



**COMMITTING
TO ONE
ANOTHER:
CHURCH
MEMBERSHIP**



Committing to One Another: Church Membership

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INTRODUCTION

What does the local church mean to you?

Maybe you love your church. You love the people. You love the preaching, the singing. You can't wait to show up on Sunday, and you cherish fellowship with other church members throughout the week.

Maybe the church is just a place you show up to a couple times a month. You sneak in late, duck out early.

We at 9Marks are convinced that the local church is God's plan for displaying his glory to the nations. And we want to help you catch and live out that vision, together with your whole church.

The 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides are a series of six- or seven-week studies on each of the "nine marks of a healthy church" plus one introductory study. These nine marks are the core convictions of our ministry. To provide a quick introduction to them, we've included a chapter from Mark Dever's book *What Is a Healthy Church?* with each study. We don't claim that these nine marks are the most important things about the church or the only important things about the church. But we do believe that they are biblical and therefore are helpful for churches.

So, in these studies, we're going to work through the biblical foundations and practical applications of each one. The ten studies are:

- *Built upon the Rock: The Church* (the introductory study)
- *Hearing God's Word: Expositional Preaching*
- *The Whole Truth about God: Biblical Theology*
- *God's Good News: The Gospel*
- *Real Change: Conversion*
- *Reaching the Lost: Evangelism*
- *Committing to One Another: Church Membership*

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- *Guarding One Another: Church Discipline*
- *Growing One Another: Discipleship in the Church*
- *Leading One Another: Church Leadership*

Each session of these studies takes a close look at one or more passages of Scripture and considers how it applies to the life of the whole church. So, we hope that these studies are equally appropriate for Sunday school, small groups, and other contexts where a group of anywhere from two to two-hundred people can come together and discuss God's Word.

These studies are mainly driven by observation, interpretation, and application questions, so get ready to speak up! We also hope that these studies provide opportunities for people to reflect together on their experiences in the church, whatever those experiences may be.

Most people think church membership is like membership in a club. If you want a few extra benefits, or you aspire to be a leader someday, you should sign up. If not, you should feel free to come and go as you please. After all, church membership isn't in the Bible, is it?

What do you think? Is church membership biblical? Does it matter?

This study argues that church membership is biblical, that every Christian should be a member of a church, and that church membership makes a profound difference in the Christian life.

We begin with our need for church membership. Sin is deceitful, and we need to be truly accountable to others.

Next we consider the mandate for membership. After all, if church membership isn't biblical, it can't be anything more than optional. But we think that after carefully considering Scripture, you'll see that Jesus expects every Christian to be a committed member of a local church.

The next three sessions look at the goal, the challenges, and the nature of church membership. What are we working toward as church members? What are some of the roadblocks? And what exactly does it mean that we are members of one another?

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The sixth session considers our responsibilities toward each other, and toward God, as church members. And the seventh session closes out our study by pulling back the curtain and glimpsing the glorious reality to which church membership points.

Whether you're a skeptic, ambivalent, or an active church member, we hope these studies will show you the necessity, power, and beauty of church membership.

AN IMPORTANT MARK OF A HEALTHY CHURCH: A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF MEMBERSHIP

BY MARK DEVER

(Originally published as chapter 10 of What Is a Healthy Church?)

Is church membership a biblical idea? In one sense, no. Open up the New Testament, and you won't find a story about, say, Priscilla and Aquila moving to the city of Rome, checking out one church, then another, and finally deciding to join a third. From what we can tell, nobody went "church shopping" because there was only one church in each community. In that sense, you won't find a list of church members in the New Testament.

But the churches of the New Testament apparently kept lists of people, such as the lists of widows supported by the church (1 Timothy 5). More significantly, a number of passages in the New Testament suggest that churches did have some way of delineating their members. They knew who belonged to their assemblies and who did not.

On one occasion, for instance, a man in the Corinthian church was living in immorality "that does not occur even among pagans" (1 Cor. 5:1 NIV). Paul wrote the Corinthians and told them to exclude this man from their assembly. Now stop and think about this. You cannot formally exclude someone if he is not formally included in the first place.

Paul appears to refer to this same man in his subsequent letter

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to the Corinthians by referring to the “punishment inflicted on him by the majority” (2 Cor. 2:6 NIV). Stop and think again. You can only have a “majority” if there is a defined group of people, in this case a defined church membership.

Paul cared “who was in” and “who was out.” He cared because the Lord Jesus himself had granted churches the authority to draw a line—as best as they humanly can—around themselves, to mark themselves off from the world.

