

CHAPTER TEN

AN IMPORTANT MARK OF A HEALTHY CHURCH: A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF MEMBERSHIP

Is church membership a biblical idea? In one sense, no. Open up the New Testament, and you won't find a story about, say, Priscilla and Aquila moving to the city of Rome, checking out one church, then another, and finally deciding to join a third. From what we can tell, nobody went "church shopping" because there was only one church in each community. In that sense, you won't find a list of church members in the New Testament.

But the churches of the New Testament apparently kept lists of people, such as the lists of widows supported by the church (1 Timothy 5). More significantly, a number of passages in the New Testament suggest that churches did have some way of delineating their members. They knew who belonged to their assemblies and who did not.

On one occasion, for instance, a man in the Corinthian church was living in immorality "that does not occur even among pagans" (1 Cor. 5:1). Paul wrote the Corinthians and

told them to exclude this man from their assembly. Now stop and think about this. You cannot formally *exclude* someone if he is not formally *included* in the first place.

Paul appears to refer to this same man in his subsequent letter to the Corinthians by referring to the “punishment inflicted on him by the majority” (2 Cor. 2:6). Stop and think again. You can only have a “majority” if there is a defined group of people, in this case a defined church membership.

Paul cared “who was in” and “who was out.” He cared because the Lord Jesus himself had granted churches the authority to draw a line—as best as they humanly can—around themselves, to mark themselves off from the world.

“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 18:18 *ESV*; see also 16:19; John 20:23)

Healthy churches, we have said, are congregations that increasingly reflect the character of God. Therefore, we want our earthly records to approximate, as much as possible, heaven’s own records—those names recorded in the Lamb’s book of life (Phil. 4:3; Rev. 21:27).

A healthy church aspires to receive and to dismiss individuals professing faith, just as the New Testament authors instruct. That is, it aspires to have a biblical understanding of membership.

Biblical Membership Means Commitment

A temple has bricks. A flock has sheep. A vine has branches. And a body has members. In one sense, church membership

begins when Christ saves us and makes us a member of his body. Yet his work must then be given expression in an actual local church. In that sense, church membership begins when we commit to a particular body. Being a Christian means being joined to a church.

Scripture therefore instructs us to assemble regularly so that we can regularly rejoice in our common hope and regularly spur one another on to love and good deeds (Heb. 10:23–25). Church membership is not simply a record of a box we once checked. It's not a sentimental feeling. It's not an expression of affection toward a familiar place. It's not an expression of loyalty or disloyalty toward parents. It should be the reflection of a living commitment, or it is worthless. Indeed, it's worse than worthless; it's dangerous, as we'll consider in a moment.

Biblical Membership Means Taking Responsibility

The practice of church membership among Christians occurs when Christians grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. By identifying ourselves with a particular local church, we are telling the church's pastors and other members not just that we commit to them, but that we commit to them in gathering, giving, prayer, and service. We are telling them to expect certain things from us and to hold us accountable if we don't follow through. Joining a church is an act of saying, "I am now your responsibility, and you are my responsibility." (Yes, this is countercultural. Even more, it's counter to our sinful natures.)

Biblical membership means taking responsibility. It comes from our mutual obligations as spelled out in all of

Scripture's *one another* passages—love one another, serve one another, encourage one another. All of these commands should be encapsulated in the covenant of a healthy church (see appendix).

Getting the last three marks correct will help with getting this mark correct. Church members will grow to recognize their mutual responsibilities the more they cherish the gospel, understand that conversion is God's work, and evangelize by instructing "seekers" to count the cost. Less will Christians regard their churches with a come-as-you-please and get-what-you-can attachment—one more store to peek your head into at the Christian mall or market. More will they view them as a body in which all parts care for one another—the home in which they live.

