

February 2, 2020 by Steve Brandon



Church Membership in Practice

1. Church Members Love Each Other
2. Church Members Seek Unity
3. Church Members Meet Together

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

Two 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. Acts 2:41 describes what took place on the day of Pentecost, "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls." So many people were added so quickly, that they were added without much form or structure. Furthermore, leaders of churches 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, lest they fall away when the persecution comes.

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. Thus, they were baptized as children and joined to the church. This practice continued for 1,000 years.

In the church after the Reformation, we saw **regenerate membership**. As 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 if you think that it's better for you not to be a church member, that's fine as well. The thought is, "Whatever works best for you." That's what some people think. Others think that church membership is necessary, though not for salvation. Rather, it is necessary as an evidence of fruit of your salvation. 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. It means that there are many ways that church membership can be practiced.

Last week we considered "Church Membership in the Bible." We saw that "church membership is assumed in the Bible." That is, there is no command for you to be a member of a church, because, when you come to faith in Jesus Christ, you are brought into the church.

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.

We saw last week how **"membership" is a Biblical word**. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul mentions "members" in the church and compares them with members of your own body. "For the body does not consist of one member but of many" (1 Corinthians 12:14). So, "membership" is a Biblical word.

Furthermore, we saw that church **membership is for clarity**. That is, the Bible speaks of the church as a defined group of people. In the Bible, someone is clearly a member of the church, or clearly not a member of a church. We see this when the church needs to remove one of its members due to his or her 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, ... outside the church. 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.

The same is true of Paul when dealing with a sinful member of the congregation. He tells the church in Corinth, ...

1 Corinthians 5:12-13

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 Paul's mind, there are "insiders" (i.e. those "in" the church) and "outsiders" (i.e. those "out" of the church). And membership is a mechanism to make this clear.

Membership is also 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, the leaders of the church are 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.

Last week I mentioned a question that you may not have thought of before. But I (and every leader of the church) has thought about it. Who is in the church? Who am I to care for? Do I care for people who are at the church every week? What about people who are only at the church each week, but never involved in any of the life of the church? Or people who just come on occasion? How many times do people need to come before I am responsible to care for them? Three times? Five times? A year? Of course, as people come and visit the church, we have an empathy for them. We want to see everyone coming here to flourish in Christ. But what if they experience trouble in their lives? Who are the leaders responsible to care for?

In most circumstances, it has been clear as to who is a member at our church. But there have been a few occasions when this hasn't been so clear. A formal church membership will help to answer these questions as we work to define our relationships with one another. And this is an important questions because the leaders of the church will be held accountable for how they cared for those in the church. "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." Formal church membership helps to identify those for whom the leaders are accountable. **Membership is for accountability.**

Well, this morning we are going to look at "Church Membership in Practice." That is, "What does church membership look like?" And so, this morning I want to paint a picture of what it means to be a church member. Because, many people have differing understandings of this.

Some think that church membership is similar to being a member of a political party. Whether it's the Republican Party or the Democratic Party, political parties have fundamental beliefs. And being a member of that party simply means that you identify with those beliefs. One may easily say, "I'm a member of the Republican party. I hold their values to be my values. I will support them with my vote. I may give them some dollars to support them in their election efforts, so that my mission carries on!"

Many think of church membership to be the same. Being a member of a church is identifying with the beliefs of that church. One might say, "I'm a member of Rock Valley Bible Church because I believe in the goals and visions and aspirations of that church. I support their cause. So, I will support them with my attendance at church and my financial contributions. So that what I believe will be carried on through the mission of the church." But that's not church membership, either. Church membership isn't simply identifying with the church that best lines up with your own beliefs.

Some think that church membership is similar to being a member of a country club. The membership of the club carries with it certain benefits. "I'm a member of the Rock Valley Country Club. I pay my dues every year. This lets me hang around the upper class of our city. I get to go to all of the events they sponsor: like the Easter Egg Hunt, and the Fireworks show every year. I can golf at the club. My family has access to the swimming pool. And if ever we hold a big family event, such as a reunion or a wedding, I have the opportunity to use their club house."

