

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN LIGHT OF THE SCRIPTURES: A CRITIQUE

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[A review of Mark Brown, "Church Membership: Option or Command?" *New Horizons* (October 1996) 4-5.]

Church membership is one of those topics that people love to argue about. After all, say many, the Bible does not command membership according to the current, traditional understanding (a list of names of those who have committed themselves to a local body for the purposes of mutual edification and accountability to Christ and one another). For Presbyterians and others who love order in the Church, the idea of free-floating individuals flitting from congregation to congregation without accountability or responsibility is downright horrifying. Membership falls under the rubric of what Hodge called "Christian prudence," which amounts to practical wisdom in implementing biblical principle. Still, it can be a challenge to justify our current system to those who love proof-texts. Rev. Mark Brown's article "Church Membership: Option or Command?" is helpful because Pastor Brown covers most of the usual arguments (ten in all) for membership. His goals are admirable: he is trying to fight against the independency of our age. In some points, he does well. In others, he is reaching, in my view. By evaluating his arguments I hope to demonstrate the truth is that membership really is a matter of *discipleship*.

Ten Reasons Summarized

Rev. Brown's reasons for church membership may be summarized as follows:

1. ***Christ commands it.*** The command Rev. Brown refers to is Matthew 28:19.
2. ***The Old Testament set the pattern.*** The covenant bond was the issue for an Israelite, not his genes.
3. ***The New Testament assumes it.*** "Conversion included being added to the body of disciples (Acts 2:42, 47; 11:25-26; 14:21, 23)." See also Ephesians 3:6.
4. ***The analogy in society at large demonstrates its legitimacy.*** In any organization, if you don't have a list of members, you have no distinct group. This is clearly the weakest of Rev. Brown's arguments. Distinctions that are no deeper than a list do not deserve to be given any credence.
5. ***The nature of salvation demands it.*** Salvation is both personal and public in the Bible.

6. ***The organization of the church requires it.*** Our God ordained officers and requirements for admission and continuance in the church. What is the point of all of that without members? It's like a teacher saying that school would be great if it weren't for the students!
7. ***Membership is prerequisite to complete obedience to Scriptural practice.*** Admission to the Lord's Supper, baptism, loving and serving the brethren, honoring ordained leadership are all the actions of publicly committed members.
8. ***Discipline is impossible without it.*** "Pastoral care and oversight is exercised over the gathered church." This is simply a matter of logical and practical necessity.
9. ***Church order demands it.*** The business matters of the church – voting, calling pastors and electing officers, adopting budgets, buying property, etc. – are impossible without distinct and accountable membership. I wouldn't say impossible as Rev. Brown does, but it certainly makes it much more prone to confusion and vice.
10. ***Evangelism is impossible without it.*** Evangelism is not complete until converts are joined to the church. In other words, there is no redemption without submission unto sanctification.

Since several of these principles overlap to some degree, I shall attempt to deal with them as a whole in the comments that follow.

Basic principles

Rev. Brown begins his article clarifying what he means by "church." First, he notes, "From God's perspective, the church involves all the saints of all ages (2 Tim. 2:19). From man's perspective, it involves *visible, local* assemblies of believers (and their children) who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and submit to his Word." It is this visible and local quality of the church that he has in mind in his arguments. So far, so good. Strangely, though, Rev. Brown does not define "membership" in his opening remarks, which seems to me to be the primary weakness of his whole argument. The average reader is left to understand membership in terms of *what we do now* in bringing people into the visible body. The temptation to then eisegete the passages he refers to as the article unfolds becomes great. Indeed, it is this reading back into the Scriptures our current practice that is the Achilles heel of traditional arguments in favor of membership. Please understand: I strongly advocate formal church membership in the local assembly – I am only seeking to establish that advocacy upon firmer, more consistent ground. The challenge is that the Scriptures do not stipulate how membership as such is to be implemented. Rev. Brown is to be commended in not attempting to add to God's Word. However, neither does he labor to stress that he is not necessarily talking about our current practice. The result is inevitable: readers left to themselves cannot help but think in terms of their own current practice, and the integrity of the argument is compromised accordingly. When he does address a firmer definition later on, the damage is already done, and his correct assessment is mentally attached to, and equated with, our current practice *carte blanche*.

Membership as Covenant

Rev. Brown's declares his first stated reason, "Christ in his Word commands church membership," to be the most important. Certainly, if Christ had issued such a command, we could find no fault with its ultimate priority. In fact, all the other arguments would be unnecessary. But did Christ really have church membership in mind when he states, "I will build my church," or when he commands the disciples to "make disciples, baptizing and teaching them"? Rev. Brown concludes, "The Great Commission *demand*s church membership."

He says so because he rightly sees baptism as the initiatory rite through which people become associated with the visible church. Since Christ commands that we be baptized, that means he commands us to be visibly identified with the local assembly. But how is that visible identification manifested? What does Brown mean by "church membership"? The closest he gets to a definition is this: "Membership in the church – sharing in its privileges and responsibilities – is part of my initial commitment as a disciple of Christ." True, but he does not close the independency door with this statement at all. Does Christ intend that this visible identification mean what we desperately want it to mean – that people are to formally commit themselves to the service, and submit themselves to the discipline, of a local body comprised of officers and members? Later on in the article (reason five) he finally states what he should have said in the opening paragraph, "Uniting with a church does not mean signing a piece of paper to get our name on a roll. It means making a covenant with God that involves public vows of profession before God and his church. To be a Christian is to be a part of the body of Christ (Rom. 14:7; 15:7; 1 Cor. 12:27). We are to serve Christ as a living member of his body, not in isolation."

