



Church Membership

Forging strong congregations

John Benton

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CONTENTS

	Page number
Introduction	3
1. Why church membership?	6
2. Qualifications for church membership	12
3. How churches are meant to function	19
Afterword: Responsibilities of church members	23

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Introduction

Church membership is a rather despised subject in the contemporary church. It is rarely referred to in the Sunday teaching and if it is, then it can appear intrusive and embarrassing for those listening.

There are many reasons for this.

- *First*, it can smack of an over-zealous church bureaucracy. Membership can appear as rather too corporate and administrative; not very personal.
- *Secondly*, it is viewed as unspiritual by many Christians, especially those with a more free-wheeling, spontaneous view of church (historically these outlooks have emerged from a Brethren or sometimes a charismatic background). It can seem that the church is keener to have order than to be spiritual. (Actually, the NT does not see these two things as in tension, 1 Corinthians 14.40).
- *Thirdly*, much of evangelicalism has unconsciously drunk deep of the secular spirit of individualism and come up with a Christian-ised version of it. The gospel is all about *my* personal salvation and *my* walk with God. Church is just there to meet my needs – rather like a spiritual convenience store. The attitude is, ‘I wouldn’t want to be a member of a church any more than I would want to tie myself to Sainsbury’s! There are plenty of other good supermarkets.’
- *Fourthly*, belonging to a local church is dismissed as not central to the gospel (you are not saved by joining a church) and therefore is unimportant. But there is a failure of logic here. It is, indeed, a secondary issue, but to be secondary is not the same as being unimportant. The wedding ring is secondary to the actual marriage relationship. But try telling the bride or groom it is unimportant.
- *Fifthly*, many Christians who once were members somewhere have sadly been hurt by misguided churches or harsh leaders. Understandably such folk want to avoid being hurt again. So, they wish to hang loose from church membership. Sensitive to their pain some churches therefore soft pedal the whole matter of membership.

So, for all these reasons and more church membership tends to get neglected.

Weak churches

But the neglect of a proper church membership is one of the primary reasons for the weakness of the church in our country.

A church's strength is to do with its connectedness and togetherness in Christ and his truth. A wall of bricks without mortar is easily pushed over – but not a wall where the bricks are cemented together. Membership is a commitment to that togetherness in the truth and it makes for strong churches. Only where a church stands together and functions in harmony with each other is it able to fulfil its God-given purposes.

One dynamic picture of a local church in the NT is that of a human body – the body of Christ. With that in mind, let us imagine what happens where one person rescues another from drowning in a lake. Someone who cannot swim has fallen into deep water and cries out, 'Help! Help!' The rescuer hears their cries – he uses his ears. He turns his head (neck muscles) and sees (eyes) the plight of the drowning person. He runs (legs) to where he can see (eyes) the local council have provided a life belt for just such a calamity. He releases it from its setting (hands), takes hold of it (hands) and runs (legs) to the waters' edge. Meanwhile his heart is pumping away getting blood to his muscles. Holding on to the life-line he casts the life-belt to the drowning person and pulls (hands, arms, legs, back muscles) them to shore. They are saved.

However, without the unity and cooperation of the different parts of the rescuer's body the drowning person would have been lost. Without his ears the rescuer would never have heard the person's cries. Without his eyes, the rescuer would never have located the person or the life-belt. Without his hands, legs, arms and heart working together, the rescue could never happen. It is such a picture that Paul has in mind as he exhorts the Philippians to 'strive as one man for the faith of the gospel,' Philippians 1.27.

But the attitude which argues for church attendance but not church commitment, not church membership, undermines the unity and coordination of the body of Christ. Going back to our scenario of the drowning person, the ears of the body might hear the cries of the person in danger, but what happens if the eyes, hands and legs won't get involved? Similarly, a church will be ineffective if it is uncommitted. It cannot do what it was meant to do. A body with limbs

disjointed or separated is not strong. It is actually dying.

To say 'well we love each other as a church and so will work together so we don't need formal membership' is rather like a couple saying 'we live together and it works because we love each other - we don't need the formality of marriage.' No. Strong churches require formal, not just notional membership.

