

# On Being a Church Member

## Definitions and concepts

*“More concretely, church membership is a formal relationship between a local church and a Christian characterized by the church’s affirmation and oversight of a Christian’s discipleship and the Christian’s submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.”*

Jonathan Leeman

Why be concerned with a topic that many would label as bland? There does not appear to be a broad-based appeal to better define the term “church membership.” So, what is the big deal? Sixteen percent (16%) is a big deal. That is the percentage of long-term attendees in my church (Christ Church, Katy, Texas, a member of the Presbyterian Church in America) that have chosen not to commit to “a formal relationship between a local church and a Christian.” For discussion’s sake, let us assume that this percentage is average for denominational churches. Another angle on this is that well over one in ten church attendees have not followed their chosen church’s membership requirements and feel comfortable in attending but not committing. For those Christians claiming that being a member of the church universal or invisible is adequate and that membership in the church local or visible is not necessary, please take the challenge to evaluate what is written below.

For evangelicals, the answer to any ecclesiological question must start with Scripture; what does the Bible say and not say? The word “membership” is not found in the Bible; so, it may be best to use the terms “member of a church” or “church member” or just “member” when talking of a believer’s relationship to a local Body of Christ. “Member” is the best word to use in topically searching God’s Word. Leeman’s above definition of church membership is concise and will help focus our thoughts.

I should emphasize that this discussion is based on my own personal observations and does not represent the views of my particular church.

## Direct Scriptural references

As stated above, the word “membership” is not found in the Bible. We are faced with a similar challenge when pressed to define the Trinity. The word “Trinity” is not found in the Bible, but it is clearly understood, and is, in fact, a theologically indispensable word and concept and is established by “an argument by weight.” Local church membership is a similar issue since no direct Scriptural references exist.

## Indirect Scriptural references

Without direct references, one is left with indirect references, but one is left with a mountain of those. The following survey is hopefully convincing and compelling and is also “an argument by weight.”

- **Body and members**
  - “Body” is used 125 times in the New Testament with 118 from the Greek, *soma*. “Member(s)” is used 41 times in the New Testament with 36 used of physical body member or illustration thereof.
  - These numbers only illustrate a volume, but for this discussion, it is significant.
  - References to being a member of the Body of Christ (universal or local) are most significant.
  - It is clear that a Christian believer is a member of Christ’s Body, His church universal. Examples are Romans 12:4-5 and I Corinthians 12:12.
  - I think that it is also clear that it is assumed that a Christian believer is a member of Christ’s Body, His church local. An example is Acts 20:28.
- **Church leadership (elders, deacons) is accountable to a limited/local group (flock or local church), and logically, the limited/local group is accountable to church leadership.**
  - The office of elder is clearly defined in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1.
  - Deacons were chosen to serve a specific group in Acts 6:1-4.
  - Elders are authorized to exercise oversight to a flock (*local group*) which presumably accepted that oversight in I Peter 5:1-3 and Acts 20:28.
  - Paul “appointed elders for them in every church” in Acts 14:23 which requires a multiplicity of *local churches*.
  - Respect for church leadership (I Thessalonians 5:12), imitation of them (Hebrews 13:7), and submission to them (Hebrews 13:17) can only happen in the context of a formal relationship of membership.
- **Church discipline can only occur in the context of a mutually agreed on relationship (or “formal relationship” per Leeman).**
  - I Corinthians 5:1-2 distinguishes between those “among you” or inside the church and “among pagans” or those outside the church. This removal of the sinful man from inside the church in Corinth can only have happened when he was removed from being a member of a defined group which was a local church.
  - Matthew 18:15-17 can only function in the context of a *local body* (“the church”) having the authority expel the sinning brother.
  - Submission to authority does not make sense without a *local church* and members thereof (BCO 27-1 limits discipline to *members*).
  - Attendance monitoring (to check a member’s well-being and faithfulness) likewise does not make sense without a *local church*.

- The multiple “one another” relationships of the New Testament (about fifty-eight uses) require an acknowledged and mutual commitment. It should be noted that these relationships are commands, not suggestions.
  - An example is seen in Hebrews 10:24 where Christians are to “stir up one another” and “encouraging one another.” How can this be done outside the context of a local church?
- Paul was addressing a multiplicity of churches (local bodies, not the universal church) when he wrote: “To the churches in Galatia” in Galatians 1:2 and “elders in every town” in Titus 1:5.
- In I Peter 2:4-5, Peter speaks of believers: “like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house.”
  - It is certainly a “formal commitment” to have other stones below, above, and beside you.
- The choosing of Matthias in Acts 1 was made by a *defined group* of believers.
- In I Timothy 5:3-16, the enrolling of “truly widows” can only be done by those in a ‘formal commitment.’
- The recognition and use of spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12 only makes sense in the context of using what God has given to help specific people (*local church*).
- In Acts 13:1-3, the *local church* in Antioch was authorized by God to send out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries.
- In Galatians 6:10, we are to “do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”
  - That household is most likely a local church, a community of people accountable to one another.
- The positive and negative characteristics of the seven churches in the book of *Revelation* only have meaning in the context of their having been local congregations.
- Acts 2:42 speaks how the early believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”
  - Can one be practically devoted to fellowship with others if that one is not a member?
- In writing to the Corinthians (II Corinthians 9), Paul touches on stewardship as he instructed them on how to give a specific monetary gift to the specific church in Jerusalem. He then discusses more general principles of stewardship. It is difficult to picture this advice outside the context of two specific and local churches.

- **In Acts 15:30, the Jerusalem Council’s letter was taken by Paul, Barnabas, Barsabbas, and Silas to “the congregation” in Antioch.**
  - The encouraging contents of that letter can only be appreciated by a local church.
- **In II Thessalonians 1:4, speaks of “churches” and “persecutions.”**
  - The church at Thessalonica was a local church of which Paul boasted to other local churches.
  - Persecution of a local church implies persecution of individuals who are distinctly part of that church, i.e., members.
  - Acts 12:1 indicates that Herod knew members of a *local church* well enough to persecute them when he “laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.”

### General Comments

This section contains personal observations and extracts from PCA documents.

1. **I can walk into any local church in the world and worship as a member of the universal Body of Christ.**
2. **I cannot walk into that local church and begin leading that church or be led by that church without a formal commitment of becoming a member.**
3. **The administration of the sacrament of baptism should only be authorized by a *local body*. The Book of Church Order (BCO) 28-1 states: “Baptism is...for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church...”**
4. **The administration of the sacrament of Communion is likewise authorized and fenced by a *local body*. BCO 58-4 invites participation by “all those who profess the true religion and are communicants in good standing in any evangelical church.”**
5. **Only church members can vote.**
6. **To those who question the requirement of becoming a member of a local church (specifically, CCK), what is unscriptural or incorrect about saying “I do” to the following joining questions from the BCO 57-5:**
  - Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?
  - Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?
  - Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?

- Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
  - Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to study its purity and peace?
7. **To those who argue against the requirement of becoming a member of a local church and who want to minister in that local body, that ministry will be markedly restricted without authenticity of membership.**
  8. **Further, to those who argue against the requirement of becoming a member of a local church, their participation is mostly that of receiving with limited opportunity to give and contribute to ministry.**
  9. **Finally, it behooves the one who refuses membership in a local church to Biblically answer the question: Why not?**