

Is “placing church membership” a Scriptural concept?

Frankly speaking, NT writers do not use the terms like “identifying with” or “placing membership with a local church” in connection with a Christian’s responsibilities. The most commonly cited passage for this practice is the statement of Act 9:27 which reports that Saul sought to “join” (KJV) the disciples in Jerusalem. A fair-minded reading of that text may only suggest that Saul was simply attempting to “associate” (NASV) with Christians in Jerusalem after his conversion. It might be considered a stretch in interpretation to read into the text the idea of being placed on an official roll of church membership.

On the other hand, some may assume on the basis of these considerations that there is no concept of identification with a particular local church taught in the NT. Consequently, they may consider themselves members of the church “at large”, attending and supporting one congregation and then another indiscriminately without thought of any commitment to a particular group. Therefore, it is important to clarify some NT principles that might help each Christian in knowing how to handle this issue.

Does the local church have a defined membership?

It is clear that one objective of gospel preaching was not only to make disciples but to also establish local congregations (Ac. 9:31; Gal. 1:22). Wherever the gospel was taught and people responded, local congregations were formed.¹ These congregations were not mere undefined groupings of disciples; but were instead organized bodies, that is at least in their mature form (Ac. 14:23; Phil. 1:1). In these

congregations, elders were appointed and urged to oversee the flock “among them” and not lord it over those “allotted to their charge” (1 Pet. 5:2-3). Likewise, Christians were commanded to appreciate those “who have charge over” them in the Lord (1 Thes. 5:12) and to obey and submit to leaders “who keep watch for your souls, as those who will give an account.” (Heb. 13:17).” Such expressions suggest a defined membership for the local congregation.

What are the blessings of this relationship?

Being identified or associated with a particular local church entitles one to several benefits. First, church membership establishes a relationship of accountability which all Christians need. By joining a local congregation, an individual has the help of mature Christians who may help and guide him in his spiritual life and call him back to faithfulness should he depart from the Lord (1 Thes. 5:14; Gal. 6:1). Local church membership also provides a means of spiritual fellowship. Each member is a partner in the planning, financing, and executing of the church’s goals and program of work (Ac. 6:5; 1 Cor. 12:27). Through working with other Christians in this way, strong bonds of mutual love, trust, and appreciation are formed. Another benefit of church membership is edification through teaching, training and worship. A Christian may through church membership enhance his Bible knowledge and also be given opportunities for growth and helpfulness to others (1 Cor. 14:12, 26). Finally, by active identification and participation in a single congregation, a Christian develops a network of loving fellow-believers who know his life and can provide help and support in time of need (Gal. 6:2).²

What are the responsibilities of this relationship?

A person who joins a local church likewise agrees to take advantage of these blessings and mutually participate in providing these blessings to others. He agrees to live a faithful life and to be accountable to the church for his conduct and its impact upon the church’s reputation (Cf. 1 Cor. 6:1-11). Joining a congregation implicitly acknowledges the church’s right to seek to correct the wayward and unruly (Mt. 18:15-17). When one joins a congregation he also agrees to be a partner in the Lord’s work, including participation in the planning, financing, and execution of the church’s program of work (Eph. 4:14-16). When one joins a congregation he also agrees to attend divinely commanded worship services and take advantage, according to his need and schedule, of the optional study opportunities that the church provides (Heb. 10:24-25). He will realize that his participation and involvement in these may help others to grow and be encouraged in doing God’s will. When one becomes a member of a local church he should seriously consider these responsibilities and his ability and willingness to perform them.³

On what basis should a person choose to join a particular congregation?

First it would be advisable to spend at least some time getting to know the group in order to assure that the blessings of membership will be forthcoming. (Will the teaching be edifying? Do members love one another? Do they reach out to newcomers? Will they be responsive if I need spiritual help or correction?) In addition, one should consider whether he can conscientiously have fellowship with the teaching and work of a local congregation (2 Jn.

