



Church Membership at Rock Valley Bible Church

1. Our History
2. Our Vision
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5. Our Membership

For the past three weeks at Rock Valley Bible Church, we have been considering the topic of church membership. We have been doing so because we are working to transition our church from practicing an informal church membership to a formal church membership. This simply means that we are looking for some formal definition to our relationships with one another.

Three weeks ago, we looked at "Church Membership in History." We looked at how church membership has been practiced throughout history of the church. And we saw that church membership has been practiced many different ways. In the early church, we saw **rapid membership**. As the church grew rapidly, so did its membership. People came to faith in droves and were quickly added to the church.

In the post-apostolic church, we saw **rigorous membership**. As the church grew, so did the persecution. And it was important to test those becoming members of the church, lest they fall away as the pressure increased in their lives. So, the post-apostolic church made it more rigorous to join.

In the church after Constantine, we saw **relaxed membership**. As the default religion in the empire was Christianity, those born into the empire were assumed to be Christians. So they were baptized as children and added to the church as members.

This continued for 1,000 years, until the Protestant Reformation. In the church after the Reformation, we saw **regenerate membership**. That is, churches sought to accept only genuine believers into membership in their churches.

And when it comes to church membership in recent history, practices and beliefs vary wildly. Some think that church membership is totally optional. Others think that church membership is necessary. Some churches accept new members the very morning they come forward confessing their faith in Christ and their desire to join the church. Other churches take several months and classes and interviews before you become a member.

Here's the big lesson for us: there has been no consensus over the years of how exactly to practice church membership. This is because the Bible is silent as to how church membership should be practiced.

Two weeks ago, we considered "Church Membership in the Bible." We saw last week how "**membership**" is a **Biblical word**. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul members in the church and compares them with members of your own body.

We also saw that church **membership is for clarity**. That is, the Bible speaks of the church as a defined group of people. So that someone is clearly a member of the church, or clearly not a member of a church. This is most clearly demonstrated when the church needs to remove one of its members due to their sin. After confronting the wayward member individually, then by a few more, then by the entire church, Jesus says, "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matthew 18:17). That is, let him be outside the church. Or you might say it this way: Jesus wants the membership of the church to be clear. Those in the church are his representatives. When someone is not representing Jesus well, Jesus said that it was mandatory for the church to removed him.

Also, **church membership is for care**. When Paul spoke to the elders of the church in Ephesus, he told them to "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). The Holy Spirit appoints leaders over a group of people, called the church, to care for them. That is, to help them and teach them and lead them and support them. Church membership is simply a way to help identify who the leaders are to care for.

Finally, we saw that with membership comes accountability. The leaders will give account to the Lord as to how they have cared for those in the church. The author of Hebrews writes, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account" (Hebrews 13:17). Regarding membership in a church, it is helpful for leaders to know who they are accountable to before the Lord.

Last week, we looked at "Church Membership in Practice." That is, how church membership works itself out. We looked at what is expected of church members. Church membership is the working out of what it means to be a member of the body of Christ. Paul compares the church to a body. Eyes help a body know where it needs to walk. Feet help the body to move. Stomachs give the energy to the body. Lungs and heart work together to deliver needed oxygen to the body. All of these things take place so that the body can function. Church members serve one another, so that the body functions properly.

This is demonstrated in the "one another" commands of the Bible. There are about 50 such commands in the Bible. Consider a few of these

commands:

- "love one another" (John 13:34-35; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12).
- "serve one another" (Gal. 5:13; 1 Peter 4:10)
- "accept one another" (Romans 15:7).
- "be kind and compassionate to one another" (Ephesians 4:32).
- "forgive one another" (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13).
- "instruct one another" (Romans 15:14).
- "greet one another" (Romans 16:16).
- "confess our sins to each other" (James 5:16).
- "pray for each other" (James 5:16).
- "show hospitality to one another" (1 Peter 4:9).
- "clothe ourselves with humility toward one another" (1 Peter 5:5).

The "one another" commands represent well the expectations of church members. Church membership is each of us, doing our part to love and serve and help one another. About a third of these 50 commands are to "love one another." Another third of these 50 commands can be placed under the umbrella of seeking unity for one another. One of the key "one another" commands is found in Hebrews 10:24-25, ...

Hebrews 10:24-25

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

These verses speak about the importance of church members regularly gathering together. It speaks of how church members should be thinking about others, and stirring them up to love and good works.

Well, this morning, I want to conclude our series on church membership by looking at what church membership looks like at our church. My message is entitled, "Church Membership at Rock Valley Bible Church." In my message this morning, I simply want to describe our church. I want to urge you to become a formal member of our church. I know that for many of you, this will be review, but it's a good review. Let's begin with ...

