

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 4: CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

The Gathered and Committed People of God

Lesson 10

THE CASE FOR FORMAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Why Commitment to a Local Body Is Not Optional

Church membership is not a bureaucratic formality. It is a covenant, a named, mutual, accountable commitment between a believer and a particular body of Christ's people.

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.”

Hebrews 13:17, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Acts 2:41–47; 1 Corinthians 5:12–13; 1 Peter 5:1–4; Hebrews 13:17; Hebrews 10:24–25

“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Introduction

The question seems almost too obvious to ask: should a Christian be a member of a local church? In most of the history of the Western church, the question would have been incomprehensible. Of course a Christian belongs to a church; that is what Christians do. The community of the baptized has always been the visible, institutional form of the Christian life in the world. But in the contemporary evangelical landscape, the question is not only asked but increasingly answered in the negative, not by those who are hostile to Christianity but by those who are sincere in their faith, deeply invested in theological formation, and genuinely committed to Christ. The “spiritual but not churchly” Christian is not a fringe phenomenon. He is a representative figure in the religious landscape of the twenty-first century, and the local church’s failure to make a compelling case for formal membership has contributed significantly to his existence.

This lesson makes that case. It does so not by appealing to tradition, institutional loyalty, or pragmatic effectiveness, but by examining the New Testament’s own assumptions about the nature of the gathered community. The thesis is simple and the evidence for it is substantial: the New Testament everywhere assumes that Christians belong to specific, identifiable, committed, accountable local congregations, that those congregations have defined membership, and that the entire structure of the church’s life, her discipline, her pastoral oversight, her fellowship, her mission, her worship, presupposes a community of named and known individuals who are genuinely committed to one another and to the body’s common life. Formal church membership, understood not as a bureaucratic technicality but as a covenantal commitment, is the visible institutional expression of that presupposed reality.

The word “membership” does not appear in the New Testament in the modern organizational sense, and this fact is sometimes invoked as an argument against the practice. The argument is weak. The absence of the specific term is entirely consistent with the presence of the underlying reality, and the underlying reality, a defined community of named individuals under pastoral oversight, bearing mutual covenantal obligations, exercising discipline over one another, celebrating the ordinances together, is present in the New Testament with unmistakable clarity. The concept of church membership is to the New Testament what the concept of the Trinity is: not a term that appears in the text, but a reality that the text everywhere assumes and requires. To reject church membership because the New Testament does not use the specific word is like rejecting the Trinity because the New Testament does not use the specific term.

The lesson opens Unit 4, which treats church membership across three lessons: this lesson makes the case for formal membership from the New Testament’s own assumptions; Lesson 11 addresses the specifically Baptist doctrine of regenerate church membership; and Lesson 12 surveys the privileges and responsibilities of covenant membership. The three lessons together constitute the most practically immediate section of the series, the section that most directly addresses what it means, week by week and year by year, to belong to a specific congregation as a covenanted, committed, accountable member of the body of Christ.

I. WHAT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IS

A Covenantal Commitment, Not an Organizational Formality

A. *Defining Church Membership*

Church membership is a covenantal commitment, a named, mutual, accountable relationship between a specific believer and a specific local congregation, in which both parties make promises to one another that they intend to keep. The congregation promises to preach the Word faithfully to this person, to administer the ordinances to her, to provide pastoral care and oversight, to pray for her, to bear her burdens, and to pursue her in the process of Matthew 18 if her conduct publicly contradicts her profession. The member promises to attend faithfully, to give generously of time and financial resources, to serve in the congregation's ministries, to submit to the oversight of the elders, to pursue holiness in life and conduct, to bear the burdens of fellow members, and to contribute her gifts to the body's common life. These mutual promises are the substance of church membership; the formal process of reception is simply the moment at which they are publicly made.

This covenantal definition of church membership must be distinguished from two inadequate alternatives that are common in contemporary practice. The first is the institutional definition: membership as a bureaucratic status that grants access to certain services and programs, carries no substantive obligations beyond nominal participation, and can be dissolved at any time without significant consequence. Many evangelical churches operate with a de facto institutional definition of membership, even when their stated theology is more robust, the membership roll is large, but the substantive difference between members and regular attenders is negligible. The second inadequate alternative is the purely relational definition: community as the sum of informal relationships between people who happen to gather in the same place, without the formal commitment that makes mutual accountability possible. Many house church and emergent church communities operate with this relational definition, valuing the organic over the formal and suspicious of any institutional expression of belonging.

The covenantal definition honors what is valid in both alternatives, the relational warmth of genuine community and the institutional structure that makes accountability possible, while correcting what is deficient in each. The covenant makes the relational commitment formal and accountable: it names the obligations that the community creates, assigns them to specific people, and creates a structure within which those obligations can be maintained and, if necessary, enforced. And it makes the institutional structure personal and substantive: the formal commitment is not a bureaucratic status but a genuine promise, made by specific people to specific people, in the presence of God and the congregation. The church covenant, the written document that many Baptist congregations use to formalize membership, is the most explicit institutional expression of this covenantal definition, but the covenantal reality is present wherever genuine, committed, mutual membership is practiced, whether or not a formal document is involved.

B. *The Covenantal Logic of Membership*

The covenantal logic of church membership flows directly from the covenantal nature of the church herself. The church is the new covenant community, the people constituted by the new covenant established through the

blood of Christ. New covenant membership is inherently covenantal: it involves specific promises (God's to His people and His people's to Him), specific obligations (the moral and spiritual requirements of covenant faithfulness), and specific consequences for covenant violation (discipline, up to and including exclusion from the community if the covenant is persistently and publicly broken). If the new covenant is genuinely covenantal, then the community that lives under the new covenant must organize its common life on covenantal lines. Formal church membership is not an imposition of human institutional structures on a purely spiritual reality; it is the appropriate visible, institutional expression of the covenantal reality that defines the church's existence.