9-11). (Can I generally agree with the teaching the church proclaims with a clear conscience? Can I support the work that is being done?) When these questions are adequately answered he can make an informed conscientious decision about joining a particular group.

On what basis should the church accept a prospective member?

Since the church’s doctrinal stance and reputation is derived from the faith and conduct of its members, it has no obligation to accept every person who asks for membership in the church (Rom. 16:17-18). Since NT churches were made up of those who had obeyed the gospel it is within the scriptural boundaries of the church to confirm that the person who want to become a member has obeyed the gospel of Christ and is living a life of faith (Rom. 15:7). They do not have to endorse the judgments of other churches toward a disciplined member; however, they would be wise to make inquiry and perhaps even insist upon correction of wrongs elsewhere in keeping with the principles of repentance (Mt. 3:8).⁴

Clearly, some Christians who come into an assembly are there as “visitors”. They do not intend to worship there regularly. They may be travelers or people who are trying to become familiar with the church before making a decision about a permanent place of worship. Visitors should be welcomed and informed about the church and encouraged to become a part of its work.⁵

How does one “place membership”?

At times it is the case that some people feel they have become members of a congregation by default. This is common if, for example,

someone obeys the gospel at a place. It is presumed that they will be members of the church because they responded to the gospel in the church's assembly. But such does not necessarily follow. A visitor from another city may respond to the gospel invitation, but that does not automatically make him/her a member of the church where he may respond to the gospel. That is to say, being added to the body of Christ is one thing; becoming a member of a local church is another.

On the other hand, the Bible reveals no specific methodology for "placing membership" with a congregation. It seems best, in view of the Scriptural concepts of defining a flock for disciples to make known their desire to join a particular congregation and for such to be publicly acknowledged by the church in view of its policies for accepting new members. When this happens, then there is a clear understanding of our intentions toward a group of disciples, what we may expect from them and what they may expect of us. With this thought in mind, I urge you, if you not presently a member of a local church to consider these principles and join a faithful congregation.

¹ Several years ago the late Charles Holt advocated in his paper "The Examiner" the concept that local churches did not exist as formal organizations.

² A disciple may entertain the notion of enjoying the benefits of church membership without becoming a member. Such a person should soberly consider his responsibilities to other Christians as well as the Biblical teaching about the nature of a local church organization. Hopefully this will induce him to become an active member of a local church.

³ Occasionally I have encountered someone who thought of membership separate and apart from the ability to fulfill the obligations of membership. In such cases, they were "members in name only", but did not fulfill their congregational obligations. "Church membership" is more than merely having one's name on a church roll. Of course, in some cases, those who are shut-in may only partially fulfill their responsibilities due to failing health; yet still be identified with a local church where they have been involved and where they can still be cared for by the church.

⁴ Some people who read this may react adversely and confuse this teaching with the denominational concept of "voting" on acceptance of a prospective member. I am not affirming that each prospective member must be "voted on" by the congregation. I am only affirming that a church must protect its doctrinal and organizational integrity by accepting only faithful Christians. Every Christian should also realize that acceptance by a local church is not equivalent to being enrolled "in the Lamb's book of life". The church may accept those whom God rejects or it may reject those whom God accepts.

⁵ I see no reason why a church may not extend the hand of fellowship to visitors who come among them instead of adopting a "wait and see" approach to newcomers. This might include asking men who visit to participate in leading our worship (leading prayers, songs, etc.) and asking them to consider joining the congregation.

This tract was written by Johnny Felker.

If you would like to study this subject or other Biblical topics further please let us know how we can help you.



We would be honored to have you visit with us at Perry Heights at any of our services.

**Sun. 9:00 a.m. (Bible class)
9:55 a.m. (Worship service)
6:00 p.m. (Worship service)
Wed. 7:00 p.m. (Bible class)**

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Questions About Church Membership

Often we hear brethren speaking about someone "placing their membership" with a particular congregation. Is this a Scriptural concept? And if so, what principles does the Bible give to guide us in this action?