

## ***The Biblical Theology of Church Membership***

*Selected Scriptures* - NCBC, January 26, 2020

Main Point: **God intends for you to officially identify with a local church.**

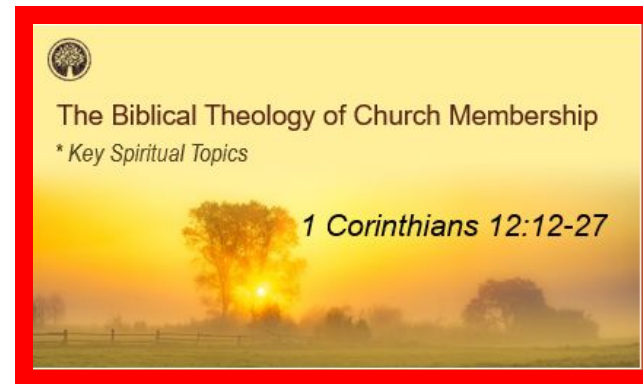
- Your church membership connects you with church history.
  - History of belonging in local churches (Acts 2:41-42, 47; 5:14; 16:5)
  - History of care in local churches (1 Tim 5:9; Acts 6:1, 3)
  - History of leadership in local churches (Acts 6:5; 2 Cor 3:1; Epistles)
- Your church membership strengthens your church's ministry.
  - Strengthens your church's leadership (Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:2)
  - Strengthens your church's love (1 Cor 12:7; 12-27)
  - Strengthens your church's purity (1 Cor 5:1-2, 7, 11-13)
  - Strengthens your church's fellowship (Phil 2:2; Heb 10:24-25)
- Your church membership benefits you personally.
  - Affirms your spiritual life (Gal 2:9)
  - Defines your spiritual accountability (Heb 13:17; 1 Thess 5:12-13)
  - Increases your spiritual care (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor 5:12-13)
  - Equips your spiritual ministry (Eph 4:11-16)

Application: **Renew your commitment to your church membership.**

## **Opening Announcements:**

- **Jordan Kauflin** visiting today refresh our vision for hiring an Associate Pastor of Music and Worship. Please plan to attend his teaching today at our combined 9:30a class in the Family Center.
- **Men's Challenge Breakfast on Feb 1<sup>st</sup> at 8am** – All men are encouraged to come receive compelling training on evangelism while enjoying a hearty breakfast together! Sign up using your Connection Card or Smartphone App today!

<<Jesus is Mine>>



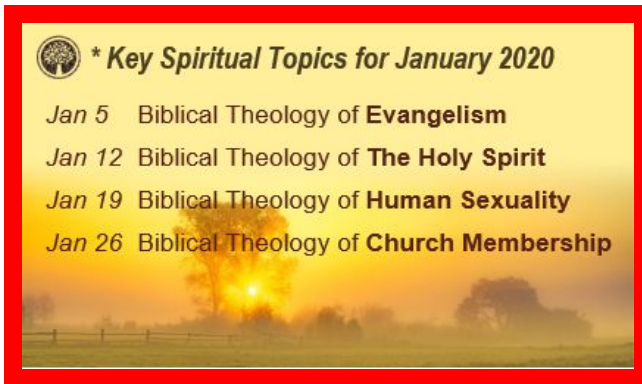
Thank you, Pastor Jordan, for leading us this morning. Take the world, but give me Jesus. For when we have Jesus, we have all that we truly need!

I pray that you really believe that this morning. That your faith in the sufficiency and the glory of God is being stirred up and encouraged through our worship together.

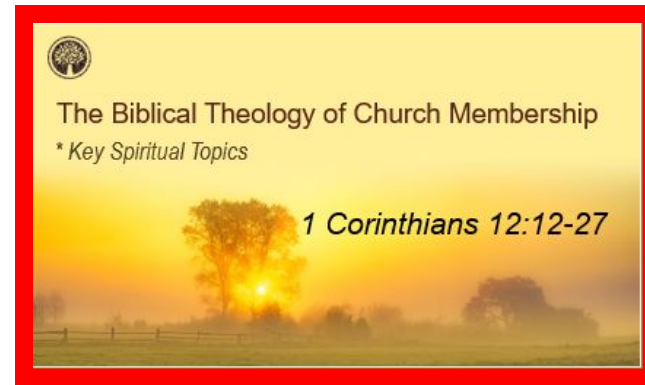
Let's now continue our worship by opening our Bibles to **First Corinthians chapter 12**, as we turn our attention to *The Biblical Theology of Church Membership*.