Many think of the church as a membership with benefits. "I'm a member of Rock Valley Bible church. I pay my tithes every week. This lets me hang around the great people of church. The picnics and potlucks are very enjoyable. I'm super excited about the Chili Cookoff next Sunday! I love the events and watching the children during the Christmas Eve service. Youth group and all of their activities are really good for my children. It's also nice that I can use the church building for my big family events." But that's not church membership, either. Church membership isn't some transaction between you and the organization.

Church membership is the working out of what it means to be a member of the body of Christ. Just as the eyes help the body know where it needs to walk; just as the feet help the body to move, just as the stomach gives energy to the body to live, just as the lungs and heart work together to deliver needed oxygen to the body, so also do church members serve one another, so that the whole body functions properly.

This is what it means to be a church member. It means that you are committed to fulfilling your role within the body of Christ. In other words, church membership is less about using the church because it is beneficial to you, than it is about being a member of the body. That's doing your part in the body to serve the whole. Because, in reality, we need each other. We need each other in crisis. We need each other for encouragement. We need each other for strength. We need each other to help in our weaknesses. We need each other to carry our burdens.

Nowhere in Scripture is this idea more clearly demonstrated than in the "one another" commands of the Bible. There are about fifty such commands in the Bible.

- We are commanded to "love one another" (John 13:34-35; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12).
- We are told to "serve one another" (Gal. 5:13; 1 Peter 4:10).
- We are told to "accept one another" (Romans 15:7).
- We are told to "be kind and compassionate to one another" (Ephesians 4:32).
- We are told to "forgive one another" (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13).
- We are told to "instruct one another" (Romans 15:14).

- We are told to "greet one another" (Romans 16:16).
- We are told to "confess our sins to each other" (James 5:16).
- We are told to "pray for each other" (James 5:16).
- We are told to "show hospitality to one another" (1 Peter 4:9).
- We are told to "clothe ourselves with humility toward one another" (1 Peter 5:5).

See, the church membership isn't about "me." But neither is it about "you." It's about "us." It's about each of us, doing our part to love and serve and help one another. And so, this morning, I want to describe for you what church membership looks like.

My message is entitled, "Church Membership in Practice." Essentially, I want to preach through the "one anothers." Now, this is practically impossible if we look at each and every one of the "one another" commands in the Bible. I can't have a message with 50 points, one for each of the "one another" commands. I would have to deal with each one so superficially, and you would not remember much. So, I want to group them together. And fortunately, we can do so, because about a third of these "one another" commands instruct Christians to love one another.^[1] This is my first point, ...

1. Church Members Love Each Other

This command to "love one another" occurs exactly like that in eleven instances in the New Testament (John 13:34, 15:12, 17; Romans 13:8; 1 Thessalonians 3:12, 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:11, 4:7, 11; 2 John 5). It comes from all sources. Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another" (John 15:12). Paul wrote, "Owe no one anything, except to love each other" (Romans 13:8). Peter wrote, "Love one another earnestly from a pure heart" (1 Peter 1:22). John wrote, "Beloved, let us love one another" (1 John 4:7).

And there are a few other commands in the New Testament that don't say "love one another," but definitely it means just that. For instance, Galatians 5:13, "Through love serve one another." Although the main verb here has to do with service, love is the sphere in which this service is to take place. You can easily take this command under the umbrella of love.

Another example comes in Ephesians 4:2, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love." The main idea here is that of tolerating each other and enduring one another. And yet, it all is to be done in love. Again, you can easily understand this command as a command to love one another (See also 1 Peter 5:14; Rom. 12:10).

If you add up all of these commands in the New Testament, you find that they encompass almost one third of the "one another" commands in the New Testament. This is the call upon all church members: love one another.

The prominence of love only makes sense when you remember that the command to love is the greatest of all commandments. Remember when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is? He responded with these famous words, ...

