

January 26, 2020 by Steve Brandon



Church Membership in the Bible

1. Membership is Mentioned (1 Cor. 12).
2. Membership is for Clarity (Matt. 18; 1 Cor. 5).
3. Membership is for Care (Acts 20).
4. Membership is for Accountability (Heb. 13:17).

As most all of you know, we are in the midst of a series on church membership. This is because at Rock Valley Bible Church, we are working toward implementing a formalized church membership. Last week, we saw how church membership has been practiced in many different ways throughout the history of the church.

In the early church, we saw **rapid membership**. As the church grew rapidly, so did its membership, without much form or structure. Leaders were often set in place only after a group of people were gathering together for worship. In the post-apostolic church, we saw **rigorous membership**. As the church settled into organizational structures, there began to be a lapse of time between faith and membership. This was done, in part, because of the persecution they faced. It was important that prospective members be tested before they were accepted into membership. 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 and baptized as children. This continued for 1,000 years. 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, sentiments span the spectrum from optional to necessary. Some think that church membership is totally optional. "If church membership suits your fancy, that's fine, you can become a member of a church. But you think that it's better for you not to be a church member, that's fine as well, whatever works best for you." That's what some people think. Others think that church membership is necessary, though not necessary for your eternal salvation. These people see church membership as a fruit of salvation. That is, actively engaging in loving and serving other believers in a covenant community gives evidence to your salvation.

Even churches that practice church membership do it differently. In some churches, you can become a member simply by coming forward at the end of the service, confessing faith in Jesus, and expressing your desire to be a member. In other churches, it takes several months and many classes and pages of application and several interviews and a final vote before you can become members of a church.

The reason why there is a discrepancy in the various attitudes toward church membership is because the Bible is silent on exactly how church membership should be practiced. But that doesn't mean that church membership isn't Biblical.

A pastor friend of mine said it this way, "Church membership is assumed in the Bible." That is, there isn't any command in the Bible for you to be a member of the church. Because, when you come to faith, you are brought into the church. Paul writes to those in Corinth, ...

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

Paul is talking about spiritual baptism that comes to all who believe in Jesus. And "we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13). That is, we have all been baptized into the church. All believers in Jesus have been brought into the church as members of the church. And that's why you don't see any verse in the Bible that says, "You must be a member of the church," or, "You must join a church." This is because when you believe, you are placed into the church by the Spirit.

Now, exactly how this membership is expressed is a matter of freedom. The Bible give no direction on how church membership is to be practiced. As a result, church membership is practiced in different ways in different churches.

At Rock Valley Bible Church, we have practiced "informal church membership." That is, we have not added a formal process by which you officially "join" the church. The way that people join Rock Valley Bible Church is much more natural.

In a typical experience, a family visits our church on Sunday morning and is welcomed by those at the church. After a few weeks of visiting, I will often make some more personal contact and visit the family in their home, or, we might have them over to our house for dinner. During that time, I have an opportunity to meet the new family, to hear of their faith journey and to 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. But it gives you a bit of what our "membership" process looks like. It's very informal.

Our church operates like acquaintances who become friends without thinking much about the process or what exactly it means that they are "friends." Now, as it comes to church membership at Rock Valley Bible Church, we are seeking to make a bit of a change. And for the most part, the change is going to be like a dating couple who has a DTR discussion. DTR stands for "Define the Relationship."

In other words, the change we are seeking isn't so much in how membership works at Rock Valley Bible Church, as it is in how we are seeking to be clear in defining the relationship. We want to answer questions like, What does it mean to be a "member" of Rock Valley Bible Church? What are expected of members? What can members expect of one another? What can members expect of the leaders of the church?

In this series, I want to clarify the answers to some of these questions. I want to work on "Defining the Relationship." To be clear, we have a membership at Rock Valley Bible Church. Many of you are members of Rock Valley Bible Church. You have attended here for years. You are involved in the life of the body. You consider me to be your pastor. You consider the elders to be your elders. You think Biblically about your commitment to the church and are all in regarding loving one another.