Sadly, it is not uncommon to find a big gap between the number of people officially on the membership rolls and the number who regularly attend. Imagine a church of three thousand members with only six hundred regularly attending. I fear that many evangelical pastors today might be more proud of their so-called membership than distressed by the large number of members not attending. According to one recent study, the typical Southern Baptist church has 233 members with only 70 attending on Sunday morning.

And is our giving any better? What congregations have budgets that equal—let alone exceed—10 percent of the combined annual incomes of their members?

Physical limitations can prevent attendance and financial burdens can prevent giving. But otherwise one wonders if churches are making idols out of numbers. Numerical figures can be idolized just as easily as carved figures—perhaps more

easily. Yet God will assess our lives and weigh our work, I think, rather than count our numbers.

Biblical Membership Means Salvation Affirmation

What's so dangerous about nonattending, responsibility-shirking members? Uninvolved members confuse both real members and non-Christians about what it means to be a Christian. And active members do the voluntarily inactive members no service when they allow them to remain members of the church, since membership is the church's corporate endorsement of a person's salvation. Did you catch that? By calling someone a member of your church, you are saying that that individual has your church's endorsement as a Christian.

So if a congregation has not set its eyes upon an individual for months, even years, how can it testify that that person is faithfully running the race? If an individual is missing in action but has not joined some other Bible-believing church, how do we know if he or she was ever really a part of us (see 1 John 2:19)? We don't necessarily know that such uninvolved people are not Christians; we simply can't affirm that they are. We don't have to tell the individual, "We know you're going to hell"; we only have to say, "We can no longer express our confidence that you're going to heaven." When a person is perpetually absent, a church endorsement is, at best, naïve; at worst, dishonest.

A church that practices biblical church membership does not require perfection of its members; it requires humility and honesty. It doesn't call them to bare decisions but to real discipleship. It doesn't discount the importance of an individual's own experiences with God, but neither does it assume too

much of those not-yet-perfected individuals. This is why the New Testament presents a role for a corporate affirmation by those in covenant with God and with each other.

Biblical Membership Is Meaningful

I hope to see the membership statistics in churches become more and more meaningful so that the members in *name* become members in *fact*. From time to time, this means removing names from the church rolls (though not from our hearts). Most often, this means teaching new members what God intends for the church and continually reminding current members of their commitment to the life of the church. In my own church, we do this in a number of ways, from membership classes to reading the church covenant aloud every time we receive the Lord's Supper.

As our church has grown in healthiness, the head count on Sunday mornings has once again exceeded the number of names officially on our rolls. Surely this should be your desire for your church as well.

We don't love old friends well by allowing them to hold onto their membership in our congregations for sentimental reasons. We love them by encouraging them to join another church where they can love and be loved on a weekly, even daily, basis. In my own church's covenant, therefore, we pledge, "We will, when we move from this place, as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word." This commitment is part of healthy discipleship, particularly in our transient age.

A recovered practice of careful church membership will

have many benefits. It will make the witness of our churches to non-Christians more clear. It will make it harder for weaker sheep to stray from the fold and still call themselves sheep. It will help shape and focus the discipleship of more mature Christians. It will help church leaders know exactly for whom they are responsible. In all of this, God will be glorified.

Pray that church membership will come to mean more than it currently does. That way, we can better know whom to pray for and whom to encourage and challenge in the faith. Church membership means being incorporated in practical ways into the body of Christ. It means traveling together as aliens and strangers in this world as we head to our heavenly home. Certainly another mark of a healthy church is a biblical understanding of church membership.

What Is a Healthy Church?

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Published by Crossway Books

a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Josh Dennis

Cover photo: iStock

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dever, Mark.

What is a healthy church? / Mark Dever.

p. cm.

“Adapted from 9 marks of a healthy church, © 2005 by Mark Dever”—T.p. verso.

ISBN 13: 978-1-58134-937-5 (hc)

1. Church—Marks. 2. Church—Biblical teaching. 3. Choice of church. I. Dever, Mark. 9 marks of a healthy church. II. Title.

BV601.D49 2007

250—dc22

2006102865

LB 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1