Matthew 22:37-40

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Jesus said that you can take all of the commandments of the Law and the Prophets, and you can boil them down to two: love God and love others. In other words, you show me a command in the Bible, and I'll bet you, dollars to donuts, that I'll be able to trace the command back to either an expression of love to God or to an expression of love for others. It really is that simple.

Perhaps the best place to illustrate the sort of love that the New Testament is describing comes from the life of Jesus. So, turn in your Bible to John 13. This chapter begins "The Upper Room Discourse," where Jesus gives his final instructions to his disciples before his crucifixion. It begins with Jesus washing the disciples' feet (John 13). It ends with Jesus praying his high priestly prayer (John 17). After Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, he says this, ...

John 13:34-35

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Here is Jesus giving to his disciples, "a new commandment." Now, the command to love wasn't anything new. What was new was the standard of that love, the depth of that love. Jesus call us to love in the same way that he loved. And how deeply did Jesus love? Here in John 13, we see his example of washing the disciples' feet, even the feet of Judas (John 13:2-3). In this act, he showed great love.

But beyond John 13, there are plenty of examples of how Jesus loved us. The gospels describe his deeds of love. He touched the unclean when he healed the leper. He healed the paralytic by the pool (John 5). He feed the five thousand (John 6). He gave sight to the blind (John 9). He raised the dead (John 11). All of these acts were acts of love.

The gospels describe how incredibly patient he was with his disciples. He was teaching them of his death, and they argued about who was the greatest (Matthew 20:17-28). They slept in his hour of greatest need. They all deserted him. But Jesus loved them. He loved them to the end (or uttermost) (John 13:1).

The gospels describe how Jesus gave his life as a sacrifice. A little later in John 15, Jesus said this, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). And, of course, that's what Jesus did. He laid down his life for his friends. He laid down his life for us. He died in our place that we might live. He bore the punishment that was due to us.

And that's what he calls us to do. We are to love one another in the same way that Jesus did, "as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34).

Now, of course, we can't do everything like Jesus did. We can't heal like Jesus healed. We can't multiply food to feed the thousands like Jesus did. We can't raise the dead. And we can't die for each other's sins. But we can hold the hands of the hurting. We can sacrifice of what we have to give to others. We can sympathize with those who have lost loved ones. We can be patient with those who see things differently than we do. We can give of our time to serve others.

Such love is required of all church members. But further, ...

2. Church Members Seek Unity

As we have seen, one third of the "one another" commands instruct Christians to love one another. Another third of the "one another" commands deal with the unity of the church. Admittedly, this is a broad umbrella, but I think that it is justified.

Let me read 13 (of the 50) "one another" verses. Then, I'll make a brief comment after each verse to show how it relates to unity.

"Be at peace with one another" (Mark 9:50). Peace is the essence of unity.

"Don't grumble among one another" (John 6:43). Grumbling creates divisions, which is against unity.

"Be of the same mind with one another" (Romans 12:16, 15:5). This is the essence of unity.

"Accept one another" (Romans 15:7). Bringing others into the group is a unifying activity.

"Wait for one another before beginning the Lord's Supper" (1 Corinthians 11:33). You wait that you all might eat together, as a united group.

"Don't bite, devour, and consume one another" (Galatians 5:15). These actions cause harm and division.

"Don't boastfully challenge or envy one another" (Galatians 5:26). These also bring disunity.

"Gently, patiently tolerate one another" (Ephesians 4:2). This maintains the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3).

"Be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving to one another" (Ephesians 4:32). Break the bonds of division.

"Bear with and forgive one another" (Colossians 3:13). Mend the causes of division.

"Seek good for one another, and don't repay evil for evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:15). That is, seek for the betterment of the community, not its destruction.

"Don't complain against one another" (James 4:11; 5:9). Complaints only tears others down and tears down the body apart.

"Confess sins to one another" (James 5:16). Deal with those things that threaten disunity.

