

THE QUESTION OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Edited transcript of a sermon given on February 1, 2004 by Wendell Brane

“Does the Bible teach that a believer is to be committed to a local body of believers?” and “Since the actual practice of church membership is not found in the NT, how can a church therefore, require it?”

The first question about being committed to a local body is one that is worthy of much discussion, but will not be something I plan to address in this paper. Ephesians 4 is just one of many passages that refutes this idea that Christians can be like department store shoppers every Sunday morning, jumping from one church to another, being accountable to no one. Even of those who resist the idea of joining a church, most agree that a Christian needs to be properly plugged in to a church home, supporting it financially, attending faithfully, and so forth.

But the second question is one that often generates a good deal of controversy. Some folks are a little apprehensive about this official, formal, “signing your name on the dotted line” practice we call church membership.

The objection is very common, so much so that many churches no longer even practice membership. However, I believe that church membership is not just a good idea, but is necessary to fulfill certain commands and directives in the Bible that are given to believers in a congregation *and* also to the elders who oversee that congregation. Without membership – at least in modern times – there would be some passages in the NT that we simply could not implement or practice. I believe you will make the same conclusion, once you read my explanation.

Let me start by addressing a couple false assumptions.

FALSE ASSUMPTION #1 – THE CONCEPT IS UNBIBLICAL

Some assume that because the actual practice of membership is not mentioned in the Bible, that the whole concept is therefore unbiblical. But this is not the case. What we need to do is define what membership is, and once we do, you will see that the NT does indeed speak quite clearly about the principles behind membership – principles that support it. The concept is there, even if the actual practice isn't.

Another example of this would be the Trinity. The Bible does not mention the word “Trinity” but yet the principle, the concept, the theology of the Trinity is certainly there, and is there quite clearly. In fact, if a church were to limit itself to only those ideas and practices that are specifically mentioned in the Bible, then it couldn't even use the New Testament, since it is not mentioned, much less endorsed. Many other examples could be given.

FALSE ASSUMPTION #2 – WE DO NOT HAVE THE RIGHT TO IMPLEMENT IT

Some also assume that if something is not referred to in the Bible, then we have no business making it a part of our practice. To adopt the practice of membership, it is often thought, is to add to the simplicity and purity of the Christian faith, shifting emphasis from the Scriptures to the traditions of man.

First, we need to be careful about trying to argue something from silence. Just because membership isn't mentioned in the NT doesn't necessarily mean that the early church didn't practice it. They did a lot of things that aren't recorded for us. Keep in mind that when Paul, for instance, wrote a letter, he wrote it out of a need to address some question or controversy that the church was struggling with. If something wasn't an issue, we usually don't hear about it.

But for the sake of the argument, let's just say that they did not practice it (and that is probably a fairly safe assumption). The reason isn't because they *opposed* the practice, but because there was simply no need for it in the primitive church. The situation was different then. They did not have 40 different churches of 40 different denominations at Ephesus or Corinth or Thessanica to choose from. In fact, a believer probably didn't even have 2 churches to choose from.

Today, in our Wal-Mart mentality, where people just go from one church to the next, the pastor and the elders need to know whom it is they are pastoring and eldering. Who is part of this church body, and who is not? Whom are they responsible for? The early church wasn't faced with those problems. The apostles and elders of the first century knew who was who, and who went where. Membership has now become necessary because this condition of the church, sadly, has changed.

Also, do not make the mistake of assuming that if the Bible doesn't require it (or even refer to it) then the Bible must therefore oppose it. This is a common error in hermeneutics. Such a standard is not only impractical and unreasonable, it isn't even biblical. The Bible doesn't prohibit churches from adopting what we call extra-biblical practices as long as those practices do not contradict the Scriptures.

