

DE DOCTRINA

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Church Membership: A Theological Issue?

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Theology permeates most elements of church life. The church makes explicit claims about God in its teaching. In its worship, it announces a vision of God, His works, and the proper response of worshippers. In its evangelism, the church points to Christ as the only way to salvation. These are merely a few of the countless ways theology is woven throughout a local church's ministry. There is no *non-theological* ministry!

But what about church membership practices? By membership, I mean how believers unite with a church, the elements of discipleship, and the types of discipline they experience within it. Do these things solely reflect practical judgments and contextual wisdom, or is something more theologically significant at stake?

Churches reflect a range of approaches to membership onboarding (catechesis) and addressing problems of obedience. To borrow a well-worn metaphor, managing the “front door” and “back door” of the church has everything to do with its growth, health, and ministry effectiveness. But in what ways do theology or doctrine shape these church activities?

Few things are as theological and practical as church membership. In this inaugural edition of *De Doctrina*, I will discuss three essential theological aspects assumed in membership practices. In identifying these, the descriptive task should push us toward the *prescriptive*. Realizing that theology is unavoidably involved in membership should compel us to be intentional in bringing sound theology to bear on otherwise practical decisions about the who, why, and how of membership.

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The Free Will Baptist Commission for Theological Integrity

Membership is Ecclesiological

Membership is plainly related to ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church). However, the sheer number of churches who, by their own admission, do not have a membership roll, may bring this claim into question. Strangely, many of those same churches have expectations of would-be leaders and officers. They impose barriers to the involvement of people in immoral situations. They often expect those who serve to tithe. (I recently learned of a megachurch nearby that does not have membership, but once you begin attending, they let you create a username so you can log in online to tithe and get news updates.) It is not difficult to see a de facto, if not, *comprehensive* vision of membership in this practice.

Many church leaders seem to be especially anxious over the language of “membership.” Some of this stems from concerns about the church being (or seeming) too insular or exclusionary. In other instances, some worry that it seems too worldly. After all, the country club has *members*. Local civic organizations have *members*. Why not discard such language in favor of *team*, *participants*, or something less loaded?

There are two main reasons why both concerns are misplaced. First, it is ironic that we might worry about being too “insular” or “exclusionary.” Is this not the

very objection that Christianity’s cultural despisers often have? We do, after all, say that Jesus is the *only* way to salvation. We do say that other religions are *false* in their core assertions. We do say the way is *narrow* (because Jesus said so). While it is important that we not erect arbitrary barriers to people coming to Christ and into the life of His church, we cannot help but recognize the *inherent* boundaries that already exist biblically and spiritually. If not everyone will take up their cross and follow Jesus, by extension, not everyone will belong to His church. The question of membership is quite different from what we may be willing to do to welcome seekers, visitors, and/or those willing to listen into a worship service. But boundaries are ultimately unavoidable.

Second, we must admit another, more fundamental truth: the language of membership is appropriate because it is *biblical*. The metaphor of the body of Christ is arguably the most prominent image for the church in the New Testament. It is because we are a body that we are, individually, members of it. Many organizations prior to and following the advent of the church had some concept of membership. Yet the church, in its membership practices, offers something unique and influential because it transcends social, ethnic, cultural, and economic categories. Moreover, we must at least acknowledge that many modern organizations that have a “membership” play fast and loose with that terminology. Membership in the body of Christ brings spiritual identity, purpose, unity, and mission. What fast-food or monthly subscription service can say that of its “membership program”?

Being Baptist also makes a concrete difference in how we define the *what* or *who* of the church. This is not inherently technical, though it is complex historically. When we survey church history, we are humbled by how Christendom often obscured what the church is and is not. In its most modest form, Christendom was a vision of the Christian church influencing and having formal authority

in all areas of society. In its most extensive and common form, it made the citizenry Christians by virtue of infant baptism. Thus, unregenerate people filled churches across the lands, especially Europe, for centuries. The spiritual damage done by a theological error—in the “who” of the church, to be exact—is incalculable.

The Baptist vision of the church offered and still offers a biblical corrective. We can state it in a two-fold form: (1) the church is and should be formally composed of those who are regenerate, and (2) only those who have made a conscious, credible profession of faith should be baptized and recognized as members. Both claims require further explanation.

