

MEMBERSHIP



BY JOSH HANSON

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Introduction

Quite possibly my most infamous sermon while here at Gateway Church, is a sermon from 2018 titled *Looking Ahead* where I preached on church membership. Since then, every few years we return to this important topic. And every time, I go into this topic with some hesitation because it, more than just about any other topic, is the one that seems to offend folks the most.

Yet at the same time I go into these sermons hopeful, because it seems that the number of people who sign up for our membership class increases when I preach on this topic. For many it's the first time they've heard about the importance of membership in a local church.

In this booklet we're going to look at three aspects of church membership. For some these may be good reminders, while for others they may be a call for action.

First we're going to see if membership in a local church is a biblical expectation. Then, we'll look at the benefits of being a member in a local church. And finally, we'll look at the responsibilities that come with being a member here at Gateway Church.

Chapter 1

Is Church Membership a Biblical Expectation?

First, is church membership a biblical expectation? To no one's surprise, my answer is yes. But I'll concede that there's no clear command in Scripture like, "Thou must become a member of a local church." But we must also acknowledge that "Thou must **not** become a member of a local church" also isn't in the Bible. In fact, your view of church membership, if it's a biblical expectation or not, is based not on a clear command, but on what theologians have called "good and necessary consequences" of what we find in the Bible.

If that makes anyone uncomfortable, know that there are many church practices that fit the category of "there's no clear command in Scripture, but doing this practice is based on good and necessary consequences of what we do find in the Bible."

For example, in the Bible we find no clear command that women are to take the Lord's Supper. Neither is there an example of a woman taking the Lord's Supper in the Bible. Yet we know that the church in Corinth, which received Paul's instructions on the Lord's Supper, was a church that included men and women. So even though there's no clear command in Scripture, nor an explicit example of women taking the Lord's Supper, by good and necessary consequence of women being part of the church in Corinth, we believe it's biblical for women to take the Lord's Supper.

So what do we find in the Bible that leads us to a similar conclusion about church membership?

First, there's the amount of the New Testament that's written to local churches. Nine of Paul's letters were written to local churches. His other four letters were written to leaders of local churches. It's believed that Hebrews was written to several local churches in Rome. Peter's two letters were written to local churches. John's three letters were as well. And the book of Revelation was written to seven local churches. That's twenty books of the New Testament, all written to local churches.

I know that this point by itself doesn't justify church membership, but it at least highlights the importance of being part of a local church. Which leads us to another defense of church membership. And that's the many biblical metaphors used to describe the church. Such as...

1 Peter 2:4–5 NLT

*You are coming to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God's temple. He was rejected by people, but he was chosen by God for great honor. And **you are living stones** that God is building into his spiritual **temple**.*

Here, individual people who've come to faith in Christ are compared to individual stones that God has joined together to build his spiritual temple. Certainly, there's a universal aspect to what Peter's saying. But, when we remember that he's writing to local churches, we see that there's also a local church application: We're joined to God's spiritual temple as found in a local church.

We're also called members of the body of Christ. As Paul writes to a local church in Rome...

Romans 12:4–5 ESV

*For as in one **body** we have many **members**, and the **members** do not all have the same function, so we, though **many**, are **one body** in Christ, and **individually members one of another**.*

Yes, these words are true about our membership in God's universal, or global church, but that doesn't mean that these words aren't also to be applied to our membership in a local church. For they are words originally written to a local church.

Similarly, to the Christians in Corinth, Paul writes...

1 Corinthians 12:27 ESV

*Now you are the **body** of Christ and **individually members of it**.*

These are nearly identical words to what we just read in Romans. Letters to two local churches telling the individual Christians in the churches that they are part of the body of Christ *as seen in local expressions of the body of Christ*.

Whether the church is described as a flock of sheep, or a vine, or a city, these biblical metaphors describe something more than just the universal church made up of Christians from all times and places. These metaphors also describe something local. And often, the Christians are called members in these biblical metaphors that were written to local churches.

Finally, there's an expectation regarding leadership and submission found in Scripture that's connected to the local church.