1. Our History

I want to take us down memory lane. You can trace the heritage of our church back to 1984, when a church began in Warrenville, Illinois, called Grace Church of DuPage. In 1993, this church planted a church in DeKalb, called Kishwaukee Bible Church. Yvonne and I were privileged to be a part of that church plant. On July 2, 1998, we began a Thursday evening Bible Study in Rockford with the hope that the Lord would establish a church in Rockford, Illinois. We met in the basement of a home in Rockford.

As our Bible study grew, we began renting out a church building on Sunday evenings. Our first meeting was on July 2, 2000. It was a great evening, as many came from Kishwaukee Bible Church to rejoice with us in what God was doing. In the summer of 2001, I quit my secular job in DeKalb, and was sent and fully supported by Kishwaukee Bible Church to focus all of my attention upon the church in Rockford.

On March 3, 2002, we began renting Rockford Christian High School for our Sunday morning meetings. We rented that building for 8 years. We finally purchased our own building in Loves Park in 2010. Our first meeting in our building was on Sunday morning, December 5, 2010. God has done some great things among us. We are thankful for his grace. Let's continue with ...

2. Our Vision

Here is our vision statement. It's our purpose for existing: "Rock Valley Bible Church exists to enjoy his grace and to extend his glory."

We have worked hard to promote this. It is written on the wall outside the auditorium. It is on our bulletins every week. It is on our website. It is on the Weekly Word email that I send out every week. We have pens with this written on them. We have mugs with this printed on them.

"Rock Valley Bible Church exists to enjoy his grace and to extend his glory." The first part of this sentence addresses our vertical relationship with God. The second part of the sentence addresses our horizontal relationship with others. Our relationship with the Lord is characterized first and foremost as a relationship of grace. That is, God has been gracious to us in Christ Jesus by dying for our sins upon the cross, based upon nothing that we have done. That's grace. God has created us to enjoy this grace.

Our relationship with others should be characterized by making God's grace known, which extends his glory. That is, the grace of God should so impact us and be so enjoyable to us, that we can do nothing else, but to show it and tell it to others. We see this often in the Bible. One example is what Jesus said to the Gerasene Demoniac who Jesus healed. Jesus told him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19).

"Rock Valley Bible Church exists to enjoy his grace and to extend his glory." And it's my aim that every member of Rock Valley Bible Church knows this clearly. So that if anyone would ask: why does Rock Valley Bible Church exist? Everyone one of us would respond: "to enjoy his grace and extend his glory!"

Before moving on to my next point, I want to spend a few moments reflecting upon the meaning of each of these phrases. First of all, ...

a. Enjoying His Grace

If there is anything that I want to see of Rock Valley Bible Church, it's this flavor of Christianity that is happy and joyful. A frumpy Christianity

that worships and serves God out of duty and not delight is dishonoring to the Lord. There's a big difference between saying, "It's Sunday, I have to go to church." Rather than, "It's Sunday, there's no other desire that I want than to go to church." There is a big difference in these things. The one is detached and burdensome. The other is part of our being and communicates with the world around us the source of our joy, God and his people.

God hasn't called us to be a dis-interested people, who obey him because he said that we must obey. Rather, we are called to be joyful worshippers, who serve him from delight. Consider the following Scriptures. Notice how the LORD commands us to be joyful.

Psalm 100:1-2
Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth.
Serve the LORD with gladness;
Come before Him with joyful singing.

Psalm 95:1
Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD.
Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.

Philippians 4:4
Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

And that's what our mission is at Rock Valley Bible Church. We are seeking to be a joyful Christian community. The source of our joy is the grace of God. That's how we come into God's kingdom, by grace.

Ephesians 2:8-9
For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Our salvation is a gift of God's grace to us. Just as a child enjoys his Christmas gift, so are we to enjoy God's gracious gift to us of his salvation. But, it doesn't merely stop there. God doesn't want for us to have this salvation only to enjoy it for ourselves. Rather, he wants for us to make it known. Or, as we say it, ...

b. Extending His Glory

If we truly embrace the grace of God, we will proclaim it to others. We see this many times in the Bible. For instance, take the leper that Jesus healed. Jesus told him to say nothing to anyone, but to show himself to the priests. And what happened? You couldn't keep his mouth shut. "But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter" (Mark 1:45). Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut? He experienced the grace of God and couldn't help, but to extend the glory of God to all he met!

Another illustration is of the deaf mute man who Jesus healed. When his ears were opened and his tongue was released and he spoke plainly. Those who saw it were amazed. We read in Mark 7:36 that "Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it." What happened? The crowds witnessed the grace of God and couldn't help, but to extend the glory of God to all who would listen.

