

Church Membership:

My Third Step



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Introduction: The Meaning of the word “Church”

Acts 19

The word *ekklesia* is a Greek word and it has the idea of being “called out.” In Acts 19, we get an understanding that often New Testament words have a definition and they have a usage. Words matter in every way and they are chosen by God for a specific thing.

Paul and his companions are starting a riot.

19:32

Some therefore cried one thing and some another for the assembly was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together. Here we have people going to be a part of a crowd and notice what the crowd is called in verse 32, it's called an **assembly**. **Assembly** is the word “ekklesia.”

19:39

But if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful assembly. So we have the word “assembly” being used first in verse 32, and we have the word being used again in verse 39. In verse 32, it is being used of a mob, and in verse 39, it's being used of a lawful group.

19:41

And when he had said these things, he dismissed the for the third time (verses 32 and 39) assembly.

When you grew up with the word “church,” you may have gotten a denominational understanding (“I am a part of the Lutheran church.”), or a building, or a general reference to organized religion (“the church let me down”, one might say).¹

In Acts 19, you have two ways in which the word “church” is used. It is translated “assembly” and it is used either of an unlawful mob

¹Perhaps like a franchise understanding. So when I say, “I love McDonald's,” I'm saying any McDonald's, particularly any McDonald's in any location, even though there may be exceptions. Can we imagine such an idea that we say “I love McDonalds” and at the same time never attend one?

or a lawful city council type gathering. So knowing that, you're a teenager and you hear the word *ekklesia* anywhere in the Greco-Roman empire, what are you thinking? You would be thinking about the political institution found in every city.

We just talked about what Peter would have thought when he heard the word *ekklesia* by Jesus in Matthew 16:13-18. He grew up in the Acts 19 world and *ekklesia* is a civic, lawmaking, governing body. (Like a city council). If that's what it is, if it's a governing body at an echelon of the Roman government, then how would you respond to Jesus saying in verse 18, "I will build my *ekklesia*"? What would you think Jesus meant?

A governing body.

When Jesus shows up on the scene and says, "I'm going to start my own and I'm going to build it on the rock," what do you think?

You would think Jesus is about to start his own lawmaking, governing body.

So since the "church" is a local gathering, why am I required by the Lord to pick the one He has for me and join its membership?

1. 1st century Christians joined local churches

Acts 2

Peter is preaching to the church here. These are Christians (1:15) in an upper room (1:12). A meeting of the church some ten days after the ascension of Jesus.

2:36-39

So you might notice he has people with him. 120 or so are a part of this assembly, this *ekklesia*, that Jesus started. He said, "I will build my *ekklesia*," and he calls out Peter and Andrew, he calls out James and John, and they assemble around Jesus. Then in chapter 18 of Matthew, he gives them a thing known as church discipline. It's funny that the Lord would say, "Hey, if you guys have a problem with each other, tell it to the church" if the church wasn't even in existence then? Very far-fetched.

2:41

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. So 3,000 are added to the 11 and probably added to the 120 which contains the 11. How natural are those church references in the Gospel of Matthew if it don't even exist or have an application for another year or two when Jesus dies, rises again, goes to heaven and then Acts 2 happens? So the *ekklesia* is now made up of at least 3,120 people.

2:44

all who believed were together, and had all things in common. Do you get the idea here that these people are meeting regularly?

sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. Now how do you do that if you're not meeting regularly? How do 3,100 people share their possessions if they don't see each other?

2:46

how often did these 3,000+ believers meet? Daily. And where did they meet? Publicly in the temple because that was a huge place. A “house of prayer for all nations” is what Jesus called it.

In Acts 2:37-47, there are several characteristics that are demonstrated by those who are in the same church. Remember, there's one body of believers so this is the very most simple way to see what a church is: look at the one and only church in existence at the time:

1. Verse 38, They weren't added to the church before they were baptized, they weren't added to the church instead of being baptized, they were added to the church because they were baptized (2:41, "those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them"). What is the New Testament profession of faith? Baptism. How do you show that you receive the word, verse 41? You were baptized.
2. An individual must affirm the same core doctrine of the Bible. Why did they believe the apostles' doctrine, verse 41 and 42? Because you had apostolic signs in verse 43. So it's called the apostles' doctrine.
3. The believer will fellowship both in and out of church with other believers as well as pray for them (2:46). It's not just Sunday, okay? They're “continuing in the apostles' doctrine...daily.”
4. The believer was numbered with a particular group of people (2:41).