For instance, the Bible doesn't specifically refer to air conditioners, sound systems, carpet or sidewalks. Or Sunday School programs. Or having other meetings other than on Sunday morning. Or greeting each other with a hand shake. Or using a pulpit. The Bible says nothing of a church meeting in a building, of using a checkbook to pay its bills, of providing a nursery during the service, of appointing ushers to pass out bulletins. Are we violating the NT model if we use songs they didn't use? Or for that matter, the Scriptures of the very early church consisted of only the Old Testament. Is it unbiblical to use a New Testament?

The needs and problems and challenges of the church change from generation to generation, and we are free to adapt along the way. Indeed, we must adapt along the way in order to fulfill the task that has been entrusted to us, as long as we don't contradict what the Bible says.

WHAT IS MEMBERSHIP?

Let's now define what membership at our church is. It is very simple.

By joining TEC a member clearly affirms each of the following about himself/herself:

- *I am a Christian. I understand that salvation is by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ and have therefore placed my trust in Him. I recognize His Lordship both universally and personally.*
- *I have been baptized by water and have made a public confession of my faith.*
- *I am at least 18 years old.*

- *I understand that joining this church simply formalizes my commitment to the people of this body. I also understand that membership in the local church does not constitute the basis for my salvation, nor guarantees eternal life.*
- *I agree with TEC's Statement of Faith.*
- *I will support the policies and process of church government described in the by-laws.*
- *I will faithfully support the church financially with my regular contributions.*
- *I will support the church with my conversations, refraining from gossip, slander, or malicious talk that would damage fellow members and/or the ministry of the church.*
- *I will faithfully attend Sunday services on a regular basis.*
- *I will contribute my time, talents, and spiritual gifts to the ministry of this church.*
- *I will support the pastor and the elders as leaders of this church body.*
- *I agree to receive instruction and counsel — and if necessary, discipline — should my words or actions become sinful, compromising my personal testimony or the testimony of this church.*
- *I will not seek nor maintain membership in any lodge or secret society that demands (a) an oath of total allegiance and secrecy or (b) participation in rituals of a religious nature which are not distinctively and exclusively Christian.*
- *I concur that my affiliation to this body is relational and reciprocal, and therefore depends upon trust, respect, and love.*
- *If in the event I decide to dissolve my relationship with this church, I will make such an intention clear to the pastor or an elder, along with a written explanation that can be made available to other members.*

There is nothing here that is out of the ordinary. Nothing here that is unreasonable, or can't be supported by the Scriptures.

Now, it has often been my experience that folks do not object to any of the particulars on this list. They agree that a believer should be committed. They agree that the list of responsibilities on our membership form reflects what the NT teaches. The objection that I often hear is one of making it official and formal, of signing on the dotted line. "I come every Sunday. I give faithfully. I already do all of these things on this paper of yours. I even invite my friends to come here. I am obviously committed. Why do I need to sign this form?"

It is a good question, and can be answered from 2 passages.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-13 – “WHO ARE OVER YOU IN THE LORD”

1 Thes. 5:12-13 NOW WE ASK YOU, BROTHERS, TO RESPECT THOSE WHO WORK HARD AMONG YOU, WHO ARE OVER YOU IN THE LORD AND WHO ADMONISH YOU. HOLD THEM IN THE HIGHEST REGARD IN LOVE BECAUSE OF THEIR WORK. LIVE IN PEACE WITH EACH OTHER.

Much could be said about this verse. Much could be said about the believer's responsibility to respect the church elders, and hold them in the highest regard, and to do so in love because we appreciate their work. And by doing this, you contribute to the goal of living in peace with each other. A whole sermon could be preached on this.

But for now, I want you to consider just one short expression, found halfway through the first sentence "...who are over you in the Lord." So here is the question? Who is over you in the Lord? If you lived in the first century church, the answer would be the elders of the church located in the town you lived in. But if we are talking about Fort Wayne, Indiana in 2004, the answer is not so easy. We have over 350 churches in this city. There are thousands of churches within an hour's drive from your home. Which elders of which church are over you in the Lord?