Paper membership

Some churches see the logic of what is being said here and understand the importance of membership. They do encourage people to become members. But for many, it is not a working membership. They are hardly any different from a church which has many in attendance who are not members. It is little more than 'membership' on paper.

The problem with these churches is often that they are more interested in a large membership list than they are in a functioning membership. They are enamoured with numbers. They may well have a process through which someone has to pass to become a church member. That process may spell out what is required of church members by way of involvement in the church. But when it comes to it, these requirements are not pressed by the leadership nor taken seriously by the members. Members pay their monthly contribution which supports the preacher and listen to his messages, usually once on a Sunday, but otherwise simply pursue their own individual agendas – of work and family. The church serves them, but they are too busy with other things to serve the church. Service in the church is left to 'the staff' or to a faithful few core members. The elders don't want to challenge this. They don't want to rock the boat. For all the numbers, this too is a weak church.

So, what does the NT teach about church membership? This is the question this booklet seeks to address.

1: Why church membership?

The apostle Paul describes the church in Corinth in the following way: ‘The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by (or in or with) one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given one Spirit to drink,’ 1 Corinthians 12.12, 13.

From this verse we propose a definition of a church in the NT sense. The church is the people of God who have been saved by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and incorporated into his body by baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Notice from the verse that baptism in Spirit is true of ‘all’ Christians, v13. Jesus’ ministry can be summarised as bringing the baptism with the Spirit, Matthew 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16. It is best understood as simply another way of speaking of New Birth, or being ‘born again of the Spirit’. That spiritual baptism (which makes us Christians) is declared publicly by water baptism. But notice from what Paul says to the Corinthians that, although Spirit-baptism happens to individuals, it has a corporate aim. We are baptised with ‘one Spirit into one body’. Having the same Spirit enables Christians to be at one and has the purpose of bringing us together in community. This gives us the theological rationale which prompts us to think in terms of church membership.

Three red herrings

There are three errors which are often used to distract or to short-circuit a discussion of church membership.

- *First*, some people say, ‘Well the gospel is the main thing and then God has left it basically up to us as to how to organise church – there are not many instructions on how to do it in the NT.’ This is absolutely false. There are clear instructions in the NT as to how the church is to be run. The church is the bride of Christ, the apple of God’s eye. Do you really think he would have left us to make up the rules as we go along? No. Paul gives clear teaching, repeatedly. Think of 1 Timothy 3.14, 15: ‘Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing these instructions so that, if I am delayed you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth’. Or consider Titus 1.5: ‘The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in

every town, as I directed you'. The word 'unfinished' indicates that Paul had a definite model in mind for church life.

- *Second*, some people say, 'When you become a Christian you become part of the universal church, the body of believers throughout the world. Why go any further than that?' The answer, of course, is because the universal church is a 'far way' concept. You can't meet with 'the universal church.' Which means your Christian involvement will be all theory and no practice. Just being a member of the universal church means that at a practical level you are never committed to any church – it is an excuse for never getting your hands dirty.
- *Third*, though in one sense a secondary issue, the church and how it operates is a very important issue once you realise that in practice, the local church is God's vehicle for the gospel and his glory in the world. The gospel produces the church, and the church together serves the Lord. 1 Timothy 3.15 indicates that the local church is the engine of fellowship, worship and evangelism in its vicinity. What could be more important?

Having addressed these three red herrings concerning church membership, we set out five reasons as to why membership must be on a church's agenda.

1. *Church membership is Scriptural*

The NT churches were not loose affiliations of Christians who happened to meet together when they felt like it. They were communities of people who were, first of all committed to Christ, but secondly were deeply committed to one another. They were a community who felt for one another, Romans 12.15.

Hence the metaphor of the church as a body, with members, 1 Corinthians 12.12, 27; Romans 12.3f. We are each given gifts by the Spirit, to serve one another, 1 Corinthians 12.7. This only makes sense in the context of committed membership to a specific local congregation. To underline this, imagine a person with a gift of music. The congregation depend on her to help the singing. But every week it is not clear whether she is going to turn up. She doesn't want to be tied down. How is that going to work? It's not. And nor is anything else without commitment, membership of the church. God gives us gifts to use in a local church. Not to join a church is for God to give us gifts but for us to refuse to put ourselves in the environment in which they can be used.

