Text: Various
Title: Church Membership, Part 1
Truth: Every Christian should be a church member.
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The Endangered State of the Church[1]

In 1945, 75 percent of American adults were members of a church, a number that held reasonably steady until 2000 (70 percent). Just twenty years later, that number had dipped to 47 percent. The steepest declines can be seen among Gen-Xers and millennials: among the latter group (born 1981 to 1996), only 36 percent claimed formal membership in a church in 2020.

In addition, while the initial declines were most drastic among mainline denominations and Christians who identified as progressive or liberal, more conservative branches of Christianity are no longer immune to the trends. The Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, lost nearly half a million members in 2022 alone. Overall, SBC membership has experienced steady decline, from a peak of 16.3 million in 2006 to 13.2 million in 2022.

The general decline in participation in church life can be seen on the ground in contracting congregations: The median congregation today has around sixty-five attendees, down from a median of 137 people in 2000. As smaller congregations struggle to stay afloat, church closures have risen. In 2019, there were more church closures than openings in the United States, and that was before the COVID-19 pandemic, which only exposed and accelerated the trends.

The decline in religious participation, which has been referred to as "the great dechurching," has been accompanied by a sharp increase in Americans who claim no religious affiliation (a.k.a. the

[1] The section in its entirety is quoted from https://pastorresources.com/church-decline-trends/. The article goes on to discuss the increasing role of the parachurch in the west. I note that this declining trend of membership is similar to the trend in marriage. In 1962 72% of adults were married; by 2010 it was 51%. See https://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr/resources/data/family-profiles/FP-24-10.html.

"nones"), who now comprise about 28 percent of US adults. While the latest data suggests that the rise of the nones may be slowing overall, young adults continue to leave the church in droves.

In addition, trust in institutions and clergy continues to fall, as a host of highly public scandals and the #ChurchToo movement[2] have rocked the religious landscape and organizations across the theological spectrum, from Roman Catholic to Southern Baptist to nondenominational churches and networks, leading to an unprecedented lack of public trust in the church, organized religion, and individual clergy. As of 2024, fewer than one-third of Americans rated clergy as highly honest and ethical—lower than nurses, police officers, and chiropractors, although still higher than politicians, lawyers, and journalists.

All this points to the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of the United States.

Introduction

The discouraging thing about the data above is that the practical definition of membership across a broad swath of Christendom is shallow—and it *still* people do not commit to it. Things are not good even with a *weak* definition of church membership, much less a meaty definition. Even membership in 'conservative' denominations is too often a formality with little reality. Many churches have large numbers of members compared to their weekly attendance. In a Biblically-organized and operated church, this cannot be the case.[3]

Full disclosure as to what I have heard on the subject of church decline (or incline)— among the Gen Z population (born 1997-2012) there are some signs of a slight resurgence in church attendance and religion. This is noted more among young men

[2] The #ChurchToo movement calls out sexual abuse and misconduct with churches and other religious bodies and advocates for reforms.

[3] In *Committing to One Another* Mark Dever writes, "According to one recent study, the typical Southern Baptist church has 233 members with only 70 attending on Sunday morning." That means that it only really has nearer to 70 members, maybe a few more or less since some attending on any given Sunday are likely non-members such as children and unsaved visitors. We want member numbers to match reality.

than women. This is good, but it is not a cure for what ails our society or our churches.

In our own assembly, we have had this question: What is the meaning of church membership? What is it good for? Is it merely a bureaucratic reality where you get a couple extra perks? What difference does it make? Is the only benefit of church membership that you have voting rights at business meetings?

We believe that church membership means to be a connected, vital part of the local community of believers. Every Christian should be a church member because it is biblical, and it makes a great deal of difference in our lives. A proper practice of membership has to do with a biblical approach to church. It is about accountability. It involves our responsibilities toward one another, and our worship toward God. It is a preview of our heavenly existence with Christ.

If you are already a member of our local assembly, you might think, "I'm off the hook. I can turn my brain onto auto pilot now because this sermon is not intended for me." But that is incorrect! This message is for members *and* those not yet members of the church.

Basic Biblical Data on Church Membership

If local church membership is not taught in the Bible, then it is optional. If it is taught in the Bible, then it is not an option.

A. Membership is taught in the New Testament

1. Every believer is commanded to be part of a local church (Heb. 10:24-25). We often use this verse to remind ourselves that we need to attend church regularly and in fact frequently. But there is more to it. There is "consider one another", "stir up love and good works," and "exhorting one another" with the urgency of the second coming of Christ. Those things do not happen if you are not a vital part of a church, with real more-than-surface relationships.

