

Introduction

Because Jonathan and Kaoru are joining the church today, it is fitting that I speak on the theme of local church membership. This suggests some introductory comments.

1) Membership is implicit. There is no explicit mention of membership in Scripture. The Bible does not spell out the notion of a membership roll. Some people want chapter and verse for every point of doctrine and we do not have such here. However, this is not as bad as first appears; many solid and important teachings of the Bible are not explicit in Scripture but implicit. Therefore, for our consideration of local church membership the lack of explicit passages does not mean that there are no implicit passages. As we shall see, there is Scriptural ground for this doctrine.

2) Membership emphasizes responsibility. It causes us to relate in specific ways with other people (shall I say, other sinners?). It is an important Christian-family duty.

My title speaks directly to what I want to emphasize, "Membership under Christ in His Church." This title gives the answer to the question: Why should I join a local church? The answer in broad strokes is this: I should join a local church because the local church is *Christ's* Church and membership in it is a matter of submission to Him.

I want to lay out the process of biblical thinking that leads to the conclusion that it is the duty of every Christian to join a local church. It is an important duty that we should refocus every now and again.

1A. The case for membership stated in principle

What is the argument in broad outline? How can we summarize it neatly and concisely?

It is simply this: when the duty we have to do all things in the life of the church "in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Co. 14.40), as we "ought" (1 Tim. 3.15), is combined with other particular duties (observing the sacraments, ordaining elders, etc) the net result is the duty of membership.

In other words, the duties given us by the Lord Jesus Christ for the organization and proper function of His church in general imply membership in particular. Sinners saved by grace and living in various localities need order and due process.

That is it. It is that simple. The church cannot function in a fitting and orderly way in observing the sacraments, ministering by gifts, ordaining officers, and submitting to pastoral instruction without having a clearly defined membership structure.

2A. The case unpacked in practice

At least four things give us the doctrine of membership: the "ought" of conduct, the pillar obligation, the responsibility of guarding the gospel, and the duty of baptism. These duties are like dots on an artist's canvas. The principle of order fills in a line between each dot and the sketch that results is a sketch of local church membership as a Christian duty. These things apply no matter what size a local expression of the body of Christ may be.

1B. Membership arises from the "ought" of conduct

Paul gave Timothy directions on how we ought to conduct ourselves in the church (1 Tim. 3.14-15). Note the down to earth nature of this passage. 1) Christians have specific duties in God's household. We have obligations. There are responsibilities there waiting for us to take them up (they are outlined in this book and the NT letters; cf. how to qualify elders and deacons earlier in this chapter). 2) Nothing is ethereal or invisible regarding these obligations. They relate to conduct *in the church* of the living God. We may know that we are part of the heavenly

Jerusalem, but this is not talking about duties we have in heaven; it is not talking about invisible duties of invisible saints to other invisible saints.

A local church is an expression of the church of Christ (universal, invisible, elect) in a particular geographical location where elders and deacons are appointed. How can we be what we are in an orderly way if we do not have a defined membership?

2B. Membership derives from the "pillar" principle

Membership derives from the duty of *holding up the truth with a good confession*.

The church, Paul says, is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim. 3.15; cf. in Eph. 2.20, the members of God's household rest on the foundation of apostles and prophets). This is a gospel duty of the utmost importance, to be a buttress of truth.

The truth that the church holds up is the mystery of godliness (1 Tim. 3.16), which at its core refers to the proclamation of Christ by sound teaching (1 Tim. 4.1, the faith, 4.6, good doctrine, 4.13, reading of Scripture, exhortation and teaching, 4.16, watching ourselves and the teaching). Therefore, the point is that the church exists to hold these truths up in public proclamation by careful teaching that blends doctrine and living, theology and practice.

How does the church do this? The church like Timothy is to follow the example of the Lord Jesus who confessed a good confession before Pontius Pilate (1 Tim. 6.13; cf. the faith confessed in the presence of many witnesses, v. 12). To do this in the best way possible, the church in a given location must labor more and more to clarify and improve her confession (as sinners growing in the faith). Holding up/confessing the truth is simply *answer giving on a corporate level regarding the hope we profess* (1 Pet. 3:15; Heb. 10:23; Col. 4:6).

However, the people of God cannot do this in an orderly fashion if there is no definition regarding who makes up the church, if there is no membership roll. Consider how this applies to believers as a body or group with the duty to confess a good confession (not just as individual believers).

1) For example, to make confession as the Westminster Reformed Church, we have to have some discussion and dialogue to work out details. Whose confession shall we confess? It is not the confession of any one of us. The church confession is a collective confession upon which we must agree. We must come to agreement and confess our agreement (confess a good confession) in an orderly way, and this necessitates a defined membership and some good and reasonable policies of procedure.

2) Furthermore, we confess the doctrines of the historic and reformed confessions. We do so in the sense that they serve as our basic understanding of Scripture but we also confess their subordination to Scripture. They help us confess our faith in a way that is in touch with church history. We confess these things as a church asking for a willingness on the part of each individual *to receive instruction within this framework* of understanding. We ask a little more of office holders requiring that they embrace the doctrines of grace defined by the Canons of Dort.