Similarly, we find in the NT the metaphor of the church being a building / temple of which we are each 'living stones' built, joined together, 1 Peter 2.5; Ephesians 2.22. A building only stands as its stones are cemented or locked together in some way.

And, of course, behind this teaching you have the OT concept of the people of God as a distinct community. There were those who belonged to Israel and those who did not. So, you come across all those lists of names and numbers starting with Jacob's family in Genesis, through the long head counts of Israel in the book of Numbers and then to Chronicles. The NT starts with the genealogy of Jesus. You then find round figures are given concerning the growth of the church, from 120, to 3,000 to 5,000 before the Jerusalem church is dispersed by persecution. There were those who did belong and those who did not. There was a church membership. It is a Scriptural concept.

2. *Church membership is essential*

The NT teaches that active participation in a local church is God's will for all Christians. Yes, there is a personal or individual aspect to our Christian lives. But there is also meant to be a corporate aspect. Thus, we find so many 'one another' commands in the NT letters. We are to be devoted to one another in brotherly love, Romans 12.10. We are to accept one another just as Christ accepted us, Romans 15.7. We are to be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave us, Ephesians 4.32. Such things are central to true Christian behaviour and discipleship.

As individuals, it is through interaction with each other that we grow in Christian character as we learn to love others different from ourselves. And only within the church do we have opportunity to develop our gifts in the service of others. You have got a contribution to make to God's work, but unless you join a local church you can't make it. Being committed to a local congregation is therefore not just useful but essential for spiritual growth to maturity as individuals and churches.

Let me give you an illustration of what can go wrong when there is no commitment to membership in a church. I have seen some 'foot loose' Christians who begin to show interest in a local church and then decide they want to attend the church's fellowship groups. There they are expecting others to share their hearts with them. But then not committed, eschewing membership, off they go to somewhere else taking other people's personal struggles and secrets

with them. Those left in the group now feel exposed. Their fellowship has been rubbished. And who knows what those 'footloose' friends are going to share with others? This kind of uncommitted behaviour destroys trust. Commitment is needed to grow together.

3. *Church membership is pastoral*

Church membership brings you under the pastoral care of the leadership of a church. (This is a reason to make sure you choose your church well. Look not for a flashy leadership but for one which is loving and godly.) We find in Scripture that God has ordained that all local churches should have leaders (normally termed 'elders' in the NT) who have the responsibility before God to care for the people of the church. Paul's words to the elders of the Ephesian church are, 'Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood,' Acts 20.28. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of leaders as those who 'keep watch over you as men who must give an account', Hebrews 3.17. Again, we see the logic of church membership at this point. How can the leaders know who they responsible for unless there is a membership?

God has appointed leaders because he believes we need shepherding. The individual Christian is not meant to isolate himself / herself. If we stand aloof as Christians we are vulnerable. We only have the benefit of our own advice and often 'lone ranger' Christians are those who are wise in their own eyes. God wants you to have a safety net – those who will help you when you fall, those who will teach you and pray for you and shepherd you. God wants you to be part of a spiritual family – the church.

It may be that we find this idea difficult. The secular West is increasingly individualistic in its direction and it grooms us all to adopt individualistic attitudes. But God inaugurated his church in the Middle East of the first century which had a far more community-based culture. The West's view of life is about personal fulfilment. But the Bible teaches that the individual will only ever find fulfilment in community, Genesis 2.18 – fellowship with God and with his people.

4. *Church membership is responsible*

When someone becomes a church member, they are given responsibility. Again, this is probably a major reason why church membership is out of fashion. Contemporary people don't like responsibility. We have imbibed the idea that

we are very frail creatures and must have plenty of 'me' time – away from any obligations. However, being given responsibility in God's church is actually a wonderful privilege and when we take on that responsibility joyfully, we are blessed.

Strikingly, part of the responsibility of members is to be involved in the decision making of the church. There is a certain authority about the gathered assembly of born-again believers who love and know the word of God. Under Scripture, Christ often makes his will known for particular situations through his body, the church.

