

January 19, 2020 by Steve Brandon



# Church Membership in History

## Acts

- 1. Rapid Membership**
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- 4. Regenerate Membership**
- 5. Recent Membership**

As most all of you know, we are beginning a series of messages on church membership, because, at Rock Valley Bible Church, we are working toward implementing a formalized church membership. Until this point in time at Rock Valley Bible Church, we have practiced informal church membership. People have come to church. Those who have stayed around have become "members." But the process in which has been very informal.

I like to compare our process with acquaintances who become friends without thinking much about their friendship. You meet someone for the first time. You like the person, so you begin spend more time with him or her. And then more time. And eventually you become friends. You become good friends. All this takes place without much thinking about it or talking about it. You simply know that you like your friend's company, and so you seek it out. This is what happens at Rock Valley Bible Church.

In a typical experience, a family visits our church and is welcomed by those at the church. After a few weeks of visiting, they like what they see. They like what they hear. I will often initiate a conversation. I may call on the phone. I may meet with them at church. We may have them over for dinner or dessert at our house. During that time, I have an opportunity to meet the new family and share a little about the church and ways to be involved. We place them on our church-wide email list so that they may understand what is happening at the church. Eventually, those who hang around are included in our directory and become a part of our church. This process is very organic and doesn't quite happen the same way for everyone who comes.

Now, with formal church membership, we are going to initiate a process to formalize our relationship. It's like a boyfriend and girlfriend who have a DTR discussion (that is a "Define the Relationship" discussion). And that's really what we are seeking to do at Rock Valley Bible Church. We are seeking to define our relationships with each other at Rock Valley Bible Church. We are seeking to clarify question like, "How does the church work?" "What does the church believe?" "What is expected of you?" "What can you expect from others?" "What can you expect from the leaders of the church?" With church membership, we are seeking to define what it means to be a member of Rock Valley Bible Church.

At this point, there may be questions in your mind, "Why are you doing this?" "Why are you doing this now?" "Is it because what you weren't Biblical before? And now you are seeking to be Biblical?" "What does this say about what we have practiced?" "Have we been doing it all wrong before?"

Regarding my message today, here's my argument: the Bible is silent on how exactly to practice church membership. It can be practiced in many different ways. The title of my message is, "Church Membership in History." I want to show you how church membership has been practiced in history. We will find is that church membership has been practiced in many different ways throughout the history of the church.

At times in history believers became members of a church very quickly after they came to faith. At other times of history, there were rigorous requirements to be a church member, which required extensive seasons of teaching and testing and examinations before becoming a member of a church. At other times there was very little demanded of a church member. Today, sentiments about church membership vary. Some believe that church membership is necessary, while others think it is optional.

There has never been agreement in the church as to why or how we should practice church membership. Now, that doesn't mean that church membership isn't important. It's simply to say that there are many ways that people have looked at the issue. And the point is this: our current membership process at Rock Valley Bible Church isn't unique to history. Others have practiced membership how we have done. We (as elders) simply think that there is a better way for us to go in the future. Over the next few weeks, I trust that you will see this.

Let's begin with Church Membership during the days of the Bible. During those days, we see ...

### 1. Rapid Membership

Let's start at the beginning. So, open your Bibles to Acts, chapter 2. For all intents and purposes, Acts 2 records the beginning of the church. Before the coming of Jesus to earth, the nation of Israel was the people of God. The center place of worship was Jerusalem. At the heart of Jerusalem was the temple. With the coming of Jesus, all of that changed. The church has become the people of God. Local churches have been scattered across the entire world.

And it all began on the day of Pentecost, as told in Acts, chapter 2. On this day, Jews from all around the world came to worship in Jerusalem. Let's pick it up in verse 1, ...

#### Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Here we see the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. They were supernaturally empowered to speak in other languages that were previously unknown to them. That's the testimony of those who were in Jerusalem.

#### Acts 2:5-13

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."

There was massive confusion from the people as to what all of the meant. The people were bewildered. Some claimed that the disciples were drunk. So Peter stood up and delivered his famous sermon to clarify what was happening.

Peter began by addressing the confusion of the people. The people weren't drunk. But their languages were a fulfillment of the prophet Joel. Peter then continued to tell about Jesus. That the Jews in Jerusalem delivered him up to Pilate and had him crucified. But Jesus was raised from the dead, in fulfillment of Psalm 16. Peter's conclusion comes in verse 36.

