

## **Pastor Kevin's Quick Summary of Membership Thoughts**

*(March, 2017; Updated June, 2019)*

### **Church Membership Thoughts**

*Good day, sir. I have a few questions to run by you regarding church government. We are currently in a study regarding the church and the topic of church membership has come up.*

*At Northridge I recall that we never stressed the issue of church membership much. Do I recall correctly?*

*I was wondering, if church membership isn't stressed, how does the church effectively exercise church discipline and hold its "members" accountable?*

*At what point did we require church membership? Or was it required at all? Was it for pastors and deacons, or just pastors?*

*And what was the reason for requiring membership at all?*

### **Questions Derived or Implied:**

1. What has been Northridge's emphasis on membership?
2. If church membership isn't stressed, how does the church effectively exercise church discipline, and hold its "members" accountable?
3. At what point did Northridge require membership?
4. Was membership required at all at Northridge?
5. Was membership just for pastors and deacons, or just pastors?
6. What was the reason for requiring membership at all?

### **Brief Thoughts and Answers**

I will likely work backwards from your questions. I would see the starting point for any doctrine and its application is not what any church's practice is, but what the Bible has to say (or not to say) about membership. Obviously, our church is not the standard; the Word is.

### **Traditional Practices and Logic**

First, though, I would like to summarize what I consider to be a normal or traditional view of the churches I grew up in and have been a part, and of churches that are of the same "flavor."

### **COMMON PRACTICE:**

As a summary for comparison, most churches in the Baptist circles (my realm of experience) and Bible churches (of which I have some realm of knowledge) create a membership list based upon some defined, basic criteria. Often that criteria includes (1) salvation, with some evaluation of one's "personal testimony," (2) believer's baptism, as the "first step of obedience," and (3) a church vote to receive them into formal membership, often preceded by an evaluation of #1 and #2 and recommend by a "board" of pastors and/or deacons. The person is thus a "member" of the local church and usually has standing to vote and serve at some level not allowed to non-members. [Sometimes some form of lifestyle evidence may be required at some churches, often by a church covenant; this is likely more ideal than something enforced, from what I have seen.] None of this process is outlined in Scripture *in any form*.

### **COMMON PROBLEM:**

Most churches have to maintain two lists: Active members and inactive members. Active members are those who fulfill minimum requirements as defined by the local church constitution (these requirements vary greatly), and thus are allowed to serve and vote. The emphasis has to define a minimum (minimum attendance, usually), so it emphasizes how little a person has to be around in order to still vote or serve, rather than one's obligation to faithful involvement (doing all one can and should to serve the local body).

Inactive members are those who do not meet those minimum standards, and thus lose the privilege to serve and vote. The barrier for being placed on an inactive list is usually, in my opinion, absurd. It is usually the failure to attend for an entire year (or more). Otherwise, they technically could still serve, and they could legitimately vote by showing only once a year for an annual business meeting (absurd, again, because they would neither have any understanding of current needs or issues or the ability to vote intelligently because of lack of knowledge due to their absence).

### **COMMON LOGIC:**

Two main reasons exist for membership lists: (1) to define who can vote in a "congregational rule" governed church [something I consider an ironic label, since most "congregationally ruled" churches are led by some type of board of elders who make most primary decisions without congregational involvement], and (2) to define legal voting membership as required by laws of incorporation. Without #1, you can still define service requirements and leadership requirements. For #2, laws of incorporation do not require congregational rule, but rather some defined membership (this could be just a group of elders that are a subset of the congregation).