"Oh, that is easy," someone might say, "The church I am attending!" Okay, last month you were going to First Assembly. A year before that it was Fellowship Missionary. Before that, you were active at Broadway Christian for a few years. And every 2 months or so you stop in to visit the Chapel. So who are the elders that are over you in the Lord? The elders of the church you attended *last* Sunday? Or the elders of the church that you attended the *most* Sundays? Or the elders of the church that are closest to your home? How do you make a determination of this unless there is something official, some statement on record, that says, "**This is my church and these are my elders.**"

Now don't get me wrong: attendance is certainly necessary, but attendance, even faithful, regular attendance is simply attendance. It is still too vague. One can attend a church all his life and still, in his heart and mind, never be under the authority of that church, attending, but yet holding back from coming under the elders. We all know people who have gone to the same church all their lives, every Sunday, and aren't even genuine believers!

There needs to be a deliberate decision. Actually 2 decisions. 1. You must decide to place yourself under an eldership, and relate to them as over you in the Lord. And, 2. You must decide which eldership. In a town of 350 churches, you have to choose which elders are over you. You simply cannot comply with the commands in this passage unless you can answer the question, "Who is over you in the Lord?"

Now, I once had a guy try to answer this by naming all of his mentors. They were various men from many different churches – men who have helped to disciple him and were always there to offer counsel when he needed it. "These are the men who are over me in the Lord, I don't need a formal relationship with any one church." Well, it is good that he had access to so many mature men. But this concept of "over you in the Lord" is one that is used of *official authority*, of parents over children, of husbands over wives, and of elders over believers. It is clear that the NT teaches an eldership form of church government, and this is one of its purposes: to "work hard" in exercising oversight.

HEBREWS 13:17 – “AS MEN WHO MUST GIVE AN ACCOUNT”

A similar passage, which makes the same point is Hebrews 13:17 OBEY YOUR LEADERS AND SUBMIT TO THEIR AUTHORITY. THEY KEEP WATCH OVER YOU AS MEN WHO MUST GIVE AN ACCOUNT. OBEY THEM SO THAT THEIR WORK WILL BE A JOY, NOT A BURDEN, FOR THAT WOULD BE OF NO ADVANTAGE TO YOU.

The same question can again be asked, Whom are you to obey and submit to? Who keeps watch over you? Can you name names? If not, you simply cannot comply with the commands given here. This verse might as well be blanked out in your Bible.

Yet, in this passage there is an additional question as well. Do these men, that you believe are over you in the Lord – **do they know it?** Look at this one statement here: “THEY KEEP WATCH OVER YOU AS MEN WHO MUST GIVE AN ACCOUNT.” Do they know who it is that they are to keep watch over?

Every Sunday there are people in and out of any church, and that the case for here as well. We have visitors who drop in once every 2 or 3 months. Some might come for several weeks at a time and then vanish. Like all churches, we have the regulars, and the semi-regulars, and those who only come on Christmas and Easter. The point is, the turnover and traffic is impossible even to track, much less require the elders to exercise pastoral oversight over everyone who walks inside these doors.

Whom do the elders elder? Whom are they to keep watch over? Whom does the pastor pastor? Can the elders name names? What list do they go to? Again, this is why there needs to be something official – somewhere one goes on record and says, “**You are my elders; you are my pastor; I acknowledge your oversight.**” And where the pastor and the elders can respond, “**Yes, we accept the role and we take will take it seriously, and by God’s grace we will seek to ‘watch over you’ faithfully.**”

The gravity of this is made even more clear in the next line, “WATCH OVER YOU AS MEN WHO MUST GIVE AN ACCOUNT.” My goodness! I will stand before God and answer for how well I shepherd this flock. Denny Laub will stand before God and get grilled on all the families and individuals who were entrusted to his oversight, *as will all the other elders.* This is serious stuff. We have to know who is a part of this flock, and who isn’t. We have to have something that is definitive, something that is clear, and not based on assumptions.