So all I want you to see is that as early as Pentecost, there was a group of people that were understood to be a part of the believer-hood and people were **added** to that. Does that prove that we should have an official church roll? Not necessarily but it proves that there was an established expectation that all Christians in a location meet regularly.

There were no three groups of people in the New Testament: unsaved, saved but not really in church, and saved and right with God and in church. You had a lost person who does everything you would expect a lost person to do, and a saved person and everything you would expect a saved person to do.

"I don't like that."

Well, look at your New Testament and find the first book written to a non-church member. Find a Christian in the New Testament who is being treated as if he's part of that middle crowd. ²

²Galatians, "To the churches of Galatia." Corinthians, "To the church of God in Corinth." Ephesians, "To the church at Ephesus." Even James written to the 12 tribes scattered abroad. What does he say in chapter 2? "If there comes in a man in your assembly." How about 1 John? Not written to a particular church but he says, "If they've gone out from you, it means they were never a part of you, for if they were a part of you, they never would have stopped being with you." Walter taught that back in July. So we know that that's just a fable.

2. God Sets Members in Particular Churches to Benefit that Church

1 Corinthians 12:20-26

26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. The church is **the body** of Christ and is made up of individual members. "You can see very clearly that he's talking to a particular church and he calls them **the body**. We have no biblical liberty to call people of different churches members of the same **body**."

What kind of sense would this make if they weren't members of the same **body**? For example, if you're supposed to profit from me being an eye and you being an arm, how can we possibly profit one another if we're members of different churches?

12:27-30

30 Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? Who or what are my giftings for?

"The body."

Which body?

That one that I'm in. If you have a gift, it is to be used primarily for your **body**, your church. In this passage, the only authority you have to apply it to the body is the one Paul is speaking to.

So here, brothers and sisters, in this very body, when Paul gives them the Lord's Supper chapter 11:17-27, he is giving it to a particular **body**. The body of the Corinthian believers to whom he is writing made up of their **particular members**.³ You would never come away from 1 Corinthians 11 and 12 and think, "I can't wait to go to the Holy Land

³Jesus did the very same things with His church: He gave them the Lord's Supper in Matthew 26 and baptism in the great commission of Matthew 28:19-20. If he was calling out disciples and if they were his church, Jesus gave the task of both evangelism and baptism to those making up the church.

and have the Lord's Supper by the Jordan River with no one in particular except my tour group." There is no biblical authority for that.⁴

Ephesians 4:11

He [Jesus, antecedent in 4:7] Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. For the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body. Remember Ephesians 1:22-23 tells us that the **body** "is the church," and **edify** is a construction term and it has the idea of "building."

What people has the body been gifted with to help them be built up or edified? **apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers.** We are stronger and more built up as a church because of gifts from Christ and these gifts are.

4:15-16

speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ--from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. How do we get real growth in the body? **Every joint supplies.** You know how it works when you've injured your foot...what do you start doing? Putting weight on the other foot. Then what? Your hip, your back, everything is misaligned because you're overcompensating and the body eventually becomes very unhealthy.

⁴Do you know how many times I've served the Lord's supper as an Army chaplain? Zero. Do you know why? It wasn't given to the chaplain, it was given to the church. Do you know how many times I've baptized a convert in the Army? You say, "But I always liked getting baptized in the surf at the Gulf of Mexico." You're going to get some other joker to do it, I ain't doing that. Baptism and the Lord's supper belong to the church. You would never come away from the epistles saying, "Thank God, I can't wait until I go with Chuck Swindoll on the next Holy Land tour. We're gonna have the Lord's supper with Pepsi and Doritos." No one is coming away saying, "Find your favorite Bible teacher and enjoy the Lord's supper with them at the next Bible conference." Completely unbiblical.

4:25

Therefore, putting away lying, Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. You're not allowed to be a liar and be a functioning part of a body. That's pretty clear in the context, **speak every man truth with his neighbor** because **we are members one of another**. So there is a wonderful thing called voluntary accountability. It's not co-dependence; it's inter-dependence. Inter-dependence means I'm choosing to need you, that I'm choosing to subordinate myself to the needing of you. The New Testament says that we need the body to be built up, and the body needs our gifts.