## COMMON ARGUMENTS (somewhat derived from Ryrrie for ease and brevity):

### 1. *Participation in the Discipline Process*

The whole church was empowered to exercise discipline (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:4–5; 2 Cor. 2:6–7; 2 Thess. 3:14–15). Since the important matter of discipline was not committed to the leaders only but to the whole congregation, this supports the concept of congregational government.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. *Participation in Leadership Selection*

The whole church was involved in choosing leaders. Certain passages clearly support this (Acts 1:23, 26; 6:3, 5; 15:22, 30; 2 Cor. 8:19). Others, like Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5, seem to argue against congregational involvement in choosing. Acts 14:23 records the appointing of leaders on the return leg of the first missionary journey. The verb *cheirotoneo* does mean appoint, though congregationalists would prefer a more etymologically related understanding of the verb as indicating a choice by raising the hands; that is, a congregational vote. However, even congregationalist Baptist theologian A. H. Strong recognizes that the idea of a popular vote cannot be sustained by the verb. He negated the use of this verse, as well as Titus 1:5 (where Titus was instructed to appoint elders in every city), to support the federal type of government by stating that the verses “decide nothing as to the mode of choice, nor is a choice by the community thereby necessarily excluded.”<sup>1</sup>

### 3. *Commitment of the Ordinances to the Whole Church*

Since the church is responsible to observe the ordinances, this somehow assigns the entire congregation the role to decide things, which means a roll is necessary to know who participates in decision making. (Matt 28:19-20; 1 Cor 11:2, 20) I would suggest that participation in the ordinances and obedience in observing them is not justification for congregational government.

### 4. *Priesthood of All Believers*

Since all believers have equal access to God (1 Pet 2:5,9), all believers should have a say in decisions. This simply does not hold up. One does not give equal standing to children in a home because they are believers. Bible colleges do not run their schools by majority vote, even though their student bodies are made up of believers. Leadership is not set aside because of the priesthood of believers. God still defines leaders in the home, church, and government, and He requires us to submit to them.

The priesthood of a believer is not a replacement for expertise or maturity. Just because one is saved does not give immediate Biblical understanding, sanctification, wisdom, or experience (“seasoning from age”). One who has been taught / has studied the Bible for five years presumably knows more than one recently saved. One who has studied the Bible for decades should have a deeper working knowledge of the Bible than most. We are not on equal standing in expertise or maturity, and therefore each vote is not equal.

## BIBLE SUPPORT FOR MEMBERSHIP LISTS:

From what I can see, a “church membership” list is only *suggested* (but never defined) as existing by some in the following verses: *These additions were added as a count to an apparently larger number, but seem to relate to a general number of believers in an area or region, but could also as easily relate to the universal church. None require a formal membership list, nor clearly state that there was one:*

- **Acts 2:41** Then those who gladly<sup>1</sup> received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added *to them*.
- **Acts 2:47** praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.
- **Acts 4:4** However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.
- **Acts 5:14** And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,
- **Acts 6:7** Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.
- **Acts 11:21** And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.
- **Acts 11:24** For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.
- **Acts 16:5** So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.

*This passage is sometimes used to suggest a larger number, with the logic that these widows must be a subset of a larger number. The passage really doesn't require or suggest a larger, formal list other than for the widows themselves. If it does suggest a larger list, the Bible is silent on what constitutes the list.*

- **1 Tim 5:9** Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, *and not unless* she has been the wife of one man,

Membership is seen as a trade of formally belonging with minimum requirements, which in turn gives a person the right to serve and vote. I do not see any clear or persuasive requirements for a membership roll for these types of purposes. Having one is not wrong (and may be legally required, based upon state laws of incorporation and one's method of church government). However, it seems to me that it should not play a separate and key emphasis apart from faithful participation in the local church.

Membership can be required as a visible, **tangible act of commitment** to the local assembly (getting married rather than just “going together”). I think there is some cultural value and legitimacy to that, but I will leave that for another discussion. It does not seem to be the emphasis in the churches with which I am familiar.

<sup>1</sup> Ryrrie, C. C. (1999). *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (p. 473). Chicago, IL: Moody Press.

## ***My Understanding of the Bible Regarding Membership:***

From my study of the Bible, my understanding of the “church membership list” idea has moved from this traditional view to something which I believe aligns more with Scripture.