Now, we don't have a chance of looking at all of these commands this morning. So let's simply take one, perhaps the best place to consider this theme of unity: Romans 15:7. So, I encourage you to turn there in your Bibles.

As you are turning there, realize that there are two ways to establish unity in a church. One way is through uniformity, where everyone is the same. Uniformity occurs when everyone believes the same thing, everyone wears the same thing, everyone speaks the same way, and everyone acts the same. Uniformity comes when the church has a position on everything, like music and alcohol and dating and movies and clothing and smoking and gambling and speeding and tattoos and hair length and debt and diet and drugs and drama in the church. And everyone falls into rank. At that point, we really aren't Christians, we are clones.

Now, obviously, that's not what the New Testament Church is called to be. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 that there are a variety of gifts in the church. These work themselves out in varieties of service and activities. This is by design. For, "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:4).

And Paul pictures the church as a human body with many members, like hands and feet and eyes and ears. Each of these members serve different functions in the body, but each being no less a part of the body. In other words, God gives different people to the church with differing gifts to make the church a place of unity through diversity.

So, if ever this church, comprised of different people with differing gifts, is going to know and enjoy unity, there must be an acceptance of one another. See, we don't achieve unity through uniformity. We achieve unity through accepting of one another. This is what we see in the following verse.

Romans 15:7

Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

The New American Standard Version translates this, "Accept one another" (as does the New International Version). The King James Version translates this, "Receive one another." J. B. Phillips paraphrased it this way, "Open your hearts to one another." This is the idea of this section of Scripture. It's a call for us to accept others as they are and welcome them into our lives. Accept them even if they have some opinions that differ with you and even if they have some lifestyle convictions that differ with you.

That's the entire context in which these words come. In chapter 14, Paul talked about how those in Rome had differing convictions on diets

and days. Now, when Paul brings up this command to "accept one another," he puts forth two issues that were pertinent to his day. The first deals with diets. The second deals with days. With each of these practices there was a variety of opinion. Some believed that you could only eat those foods prescribed in the law. Others believed that you could eat anything. Some believed that there was a specific day of worship. Others believed that all days were equally holy, so could worship on any day.

In Rome, these practices were causing conflict and disunity. Paul's counsel is this, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). In other words, "Don't give up what you believe about your dietary habits. Don't compromise on worshipping on another day. Keep your convictions." But, with these convictions in your heart, "welcome one another." The standard for welcoming others is the kingdom. "Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15:7). I like to say it this way: If God has welcomed you into his kingdom, we welcome you into our fellowship, even if there are differences of opinion among us.

The issues in Rome were not unlike many issues in the church today. People have convictions today that can easily cause conflict in churches. The schooling choice you have made for your children. Some believe that alcohol or cigarettes are permissible for Christians, while others believe that both are wrong. Some have convictions about the sorts of movies you can or music you can listen to. Others have different standards. Some have convictions about what version of the Bible you should read. Others think that any version of the Bible is permissible.

Certainly, there are times when this causes tension as we see things differently and as we work out our Christianity differently. The solution to resolving these tensions isn't a forced conformity to the church's stance on any particular issue. Paul would urge us to maintain our convictions (Romans 14:5). Rather we, as a church, need to work through these things for unity in the body, always asking this question: "Has Christ welcomed you into his kingdom?" Then, we will do all we can to welcome you into our fellowship."

Well, let's move on.

1. Church Members Love Each Other
2. Church Members Seek Unity ... and ...
3. Church Members Meet Together

I get this final point from Hebrews 10:24-25. It's really a core verse regarding the regular life of those in the church. Here's the context:

Hebrews 10:19-25

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 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.

In other words, because Jesus brings us to God in a new way that the Old Testament priests were never able to do, "Let us draw near" to God (verse 22), "Let us hold fast" to our confession (verse 23), and "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works" (verse 24).