The covenantal logic also explains why church membership is mutual, why it involves obligations for both the congregation and the individual member. A covenant is a bilateral commitment: both parties make promises, and both parties are held to them. The congregation that receives a member into its covenant community is not merely granting the member access to its services; it is committing itself to specific obligations of care, instruction, oversight, and accountability toward that member. And the member who joins the congregation is not merely acquiring a status; he or she is committing to specific obligations of attendance, giving, service, submission, and mutual care. The mutuality of these obligations is what distinguishes genuine covenant membership from the consumer model's church relationship, in which the congregation is the service provider and the attender is the customer with no reciprocal obligations.

The covenantal nature of membership also gives it a weight and seriousness that the contemporary church has largely lost. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the reception of a new member into a Particular Baptist congregation was a solemn act: the congregation examined the candidate's profession, the candidate affirmed the church's covenant before the assembly, and the congregation received the new member with prayer, the right hand of fellowship, and an explicit acknowledgment of the mutual obligations thereby incurred. The solemnity of the act reflected the seriousness of the covenant being made. The recovery of that solemnity, the recovery of a sense that membership is a significant, binding, mutual commitment made before God and the congregation, is one of the most important pastoral tasks facing the contemporary church.

II. THE NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

Defined Community Everywhere Assumed

A. *The "One Another" Commands Presuppose a Known Community*

The most pervasive evidence for church membership in the New Testament is the body of "one another" commands that appear throughout the epistles. Love one another (John 13:34–35; Romans 13:8; 1 Peter 1:22). Bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another (James 5:16). Encourage one another and build one another up (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21). Stimulate one another to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24). The list is extensive, scholars count more than fifty distinct "one another" commands in the New Testament, and the collective weight of these commands presupposes a community of people who know one another with the depth and regularity that makes such commands actionable.

The "one another" commands cannot be fulfilled in the abstract. You cannot bear the burden of someone you do not know. You cannot confess your sins to someone you will never see again. You cannot genuinely forgive

someone from whom you are relationally disengaged. You cannot stimulate someone to love and good deeds without the kind of sustained, regular, personal engagement that allows you to observe their spiritual condition and speak into their lives with pastoral specificity. Every one of these commands presupposes a community of people who are in genuine, ongoing, face-to-face relationship, people who know each other's names, circumstances, struggles, and gifts, and who have made a commitment to one another that makes the long-term fulfillment of these mutual obligations possible. That is precisely what formal church membership provides and what informal attendance cannot: the named, committed, accountable community that the "one another" commands require.

The depth of community that the "one another" commands require is not achievable through occasional attendance at a large gathering. It requires the kind of sustained, regular, deeply personal engagement that only a specific, committed, defined community can provide. The believer who attends a large church service on Sunday mornings but maintains no formal membership, no regular participation in a small community within the church, and no committed relationship with specific members and leaders has no realistic means of fulfilling the "one another" commands that the New Testament addresses to the gathered community. He is present in the building but absent from the community, a regular attender but not a covenant member, receiving the benefits of the gathered assembly without bearing the obligations that genuine community creates.

B. Lists, Numbers, and Defined Boundaries

A second category of New Testament evidence for defined church membership is the consistent pattern of counting and listing that appears in the early church's records. Acts 2:41 records that on the day of Pentecost, "there were added that day about three thousand souls." The language of addition, "there were added", presupposes a community to which the new believers were added. You cannot add to a group that has no defined membership. Acts 2:47 repeats the pattern: "The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." Again, the addition presupposes a defined number, a community whose boundaries are clear enough that an addition to it can be recognized and recorded. Acts 4:4 notes that the number of the men came to be about five thousand. The early church kept track of its members, and this tracking reflects an understanding of the community as a defined, bounded group with a specific membership.

First Timothy 5:9 provides a particularly instructive example: "Let a widow be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old." Paul is addressing a specific formal list of widows who are supported by the congregation, a list with defined criteria for inclusion. The existence of this list presupposes a congregation with defined membership and formal processes for managing its community obligations. The congregation must be able to distinguish between those who are formally enrolled as widows under the congregation's care and those who are not. This is impossible without defined membership. The same logic applies to every function of the congregation that requires a defined community: the exercise of discipline (you cannot remove from among yourselves someone who is not clearly among you in the first place), the exercise of pastoral oversight (the elders cannot shepherd an indefinite and undefined flock), and the exercise of the ordinances (the Lord's Supper is fenced to those who are members of the covenant community in good standing).

The pattern of defined community is also evident in the way the New Testament letters address their recipients. When Paul writes "to the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1:2), he is addressing a specific, identifiable community, not a general audience of anyone in Corinth who might identify as Christian, but a specific assembly of people whose identity as "the church at Corinth" is sufficiently clear that the letter can be

meaningfully addressed to them. When the Revelation letters are addressed to the seven churches, each letter is addressed to a specific community with specific characteristics, a community so well-defined that Christ can say to one of them, “I know your deeds” (Revelation 2:2), implying that the deeds of this specific community, in distinction from other communities, are within Christ’s focused pastoral attention. The New Testament’s own way of addressing the church presupposes defined, specific, identifiable local communities, which is to say, it presupposes church membership.

III. DISCIPLINE PRESUPPOSES MEMBERSHIP

You Cannot Remove from an Undefined Community

A. The Logical Necessity of Membership for Discipline

Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 5:12–13 is perhaps the clearest implicit evidence for defined church membership in the entire New Testament: “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.” The distinction Paul draws, between those who are “within the church” and those who are “outside”, is a distinction between members and non-members. Paul is not drawing a theological distinction between the saved and the unsaved; he is drawing an ecclesiological distinction between those who belong to the defined covenant community and those who do not. The discipline he commands, “remove the wicked man from among yourselves”, is only possible if “among yourselves” has a defined meaning: if there is a community with clear enough membership that someone can be recognized as part of it and removed from it.

