

## Is Formal Church Membership Biblical?

Some Christians hold that the only requirements for membership in the Book of Acts were baptism and a credible profession of faith. Therefore, why require more for official church membership?

Let's look at several historical, biblical, and rational factors.

### **The meaning of EKKLESIA**

The New Testament Greek word for "church" is EKKLESIA. According to Greek lexicographers, this word contains within itself the concept of a well-defined membership. "...an assembly of persons constituted by well-defined membership." <sup>1</sup> Other terms are used to describe a crowd of people.

EKKLESIA occurs about 100 times in the Septuagint<sup>2</sup> in texts involving an assembly of the Jews, such as "*assembly of the Lord*" <sup>3</sup>, referring to the congregation of Israelites assembled to hear a proclamation from God.

### **Church Membership in the Book of Acts**

Church historians tell us that, as of the latter part of the first century, the church required prospective members to understand what the church believes and how it is governed, along with its privileges and responsibilities. This required instruction, sometimes extensive. An early Christian term for inquirer is "catechumen," from which we derive the word catechism.

Converts to Christianity in the first century had already received years of instruction in the scriptures before they heard the gospel.

The first converts were Jewish. All Jewish boys were required to study the scriptures from an early age. The curriculum included the scriptures, plus Jewish tradition and history. By the time they reached their mid-teens, they had years of formation, plus any other teaching from regular synagogue attendance.

When Peter preached his two sermons in Acts, he was speaking to those who knew there is one God, who are the people of God, what election meant and for whom, and what atonement means, along with God's moral law. They also knew what baptism was and believed in a coming Messiah. The only thing they lacked was the name of the Messiah.

What about gentile converts? Paul's converts were either proselytes to Judaism or inquirers into Judaism. They were God-fearing gentiles familiar with the basic Old Testament concepts. Paul went to synagogues where such people were present.

In short, the converts in the Book of Acts, both Jew and gentile, were pre-catechized through years of teaching.

### **Post-apostolic history**

Over the last two thousand years, unbiblical forms of church government, theology, and practices have infiltrated the church. The early church did not have to address most of these. Today, some of these errors have become widespread among evangelicals, making it imperative that inquirers understand how we differ from others and why.

Western culture is individualistic and democratic. Biblical church government is neither of these. It is a covenant community and theocratic, administered by ordained elders. (1 Tim. 5:17) Western Christians normally assume the church should be run democratically since their civil government is democratic. This assumption is unbiblical. God's kingdom is not a democracy. How can we expect to induct into membership people who have never been taught the difference?

What will the church leadership say if a clique of members wants to overthrow the doctrine of the Trinity by congregational vote? Receiving people as members into the church who are unclear as to what it stands for is a formula for division and confusion.

### **Westminster Confession and Christian Prudence**

The Westminster Assembly of 1648 in England put together a declaration of the fundamentals of Protestant theology. Presbyterians, some Baptists, and others accept it in various forms as their standard of faith. The Westminster Confession recognized that Scripture does not specifically command some church government practices. Common sense and Christian principles guide us at that point.

... and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and the government of the church common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. WCF 1-6.

We do not need a chapter and verse to justify everything we do in church government. As long as an administrative practice fits within the norms of common sense, Christian conduct, and the general principles of scripture, we may consider it biblical. Nevertheless, we do see verses from which we can draw strong inferences for the official church membership directory.

### **Biblical Evidence for Membership Rolls**

The Presbyterian Church in America, a strongly conservative denomination, did a study on this point and published it in their **POSITION PAPERS**, which deals with secondary doctrinal issues:<sup>4</sup>

- ... The clear evidence of Scripture is that the church should keep a roll of members. The supreme model for our membership roll is the membership roll of heaven. Exodus 32:32, 33; Daniel 12:1; Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:3; Revelation 13:8; 20:12, 15
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- The Biblical pattern is for new believers to be *numbered* or *added to* the rolls of the local church—Acts 2:41, 47; 6:7; 1 Timothy 5:9
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- Members could be taken away from the roll (1 Corinthians 5:2—this indicates more than being physically barred, since even unbelievers could attend Christian worship—1 Corinthians 14:23) or reinstated—2 Corinthians 2:6-7
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- It is impossible to have coherent discipline without such a role. There was a widow's roll for diaconal purposes—I Timothy 5:9
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- Elders are to know their sheep, and are accountable for the care of the flock entrusted to them—this demands knowing who they are; that is, it demands a

list or roll—Hebrews 13:7, 17-19; 1 Thessalonians 5:11-14; 1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28

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- The apostolic church utilized letters of transfer or commendation (Acts 18:27; Romans 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 3:1; 8:23-24); examples of these letters include Philemon and 3 John. Interchurch business was conducted by people with reference letters. 1 Corinthians 16:3; 2 Corinthians 8:16-24
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- We conclude, therefore, that requiring professed believers to be enrolled as members of an evangelical church as a condition for taking the Lord's Supper is consistent with sound Biblical practice.
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## **Conclusion**

A specific church membership directory, along with an inquirer's class previous to membership, seems reasonable, necessary, and biblical.

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<sup>1</sup> Louw and Nida, Accordance Bible Program.

<sup>2</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC translation into Greek of the Old Testament; the Bible of the apostles.

<sup>3</sup> Deut.23:3-4

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<sup>4</sup> PCA Position Papers, CEP Publications, Lawrenceville, GA, 1993, Vol. V, P. 299