#### Acts 2:36

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

The people were cut to the heart (Acts 2:37). Peter commanded them to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38). And then, in verse 41 we see what happened.

#### Acts 2:41

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Here we see the beginning of the church. Some three thousand people joined the first day! Regarding membership in the church, this is what I call "Rapid Membership."

Now, as we are thinking about church membership, I want for you to consider how these people were incorporated into the church. What sort of "church membership" program did they have? They didn't have a eight-week class introducing new members into the church, with a formal recognition at the end. There were simply too many coming into the church at the same time to do this.

Furthermore, at this time, the church had very little established by way of formal structure. The only leaders in the church were the apostles. And you had thousands of people believing! It was simply impossible to have any church membership program developed. People were rapidly brought into the membership of the church.

This is compounded by the fact that verse 47 indicates that "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." In other words, every day, more and more people were being added to the church. Only a short time later we read, ...

#### Acts 4:4

But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

So within a few weeks or months, you had 5,000 believers in the church, with little structural leadership of the church in place.

As you trace through the history of the New Testament, you see how the structural leadership of the church developed. It often developed in response to the number of people in the churches. In Acts 6, you see some men appointed to help the apostles in the serving of tables. They were appointed because the burden of service was too great. They needed help.

In Acts 14:23, you see Paul appointing elders in every church. In other words, the church formed first, without any formal leadership in place. Believers in Christ simply gathered together for worship and edification. Then, the leaders were established afterwards in efforts to shepherd the people. Any formal church membership must have come after this.

In fact, it is curious to note that Acts 15 records a major conflict at Jerusalem between the Judiazers and the apostles concerning the requirements to be placed upon those who believe in Jesus. The major question was this: "Do believers in Jesus have to be circumcised to be saved?" The Judiazers were saying, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). The apostles were arguing that you come into the church through faith alone and that circumcision was not necessary.

John Levack points out that "the first considerable dispute within the ranks of the Church was concerned with this very issue of Church membership—who is inside the Church and who is outside." [\[1\]](#) And as it comes to church membership, this is the issue. Who is inside the church? Who is outside the church? And this is what we are seeking to do with a formal church membership. We are seeking to make it clear

who is inside the church, and who is outside the church.

Over the next few decades, the gospel message spread quickly throughout all of Asia Minor and as far as Rome (more than 1,000 miles from Jerusalem). The church experienced rapid growth. As the gospel spread, these baptized believers began gathering together in local churches for worship and for edification (Heb 10:24-25). The New Testament identifies dozens of these churches. Paul identifies those in these churches as “members.” He writes, ...

1 Corinthians 12:27

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

However, one will search the Bible in vain to find details concerning the process by which believers joined these churches. The New Testament contains no indication of “New Members” classes or church covenants or voting in church members. Believers simply united themselves with other believers.

The reason for this rapid membership process was due, in part, to the newness of the church. Organizational structures of the church (i.e. membership and leadership) would develop over time. As a result, the New Testament doesn’t outline a clear process of how church membership was practiced (or should be practiced).

As history progressed beyond the apostles, we see the development of ...

## 2. Rigorous Membership

This is seen during the post-apostolic church, the time after the apostles (circa 100AD - 325AD). During this time, we begin to see a large gap of time between faith in Christ and membership into the church. People were not accepted rapidly into the membership of the church simply on the basis of their profession of faith in Christ. There began to be a time of rigorous instruction and examination between faith and membership.

This delay is due, in part, to the lapse of time after the apostles. The time gave those in the post-apostolic church to think through church structures, like leadership and membership. The post-apostolic church took great care to verify (as much as humanly possible) that professing believers were genuine before allowing them into membership of the church.

Another factor for the delay in membership was the persecution that the church experienced during this time. In fact, this was one of the greatest eras of persecution in the entire history of the church. And the church had seen many professing believers join the church and then fall away when the persecution proved to be too difficult.

Faced with beatings, imprisonment, or death, many church members denied the faith they once professed. But later, they wanted to be received back into church membership. This was a huge issue in the church. These people were even given names. They were called “penitents.” They were not received back into the church quickly. They were given years of time to prove the sincerity of their repentance.