If you don't have a Bible with you, simply raise your hand as we'd love to give you a Bible today! Today's Scripture reading will be from **1 Corinthians 12, verses 12-27**.



Today is our last sermon in our **Key Spiritual Topics series**. We've consider *The Biblical Theology of Evangelism*, *The Biblical Theology of The Holy Spirit*, *The Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality*, and now today we turn to – *The Biblical Theology of Church Membership*.



**1 Corinthians 12** appropriately frames our study on **church membership**. Because as I read, you are going to notice that Paul uses the words, “body,” “member,” or “parts” over 30 times in these verses. God clearly desires for individual Christians to be part of a greater body—which is Christ’s body made visible through a local church.

So please stand in honor of the reading of God’s Word. From the English Standard Translation, I’ll begin reading from **1 Corinthians 12, verse 12**:

*12 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. 13 For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of*

*hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. <sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup> and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, <sup>24</sup> which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, <sup>25</sup> that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. <sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

This is God's Word. Please be seated.

**Let's Pray.**

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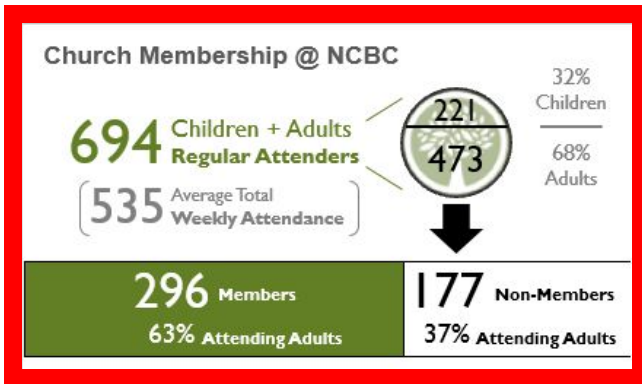
It's no secret that formal church membership has fallen out of style in recent years. Today many churches ignore this practice altogether as they try to make it as easy as possible for people to connect to their community of faith.

The majority of churchgoers commonly end up "dating" the church, receiving desired benefits without any real accountability or commitment. After all, what matters most is a person's personal relationship with Jesus, not any particular church, right? And so local churches today become revolving doors of autonomous religious consumers – seeking the preaching, or music, or children's ministry, or community that matches their own personal tastes from the best available accessible provider. And interestingly, this consumer mentality breeds a critical spirit that makes it easy to just move along to a different church the moment I sense that there's a better option available for me.

But the Scriptures teach something far different about the church – God's bride and Jesus' body. God's design for His children in a local church is far better than what popular church-hoppers believe. God has a good and biblical design for local church membership.



Now as best as we can tell from our church records, there are **694** total children and adults who regularly attend New Castle Bible Church. (Now obviously not everyone is here each week, as our average total weekly attendance is only **535** people.) But there are presently a total of **473** adults who would claim New Castle Bible Church as their home church.



Of all 473 regularly attending adults, only 296 or 63% of us are church members. So approximately 2/3 of us are formal church members, and 1/3 of us adults are not.

Interesting statistics perhaps. But regardless of whether you're a member or not, today's sermon is for you! Both our current members, and our nonmembers, need to be refreshed by God's design for church membership, and better understand why this is something God has designed for our good.

Now clearly there's lots of misconceptions about what church membership really is. Some believe that membership just gives a person the right to vote at a church business meeting. Or some believe formal church membership is only a legal protection for churches who discipline a professing Christian in unrepentant sin. And then many of us are just indifferent about membership...perhaps willing to do it, but viewing it as merely a cultural option that functionally makes no difference in one's relationship with God Himself.