1 Peter 5:1–5 ESV

*So I exhort the **elders among you**, as a fellow **elder** (implication — Peter's an elder but is not among the elders of the local churches he's writing to...) and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: **shepherd the flock of God that is among you**, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; **not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock**. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, **be subject to the elders**. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward **one another**, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*

Hebrews 13:7 ESV

*Remember **your leaders**, **those** who spoke to **you** the word of God. Consider the outcome of **their** way of life, and imitate **their** faith.*

Hebrews 13:17 ESV

*Obey **your leaders** and submit to **them**, for **they** are keeping watch over **your** souls, as **those** who will have to give an account. Let **them** do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to **you**.*

1 Thessalonians 5:12–13 ESV

*We ask you, **brothers**, to respect **those** who labor among **you** and are over **you** in the Lord and admonish **you**, and to esteem **them** very highly in love because of **their** work.*

Once again, when we remember that these words were originally written to local churches, we see that the original audience would've heard "shepherd the flock of God that's among **you**" to mean the "local church that specific elders are responsible for." And the command "be subject to the **elders**" to be specific elders in your local church. The same elders whose lives **you're** to imitate. The same elders who keep watch over **your** souls, and who will give an account to God. Elders of local churches that individual Christians are responsible to obey and submit to.

Though there's no clear command to be a member of a local church, the good and necessary consequence of the biblical evidence we've just looked at leads to questions such as:

- Who are the elders among **you**?
- Who are the elders responsible to shepherd **you**?
- Which elders are **you** subject to?
- Who are the leaders whose way of life and faith **you're** imitating?
- Which elders are **you** obeying and submitting to?
- Which elders are keeping watch over **your** soul?
- Which elders will give an account to God for **their** care of **you**?
- Which elders are **you** esteeming highly in love because of **their** work?

Questions no Christian gets out of answering, at least not while being obedient to God's Word. And this is why I think church membership ends up ruffling so many feathers. For it brings to the forefront commands in Scripture that are hard to obey while not being a member in a local church.

Chapter 2

What are the Benefits of Church Membership?

Now let's turn to the benefits of church membership.

Often when I hear from someone who has concerns about church membership, one of the questions asked is, "What are the benefits of me becoming a member?" Or they ask from the opposite angle: "Will the elders still care for me if I don't become a member?" They wonder if we will visit them in the hospital or offer marriage counseling if they aren't official members. The answer is yes. We gladly provide care to members and non-members alike.

Now knowing this you may wonder, "If that's the case, then I really don't see any benefit to becoming a member. If you get all of the benefits of membership without being a member, why become one?"

So what I want to do is orient our focus in a different direction. Away from the individual who is or isn't a member, and put our attention on the rest of the church. I know this is hard, but let's take the focus off of ourselves and let's put all of our focus on everyone else instead — the other adults, the youth, and the kids of Gateway.

And here's our new question: What are the benefits for everyone else if you become a member of Gateway?

Here's the question asked a bit differently: What benefits are you keeping others from experiencing by not becoming a member of Gateway?

Remember, someone will show up to the hospital when **you're** sick. We'll provide marriage counseling when **you** need it, and so on. Regardless if **you're** a member or not, **you** benefit. So what about everyone else? What benefit are **you** offering, or keeping from the rest of **us**?

One benefit of you becoming a member is that your membership spiritually protects everyone else at Gateway. What do I mean? When you become a member of Gateway, you agree to a set of beliefs that are called the Essentials of our Faith. These essentials help to define the core beliefs of what it means to be a Christian. Here they are:

All Scripture is self-attesting, and being Truth requires our unreserved submission in all areas of life. The infallible Word of God — the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments — is a complete and unified witness to God's redemptive acts culminating in the incarnation of the Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible, uniquely and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, is the supreme and final authority on all matters on which it speaks. On this sure foundation, we affirm these additional essentials of our faith.

1. We believe in one God, the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To him be all honor, glory, and praise forever!

2. Jesus Christ, the living Word, became flesh through his miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit and his virgin birth. He who is true God became true man united in one Person forever. He died on the cross a sacrifice for our sins according to the Scriptures. On the third day he arose bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven where, at the right hand of the Majesty on High, he now is our High Priest and Mediator.

3. The Holy Spirit has come to glorify Christ and to apply the saving work of Christ to our hearts. He convicts us of sin and draws us to the Savior, indwelling our hearts. He gives new life to us, empowers and imparts gifts to us for service. He instructs and guides us into all truth, and seals us for the day of redemption.

4. Being estranged from God and condemned by our sinfulness, our salvation is wholly dependent upon the work of God's free grace. God credits his righteousness to those who put their faith in Christ alone for their salvation, and thereby justifies them in his sight. Only such as are born of the Holy Spirit and receive Jesus Christ become children of God and heirs of eternal life.