Churches certainly do not *make* anyone a Christian. Rather, they affirm those who already are Christians. This is a proper understanding of the church as a steward of the keys to the kingdom (Mt. 16:19). With this image, the apostles were offered a picture of how professions of heavenly citizenship worked on earth. This would become especially important for two reasons. First, false professions would inevitably be difficult to discern. Second, the apostles would be the pivotal church leaders during the transitional period between Christ’s ascension and Pentecost and then the first generation of churches who would be led by their own elders and deacons (Phil. 1:1). Soon these churches would themselves be entrusted with the basic tasks of identifying and ordaining leaders, but *more fundamentally*, admitting, disciplining, and sometimes excommunicating members (Mt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5–6). The authority of the church to discern professions of faith did not mean they were infallible, only that they had infallible guidance through the Holy

Spirit and Holy Scripture. Their task was to listen carefully, discern, and obey.

Augustine of Hippo was not the only church father to emphasize that even the visible church was a mixed multitude, composed of both believers and unbelievers. Since the earliest biblical

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interpreters, some saw Matthew 13:24–26 as a warning that there would be tares among the wheat. If that interpretation is not convincing, Jesus warned elsewhere of those who would openly depart from the faith. Others would be revealed to have never known the Lord at all (Mt. 7:21–23). Acknowledging this reality does not mean we lessen our commitment to careful discernment! If anything, we strengthen it.

Much is at stake in the church’s membership and discipline. The church’s self-understanding depends on the body’s legitimately discerning professions of faith. Even when churches delegate some of this responsibility to leaders, especially pastors, this should be undertaken carefully, with the congregation not treating the particular leader as though he alone possesses the keys to the kingdom. The *body* discerns (1 Cor. 6:3; 11:29). Whether it is the Sunday school teacher, small group leader, deacon, parent, spouse, or other members closely connected to one professing faith, their insight is invaluable.

Ecclesiology is not a boutique theological area obsessed with conventional denominational distinctives. It is not confined to the definition of an elder,

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deacon, baptism, or autonomy. It has the identity of the church at the heart of its concerns. A church's core ecclesiology is involved in how it admits members.

Membership is Soteriological

Soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) may seem to be a redundant inclusion, given what has been said above about ecclesiology. If the "who" of the church (a central ecclesiological concern) is regenerate, baptized persons, have we not already addressed soteriology?

“ IF SOTERIOLOGY IS MORE THAN CONVERSION, BUT ALSO THE WAY SAVING FAITH EXPRESSES ITSELF IN DISCIPLESHIP AND PERSEVERENCE, THEN MEMBERSHIP IS THEOLOGICAL BECAUSE OF HOW IT INVOLVES SALVATION THROUGH AND THROUGH. ”

There is an all-too-common error in much contemporary discussion about salvation that we should avoid. Rather than limiting salvation to regeneration or conversion, we should remember the New Testament emphasis on salvation as a past, present, and future reality. Believers have been saved (Eph. 2:8), are being saved (1 Cor. 15:2), and will be saved (Mt. 24:13). Such an understanding dovetails nicely with what Dr. Robert Picirilli has forcefully emphasized in *Discipleship: The Expression of Saving Faith* (Randall House, 2013). Picirilli argues that the New Testament presents salvation in two primary ways: salvation as a transaction and salvation as discipleship. In the transaction model, salvation is something received or given. In the discipleship model, the lived-out following of Jesus Christ is the evidence

of saving faith. It demonstrates that one has received what Jesus gives.

Picirilli's formulation is developed much further in his book, but his basic argument serves us this way: it reminds us that "salvation" is a legitimate way of talking about one's ongoing discipleship, and discipleship is a legitimate way of evaluating the validity of one's salvation.

An illustration may help. Some years ago, I was counseling an older, widowed member who was planning to remarry. One concern that emerged during a meeting was his remark that his fiancée

would be "good for his salvation." This alarmed me initially because I thought he meant that her spiritual maturity and biblical knowledge would somehow accrue spiritual merit to him. It took a lot of back-and-forth to discern that perhaps he meant something less problematic: that a good, godly wife would be

helpful to his life as a saved person (a disciple).