The logic is inescapable: you cannot remove someone from a community to which they have never formally belonged. The discipline process of Matthew 18:15–20, which culminates in the person being treated “as a Gentile and a tax collector”, as an outsider, only makes sense if the person was previously an insider. The distinction between insider and outsider, between the within-the-church and the outside, between member and non-member, is the ecclesiological distinction that makes church discipline logically possible. A congregation that has no formal membership has, by that very fact, abandoned the possibility of meaningful church discipline, because it has abolished the distinction between inside and outside on which discipline depends. The “done with church” Christian who attends occasionally and maintains no formal membership commitment cannot be disciplined by any congregation, because no congregation can meaningfully claim him as one of its members from whom it might remove him.

The connection between membership and discipline is also visible in Paul’s instruction in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15, where he instructs the congregation to “keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life.” The ability to “keep away” from a specific person, to withdraw the ordinary fellowship of the community from someone whose conduct violates the community’s standards, presupposes a defined community whose fellowship is sufficiently structured that it can be withheld from a specific member. The withdrawal of fellowship is meaningful only in the context of a community whose fellowship is normally present and whose membership has defined boundaries. In a community with no formal membership, there is no fellowship to withdraw, no inside from which someone can be excluded, and therefore no discipline in any meaningful sense of the word.

B. Membership as the Foundation of Genuine Accountability

The deeper theological point behind the logical necessity of membership for discipline is that genuine accountability requires genuine commitment. The accountability that church membership provides is not the accountability of a monitoring system imposed by an institution on individuals who happen to occupy its space; it is the accountability of a covenant community in which individuals have voluntarily placed themselves under the oversight of appointed leaders and the mutual care of fellow members. This voluntary placement is what gives the accountability its moral weight. The member who has publicly made the covenant commitments of membership has, in effect, invited the congregation's accountability into his life, he has said, in the presence of God and the assembled body, that he wants to be known, that he wants to be held to account, and that he consents to the process that Christ prescribed in Matthew 18 if his conduct departs from the covenant he has made.

This voluntary accountability is not legalistic coercion; it is the mature recognition that human beings, including regenerate human beings, need external accountability to sustain the commitments they have made. Paul's observation in Romans 7:14–25, the conflict between the law of the mind and the law of sin working in the members, is not a description of unregenerate moral failure but of the regenerate believer's experience of the ongoing struggle against indwelling sin. The believer who recognizes this reality about himself will not resent accountability as an intrusion on his spiritual autonomy; he will welcome it as a means of grace that helps him maintain the integrity of the covenantal commitments he has made. The church member who submits to elder oversight and mutual accountability is not surrendering his freedom; he is exercising the wisdom to recognize that he needs precisely the kind of sustained, knowledgeable, covenantally grounded oversight that formal membership provides.

The practical failure of accountability in the contemporary church is directly traceable to the collapse of formal membership as a substantive covenantal commitment. In churches where membership is a nominal status rather than a genuine covenant, the elders have no real basis for holding members accountable, because the members have made no real commitment that accountability can address. The member who has never made explicit covenant promises to the congregation cannot be meaningfully held to those promises. The elder who has never been given a defined flock cannot shepherd a flock he does not have. The discipline process of Matthew 18 cannot be initiated against someone who is not clearly within the community from which he would be removed. The recovery of genuine accountability in the contemporary church requires, as a prior condition, the recovery of genuine church membership as a substantive covenantal commitment.

IV. PASTORAL OVERSIGHT PRESUPPOSES MEMBERSHIP

You Cannot Shepherd an Undefined Flock

A. The Elder's Accountability for Specific Souls

Hebrews 13:17 places the pastoral office in a framework of direct, personal, and ultimately eschatological accountability: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." Three features of this verse are directly relevant to the membership question. First, the oversight is personal: the elders "keep

watch over your souls”, not over a general population of religious consumers, but over the souls of specific, known individuals who have committed themselves to the community’s oversight. Second, the accountability is eschatological: the elders will “give an account”, presumably to God, at the final judgment, for the quality of their stewardship of the souls entrusted to them. Third, the relationship is mutual: the members’ obligation to submit to the elders’ oversight is grounded in the elders’ obligation to watch over the members’ souls.

The eschatological accountability of Hebrews 13:17 is only meaningful if the elders know which souls they are accountable for. You cannot give an account for souls you have not watched over; you cannot watch over souls you do not know; you cannot know the souls of people who have never committed themselves to your congregation’s oversight. The elder who attempts to exercise pastoral care over an anonymous and undefined population of Sunday morning attenders is not fulfilling the mandate of Hebrews 13:17; he is engaging in a form of pastoral activity that lacks the specific, personal, accountable character that the text describes. The flock that the elder is called to shepherd must have defined boundaries, specific, named individuals whose welfare the elder is specifically responsible for, or the shepherding metaphor becomes unworkable.

Peter’s charge to the elders in 1 Peter 5:1–4 reinforces this point: “shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.” The phrase “those allotted to your charge”, the Greek *klēros*, from which our word “clergy” derives, designates a specific portion, a defined allotment: this flock, these people, the ones God has specifically placed under this elder’s oversight. The elder does not shepherd a general Christian population; he shepherds a specific, defined community of people who are specifically his responsibility. This specific allotment presupposes defined membership: the elder’s flock has named members, and the elder’s accountability is specific to them.

B. Pastoral Care Requires Personal Knowledge

The New Testament’s vision of pastoral care is intensely personal and relational, the opposite of the institutional, programmatic, anonymous model of pastoral ministry that large, undefined congregations tend to produce. Paul’s pastoral practice as reflected in his letters is characterized by specific personal knowledge of specific individuals: he knows Euodia and Syntyche by name (Philippians 4:2), knows that Epaphroditus has been ill (Philippians 2:26–27), knows the specific doctrinal situation of each of the seven churches (Revelation 2–3), and addresses specific individuals by name in his letter closings. The pastoral relationships reflected in these texts are specific, personal, and sustained, the relationships of a shepherd who knows his sheep, not of an administrator who manages a population.