And this becomes very practical. Who decides whether certain candidates qualify and would be good faithful leaders? It is the church. To whom are the leaders accountable should they step out of line? The answer is the members' meeting. The ultimate court of appeal when there has been sin or a dispute is the church meeting. Jesus teaches this. 'If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan...' Matthew 18.15-17. Notice ultimately the problem is taken not just to the elders, but to the church.

Without a qualified church membership, such vital processes are impossible in church life. This is why church membership is needed.

5. *Church membership is powerful*

Church membership brings a practical unity. It is an acknowledgment that we all believe the same things. It is a statement that we are all committed to God and to each other. We are not just a collection of individuals who happen to meet together on a Sunday. We are a family. We are a community. We are the body of Christ, joined in love to one another.

And there is strength in such unity. That is why, for example, Paul is so keen for unity when he writes, 'If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose,' Philipians 2.1-3.

Individual twigs are easy to snap. But bundled together very hard to break. Church membership ties us together as Christians. Church membership makes for a strong church.

And that unity points forward as a witness for Christ. The local church with all its diverse members, committed to each other, worshipping the Lord and serving one another is a great display of the wonderful wisdom of God which one day will unify the renewed humanity under the headship of Christ to the glory of God. 'His intent was that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord', Ephesians 3.10, 11. Why join a church? Why promote church membership? We do it in order that God's eternal purpose might be seen.

Church membership declares 5 wonderful things:

When we become church members, we are saying:

- 'I believe God has saved me and wants me to serve Christ's body, the church'.
- 'I believe the local church is God's vehicle for his gospel and his glory'.
- 'I recognise I have other believers to help me and they are part of my life in Christ'.
- 'I recognise that I share a responsibility to help other believers and care for them'.
- 'I stand as one with this group of God's people, as we look forward to Christ's return when he will bring all the church together to the glory of God.'

That's why join a local church.

2: Qualifications for church membership

Soon after freshers' week for the university in Cambridge a few years ago, a new student, (we will call her Jane) wrote an article for *The Tab Cambridge* website attacking the Christian Union.

It was under the shock-jock headline 'Screw you CICCUCU'.¹ As Jane attended their meetings she says, 'I began to realise that I didn't qualify as a Christian in the CICCUCU sense of the word at all – I have sex...I drink (often in excess) and I purposefully try to avoid making my theism a big part of my life. If I was ever going to fit in at CICCUCU, I'd have to make a lot of uncomfortable life changes.' She goes on to suggest that the CU is promoting an erroneous and eccentric version of Christianity.

But you simply have to read Christianity's original documents, namely the NT, to see that it is not CICCUCU who have got Christianity wrong, but Jane. The lesson is that all kinds of people see themselves as 'Christians,' but in NT terms, they are not. Jesus said, 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven,' Matthew 7.21.

This shows us that if a church is going to be faithful to the Lord, and its original purpose, it needs to have a membership and some guidelines about who should be a member and who should not. We can't simply say to the Janes of this world, 'just jump on board.'

The church is made up of disciples

So, the question we must ask now is how you become a member of a NT church.

What were the qualifications, the requirements for membership? In the last chapter we thought of church membership from the point of view of the individual asking, 'why membership?', 'why should I join a church?' Now we think of church membership more from the perspective of the church itself. 'Who should we receive into our membership?'

The arms of the church should be open and welcoming, but it would be wrong for a church to endorse someone as a Christian when actually they are still in need of salvation. That would not be loving. It would be misleading. So, who qualifies to be a church member?

¹ CICCUCU stands for Cambridge Inter-collegiate Christian Union

That takes us back to our definition of what a church is, (rooted in 1 Corinthians 12.12,13). The church is the people of God who have been saved by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and incorporated into his body by baptism in the Holy Spirit. When we ask, ‘who should join the church?’ and think about requirements we are simply seeking to keep the church, the church!

The NT indicates that the church is made up of disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 11.26, for example, simply assumes this stance. The verse refers to the church in Antioch, where Barnabas had been sent by the apostles in Jerusalem. He had asked Paul (at this point still known as Saul of Tarsus) to join him in the work and we read, ‘So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch’. The church was made up of disciples. Others, no doubt, were welcome to listen in on the teaching, but the church itself was comprised of those who, with God’s help, had decided to follow Jesus. With regard to church membership, we therefore need to look for people who show signs of true discipleship (see also Acts 14.27,28).