THE NEED FOR CLARITY

Faithful attendance, and financial giving, and even shoveling snow before the church service starts: all of these are certainly signs of commitment but none are definitive. We need to have it clearly understood. It really comes down to this: we need commitment, **but we also need clarity.** We need clarity *for all parties involved.*

This is simply what church membership is. There is no need to get all worked up about it. No one is going to tell you that you can’t go to Disney World for vacation, or that you can’t buy a new car, or that you have to come to every work day at church. No one is going to restructure your life, take away all your freedoms, and make you hang up pictures of the church leaders in your prayer closet.

We think nothing of becoming members of the astronomy club, Right to Life, the NRA, the local union, a country club, or whatever. And they all have rules. Membership is simply a way of going on

record saying, "I support this endeavor, and want to be a part of it, officially." But when it comes to church membership, all sorts of emotions can rise up. "What liberties will I lose? What expectations, demands, are they going to place upon me? Will this be the hotel California where I can never really leave?"

Relax. This is not a blood covenant, It's not "till death do us part." This is why we want folks to come here for a good 4 months or so before we even talk about membership. We want people to see that there are no abuses. We see the importance of gaining people's trust. We want everyone to feel comfortable with the decision.

Church membership is saying yes to the questions, "Are you committed to this local body? Will you attend faithfully, give financially, use your gifts to serve, accept correction and discipline if necessary, respect and honor the elders as those over you in the Lord, support the church through your involvement and participation and conversation? Do you agree with our statement of faith and do you consider this community of believers your own?"

And so yes, we have more accountability here than a seeker friendly church. But yet far less than many other churches (I could give examples). Our objective is to lead through love, and convince through truth, not control through fear. "Not lording it over those entrusted to us, but being examples," as Peter puts it.

Yet, we are responsible to watch over those in the flock, and this is a command we as elders must take seriously.

A MATTER OF "ONE'S STANDING"

Matthew 18:17 IF HE REFUSES TO LISTEN TO THEM, TELL IT TO THE CHURCH; AND IF HE REFUSES TO LISTEN EVEN TO THE CHURCH, TREAT HIM AS YOU WOULD A PAGAN OR A TAX COLLECTOR.

How can we practice church discipline unless we have some sort of membership role? "Tell it to the church" What church? The church he is attending? Okay, what if he has attended once? Or twice? Or for 3 months? Where do we draw the line and make it decisive and official? 6 months? 1 year?

What if he attended here 1 month, but had been attending First Baptist before that? Which congregation meets for the purpose of being told about the sin of the offender and then moves forward in the restoration process? How do we figure all of this out?

We also have another important issue to consider. Must a church be willing to lose all of its assets just to accommodate this anti-church membership thinking? Lawsuits abound against churches because of confusion on membership and responsibility. When you join our church, you give the elders permission to be your elders, and part of that means that you give them permission to discipline you if necessary.

If someone is cheating on his wife, and is unwilling to repent, we will get involved. And if he continues to resist all efforts to correct the problem, we will follow the Matthew 18 process and get the whole congregation involved in praying for him and warning him about his sin. If he is *not* a member, then we probably won't. We want the permission ahead of time. We have to know what our standing is. If we proceed without you ever saying "I agree to this" then we open the church up

to severe civil liabilities. It happens all the time. This is another example of how the condition of the church is different than the one of the first century.

Countless churches have been sued for slander and emotional duress from those seeking millions of dollars in damages from those placed under church discipline. We are therefore faced with one of three options: 1) We do not practice church discipline period (which is the norm of the day we live in) and remove all relevant verses from our Bibles; 2) We throw out the membership idea, and take our chances. Or, 3) We will practice church discipline because the Bible tells us to, and we will not be reckless and foolish about it for we will seek permission right up front. And this permission is granted when one signs on to become a member.

Which makes the most sense? Which is the most responsible? Certainly it is wrong to compromise to avoid a lawsuit. But this is not a compromise. It is not a compromise to ask someone to go on record that we are their church.

But even apart from the civil liability, we want to know what our standing is with an individual. It is unfair to us when you intend to make this your church home, and yet never give us permission to oversee you, disciple you, hold you accountable, and serve you in your walk with the Lord, as the Scriptures instruct us to do.