Now he is getting somewhere. Covenant discipling and discipleship are the issues here. Brown is right when he stipulates that a church is not, ultimately, a "voluntary society," at least as far as Christ is concerned. We may legitimately recognize the voluntary nature of any given local assembly, but the biblical picture consistently reveals that every believer is connected *organically* and *organizationally* to other believers. This truth Rev. Brown repeatedly stresses, citing such passages as Genesis 17:7, 10; Romans 11:17-20; Acts 2:41-42; 11:25-26; 14:21, 23; 16:30; and Ephesians 4:11. Nevertheless, his statement that in the NT "there were no spiritual drifters or permanent adherents ... there was no such person who was a Christian, yet not a church member" is troubling. What is the difference between a "permanent adherent" and a "church member"? It appears that Rev. Brown has current practice in mind. While I have no problem with arguing against "spiritual drifters," there is no biblical evidence that I know of that anything like a membership role was kept in the early church (though there were such lists in synagogues). People gathered into the church became a homogenous group because of their common bond in Christ that demanded of them service, obedience, accountability, giving, and participation. What I am concerned about is equating "Christ commands a covenant bond" with "Christ commands church membership [as we know it]."

Still, the points four and six through nine must be considered. Our God does things "decently, and in order," and much of the work of the church requires some degree of

organization to prevent chaos and injustice. But Rev. Brown's reasoning at times tends to be somewhat circular: you can't do certain things without formal membership, so you have to have membership to do certain things because you can't do those things without a membership list. For example, in point six he makes membership the foundation of organization and then states, "Without organization you could have no seminaries, no home or foreign missions." I agree with his scruples, but his argument falls flat. Anyone can start a seminary or preach at home or abroad. Many do these things all the time without regard for any membership obligations at all. In point seven, though it is true that "the Lord's Table is open only to those who are baptized members of a church," many evangelicals today do not see the link between membership and the Lord's supper, inviting anyone who names the name of Christ to partake at the table without constraint. I lost four families from my own church on one occasion because I refused to baptize an individual who had no intention of joining with the local church – ours or anyone else's! While such thinking ignores biblical principle, Rev. Brown's solution of declaring formal membership to be the grounds of obedience is not the answer.

I believe the main problem with Rev. Brown's argument is that he attempts to make too much ride on formal church membership *as we know it*, instead of allowing Christ's principles to carry his argument completely. Christ's principles of mutual obligation to one another and to the Lord, regular fellowship with the body, submission to ordained leadership, edifying ministry to one another, accountability for our actions unto the Lord under the oversight of the church, and frequent, thoughtful participation in the ordinances of the church are what we should argue for. Membership as we practice is simply a tool to help us accomplish those ends. Certainly, anyone who refuses to join (through whatever means that body deems appropriate before the Lord) a local church formally should be questioned concerning their reasons, and confronted concerning their lack of desire to be visibly knit to the kingdom of Christ. If people are submissive to Christ's principles, they will have no trouble formally attaching themselves to a faithful local assembly, in my opinion.

You see, the trouble most of us have with discipleship (that is, others discipling us) boils down to the fallen soul's hatred for authority and oversight. Rev. Brown's remarks on this point are insightful:

There is a spirit of independency prevalent today that despises and rejects authority (2 Pet. 2:10; Jude 8). It is impossible to obey the scriptural commands to "respect those over you in the Lord" (1 Thess. 5:12) and to "obey your leaders" (Heb. 13:17) unless you have promised to submit to them – joined the church of which they are overseers.

If you are a believer, your ruler is Christ: who, in turn, has appointed men to stand before him as officers in his church. He did not save you as an individual only; he saved you as a part of the body, an integral member of an organism and an organization. In other words, Jesus came to save a people, not just persons. No believer can feel free to worship and serve the Lord autonomously from the church, Christ's visible kingdom. The visible church is the means through which our Lord chiefly administers his word (Romans 10:14). As a believer, you are under the Lord's authority – and his visible representatives – whether you like it or not. The question is whether or not you are in

submission to Christ. The prophecy of Jeremiah 31:34, “No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD” has not yet been ultimately fulfilled. In your covenant bond with Christ and his people, you must be taught, disciplined, encouraged, helped, confronted – in short, you are accountable. This is why church membership, however implemented, is important. Additionally, your formal, visible connection with others in the same body places you in a position to edify them in the same ways in which they minister to you.

Conclusion

I appreciate Rev. Brown’s commitment to the covenant nature of the church. Though I would question a few of his applications, his basic principles are sound. If we fall back upon the corporate nature of Christ’s body and remain there, we will have no hesitancy about being visibly united with the church. It is truly a matter of being a faithful disciple who is seen of men, a city set on a hill where it will not be hidden. “Let your (plural!) light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).