Let’s take another example. This was what was in people’s minds when earlier, having been converted on the Damascus Road, the ex-persecutor Saul of Tarsus tried to join the church in Jerusalem. Acts 9.26-28 tells us, ‘When he (Saul) came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So, Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.’

That word ‘join’ used here, is a strong word. It comes from a root meaning to ‘bind closely or unite’. It is used of joining oneself to the Lord, 1 Corinthians 6.17 and of a husband being joined to his wife, Matthew 19.5, and is used with respect to church membership in Acts 5.13. What we have here is not Paul / Saul trying to make casual contact with Christians in Jerusalem, but to join the church – to become a member. Understandably they are afraid of him because of his past track record of persecution. Was he acting as a spy, or an *agent provocateur*? The crucial question was: ‘Is he a true disciple?’ And as Barnabas took him to the church leaders, the apostles, and enabled Paul’s story of conversion to be told alongside his ongoing public witness for Christ, he was accepted as part of the church. He was endorsed by them as he preached and was taken under their care. In other words, he was accepted as a disciple and

treated as a member. They asked for evidence that he was a real Christian and were satisfied.

The evidence of discipleship

We cannot infallibly know who is saved and who isn't. Only the Lord sees the heart. But, like the Jerusalem church with Saul of Tarsus, we look for credible evidence of salvation – sometimes called 'the marks of grace.'

If God truly touches someone's life, they are changed as people. They don't become perfect, but they will show signs of following Christ, to be his disciple. We are to look for such evidence when people ask to become church members. So, what is the evidence?

The letter of 1 John is one of the places in the NT which identifies these 'marks of grace'. John writes with the purpose of identifying true Christians. 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life,' 1 John 5.13. The Christian recipients of the letter already know the truth, but at the same time there is a lot of false teaching around which might throw them off balance and undermine their faith. Therefore, John is writing so that they might know what characterises a real Christian, and therefore be assured that they are real Christians themselves. This will also enable them to have some discernment with regard to others.

Though John continually weaves them together in the letter, he gives basically 3 marks of a real Christian. How do we know the Holy Spirit has worked in someone's life and they are born again? By these 3 indicators:

- The intellectual mark – what they believe about Jesus. 'Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God', 1 John 5.1. And of course, what is meant by 'the Christ', for John, is specified by the Scriptures. What is a sign that someone has been truly born again? *First*, what they believe about Jesus has changed. Maybe they used to believe he was a myth or just a carpenter from Nazareth or just a prophet. But now they believe what the Scriptures teach, that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God, 1 John 5.10-12; Matthew 16.16.
- The moral mark – sincere obedience to Christ. 'This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did,' 1 John 2.5b, 6. *Second*, their behaviour has changed. What is a sign that someone

is born of God, born of the Spirit? 'No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning because he is born of God', 1 John 3.9. Unlike Jane, who we met at the beginning of the chapter, a truly born-again person cannot be comfortable to accept sin as part of their lives. Rather, though they may fall at times, they pick themselves up, ask for forgiveness and push on with following Christ. They are engaged in battling against sin in order to obey the Lord Jesus.

- The social mark – we love God's people and that indicates we love God. 'We know we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers and sisters', 1 John 3.14. *Thirdly*, they have a real affection for other Christians. They delight in their welfare and serving them. 'Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God,' 1 John 4.7. Those who truly love their fellow disciples will not be content simply to have their name on a membership list. They will want to serve their brothers and sisters in the church and not sit on the side-lines. 'Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth,' 1 John 3.18.

Many Christians struggle with assurance. 'I wish I knew for definite that I am saved.' Well, says John, this is how you can know. Your mind has changed – you believe what the Bible teaches about Jesus. Your choices have changed – you choose to do your best to follow Jesus – 'my sheep hear my voice and they follow me' said Jesus, John 10.27. Your affections have changed – whereas you used to think Christians were creepy and weird – now you love them, and delight to be with them – even the ones who are in a different age group from you. Those are the signs that you are born of God and are the kind of evidence of new birth that we must look for in others when they ask to become members of the church. If you fail to use these criteria, and allow those who show no signs of grace to join, you will undermine the church. It will end up being a church only in name and not being a real church at all. But a church of true believers has enormous potential for Christ's cause.

