

WHY I THINK IT'S A MISTAKE TO ASSUME THE NEW TESTAMENT DOESN'T REQUIRE LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

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1 Corinthians 12:12-20 - "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. [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."

I wanted to share how a change of thinking took place in my own mind regarding local church membership. I've always *encouraged* Christians to become members of Cedarview Community Church. And there's been no change in my assessment of the value of specific local church membership in my mind. It's always made *sense* to me.

Here's where the change has gradually come. And I think this teaching will come as a new idea to many - perhaps most - of you. I no longer feel membership is merely something to be *encouraged*. Let's face it, I've been pastoring this local church for 33 years. No one would consider me an *unbiased* advocate of joining this church. But what if local church membership - however that covenant gets expressed in different church structures - what if local church membership isn't just something to be *encouraged*? What if it's something the New Testament actually *expects*?

We all know there's a difference between *encouraging* and *expecting*. Who among us believers would be satisfied if I said I was *encouraging* married Christians not to sleep with each other's spouses? To merely *encourage* marital faithfulness certainly falls short of recognizing the *importance* of marital faithfulness. That's because marital faithfulness is *expected* in the New Testament.

But there's a problem applying this logic to local church membership. Look at most churches - look at *our* church - and local specific church membership doesn't *seem* to be that important. Membership doesn't appear to make much difference. Everyone can come regularly. Everyone can pray. Everyone can worship. Everyone can partake of the Lord's Table. All the kids can be cared for in the nursery and children's ministries. All give offerings and support missions. All who come here can be married and buried and have their children dedicated. As much as is humanly possible all will be visited when sick and counseled and encouraged when facing trials.

Aside from voting on a relocation or inviting a new pastor, what difference does local church membership make? And so, how can such a membership be that important?

And here's where I have come to land on this issue. In spite of how open and inclusive we try to be, I have come to believe local church membership is important because the New Testament *makes* it important. In other words, I no longer *encourage* local church membership as a *pragmatic* issue. I've come to see local church membership - in whatever specific form it gets expressed in different churches and denominations - as a *Bible* issue.

Now that's quite a statement to make. And I am going to do something I don't do all that often. I'm going to consider *four reasons* local church membership is *expected*, and indeed, *assumed* in the New Testament. And I need to repeat, I'm talking about *local* church membership. I'm not talking here about believers being *members* of the universal body of Christ. I believe the New Testament recognizes and teaches *two kinds* of church membership. And even more than that, I believe each one assumes the other.

Let's consider *four textual reasons for assuming local church membership*:

1) **WHEN PAUL TALKS ABOUT THE DIFFERENT PLACEMENTS OF BELIEVERS AS MEMBERS OF THE BODY HE ISN'T TALKING ABOUT THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH**

This observation certainly isn't original to me, but I'm amazed how often Paul's words about the *local* church are quoted in the context of the *universal* church. In other words - and here's the fresh point of truth for me - when we talk about the relationship of each individual of this congregation to Cedarview Community Church the most proper New Testament term

is **membership**. It's the New Testament terminology, not a church politics terminology.

This all becomes clearer when we compare the **two kinds** of description of the body of Christ in the New Testament. Paul talks about the **universal** church in two important texts and the **local** church in one. Here are Paul's descriptions of the universal church with Christ as the head:

Ephesians 4:11-16 - "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."

Colossians 1:15-20 - "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. [16] For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. [17] And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. [18] **And he is the head of the body, the church**. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. [19] For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, [20] and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."

I'm only magnifying one dominant point from these two gigantic texts. **Christ is the head of His body, the redeemed, the universal church**. There is no other Lord. There is no other Redeemer. There are no equals or rivals for worship and devotion. This whole church **belongs** to Christ. It is **His** and His alone. He **bought** this bride with His own shed blood. There is no getting **into** this body apart from the redeeming work of its Head - Jesus Christ. That's Paul's point.

And as precious and central as this truth is, it is **not** the theme of Paul's words about the body in our opening text, **1 Corinthians 12:12-20**. Paul, balancing His words in **Ephesians 4** and **Colossians 1**, is describing **another body**. Or, more precisely, a different and essential **expression** of that invisible universal body of Christ. Significantly, he's using the very same image of a **body**. And he's using it on purpose to point to what that glorious body with Christ as its head will **look like** and how it will **function** in this physical, visible world.

