

Polity Series: Church Membership

Intro:

What does the word politics mean? Politics is the science of organizing life together. When we think of politics we often think of civil government but it also has to do with interoffice government, boardroom government, family government and, yes, church government.

When it deals with church government or church order or church polity, it has to do with how a church is organized. Listen to me . . . the steps; procedures and polity of church order are theological concerns. They express a church's understanding of itself. They express who we are; the why and how we do what we do in our life together as a local church.

When we gather as a church we talk about the gospel and how we glorify God. We talk about the importance of evangelism and discipleship as followers of Christ. When we talk about these things we often can disconnect how discipleship and polity are connected. After all, does church structure really matter for discipleship or evangelism? Isn't one polity as good as another? Doesn't the Lutheran church, Stonebrook, Christ Community and Cornerstone, for example, all do discipleship and evangelism? Why is church order, polity, and structure that important? It is important because the main discipleship program God's gives the church does not come in a box or through the mail. The church is the discipleship program itself. It is the membership, the people, not the elders or deacons or any other leader.

You see if God has revealed His will in His word and if we assume that what He has revealed for us to do is a reflection of the kind of followers of Christ He has made us to be and He has revealed the kind of relationship He has called us in then, yes it is important. The gospel produces gospel order and gospel order displays and protects the gospel.

There are some churches, and I have friends in these churches, that are more pragmatic. They mean well but they will say that membership in a local church is not important or that baptism by immersion is not important. They will say that these things can be divisive and so we should not make a big deal out of them. They say this because they do not believe God has revealed his will on these things clearly whereas I (we) believe He has revealed these things clearly. Since He has revealed clearly what baptism is, that a local church should have deacons and elders and that membership is biblical well we are now talking about church polity, church government. So you see, church polity is theological and it is important.

This morning I am going to talk about membership in a local church. Since God has revealed who He is and what we are to be like as a people, this has implications for us as a local church. Membership is biblical and it comes with a certain set of obligations, expectations, and privileges.

I. Why is church membership important?

- **If Word of God is the water of life, then how do we capture this water?** What is it held in? We need a bowl or a glass. The church is that context in which the water of life caught and enjoyed. So to be clear, church membership is not the water of life but the gathered church, those who belong to a local body. They are the display of the power of that word, the water of life, which is working in that church. The local church is a display of the glory of God.
- When we begin to talk about how the congregation is the context in which the water of life is caught, now we begin to see the gospel order it produces. We now get into the topics of who is the congregation, who are elders and what do they do, who are the deacons and what do they do, who are the pastors and what do they do, what is church discipline and who can be a member and what are their obligations, expectations and privileges?
- **Again, polity is important because what the local church does is: displays the gospel, protects the gospel, and shapes the gospel in each other's lives.** The church is the social dynamic of the gospel in a congregation.
- Consider this:
 - When Jesus comes to us as Savior, Lord, and King and He says, "Repent and believe!" He makes a demand on each one of our lives and that reorients us toward the King but it also reorients us toward everyone else in the kingdom.
 - **Illst:** Think about it this way, if we were adopted, when our mom and dad came to the orphanage and adopted us, brought us home and sat us at the dinner table with the family, we would have a new set of relationships with other people. The gospel creates these new relationships and we must learn to live with them. This is the social dynamic of the gospel.
 - We "put on" these new relationships that flow out of the gospel, these new realities in the local church. So it is incorrect to say, "I follow Jesus but I don't gather with His people" or to say you are a member of the family but you never show up at the family dinner table.

II. Is church membership biblical?

God has always marked off His people in regards to the rest of the world.

1. Old Testament examples:

- a. The Garden of Eden had inside and outside
- b. Noah's ark had an inside and outside
- c. In Egypt, during the plagues, God's people were marked by not experiencing the plagues
- d. When God's people wandered in the wilderness they had an inside the camp and outside the camp
- e. Israel had an inside and an outside the boarders
- f. The OT book of Numbers was about knowing who was in and who was out.
- g. In the OT we find the covenantal signs that marked God's people. There was the covenant sign of circumcision for the people of Israel and also the Sabbath was a covenant sign.

2. New Testament examples:

- a. What is the covenant sign for the people in the NT? It is baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are the two ordinances that mark off who the people of God are. Membership identifies who the people are. That is all it is. It is that group of people who have shown to be His people through baptism and Lord's Supper.

- b. We find this in the NT in Matt. 18 when it talks about telling an issue or relational problem to the church. If it cannot be resolved and the person will not repent then treat that person as you would a pagan or tax collector, in other words, put them out of the church.

In 1 Cor. 5, again we hear about what is on the inside being put on the outside. The man is committing adultery and the text says that when the assembly is gathered put him out of the fellowship, hand him over to Satan. **1 Corinthians 5:11-12**, *"But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?"*

- c. You hear in these verses that those inside the church are to not judge those outside the church. Judgment in this sense is not that of final condemnation. The judgment that is to be given is to remove him from the fellowship so he will repent and return to the Lord.

- d. What we are hearing in these passages is that churches kept track of their church members.
- **Matthew 18:17**, "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." (concerning a member in unrepentant sin who refuses to repent after being confronted by the church as a whole is to be excluded from fellowship/membership),
 - **1 Corinthians 5:9-13**, "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹²For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you." (concerning distinction between those inside and outside the church),
 - **2 Corinthians 2:5-11**, "Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. ⁶For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. ¹⁰Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, ¹¹so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs." (where Paul urges the church to take back into fellowship/membership a man who has repented after being disciplined by the church),
 - **1 Timothy 5:9**, "Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband." (where the church tracks widows and by implication its members).
- e. Revelation refers to the Lamb's Book of Life where the names of God's people are written down. Certainly, church membership is not the Lamb's Book of Life but if you have life in Christ doesn't it make sense that you will be affiliated in some way with others who's names are written in the Book of Life? Can we not as a people who worship together write down names of those whom we can give affirmation to for their profession of faith in Christ?