And should Jesus tell us not to talk about the salvation that he has brought into our lives, it would be like trying to hold a laugh in during a laughing contest. Sooner or later, we are just going to burst, telling others of God's grace in our lives. And so, likewise, we as a church exist to enjoy his grace (in its fullness), and to extend his glory (to the nations). That's what we mean by "enjoying his grace and extending his glory." Let's move on to our next point.

3. Our Values

By "values," we mean the core beliefs that we hold to. And in some regard, each of these core values help to distinguish us from others churches in the area. The first is this:

a. We believe in the power of the Word of God.

In other words, we believe that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). We believe that "the word of the Lord remains forever" (1 Peter 1:25). We believe that the word of God "is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). We believe that "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16). We believe in the power of the word of God.

There is a reason why our pattern is to preach through books of the Bible. Because we aren't trusting in our own wisdom, but in the wisdom of God as he has revealed it in the Scriptures. We don't need to go chasing down every relevant topic pertaining to our Christian lives, packaging together in our own way what the Bible says about this or that. We believe this because, we believe in the power of the Word of God. He has given us his word. We want to let God speak in his way. Next, ...

b. We believe in the power of the God.

Fundamentally, this is why we believe in the power of the word of God, because we serve a powerful God who backs up his word. When he makes a promise, he brings it to pass. When he decrees, it happens. "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases" (Psalm 115:3). And there is nothing that is too difficult for him. "Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and

by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you" (Jeremiah 32:17).

God rules the world, as he created it by the power of his speech. He rules over all of the objects of creation. God rules over the animals. He rules over the spiritual beings. God rules over human beings. He gives us life (Genesis 2:7). He determines when and where we live (Acts 17:26). He directs our steps (Proverbs 16:9). He raises up leaders (Isaiah 44:28-45:1). He pulls down leaders (Exodus 11:1). He buries every king.

God rules over the souls of men. God is the author of our salvation. He is the one who has chosen us from the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4, 5; 2 Timothy 1:9). He is the one who "causes us to be born again" (1 Peter 1:3). He is the one who grants us repentance (Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25). He is the one who gives us faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). He is the one who changes us from those who were dead in our sin to those who are alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:1-6). He changes us from being blind to the spiritual realities of Jesus Christ to seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of God in the face of Christ. It is the Spirit of life that God blows into our hearts that gives us new life in Christ (John 3:3, 8). We can take as much credit for our spiritual birth as we can take for our natural birth. None. It's all of grace. That's the power of God in our lives. Our third value is that ...

c. We believe in the power of the Gospel.

Consider Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." You can't get much clearer than Romans 1:16 says it. There is power in the gospel.

The gospel is the greatest story ever told. It's the greatest news that you will ever hear. "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to [many after his death]" (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).

There is power in this message. This simple message has turned drunkards into respectable citizens (1 Corinthians 6:10). This simple message has turned homosexuals into straight men and women (1 Corinthians 6:10). This simple message has turned idolaters into God-worshippers (1 Thessalonians 1:9). This simple message has turned demon possessed men into spirit-controlled men (Mark 5:1-20). This simple message has turned the worst of sinners into the greatest of saints. The apostle Paul, Augustine, and John Newton are but a few famous examples in church history.

And if this morning finds you entrapped in any sin, this message of Christ crucified is sufficient to give you the strength to overcome sin. The gospel is powerful! This is why we need to hear it often. Paul told those in Rome that he was eager to preach the gospel to them (Romans 1:15). Likewise, we are eager to preach the gospel, because it has power to transform lives.

4. Our Mission

And it is right here that we get very practical. How is it that our vision and values work themselves out? Our vision is to enjoy his grace and to extend his glory. We value the power of God, his word, and the gospel. Here's how it works: we gather together to be strengthened and equipped, by trusting in God, his word, and the gospel, that we might scatter to reach a world that is lost and in need of salvation.

When we gather, we focus our attention upon the same things that the early church focused upon. When the early church was established, there were four characteristics of the church that marked out its activities. They are set forth in Acts 2:42, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." We see here four core activities of the church.

- The apostles teaching
- Fellowship
- Breaking of bread
- Prayer

The early church "devoted themselves" to these things. That is, they gave strong attention given to these activities. And I believe that they are normative for us as well. We, as a church, ought to give "strong attention" to these activities as well. Rather than simply go through each of these characteristics one by one, I would like to show how they relate to our church. We engage in each of these activities on Sunday mornings, here at the church building.