Such agreeing is the seedbed of our covenant relationship to one another. We confess these things as a matter of covenant. It is a matter of integrity for us as a church. If some people began to attend with us who wanted a minister who did not believe the Canons of Dort, we could not allow that. Why could we not allow that? You might say we cannot allow erroneous instruction and that is surely correct. However, on another level, we could not appoint this person to the ministry here *because of our covenant with one another* to confess a good confession, one that we jointly connect to the Canons of Dort. It is *a matter of our word and of loyalty to each other in seeking to honor Christ* (ultimately, our covenant is with Him).

For any change on what a pastor must profess, we would have to negotiate our way there by study and due process in an effort to keep covenant with one another and with the Lord. This is the testimony we seek to hold up to the nations. It is a serious matter, it demands conduct that is decent, and orderly, that is in effect a decent and orderly form of discipleship. Such order requires a membership roll (defining who is making covenant and may vote on group decisions).

3B. Membership emerges from the duty of guarding the gospel

This fills in the sketch even more clearly.

To guard the gospel, there must be a system of checking and balancing in place. To guard the gospel, we must screen and guard the membership in order to screen and guard the eldership.

The major role of doctrinal instruction/gospel proclamation belongs to pastor/teachers. That they must be *duly appointed by the people of the church* is shown to us in the fact that the qualifications of ministers are put into the hands of the people (cf. the lists of qualifications for ministry, 1 Tim. 3:1-10; Tit. 1:5-9). There are no apostles to do this now as was done in the book of Acts (14:21-23). Christ must first call them to the ministry, *but the local church where they would serve must also evaluate them and call them*. The church must evaluate and voice its approval or disapproval regarding the ordination of pastors and elders. Order requires a vote, but who has the right to vote? Should it be anyone who drops in at the time of a business meeting? For good order, there must be a defined membership. The members have the privilege and responsibility to evaluate and appoint ministers of the word. Having a membership that is responsibly defined *and* responsible regarding the duties of being members fulfills the principle of order and *guards the gospel by wise appointments to gospel ministry*.

Furthermore, guarding the gospel (in eldership appointments) demands screening and guarding the membership as well. We call for the confession of faith in the triune God (Matt. 28:19-20). We call for a credible living of that confession by the word of God found solely in the sixty-six books of Scripture. We have a simple and reasonable process of screening members by asking for their confession of faith and for a covenant with us in seeking to confess a good confession. Elders do this screening and make recommendation to the church for a vote of approval.

Members here in the WRC commit to give a careful and prayerful hearing to the preaching diet that is rooted in the historic reformed confessions. In our particular context, this is how Hebrews 13:7, 17-19 is applied. Obey and submit means submit to the instruction in the reformed faith provided by the pastor. Members should do this with the right spirit. It includes prayer for the pastor (v. 18) and a sober recognition of the consequences that pertain to both the minister (17a, they must give an account) and to you (17b, making the life of the minister a burden is of no benefit to you). Interestingly, your benefit and blessing comes by making the work of the pastor a joy. I like this point and it is sobering (there is a double edge here!).

You have the responsibility *under the authority and command of Christ* to submit yourself to pastoral instruction *from a pastor you own*, as *your* pastor because this is how God has set things up. Christ has appointed the office of pastor/teacher (Eph. 4:12, it is He who gave...pastor/teachers). His purpose in appointing pastor/teachers is *for the up building* of the people of God, the church. Hence, it is the duty of all Christians to submit to pastoral instruction and by this, each is brought to the duty of guarding the gospel (thus, submission to pastors is not orderly without membership). This is what Jesus has ordained for our up building. If we think we can do without it, we make ourselves wiser than God.

Therefore, when we connect the dots, we see that Christians cannot fulfill their duty to guard the gospel in an efficient and orderly way unless they are on a membership roll in a local church pursuing faithfulness.

4B. Membership flows from baptism.

Baptism leads to membership and membership is founded on baptism (to become a member one must be baptized).

Baptism symbolizes our entry into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12.13) and our commitment to live out our profession of faith in relation to the gathered (local) church (Heb. 10.19-25). We are to draw near to God based on the work of our great priest (vs. 19-22a, cf. the last saying from

the cross). Baptism symbolizes His cleansing work in our lives (v. 22). Implied in the profession of our hope (v. 23) is the confession of sin and pledge of obedience made in baptism (Matt. 3:6; 1 Pet. 3:21). Implied in "let us not give up meeting together" (v. 25) is a commitment to the body of Christ, to meet for specific purposes. This is a commitment to promote love, good deeds, and mutual encouragement.

In other words, baptism involves a commitment that we cannot fulfill properly without a regular and healthy diet on the word under pastoral care (without a pastor that is "your" pastor, Heb. 13:7, 17). Further, believers cannot do this in an orderly way without joining a local assembly to fulfill the "ought" of conduct in God's household, to fulfill the duty of holding up the gospel *by a mutual and good confession*, and to fulfill the task of guarding the gospel by having a guarded eldership and a guarded membership. These threads make a single fabric--membership.

Conclusion: Church membership is a matter of covenant keeping and integrity.

It is a matter of truthfulness, of being honorable in our speech, of righteous promise keeping to one another and to Christ. *You should seek membership intent on keeping this covenant before God and the church.*

Membership is concrete and down to earth. It is not a commitment to invisible preaching and invisible keeping of ordinances. It means being present, being in contact and getting to know the saints. It means praying with the saints and for the saints. It involves praying for an open door, God's open door, for the message entrusted to us from the apostles.

Obedience will cause you to make covenant with the people of God in a local assembly *because of your reverence and love for Christ.*