We just haven't been very clear of what's expected of members. Nor have we been very clear of what's expected of church leaders. We have not done well at "Defining the Relationship." It's because we have practiced "informal membership" We are simply working towards making our relationship "formal."

Well, this morning, I want to present what the Bible says about church membership. I want to show what the Bible says about church membership. I want to show what the Bible doesn't say about church membership. First of all, let's point out that ...

1. Membership is Mentioned (1 Cor. 12).

"Membership" a Biblical word. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul compares the church to a body. Just as a body has many "members," so also does the church have many "members." Paul writes, ...

1 Corinthians 12:14-27

For the body does not consist of one **member** but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the **members** in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

If all were a single **member**, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the **members** may have the same care for one another. If one **member** suffers, all suffer together; if one **member** is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually **members** of it.

Paul explicitly uses the word, "member" seven times in these fourteen verses to identify members in the church. The analogy here is of a body. Just as your eyes and ears are members of your body, so also are there members of the church. We may not often identify our hand as a "member" of our body, but nevertheless, the word works. Your hand is a member of your body, as is also your eye and ear and foot. And just as each of these members of your body plays a crucial role in the functioning of your body, so also do members of churches play important roles in the life of every church. This was Paul's point earlier in the chapter.

1 Corinthians 12:4-11

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

The Holy Spirit is actively involved in placing the members of the church together, each with their own gifts, to be used "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). Note here that membership here in the church is local. In other words, when Paul describes us as "members" of the body of Christ, he isn't simply referring to the universal church, as if all who believe in Jesus are members of the church at large. No, Paul describes membership in relationship with others, each one doing their part for the common good.

So, "membership" is a Biblical word. Notice how they became "members." It wasn't by signing up to receive all of the benefits that "membership" brings, but by being placed into the church by the Holy Spirit with their gifts that they might be used "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). And that's why an informal membership can work, because "membership" in a church isn't about "signing up." Membership in a church is fundamentally about believing in Christ and being engaged in the life of the church. This leads to being involved with others in the church, and serving others with your gifts, and giving, and helping, and encouraging.

Next, I want to look at a several passages of Scripture that mention the church as a specific, identifiable, quantifiable group of people. This is my point:

2. Membership is for Clarity (Matt. 18; 1 Cor. 5)

In other words, churches in the Bible consisted of a clearly defined group of people. Those in the group we call, "members."

Let's begin with Matthew 18:15-17. Many of you are familiar with this passage. It's often called the passage about "Church discipline," which

is true. Jesus instructs the church on how to “discipline” a wayward member, by removing him from your midst. However, this passage is far more about “Church restoration” than it is about “Church discipline.” Jesus instructs the church how to restore a sinning believer by bringing him back into the church. It’s all about calling those straying from God to turn back from their false ways. It’s only at the end, after multiple attempts at restoration have failed that the church enters into formal “discipline.”

Beginning in verse 15, Jesus tells us what to do when people go astray. He says, ...

Matthew 18:15-17

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Jesus begins with the situation of another believer sinning. Initially, the sinning brother is confronted individually and called to repentance. If the brother repents, then forgiveness is freely extended. However, if the brother fails to repent, then others are brought into the process. This time, a group of people come to confront this individual. If the brother repents, then forgiveness is freely extended. However, if the brother fails to repent, then it should be told to the church. Those in the church should call the brother to repentance. If the brother repents, then forgiveness is freely extended, and fellowship within the body is enjoyed once again. However, if the brother fails to repent, then he should be treated as an unbeliever, outside of the fold of the church.

How easy this sounds, and yet, how difficult it is to practice. Many individuals find confronting the sin of another person to be difficult. Furthermore, many leaders of churches would never dare to bring such an open accusation of sin to the entire church body. Yet, Jesus calls the church to this practice regardless of the difficulties.