We meet together to pray at 9:00am to **pray** together as a church (Acts 2:42) . We meet to pray in order

- to plead for God's guidance, strength, and wisdom in the church and in our lives;
- to intercede for others at the throne of grace;
- to share our trials with one another;
- to visibly demonstrate as a church our complete dependence upon God for everything (Ps. 123:1);
- to inform those who come with the needs for prayer;
- to train those who come in prayer;
- to express our love for one another in praying for one another;
- to learn more about God;
- to submit to God's will.

We experience **teaching** in our Sunday morning worship service at 10:00am in the auditorium. This corporate worship service allows us to worship God publicly.

- to remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.
- to provide a forum for the public reading of Scripture.
- to instruct the church in godliness.

- to equip the church body for works of service.
- to bring unity to the church (i.e. once a week, all are gathered in one place).
- to give opportunities for service.
- to obey God's counsel to gather together.
- to stimulate one another to love and good deeds.
- to mobilize a group of people to work to promote God's glory.

Every Sunday, we have a **fellowship** time, namely the hour after the service. This usually begins near 11:30am. This is why we have snacks at church.

- to help encourage others to stay after church.
- to connect with others;
- to encourage one another (talking, praying, ...);
- to discover ways to serve one another;
- to stimulate one another to love and good deeds;
- to meet others;
- to strengthen relationships.

And as a church, we have several opportunities to **break bread** together. This may have specific allusions to the Lord's Supper. Or it may also refer generally to eating food together. There is a way in which eating together forms a bond with one another. This happens during various times when we gather together.

- the fellowship time after our church services.
- the Lord's Supper every 4-6 weeks during our weekly services.
- the monthly fellowship dinners we have together.
- the times when you invite families over to your home for dinner.

In this way, we are committed to "the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

All of these activities are very intentional. Our **teaching** on Sunday mornings helps to teach us and unite us in our common faith and purpose. Our **fellowship** after our Sunday service helps to give opportunities to love and serve and encourage one another. Our **eating together** gives opportunity for us to form bonds with each other. Our **praying** together shows visibly that we are dependent upon the Lord for all that we do. But it's not only on Sunday mornings that this happens. It also happens throughout the week. We have various small groups and Bible studies and gatherings, many of which meet informally, all to promote a community that would extend God's glory to the world.

These are all activities in which we gather and enjoy God's grace. But this is only half of our vision. We also have a vision to extend God's glory. We do this by scattering. We do this locally through helping local ministries, such as the Pregnancy Care Center, the Rockford Rescue Mission, ReachOut Jail ministry, Kids Klub, Safe Families or foster agencies. Furthermore, there are ways that we give financially to support outreach, as we support various missions organizations. We support First Love International with their efforts to Nepal and India. We support Farms International, who reaches out to micro-loans to Christians in poorer nations. We support Leadership Resources International, which equips needy pastors overseas.

On top of this, there are many ways in which you can reach out informally. You can reach out to your neighbors or coworkers or friends. You can do this with smiles and handshakes and invites over to your house and offers to serve them in some way or another. You can be involved in the community with a goal to reach others for Jesus. You can be involved in youth activities, reading clubs, pool leagues, bowling leagues, quilting guilds, or musical groups. Really, the opportunities are endless. You simply need to make the effort to discern what you can do with your giftedness and time. Then, you simply make the effort to reach out and extend the glory of God.

All of our church-centered activities are aimed to equip you and encourage you and support you in seeking to extend God's glory to the nations. Finally, let's talk about ...

5. Our Membership

This is where we have been headed the past four weeks. Until this point in time at Rock Valley Bible Church, we have only practiced informal membership. People have come to church. Those who have stayed around have been members.

With formal church membership, we are going to initiate a process to formalize our relationship. It's really an opportunity for you all to pledge that Rock Valley Bible Church is your church, where you will serve, where you will practice the one anothers, and where you will be shepherded by the elders.

We are simply going to ask you to fill out a form, that we might have a record of those who are formal members of the church. The form is quite simple. It's one page. On the front side, there's an opportunity for you to profess your faith in Jesus, and to express your desire to formally commit yourself to Rock Valley Bible Church. Acts 2:42 forms the guidelines for the commitment. It gives you an opportunity to sign and date the document. Below, there is a place for the elders to make their commitments to care for you.

On the back side, there's an opportunity for you to give an account of your salvation. Then, a place where you can express any desire to serve the church. Finally, there is a question about baptism. We ask that you would take this paper home and pray over it. We would ask that you would work through in your own heart whether Acts 2:42 is representative of what you want to devote yourself to. And over the next few months, we, as elders would love to sit down with you and talk with you about this form. We would love to see every one of you make a formal commitment to Rock Valley Bible Church and become formal members of this church.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 9, 2020 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.
