

Peter says, “employ it, use it in serving *one another*.”

Look over at 1 Corinthians 12:4 for another passage on spiritual gifts: **“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. 7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.**

The emphasis today in the church when talking about spiritual gifts seems to be on identifying your spiritual gift.

Take a test, find out your gift before you start serving.

But remarkably, in the NT, there’s actually no command to identify your gift. That’s not the point of those passages.

It’s just assumed you’re going to be serving and identifying an area that you do well in.

The emphasis in these passages is on recognizing you have been given an ability and you have an obligation to serve and build up the body of Christ.

What is this ability, what is a spiritual gift? A couple of definitions I've found are helpful by a few authors:

Spiritual gifts are divine enablements for ministry in the local church. [[MacArthur]]

Here's another one that I thought was helpful: "a supernatural, Holy-Spirit energized ability, sovereignly given by God for service within the local church." [[Larry Petegrew]]

You'll notice in both of those definitions there is the idea of using your abilities within the context of the local church.

Your service, while not limited to the local church, should have its primary emphasis in the local church.

God has given you a gift to bless the particular body you are committing to.

Granted, you have freedom with regard to the giving of your time and resources to other ministries you may be interested in serving or supporting in some way.

But the primary giving of your time and resources should be to one particular body of believers. That is the design in the NT.

Now, a common question that gets asked is, "How do I know where to serve and in what capacity to serve?"

And I would say, over time you may be able to identify your gift in the language and categories that the NT gives us.

But it's also possible that you may never be able to get too specific in identifying your particular gift.

But the specific identification is not necessarily a problem. Why? Because there is no exhaustive list of gifts in the NT.

There are 3 primary passages that list out spiritual gifts in the NT, Romans 12, 1 Peter 4, and 1 Corinthians 12. All of them are significantly different.

Furthermore, the NT authors never use language in those passages that suggest they are giving an exhaustive and comprehensive list.

Rather, the particular gifts are highlighted in those particular letters because they are the more relevant gifts that those churches were either using, abusing, or simply confused about.

So, all that to say, for us when it comes to thinking about our own spiritual gift, we need to be thinking about it in terms of not specifically identifying it, though that might come.

But rather recognizing God has given me an ability to serve this particular body. And I am under obligation to be faithful in this service.

Which means, no member of any church should be a mere attendee, a spectator, a seat filler. The NT knows nothing of a professing Christian just attending a church service, and that's as far as their commitment goes.

Furthermore, in whatever way we do serve, we are not to view our role, our area of service as any more or less spiritual than anyone else's.

There's a couple of errors we have to avoid: You're not to view your role or area of service as meaningless on the one hand, or view yourself as irreplaceable on the other hand.

You don't need to compare yourself to others either to feed pride, I'm so much more significant than them. Or to feed self-pity, I have nothing to contribute, everyone else is so much better than me.

No, God has gifted you in His perfect wisdom to serve the particular church you are committed to.

And you say, where do I get started, what do I do? I don't know what my gifting is.

Start with practicing the one another commands. The one another commands apply to all of us.

You don't need to worry whether or not you think you are gifted in that area or not. The deacon or elder who oversees that particular ministry, they can determine if you should or shouldn't be serving in a particular area.

But from your perspective, there should be a willingness to meet needs, even in areas that make you uncomfortable.

And over time as you serve the body, maybe even fulfilling several different roles over time, several different kinds of ministry...

Both yourself and others are going to recognize a giftedness in a particular area. And you're going to recognize a particular area where you desire to serve and where you see yourself as most helpful.

Start serving, start signing up for things and overtime it will become clear where do you like to serve and where are you the most effective?

So, the exhortations to mutual edification, this is the fourth evidence in the NT for local church membership.

That brings us to the fifth and final evidence in the NT for local church membership. The explanation of the church as a body. This one will be much quicker.

Local church membership is implied in the metaphor of the *body*.

Take a look at 1 Cor. 12:12, “**Just as the body (physical) is one and has many *members* [like hands, feet, eyes, ears, etc.], and all the *members* of the body (physical), though many, are one body, so it is with Christ [that is, so it is with Christ’s body the church].**”

So there’s a unity and an organic relationship implied in the imagery of the body.

It is both impossible and unnatural for a hand trying to exist apart from a body.

Well, in the same way there’s something unnatural about a Christian trying to exist apart from the Body of Christ or a Christian treating the local church like a smorgasbord and trying to be attached to multiple local churches.

The imagery of the body of Christ expects cooperation and dependence of its many members with one another. It demands a mutuality.

Each member is NOT only related to Christ the Head but also to one another. They are members one of another (Rom. 12:5; Eph. 4:25).

So we’ve seen 5 key pieces of evidence in the NT supporting local church membership.

- 1) The Example of the early church.**
- 2) The Existence of church government**
- 3) The Exercise of church discipline**
- 4) The Exhortation to mutual edification.**
- 5) The Explanation of the church as a body**

I believe these five evidences more than sufficiently demonstrate that church membership is biblical and is undeniably implied.

Just a few practical considerations before we move on and talk about baptism:

What is required once you are a member here at this church? The answer is pretty simple: Nothing more than is required of any Christian according to the New Testament.

What are the benefits of church membership? We don’t have time to turn to these passages but I’ll give the principles and references when applicable so you can look them up if you desire.

First, while no one will be excluded from spiritual and tangible care, members will certainly receive priority with regards to the time and resources of the church and church leadership.

Secondly, although our form of church government is elder rule, we will certainly pursue input and affirmation from the members of the church with regard to significant decisions affecting the church.

In other words, just because the elders have the authority to make the final call and ultimately the burden of each decision is on them, we will pursue input and wisdom from the members, especially when it comes to significant issues.

Thirdly, a pretty significant benefit of church membership is biblical accountability. A commitment to hold one another to our profession of faith. Local church membership is a deterrent for sin. As we looked at in Matthew 18:15 ff.

We could even say this: it is the means by which God protects you from apostasy. From hardening your heart. Hebrews 10:19-31.

Fifthly, it is the means by which you are equipped to minister to others in your life. Ephesians 4:11-12.

Sixthly, it is the context in which you fulfill your obligations to the body and exercise your gifts in building up the body. 1 Peter 4:10

Seventh, a commitment to the church is the ordained means by which God supplies for the believer all that we need to grow spiritually and become more like Christ. In other words, it promotes growth and maturity in the life of the believer. Ephesians 4:13

An eighth benefit, protection from doctrinal error. Shepherds who watch out for the sheep and protect them from error. Ephesians 4:14

Certainly not an exhaustive list but comprehensive enough to demonstrate the many benefits of church membership.

Now, I know that none of you need convincing on this point, or are in disagreement with this, otherwise you wouldn't be here.

But as we bring this topic to a close, the question is not "should I become a member of a local church?"

The better question is: In light of the biblical data supporting membership and the benefits of membership, are there any good arguments, for *not* becoming a member of a local church?