Now, the main point for us today is this: Jesus wants the church to be clear about who is inside the church and who is outside of the church. Or, you might say it this way: Jesus wants the membership of the church to be clear. You see this best in the last step of the process of dealing with an unrepentant person. At the end of verse 17, we read, “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” The terms, “Gentiles” and “tax collectors”, were terms used by Jesus as illustrations of those who are “at the bottom of the moral scale.”^[1] In Matthew 5:46-47, Jesus uses these terms to indicate those of lowest morality. One commentator points out that these terms described “the worst sort of persons.”^[2]

To be sure, Jesus told us to treat “Gentiles and tax collectors” with compassion (see Matt. 8:1-11; 9:9-13; 15:21-28). But the point here is that they have been treated with compassion, with multiple people coming in grace and calling them to repentance. And in the end, the one who has refused all calls to repent “has no place among the holy people of God, and ... is to be shunned.”^[3] He should be kept out of the covenant community and not welcomed into the fellowship of the church.

Ultimately, this four-step process works to differentiate those who are in the church and those who are outside of the church. Those who are inside the church are the ones who trust in Christ and are seeking to follow in his ways. They are “church members.” Those who rebel against the rule of the Lord should be expelled from his church, as they neither represent Christ or the church that he is building. They are not “members” of the church. Somehow, and in some way, it must be clear who is in the church and who is not. The method for identifying those in the church is called, “church membership.”

Now, Jesus doesn’t tell us how to make this distinction, only that this distinction needs to be made. Until this point in the life of Rock Valley Bible Church, we have made this distinction naturally. That is, those who attend are involved are “members” and those who aren’t involved or listed in the directory are “not members.”

However, it has been clear enough for our church to follow through with the words of Jesus. On two occasions in this church, we have done this. We approached sinning “members” of the church, individually first, then as a small group. We have told the entire church. We have considered them to be like “Gentiles and tax collectors” (Matthew 18:17).

In each of these cases, it has been clear that the sinning individuals were “members” of the church. They attended our church services regularly. They were involved in the lives of others. They attended events of the church. They invited others to their homes. They were in the homes of others at church. In these cases, it was clear that they were “members.”

But sometimes, this boundary is a bit fuzzy and not quite so clear. It’s fuzzy when people sometimes come to church and are sort-of involved in the life of the church. It’s not quite so clear when people aren’t even listed in the directory.

At Rock Valley Bible Church, as we formalize our membership practices, we are simply looking to clear up the line, to make it clear who is inside the church and who is outside. We are doing this because Jesus wanted that to be clear. In the case of an unrepentant sinning member, Jesus commands us to make it clear that such a one is outside the church. In the case of communicating such things, Jesus commands us to make it clear that everyone else is inside the church. That’s what Jesus taught about church membership.

Paul has a similar mention of church membership in 1 Corinthians 5. In this chapter, Paul is talking about an unrepentant sinner in the church of Corinth. Paul wants the church to be clear about this man’s status. That such a one is not a part of the church in Corinth. He writes, ...

1 Corinthians 5:1-2

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

Paul is telling the church to “remove” such a man. That is, “Remove him from the church. He cannot be one of your members. Remove him

from your membership." In other words, the church is to be a place of purity. Overtly, unrepentant sinners have no part in the church. It should be clear who is in the church and who is outside the church. In verses 9-13, Paul clarifies his thoughts, ...

1 Corinthians 5:9-13

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

In other words, it is expected that those outside the church are living immoral lives. It's perfectly fine to associate with them to bring the gospel to them. However, it is not acceptable for those in blatant immorality to be inside the church.

Notice how Paul speaks about those "outside" and those "inside the church." God judges those outside the church. We must judge those inside the church. We must "purge the evil person from among you." This is what church membership represents. It represents who is inside the church and who is outside the church. Church membership is the way to bring clarity in these matters. Let's move on to my third point.

3. Membership is for Care (Acts 20).

Thirdly, I want to show you a few passages where the leaders of the church are given the task of caring for a specific group of people. Membership helps to clarify exactly who these people are. So, turn to Acts 20.