This level of pastoral specificity requires defined membership. The elder who does not know his congregation’s membership, who cannot name his members, who does not know their circumstances, who has no regular contact with them beyond the Sunday morning gathering, cannot provide the pastoral care that Paul’s model envisions and Hebrews 13:17 requires. And the congregation that has no defined membership makes this level of pastoral knowledge impossible: the elders cannot know every person who occasionally attends a Sunday service, cannot maintain ongoing pastoral relationships with people who have made no commitment to the community, and cannot keep watch over souls who have not placed themselves under their care.

The practical consequence is that the quality of pastoral care in a congregation is directly correlated with the seriousness with which the congregation maintains defined membership. Congregations with robust membership

practices, where members are known by name, where the elders make regular contact with members, where the congregation's ministry is organized around the specific needs of its defined community, provide the kind of pastoral care that the New Testament's model of shepherding envisions. Congregations with nominal or undefined membership, where the distinction between members and regular attenders is negligible, where the elders' pastoral attention is spread thin across a large, anonymous population, cannot provide the specific, personal, sustained care that genuine shepherding requires. The recovery of pastoral care in the contemporary church is inseparable from the recovery of genuine church membership.

V. THE MUTUAL OBLIGATIONS OF MEMBERSHIP

What the Congregation Commits to the Member, and Vice Versa

A. *The Congregation's Obligations to the Member*

The covenantal nature of church membership means that the congregation assumes specific obligations toward every person it receives into formal membership. These obligations are not merely aspirational; they are covenantal commitments that the congregation makes when it receives a new member through the right hand of fellowship. The first and most fundamental obligation is the faithful preaching of the Word: the congregation, through its pastor and elders, commits to provide every member with the regular, expository, theologically substantive proclamation of the whole counsel of God. This is not merely a service that the congregation offers; it is a covenant commitment to the spiritual nourishment of every member through the ordained means of grace that Christ has appointed.

The congregation's second obligation is the right administration of the ordinances: the commitment to baptize those who profess faith and to administer the Lord's Supper regularly as the community's enacted proclamation of the Lord's death and the renewal of the new covenant relationship. The third obligation is pastoral care: the commitment of the elders to know each member personally, to pray for each member by name, to visit in times of illness and crisis, to provide counsel in times of spiritual struggle, and to exercise the ongoing oversight that Hebrews 13:17 describes. The fourth obligation is church discipline: the congregation's commitment to pursue every member who departs from covenant faithfulness through the process of Matthew 18, seeking the member's restoration before resorting to exclusion. This commitment is an act of love, not of institutional self-protection; the congregation disciplines its members because it has promised to do so, and because the love that membership creates requires it.

The fifth obligation is the mutual bearing of burdens, the congregation's commitment to provide practical, material, and emotional support to members in need, as an expression of the *koinōnia* that genuine covenant community creates. The early church's practice of having all things in common (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35) was not a proto-communist economic program; it was the natural expression of a covenant community in which the needs of specific, known members were the responsibility of the whole body. The congregation that formally receives a member into its community is committing, in principle, to provide that kind of support when it is needed, not from institutional obligation but from covenantal love. This commitment is what distinguishes genuine covenant membership from nominal institutional affiliation: the covenant community is one in which members actually bear one another's burdens.

B. The Member's Obligations to the Congregation

The obligations flow in both directions. The member who is formally received into the covenant community assumes specific obligations toward the congregation that are the mirror of the congregation's obligations toward him. The first is faithful attendance: the obligation to be present at the congregation's regular gatherings for worship, the Word, and the ordinances. Hebrews 10:24–25 identifies the forsaking of “our own assembling” as a specific failure, not merely a matter of personal spiritual preference but a violation of the covenantal commitment that the member has made to the community. The member who regularly absents himself from the gathered assembly is not merely missing a spiritual resource; he is failing in a covenantal obligation to a community that has promised to watch over his soul.

The second obligation is generous giving: the commitment to support the congregation's ministry through regular, sacrificial, and cheerful financial contribution. Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 16:1–2, “on the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper”, is addressed to the local congregation's members, who are expected to contribute to the common financial resources that support the church's ministry. The New Testament nowhere presents tithing as a new covenant requirement in the legal sense, but it consistently presents generous, regular, proportional giving to the local church as the normal expression of the member's covenantal commitment. The third obligation is faithful service: the exercise of the member's spiritual gifts within the congregation's ministry, contributing to the every-member ministry model of Ephesians 4 that makes the body's growth possible.

The fourth obligation is submission to elder oversight: the member's commitment to receive the elders' pastoral care, to submit to the elders' teaching authority, and to respond to the elders' counsel with the trust and submission that Hebrews 13:17 commends. This obligation does not require blind deference to every pastoral judgment; elders are fallible human beings, and the congregation that holds its elders accountable to Scripture and to their covenant commitments is doing its pastoral duty. But it does require a disposition of genuine trust, genuine submission, and genuine receptivity toward the elders' ministry that is possible only in the context of a real covenantal relationship. The fifth obligation is the pursuit of holiness in community: the member's commitment to live in a manner consistent with the covenant identity he has publicly claimed, to be honest about his failures within the community, and to submit to the community's accountability processes when his conduct departs from the covenant's demands.

