

What Is Church Membership and Why Is It Necessary?

“What is the point of church membership? I am already a Christian and have a personal relationship with Jesus. Why do I need to become a member of a church?” Chances are, we asked those very questions when we first encountered a Reformed church. Church membership is a foreign concept to many. Due to the radical individualism common to American Christianity, many today find the idea of formal membership in an established church to be antiquated, unnecessary, and maybe even legalistic.

Church membership also goes against the popular notion in our culture that “organized religion” is inferior to “spirituality.” The former is disparaged as passé at best and hatefully intolerant at worst, while the latter is readily embraced as chic and healthy. Organized religion is viewed as something very particular that manifests itself in narrow doctrines, liturgical customs, and exclusive tradition. Spirituality, on the other hand, is seen as something universal that can express itself in a wide variety of personal faiths and individual practices that generally seek one common goal: self-improvement. Influenced by this mode of thinking, many professing Christians believe they can have membership in the invisible church while opting out of membership in the visible church.

Sadly, things do not appear to be improving. According to some market research gurus, established churches are becoming a thing of the past. Some of the so-called experts project that in the future many Americans will derive all their spiritual input through the internet. If this is true, some may not see the point in being inconvenienced by attending (let alone becoming a member of) a church when they can get the same spiritual benefits in private. Why then do Reformed churches require membership? What exactly is church membership and why is it necessary?

What Is Church Membership?

Church membership is a formal and binding covenantal relationship between a family or individual and Christ Jesus, the Head of the church, through incorporation of this family or individual into the visible body of Christ in this world, namely the church. It begins with the understanding that Christ, who possesses an invisible church composed of all those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life (Rev. 13.8; 20.15; 21.27), established a visible church on earth, that community where the elect of God are normally gathered, protected and preserved (Matt. 28.18-20; Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 54).

God first instituted the visible church immediately after the fall, when he separated the seed of the woman from the seed of the serpent and established them as a people united by his promise of salvation (Gen. 3.15). He further established his community when he made his covenant with the patriarch Abraham and his offspring (Gen. 12, 15, 17). He fulfilled his promises to Abraham

first in the nation Israel and the land of Canaan but then more fully in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Gal. 3.16, 29). Throughout the unfolding drama of redemptive history, from Abraham to Christ, God kept his people as a visible covenant community marked by the covenantal sign and seal of circumcision.

With the completion of Christ's earthly ministry and the inauguration of the new covenant, however, God no longer confined his visible church to one people (national Israel) and one place (the land of Canaan). Having satisfied the Law of Moses in his life, death, and resurrection, Christ commissioned his apostles to preach the gospel, baptize, administer the Lord's Supper, and make disciples to the ends of the earth. As the book of Acts reveals, the apostles fulfilled this commission by planting churches (Acts 2.42). Beginning in Jerusalem, Christ added daily to his church those who were being saved (Acts 2.41, 47; 4.4). The visible, covenant community became a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Pet. 2.9; cf. Exod. 19.6), made up of people ransomed "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5.9). After the apostles died, the visible church did not cease to exist. The New Testament makes very clear that Christ intended for his visible church to continue until the end of the age. He ordained the office of pastor to feed his flock with the preaching of the gospel so that his sheep will be healthy and grow to maturity (Rom. 10.14-17; Eph. 4.11-16; 2 Tim. 4.1-5; Titus 1.5-9). He has supplied his church with the tangible elements of ordinary water, bread, and wine in the sacraments, which the Holy Spirit uses to nourish our faith (1 Cor. 10.16; 11.17-34; cf. John 6.41-58). He gave the office of elder so that his people will have guardians over their souls and governors who keep order (Acts 14.23; Phil. 1.1; 1 Tim. 3.1-7; 5.17; Heb. 13.17; 1 Pet. 5.1-4). He maintains the purity and peace of his church through the exercise of discipline (Matt. 18.15-20; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Thess. 3.6, 14-15; Titus 1.10-14; 3.9-11). He has provided the office of deacon for the care of the poor and needy in the congregation (Acts 6.1-7; Phil. 1.1; 1 Tim. 3.8-13; 5.3-15). He pours out gifts upon his church so that each believer will use them for the benefit of others (Rom. 12.3-8; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4.15-16). The New Testament reveals that Christ established His church to be an observable, identifiable society with its own organization and structure, and composed of real flesh and blood members.

Church membership, therefore, is about belonging to this visible community as manifested in a local congregation. The church is not a store frequented by loyal customers. Nor is it a voluntary association of individuals who are loosely united by consumer preferences or cultural practices. Rather, the church is the people who belong to Christ, and the place where Christ meets them through the means he has ordained.