Membership classes?

There are always pressures to relax the criteria for church membership. This may be because a church is small and is rather too desperate to grow. It may be because, although he has his doubts about the candidate, the pastor doesn't like to confront or challenge people. It could be because there are family members

who are already members of the church, and they will take offence if their son or daughter is told they are not ready for membership. But, for whatever reason, it is a mistake to accept as a church member anyone who does not show credible evidence of a changed life.

Difficulties here can often be alleviated by running a membership course for those who show interest in joining. Here the basic beliefs of the church, its ecclesiology and what it requires by way of participation from its members can be spelt out. Often candidates will sift themselves out as they hear the teaching and have the chance to ask their questions.

The badge of discipleship

Now all this leads to baptism. This is because in the NT baptism is the badge of a Christian. Also in some ways baptism should be the first act of obedience as a disciple of Christ. Baptism doesn't save us any more than a wedding ring makes a marriage. But like a ring being the sign that you are married, baptism is the outward sign of being joined to Christ.

What is baptism? The Greek word means to immerse, and the symbolism used in the NT of dying and rising, Romans 6.3,4, chimes in with that. That is the reason that in the NT it was often performed in rivers, e.g., Mark 1.9; John 3.23; Acts 8.38. And, for Christians, this is performed according to the command of Jesus in the name of the Trinity. Jesus said: 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you,' Matthew 28.19. Notice, it is disciples who are to be baptised.

In the NT you will not find an un-baptised Christian. (Except the dying thief, Luke 23.42,43) So, in seeking to uphold Christ's command, church members should be baptised upon profession of faith in Jesus Christ. This was the NT practice. Here are 3 things which baptism means.

- Baptism is a pledge of obedience – Even the Lord Jesus himself was baptised, Matthew 3.13-15. He had no sins to be washed away but for Jesus, baptism was a way of expressing his dedication to obey his Father's will. This is why as he was baptised the Father spoke from heaven saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased,' Matthew 3.17. And for Christians it is the public declaration of obedience to Christ. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter had just preached that Jesus is 'both Lord and

Christ' through whom we receive forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We read, 'Those who accepted his message were baptised,' Acts 2.41.

- Baptism is the sign of the new covenant – Look at Colossians 2.11,12: 'In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.' There is a great deal of theology packed into these verses which speak about baptism. The sign of the Old Covenant was circumcision. This was the mark of the people of God. But it pointed to the need of a 'circumcised heart' (see Deuteronomy 10.16). In becoming Christians, Christ has given us his Spirit and we have that new heart. We celebrate that in baptism. OT circumcision was a symbolic removal of a piece of 'the flesh' (which Biblically stands for sin and this world). But in Christ we have been made new people, who belong not to this world but to God's kingdom. Thus, baptism doesn't just remove a piece of flesh, it symbolises the death of the old self (joined to Jesus by faith, we have in essence, put off the flesh / the sinful nature completely) and we rise to new life in God. We are partakers of the New Covenant, which is not of law but of grace, not of the flesh but of the Spirit.²
- Baptism signifies joining the church – Acts 2.41 speaks of the response of many of those who heard Peter declare the good news of Jesus on the Day of Pentecost. 'Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about 3,000 were added to their number that day.' The act of being baptised meant they had joined the church. Repentant-hearted people were baptised and so added to the church. That is the NT pattern. The ideas of some who say 'I want to join the church, but I don't want to be baptised' or 'I want to be baptised, but I don't want to join the church' are totally out of step with the NT – and churches should not give in to such demands. How can anyone say that they want to follow Christ but want nothing to do with his people? How can anyone think they can truly love God but not love God's family? If we think like that or encourage others to think that such ideas are acceptable, something is terribly wrong.

² Hence though male children were circumcised in OT times, we do not baptise babies. OT circumcision said, 'this child needs a new heart', 'he requires a second birth'. Rather we wait have to until that child/person has a new heart before we baptise. Otherwise, infant baptism becomes a doorway to having unsaved people accepted as members of the church. This is a source of innumerable problems.