VI. THE CHURCH COVENANT

Formalizing the Mutual Commitments of Membership

A. The History and Purpose of the Church Covenant

The church covenant, a written document expressing the mutual commitments of the members and the congregation, has been a characteristic feature of Particular Baptist ecclesiology since the seventeenth century. The earliest Baptist church covenants were simple, spare documents that named the essential commitments of the gathered community: to walk together in fellowship, to bear one another's burdens, to support the congregation's ministry, to submit to the discipline of the body, and to pursue the holiness that the gospel

requires. Their simplicity reflected the Baptist conviction that the church is constituted not by elaborate institutional structure but by the voluntary covenantal commitment of regenerate believers to one another and to the Lord they serve together.

The church covenant serves several important ecclesiological functions. First, it makes the covenantal nature of membership explicit and visible: when a new member signs or affirms the covenant before the congregation, both parties are reminded that membership is a serious, mutual, binding commitment, not a casual institutional affiliation. Second, it provides a concrete standard against which covenant faithfulness can be assessed: the covenant names the specific obligations that membership entails, so that both the elders and the congregation can identify when a member's conduct has departed from what he or she has promised. Third, it serves as a formative document: a church covenant that is regularly read aloud, regularly commended to new members, and regularly reflected upon in the congregation's teaching ministry serves as a catechism of covenant membership, forming the congregation's identity and expectations over time.

The church covenant must be distinguished from a creedal statement or a doctrinal confession. The confession tells the congregation what it believes; the covenant describes how the congregation intends to live together in light of what it believes. The two documents serve different but complementary functions: the confession anchors the community in the apostolic deposit; the covenant commits the community to the specific practices of mutual obligation that the apostolic deposit requires. Many Baptist congregations maintain both: a confession that defines the doctrinal standards of membership and a covenant that defines the behavioral and relational commitments of members. Together they constitute a comprehensive framework for the community's life, what it believes and how it lives in light of what it believes.

B. The Pastoral Appeal: Membership Is Not Legalism

The most common pastoral objection to formal church membership, particularly from those formed in more informal evangelical contexts, is that it smells of legalism: the imposition of institutional requirements on what should be a free, organic, Spirit-led community life. This objection deserves a direct and honest response, because it reflects a genuine concern about the difference between the freedom of the gospel and the burden of institutional obligation. The response is not to dismiss the concern but to reframe it correctly. Membership is not legalism because it is not a condition of salvation; it is a covenant of community. No one enters the kingdom of God by being a church member, and no one is excluded from the kingdom of God by the lack of formal church membership. The covenant of membership is not a means of justification; it is an expression of sanctification, the visible, institutional form in which the believer's commitment to the body of Christ takes concrete, accountable shape.

The legalism objection also misidentifies the source of the obligation. Church membership is not an obligation imposed by an institution on an unwilling individual; it is a commitment made by a willing believer to a specific community, in the recognition that this commitment is the appropriate expression of the covenantal life that the gospel creates. The believer who resists formal membership on the grounds that it is institutional and constraining has confused the freedom of the gospel with the absence of covenant obligations. The gospel creates covenant obligations, to love God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Church membership is the specific, local, community-shaped expression of the love-for-neighbor obligation in the context of the covenant community. To resist it on the grounds of freedom from legalism is to confuse evangelical liberty with the absence of any binding commitment to specific people in a specific place.

The pastoral appeal is therefore not “you must join a church or you are in spiritual danger”, though that observation has merit. It is: “You have been loved by a Savior who gave Himself for a community. You have been regenerated by a Spirit who places you in a body. You have been given gifts that are for the common good of the body. You have been called to the ‘one another’ life that the New Testament describes. All of that is real, and all of it requires a community in which it takes place. Formal church membership is simply the visible, public, covenantal expression of the community you are already part of in the Spirit. To resist it is not freedom; it is the refusal to let your spiritual reality take its appropriate visible, institutional, accountable form.” Membership is the body’s way of saying: we know you, we love you, we are responsible for you, and you are responsible for us. That is not legalism. That is the New Testament.

VII. OBJECTIONS AND ANSWERS

Common Resistances and the Biblical Response

A. *The New Testament Doesn’t Mention Formal Membership*

The most intellectually serious objection to formal church membership is the one already addressed in the introduction: the New Testament does not use the specific term or describe a formal membership process. This objection is worth addressing with more specificity than the introduction allowed. It is true that the New Testament does not describe anything precisely analogous to the modern membership process, the written application, the new member class, the public affirmation of the church covenant, the reception into formal membership. But the objection proves too much. The New Testament also does not describe anything analogous to the modern order of service, the printed bulletin, the church constitution, or the weekly nursery rotation schedule. The absence of these institutional particulars in the New Testament does not mean that they are illegitimate; it means that they are the church’s appropriate institutional expressions of principles and realities that the New Testament does describe.

The principles and realities that the New Testament does describe, defined community, mutual accountability, pastoral oversight of a specific flock, discipline requiring an inside from which someone can be removed, all require formal membership as their appropriate institutional expression in any organized community of any size. The early church’s practice of adding specific numbers to a community (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4), listing specific categories of members (1 Timothy 5:9), distinguishing between those inside and outside the church (1 Corinthians 5:12–13), and holding specific elders accountable for specific souls (Hebrews 13:17) are all evidence of defined membership as a functional reality, even if the modern formal process was not yet in place. The absence of the process does not indicate the absence of the reality; it indicates that the reality was so thoroughly assumed that no formal process needed to be established for communities of the apostolic era’s scale and social context.

The argument from the New Testament’s silence is also structurally flawed because it confuses the form with the substance. The substance of church membership, defined community, mutual covenantal obligation, pastoral accountability, discipline, is everywhere present in the New Testament. The form, the specific institutional processes through which that substance is expressed and managed, is appropriately developed by each congregation in light of its own size, cultural context, and organizational needs. A first-century congregation of two hundred people meeting in a private home in Ephesus does not need the same formal membership process

as a twenty-first century congregation of three hundred people meeting in a dedicated building in Greenville, Texas. But both congregations need the substance of defined membership, and the appropriate form for expressing and protecting that substance in the contemporary context is the formal membership process that generations of Baptist churches have found to be most effective.