When a family or an individual pursues formal church membership, they are saying, "We are Christians, and therefore belong to Christ and his body." They and their children pass through the waters of baptism, acknowledging that they are part of something much larger than their own private, spiritual experience. They recognize that Christ has set them as living stones in his one temple (Eph. 4.19-22; 1 Pet. 2.4-5) and has gathered them as sheep in his one flock (John

10.1-29; Acts 20.28). They take public vows in the holy assembly of God's people, in which they profess their faith in Christ and their willingness to submit to his Lordship and the government of his church. Likewise, the congregation receives these disciples of Christ, and acknowledges their own obligation to these new members as brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Why Is Church Membership Necessary?

“All of this sounds great,” one might say, “but I just want to attend this church. Why is it necessary that I become a member?” Some people recognize the visibility of Christ's church and enjoy attending worship services, but view membership as little more than an unnecessary formality. The Bible, however, gives us at least three reasons why membership in a local congregation is essential.

1. Spiritual Nurture through the Word

Christ is the Head of his church (Eph. 1.22-23; 4.15), the King of his kingdom (Matt. 28.18; Heb. 2.8-9; 1 Cor. 15.25; cf. Ps. 110.1). He was not only crucified and raised from the dead, but also exalted to the right hand of the Father in heaven. In other words, Jesus saves but also rules. And the way he rules his citizens is through his Word and Spirit, chiefly through the officers he has appointed at the local congregation. Consider the exhortation the writer to the Hebrews gives at the end of his sermon-letter: “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” (Heb. 13.17). This is Christ's design. As his subjects and possession, we must submit to what he has ordained.

This can only be done through church membership. Membership in a local congregation creates a formal relationship between the elders and the congregants. This formal relationship is a covenant that obligates the elders to watch over the souls of those who belong to Christ. It is part of our submission to our Lord. We never mature beyond the nurture of the church. No Christian can sustain himself as a self-feeder. We cannot be our own pastors. Rather, God has commanded us to submit ourselves to the preaching, teaching, and oversight of those shepherds whom he has placed over us in his love.

It has been the historical practice of Reformed churches to require a public vow to that end. For example, the fourth and final vow of Public Profession of Faith, Form Number 1, in the Psalter-Hymnal (used by the United Reformed Churches in North America) asks: “Do you promise to submit to the government of the church and also, if you should become delinquent either in doctrine or in life, to submit to its admonition and discipline?”

According to the command of God, elders are responsible to care for the souls over which they have been appointed (Heb. 13.17). One of the ways that elders care for church members is through family visitation, the historic practice of ministering the word to families in their homes

(Acts 20.28). Family visitation is a blessed opportunity for Christ's servants to bring his word close to the hearts of his children, and for the elders to help bear some of the burdens of the family which are communicated in the personal setting of the home. Surely, elders will do their best to care for occasional or even frequent church attendees. But they are bound to care for those church members who have been entrusted to them. Those who absent themselves from God's plan for the spiritual nurture of themselves and their family take great risk in doing so.

Spiritual Nurture through Accountability and Discipline

One of the ways in which Christ watches over our souls through the leaders in the local church is by the exercise of church discipline. Church discipline is the practice of applying the Word of God to members of the congregation who are in rebellion (i.e. unrepentant of a particular sin) or involved in some public scandal that affects the health of the church as a whole. The purpose of church discipline is the restoration of wayward disciples, the preservation of the church's doctrine, the peace and purity of the congregation, the protection of the church's reputation in the eyes of the unbelieving world, and the honor of God's holy name.

Christ gave his church the authority to exercise formal church discipline when he said to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16.19). Reformed churches have understood these keys to be the preaching of the gospel and the exercise of church discipline. The Heidelberg Catechism puts it like this:

83. Q. What are the keys of the kingdom?

A. The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline toward repentance. Both preaching and discipline open the kingdom of heaven to believers and close it to unbelievers.

84. Q. How does the preaching of the gospel open and close the kingdom of heaven?

A. According to the command of Christ: The kingdom of heaven is opened by proclaiming and publicly declaring to each and every believer that, as often as he accepts the gospel promise in true faith, God, because of what Christ has done, truly forgives his sins. The kingdom of heaven is closed, however, by proclaiming and publicly declaring to unbelievers and hypocrites that, as long as they do not repent, the anger of God and eternal condemnation rest on them. God's judgment, both in this life and in the life to come, is based on this gospel testimony.

85. Q. How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by Christian discipline?

A. According to the command of Christ: If anyone, though called a Christian, professes unchristian teachings or lives an unchristian life, if after repeated brotherly counsel, he refuses to abandon his errors and wickedness, and, if after being reported to the church, that

is, to its officers, he fails to respond also to their admonition – such a one the officers exclude from the Christian fellowship by withholding the sacraments from him, and God himself excludes him from the kingdom of Christ. Such a person, when he promises and demonstrates genuine reform, is received again as a member of Christ and of his church.