Membership, then, is tied to soteriology in at least three ways. First, prior to baptism (a prerequisite for membership in a local church), the church is tasked with discerning the credibility of a prospective member's profession of faith. Second, the church commits itself to nurturing and deepening the faith and spiritual life of the church member as part of the body of Christ. As members grow and serve in the body, their grasp of salvation and all its benefits and claims should become clearer and stronger. Third, the church should apply corrective discipline to the member, should he or she fail to follow Christ in holiness and obedience in an *unrepentant* way. Membership tests the sincerity of a believer's faith, and this examination

should contribute to his or her growth and perseverance in salvation.

This claim may seem unkind at best and audacious at worst. However, it is not without biblical support. The discipline that Paul instructs the Corinthians to apply in 1 Corinthians 5:4–5 is not exclusively about the purity of the body—as true and necessary as that was. It is not even just about the value of corrective discipline as a deterrent to other sinful conduct (1 Tim. 5:20), though this is also true and valid. Excommunicating (literally, *ex-communicating*) someone not walking in fellowship with Christ is done with the hope that they will see the seriousness of their sin, experience godly grief (2 Cor. 7:10–11), and eventually repent. Even if this discipline of the church does not produce immediate repentance, Jesus and the apostles have a much wider time horizon in mind than we often do. Ultimately, the discipline enacted by the church is motivated by holiness, love, and truth. The concern for holiness is connected to the sin problem (in light of God's holiness), and truth is concerned with remaining true to what God's Word says. But love's role is no less relevant; it is the basis for doing what may, in the end, result in the salvation of the offender.

If soteriology is more than conversion, but also the way saving faith expresses itself in discipleship and perseverance, then membership is theological because of how it involves salvation through and through. Even if one prefers to discuss this under the heading of sanctification and not soteriology, none of the fundamentals of the argument change.

Membership is Eschatological

Similar to soteriology, much modern thinking about eschatology (the doctrine of last things) suffers from reductionism. The rapture, the millennium, the tribulation, or even the potential identity of the anti-Christ have characterized far too much conversation of

last things. These have nearly swallowed up other beneficial and practical eschatological issues, such as heaven and hell, the bodily resurrection, the immortality of the soul, and the coming kingdom. I want to add church membership and discipline to this list.

Three aspects of eschatology are in view in membership practices: (1) the provisional nature of church decisions; (2) the administration of corrective discipline; and (3) the way language about the future forms disciples (members) in the present. I will treat the first two together and then reserve some final remarks on the third for last.

Above, I alluded to the way the church "binds and looses" things on earth (Mt. 16:19). Specifically, when the church admits members, dismisses members, and in some respects, makes any decision as a body, those decisions carry true spiritual weight. We know from elsewhere that Jesus would have his followers let their yes be yes and their no be no (Mt. 5:36–37). They must honor their word as part of honoring His Word.

When the church makes a decision about members, it exercises spiritual authority that God has delegated to them. We could say that the church renders a verdict of sorts. (Notice how many times variations of the word "judge," "judgment," or "discern" appear in the New Testament in connection to the church.) Yet we must concede: the church is neither sinless nor omniscient. It does not always obey, and it does not see everything. Thus, it is good news that we are saved by grace and not by being members of the best church (or any church)! We could extend this thankfulness to not having to be baptized or properly catechized or onboarded into a church before saving grace is applied. Membership in the universal, invisible church is not contingent on membership in the local, visible church, though these two are related. But local church decisions have a *provisional* quality to

them. They serve as a legitimate exercise in spiritual authority, but they are always subject to a greater, definitive verdict which will finally be made clear in the future (1 Cor. 4:5).

Just as some who were never disciplined will most certainly give an account, those who may have been dealt with hastily or wrongly by their church will be vindicated. The full number of disciples will become clear, as will the sturdiness with which churches conducted their ministries (1 Cor. 3:10–15). This is especially true of church leaders. Hebrews 13:17 gives the most compelling reason for shepherds to serve well: they will give an account. Certainly, they should be obeyed by those whose souls they oversee. But the second part of the verse brings the point full circle. Members should obey their leaders (provided their instruction is not unbiblical). If the leaders are wrong, God will sort that out eventually. In both instances, present obedience has a future horizon: the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). Even a legitimate attempt by a congregation to correct an errant leader is itself an exercise in both congregationalism and spiritual accountability.