This passage is one of the most tender scenes in all of the Scriptures. This is where the apostle Paul bids farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus. Paul dearly loved these men, having spent three years with them in ministry together (Acts 20:31). He believed that he would never see them again (Acts 20:25, 38), which is why they departed with prayers and tears (Acts 20:36-37). Paul gave these Spirit-appointed leaders the advice they needed to shepherd the church in Ephesus without him. His counsel is applicable to all of those who shepherd local churches. His counsel is applicable to leaders of Rock Valley Bible Church.

Paul's counsel to these elders begins with a review of his ministry (Acts 20:18-21). He tells the elders how he served them and taught them during his days in Ephesus. Paul, then, looks forward to his own destiny (Acts 20:22-24), saying that "imprisonment and afflictions await me" (Acts 20:23). Next, Paul turns to his expectations for what the elders will face (Acts 20:25-31). They will face danger in the church and defection from among the elders. Finally, Paul points the elders to their only source of security, God himself (Acts 20:32-35). The heart of Paul's words is his fundamental exhortation to the elders, found in verse 28, ...

Acts 20:28

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.

One commentator identifies verse 28 as "both the practical and the theological centre of the speech."^[4] Another calls it, "the key exhortation to the elders."^[5]

Another claims that this verse is "the most discussed part of the entire speech."^[6] It is where we will focus our attention as it pertains to church membership.

Verse 28 describes the work of shepherds. They must watch themselves and the flock under their care. This defines the shepherding work: caring for the flock. Just as the elders of the church were called to care for their own spiritual condition, so also were they instructed to care for the spiritual needs of their local flock in Ephesus.

Notice the role of the Lord in this spiritual work of the church. These elders were appointed by the Holy Spirit. From an earthly perspective, Paul appointed the elders (Acts 14:23). Yet, equally clear is the Lord's appointment of those in the church. Paul told the elders in Ephesus that it was "the Holy Spirit [who] has made you overseers." The church is not an institution created, designed or sustained by human effort. Jesus promised to build his church (Matt 16:18). He "obtained [the church of God] with his blood" (Acts 20:28).

God's design for local churches is straightforward. Each church should have a structure, with Spirit-appointed shepherds and an identifiable congregation. The shepherds are responsible to care for the spiritual needs of those in the congregation. The congregation receives the oversight and protection of the leaders.

We see Peter telling some elders similar things.

1 Peter 5:1-3

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Again, we see the shepherd imagery in these verses. It is the elders of the church who are given the task of shepherding the flock. I love the way that Peter describes how this should be done. Pastors and elders should shepherd the flock willingly and sacrificially and lovingly.

- Willingly: "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you;" (1 Peter 5:2).
- Sacrificially: "not for shameful gain, but eagerly;" (1 Peter 5:2).
- Lovingly, "not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:3).

This is the sort of leadership that I have sought to provide at Rock Valley Bible Church. This is the sort of leadership that all of us elders have sought to carry out: willing, sacrificial, and loving leadership. Any failings in doing so has been our sin. It's what we are striving to do. We are striving to care for all of you like a shepherd would care for his sheep.

And so, as we institute a formal membership at Rock Valley Bible Church, please know that it's not a power thing. It's not an authority thing, which sometimes church membership can be. There are plenty of examples of those who have been shepherds of churches for their own gain, using and abusing those in the church for their own good. Please know, that we, as elders, aren't seeking to use our position as a place of power and authority to gain control over you or use you in any way. Our heart is to care for you. Church membership will help this.

Now, I don't know if this has ever crossed your mind, but it has crossed my mind (and the minds of the other elders): Who is a part of the flock? Who is a part of Rock Valley Bible Church? Who is the object of our oversight and spiritual care?

Now, for the most part, this is obvious. Those of you who regularly attend our services on Sunday. Those who receive the Weekly Word. Those who are listed in the directory. Those of you who are involved in a small group. Those who are involved in the lives of the people of the church, calling them, emailing them, and texting them. Those who are supporting the church financially. Gladly, this is the case with most of you. You are members of the church. And when there is a need in your life, we are fully committed to helping you and serving you and guiding you in whatever way we can.