The difference in this **1 Corinthians** text isn't imaginary. It's not something forced on the text. It is clearly a difference Paul **intended** to make and highlight. And the key difference is in **Ephesians** and **Colossians** the head of the entire body is Christ. The location of the rest of the parts isn't of significance for Paul's argument. We are **all** the body. And **Christ** is the head. Again, we get into this body **only** through Christ Jesus.

That's the only point. We all get spiritually born into the **same** church, whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, young or old. And there is only **one way** into this church - redemption accomplished by Christ's death and applied by the Holy Spirit. That's Paul's picture of the world-wide, universal church of Jesus Christ.

In **First Corinthians** the head of Paul's body analogy very clearly **isn't** Christ. All the body parts - **including the head parts** - are the members of the congregation. Paul makes it clear that the eyes and the ears (head parts) along with the feet and hands are **all** references to the role of individuals in a **local** church body - in this case, the local congregation in **Corinth**. Unlike the universal body of Christ described in Ephesians 4 and Colossians 1, Paul is writing to a church you could walk into - people you could count and see - a specific local place on a map. Those specific people in Corinth are the members of that body of people at Corinth just as surely as they are members of the universal body of Jesus Christ.

That's why they're called **members** of both bodies. Remember, Paul is still talking about **membership**. That's his word. And Paul's point is these individual people are **tied to** this specific local congregation in a way they aren't tied anywhere else on earth - not even to another local church. They were attached to **one congregation** the way a **finger is attached to one hand**. The parts are located and attached to **one** local body. My finger isn't attached to **your** hand. It's attached to **my** hand.

In other words, the membership Paul is describing in this local congregation in Corinth is a specific attachment to **one** congregation. A hand can't be attached to three different bodies.

All of these points have powerful and personal application once we remember Paul isn't talking about the universal church in 1 Corinthians 12. Local church membership starts to have deep traction and implication. You become a member of **one** church in a way you aren't a member of **any other** church.

Then I started to honestly ask another question. If Paul isn't referring to the universal church in 1 Corinthians 12 **why** does he use the very same image of a **body**? And the answer - the **only** satisfactory answer for me - is Paul wanted to make it as plain as could be that to be a **member** of the **universal** church was to be a **member** of a **local** church. That is, in the New Testament these **two memberships** weren't two **separate** things. Both matter. Both carry equal weight. Both are **expressions** of the **very same** attachment and devotion to Christ. They affirm the same commitment in different expressions - universal and local.

In other words, concrete membership in one **local** church is the way membership in the **universal** church has any functional reality. Local church membership matters as much as membership in the body of Christ. That's why Paul uses the very same metaphor of a body to describe both and the very same term - **member** - to define and recognize their identity.

The next question we need to explore is **does this interpretation hold up?** Does it make sense with other passages dealing with local congregations and how they function in the New Testament documents? And I've come to the conviction that this fits the New Testament teaching as no other interpretation does.

Here's my thesis for the remaining points. I'm arguing it is **impossible** to do what the local New Testament congregation is called to do apart from specific, recognizable local church membership. Consider these texts with me:

2) CONSIDER THE ISSUE OF JESUS COMMANDED CHURCH DISCIPLINE

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. [16] 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. [17] 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."

These verses have given the church headaches for generations. Interpretations abound. But there's one nagging question that almost gets lost in all the quarreling. How shall we define the group that will finally pass judgment on this unrepentant sinner?

"Tell it to the church" (17). Seriously, by what standard are we going to say, regarding this final arbitrating group, **"You can be involved in issuing this verdict and you can't. You're in this official group and you're out. You're qualified to do this and you aren't?"**

Let's be honest. The outcome of this final decision is serious - scary serious - **"Let him be to you as a pagan and a tax collector!" (17)**. The local church is about to write this unrepentant sinner off as a pagan at Jesus' command. So who is going to make this final call? Anyone who shows up at a Thursday night meeting? Anyone who has ever darkened the door of the assembly? Even if they just came twice? And if you're going to **exclude** some from this final arbitration, on what grounds will you do so?

There is no longer any doubt in my mind that some form - however confessed or signed or processed - some form of local church membership is flatly **assumed** in this assignment from Jesus to the local church. They knew who was **in** their church and who was **not** in their church. In other words - please consider this - they knew who was merely a **believer** (that is, a member of Christ's universal church) and who was a member of **their** local congregation. And their whole assignment from Jesus was **based** on that important distinction.