B. I Attend Faithfully, Isn't That Enough?

The second most common objection to formal membership comes from those who are regular, faithful, generous attenders of a local congregation but who have not taken the step of formal membership. Their argument is essentially pragmatic: I am here every Sunday, I give regularly, I serve in ministry, I know the people and they know me, what does the formal membership step add that my faithful attendance has not already established? This is the most sympathetic objection, because it comes from people who are already doing much of what covenant membership involves. The answer is not that formal membership adds new obligations that faithful attendance does not; it is that formal membership makes those obligations explicit, mutual, and accountable in a way that mere attendance cannot.

The faithful attender who has not formally joined the congregation remains, from the congregation's perspective, someone who might leave at any time without the covenantal complications that formal membership creates. He has not made explicit promises to the congregation; the congregation has not made explicit promises to him. He has not placed himself under the elders' oversight in a formal, publicly acknowledged way; the elders cannot hold him accountable for the covenant he has never made. He cannot be meaningfully disciplined if his conduct departs from what his profession requires, because he has made no formal profession of covenant commitment to the community. His faithful attendance is genuinely valuable and genuinely commended; but it is not a substitute for the covenantal commitment that formal membership involves. The step of formal membership is the step by which the faithful attender says: I am not merely here; I am committed. I am not merely present; I am accountable. I am not merely giving my attendance; I am giving my covenant.

The pastoral call is gentle but clear: if you love this congregation, if you are here every Sunday, if you are already giving and serving and engaging, then take the formal step. The formal step does not change the practical reality of your participation; it expresses and confirms it in a way that is accountable, mutual, and covenantally significant. It says to the elders: I am placing myself under your oversight. It says to the congregation: I am one of you, and you may hold me to what I profess. It says to yourself: I am not attending a religious event; I am belonging to a people. And it says to the Lord: the commitment I have made in private and in practice, I am now making publicly and covenantally, before the assembled community that is the body of Your Son. That is a step worth taking.

“Not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

Hebrews 10:25, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Church Membership	A covenantal commitment between a specific believer and a specific local congregation, in which both parties make mutual promises of care, accountability, and service. Grounded in the New Testament's consistent assumption of defined, committed, identifiable local communities. Not a bureaucratic formality but the visible, institutional expression of the covenantal life that the gospel creates.
Church Covenant	A written document, characteristic of Particular Baptist ecclesiology since the seventeenth century, expressing the mutual commitments of the members and the congregation. Distinct from a confessional statement (which defines what the community believes), the church covenant defines how the community intends to live together in light of what it believes. Serves to make the covenantal nature of membership explicit, visible, and formatively regular.
Covenantal Accountability	The mutual obligation of members within a local church to one another and to their appointed leaders. Made possible by and grounded in formal membership, which defines the community within which accountability operates and the specific obligations to which members can be held. Distinguished from informal relational accountability by its explicit, named, voluntary character.
One Another Commands	The body of approximately fifty distinct commands in the New Testament addressed to members of the covenant community regarding their obligations to fellow members: love one another, bear one another's burdens, forgive one another, confess to one another, encourage one another, submit to one another. These commands presuppose a defined community of named, known individuals committed to one another in sustained relationship, the community that formal church membership establishes and maintains.
Right Hand of Fellowship	The traditional gesture accompanying the formal reception of a new member into the local church, expressing the congregation's acceptance of the new member into the covenant community and the member's formal entry into the mutual obligations of membership. Drawn from Paul's description of the Jerusalem apostles extending "the right hand of fellowship" to himself and Barnabas (Galatians 2:9).
Koinonia	The Greek word translated "fellowship" in the New Testament, describing the deep, participatory, mutually committed community life of the covenant assembly (Acts 2:42). Not merely warm social interaction but the genuine sharing of life, resources, burdens, and spiritual labor among those who are genuinely committed to one another. The fullness of koinōnia is only possible in a defined covenant community where members have made explicit mutual commitments.
Kleros	The Greek word translated "those allotted to your charge" in 1 Peter 5:3 (from which the English word "clergy" is derived). Refers to the specific portion or allotment of the flock that God has placed under a particular elder's oversight. The word's use implies a defined membership: the elder's flock has specific, named members who constitute his specific pastoral responsibility.
Nominal Membership	The condition of a church whose membership roll is large but whose formal distinction between members and regular attenders is negligible, where membership confers a status without substantive covenantal obligations or meaningful accountability. Distinguished from genuine covenant membership by the absence of mutual, explicit, binding commitments between the congregation and the member.
Reception	The formal process by which a new member is received into the covenant community of a local church, typically involving an examination of the candidate's profession of faith, the

	candidate's affirmation of the church's covenant, the congregation's vote of affirmation, and a formal act of reception (the right hand of fellowship) before the gathered assembly. The reception process is the institutional expression of the covenantal commitment that membership involves.
Every-Member Ministry	The New Testament's model of congregational life in which every member of the covenant community has been given a spiritual gift for the common good and is expected to exercise that gift within the gathered assembly (1 Corinthians 12:7; Ephesians 4:11–16). Formal membership provides the communal context, the defined, committed, accountable community, within which every-member ministry is possible and sustainable.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that formal church membership is not an institutional technicality but a covenantal commitment, the visible, public, accountable expression of the believer's participation in the new covenant community. This conviction does not require the elevation of any particular form of the membership process to the status of a biblical command; it does require the recognition that the substance of defined, committed, accountable community is a biblical reality that every faithful local church must express in some formal and institutionally appropriate way. The specific process matters less than the covenantal substance; but the covenantal substance is not optional.