While we may busy ourselves in ordination examinations with questions about the nature of the millennium or conduct twelve-week Bible studies on the rapture, we must also see eschatology as relevant to how our churches exercise spiritual authority in church membership. It is a weighty and practical consideration.

A final eschatological dimension of membership concerns the ongoing spiritual formation of members. Scripture is clearly fundamental to this lifelong task. God's Word penetrates and shapes the hearts of people in many interesting ways. One of the most peculiar ways is how various genres do this.

Not every passage of Scripture is easily translatable into four or five propositions, or three easy steps. Careful listening, skilled interpretation, and wise

application are needed for all sixty-six books. But one type of passage that surfaces throughout them all is warning. Warnings come in many different forms. At the risk of oversimplifying, they generally have two dimensions: (1) a call to action or to discontinue a particular action and (2) a promise of discipline or judgment if the call is not heeded. Some judgments are temporal, and some are eternal. Both are to be taken seriously.

Free Will Baptists are perhaps better acquainted with the nature of warning than some. Our authors have published extensively on the subjects of eternal security and apostasy. An appreciation for the legitimacy of warnings should be at least somewhat native to a movement like ours. Nevertheless, we are regularly exposed to alternative readings of such warnings. Many Southern Baptist scholars have grown fond of explaining many warning passages (especially those in Hebrews) as being hypothetical in nature. One could never *actually* fall away and commit an irreversible apostasy, they say. However, the difference between the older hypothetical view and newer hypothetical interpretations is that the newer ones seek to take seriously the *function* of the warnings. In most of these authors (see especially Thomas Schreiner), the warnings serve a legitimate purpose as the means by which God brings about the repentance and perseverance of his people. The warning provokes the response of repentance—a response that *necessarily* obtains for the elect.

These scholars are correct in one respect: language is not just about the transmission of facts. Many linguistic expressions (“speech acts”) are designed to *do something*. They are designed to *engender a response*. Warnings should produce repentance.

What does this seemingly arcane theological dispute over apostasy have to do with membership? Warnings are one of many ways God forms people in their faith. We are warned about the brevity

of life and thus the need for humility when planning today for the future (Jas. 4:13–16). We are warned about seeing ourselves as innocent too quickly; we may not be seeing ourselves as God does or will (1 Cor. 4:4–5). We are warned not to put Christ to the test, lest we face what our ancestors faced when they tested God (1 Cor. 10:1–6). These and countless other warnings saturate the New Testament. They tell us of what may come to us in the future if we do not turn in a different direction.

Churches who take the future seriously (and all the aspects of eschatology associated with that future) teach the whole counsel of God, including the warnings. If they seem heavy, this may not be primarily a problem with the preacher's tone; it may be a problem with our hearts. Or we could also reason that sober warnings *should* feel weighty. In any event, preparing for a future rapture, specific tribulation period, or type of millennial reign will all be for naught if the clear and precise warnings of Scripture are not given a full hearing.

Conclusion

In this article I have identified three theological areas that inform church membership and discipline. No doubt more areas could be raised, but these three seem to relate most naturally to the fundamentals of membership and discipline.

As churches review their practices and policies, mission statements, and core values, they should spend as much time on what they believe and communicate about membership as they do on any other subject. A newly crafted vision statement may feel like an accomplishment, but it cannot sit atop membership policies that lack theological coherence.

In this respect, my challenge is two-fold: (1) identify the theology already assumed within existing policies and practices; and (2) be proactive in aligning those policies and practices with the theology that arises from New Testament principles, patterns, and priorities.

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Failing to see church membership as a theological issue *will* have consequences. The most likely will be that churches may assume that how they practice membership is exclusively a practical matter, subject only to context, custom, and/or ministry philosophy. Instead, we must realize how theological principles of membership provide foundations to anchor our membership practices. These foundations *do not* mean that context, custom, or philosophy cannot help us decide some aspects of our church's approach. But they will more likely prevent us from being too arbitrary, subjective, or style driven. They will also provide a common foundation for conversations with other believers and church leaders about wise, time-tested, and culturally appropriate practices that more capably nurture disciples and healthy, holy churches.

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