3) CONSIDER THE ISSUE OF RECOGNIZING WHO IS A PART OF THE LOCAL CHURCH AND WHO ISN'T

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. [2] And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you."

Whenever you deal with the New Testament instruction regarding **excommunication** from the local church the issue of

specific church membership is on the table.

“Let him be removed from among you”(2). And the two issues that can’t be easily dodged are these: ***In any local congregation, who does the local church have the right to assess and judge and remove?*** And second, ***in what sense is such a removal from the rest of the congregation accomplished and recognized?*** In other words, ***in what sense*** is this person ***outside*** the rest of that congregation?

These aren’t light questions. Imagine you’re a visitor here with us this morning. This is your first time in this building. No one knows your background or even if you’re a believer. Can the rest of us inspect your life and tell you you’re ***out - disqualified - removed*** from the rest of us? You’d probably reply, ***“Out? What are you talking about. You can’t put me out. I’m not even in!”***

Then there’s the second question. In what sense are they put ***“out”*** of the church? It’s a free country. If they aren’t a physical threat you can’t keep them out of the building. Are you going to rush into the middle of the aisle and grab the communion wafer out of their hand if they try to partake along with everyone else?

I simply see no way for the local church to obey this huge block of New Testament instruction about ***removing the disqualified*** apart from some kind of visible, commonly recognized, and affirmed church membership that can be taken away as a physical sign of the spiritual reality of being cut off from the grace of Christ that grows in the local congregation.

4) **CONSIDER THE ISSUE OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN MINISTRY IN THE LOCAL CHURCH**

This is by no means a slight issue. People change churches a lot in today’s world. Where do the lines of ministry responsibility fall? How can they be measured if we’re going to use the New Testament rather than whim or emotion? By that I mean to address ***two*** vitally important God-given assignments that are very quickly becoming unrecognizable and undoable in today’s church.

Consider these important texts and try to figure out how they can happen in a church with no recognized membership:

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.*”**

Hebrews 13:17 - ***“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 assignments in these verses. The Acts 20 text spells out the New Testament assignment to ***pastors - overseers.*** The Hebrews 13 text spells out the assignment of the congregation - ***“Obey your leaders and submit to them....”***, and then returns to the assignment of ***pastors - leaders.*** But this time the writer adds the fact that leaders will have to ***“give an account”*** of their work for the Lord.

Now how will we be obedient to these texts? First, how will ***pastors*** measure ***for whom they are responsible?*** That’s an important question to me and to the rest of the leadership at Cedarview because I will be ***accountable*** for how I did this.

For whom am I responsible? I’m good friends with Pastor Keith Smith at Agincourt Church. Am I responsible for all the people who attend that church on Sunday? Are they part of the ***“flock”*** or the ***“church of God”*** for whom I must answer? And if not, what about people who once came to this church and now attend another? And are they still being told by our Hebrews 13 text that they still need to ***“submit”*** to me as their pastor - even though they now have another pastor?

And what about all the visitors? What about the people who are here one Sunday who quickly leave after church and never come back? Are they a part of the ***“flock”*** for whom I must answer to God? I don’t even know their names. And what about people who hop around to ***several churches at the same time?*** Do I have to answer for them? What if they attend three different churches on any given month? Where are they functioning in a ***submitted fashion*** as described in Hebrews 13?

Are we going to just throw these texts out and say they were just relics from another age? My argument is these are still very precious texts. They do apply. And they made perfect sense in the context of New Testament local congregations where Paul’s concept of ***membership*** was embraced and understood.

A finger had no identity as a detached piece of flesh. You only know a finger as a finger *in its attached relationship to a hand*. Some form of specific, identifiable, local church membership is constantly taught, named, and assumed in the whole New Testament. The commands given to the church are *unperformable* apart from it. It's not church politics. It's life-giving and precious.

I have never understood the fear of local church membership. *"Well, I've seen a lot of scary things in local churches, pastor Don."* Me too. Come by my office. You don't know *half* the scary things that go on in churches like ours. Some weeks there are more problems than you can shake a stick at.

But I view church membership like I view marriage. I've seen a lot of scary things in a lot of marriages. But that didn't make me just decide to live with Reni. Marriage is right and good in spite of all the abuses. And so is the church. Jesus didn't just die for some vague invisible church. He gave His life for *Cedarview Community Church*. And anything the New Testament endorses - like I've been arguing it endorses local church membership - has to be good for all of us.