

Formal Church Membership

What it Is and Why it Matters

A Study

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The Covenant of Peace Church
13600 John Clark Road
Gulfport, MS 39503
(228) 832-7729
www.covenantofpeace.net

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Introduction

The Acts 2:41

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

We live in a day when both formal and long term commitment is a very rare commodity. So it should come as no surprise that formal Church membership is such a low priority to so many believers today. Sadly, it is not uncommon today for Christians to move from one Church to another- sometimes quite often- never fully submitting themselves to the care of Elders and never fully committing themselves to a particular group of fellow believers.

Too often today, the modern Church does not resemble the portrait given in the Bible- one which showed an assembled group of redeemed and committed souls who had the same mind and heart (**1Corinthians 1:10**); who were in one accord (**The Acts 2:1**); and who were formally connected by four things which distinguished them from every other group on earth:

- ✓ The Apostle's Doctrine
- ✓ The Breaking of Bread (Communion)
- ✓ Godly Fellowship
- ✓ Effectual and Fervent Prayer (**The Acts 2:42**)

Today the Church is a very loose and informal assembly of people- some saved and others not- some committed and others not- who are joined on the basis of a variety of things- many of which are temporary and unstable (and sometimes even untrue) and which constantly change. Trying to keep this kind of "union" together has put pressure on the leadership of the modern Church to emphasize things that do not matter at the expense of things that do matter.

Even though it is done all the time- to neglect (or to refuse) to "join" a Church as a formal member reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of what a Biblical Church is and of the individual believer's responsibility to the Body of Christ. In addition, it also cuts one off from the many joys, blessings, and opportunities that flow from this wonderful commitment.

Because so many of us in this Church are coming from a background in which formal Church membership was non-existent and even taught against- it is essential for us to understand just what a formal system of Church membership actually is and why it matters. I pray that this message will help us to realize that we were wrong (I was wrong) about this issue and to solidify in our hearts the need that we have in this Church to go to a system of formal Church membership.

As you are aware, I have struggled with the issue of formal Church membership for several years. I first came to realize the need to do *something* about membership when so many people who attended this Church (some for several years) felt the liberty to just leave without notice or explanation to me or

anyone else. Every Church has people who come and go. Always have- always will. And formal membership won't stop that- but that type of "divorce" is both painful and disrupting to the entire Church- *especially* if that person is in a position of leadership.

I never wanted to make being a member of the Church to be more difficult than it is to go to Heaven- so I struggled with this for a long time. But it became abundantly clear to me that it is impossible on a practical level to actually obey the Scriptures that pertain to the Church without some type of formal membership. This Document will reflect my honest and best effort on how to apply what the Scriptures teach to this Church pertaining to Formal Membership.

I want you to know that I didn't just "wing" this. I haven't simply thrown something together. I have diligently sought God about this for years and have been in contact with over 50 Churches and Pastors and Elders from all around the country- some very large; some very small. I have bought and read several books; listened to tapes; E-mailed and written and telephoned people from all around the nation; so I could listen and learn both the pros and cons of this endeavor. Elder Vern Follis was a great help to me in this task.

First Things First

Sitting in John MacArthur's Church in March of 2005 at a Shepherd's Conference and surrounded by over 4,000 pastors from all over the world who are of like minded faith as we are- it suddenly dawned on me that there was no way to effectively ask anyone to be a member of my Church until I produced a written Doctrinal Statement which clearly outlined what we believe and what we teach. I began that task in the Middle of March and it took until December of that year before I finished it and published the results.

This Doctrinal Statement can never and should never replace the Scriptures, but it is a workable Document which will cause all teaching and all ministry to be consistent and standardized so that everyone will be taught that same thing. All leadership are required to adhere to the Doctrinal Statement if they are to minister in this Church.

I then realized that I still couldn't ask anyone to be a member of the Church until I produced a written set of By-Laws which outlined how we would organize and operate the Church. That task took me from December 2005 until November of this year.

Now is time for me to make the case for formal membership.

Respectfully Submitted for the Glory of God,

Blair Bradley
Gulfport, Mississippi
December 2006

The Definition of Church Membership

When an individual is “saved”, he automatically becomes a member of the Body of Christ (**1Corinthians 12:13**). He is now in fellowship with all living saints throughout the world and is part of the current *visible* representation of the one true Church that began over 2,000 years ago. Because he is now united to Christ and the other members of the Body in *this* way, he is therefore qualified to become a member of a *local* expression of that universal Body.