We should be very glad when people start attending services and are attracted to the church. But it needs to be made clear to them that to become a church member you need to be a disciple – to commit yourself to the Lord Jesus. And to commit yourself to Jesus should lead to committing yourself to his church.

3: How churches are meant to function

With the basics of church membership in place our task in this final chapter is to sketch out briefly how a church is to be ordered. What should be the structure of a church? How does it operate etc.? Here we will see just how crucial it is to have a good policy of church membership.

The Head of the Church

Not only is the risen and ever-living Lord Jesus the head of the universal church, he is the head of every local church. This is shown not least in his personal letters to local congregations in Revelation 2 and 3. He walks among the lamp-stands, the individual churches, Revelation 1.20. He speaks to them. They are answerable to him, e.g. Revelation 2.5. It must be each local church's primary concern to please the Lord not ourselves. Though we are members of it, the church is not ours. It is his. This is vital to grasp.

So how does the risen and ascended the Lord Jesus govern his churches? The answer is he governs through his word and by his Spirit.

His word: In the NT times Christ's apostles brought his word to the churches. They heard his teaching first hand, saw him risen from the dead and were filled with his Spirit for the task. We now have Christ's word in the Scriptures. There is no need for any 'apostolic succession' because we have the apostles' teaching following on from the OT, in the NT. Nothing needs to be added to that because Jesus promised the apostles that the Holy Spirit would teach them 'all things' and lead them into 'all truth', John 14.26; John 16.13. Thus, with respect, we say 'No' to the Koran and the books of other religions, and to people claiming to be modern day apostles. The Scriptures fully equip us for every good work, 2 Timothy 3.16, 17.

His Spirit: The Spirit of the Lord Jesus lives in every believer and is at work to make us more like Jesus. Our minds are renewed to think, not like the world, but more like Jesus and so understand the Lord's will, Romans 12.2. How are we to interpret and understand the Bible? The Holy Spirit, who inspired the writing of Scripture, is in us. He both helps the church to understand the Bible and guides the church under the authority of the book he wrote.

It is because Jesus is head of the church, the church meets on Sundays, the day of his resurrection.

The Members of the Church

Because each individual believer has the Spirit, 1 Corinthians 6.19, and the church as a whole is God's new temple in which God's Spirit dwells, 1 Corinthians 3.16, we believe that under Scripture, Christ's will in any particular situation is made known through the participation of the whole church membership. This is called the congregational form of church government. We refer to each other, have church meetings, pray together, decide together. You can see this happening in the NT. Let me give a few examples from Acts.

- When the first deacons of church were appointed – Acts 6.2,3 – the church people propose the men.
- When elders were appointed they were confirmed by the church – Acts 14.23 – the Greek is linked to a show of hands (see NIV Study Bible 1987).
- When the crucial question of how to include Gentiles in the church – circumcision or not – is discussed at Jerusalem, the church as a whole is involved, Acts 15. 4, 6, 12, 22. Although apostles and elders took a lead, nevertheless the whole membership is involved in decision, Acts 15.22.
- When the church faced persecution or crucial decisions, the members gathered as a whole to seek God in prayer, Acts 1.14; 2.42; 4.23,24, 31; 12.5.

We see that ultimately the church is not dictated to, either by pseudo-bishops from above or cliques from within. It is the local membership which is the 'body politic' of the church. The church is the judge of things, 1 Corinthians 5.4,5; Acts 14.27.

In order for a church to function properly, it is not just a matter of keeping church 'rules'. Living spirituality is required of the members. Thus, churches must aim at having a born-again membership.

The Leadership of the Church

Christ is the head of each church and the whole membership needs to seek his will. But for the everyday running and care of the people of the church, the Lord gifts certain people to take responsibility as leaders, who 'shepherd the flock', 1 Peter 5.2.

- The only two leadership positions, or 'offices' in the local church

according to the NT are those of elders and deacons, Philippians 1.1; 1 Timothy 3.1,8.