In light of these factors, the post-apostolic church developed a lengthy “screening” period before membership. Those who came to faith in Christ and had expressed a desire to be included in the membership of the church were called, “catechumens.” We get the word, “catechism” from this word. It denotes those who need to be taught. In the church today, we “catechize” our children. That is, we teach them the “catechism.”

These catechumens, “... were regarded not as unbelievers, but as half-Christians, and were accordingly allowed to attend all the exercises of worship, except the celebration of the sacraments.”<sup>[2]</sup> That is, they were brought into the church and were able to hear the teaching of the church and enjoy the fellowship of the church, but they just weren’t able to fully participate in the life of the church. They first needed to be examined.

These catechumens were carefully instructed over a long period of time in the ways of the faith before baptism and membership. This is in remarkable contrast to the days of the New Testament in which no such delay was experienced. The Ethiopian Eunuch was baptized immediately upon his profession of faith (Acts 8:35-39). Friends and family of Cornelius were likewise baptized immediately upon believing. But this was not permitted in the post-apostolic era. Instead, there was “a very thorough preparation before entrance into the privileges of church membership” according to Peter Toon.<sup>[3]</sup>

This lengthy preparation served as “a bulwark of the church against unworthy members.”<sup>[4]</sup> The entire membership process was not easy, but it enabled those interested in the church to weigh their decision to follow Christ. It also allowed the leaders of the church to discern the character and genuineness of those wishing to join the church.

We have several documents from church history that give us examples of the early church curriculum that was taught to prospective church members. One example is the “Didache.” It is a brief document, about the length of Paul’s epistle to the Galatians. Most scholars date the document to the late first or early second century, somewhere near 100 A.D. give or take a few decades. So, it was written close to the time of the apostles. The Didache consists mostly of instructions for holy living. It was only after learning the Christian morality presented in the Didache that one was considered ready for baptism.

Another example of documents from this era is called, “The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus.” It is about twice as long as the Didache. It is dated about a hundred years later than the Didache. The “Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus” requires a three-year instruction period for the catechumens, yet leaves room for exceptions. It reads, “Let catechumens spend three years as hearers of the word. But if a man is zealous and perseveres well in the work, it is not the time but his character that is decisive.”

The Apostolic Tradition is aware of the reality of persecution and potential martyrdom. It reads, “If a catechumen should be arrested for the name of the Lord, let him not hesitate about bearing his testimony; for if it should happen that they treat him shamefully and kill him, he will be justified, for he has been baptized in his own blood.”

Under persecution, this is how the church practiced membership. It rigorously guarded the door of entrance into membership. The church knew that church members would all be tested. And the church wanted to do all it could to insure that those in the church were genuine believers. So, they took their time, and demanded much proving of church members. The times of persecution required it!

However, as Christianity prevailed in the world, and the number of churches increased, and persecution from the governing authorities was reduced, the church transitioned from "Rigorous Membership" to ...

### 3. Relaxed Membership

That is, requirements of church membership were made easier. This was a process from the legalization of Christianity to the time of the Reformation. The best way to understand "Relaxed Church Membership" is to understand Constantine the Great (272-337). He did much during his reign to further the cause of Christianity. First of all, he played an active role in issuing the Edict of Milan (313 AD), which gave Christians legal status and helped to end the centuries of persecution. Second, he called for the council of Nicaea in 325 AD, where the Nicene Creed was developed, which helped to unite Christians world-wide. Finally, his death-bed conversion led to the wide-spread acceptance of Christianity.

Philip Schaff notes that Constantine "was the chief instrument for raising the church from the low estate of oppression and persecution to well deserved honor and power." <sup>[5]</sup> Through the influence of Constantine, Christianity became the default religion of the Roman Empire. This had huge implications upon church membership.

With the absence of persecution, it was made easier and easier for people to become church members. In fact, there was great cultural pressure to be members of the church. It took more fortitude not to be a member of the church than to be a member of the church, as you had to go against the culture of the day.

After the days of Constantine, people born into the Roman Empire were essentially born into the church. Thus arose the predominance of the practice of infant baptism. In fact, church records of baptisms often became the official records of citizenship in some regions. Jeremy Kimble well describes the slide from rigorous membership to relaxed membership. He writes, ...