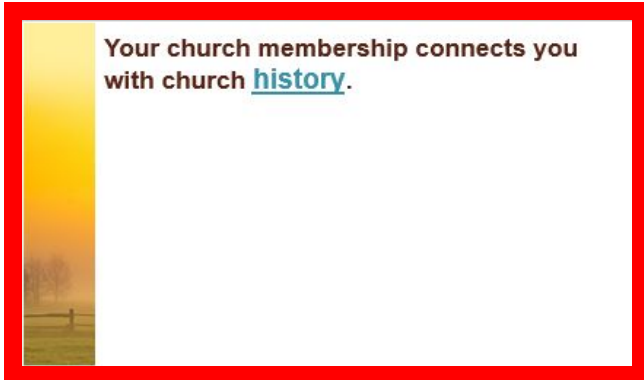
But God's design for church membership is so much better than any of these common views! Today we are going to survey Scripture to discover that,



God intends for you to officially identify with a local church. God desires every Christian to belong to, and

publicly identify with, a local church. So in this sermon, when I use the words, “church membership,” I’m referring to the cultural means of publicly identifying with a particular local church. **Church membership is how a Christian and a local church intentionally express their commitments to each other for the glory of God.**

So let’s observe 3 reasons why God intends for every Christian to officially identify with a local church through formal church membership.



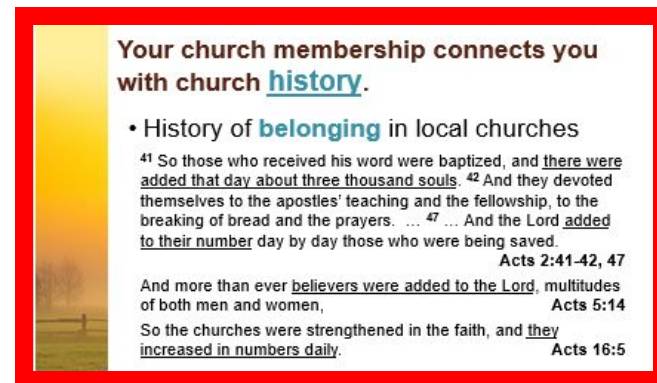
First, your church membership connects you with church history. Now this is important since Scripture nowhere commands Christians to take a class, or sign a covenant of membership. However, while Scripture never explicitly commands church membership, it clearly assumes local church membership throughout the New Testament.

The book of Acts presents a strong,



History of Christian’s belonging in local churches.

The possibility of being saved and living apart from any belonging with a local assembly of Christians is entirely foreign to the New Testament Scriptures.



For example, **Acts** consistently records how new believers were “added” to the church. While we might debate whether there were formal membership rolls in place, here’s the New Testament pattern: people would repent and believe in Christ for their salvation, receive public baptism, and then devote themselves to the *apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of*



bread and the prayers.<sup>1</sup> New Testament Christians always join up with a local assembly of believers. There's no such thing as a "lone ranger" autonomous Christian in the New Testament.

Further, the Scriptures clearly present a,



**Your church membership connects you with church history.**

- History of **belonging** in local churches
- History of **care** in local churches

History of care within local churches.

The local church is God's design for Christians' relational care for one another. We see this first illustrated in,



**Your church membership connects you with church history.**

- History of **belonging** in local churches
- History of **care** in local churches

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ...  
<sup>3</sup> Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, ... whom we will appoint to this duty. Acts 6:1, 3

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, 1 Timothy 5:9

<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:42

**Acts chapter 6**, where the church in Jerusalem cared for believing widows scattered all throughout the region. This care was organized through, and received by, one's participation in the local church. When complaints came to the apostles about how the widow's aid was being distributed, they charged the local church in Jerusalem to select seven men from "among you," or from within the church, to make sure that all the Christian widows were properly cared for. **Acts 6** is clear, the mutual care of Christians was organized and administrated through a local church.<sup>2</sup>

**1 Timothy 5:9** gives further clear evidence that Christian widows publicly identified with their local church by enrolling on a list that each church maintained for the purpose of financial aid. Care for individual Christians was administered through one's public identification with your local church.

And this wasn't just the widows. Whenever the Scriptures speak of Christians caring for other Christians,<sup>3</sup> these efforts were done by and through local churches.