To become a member of a Church then is to *formally* commit oneself to an identifiable, visible, and specific local Body of Believers who have joined together for specific, Divinely ordained purposes. These purposes include:

- Receiving instruction from God’s Word (**1Timothy 4:13; 2Timothy 4:2**)
- Serving and edifying one another through encouragement, correction, and chastisement through the proper use of Spiritual Gifts (**Romans 12:3-8; 1Corinthians 12:4-31; 1Peter 4:10&11**)
- Participating in the Ordinances of the Church (**Luke 22:19; The Acts 2:38-42**)
- Proclaiming the Gospel to those who are lost (**Matthew 28:18-20**)

It is simply impossible on a practical level to carry out all of these Biblical purposes without formal Church membership

The Basis for Church Membership

Although Scripture does not contain an explicit *command* to formally join a local Church- the Bible *does* give an *implicit foundation* for formal Church membership and that foundation permeates the entire New Testament. This Biblical basis can be seen most clearly in four distinct areas:

1. The Example of the early Church’s Operation
2. The Existence of a formal Church Government
3. The Implementation of Church Discipline,
4. The Exhortation to Mutual Edification

1. The Example of the Early Church’s Operation

In the early years of Christianity, coming to Christ was equated with coming to the Church. The concept of anyone experiencing Salvation without belonging to a local Church cannot be found in the New Testament. When individuals repented and believed in Christ, they were baptized and “**added to the Church**” (**The Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 16:5**).

More than simply living out a personal and private commitment to Christ- this practically meant joining together *formally* with other believers in a local

Assembly and devoting themselves to the Apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (**The Acts 2:42**).

The Epistles of the New Testament were written to specific Churches. In the case of the few Epistles written to individuals—such as **Philemon, Timothy** and **Titus**—these individuals were leaders in Churches. The New Testament Epistles themselves demonstrate that the Lord assumed that believers would be formally committed to a local Assembly.

In addition, there is ample evidence in the New Testament that just as there was a "list" of widows who were eligible for support (**1Timothy 5:9**), there may well have been some type of formal "list" of members which grew as people were saved.

The Acts 2:41

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

The Acts 2:46&47

**46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,
47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.**

The Acts 5:14

And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.)

The Acts 16:4&5

**4 And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem.
5 And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily.**

In the Bible, when a believer moved from one city to another- a "letter of commendation" was often written by his old Church to the new Church. (**The Acts 18:27; Romans 16:1; Colossians 4:10; 2Corinthians 3:1&2**)

In **The Book of the Acts**- much of the terminology that Luke used makes sense only in that he had *some* concept of formal Church membership in mind. Phrases such as "**the whole congregation**"(6:5), "**the church in Jerusalem**"(8:1), "**the disciples**" in Jerusalem (9:26), "**in every church**" (14:23), "**the whole church**"(15:17), and "**the elders of the church**" in Ephesus (20:17), all suggest recognizable and definable Church membership with well-understood boundaries (also see **1Corinthians 5:4; 14:23; and Hebrews 10:25**).

Point 1: The man who was used by God to write The Book of the Acts of the Apostles (Dr. Luke) used terminology that lends itself to assume that there was some form of official membership in the early Church.

2. The Existence of a Formal Church Government

The consistent pattern of Government throughout the New Testament is that a plurality of Elders is to oversee each local Body of Believers. But in practical terms, the specific duties and responsibilities given to these Elders would have been impossible to accomplish without having a clearly defined group or “list” of Church members who were under their care.

Among other things, the Elders are responsible to:

- Shepherd God’s people (**The Acts 20:28**)
- To Labor diligently among them (**1Thessalonians 5:12**)
- To Have charge over them (**1Thessalonians 5:12; 1Timothy 5:17**)
- To Keep watch over their souls (**Hebrews 13:17**)

The Scriptures clearly teach that the Elders will have to “give an account” to God for the individuals who were allotted to their charge (**Hebrews 13:17; 1Peter 5:3**)

Those responsibilities *require* that there be a distinguishable, mutually understood membership in the local Church. Elders can shepherd the people and give an account to God for their spiritual well-being only if they know who they are; they can provide oversight only if they know those for whom they are responsible; and they can fulfill their duty to shepherd the flock only if they know who is part of the Flock and who is not.

The Elders of a Church are not responsible for the spiritual well-being of every individual who simply visits the Church or who attends sporadically. But they *are* responsible before God to shepherd those souls who have submitted themselves to the care and the authority of those Elders, and this can only be done effectively through the vehicle of formal Church membership.

In addition to there being a formal membership in the Church- there must also of practical necessity be a highly trained (both Biblically and Theologically); Biblically qualified; and formally ordained leadership. The Scriptures teach that the Elders of the Church have to be definable men who formally hold their positions in the Church. If this were not true- then no one could fulfill Scripture when it commands believers to submit to their Elders. **Hebrews 13:17** says:

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

The question for each believer then is, “*Who are your Elders?*” and those men serving as Elders have to be distinguishable from the Deacons and other leaders in the Church in order for believers to know who to submit to. The one who has refused to join a local Church and entrust himself to the care and the authority of the ordained Elders has no leaders and is a law unto himself. For that person, obedience to **Hebrews 13:17** is impossible.

