

## Healthy Church Membership: *It's Biblical and Beneficial*

1 Corinthians 12:27

Sunday, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2025

By Ryan Perry

### Scripture:

1 Corinthians 12:27

*[27] Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

### Pray

### Introduction

Today marks the beginning of what will be a 4-week series on healthy church membership. And as we begin this series, I want to start by recognizing that there are many different beliefs that probably exist in this room about membership.

- Some believe it is vital.
- Some believe it is good, but optional.
- Some may even believe that it is unbiblical and harmful.

I also realize that there are those in this room who struggle with membership because of your past church experience.

It's not that you see it as unbiblical, but you have walked through hard church circumstances as a member of a previous church and frankly, you don't want to go through that again.

Lastly, I also recognize that there may be people in here who are members, believe it is a good thing, but also don't have a good grasp of what it actually means to be a member of a local church.

In fact, realizing that all of these perspectives and experiences exist in this room is exactly why we are doing this series.

Because we, as your elders, do believe that church membership is biblical, it is what God wants for his people, and it is beneficial and good for each one of us.

So this morning in part 1 of this series, we are going to look at the biblical basis for church membership and then we will end with the benefits of church membership.

Then looking ahead to future weeks: **we will talk about what it looks like to be a healthy committed member, the importance of being a prayer warrior in the church, and finally the reality that a healthy church member is a growing disciple.**

So that gives you an idea of what we will be discussing throughout the month of January.

And it is our hope as your leaders that you will come away from this series with a better understanding of what the Bible says about membership and it's benefits, that you will have a good grasp of what it means to be a healthy and committed member, and you will desire to live that out here at LEFC.

But before we jump in, I want to take a quick step back and actually answer a question that will help to make the rest of this sermon and series make sense. And that question is "What is church membership?"

### **What is church membership?**

To answer this question, we need to start by recognizing that when someone becomes a Christian the Bible says that they are first and foremost a member of the body of Christ.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13:

***[12] 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. [13] 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.***

### **1 Corinthians 12:27**

***[27] Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.***

If you are a Christian here this morning, you are one of the many members of the body of Christ.

Secondly, because you are a member of the body of Christ, which means that you are united to Christ and the other members, you are now qualified to become a member of a **local expression of that body, a church.**

And because Churches are a local expression or reflection of the greater universal body of Christ, **church membership is one of the main ways that we identify as being a part of the body of Christ.**

Or if we connect it to what we have been learning in the book of Philippians, **it is one of the main ways that we identify as a citizen of heaven, and live out that citizenship in the world so that Christ would be made to look great.**

If I were to put it into a more formal and concrete definition I would define church membership this way:

***Church membership is a formal relationship between a local church and a Christian characterized by the church's affirmation and oversight of a Christian's faith and the Christian's submission to living out his or her faith in the care of the church.***

This means that when a church votes on affirming someone as a member they are saying the following:

*"We recognize your profession of faith and baptism as valid and genuine. Therefore, we publicly affirm and acknowledge that you belong to Christ, and we extend the oversight of our fellowship."*

Likewise, when the individual goes forward in membership, they are saying to the church:

*"Insofar as I recognize you as a faithful, gospel-declaring church, I submit my presence and my faith to your love, care, and oversight."*

Now, I am going to admit upfront that I don't have space this morning to unpack this definition, but my hope is that the other things we talk about today and in this series will bring this definition to life and will help you see that local church membership is what God wants for his people, the church.

But I wanted to give you this definition so that you understand what we mean when we talk about "church membership."

So with this definition in mind, we can now start to look at the larger question that many have which is this:

### **Is church membership biblical?**

You may or may not already know this, but there is no single text in the Bible that perfectly lays out the necessity of church membership.

However, there is also no single text that lays out the doctrine of the Trinity, how worship services should function, all of the benefits and implications of the gospel, or what it means to be made in the image of God.

Yet, all of these things are deduced and pieced together from many different texts. I believe that the same is true of church membership.

So let's begin to look at the biblical basis for church membership by looking at a larger chunk of 1 Corinthians 12. I am going to read verses 14-27.

***[14] For the body does not consist of one member but of many. [15] 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. [16] 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. [17] 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? [18] But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. [19] If all were a single member, where would the body be? [20] As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.*

*[21] 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.” [22] On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, [23] 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, [24] which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, [25] that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. [26] If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.*

*[27] Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

First, we need to recognize that the idea of the body of Christ carries with it the implicit idea of membership. And not just a voluntary membership, but a mandatory membership.

This strikes at the idea of an individualized Christianity. Because a detached member is something that goes against what scripture talks about.

So Paul’s words make it clear that all believers are members of the body of Christ, but they also show us that this membership is meant to be lived out within the community of believers.