Further, Scripture clearly reveals a,

<sup>2</sup> It was the "whole gathering" of the Jerusalem church that was encouraged by this organization of widow care.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 11:29-30; Romans 15:25-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-6; 19-24; 9:5

**Your church membership connects you with church history.**

- History of **belonging** in local churches
- History of **care** in local churches
- History of **leadership** in local churches

**History of leadership in local churches.** The New Testament assumes that every Christian will be under the leadership of a particular local church. For example, all of the New Testament epistles were written to local churches, or leaders of local churches. God assumed that every Christian would receive His Word because he or she was committed to a local church, and benefiting from the spiritual leadership of a local church.

**Your church membership connects you with church history.**

- History of **belonging** in local churches
- History of **care** in local churches
- History of **leadership** in local churches

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them.... Acts 15:22

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?  
2 Corinthians 3:1

**Verses like Acts 15:22** make it clear that the leaders knew who specifically was identified with the local church.<sup>4</sup> In fact, **2 Corinthians 3:1** implies that church

<sup>4</sup> C.f. 1 Corinthians 5:4, 14:23; Hebrews 10:25  
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leaders provided letters of recommendation for members transferring from one church to another.<sup>5</sup>

So biblical history assumes all Christ-followers would belong to a local church, receive benevolence by means of their association with a local church, and be publicly identifiable to their local church leadership. Therefore the first reason why every Christian should officially identify with a local church is because your church membership clearly connects you with the historical pattern we see described in Scripture.

But the second reason God intends for you to officially identify with a local church is because,

**Your church membership strengthens your church's ministry.**

**Your church membership strengthens your church's ministry.** If you desire to see your local church strengthened for the glory of God, then you do not want to miss this point. Because God's Word clearly teaches that your official identification with your local church actually strengthens its ministry.

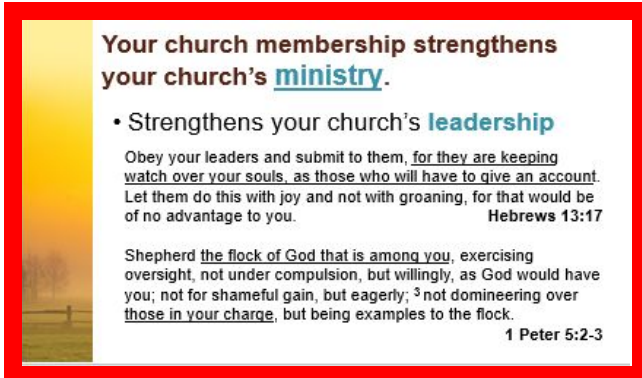
<sup>5</sup> C.f. Acts 18:27; Romans 16:1; Colossians 4:10; 2 Corinthians 3:1-2

The first way church membership strengthens your local church is by,



Strengthening your church's leadership.

We see this most clearly in,



**Hebrews 13:17** which says,

*Obey your leaders and submit to them...*

Now that sounds like a verse that a power-hungry pastor might like, right? Christians are supposed to follow their church leaders! But then we keep reading ...

*Obey your leaders and submit to them, ...for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.*

Did you hear that? Because I definitely heard that! **Hebrews 13:17** clearly teaches your spiritual leaders are responsible to keep a watch on your soul, because someday we will give an account to God Himself for your soul and how we have shepherded you.

Whoa. Now put yourself in the position of a church elder. Would you like to know *who* you will give an account for? Every Christian in the world? Every Christian in your city?

According to **1 Peter 5:2**, overseers are responsible to *shepherd the flock of God that is among you*. But how does an elder specifically know who is *in his charge*? Is he responsible for every soul who ever steps foot in the church building, only attends on holidays or special events, but may otherwise be entirely unknown to the leaders?

No. Church leaders are held accountable only for those specific souls which voluntarily commit themselves to that flock in a formal and publicly identifiable church membership. Think about this... and notice the end of **Hebrews 13:17**. It is to your spiritual advantage to be shepherded by joyful leaders. So when you publicly commit to a local church, you help your leaders know they are spiritually responsible for you. Your church membership adds joy to your leaders, and thereby strengthens your church's ministry.