So in order for the believer to know *who* to submit to and in order for the Elders to know who to shepherd *requires* formal and definable membership.

Point 2: The Church that is recorded in The Book of the Acts of the Apostles had a formal Church Government. But that Government would have been ineffective at best unless there had also been a formal membership.

3. The Implementation of Church Discipline

In **Matthew 18:15-17**, Jesus outlines the way the Church is to seek the restoration of a believer who has fallen into sin—a four-step process commonly known as Church Discipline.

First, when a brother sins, he is to be confronted privately by a single individual (v. 15). If he repents- then the matter ends right there. But if the sinning believer refuses to repent, that individual is to take one or two other believers along to confront him the second time (v. 16). If the sinning believer repents- then the matter ends at this point. But if the offending believer continues to rebel against the two or three and persist in his sin, then the red letter words of Jesus commands them to tell it to the Church publicly (v. 17). If there is still no repentance, the final step is to formally put the person out of the Assembly (v. 17; **1Corinthians 5:1-13**).

The Biblical exercise of Church Discipline according to **Matthew 18** and other passages (**1Corinthians 5:1-13; 1Timothy 5:20; Titus 3:10&11**) is *impossible* to fully carry out without formal membership and it presupposes that the Elders of a Church know who their members are. Unless there is an official way in which believers willfully and formally submit to Biblical Discipline, the Elders would have no authority to implement it- especially in our litigious society.

For example, the Elders of The Covenant of Peace Church would have no authority to implement all four steps of Church Discipline on the members of a Church down the street- even though, technically, we are all members in particular of the worldwide Body of Jesus Christ.

Regrettably, the widespread lack of understanding about formal Church membership on both the believers and the Elders part has created an unworkable environment where fewer and fewer Churches are able to implement all four steps of Biblical Discipline on sinning members. This places the Body of Jesus Christ in the terrible position of being in willful disobedience to her Head.

Point 3: The Head of the Church (Jesus) requires Church Discipline to exist and function according to His standards. The four steps of Church Discipline are unworkable and unattainable without formal membership.

4. The Exhortation to Mutual Edification

The New Testament teaches that the Church is the Body of Jesus Christ, and that God has called *every* member to a life devoted to the health of the Body. In other words, Scripture exhorts all believers to edify the other members by practicing the “one-anothers” of the New Testament (**Hebrews 10:24&25**) and by exercising their spiritual gifts (**Romans 12:6-8; 1Corinthians 12:4-7; 1Peter 4:10&11**).

Mutual edification can *only* take place in the context of the Corporate Body of Christ. Exhortations to this kind of ministry presuppose that believers have committed themselves to other believers in a specific local Assembly. Formal Church membership is simply the best way to make that Scriptural commitment practical.

Point 4: Due to the fact that human beings periodically sin, to base mutual edification on human relationships (friendship) alone is neither productive nor sustainable long term. Formal membership provides the best vehicle to achieve the mutual edification that Scripture demands.

Conclusion

Living out a Scriptural commitment to a local Church involves many responsibilities:

- Exemplifying a godly lifestyle in the community
- Exercising one’s spiritual gifts in diligent service
- Contributing financially to the work of the ministry
- Giving and receiving admonishment with meekness and in love
- Faithfully participating in corporate worship.

By examining the four points made in this report together, a strong case can be made that by implementing formal Church membership in the Covenant of Peace Church, we can become more in line with that Church that is recorded in **The Book of the Acts of the Apostles** and more able to fully obey the Biblical requirements that Scripture places upon the Church.

Point 1: The man who wrote **The Book of the Acts of the Apostles** (Luke) used terminology that lends itself to assume that there was some form of official membership in the early Church.

Point 2: The Church that is recorded in **The Book of the Acts of the Apostles** had a formal Church Government and that Government would have been ineffective at best unless there had also been a formal membership.

Point 3: The Head of the Church (Jesus) requires Church Discipline to exist and

function according to His standards. The four steps of Church Discipline are unworkable and unattainable without formal membership.

Point 4: Due to the fact that human beings periodically sin, to base mutual edification on human relationships (friendship) alone is neither productive nor sustainable long term. Formal membership provides the best vehicle to achieve the mutual edification that Scripture demands.

Much is expected in and from a real Church because much is at stake. According to Scripture, the Church is the only visible representation of Jesus Christ to the world. The Church is the repository for Divinely inspired Truth and so those who make up the Church must be redeemed, bought, and faithful.

When every believer is faithful to this level of commitment, the Church is then able to live up to her calling as Christ's representative here on earth. To put it simply:

Formal Membership is the only practical vehicle which allows the local Church to be in complete subjection to Jesus Christ and to fully obey her Head and that is why it matters.

I love you all. The Grace of our Lord be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace.

Pastor Blair