As infant baptism became increasingly popular, less emphasis was placed on teaching adults prior to baptism. Instead, increasingly churches sought to baptize infants and prepare those children, through confirmation, for full membership. As the church spread into the west, it became a common pattern to baptize and allow someone into membership with no catechetical instruction. In many cases, the only requirements were renunciation of the pagan gods and a willingness to be baptized. As such, church membership, whether initiated through infant baptism or adult confession, had lost its meaning in terms of separating the regenerate from the rest of the world. <sup>[6]</sup>

In other words, as Christianity came to be the dominant religion across the Roman Empire, it became easier and easier to become a church member. Any membership requirements were relaxed. Gone was the fundamental distinction between those who were genuine in their faith and those who had none, as the culture made it easy for nominal believers to join the church. In fact, (as Jeremy Kimble continues), "infant baptism was a sign tantamount to both church membership and citizenship. This made church membership not a free decision based on conversion, but rather part and parcel of merely living in a certain geographical locale." <sup>[7]</sup>

The result of this was many regions where everyone in the community was baptized as infants because of cultural norms., because everyone is a member of the church. The result of this "relaxed membership" is that it filled the churches with unbelievers. This was the way of the church for a thousand years, until the days of the Reformation, when the church began to practice (once again), ...

### 4. Regenerate Membership

The days of the Reformation were marked by the rediscovery of the sole authority of the Scriptures and the grace of God in salvation. The cries of the Reformation were "Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Solus Christus, and Soli Deo Gloria." That is, we look to Scripture alone as our spiritual authority. We are saved by God's grace, not by our works. We are saved through faith in Christ, not by our own righteousness. We are saved by Christ alone, not the church or any sacrament. Our lives are to be lived for the glory of God alone. These are the things we embrace entirely at Rock Valley Bible Church.

Now, with the rediscovery of these things, many in the heritage of the Reformation have rethought church membership. Their responses have been varied. Some sought to redeem existing membership structures. Others sought a fresh start at what church membership is. Others sought a middle ground.

Among those who sought to redeem the existing practices of church membership were the Lutherans, the Reformed churches, and the Church of England. They continued in the ways of the Roman Catholic Church by continuing the practice of infant baptism. However, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, they didn't rely upon any saving power in baptism. As a result, they elevated the importance of a confirmation process, whereby people can be taught the fundamentals of the faith (like the catechumens of the first centuries). Only upon a credible confession of faith after their training, were people "confirmed" as believers and brought into full membership of the church. This practice continues today among many evangelical Paedobaptists.

Among those who sought a fresh start in church membership practices were the Anabaptists. They rejected infant baptism and practiced believer's baptism, which became the initiatory rite into full church membership. This brought about a voluntary membership of the committed. The fruit of this was a strong emphasis on community life as well as a practice of church discipline in order to protect the purity of the church. This is the policy of the majority of Baptist churches today.

Among those seeking middle ground were those who practiced "Open Membership." They were primarily Baptists who prioritized regenerate church membership over doctrinal positions. In particular, "They did not require credobaptism as a prerequisite to church membership or

Communion."<sup>[8]</sup>

John Bunyan was one of their chief advocates. George Offor, editor of *The Works of John Bunyan*, offers a summary of Bunyan's position,

[Bunyan] was satisfied that baptism is a personal duty, in respect of which every individual must be satisfied, in his own mind, and over which no church had any control; and that the only enquiry as to the fitness of a candidate for church fellowship should be, whether the regenerating powers of the Holy Ghost had baptized the spirit of the proposed member into newness of life.<sup>[9]</sup>

This position continues to be advocated today. The Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) accepts both Paedobaptists and Credobaptists into membership. Greg Strand writes of the EFCA, "We are baptist with a small 'b' in that what is critical for membership in a local church is true salvation. The fact that both credo and paedo baptism are allowed is a 'significance of silence' issue, i.e. we will debate it but not divide over it."<sup>[10]</sup> John Piper also has advocated for open membership.