2. In the context of the early church, to even ask the question "Should I join a church?" would be way out of line. They assumed you would join the church if you were a real Christian. That was the natural thing to do for a born-again person. A

believer without a church was not a thing—like a fish out of water. If it temporarily were the case because there was no church yet, a church would be started/planted.

3. The believers gathered in local churches. Paul wrote to local churches and planted local churches and ministered in local churches. An individual Christian existence was never encouraged or even considered as a viable possibility in the NT. Consider the many "one another" commands in the NT as an evidence of the truth of this proposition (Romans 12:10, 12:16, 13:8, 14:13, 15:5, 15:7, 15:14, 16:16, and that is just in Romans!).[4]

B. Several texts indicate that the church maintained a formal list. In the New Testament church, members were well known to the church leadership and family. Various verses give evidence of this:

1. Acts 2:41, 4:4 – the disciples knew the number of people that were part of the church ("that day about three thousand souls were added *to them*"[5]). This implies a list, whether written or memorized in distributed fashion by the leaders of the church.

2. 1 Timothy 5:9 – the widow list ("taken into the number").

3. Acts 6:2-5 – the election of deacons from a known set of people ("seek out from among you").

4. 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 – church discipline requires us to know who is inside and who is outside so we can treat them accordingly. Church discipline—the ministry of the church to the non-repentant—moves someone from inside to outside.[6] If there is a formal removal, there must also be a formal inclusion process.

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[4] See https://www.fbcaa.org/MattPostiffBlog/2025/05/Love-One-Another and https://www.fbcaa.org/MattPostiffBlog/2025/06/Our-One-Another-Negative-Responsibilities for a total of 42 "one another" commands.

[5] Acts Masons: "many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand."

[6] Church discipline does not, as some cynically assume, "remove a person from salvation" or declare the person to be unsaved. Instead, it means that the church people no longer can give affirmation to the person's testimony of faith. It is as if when asked, "Is that person a follower of Christ?" the best we could answer is, "No comment" or "We do not know." That would be a very kind and indirect way of saying what we really

This is a practical outworking of what Jesus taught in Matthew 18:17 about the responsibility and privilege of the local church to bind or loose, to agree among itself who is part and who is not. Certainly, churches do not do this perfectly, but we have a responsibility to try despite imperfection to maintain a demarcation between who belongs to the church and who does not. This is because God has a list of believers in Heaven, and we want our list to match His as much as is possible to humanly know! (We cannot know what only God knows.)

This reminds me to mention that there are almost certainly names on the Lamb's list that are not and never have been members of our church—names of young people, or people in Ann Arbor that we have not reached yet. We want to focus on *adding* those people to the list instead of getting hung up on *removing* people who are misbehaving!

5. Romans 16:2-15 – Paul greets a whole list of people in the Roman churches.

6. 2 Cor. 2:6 – Paul writes of the punishment inflicted by the majority. This implies that the larger part of the church agreed to remove a person from their fellowship. There must be a defined list of people to know who or how many make up a majority.

C. In summary, if we know who is "in" and who is "out", then we have a membership list and some formalized way of recognizing who is on it. My personal testimony observing the ministry of Pastor Charles Mason is relevant at this point. Over 20 years ago when he came to our church to supply the pulpit for several months, he

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mean: "We cannot affirm that person is living for the Lord. They seem *not* to be living for the Lord." For example, if the person stops attending the church for no evident reason and stops talking to many of the people in the church, there is no way that the church can affirm that this individual is walking with Christ. For all we know, they may be living in sin, or not. If a person leaves his wife and lives with another woman, he is practicing adultery. If he will not repent, then we cannot give affirmation to his profession of faith. He may come around in time—if a true believer—or he may not—if not a true believer. In any case, such a person is not a "part" of the church anymore. If the person became repentant and amended his ways, then once again hearty affirmation could be made of his partnership in the church.

asked us this question: “Where is the membership list of the church? Who is on that list?” The reason? He wanted to know which people he was officially—before God—responsible for teaching, leading, pastoring. This is important to a pastor because he is charged with the care of the flock and will give an account according to Hebrews 13:17. In the membership, there is a relationship established between the member and the pastor in the sense of the pastor having a responsibility to carry out his pastoral duties toward that person. Heb. 13:17 and 1 Peter 5:4 give the pastor a responsibility to watch out for souls—a responsibility that he will be called to account for before the Lord. Are you part of the group of people for which I will be held responsible? Or are you skirting around that relationship?