- The terms ‘elder’, ‘overseer or bishop’ are synonymous, Acts 20.17,28. Elders are men who, together, are responsible before God for all the affairs of the church, 1 Timothy 5.17. The deacons are men and women, 1 Timothy 3.11; Romans 16.1, who are gifted to help the eldership and to whom the elders can delegate various tasks as different situations require. (I’ve skated over gender issues here but basically men head-up the church as husbands head-up the family).
- The qualifications for elders and deacons/deaconesses are there in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.
- All NT churches had plural elderships – not just one elder. Pastors are simply elders set apart to do most of the teaching. There is great wisdom in having a plurality of elders since no one man can cope with all the problems, or be on call all the time, nor have all needed gifts, and it is not good for one man to be the focus of everything.

The leadership is to be personally involved in and organise the care of God’s people. This will include seeking to keep the members spiritually keen and serving the congregation’s needs (and beyond). That is done principally through prayer, the ministry of the word and visiting the members. But, though in this way the elders lead, as we have indicated, for large issues which affect the life, discipline, finances and strategy of the church, decisions go to meetings of church members. The elders are not infallible. They need the prayers of the church. They also need to be treated with respect for the work they do, 1 Thessalonians 5.12.

The Independence of the Church

Though the various local churches we meet in the NT associated in fellowship and tried to help each other, 1 Corinthians 16.1-3, there was no authority over and above the local church, except that of Christ himself. Being still under that same authority through the word of God in Scripture, we recognise no other source of authority over the local church.

In particular, we find no popes, archbishops, or denominational hierarchy in

operation in the NT. Even the apostles saw themselves as ‘only servants’, 1 Corinthians 3.5. To build ecclesiastical hierarchies seems almost to usurp Christ’s headship and imply that he is not really able to coordinate and govern his church. And while it is right for us to obey the laws of the land (though not where they conflict with God’s laws, Acts 5.29), we find no formal link between the church and the state in NT. The state is a secular organisation, especially these days, and has no place dictating to the church.

The NT teaches the independence of the local church under Christ. We are to associate with and work alongside other churches which are unashamed to proclaim the essentials of the NT gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-11), but the church is ultimately answerable to no one except the Lord.

Independency has many advantages. When churches belong to hierarchical denominations, if those leaders at the top go wrong it affects all the churches. Often pressure is put on congregations to conform to the latest fad of the prelates and superintendents. Independency rescues us from that. And we don’t finance things we don’t agree with by giving money to a central pot of a doctrinally compromised denomination. Independency also rescues us from unhelpful clerical professionalism. In a local church we are simply brothers and sisters. We are all in it together and have to rely on one another and the Lord. Independency gives flexibility to respond to local situations without entanglements of denominational politics.

So here we have a sketch of how churches operate according to the NT. Such local churches, with committed memberships, are the hope of our nation – to proclaim the gospel, see people saved, to bring them to God and into the family of his church. In our days, little churches are holding on and some being revived. New churches are being planted and making headway. And we may yet see our country turned around – through local churches of different labels which follow the NT pattern of what a church should be.

Afterword: Responsibilities of church members

Here is an example of the expectations which a church would have of its members. These are to be held in love and not legalistically.

Membership entails commitment to the church and applicants are required to give assent to the following:

1. To confess that Jesus Christ, God's Son, died for our sins and rose again as Lord of all.

This is witnessed in baptism, daily life and conversation. We do all this in conformity with the church's confession of faith.

2. To attend as far as is practically possible both Sunday services, the communion service, church meetings and midweek prayer.

As Christians we should want to meet with others of God's people in order to be an encouragement to each other, to be instructed in the Word and to worship.

Hebrews 10.25

3. To pray regularly for all aspects of the church's life and ministry and for the Lord to build His church.

You cannot do this without your own personal quiet times and family prayers.

2 Corinthians 1.11

4. To support the church financially.

We are encouraged to at least tithe our money. *Malachi 3.10*

5. To look for areas of service where your gifts may be used.

Elders may suggest some service but it is always good to have volunteers.

Ephesians 4.16

6. To respect the authority of the elders.

Elders do not seek to lord it over the flock but to be good shepherds responsible to Christ. *Hebrews 13.17*

7. To live a life that is holy, pleasing to God and good for His church.

Be in the world but not of it. *John 17.14-16, 1 Peter 1.15, 16*

