

Testing Your Membership

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The word “church” in the Greek language (*ekklesia*) means a group of people separated from others. Most understand that the word “church” as it is used in the New Testament has two meanings: the church that is universal; (a.k.a. the kingdom) is composed of all believers throughout all time who are those who will inherit eternal life. The church that is local (a.k.a. a congregation or assembly) is comprised of Christians in a geographically specific area who gather with the intent and purpose of fulfilling the purposes given to local churches in the New Testament. The relationship between those in the universal church is referred to as “fellowship”, while those in the local church describe their relationship as “membership”.

We define these words (fellowship and membership) based on their use in Scripture. In 1 John 1 John tells us that fellowship the relationship all believers have with Christ and with one another when we are walking in the light. Therefore it is not something that is offered or taken away; it is a condition that exists (like brotherhood, a synonym for fellowship). Membership is addressed in 1 Corinthians 12. There we see by the statements and the context (i.e. 1 Cor. 11 through 14 and the worship assembly of a local church) that we are discussing the relationship of Christians in a local assembly. But let’s consider for a member what these ideas have in common. If we are not in fellowship with Christ, it is because we are not walking in the light, and therefore we cannot inherit eternal life out of fellowship. But if we are not participating as members of a local church, there are many commands that we are necessarily not keeping, and therefore we need membership in a local church.

What can be said about your membership in a local church? There are many who think that they are in fellowship with Christ but are not; is it possible that your membership in a local assembly is not what it ought to be? How can we test ourselves to see where we are with a local church?

1. Have you made your membership known? In Acts 9:26 Saul of Tarsus attempted to identify himself with the Christians in Jerusalem (*And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple.*) The first thing to consider with membership is whether we have made a conscious and known decision to be a member of a church. If you were a member of a local church, does that local church know it?

2. Are you participating in the body? There are many works we do together as a local church. Every first day of the week we assembly to worship (Hebrews 10:25, Acts 20:7). Members of a local church are part of that worship. Every first day of the week a local church takes up a collection to support the work of that church (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). That too demonstrates our membership in a church. Finally, one difficult work of the local church is discipline (1 Corinthians 5:4). All members of a local church are to encourage and admonish one another, and to administer discipline (even the most harsh of actions, withdrawing from an unruly member).

3. Do you see the needs of the body as your needs? Paul told the church in Philippi that they needed to look at each member of the church above themselves (Philippians 2:1-4). This was the mature mind that they needed to grow into (Philippians 3:15-16). Our obligation is to associate and engage with each other and meet one another's needs (Romans 12:16).

4. Can the church depend on you? Paul did not want to bring Mark with him on his secondary missionary trip because Mark had not proven dependable during the first (Acts 15:36-39). A local church needs to be able to depend on its members to accomplish its purposes. As Paul discussed membership in 1 Corinthians 12:15-17 he explained that we each have a part, and if one of us is not doing our part we all suffer.

Sometimes people are attendees only, and not members of a local church. That might be fine for travelling or for a short time, but in the long term it fails to accomplish the purpose of God. Some people are members who are absentee. They too are not walking according to the pattern given to us.