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.
(Matt. 18:18; see also 16:19; John 20:23)

Healthy churches, we have said, are congregations that increasingly reflect the character of God. Therefore, we want our earthly records to approximate, as much as possible, heaven’s own records—those names recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life (Phil. 4:3; Rev. 21:27).

A healthy church aspires to receive and to dismiss individuals professing faith, just as the New Testament authors instruct. That is, it aspires to have a biblical understanding of membership.

BIBLICAL MEMBERSHIP MEANS COMMITMENT

A temple has bricks. A flock has sheep. A vine has branches. And a body has members. In one sense, church membership begins when Christ saves us and makes us a member of his body. Yet his work must then be given expression in an actual local church. In that sense, church membership begins when we commit to a particular body. Being a Christian means being joined to a church.

Scripture therefore instructs us to assemble regularly so that we can regularly rejoice in our common hope and regularly spur one another on to love and good deeds (Heb. 10:23–25). Church membership is not simply a record of a box we once checked. It’s not a sentimental feeling. It’s not an expression of affection toward a familiar place. It’s not an expression of loyalty or disloyalty toward parents. It should be the reflection of a living commitment, or it is

worthless. Indeed, it's worse than worthless; it's dangerous, as we'll consider in a moment.

BIBLICAL MEMBERSHIP MEANS TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

The practice of church membership among Christians occurs when Christians grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. By identifying ourselves with a particular local church, we are telling the church's pastors and other members not just that we commit to them, but that we commit to them in gathering, giving, prayer, and service. We are telling them to expect certain things from us and to hold us accountable if we don't follow through. Joining a church is an act of saying, "I am now your responsibility, and you are my responsibility." (Yes, this is countercultural. Even more, it's counter to our sinful natures.)

Biblical membership means taking responsibility. It comes from our mutual obligations as spelled out in all of Scripture's one-another passages—love one another, serve one another, encourage one another. All of these commands should be encapsulated in the covenant of a healthy church.

Church members will grow to recognize their mutual responsibilities the more they cherish the gospel, understand that conversion is God's work, and evangelize by instructing "seekers" to count the cost. Less will Christians regard their churches with a come-as-you-please and get-what-you-can attachment—one more store to peek your head into at the Christian mall or market. More will they view them as a body in which all parts care for one another—the home in which they live.

Sadly, it is not uncommon to find a big gap between the number of people officially on the membership rolls and the number who regularly attend. Imagine a church of three thousand members with only six hundred regularly attending. I fear that many evangelical pastors today might be more proud of their so-called membership than distressed by the large number of members not attending. According to one recent study, the typical Southern Baptist church has 233 members with only 70 attending on Sunday morning.

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And is our giving any better? What congregations have budgets that equal—let alone exceed—10 percent of the combined annual incomes of their members?

Physical limitations can prevent attendance and financial burdens can prevent giving. But otherwise one wonders if churches are making idols out of numbers. Numerical figures can be idolized just as easily as carved figures—perhaps more easily. Yet God will assess our lives and weigh our work, I think, rather than count our numbers.

BIBLICAL MEMBERSHIP MEANS SALVATION AFFIRMATION

What's so dangerous about nonattending, responsibility-shirking members? Uninvolved members confuse both real members and non-Christians about what it means to be a Christian. And active members do the voluntarily inactive members no service when they allow them to remain members of the church, since membership is the church's corporate endorsement of a person's salvation. Did you catch that? By calling someone a member of your church, you are saying that that individual has your church's endorsement as a Christian.

So if a congregation has not set its eyes upon an individual for months, even years, how can it testify that that person is faithfully running the race? If an individual is missing in action but has not joined some other Bible-believing church, how do we know if he or she was ever really a part of us (see 1 John 2:19)? We don't necessarily know that such uninvolved people are not Christians; we simply can't affirm that they are. We don't have to tell the individual, "We know you're going to hell"; we only have to say, "We can no longer express our confidence that you're going to heaven." When a person is perpetually absent, a church endorsement is, at best, naïve; at worst, dishonest.

A church that practices biblical church membership does not require perfection of its members; it requires humility and honesty. It doesn't call them to bare decisions but to real discipleship. It doesn't discount the importance of an individual's own experiences with God, but neither does it assume too much of those not-yet-

perfected individuals. This is why the New Testament presents a role for a corporate affirmation by those in covenant with God and with each other.

BIBLICAL MEMBERSHIP IS MEANINGFUL

I hope to see the membership statistics in churches become more and more meaningful so that the members in name become members in fact. From time to time, this means removing names from the church rolls (though not from our hearts). Most often, this means teaching new members what God intends for the church and continually reminding current members of their commitment to the life of the church. In my own church, we do this in a number of ways, from membership classes to reading the church covenant aloud every time we receive the Lord's Supper.