However, there have been times when people are clearly on the fringe. They come sporadically. But not really involved. They have been around for a little while, but not a real long time. We don't know them very well. They don't know us very well. What about them? Are they part of the flock? Are we under divine obligation to care for them? If they have needs, how committed are we to help them with our limited resources? How much can we ask them to serve, if they haven't even made any sort of commitment to the church.

And then, there are another category of people. They have been attending our church for a long time. But they have never gotten involved in the church. They leave quickly after our service ends. They have very little contact with those at church during the week. I think they would call Rock Valley Bible Church their church. Yet, they have been on the fringe for so long, that I'm not quite sure. What about them? Are they part of the flock? Are we under divine obligation to care for them? Do they even want for us to be a part of their lives? Do they expect us to pursue them when they have been gone for a few weeks? What is their status as a part of Rock Valley Bible Church?

Now, you may never have thought about these sorts of questions, but the leaders of the church sure have. We have thought about these things because God will hold the leadership of the church responsible for how well they shepherded those in the church. This is my final point:

4. Membership is for Accountability (Heb. 13:17).

Turn to Hebrews 13. I simply want for us to consider one verse: Hebrews 13:17.

This book was written to Jewish people, who had embraced Jesus and come into the church. But they were in danger. They were in danger of turning from Jesus and returning to their Jewish roots. The author of the book spends the entire letter seeking to persuade them to continue on in following Jesus.

His argumentation comes along two lines. The first is the supremacy of Jesus. Jesus is better than the angels (Hebrews 1:4). Jesus is better than Moses (Hebrews 3:3). Jesus is better than Abraham (Hebrews 7:7-9). Jesus is better than Aaron, as He has brought in a new priesthood (Hebrews 7:23-24). Jesus has inaugurated a New Covenant, which is better than the Old (Hebrews 8:6). Jesus has cleansed a holy place that is better than the Old Testament tabernacle (Hebrews 9:24). The sacrifice of Jesus was better than any of the Old Testament sacrifices (Hebrews 10:14). As a result, we should follow after Jesus in faith (Hebrews 12:1-3). We should press on to maturity (Hebrews 6:3).

The second line of argumentation comes through his strong warnings to the people if they would ever forsake Jesus. These warnings are sprinkled throughout the whole book (Hebrews 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29). They are summed up in Hebrews 10:31, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." In these warning passages, there is encouragement to stay on the path of following Jesus. One of his final exhortations comes in chapter 13 and verse 17.

Hebrews 13:17

Obeys your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

In this verse we see that members of the church are accountable to the leaders of the congregation. And the leaders of the congregation are accountable to the Lord.

The commands in this verse are two: obey (πείθεσθε) and submit (πείκετε). The first command carries with it the idea of persuasion. As those in the church are persuaded by the trustworthiness of their leaders, they obey them out of respect for the leadership they provide. The second command carries with it the implication of yielding. As those in the church understand the importance of the unity of the church, they submit to them for the greater good. The weight of both of these commands describe how church should respond to the authorities of the church: They should obey them and submit to them.

Now, again, this can easily be abused by church leaders, when they wield their power to control people. But if the leadership of the church is reasonable, and where they are leading is Biblical, and how they are leading is with humility, people in the church should yield to them. Those in the congregation should follow after the course they have laid out. This is true even in ways that are not explicitly mentioned in the Bible. Think about the number of ways that you all willingly submit to the leadership of our church for the sake of unity. The leadership of the

church has determined where our church will meet. We have determined what day and time our worship services will be. None of these particulars are prescribed in the Bible. Yet, in coming this morning, you all are demonstrating your submission to the elders of the church.

And there are many other things as well like this that we have chosen to do things are our church that aren't commanded in the Bible. We use an offering box, rather than passing a plate. We have fellowship dinners on the first Sundays of the month. We have a youth group that meets on Wednesday evenings. We have a prayer meeting on Sunday mornings. We celebrate the Lord's Supper every 4-6 weeks. We celebrate Christmas and Easter in ways peculiar to our church. We choose to have Christmas Eve services and Good Friday services. We have small groups twice a month. We choose to communicate to the church primarily with emails which you get twice each week. One email is visionary. The other email is administrative. And as you attend these services, and make use of the offering box to give to the church, and read the various emails we send out, you demonstrate your submission to the leadership of the church. That's some of the ways that you can fulfill Hebrews 13:17. Formal church membership is in the same category.