- f. Finally, all the metaphors in Scripture are corporate metaphors: flock, temple, bricks, vine and branches, people, body with different parts. You cannot put these metaphors on the church universal because it just does not work.
- g. **The church is pictured as a building.**
- **1 Peter 2:5** you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.
- h. **The church is pictured as a body. (Ephesians 4:15-16)**
- **1 Corinthians 12:12-27** 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...and all were made to drink of one Spirit...Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.
- i. **The church is pictured as a family.**
- **1 Timothy 3:14-15** I am writing these things so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar, and buttress of truth.
- j. When you read the Bible, what you find is that Christians were to be a part of a church in some way and the language we use at Grand to express this biblical idea is membership. That is simply the term we use. It could be called something else like covenant fellowship or covenant partnership. There is nothing special about the word membership and in reality, it might not be the best way to express it.

III. What is Local Church Membership?

Church Membership

Church membership is the church's affirmation and oversight of an individual and their profession of faith and an individual's submission to that affirmation and oversight. The church affirms a person's profession of faith and their discipleship and the member agrees to do that with others. It is the church taking responsibility for you and you taking responsibility for a church.

IV. Church membership consists of two parts:

1. **An individual believer's public statement** affirming and committing to the faith and practice of a local church, promising to join with that body, and
2. **The local church's public statement** that, based upon evidence of repentance and faith, it holds out the person as a believer and accepts this person into Christian fellowship.

V. What are the requirements for becoming a member of a Christian church?

These requirements include a credible profession of repentance and faith, expressed as a confessing baptized (Acts 2:41-42; Matthew 28:18-20; Colossians 2:9-14; Galatians 3:26-27).

VI. What are the legitimate behavioral expectations for members of a Christian church?

Christians are expected to be active in specific ways as members of a local Christian church. Those expectations include, but are not limited to:

- Regular attendance, Hebrews 10:25;
- Regular and cheerful support/giving, 2 Corinthians 8-9, Acts 4:32-37;
- Loving other Christian brothers and sisters in the church, John 13:35 and 1 John 4:20;
- Partaking of the Lord's Supper, Acts 2:41-42, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26;
- Exercising a member's gifts for the benefit of the local church like discipleship and evangelism or some other gift, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; 14:12; Ephesians 4:12-13;
- Devotion to learning the Bible, fellowship with other members, breaking of bread, and prayers, Acts 2:41-42.

VII. What are the implications of membership in a local church?

Implication One: A local church consists of Christians.

- Scripture teaches that Christians are those who hear God's Word, trust in Christ's atoning death alone for their salvation, and obey their Lord. This is what we call *regenerate church membership*.
- The purity of the local church is important to God, and it should be important to His church. Believers in a church are the Bride of Christ.
- It is God and God alone who truly knows the state of our condition.

Implication Two: A local church includes accountability.

- Biblical accountability is vital to the life of the church; it is often referred to as church discipline.
- Church discipline is both formative and corrective.

1 Timothy 4:7 . . . *discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness . . .*

Matthew 18:15-17 *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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."*

Implication Three: A local church requires mutual encouragement.

Hebrews 10:24-25, *"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."*

VIII. How we receive members at Grand?

Anyone desiring membership shall complete:

1. The Foundations of Membership Class
2. Complete the membership request form, indicating any previous church affiliations and signifying their willingness to be interviewed by an officer of the church.
3. The elders will then schedule an interview with the prospective member to if the person requesting membership is indeed qualified.
 - a. The elders may undertake other action to determine if the person is qualified for membership, which may include but is not limited to conversing with church members who know the individual requesting membership, contacting leadership in any church they had previously been affiliated.
 - b. The prospective member's name will be put in the worship guide to request the input of other church members who may know them.
 - c. Once the elders are assured beyond reasonable doubt that the candidate is qualified, the person shall be granted membership by the body of elders and presented to the church body based on statement of faith and baptism.

IX. Helpful resources on church membership

Books

Barcellos, Richard, C. *The Lord's Supper as a Means of Grace*.

Chester, Tim & Timmis, Steve, *Everyday Church: Gospel Communities on Mission*.

Dever, Mark, *9Marks: The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*.

Dever, Mark, *A Display of God's Glory, Basics of Church Structure: Deacons, Elders, Congregationalism, and Membership*.

Jamieson, Bobby, *Going Public: Why Baptism is Required for Church Membership*.

Jamieson, Bobby, *9Marks: Building Healthy Churches Series Study Guides: Committing to One Another: Church Membership*.

Kuiper, R. B. *The Glorious Body of Christ*.

Leeman, Jonathan, *9Marks: Building Healthy Churches series: Church Membership*.

Leeman, Jonathan, *Series: Church Basics, Understanding the Congregation's Authority*.

Leeman, Jonathan, *Don't Fire Your Church Members: A Case for Congregationalism*.

Leeman, Jonathan, *9Marks: The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love, Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline*.

Mack, Wayne & Swavely, Dave, *Life in the Father's House*.

Podcasts

9Marks Pastors' Talk, Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman: Church Polity and Discipleship, Episode 23, October 16, 2017.

Pastors and Preaching, Jason Allen interview with Jonathan Leeman, *The Pastor and Church Membership*, Episode 74, December 4, 2017.

Pastors and Preaching, Jason Allen interview with Bobby Jamieson, *Baptism and the Local Church*, Episode 80, February 19, 2018.

Wednesday Conversations, Bob Thune, *Taking Church Membership Seriously*, Coram Deo Church Community, 2016.