3. There Must be a Process of Determining Who to Help First

Acts 6:1-4

2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you If they're going to pick people from among them, that means "them" are a well-known group of people. Otherwise how is a multitude of disciples going to pick people if those people were not regularly known as being "among them?" So the deacons were supposed to come from among the regulars and they had to be identifiable. I'm certain that no one would have said, "Eh, it's like your second week with us, how about you?" No, an irregular, undedicated man would never been seen as **of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom**, as it's doubtful anybody could vouch for him.

1 Timothy 5:9

Honor widows who are really widows. But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God. Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, So there's a list. If we don't have a sort of membership...what is the starting point for this "list?"

and not unless she has been the wife of one man. Alright, so you're not supposed to support a widow unless she's a widow regularly known by those assessing this list. We're not just looking for little old ladies to support. She has got to be a particular kind of honorable woman who really has been married and proved to be a good wife. By the way, she has to be 60.⁵

So Paul is saying there are some qualifications because of the situation which most of those people lived in. They were generally not well fed; they would probably be lower middle class people that we're talking about. There were rich people in the early church but on the

⁵Why? That's a different study.

whole, a lot of these people were struggling. So you had to have some kind of qualification if you were going to help somebody with what little you had, Paul has given them at least guidelines of the person that you are trying to help. There should be some qualifications of how we spend our resources and this is what Paul I think is doing because they in that time, they were mostly poor people.

5:19-20

Now how earth shattering was this accountability? **Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. 20 Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.** So if there is sinfulness, they are supposed to be rebuked **before all.** Let's get to the context of this passage. What are we talking about? All that are under the **elder.** All that are in this number we've been talking about all along. You see, this is pointless if there's not a designated or specified or quantifiable group of people. It's pointless. You can't have business like this if, "Ah, she hasn't been here like eight months. Well, you know, I mean, she's a widow and you know. One time she was washing feet, I guess. I don't know." There has to be a level of accountability. In the context of our discussion as to whether or not church membership is biblical, don't forget we have to have that sort of "merit" list. We have to have a triage mechanism.

Churches are usually too big to have church in your living room. This is how we would handle membership in the first century if we're having church in Steve's living room: if we didn't want somebody to come, guess what Steve would do? "I'm sorry, you can't come in here." That's pretty simple. That was church membership. Who is in your church membership? The people meeting in Steve's house on Friday night. Can anyone come? "No, we're full. But maybe I can work it out for you to visit us once". Now we don't have that. Now we're too big for that. Remember, if there are 15 of us meeting in a living room and I say, "Hey, we need to decide, folks, if we're going to have a meal next Sunday. We need to decide if we're going to support this missionary. We need to decide if we're going to get new walls for Steve." Then it's simple. I see all 15 of you four out of five Sundays. You all can help me make this decision. We would call a vote, right? But since we don't have that management, we have to have something a little different. We

have decided that the first level of communication is you decide to join this church. We have to have a way to prioritize care. We can't care for people who might come. We can't put them up with members.

4. There Must Be an Identity of One's Elders and that Elder's People

Hebrews 13:7

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow. Now that's pretty bold, and here the writer of Hebrews says when you see those who have the **rule** over you **follow** them. This is a shepherding term: a rod was used for a number of things, everything from beating off wolves as a shepherd to breaking the legs of your sheep when they would run off. a rod was also used to keep a good count. You would hold the rod over the door of your sheep, the sheepfold, and as sheep would pass under it, you had a good straight line there to count them as they passed under it. So here, those who have the **rule over you** are those who are keeping a good count of you. How is this possible with no official "count" to "keep?"

13:17

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. If there is no local church membership, then who do we know to obey? Also, if there is no local body of believers, for whom is the pastor responsible to keep account?

How, then, does a sheep know to follow a shepherd if they don't belong to the fold or belong to the flock? So this strange idea that you don't have to commit to a local church is awful if you really want to be able to live by the spirit of verse 7 and verse 17. Moreover, it works the other way too. How is a pastor supposed to know who he's accountable for? It says in verse 17 that we must give an account. Well, how do we do that if you haven't made a commitment to the church and you don't consider me your pastor enough to even say, "Well, this is my church and here's how this is my church. I'm making this public commitment to the church that they know I'm one of them. I can count on them, they can count on me. And this man is my shepherd."