As he says in verses 25-26: *[25] that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. [26] If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.*

Unity in the body, care for one another, and suffering and rejoicing together require us, as believers, to live out **our membership in the body of Christ** within the context of a committed community of the local church.

**You can’t do this by yourself, nor can this happen if believers only have a loose affiliation with the church.**

And this isn’t merely a command for a certain group of believers, but it is for every member of the body of Christ. **Because Paul says that every part is needed.**

Application:

So if you are here this morning, and you call LEFC your church home, then you are meant to be a productive, invested, and useful member of this community.

And it doesn't matter if you feel weak or strong or gifted or not gifted, you are needed and are indispensable to this church.

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Secondly, as we look for the markers of church membership in the New Testament we also see throughout the epistles a call to live out this membership *by loving and serving one another*.

As Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:22:

***[22] Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart,***

**Galatians 5:13**

***[13] For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.***

And if we keep going through the epistles we also see commands like: *live in harmony with each other and to submit to one another*.

**Romans 12:16**

***[16] Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.***

**Ephesians 5:18–21**

***[18] And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, [19] addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, [20] giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, [21] submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.***

These are all wonderful truths that are good for us as God's people. However, they lose the full weight of their meaning if church membership is not the New Testament pattern. Because it would be impossible to live them out if there is not a clearly defined group that we are called to love, serve, live in harmony with, and submit to.

This is why Wayne Mack writes: **“There are fifty-eight “one another commands” in the Word of God, and, realistically understood, it’s impossible to understand how these commands may be truly fulfilled towards other believers without committed involvement in a local church.”**

The one another commands, only make sense within the framework of committed church membership.

Application:

Now, I'm not saying that you shouldn't love or serve those outside of the church. There is a time and place for that. However, the New Testament, and especially the epistles are pretty clear on the fact that the main place that these one another commands are called to be lived out is within the local body of committed believers. The church. **That is the New Testament pattern.**

And this is meant to be a blessing for us as Christians. Because it doesn't just mean that you are called to live out these commands toward others in the church, but that you are also meant to be blessed in the same way by others in the body of Christ.

Therefore, the verses that talk about being members of the body and spell out one another commands, heavily lean toward the reality that God's call for us is to be a committed member of a local church.

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Finally, committed membership within the local church gives God's people a clear understanding of who they are called to follow, and who we as leaders must shepherd and lead.

### **Hebrews 13:17**

***[17] Obey 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.***

There are two important things here that help us to understand that membership is biblical and important.

The first is the call to obey and submit to your leaders. The leaders that the author has in mind are not just general leaders in society, **but the leaders within a local church.**

### **But how does that happen?**

Now, I find it interesting that when the words obey and submit are used in the New Testament they are within the context of formalized or covenant relationships.

- Slaves are called to obey their masters.
- Believers who have been redeemed by the new covenant of Christ submit to one another.
- Wives are called to submit to husbands within the confines of the covenant of marriage.

- Formal citizens of a country are called to submit to and obey the authorities that are over them.

This is important because these words only make sense within formalized associations or covenant relationships. And they lose all of their meaning and force when those formalized relationships don't exist.

Therefore, obeying and submitting to local church leaders requires a formalized membership in order for it to make sense and work properly.

However, Hebrews 13:17 isn't just about church members obeying and submitting to their leaders, rather the author has something to say about leaders as well. He says that **“they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”**

We as elders are called to shepherd and give an account for those who are under our care. **But who are the people that we are called to give an account for? Is it simply those who show up on a Sunday? Come to a Bible study? Or maybe come to a church meal?**

If we simply used attendance as our guide for who is under our care, it would be impossible for us to shepherd well and to have any clarity on who is actually a part of the flock that God has given us. **Because attendance is always fluctuating.**

But when there is a formal commitment to a church, where a believer says, *“I am committed, I am submitting my life and my family to the leadership, I am a member of this body here to build it up and to serve others,”* then it gives us a much clearer picture of who is actually under our care, and who we will be accountable for.

Now, to be clear, this doesn't exclude us from ministering to non-members when things come up, or when tragedy strikes, but it does mean that there will be an emphasis on those who have committed themselves to this local body.

### **Application:**

In fact, we were just talking about this at our elder retreat. And one of the ways that we want to work on proactively loving and shepherding the membership is by doing a formal follow-up with each member and member family at least once or twice a year.

This is not only to see how you are doing in your walk with Christ, how you are doing as parents in shepherding your kids, how you are doing at living out your faith in your home, work, and community, but it's also focused on wanting to hear from you.

How are we doing at shepherding you? How can we serve you better as your leaders and shepherds? Do you have any questions and concerns that we may not know about?

Now, for sure we can do this in an informal way with everyone, and we do. But we know that we have a special call to those who have committed themselves to this body in membership. **And we want to make sure that we are proactively shepherding and helping them to live out the responsibilities of membership.**

And with it, that we as elders would be shepherding them in the ways we said we would when they committed themselves to membership.