As I said earlier, the Bible is silent on exactly how church membership should be practiced. We, as a church, are simply making a change, from informal church membership to formal church membership. And we are asking you to submit to our leadership in this area for the sake of unity in the church. But we are also asking for the sake of helping us to know who we are accountable to shepherd, because the leaders of this church are accountable to the Lord, as to how we lead, and how we keep watch over the souls given to us (Hebrews 13:17). Keeping watch over the souls of others is a solemn, God-given task for those who lead God's people. Leaders will give account for their work. Although not explicitly mentioned in verse 17, this accountability is surely before the Lord, "to whom we must give an account" (Heb 4:13). Just as a manager expects to give account to his superiors for how he has done in managing assets entrusted to him (Luke 16:2), so also will shepherds of God's people expect to give account to the Lord for how they have managed his flock.

The stakes are high. This is why James says, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1). Not only will leaders be judged for their own walk with the Lord, but also with how they led God's people (see 1 Timothy 4:16; Acts 20:28). This accounting will come on judgment day, when leaders will give account to those who have been appointed under their care. And we believe that one of the ways that we can do this is with a formal church membership. So we know who we will be accountable for.

The clear implication here is that the congregation is well-defined. Spiritual leaders won't be accountable for those outside their congregation. Instead, leaders will be held responsible for their oversight of those who have willingly submitted themselves to their care. This is the need for church membership. Church membership helps define for the leaders those who are under their care, for whom they will give an account.

Now, the author of Hebrews continues on in verse 17 to talk about how to help the leaders in their task. He writes, "Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." I love this idea. I love how it puts forth the blessing that comes to the congregation who support and encourage their leaders so that they serve with joy. A grumpy and burdened pastor is of no advantage to a congregation. But a happy, joyful, and energized pastor is of great benefit to a congregation. Christopher Ash has some helpful comments to other church members about this verse:

Unless there is at least some whisper of joy in [the hearts of pastors] as they do their work, some spring of gladness in their step, they will never persevere to the end. And—and this is the point—it is we who will suffer. Instead of being well taught—faithfully preached to with insight and depth—instead of being patiently prayed for, instead of having our souls guarded from evil, instead of being lovingly equipped, instead of being well led in our churches, we will be harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, at the mercy of all kinds of destructive evil. And our churches will be places of shallow immaturity and instability, at the mercy of every whim of cultural pressure or theological oddity.

It is therefore in our own interests, to say nothing of love for the pastor, that we should make their work a joy and not simply a heavy and gloomy burden. If you and I truly grasp the extent to which healthy pastoral oversight is a team effort—a two-way dynamic in which we, as church members, play as critical a part as our pastors—then, and only then, will we be urgently motivated to learn the better to care for them. You and I have it in our power to demotivate our pastors, so that they gradually ground down into a slough of despond from which they will be utterly unable to do us any good at all. But we also have it in our power so to cheer them, so to put a spring in their step, that they will gladly do for us all that we hope and pray."^[1]

It has been my joy to shepherd this congregation for 20 years. You have responded well to God's word. You have responded to my leadership. You have followed my lead. Those who have rebelled and resisted are the exception, rather than the rule. For the most part, it has been a great joy to shepherd all of you. One way to help this shepherding process is to identify clearly those who are members of the church, that we might care for your spiritual needs.

Next week, we will talk about what it means to be a healthy church member.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on January 26, 2020 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] R. T. France, The Gospel of Matthew, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 694.

[2] Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 14-28, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 532.

[3] France, The Gospel of Matthew, 694.

[4] C. K. Barrett, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 974.

[5] Darrell L. Bock, Acts, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 629.

[6] John B. Polhill, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 426.

[7] Christopher Ash, The Book Your Pastor Wishes You Would Read (but is too embarrassed to ask) (India: The Good Book Company, 2019), 32-33.