Second, your church membership,



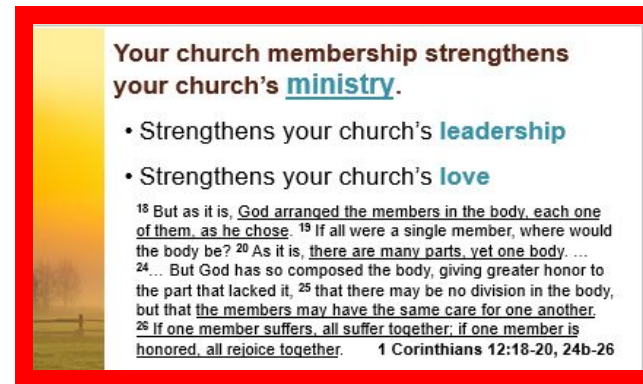
Your church membership strengthens your church's ministry.

- Strengthens your church's **leadership**
- Strengthens your church's **love**

Strengthens your church's love.

Here's how formal church membership strengthens love: Where there is no sacrifice, there is no love. Where there is no commitment, there is no love. How much love can a church body really experience if it's only a spiritual marketplace filled with consumers seeking to get the best bang for their buck?

God's Word is absolutely clear on this point. Every Christ-follower is called to loving commitment with other Christians in the local church. Just as we read from **1 Corinthians 12** earlier,



Your church membership strengthens your church's ministry.

- Strengthens your church's **leadership**
- Strengthens your church's **love**

<sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. ...  
<sup>24</sup> ... But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, <sup>25</sup> that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.  
<sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. 1 Corinthians 12:18-20, 24b-26

God puts all the individual members together into one body, *each one of them as He chose*. Notice, Christianity is not just about Jesus and me... because **verse 19** – *If all were a single member, where would the body be?*

God rescues individual sinners yes...but for the purpose of putting all the redeemed into one body – the bride of Christ! So that rich and poor, and black and white, and quiet and loud all truly love each other supernaturally – within one body!

Normally such diversity among Christians would lead to division, right? Birds of the same feather are the ones who flock together...if it wasn't for the sacrificial self-giving nature of God's love. But **verse 25** says God has so composed His local church so that *the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.*

True love is never convenient nor cheap. It will only last if it's grounded in a promise or a covenant.

Every married person understands this. Because when marriage gets hard, it's tempting to just walk away. Except I promised to love and cherish my spouse until death do us part – no matter what may come. It is the covenant that keeps fueling love when emotions leave.

And in this same way, the covenant of church membership strengthens your church's love, because membership strengthens the individual's mutual commitment to one another in Christ.

However your church membership also,



Your church membership strengthens your church's **ministry**.

- Strengthens your church's **leadership**
- Strengthens your church's **love**
- Strengthens your church's **purity**

**Strengthens your church's purity.** In **1 Corinthians 5** Paul clearly argues for a defined boundary of who is part of the local church, and who isn't:



**In 1 Corinthians 5:1** Paul refers to one of the church members at the church in Corinth who is living in adultery with his step-mom. **Verse 2,**

*And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.*

The purity of the church's worship and witness is being tarnished by their tolerance of this ongoing sin! So Paul says this member needs to be removed from among them.

Now, this is a logical argument for some kind of formal church membership. Because how do you formally remove someone from a group if they haven't first been formally included?



**Your church membership strengthens your church's ministry.**

- Strengthens your church's **leadership**
- Strengthens your church's **love**
- Strengthens your church's **purity**

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? <sup>13</sup> God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."  
**1 Corinthians 5:12-13**

Paul goes on in **verses 12-13**,

*Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside.*

In other words, God intends for there to be a clear line of demarcation between those who are inside the church, and those who are outside the church.

Regular attendance does not commit a person or put them on the inside of a church anymore than faithful attendance at a sporting event makes you a member of the team. Church membership is the formal process of officially identifying yourself with a particular local church. It's what defines who's inside, and who's outside the church. This is how membership strengthens a church's purity.

Finally, your church membership also,



**Strengthens your church's fellowship**, or partnership together. Just think about it:

When you become a member of a local church, the elders affirm that you have been born again by the Spirit of God. You agree to a common doctrinal understanding, and unite together around a shared mission or passion in your particular region. Membership confirms and affirms the body's spiritual fellowship and oneness together.<sup>6</sup>



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<sup>6</sup> John 17:22-23

The process of becoming an official member ensures that all the individual parts are, *having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*<sup>7</sup>

Can you see now how church membership is way more than just voting privileges at an annual meeting? Your church membership is God's good design to strengthen your local church's ministry!