We must believe that the New Testament's assumptions about the church, defined community, mutual covenantal obligation, pastoral oversight of a specific flock, discipline requiring a definable inside, all require formal membership as their appropriate institutional expression. The absence of the specific term in the New Testament is no argument against the practice, any more than the absence of the term "Trinity" is an argument against the doctrine. The concept is everywhere present in the reality; the formal expression is the church's responsible institutionalization of that reality in a way appropriate to her size, context, and organizational needs.

We must believe that the mutual obligations of membership, the congregation's obligations to the member and the member's obligations to the congregation, are genuine covenantal commitments that carry the weight of promises made before God and the assembled community. This means that both parties are morally accountable for fulfilling what they have promised: the congregation must preach, administer the ordinances, provide pastoral care, exercise discipline, and bear burdens; the member must attend, give, serve, submit to oversight, pursue holiness, and bear the burdens of fellow members. Neither party can default on its covenant obligations without consequences for the community's integrity and the member's spiritual health.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel the weight of the covenantal commitment that membership involves and carry it with seriousness. The believer who treats church membership as a bureaucratic formality, something to be completed in order to gain access to a service, has not understood what he has done. He has made promises to specific people in the presence of God. He has placed himself under the care of appointed leaders who will give an account for his soul. He has committed to the long, slow, sometimes difficult work of building up a specific body in love. That is not a trivial institutional transaction; it is a covenant act with moral weight, pastoral consequence, and eschatological significance.

We should feel a genuine desire for every person in this congregation who is a regular attender but has not yet taken the step of formal membership to take that step. Not as a desire for institutional tidiness or numerical completeness in the membership roll, but as a pastoral desire for their own welfare: for them to be known, cared for, held accountable, and genuinely incorporated into the covenant community in a way that protects and advances their spiritual health. The informal attender is missing something real: the specific pastoral attention that membership enables, the specific accountability that covenant commitment provides, and the specific spiritual investment that comes from belonging to a community that has promised to watch over your soul.

We should desire for this congregation's membership to be substantive rather than nominal, for the difference between being a member and being a regular attendee to be genuinely meaningful in terms of mutual obligation, pastoral accountability, and covenantal commitment. This means desiring a congregation in which the members know and are known, in which the elders can exercise genuine pastoral oversight of a defined flock, in which the covenantal obligations of membership are regularly taught, regularly affirmed, and regularly practiced. That is the kind of membership that the New Testament's own assumptions require, and the desire for it is a form of love for the church.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- If you are not a formally received member of this congregation, speak with the pastor or an elder about the membership process this week. The step of formal membership is not a high bar; it is the appropriate public expression of the covenantal commitment you are already making informally. Do not let the formality of the step be a barrier to taking it; let the covenantal significance of the step be a motivation.
- Read the church covenant of this congregation, or, if the congregation does not have a written covenant, ask the elders to describe the explicit obligations of membership, and examine your own practice against it. Are you attending faithfully? Are you giving generously? Are you serving in the congregation's actual ministries? Are you submitting to elder oversight? Are you pursuing holiness in your life and conduct? Are you bearing the burdens of your fellow members? Identify the obligation that your practice most needs to strengthen and make a specific, concrete commitment to strengthen it.
- Thank your elders this week for the pastoral oversight they provide. Hebrews 13:17 asks you to let them "do this with joy and not with grief", which means your submission, your responsiveness, and your gratitude are genuine gifts to those who are watching over your soul. A note, a conversation, or a specific expression of appreciation for something specific in their ministry is a meaningful act of covenantal faithfulness.
- Identify one person in this congregation whom you know is a regular attendee but has not formally joined the congregation. Pray for them specifically this week, and ask God for an opportunity to have a conversation with them about the covenantal significance of membership. Not a confrontational conversation, but a pastoral one: an invitation to take the step that makes their existing commitment explicit, mutual, and accountable.
- Commit to attending this congregation's members' meetings, business meetings, or whatever form of congregational governance is practiced here. These gatherings are the occasions when the covenant community exercises its collective responsibility for the congregation's life, receiving new members, making decisions about ministry direction, and expressing the congregational accountability that elder-led congregational polity requires. Your presence is not optional; it is a form of covenantal faithfulness.

Key Texts: Acts 2:41–47; 1 Corinthians 5:12–13; 1 Peter 5:1–4; Hebrews 13:17; Hebrews 10:24–25

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- What was your understanding of church membership before this lesson? Was it primarily institutional (a status that grants access to services), relational (the sum of informal community relationships), or covenantal (a mutual, binding commitment between a believer and a specific congregation)? What shaped that understanding, and how has this lesson refined or challenged it?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Acts 2:41–47. What specific words or phrases in verses 41 and 47 indicate that the early church had a defined, countable membership? What four activities characterized the community’s life in verse 42? What does the description of verses 44–47 reveal about the depth and specificity of the community relationships that the early church’s life together involved?
- Read 1 Corinthians 5:9–13. What distinction does Paul draw between those “within the church” and those “outside”? What practical activity does this distinction make possible in verse 13 (“Remove the wicked man from among yourselves”)? What does the logical structure of Paul’s argument in verses 12–13 imply about the necessity of defined membership for church discipline?
- Read 1 Peter 5:1–4. What does the phrase “those allotted to your charge” (verse 3) imply about the nature of the elder’s flock? What is the elder expected to know about this flock? What accountability does the elder face (verse 4: “when the Chief Shepherd appears”)? How does the specificity of this accountability language support the need for defined church membership?
- Read Hebrews 13:17. What specific obligations does the writer place on the congregation? What specific accountability do the leaders face? What does the phrase “they keep watch over your souls” imply about the nature of the pastoral relationship? What is the consequence of making the leaders’ work grievous rather than joyful?
- Read Hebrews 10:24–25. What two activities does the writer call for in verse 24? What specific behavior does verse 25 address, and what does the phrase “our own assembling” (as distinct from any assembling) imply about the nature of the relationship the writer envisions between the readers and their congregation?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the “one another” commands of the New Testament presuppose a defined community of named, known individuals committed to one another in sustained relationship. Is this argument compelling? Could the “one another” commands be fulfilled in an informal, non-membership community if the relationships were sufficiently deep and committed? What does formal membership add to informal relational community that makes it specifically necessary?
- The lesson distinguishes between the covenantal definition of church membership and two inadequate alternatives: the institutional definition (membership as bureaucratic status) and the relational definition (community as informal relationship). Is the covenantal definition practically distinguishable from the institutional? What specific features of the covenantal definition cannot be replicated by either of the inadequate alternatives?
- The lesson argues that the absence of the specific term “church membership” in the New Testament is no argument against the practice, just as the absence of the term “Trinity” is no argument against the doctrine.