D. Another key point of Biblical data on the subject has to do with the meaning of the words used to describe someone who belongs to a church. Ephesians 4:16 uses the word μέρος (part or share) and 1 Cor. 12:12 has μέλος (member). If you are a member of a church, that is the same thing as saying you are a part of the church. *Member* is used in Romans 12:4-5, 1 Cor. 6:15, 1 Cor. 12:12-27, Eph. 4:25.

In English, the word “part” is slippery enough that we can get away with saying, “I’m a part of Fellowship Bible Church” even though I only attending about half of Sunday morning services and do not have a vital connection to most if any of the other people in the church! In Christian theology, the word does not allow that kind of imprecise use. Part and member are basically interchangeable, and they mean the real kind of vital family connection in Christ.

In order to avoid becoming “loosey goosey” with *part*, I suggest you think of it with the added biblical flavor of fellowship, *koinonia* from the Greek, and think of it therefore as **partnership**. You are a partner with others in the church, not a mere spectator, or associate. You are like a **partner in a business or law firm**. If you prefer, since part and share are definitions of μέρος, you might think of yourself as a **shareholder in the firm**, but an active shareholder, not just a passive investor.

E. Church membership arises from the nature of our connection to Jesus Christ. If we are united to Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:5)…and if we are united to Him in His eternal life (John 17:3, 1 John 5:11, 5:20)…then we are a part of Him, and thus part of His body. The body consists of its members who share likewise in these great realities. Consider also 1 Cor. 6:15 (close connection with Christ), Eph. 2:19 (part of God's family), 4:25 (we do not lie to one another because we are part of one another), and 5:30 (the Lord loves the church, part of Himself).

Application: Are You a Member of a Local Church?

A. Some people remain in an almost perpetual state of church shopping. They might sanctify it by saying, "I am searching for God's will." That is a pious-sounding excuse for not settling down and getting to work in a good church. You can forget finding a perfect church. You can forget finding Jesus in the pulpit, or Jesus in the pew, or Jesus in the leadership of the church. He is not there. People in those places are hopefully becoming like Him, but we all know how that goes.

B. We do not find "church shopping" in the Bible. Many people have a consumer mentality—I will show up when I want to and I need to get what I want to get out of this, otherwise I am out of here! There was initially only one true church in each ancient city, even if it may have met in various places. Eventually there may have been multiple churches but they were, again initially, of like faith and doctrine under the care of the apostles. If you were a Christian in that context, you would naturally be a part of the church nearest to you. Today we have "options" and many of those options have strayed from sound teaching.

   Other people have given up in their shopping expedition and just stay home, not participating at all (and being in a perpetual state of sin) or watching online so they can pick and choose what they like and again not being involved in the real life of the church.

C. God has made His will known already about this matter: be a vital, integral part of a church. Do not have a consumer mindset where you are just looking for what you can get out of it. Do not have the

80/20 mindset where you are part of the 80% hanging around and not part of the 20% doing most of the ministry work.

But though God has made clear His will, many people do not want to submit to it. People want a church that offers just the services they desire, has the number of people they desire, has the type of people they like (Is that profiling? Is it age discrimination?), has the same music they like to listen to in the car, and so forth. Instead, I counsel you to ask how you can serve the church to help it have those ministries, people, and anything else godly and agreeable to the large majority of Christians there.

D. The issue of submission is one that rubs us all the wrong way to a greater or lesser degree. If FBC as a church has deemed it wise to implement the "membership list" in a certain way that is not unbiblical, why not just "knuckle under" and join the church on its terms, instead of demanding *your* terms? Maybe God is putting you to the test if you will be obedient even if it is not perfectly to your liking? Maybe you have doctrinal hangup? Are you willing to submit to the wisdom of people who have studied it a lot more than you have? To put your pet issue aside for the good of God's work? To gladly link arms with people you know are decent people, imperfect though they may be?

Maybe you have not been baptized by immersion and you bristle at the idea of having to be "re-baptized." We do not believe it is re-baptism, by the way, but are you really sure that being sprinkled as an infant matches what the Bible says about baptism in the New Testament church—so much so that you are willing to hold on to your view and dismiss the whole church membership thing?

Are you concerned if you join that you will have to get involved in church politics? We try to keep those at bay.

Concerned that someone will ask you to do *more* work than you are already doing? I can assure you that is not the case—unless you are not doing much! Joining a church is not about more work—it is about an expression of solidarity together in Christ, explicitly saying that you are part of the family of God here, committed and accountable to God and to one another. MAP