



## Why Membership?

### INTRO

The big “C” Christian Church gathers across the world around common creeds and confessions surrounding our belief in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is what unites us. On a local level, churches gather under that umbrella, yet are formed by a specific polity – a fancy word that means “the operational structure of a church and how it functions”.

Salt Church is an elder-led church consisting of elders and congregation members. This paper will outline why church membership is healthy from a biblical perspective, congregation perspective, and elder perspective.

### THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

You can dig far and wide in the original languages of Hebrew and Greek and you will never find the word “membership”. However, as one reads through the New Testament, a clear structure can be seen throughout the early church.

The book of Acts is foundational in understanding our history as God’s people. In Acts 2, Peter preaches a clear message of the Gospel and three thousand people respond. Talk about a great day in ministry! Pretty soon, that number reaches 5,000, and structure starts to take place. The church gathers together, is led by the apostles, and is immediately seen as a contrast to the world around them. This leads to heavy persecution, and the church starts to scatter outside of the walls of Jerusalem.

One would think that a persecution would effectively end the movement, but it did the opposite. As the church expanded, so did the Gospel. As the Gospel expanded, a great number of people - both Jew and Gentile - came to faith in Jesus Christ.

Whether a church was started in Syria, Asia Minor, or even as far as Africa, a clear structure is seen through 7 different themes:<sup>1</sup>

1. The church unifies around the message of Jesus Christ being Savior and Lord. Even though they were still subject to a local government, their deepest allegiance was to Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:5; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 5:1-5).
2. Christians collectively identified themselves as “churches”. By using the word *church* (original Greek word is *ekklesia*, where we get the term Ecclesiology, which means “study of the Church”) to identify themselves in their life together, Christians showed that they were individuals belonging to something larger and corporate (Acts 8:3; 11:22, 26; 12:1, 5; 14:27; 15:3-4).
3. The church possesses a special power and corporate identity when formally assembled. Simply put, when the church was assembled, the power of the Lord was present (1 Cor. 5:4; 11:18).
4. Christians were to separate themselves from and not formally associate with the world. This does not mean that they did not have relationships with non-Christians, but it does mean that they did not do anything that might have risked the formal sharing of their Christian identity with nonbelievers (1 Cor. 5:9-10; 2 Cor. 6:14)
5. Christians lived in proximity to one another in a spirit of unity (Rom. 12:4-16; 1 Cor. 5:11; Gal. 2:11-12; 1 Tim. 5:9-10; Heb. 10:34; 1 Pet. 4:8-11).
6. Leaders were provided to the church in order to be responsible to the sheep (1 Pet. 5:2; Acts 20:28).
7. Christians were to submit to their specific local church leaders (Heb. 13:17). This implies that the church would know who the leaders are and know who they should honor and pray for (1 Tim. 5:17).

Once again, even though the term “membership” is never used, the New Testament shows a defined structure of a people who gathered and identified around

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<sup>1</sup> These themes, of which there are a total of 10, have been adapted from *Church Membership* by Jonathan Leeman, Kindle pgs. 42-46.

the same rallying cry, developing an identity of distinct unity and submission to church leadership.

## **BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP FROM THE MEMBERS' PERSPECTIVE**

### **A Place Where You Can Belong**

In his book *Love Your Church*, author Tony Merida references the popular 1980s TV series, *Cheers*, where a group of friends gathers at a local bar because you know, sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name.<sup>2</sup>

For several years, my wife and I were members at a CrossFit gym in Goodyear. It was amazing to us that several hundred people who gathered together to physically suffer and move toward a common goal could build community so well. After a year of being there, we built solid friendships that led to many of the people from the gym coming to help plant Salt Church.

We feel we belong to any sort of affinity in life, but one of the best things to belong to is a local church. The beauty of the body of Christ is that hundreds of thousands of local expressions of the body gather together every weekend to sing, pray, and worship Jesus Christ. Every time our church takes communion, it's amazing to wonder how many other churches are gathered at that same exact moment doing the same exact thing.

Belonging to a local church is saying "This church is my church. I care about it. I serve it. I love the people in it." To be a church member is to be a person who constitutes what makes the church a church. A sports team would not exist without players, a family is not present with just an individual, a nation is not developed unless it has people. Becoming a member is a way to declare where your home is.

### **A Place Where Your Voice is Heard**

A healthy church leadership structure provides specific checks and balances. A lack of accountability is the fastest way to build an unhealthy church. We (the elders) want agreement from the members of the church for major decisions.

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<sup>2</sup> *Love Your Church*, Merida, pg. 23

Currently, our fiscal year runs from July 1st to June 30th. When our budget is finished at the end of May, we will seek approval from the members of the congregation. The same will go for things like confirming a new elder, hiring a new Lead Pastor (Note: The Lead Pastor doesn't plan on going anywhere anytime soon), and firing the current Lead Pastor (see previous note).

Our elder team actively pleads with the Lord to open the door for us to move into our own space. When that time comes and the right opportunity presents itself, whether it is the purchase of land or a long-term rented space, we want to solicit the opinion of the church so that we can move together in a unified direction.

We are committed to a model of plurality. Salt Church is not a church where the Lead Pastor is a solo-pastor who leads as the CEO. As elders, we work together to shepherd the congregation, and the input of the congregation is vitally important in order to do that well.

## **BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP FROM THE ELDERS' PERSPECTIVE**

### **To Know the Sheep**

Hebrews 13:17 says that leaders (Greek word for "shepherd" or "pastor") will one day give an account for how they watched over the souls in the church. This is a sobering thought that must be taken seriously. In order to give an account, the elders must know who the sheep are.

I (Michael) have four children at home. Each of them are different. In order to effectively lead my kids, I must know them. The same goes for the church. We want to know your family – where you come from, where you work, memorize your kids' names (we're their pastors, too!), and find out what your interests are.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 4 that God gave leaders to the church so that the saints (members) can be equipped for the work of the ministry. We are called to know who the saints are, identify their spiritual giftedness, and move them toward the

fullness of Christ. In order to do that effectively, it helps to know who the committed sheep are.

### **To Provide Intentional Pastoral Care**

As churches grow, the tendency becomes for all pastors to minister in a reactionary way. This is not an effective mode of ministry. As members are added to the church, the elders are committed to fervently pray over and care for the families in a proactive manner.

Each family unit will be put under the pastoral care of one specific elder. The elder will then work to lead that family well by caring for them, seeking their growth in Christ, helping in times of need, and praying.

Elders and members of the church should strive for a mutual belonging. We believe that church goes beyond sneaking in the back door on Sunday and leaving right when the service ends without ever being known.