And what is particularly helpful to us about these verses this morning is that the author is telling us that it's not enough simply to draw near to God on your own. It's not enough to "draw near" to God and to "hold fast" to your faith alone. The call of these verses is for you to help others around you to draw near to Jesus and. Isn't that what verse 24 says? "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works."

Notice here, that to fulfill verse 24 requires a relationship. You can't stir up others to love and good works if you don't know them. That's the idea of verse 25, "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." In other words, you need to come together regularly for the purpose of encouragement. That's why Christian churches gather together. We gather for encouragement to keep walking in the way.

That's one of our purposes every Sunday morning. Every Sunday, a key purpose of our gathering is to be encouraged through being reminded of the gospel. When we remember that Christ Jesus died for our sins, that we aren't made righteous through our own efforts, but that we are justified through faith in Christ, it comes as a great encouragement into our lives. All of the elements of our service are aimed at this. Our songs are geared to remind us of the realities of our faith. We read the Scriptures to show us where our hope remains. We pray to God to help us in our weaknesses. We preach to open up God's word to our hearts.

But as much as of this public ministry helps, there is still an element that's missing. It's the personal ministry of interaction of "One Another." This is the importance of our fellowship together after church, where we provide a time and a forum for you to talk with other people. This time is important so that you can get to know each other and so that you can encourage one another on a personal level.

This is the importance of our Chili Cookoff next Sunday. Not only is it an enjoyable time, it also provides an opportunity for us to spend time with one another. This is what it means to be a church member, not simply attending a church service (though this is important as verse 25 say), but rubbing with other people in the church and stirring them up to love and good works.

See, it's not merely enough to be engaged in love and good deeds yourself. God's call upon your life is to bring others along in love and good deeds. Isn't this what verse 24 says? "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works." You can't "stir up one another to love and good works," by simply coming to a church service on Sunday morning and leaving quickly after the service is over. This verses requires some level of involvement and engagement in the lives of others.

It requires some effort in the mind. It requires some study, not of doctrine, but of people. It requires you to know people, not people in

general, but in specific people. It requires you to know those in the community of faith, other members of the church.

It's done like this. You get to know others at the church. You study them by asking them questions. You find out their strengths. You find out their weaknesses. You discover what their gifts are. You notice what areas of need are in their lives. You observe the areas in which they flourish. You detect the areas in which they are floundering. And then, you think about these things. Then, you do what you can do to encourage them on to love and good deeds.

Sometimes, this can be with a word of encouragement. When you see those who are weary in doing well, you encourage them that you have noticed their work and are appreciative. This will encourage them to keep going. Sometimes, this comes by matching up the need of one person, with the gifts and abilities of others. When you hear someone struggling with their finances, you tell them of someone in the church who helps with financial counseling. And you match them up. Sometimes, this comes by personally bringing someone with you as you serve someone else in the body. When you hear of someone who needs help with a house repair, you know that you can help. And you bring someone along to help with the project. These are all examples of what it means to "stir up one another to love and good works" (verse 24).

Now, one of the things that I want you to notice here is that it's not a program issued from the leadership of the church. Rather, it's a grassroots movement of those in the church, in which the people of the church are involved in each other's lives to such an extent that they know each other well enough to urge them on to love and good deeds. Certainly, it takes time. And it takes effort. And it's not easy. Yet, it's the call of Biblical Christianity. It's what "church membership" is all about.

And the catalyst for us is our Sunday morning service, when we are all together. Our meetings provide the forum where we can form these connections. That's why we are exhorted in verse 25, "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."

I trust that you can see that verse 25 is more than merely attending some church service and thinking that you have fulfilled your God-ordained call in your life. We are called to live in community with one another, to love one another, to serve one another, and to help one another. And if you are off doing your own thing, serving Jesus alone, then you are missing a crucial component to your life of faith: the body. And all of us are called to be functioning members of the body.

Next week, we will look at how that works itself out at Rock Valley Bible Church.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 2, 2020 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] The groupings from my message are taken from <https://overviewbible.com/one-another-infographic/>.