I am pointing this out because I want this for everyone who calls La Crescent Free their church home. **I want you all to experience the full benefits of submitting yourselves to the local church and receiving the care that comes with it.**

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Now, there is a lot more that could be said about the biblical basis for membership. How it makes church discipline possible in Matthew 18, how there is at least some biblical evidence that lists of members existed in the New Testament, and how membership makes accountability possible.

But I hope you can at least see that though there isn't one single verse that points to membership, the whole of the New Testament is full of membership language and commands that only make sense when believers commit themselves to a local church.

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And yet, church membership isn't something we should do just because we are supposed to. Rather there are real benefits that exist when we commit ourselves to a local church as believers. This morning, we are going to look briefly at 4 of them.

## **The Benefits of Membership**

It includes us in the Great Commission

### **Matthew 28:19–20**

***[19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

This wasn't simply a call for individual believers to go and share the gospel, though we should do that. Rather, this was Jesus telling his disciples, who made up the first church, what they are supposed to be about. **They are to be about disciple-making.**

This was their mission within the first church, and it's the mission of every subsequent church that has come after it. And to give you a taste of what this looked like in the first church Luke writes these words in Acts 2:46-47:



***[46] And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, [47] praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.***

A local church where believers are committed to living out their faith and membership with one another will display the greatness of Christ and people will be saved and disciplined.

It clarifies the one another commands

I realize that I have already touched on this, but I want to recognize the fact that everyone here is fairly busy. Which means that we have a limited amount of time.

So when we see commands like the one found in Galatians 6:2 which says: ***“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”*** It can feel daunting in light of the fact that we know so many brothers and sisters both inside and outside the church.

Church membership helps us through this by clarifying who we are responsible to pour into and how to direct our limited energy.

It doesn’t mean you won’t at times bear the burdens of those outside the church, but it does help you to focus the limited time and energy that you do have.

It helps us to grow spiritually

Just as you have an obligation to the local church, when you become a member, they have an obligation to you. As I said earlier, they are responsible to fulfill the one another commands toward you. And one of those commands is found in Ephesians 4:11-16 which says:

***[11] And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, [12] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, [13] until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, [14] so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. [15] Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, [16] from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.***

Now, I realize this isn't written in a one-another format, but the one-another commands are there. All of us are meant to be equipped for the work of the ministry (in the local church) and to speak the truth in love so that every person in here will grow spiritually and will look more and more like Jesus Christ.

Membership helps us to fulfill the obligation to grow others and it will in turn help us to grow spiritually as others fulfill that toward us.

### It Produces Joy in Us

#### **1 Corinthians 12:26**

***[26] If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.***

#### **1 Thessalonians 1:6-7**

***[6] And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, [7] so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.***

#### **Philippians 2:2-3**

***[2] complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. [3] Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.***

All of these verses are pointing to a Christ-centered joy that is experienced within the church when its members are together and committed to one another.

There is joy when one member is honored. Joy that comes from receiving and believing God's Word together even in the midst of hardship. And a God-produced joy that comes when the church commits to pursuing unity together.

### **Conclusion**

Now, I hope you realize that there are definitely more than just four benefits of being church member. But I gave you these four for a couple of reasons:

One, I believe they give us a great picture of how a formal covenant like church membership isn't simply about obeying God or being a part of a club. Rather, God wants to use it for our good, our growth, and our joy.

Secondly, all of these benefits give us a picture of how we are to live out our heavenly citizenship, within the confines of the local church, so that Christ will be proclaimed, honored, and believed.

That committing to loving one another, helping each other grow, and experiencing the joy of a committed fellowship, will lead others to see, believe, and treasure Christ

So then, when we put all of this together, we, as elders here at LEFC, believe that church membership is wholly and fully biblical. We believe that it is what God wants and desires for each person who calls themselves a Christian. And we believe that there are great benefits for us individually and for the entire church when we commit ourselves to a local body of believers.

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However, if you are here this morning and have not put your faith in Christ Jesus as your Lord and Savior, that is the first step for you. You need to see your need of him, that you are separated from God and in need of someone to pay the penalty of death that your wrong doing deserves.

This is what Jesus did when he died on the cross. He took the penalty of sin upon himself, died in our place, and has opened up the way to be with God forever for all those who believe him and follow him.

So if you haven't put your hope and trust in Jesus, I urge you to do that this morning. And then, and only then, will you be able to join and receive the same benefits of membership that were talked about this morning.

But if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, I want to urge you, whether you are a member or not, **take membership in the local church seriously.**

It's biblical, it's beneficial, and it is God's means for displaying Christ to the world. As Paul said in Ephesians 1:22-23:

***[22] And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, [23] which is his body, the fullness of him (Christ) who fills all in all.***

**Let's Pray**