5. The true Church is composed of all persons who through saving faith in Jesus Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit are united together in the body of Christ. The Church finds her visible yet imperfect expression in local congregations where the Word of God is preached in its purity and the sacraments are administered in their integrity, where scriptural discipline is

practiced, and where loving fellowship is maintained. For her perfecting she awaits the return of her Lord.

6. Jesus Christ will come again to the earth personally, visibly, and bodily—to judge the living and the dead, and to consummate history and the eternal plan of God. “Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

7. The Lord Jesus Christ commands all believers to proclaim the gospel throughout the world and to make disciples of all nations. Obedience to the Great Commission requires total commitment to “Him who loved us and gave himself for us.” He calls us to a life of self-denying love and service. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).

Again, every member of Gateway formally says, “I believe these essentials, and if anything in my beliefs about the essentials changes, I agree to let the church know.”

Now let me admit something, because someone may be thinking it. Yes, this isn’t a sure fire way to know **for certain** that someone actually believes and agrees with our essentials. The Bible warns of false teachers who will try to infiltrate the church to lead people astray. Yet I think it’s still good practice to have a theological line of entry that we know all members of our church have agreed to.

Especially when we read passages such as...

James 3:1 ESV

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

A warning not just to pastors who preach, but to all who teach or help others understand what God's Word means and how it applies to life. This would include our Life Group leaders, teachers of our Equip classes, those who serve as small group leaders in our youth ministry, those who serve as large group teachers in our Kidway ministry, those who are small group leaders in our kid's ministry, and so on.

But the benefit to all who receive such teaching is that you know the person teaching you has agreed to the Essentials of our Faith. Meaning you don't have to wonder about what they believe about God's Word, or God, or specifics about Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, or salvation, or the church, or the second coming of Christ, or our mission until he returns, and everything else you just read. That's all clear in the Essentials of our Faith and every member of Gateway agrees to these beliefs.

What a reassuring benefit, I hope, to all of you who are in a Life Group. You know what your Life Group leader believes regarding the essentials. What a reassuring benefit for all who sit under my preaching. You don't have to worry, wonder, or be concerned about where I, or others who preach, stand on the Essentials of our Faith.

Yet, we do have some loopholes right now. Though we currently require all of our adult Life Group leaders to be members of Gateway, formally agreeing to the Essentials of our Faith, we've yet to make membership a requirement for those who teach in our Next Gen ministry. However, we have a theologically solid

curriculum that all of our volunteers use in our Next Gen ministries which gives us some peace about this membership loophole.

I bring this up not to throw our Next Gen staff team under the bus. I don't think this was ever their decision. It's been a membership loophole for over a decade. My reason for bringing this up is to highlight an area where some among us have an opportunity to increase the benefits our Gateway families can receive by you becoming a church member.

Here's another benefit the church receives when you become a member: You become an equal participant when you get baptized, or when your child is baptized or dedicated. What do I mean by that?

According to our church constitution, when an individual is baptized, the members of the church are asked...

*Do you, the **members of this congregation**, take **responsibility** for the continued Christian nurture of those being baptized today and do you promise to set a Godly example by your own life?*

And when parents bring their children to be baptized or dedicated, the members of the church are asked...

*Do you, the **members of this congregation**, acting for yourselves and on behalf of the whole Body of Christ, as far as you are able, assume **responsibility** with these parents for the spiritual nurture of these children?*

And are asked...

*Do **you** commit yourself to **set** a Godly example before these children, to **provide** as far as **you** are able, all that is*

necessary to the end that these children may one day confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord?

I bring this up because first, look at the benefits the individual, the parents, and the children receive from the members of Gateway.

- The members of the church commit themselves to the continued nurture and growth of the person being baptized.
- The members commit to setting a Godly example to the person being baptized.
- The members commit to sharing in, with the parents, the responsibility of the spiritual nurture of the children presented for baptism and dedication.
- The members commit to setting a Godly example to the children presented for baptism and dedication.

What are the benefits for those being baptized and for the parents of the children presented? A church full of individual members who are committed to you and your children. Yet, and this will be a rather strange sounding question, what's the benefit for the church members?

- To the person being baptized — what benefit are you offering to Gateway's members?
- Parents of the children — what benefit are you offering to the members?
- After all, the members are making quite the commitment to you and your children. You benefit from us. So what are you bringing to the table?