So church membership is consistent with what we see described in biblical church history. It's good for your church. And third,



Your church membership also benefits you personally.

Officially formalizing your belonging and your committed partnership to a particular local church is good for your own soul.

First, because church membership,



Affirms your spiritual life.

Remember, only the forgiven can enter Christ's body. Any person is welcome to attend and witness a local church's worship of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> But theologically speaking, the church is only made up of those who have been born again! And church leaders are given the responsibility to affirm the evidence of spiritual life in others.



In **Galatians 2:9**, we see the apostles confirming God's grace in Paul and Barnabas before they extended the right hand of fellowship to them. In **Matthew 16** and **18**,

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<sup>7</sup> Philippians 2:2  
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<sup>8</sup> I.e. outsiders are invited according to 1 Corinthians 14:24

Jesus teaches that God holds local church leaders accountable to discern who's in and who's out of God's kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

This is why the process for church membership includes an interview with your spiritual shepherds to confirm and affirm your salvation! This is why you must be publicly identified with Jesus in believer's baptism before you can be publicly identified with Jesus' bride in church membership.

Even though our human process of church membership is imperfect and God of course is the final judge of one's salvation... it is good and helpful for every professing Christian to have his or her spiritual shepherds get to know them well enough that they can affirm your spiritual life!

Second, church membership is beneficial by,



**Defining your spiritual accountability.**

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Matthew 18:18-20. For further study, please see the very helpful discussion on "Kingdom Keys" and "Binding and Loosing" in *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, by Jonathan Leeman, pgs 182-192.

After all God's Word is clear,



**God desires for every Christian to obey your spiritual leaders and submit to them.** In our age of podcasts and internet preachers...every Christian needs to figure out how he is going to obey **Hebrews 13:17**.

And here's how church membership helps you – it tells you which group of spiritual leaders God commands you to submit to!

God's authority structure is for our good, and you can't benefit from submission to your church leaders if you haven't formally chosen to whom you will submit.

Understand that your church membership also,





**Increases your spiritual care.** Membership is a two-way covenant. Your commitment to the body invites greater commitment and accountability from the rest of the body towards you. There are 33 “one-another” commands in Scripture which direct how Christ-followers should relate to each other within the local church. Praying for one another, serving one another, admonishing one another, greeting one another, encouraging one another, etc.



**But additionally, Scriptures like Acts 20:28 and 1 Corinthians 5:12** clearly put the elders’ priority on caring for those who are *inside* the church.

Practically, this means our elders regularly pray for every person in our membership. Each week our membership list is divided among all our elders and emailed to them for their week’s prayers. The following week, they get the next section of member’s names for their prayers. It’s not that we don’t love or care for our regular attenders...but its just that we necessarily have a higher priority of commitment to those who are officially part of our family. We will give an account to God for how we have shepherded our members.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, church membership benefits you by,



**Equipping your spiritual ministry.**

Listen, the church is not about volunteerism. The church is about worship. Therefore, most of the church’s ministry is reserved for those who are controlled by God’s Spirit, those who are officially united with us in our mission for God’s glory. Reserving ministry for church members ensures that our volunteers are truly of one accord and mutual partnership together.

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<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 13:17



Additionally, God gives pastors and teachers to shepherd, care for, and equip saints for the work of Spirit-controlled ministry.

We must think deeply about the dangers of individual Christians commissioning themselves to the Lord's work, apart from the spiritual accountability and shepherding which is God's good design.

Here's the point church,



God intends for you to officially identify with a local church. It's the clear example from biblical history, it's good for your church, and it's good for you.



So no matter whether you are currently an official member of your local church or not, today will you **renew your commitment to your church membership?**

It all starts by submitting to God Himself and His Gospel love. Our self-reliant hearts can lay down our independence and find belonging in the finished work of Jesus Christ! Jesus' blood paid for all our sins... the tomb is empty! You will never understand the joys of submission to God until you have received the love of God Himself! Will you surrender today, and believe that God truly loves you?

God saves you and I with a glorious purpose – to redeem for Himself a bride! To build a body where all the members of the body, though many, are truly one body.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:12



So here's the opportunity before us. This coming Saturday I'm going to be teaching a special 3-hour membership class. And you're all invited!