Is this analogy apt? Are there important disanalogies between the two cases that affect the strength of the argument? How do you assess the claim that defined membership is “everywhere assumed” in the New Testament even though it is never explicitly commanded?

- The lesson claims that the pastoral quality of a congregation is directly correlated with the seriousness with which it maintains defined membership. Is this a defensible empirical claim? What evidence would you cite for or against it? Are there congregations with robust formal membership that nonetheless provide thin pastoral care, or congregations with informal membership structures that provide rich pastoral care? What does this evidence suggest about the relationship between membership and pastoral quality?
- The lesson addresses the legalism objection by distinguishing between membership as a condition of salvation (which would be legalism) and membership as an expression of sanctification (which is not). Is this distinction compelling? Is there a form of the legalism objection that this distinction does not adequately address? How would you respond to someone who says: “I am already sanctified, already in the Spirit, already in the body of Christ, why do I need an institutional formality to confirm what is already spiritually real?”

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- Examine the current practice of this congregation’s membership against the covenantal definition this lesson has established. Is the formal distinction between members and regular attenders substantively meaningful? Do the elders know their members by name? Are the mutual obligations of membership clearly communicated and consistently practiced? What is one specific change to the congregation’s membership practices that would bring it more fully into alignment with the covenantal model?
- Read this congregation’s church covenant (or the elders’ description of membership obligations) as a personal examination. For each obligation the covenant names, assess your own practice on a scale of one to five: five being consistent, faithful, and wholehearted, and one being consistently neglected. Identify the two obligations you are most faithfully keeping (give thanks) and the two you are most consistently neglecting (make a specific plan for growth).
- The lesson argues that the pastoral care available to a formally received member is qualitatively different from, and richer than, the pastoral attention available to a regular attender. Have you experienced that difference? If so, describe it. If not, what would it mean to place yourself more fully under the kind of personal, named, covenantally accountable pastoral care that formal membership enables?
- The lesson closes with a pastoral appeal to regular attenders who have not yet formally joined: take the step. What is the primary obstacle, in your own experience or in the experience of people you know, to taking that step? Is it a theological hesitation? A relational concern? A fear of accountability? A simple lack of urgency? How does the lesson’s argument address that specific obstacle?

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading Hebrews 13:17 aloud: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” Sit with the phrase “they keep watch over your souls.” The elders of this congregation are not merely administrators managing an institution; they are watchmen appointed by God over the souls of specific, named, known individuals, individuals who have placed themselves under their care through the covenant of membership. That is a profound and weighty thing, both for the elder who gives account and for the member who is watched over. Let that gravity shape the prayers that follow.

Pray specifically for the elders and pastor of this congregation. Pray that they would know their flock, not merely know about the congregation in general, but know each member by name, circumstance, struggle, and gift. Pray for their courage to exercise the oversight that Hebrews 13:17 describes: the courage to address sin when it appears, to pursue the wandering when they drift, to speak the truth in love when the comfortable word would be easier, and to maintain the faithfulness of their watch even when it is costly. Pray that the congregation would make their work a joy rather than a grief, receiving their ministry with gratitude, submitting to their oversight with trust, and supporting them with the prayer and encouragement that the weight of the pastoral office requires.

Pray for the formal members of this congregation by name if possible, or by category if not. Pray for those who are growing in their covenantal faithfulness, that the Spirit would sustain and deepen what He has begun in them. Pray for those who are struggling to fulfill the obligations they have made, that the grace of God would be sufficient for their weakness, and that the community’s love would be patient and restorative toward them. Pray for those who are drifting from regular attendance, generous giving, faithful service, or the pursuit of holiness, that the elders would notice the drift and pursue them with pastoral love before the drift becomes a departure.

Pray for those who are regular attenders but have not yet formally joined the congregation. Pray that the Spirit would remove whatever obstacle is keeping them from taking the covenantal step, whether it is a theological hesitation, a relational concern, a fear of accountability, or a simple lack of urgency. Pray that the pastoral teaching of this series, and the specific challenge of this lesson, would be the occasion for them to take the step that makes their existing commitment explicit, mutual, and covenantally significant. Pray for the elders and members of this congregation to be the kind of community that makes the step of formal membership feel like an invitation into genuine care rather than an institutional requirement to be fulfilled.

Close with a doxological prayer grounded in Acts 2:42: that this congregation would be a community devoted to the apostles’ teaching, to genuine fellowship (*koinōnia*), to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Pray that each of these four marks of the apostolic community would be genuinely present in this congregation’s life, that the apostles’ teaching would be faithfully proclaimed and eagerly received, that the *koinōnia* would be the deep, mutual, burden-bearing kind that formal covenant membership enables, that the breaking of bread would be received with the theological seriousness and covenantal gratitude that the ordinance deserves, and that prayer would be the earnest, corporate, expectant cry of a community that knows it is absolutely dependent on the God who has promised to watch over it. To God alone be the glory.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Acts 2:41–47; 1 Corinthians 5:12–13; 1 Peter 5:1–4; Hebrews 13:17; Hebrews 10:24–25

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com