- **1 Cor 12:13** For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

### **BIBLICAL PREMISE:**

We connect with a local body because we are **already** a member of The Body, having become so when we believed. It is not a decision we make as much as it is an obligation that we fulfill. 1 Cor 12:13 says that we do not join, but rather we are placed into the body of Christ. Assembling together with other believers is an acknowledgement of that truth. We assemble because we already are part of the body, not in order to become so. We are not members because our name is placed on a roll (membership list), but because we have been connected to the Body at salvation through the Holy Spirit. If we claim or identify that we are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Sin Bearer, we are obligated to assemble. The Bible nowhere discusses joining a church; it expects active involvement in one. It is not a choice; it is a required outworking of our connection with Christ.

### **BIBLICAL CONNECTION:**

The Biblical connection of believers in an assembly is defined by **faithful participation**. Membership rolls are without value if faithful participation and service do not accompany such. Members on a roll but who are not faithful in attendance, giving, or service have no value, but those not on some roll but who are actively involved and faithful attending, giving and serving are exactly what God desires. The membership roll has no clear value; action does. Lack of participation is evidence of ignorance, immaturity, or disobedience. It is not a failure to join, but a failure to obey what the Bible defines as our responsibility to the local assembly.

The idea that if one’s name is on a membership list somewhere, it qualifies us for privilege or status to receive benefit (the care, protection, and service of others) or privilege (to vote) is foreign to Scripture. It is the mutual, active commitment to one another as believers that secures those things.

At Northridge, we emphasized faithful participation and involvement, not placing oneself on a roll. We did (and do) maintain a membership roll, but that only formally defines who can vote (something we have little cause to do, and which usually relates to major decisions: budget, leadership, major expenses, etc.).

### **BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP:**

Membership is key in congregationally ruled churches. Again, it defines who can vote and not vote (and usually, who can serve and cannot serve). I believe this is where the problem arises. I do not see clear evidence of congregational rule (though I do see congregational involvement, including the responsibility to teach and admonish – of which all are commanded to do). On the contrary, the Bible clearly defines the appointment of leaders (by other leaders, from what I see in Scripture), the requirements for leadership, their responsibility to lead, teach and protect the flock, and the responsibility of the congregation to submit or yield to their leadership. As I would understand it, the idea of congregational rule circumvents Biblically defined leadership. Leaders are sinners and imperfect, and yet God puts them in place to lead, and requires us to follow them. Submit, as I would understand it, assumes that one disagrees in some way with the leader (husband, father, pastor, government leader) and yet yields to their leadership.

Most “congregationally ruled” churches are not ruled by their congregations. They have very little input, and vote on things that largely have already been hashed out by leaders (pastors, deacons, or a board of some type). That may be congregational affirmation of leader decisions, but it is not true congregational rule.

### **BIBLICAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

Believers identify with the body via their testimony and their activity. They are held accountable on that bases as well. Fellowship seems to be based upon obedience, faithful participation, and responsiveness to correction, not having one’s name on a list. If one claims to be a believer in Jesus Christ, they are immediately placed in a realm of Scriptural expectation to live out that claim, including Biblical behavior and faithful participation in a local body.

### **BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP SELECTION:**

Leaders are chosen from those that serve and display their willingness, their walk, their faithfulness and their giftedness. Based upon the requirements of pastors in Scripture, it is evident that potential leaders are evaluated over an extended period of time. That would require ongoing faithful involvement in the local body by those potential leaders. Further, Scripture would suggest that seasoned leaders select new leaders. They would have the Biblical training, experience, and insight to evaluate potential leaders. Young or immature believers would not, and in fact, could easily be misled by poor or even dangerous leaders.

At Northridge, we require pastors and deacons to be members. We reduced requirements for others because we hand-pick teachers (for example) and others to serve. Formal membership can be a time to confirm alignment to doctrinal statements, or bring someone to a formal commitment to the body. However, I would still place faithful involvement over time as the key emphasis in Scripture. I would say that it would help for our church to re-visit this in order to further refine and update our constitution, but what we have has been working and has not been an issue. We think we are functioning within the realm of the Biblical model.