As our church has grown in healthiness, the head count on Sunday mornings has once again exceeded the number of names officially on our rolls. Surely this should be your desire for your church as well.

We don't love old friends well by allowing them to hold onto their membership in our congregations for sentimental reasons. We love them by encouraging them to join another church where they can love and be loved on a weekly, even daily, basis. In my own church's covenant, therefore, we pledge, "We will, when we move from this place, as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word." This commitment is part of healthy discipleship, particularly in our transient age.

A recovered practice of careful church membership will have many benefits. It will make the witness of our churches to non-Christians more clear. It will make it harder for weaker sheep to stray from the fold and still call themselves sheep. It will help shape and focus the discipleship of more mature Christians. It will help church leaders know exactly for whom they are responsible. In all of this, God will be glorified.

Pray that church membership will come to mean more than it currently does. That way, we can better know whom to pray for and

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whom to encourage and challenge in the faith. Church membership means being incorporated in practical ways into the body of Christ. It means traveling together as aliens and strangers in this world as we head to our heavenly home. Certainly another mark of a healthy church is a biblical understanding of church membership.



WEEK 1

THE NEED FOR MEMBERSHIP

GETTING STARTED

1. Do you think it's important for Christians to be members of local churches? Why or why not?

MAIN IDEA

Christians need to be members of a local church so that, through a church's accountability and exhortation, we are protected from sin's deceiving, hardening effects.

DIGGING IN

Before we examine a passage of Scripture which shows us our need for church membership, let's clarify what exactly it is we mean by "church membership."

Here's how Jonathan Leeman defines church membership in his book *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*:

Church membership is (1) a covenant of union between a particular church and a Christian, a covenant that consists of (2) the church's affirmation of the Christian's gospel profession, (3) the church's promise to give oversight to the Christian, and (4) the Christian's promise to gather with the church and submit to its oversight.¹

Let's unpack these four elements a little bit:

1. **Church membership is a covenant.** That is, it's a solemn agreement between a Christian and a local church. In this covenant:
2. **The church affirms the Christian's profession of faith in Christ.** That is, by extending church membership to an individ-

¹Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 217.

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ual, the church is saying, “As far as we can tell, you’re a Christian. We’re putting our seal of approval on your claim to follow Christ.”

3. **The church promises to oversee the Christian’s discipleship.** This comes through teaching, preaching, the elders’ oversight, and the mutual building up which all members of the church are to engage in (see Eph. 4:11–16).
4. **The Christian promises to regularly assemble with and submit to the church.** By committing to a church through membership, an individual Christian promises to regularly gather with this church and to submit to its authority and teaching.

1. Before we jump into the passage for this study, let’s reflect a little on this understanding of church membership:

- a) How does this definition differ from what you’ve thought or experienced of church membership?
- b) Does this understanding of church membership make it more appealing to you or less? Why?

With this foundation in place, let’s turn to Hebrews 3. The book of Hebrews is a “word of exhortation” (Heb. 13:22) addressed to professing Christians who are in danger of giving up their faith under the relentless pressure of persecution. In Hebrews chapter 3, the author specifically warns his readers not to be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness:

⁷ Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

“Today, if you hear his voice,

⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
on the day of testing in the wilderness,

⁹ where your fathers put me to the test
and saw my works for forty years.

¹⁰ Therefore I was provoked with that generation,
and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart;
they have not known my ways.’

¹¹ As I swore in my wrath,
“They shall not enter my rest.””

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¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. (Heb. 3:7–14)

Note: After the introductory remark, “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,” verses 7 through 11 are an extended quotation from Psalm 95, which itself refers back to earlier incidents recorded in Exodus 17 and Numbers 14.

2. *What does the Holy Spirit exhort us not to do (vv. 7–8)? What does that mean?*

3. *What negative example does the author hold up for us? (Read Exodus 17:1–7 for background.)*

4. *What happened to the Israelites who hardened their hearts and disobeyed God (vv. 10–11)?*

5. *What does the author of Hebrews tell us to make sure doesn’t happen to us (vv. 12–13)?*

6. *What does this passage tell us to do in order to make sure that we don’t fall away from the living God (v. 13)?*

7. *Give some practical, everyday examples of how you exhort your fellow church members on a regular basis. If you can’t think of any, what’s one practical way you can begin to help others grow in godliness and not be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness?*

8. *In verse 13, the author warns us not to be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. What does this teach us about sin?*

9. *Do you think of sin as something active, dangerous, and threatening, or merely as something that causes an occasional minor slip-up here and there?*

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How should this passage's teaching about the nature of sin shape our lives as Christians?