To be honest, I don't know of any other way of doing it. If we aren't official, if there is no actual agreement made, nothing definitive (like signing a membership form), then we are left to guess and assume and speculate, on something that is too important to guess, assume, and speculate.

THE ISSUE IS IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO PRESS

Now, I am going to say something that will certainly raise some eyebrows, but please hear me out. Don't take what I say and twist its meaning. Please consider these words in light of everything I have said so far.

If someone intends to make this their church home, but to do so without actually joining, then let me say this as kindly as I know how: *it won't work*. We are not going to tell you that you can't come, but you must understand that it isn't an option that we, from our perspective, offer on the table.

After 6 months or a year, such a person should know enough to decide whether this is the church body they can commit to or not. If they say to themselves, "We like this church, but we won't commit to it," then it is time that they find a church **can commit to**. If Trinity Evangelical is not that church, then fine, go in peace with our blessings. But to allow someone to just hang out here indefinitely, month after month, year after year, with no intent of ever coming on board is not only a contradiction of our ecclesiology, (an ecclesiology supported by the Scriptures), but it is also a failure on our part to do what is best for him. The NT does not provide as an option this notion of just being an ongoing spectator. He needs to make it his goal to become a member *somewhere*: either here, or somewhere else.

ANOTHER OBJECTION ANSWERED

I am sometimes told that formal membership contradicts the NT teaching that a church is a family. We don't make brothers and sisters in our home sign forms saying that they belong. While it is true

we are a family, we must also be careful about pushing an analogy too far. For instance, at home many people feel the freedom to run around all evening in their pajamas. Would we advocate that same sort of freedom at church? The way we are a family in a church is different than the way we are a family in our homes. For instance, siblings can't just pack up and leave and choose other parents for a couple years if they want. The kids know who mom and dad are; there is nothing left to assume. This simply is not the case in a church where individuals are given the liberty to make decisions about where to belong.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Membership sounds like a big commitment, one that spooks us a little bit. We like the one foot in, one foot out sort of thing. We like the door to be open so we can back out if we want to. We don't like our freedoms and liberties threatened. Membership is often perceived as a threat.

This is wholly unnecessary. If the liberties you want to protect are things like adultery, stealing, beating your wife, running from your debts, or drunkenness, then, yes, membership would be a threat. But if you are a believer who wants to grow in the faith, and be accountable, and be part of a community of believers all sharing the same goal and purpose, all spurring one another on toward good works (as the verse says), if you want a sense of belonging and having people love you enough to challenge you and help you in your discipleship, then why would you not want to join? For that matter, why would you not want to join **this** church?

Let me be so bold as to say that this is a church body which strives to be authentic, strives to uphold the priority of truth, strives to nourish the relationship and sense of family and community among the members. This is a church body that is not plagued with in-house fighting, bitterness, political battles and manipulation. This is a church body that takes what it does seriously. No one comes to this pulpit unprepared. No Sunday School teacher walks into the classroom and tries to wing it.

And though we take what we do seriously, we don't take ourselves that seriously. We are close enough that we can kid around with each other in love. This is a body that can both laugh and cry with one another, and we have done a lot of both.

This is a church that will go to the wall for you, if necessary. You have seen it. This church stood with me (before I was the pastor) when the abortion clinic dragged me into court and garnished my wages and wanted to take everything I owned. This church stood with the Spencers during Michael's ordeal with cancer. We prayed and fasted for Denny Hamilton during the days of his battle with cancer as well. I could go on and on with more. **This is a church to commit yourself to, for it is a church that will commit itself to you.**

This is a church that knows who we are. It has a well-defined statement of faith. It has a well-defined philosophy of ministry. We are not riding on the surf of every new wave, every fad that sweeps through the Christian pop culture. And yet, do not understand my words here as meaning that we are perfect. Far from it. We have a lot of growing to do. And so, we invite you to come and grow with us.