If you're already a member of New Castle Bible Church, but you've not attended one of the Membership Classes that I've taught, please come. I believe these 3 hours will sincerely renew your understanding and practice of membership here!

If you're not yet a member, please come. The class is a required discipleship step in our membership process... but it is exploratory. Attending doesn't commit you to membership, but helps you better understand what it practically means in our specific context here.

Will you invest 3 hours this coming Saturday to renew your commitment to your church membership? If so, I believe both you and our church will grow spiritually as we better reflect God's design for His church as observed through biblical history.



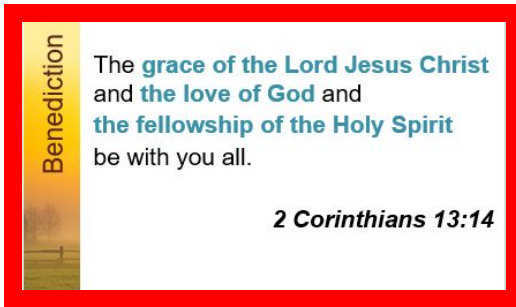
**Let's pray.**

<<Yet Not I but through Christ in Me>>



**Only after 1<sup>st</sup> Service**

Let's pray our benediction together as we dismiss.



Benediction

The **grace of the Lord Jesus Christ** and **the love of God** and **the fellowship of the Holy Spirit** be with you all.

**2 Corinthians 13:14**

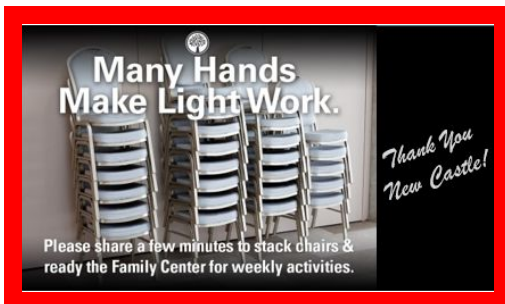
*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. 2 Corinthians 13:14*



Making the first **2** minutes count!

Seek to show hospitality ...

Romans 12:13b



**Many Hands Make Light Work.**

*Thank You New Castle!*

Please share a few minutes to stack chairs & ready the Family Center for weekly activities.

Only after 2<sup>nd</sup> service

## **Recommended Resources on Church Membership:**

- Acts 2:41-42, 46-47; 5:14; 6:3, 5; 16:22; 16:5; 18:27
- Romans 12:6-8; 16:1
- 1 Corinthians 3:9; 5:1-13; 12:7, 12-27
- 2 Corinthians 3:1-2; 6:14-18
- Galatians 2:9
- Philippians 2:2
- Colossians 4:10
- 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13
- 1 Timothy 5:3-16
- Hebrews 10:24-25; 13:7, 17
- 1 Peter 4:10-11; 5:3-4
  
- <https://www.gracechurch.org/about/distinctives/church-membership>
- <https://www.9marks.org/journal/church-membership-holding-body-together/>
- <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/how-important-is-church-membership>
- <https://radical.net/sermon/12-traits-of-a-biblical-church-membership/>
  
- Church Membership, Jonathan Leeman & Michael Horton
- I am a Church Member, Thom Rainer
- Life in the Body of Christ, Curtis Thomas
- Life in the Father's House, Wayne Mack & Dave Swavely
- The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love, Jonathan Leeman

## **Growing Deeper: Life Group Questions**

1. Read Acts 2:41-42, 47; 5:14; and 16:5. Discuss why the idea of experiencing salvation apart from belonging to a local church body is so foreign to the New Testament.
2. Read Hebrews 13:17. Discuss how to relate with your spiritual leaders in a way that practically brings them joy. Discuss how you can fulfill 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 even when your spiritual leaders make mistakes or disappoint you.
3. Read Acts 5:29 and 23:1-5. When is it wrong to submit to your spiritual leaders?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 12:13. Is it possible for someone to be born again and not be a part of Christ's church? Why do you believe so many Christians are not official members of a local church today?
5. Read John 17:22-23 and Philippians 2:2. How does local church membership cause the visible church to better reflect the invisible church of Christ?
6. Share together what you most appreciate about church membership at New Castle Bible Church. Pray for one another to live as faithful partners together by glorifying God as we grow deeper and reach farther together.