Now, this survey of church history is only a sample of how the church has practiced church membership throughout her history. We have looked only at the largest, broadest strokes of church history. These strokes have progressed from "Rapid Membership" in the times of the New Testament to "Rigorous Membership" in the post-apostolic era to "Relaxed Membership" in the thousand years after Constantine to "Regenerate Membership" since the days of the Reformation. But no mention has been made of age-related questions of membership (or baptismal) candidates. No discussion has been offered of those who require membership classes or of the extent of catechetical instruction. Furthermore, nothing has been stated about "community membership" or "discipleship membership" or "covenant membership" or "renewable church membership." Yet, enough has been said to affirm Nathan Finn's statement, "In two millennia of Christian history, there has been considerable diversity in the prerequisites for and practice of church membership."<sup>[11]</sup>

This diversity continues into church membership practices today. Let's consider my final point:

## 5. Recent Membership

By "Recent Membership," I mean the current practice of church membership in the church today. First of all, opinions about its importance span the spectrum. Some view church membership as completely optional. Some view church membership as necessary. Wayne Mack summarizes the common reasoning of many:

"In my over forty years of ministry, I've had many people say to me, 'I'm not saved by church membership; I'm saved by the grace of God through faith. When I get to heaven, I'm not going to be there because I joined a church, but because I repented of my sins and believed on Jesus Christ. So what difference does it make whether I'm a member of a local church or not?'"<sup>[12]</sup>

Mark Dever holds that it makes a big difference. He claims that church membership is necessary. He says that the core of the issue is that Christians often tend to view their Christianity as "A personal relationship with God and not much else. ... Many Christians don't realize how this most important relationship with God necessitates a number of secondary personal relationships—the relationships that Christ establishes between us and his body, the Church."<sup>[13]</sup>

The reasons for these two extremes (church membership as optional and church membership as necessary) are vast and broad. Let's consider why some Christians consider church membership to be optional.

First of all, some have never even considered being a member at a church. They are ignorant of what the Bible says about church membership. They are ignorant of what their church teaches about church membership. In 2012 Grey Matter Research Consulting conducted a study among American adults who attend a place of worship once a month or more. Their conclusion is that there is a "widespread confusion and ignorance on the subject of official membership in a place of worship." The survey asked if their place of worship offers "any kind of official membership in the organization, or not." The study found that "Among all worship- goers, ...

48% say that such official membership is offered,  
33% believe it is not, and  
19% are not sure.

Statistics are a bit better among professing evangelicals, with ...

72% saying that such official membership is offered,  
14% believing it is not, and  
14% are not sure.<sup>[14]</sup>

Second, some have come to view church membership as optional because of their own, personal experience. William Hendricks observed that "More and more Christians in North America are feeling disillusioned with the church and other formal, institutional expressions of Christianity." He wrote a book entitled, "Exit Interviews" in which he interviewed in depth more than a dozen disillusioned Christians who have left the church for various reasons. By relating their stories of disappointment and hurt, he points out that many of these "have remarkably vibrant spiritual lives and touchingly close friendships with a kindred spirit or two. But in the main, they tend to nurture their relationship with God apart from the traditional means of church and parachurch." He concludes by saying, "In the end, ... what matters when it comes to the church is neither membership nor attendance but spirituality—one's relationship with God and the implications of that relationship for day-to-day life."<sup>[15]</sup> In other words, one's personal relationship with God is often considered to be so important that it trumps membership in a local church.

This leads us into a third reason why many consider church membership to be optional. Many believe that Christianity is simply a “personal relationship with Jesus.” Did you know that this phrase a “personal relationship with Jesus” is not even in the Bible? Yet, as Trevan Wax says, “No phrase is more characteristic of evangelical lingo than this one.”<sup>[16]</sup>

I will admit that emphasis upon “relationship” may be helpful to distance Christianity from the rituals and rules of “religion.” However, it has some consequences. It can create a self-centered Christianity. This is illustrated in the lyrics of “Personal Jesus,” by Depeche Mode (a secular band).

Your own personal Jesus.  
Someone to hear your prayers.  
Someone who cares.<sup>[17]</sup>

Nothing in the song speaks of the glory of Christ or of our duty to serve him. It is all about Jesus who is ready to hear us and help us. This song is one of the most successful hits of all time. People love the idea of Jesus being our ever-ready servant.

With this perspective, it is no surprise, then, that some Christians are consumers, viewing church membership on their own terms through the lens of whether it will be a help or hindrance to their relationship with God. One man had a helpful story.