Reformed churches confess this because it is what the New Testament teaches. Jesus gave instruction on discipline and public excommunication in Matthew 18.15-20. Paul wrote a whole chapter to the church in Corinth describing how sexual immorality amongst Christians defiles the church, and that the offender, if unrepentant, is to be excommunicated and delivered to Satan (1 Cor. 5). See other examples in 1 Tim. 1.18-20; 2 Tim. 2.14-18; and Titus 1.10-14; 3.10-11.

Without church membership, however, the church cannot fully use the keys which Christ has given to her. The elders cannot excommunicate an unrepentant offender who was never in communion with the church in the first place. Church membership, therefore, provides every member of the congregation – including the minister and elders – with accountability. It allows the elders to fulfill their duty of ensuring that purity of doctrine and holiness of life are practiced (Titus 1.9; Heb. 1.17); it permits the deacons to care for the needy within the church (Acts 6.1-7; 1 Tim. 5.9); and it makes every member in the congregation responsible for his doctrine and life.

2. Spiritual Nurture through the Sacraments

Church membership allows a disciple to participate in the sacraments and thereby receive the spiritual benefits which the Holy Spirit provides through them (1 Cor. 10.16). A person who does not join a true congregation of Christ's church, however, does not have this privilege. Christ's sacraments are inseparably related to membership in his church.

For example, one does not have the right to be baptized without joining the visible church. Christ instituted Christian baptism as a one-time, initiatory sacrament that not only signifies the washing away of sins with his atoning blood, but also identifies the baptized person as a member of God's visible covenant community, much as circumcision did in the old covenant (Matt. 28.18-20; Acts 2.39). Thus, one is to be baptized into church membership, and in this way placed under the oversight of a local body of elders. Baptism cannot be separated from church membership (Eph. 4.4-5).

Likewise, one does not have the right to partake of the Lord's Supper without church membership. Christ established the Supper as a holy meal for the members of his church. It not only signifies his body and blood offered on the cross, but also nourishes the faith of repentant sinners (1 Cor. 10.16; John 6.22-60). As the governors and overseers of the church (Rom. 12.8; 1 Cor. 12.28; 1 Tim. 3.1-7), the elders have the responsibility of supervising participation in the Lord's Table, and ensuring, as much as possible, that people do not partake in an unworthy manner (1 Cor. 11.17-34). The Heidelberg Catechism summarizes the New Testament's teaching in this way:

81. Q. Who are to come to the Lord's Table?

A. Those who are displeased with themselves because of their sins, but who nevertheless trust that their sins are pardoned and that their continuing weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life. Hypocrites and those who are unrepentant, however, eat and drink judgment on themselves.

82. Q. Are those to be admitted to the Lord's Supper who show by what they say and do that they are unbelieving and ungodly?

A. No, that would dishonor God's covenant and bring down God's anger upon the entire congregation. Therefore, according to the instruction of Christ and his apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such people, by the official use of the keys of the kingdom, until they reform their lives.

In the URCNA, we have sought to apply this teaching by requiring a public profession of faith and membership in good standing for all who come to the Lord's Table.

The bottom line is that participation in the sacraments requires biblical church membership. While Christ has appointed the sacraments as visible signs and seals of the gospel for the nourishment of our souls, he did not design them to be individualistic practices. The sacraments are acts of divine service to his assembled people on the Lord's Day. He condescends to his flock so that he can feed them with his means of grace.

Thus, we confess in Article 28 of the Belgic Confession, "We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself." The fact that in this life the visible church is imperfect and mixed with hypocrites gives no Christian the right to depart from it. Except in otherwise extraordinary cases, a person cannot belong to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church without also belonging to a visible manifestation of the same, which, according to the New Testament, is the local congregation that preaches the gospel, administers the sacraments, and exercises church discipline.

If we profess to be Christians, we must practice the Christian faith according to the Word of God, not according to our opinions. The New Testament makes it clear that every Christian is to be baptized into the body of Christ and held accountable for his doctrine and life. It tells us that for our good God has provided us with pastors, elders, and deacons, as well as the communion of saints in the local church.

If you have been baptized but you are not a member of a true congregation of Christ's church, you are living an irregular life that the New Testament does not recognize as Christian. The Lord calls you to repentance. He calls you to come home to the safety and benefit of his sheepfold. We urge you to join a true church, a body of believers that confesses the truth, submits to the

authority of Christ as delegated to elders, and meets each week to worship God and receive Christ through Word and sacrament. You are not free to roam as a spiritual drifter on the internet or as a perpetual visitor from church to church. Find a good church and join it, for in this life we can do no better than to take up our place in the body of Christ, receive the means of grace, and enjoy the communion of saints.

Extracted from the Missions Committee Report, URCNA Synod of 2014