To ease anyone's concerns, here are the benefits on my mind.

- What if you commit to becoming a member when you are baptized, so that the congregation's commitment to your spiritual growth is matched by your own?
- And what if you commit to membership when baptized, so that the Godly example the church sets for you becomes an example you agree to set for others who are baptized after you?
- What if you, as parents, commit to membership when presenting your children, making your commitment to nurture your children a shared responsibility with the church?
- And what if you commit to membership, so that the Godly example the church sets for your children becomes an example you also promise to set for ours?

If we all do this, then there are benefits not only for those being baptized, and not only for the parents of children being presented for baptism or dedication, and not only to the children, but also benefits for the members of this local church. Benefits that can be ours, and abundantly so, when instead of making our decisions based on the benefit we'll receive, we see the benefit others may be missing out on by us not being a member.

Chapter 3

What are the Responsibilities of Being a Church Member?

Finally, and briefly, what are the responsibilities when one becomes a member of Gateway? Two passages from Ephesians will do.

Ephesians 4:11–16 ESV

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

And in the next chapter we read...

Ephesians 5:18–21 ESV

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making

melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

The path that leads us towards the spiritual maturity that Paul describes is summed up in our discipleship process of Worship, Connect, Serve, and Go. Where, because of our submission to one another, not just to the church leaders who we're to submit to, but in our mutual submission to one another's spiritual growth and maturing, every member of Gateway commits to our discipleship process of Worship, Connect, Serve, and Go.

Where we each recognize the personal responsibility we have as a member of this faith family to prioritize weekly worship with our local church. Which means part of the weekend is already booked on your calendar. Because as a member, you have a weekly commitment and you schedule the rest of your weekend accordingly.

Of course sickness happens, and we're not against vacations. We know that college students may go home for the summer and snow birds may be gone for the winter. But what I'm saying is that all too often worshiping God in a local church can become more of an "option we'll do if our calendar is open" instead of a "priority we plan all of our other weekend activities around."

Members of Gateway know it's their responsibility to make weekly worship a priority.

As the author of Hebrews writes...

Hebrews 10:24–25 ESV

*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.*

The next step in our discipleship process is Connect, and the primary way we connect to one another is in our Life Groups. Life Groups are where we meet regularly with fellow Christians to discuss how the Bible applies to life and are where we practice care for one another. And members of Gateway agree that it's their responsibility to be in a Life Group.

The third step in our discipleship process is Serve. And by serve we mean serve each other in the church. One of the questions all new members are asked is...

*Do you promise to **serve** Christ in his Church by supporting and participating with **this congregation** in its service of God and its ministry to others to the best of your ability?*

Thus, members of Gateway know it's our responsibility to serve in our local church.

And finally, we Go. For Jesus said...

Matthew 28:18–20 ESV

*And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **Go** therefore and **make disciples** of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

Every Christian has been called and commanded to go and make disciples. And the members of Gateway have accepted the responsibility to make disciples here locally, in our nation, and to the ends of the earth.

These are the responsibilities every member of Gateway has freely accepted: To make worship a priority, to be an active participant in a Life Group, to serve the people of this congregation, and to go and proclaim the gospel.

If you're a member, now's a great time to ask yourself, "How am I doing with the responsibilities I agreed to when I became a member?"

Conclusion

I've preached enough sermons on church membership to know that I haven't convinced everyone that it's a biblical expectation. I also know that the benefits I presented won't persuade everyone. And I'm sure that for some of our current members there's a reason why you're not fulfilling the responsibilities we just covered, and that reason works for you.

Yet I hope that for some reading this booklet, you were convinced of the biblically good and necessary consequence of church membership. And for others, that you've seen the benefits you've received from us, even while not being a member, and now desire to be a benefit to others. And that for some current members, you've been nudged to re-engage in some of your responsibilities that you've allowed to be lacking in your life.

And I have this hope, because every time thus far the Lord's been faithful in maturing us just a bit more after we've been reminded of the importance of church membership. May he do so once again for all of our good, but more importantly so we make him look glorious to the world.

Resources

Books

- *Church Membership*, Jonathan Leeman
- *What is a Healthy Church Member?*, Thabiti M. Anyabwile

Other Booklets by Pastor Josh

- *The Pastor*
- *Church Leadership*
- *How Do I Grow?*
- *Disciples of Jesus*



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9555 County Road 9 Findlay, Ohio 45840
(419) 423-5947 | www.gatewayepc.org