Take my friend Nathan. He attended *two* churches on Sundays—one because he liked their music, the other because he liked the preaching. And his involvement in both went no deeper. At the first church he’s slip out just before the last song wound down and drive to the other church five minutes away. He even factored in time to stop by McDonald’s for an Egg McMuffin. He timed it so that he’d be walking into the second church just as the pastor started to preach.<sup>[18]</sup>

Finally, there are those who would advocate against any sort of official church membership. This is especially the case when any sort of membership contract or church covenant is involved. Wade Burleson argues that who sign such a document are “handing over the authority of Jesus Christ ... to mere men.”<sup>[19]</sup>

On the other side of the spectrum are those who consider church membership to be necessary. Mark Dever lists church membership as one of his “Nine Marks of a Healthy Church.” He views membership as necessary because “membership in a local church is intended as a testimony to our membership in the universal church. Church membership does not save, but it is a reflection of salvation.”<sup>[20]</sup> In this way, church membership can be seen as a fruit of salvation, where God gives a desire to a believer in Jesus to unite with a visible assembly of believers.

Jonathan Leeman brings in another dimension to argue why church membership is necessary. He contends that those who argue that “church membership” is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible are looking at it wrong. He points out that membership is a “club word,” But the church is not a club. Rather, Leeman likens it to an embassy, a place where one nation has a presence inside of another nation. So, he argues, “When you open your Bible, stop looking for signs of a club with its voluntary members. Look instead for a Lord and his bound-together people.”<sup>[21]</sup> Thus, Leeman and Dever argue: Church membership is necessary.

So, not only has church history demonstrated an array of church membership practices, but today, people are equally divided as to the importance of church membership today. In fact, even today, churches are across the spectrum when it comes to the practice of church membership.

Some churches (like Rock Valley Bible Church) have no formal church membership process. We simply affirm that all regular attenders are members. One church expresses it with these words, ...

We do not have a two-tier group attending our church. We consider all who attend our church to be members. There are no tests to take or forms to sign. The reason for this is that our elders feel a responsibility for all who involve themselves with [our church]. Since our church is elder ruled, the congregation does not vote and therefore the stability of the church is not threatened by this approach.<sup>[22]</sup>

Other churches will formally accept anyone who comes forward near the end of a worship service, professes faith in Christ, and a desire to join their church. Most churches will embrace members only after some sort of membership class (or classes), followed by various other assignments. Some require one class. Others require four classes. Others require eight classes.

Most churches with membership have some sort of membership covenant. But the content of these covenants vary greatly. For instance, one church simply states that, “When you become a member, you are agreeing to support this ministry with your finances, time, and gifts and talents. You are also agreeing to live a lifestyle that reflects a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and allow yourself to be held accountable to the spiritual oversight of [the] Elders.”<sup>[23]</sup> On the other hand, I know of a church where the membership covenant is more than three pages long! It’s filled with a detailed description of commitments that a member of a church will make. It contains commitments to attendance at meetings, morality standards of the church, financial support, maintaining peace in the body, and support and submission to the leadership. It contains commitments of one’s personal devotion to God, family life, evangelism, Christian liberty and separation from the world.

All of this is my point: there is no historical agreement on why and how to practice church membership. Which means that we, at Rock Valley Bible Church, have great liberty in choosing how it is that we practice our church membership. And as you all know, it has always been my heart to submit our church to what the Bible says.

Next week, we will look at the issue of church membership in the Bible.



- [1] John G. Levack, *The Potential Church: Lectures on the Meaning of Church Membership under the terms of the Chalmers Lectureship Trust* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrews Press, 1982), 23.
- [2] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, *Ante-Nicene Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 256.
- [3] Peter Toon, "Catechumens" in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 201.
- [4] Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, 256.
- [5] Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 12.
- [6] Jeremy M. Kimble, *40 Questions About Church Membership and Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2017), 59.
- [7] Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 59.
- [8] Nathan A. Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership," in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, ed. John S. Hammett & Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2012), 67.
- [9] John Bunyan, *The Whole Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 2, ed. George Offor (London: Blackie and Son, 1854), 592.
- [10] Greg Strand, "Baptism: Infant and Believer," accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.efca.org/blog/understanding-scripture/baptism-infant-and-believer>. It is worthy to point out that Strand speaks with some authority regarding the Evangelical Free Church of America, having written *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Free Church of America*.
- [11] Nathan A Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership," 75.
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