Are we supposed to just give every visitor to a deacon to care for? What happens if they decide not to come and we take them off the deacon's list after a month and then they decide to come back? Do we

add them back? And then if they don't come for a straight month, do we take them back off? And we put it on deacons to not only know members but non-members?

1 Timothy 5:17

Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor.

Elders comes from a particular word, *presbuiteros*. So the **elder** has two functions: oversight and feeding. So we have the **elder** and he has two functions: pastoring and oversight, and we find here he uses the generic term for the leader.

How can a believer know if an elder is **worthy of double honor** if they have not submitted to his pastoral oversight? So you have to **rule well** to be considered **worthy of double honor**, well then, how do you know a person is **ruling well** if you aren't submitted to their rulership?

We have this requirement that you should have an elder who knows how to rule things a little bit, and make some administrative decisions. Well again, if you're not under his oversight, how do you know if he's **worthy of double honor**?

1 Peter 5:1

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder. 2

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, overseers typically translated as “bishops,” here it’s “overseers,” **not by compulsion**. In these two verses you have three words being used interchangeably. Peter is talking to elders telling them to pastor, shepherd, feed, and have oversight. elder, pastor and bishop. Overseers is usually translated as bishop. “Pastor” here is used in the verb form, **shepherd the flock**, pastor the flock, feed the flock.

5:3

not as being lords over those entrusted to you. There are a certain group of people that are entrusted to the elder who is supposed to pastor who is supposed to oversee or be a bishop. There are a certain group of people entrusted to them.

but being examples to the flock. If there is no quantifiable flock, then how do we know who the pastor is accountable for? You see, if you

have people that say, "Hey, pastor, you just be accountable to whoever regularly shows up." Well, when does that relationship end? "Well, when we stop coming regularly." Well, how regular? When will I cease to be a good shepherd? When I only visit you after every third missed Sunday? When I only visit you every second stay in the hospital? You see, that is why we have to have a definable flock and we have decided to call it "membership."

If I'm not a member, that means I'm not under the numbered flock of an under-shepherd or pastor. Are the deacons responsible for the people that "come sometimes?" No. We have a number of deacons based on the number of members.

5. There Must Be an Identified Voting Body To Handle Corporate Actions

1 Corinthians 5:1-5

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you. And such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles, that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. 3 For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged. “Oh my goodness, Paul, don't you know you're not supposed to judge?” No. No one quoted that to Paul. “I have already judged and I'm not even there, I'm judging,” (as though I were present) **him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ**, in other words, “on behalf of Jesus, as if you are Jesus,”

when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one Paul is telling them to take a body-wide action. How is this done? Well, in that day it may have been to tell somebody to stay away from your home (see verse 9), but today, it might be by a vote. **to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.**

5:9

I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people...11 But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral. He's writing to the entirety of the body. "Get rid of him. Yeah, I know he likes to worship with you. Too bad. He's not allowed and you take action before I get there. Don't even eat supper with him."

The only way we know how to do something corporately is to go around and get a head nod from everyone. As much as we love the non-members that come with us every week, that come here every week, that visit us every week, they don't get the privilege of deciding who can come and who can't come. The members of the church own the

church building and the church property. Also, the members of the church, according to our constitution, own the membership.

"I'm gonna take my letter with me."

You don't own a letter. This passage says that the church membership owns the membership and so "purge out the leaven." (5:7) It's on the church to do that. So how do we do that if we don't have a quantifiable identifiable person doing it or a group of persons doing it? You see, we have to have membership.

Conclusion

If these five reasons are not robust enough, to drive the believer to join a church, nothing is. If they are enough, then any delay in joining a church is willful disobedience. Baptism is really part of anybody's first experience of joining a church, but later in life as new memberships are sought through geographical moves and so forth, church membership is a very holy thing and follows baptism in its importance.

Why would I want to join SRBC?

1. priority with pastor(s)
2. assigned deacon
3. voting influence
4. election to leadership
5. ability to teach
6. considered for benevolence
7. priority in building usage