10. How is someone who is not a member of a church especially susceptible to being hardened by sin's deceitfulness?

11. How do we know that we share in Christ (v. 14)? What effect should this have on how we live as Christians?

12. In light of this passage, how would you respond to someone who said, "I don't need to join a church. I can grow as a Christian just fine by coming to church whenever I want to, wherever I want to"?

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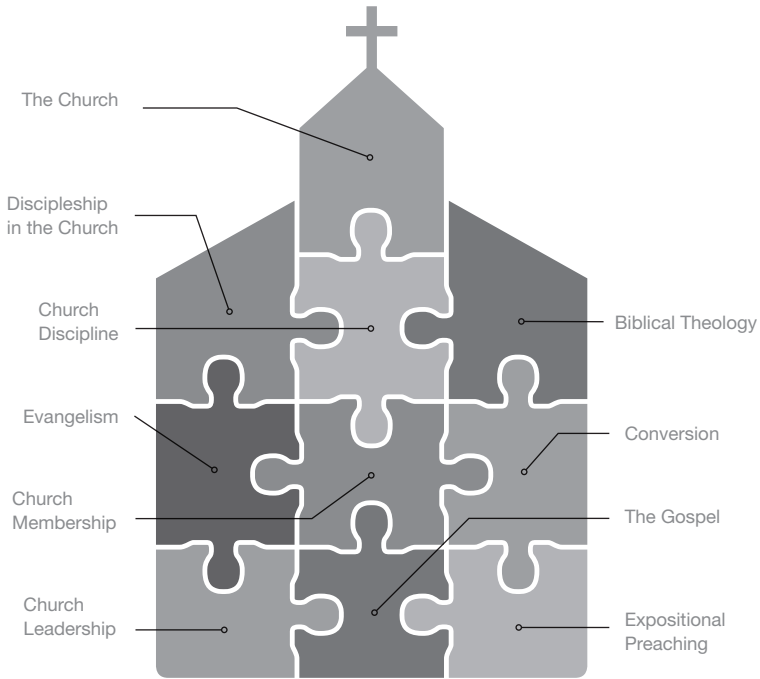
Building Healthy Churches

9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches.

To that end, we want to see churches characterized by these nine marks of health:

- 1** **Expositional Preaching**
- 2** **Biblical Theology**
- 3** **A Biblical Understanding of the Gospel**
- 4** **A Biblical Understanding of Conversion**
- 5** **A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism**
- 6** **Biblical Church Membership**
- 7** **Biblical Church Discipline**
- 8** **Biblical Discipleship**
- 9** **Biblical Church Leadership**

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Be sure to check out the rest of the
**9MARKS HEALTHY CHURCH
STUDY GUIDE SERIES**

This series covers the nine distinctives of a healthy church as originally laid out in *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever. Each book explores the biblical foundations of key aspects of the church, helping Christians to live out those realities as members of a local body. A perfect resource for use in Sunday school, church-wide studies, or small group contexts.





CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

This study answers the question: *Why join a church?* By seeing the scriptural reasoning for becoming a church member, participants will also learn what it looks like to be a healthy member of the body and how to serve in their local congregation.

“I am unaware of any other tool that so thoroughly and practically helps Christians understand God’s plan for the local church. I can’t wait to use these studies in my own congregation.”

JERAMIE RINNE, Senior Pastor, South Shore Baptist Church, Hingham, Massachusetts

“Rich exposition, compelling questions, and clear syntheses combine to give a guided tour of ecclesiology—the theology of the church. I know of no better curriculum for generating understanding of and involvement in the church than this.”

RICK HOLLAND, Senior Pastor, Mission Road Bible Church, Prairie Village, Kansas

“I have used these guides for the last year at my own church and appreciate how easy they are to adapt to my own setting. Highly recommended!”

MICHAEL LAWRENCE, Senior Pastor, Hinson Baptist Church, Portland, Oregon

9MARKS HEALTHY CHURCH STUDY GUIDES are a series of ten 6–7 week studies covering the nine distinctives of a healthy church originally laid out in *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever. This series explores the biblical foundations of key aspects of the church, helping Christians to live out those realities as members of a local body. Conveniently packaged and accessibly written, the format of this series is guided, inductive discussion of Scripture passages and is ideal for use in Sunday school, church-wide studies, and individual or small group contexts.

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