

Become a Member

Committing to Be the Body
Here and Now Together



A **Next Steps** Resource of Mercy Hill Church

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Here and Now Together

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Much of the content of this booklet has been adapted from the first section of Mercy Hill's Covenant Membership Handbook. This material, while covered in the Covenant Membership Class, is provided for you here as a way of introducing you to the important subject of church membership.

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27

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Kicking Against the Current

In this little booklet we are going to deal with the subject of church membership. As we begin, it is perhaps worthwhile to note that such a subject immediately has us kicking against the current of our culture and the natural drift of our flesh.

- Our culture prizes *individualism*—"Get out of my business. Sure I'm a Christian, but it's just me and Jesus. I don't need the church getting in the way!" But church membership presses in and says: "No! We're in this thing together—I need you in my life; and you need me in yours!"
- Our culture has so fostered *consumerism*—"I'm here only so long as you meet my needs. When you stop satisfying me, I stop coming!" But church membership presses in and says: "No! Though I'm a mess, and you're a mess; though I'm going to hurt you, and you're going to hurt me; I'm committing to follow Christ along with you through the ups and the downs."
- Our culture preaches *tolerance* as the highest of virtues—"What's true for you is true for you, but don't you try to tell me what's true for me!" But church membership presses in and draws hard lines of truth in love and says with great joy that some seem to be in Christ, and with great sorrow that others seem, according to biblical standards, to be out of bounds.

So we mustn't assume that all the contents of this booklet will go down smoothly. We might struggle and question at certain points. But we are still right to assume, and even expect, that there is much grace and glory waiting for us in all of this. For, while church membership may seem foreign and even offensive to some of us, it is a subject that matters greatly to God. I trust you will come to see this as you proceed.

Hit pause for a moment before you go any further. What immediately comes to mind when you think of church membership? How does it sound to you out of the gate? Does it seem like a good thing, a suspicious thing, a confusing thing? How would you define it?



So far as church membership is concerned, do you think you're more likely to struggle with individualism, consumerism, tolerance, or something else? In what ways does church membership push back against the culture and the flesh?

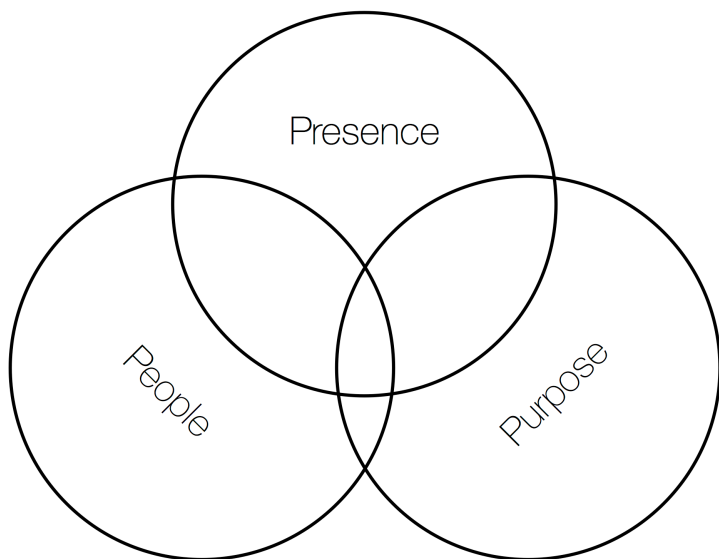
Look back at the verses printed on the opening page of this booklet (1 Cor. 12:12-14, 27). Read them carefully. What do you think this text has to do with the subject of church membership? In what ways does it properly orient us towards the matter?

What Is the Church?

One Blessed Assembly with Three Distinct Aspects

Before we can effectively introduce church membership, we should back up and ask: What is *the church* in the first place? It's a question we all imagine we could answer quite simply, but when we start to make an attempt, we come to face the complexities of it. What is the church? Stop for a moment. How would you answer?

Here's my humble attempt at a definition: **The church is that blessed assembly that exists in the *presence* of God, as the *people* of God, for the *purpose* of God.** One blessed assembly, with three distinct aspects.



The Church in Redemptive History

I've defined the church using these broad terms here to help us see that the church is not merely a New Testament reality but something that God has been after with us from the very beginning. In other words: what Christ redeems us to be is organically connected to what God originally created us to be in Adam.

Adam and Eve

Consider Adam and Eve:¹

- In an overflow of joy and love, God creates them and sets them in the garden sanctuary of Eden, where he himself would walk with them (Gen. 3:8). They were created to exist in his holy *presence*.

¹ You might want to read Genesis 1-3 for a refresher on this. As you do, make special note of God's dealing with the first man and woman.

- But, even more, they were created to be his *people*. It was not good for man to be alone so “God created man in his own image . . . *male and female* he created them” (Gen. 1:27). One human being was not enough to truly image God (who himself exists as one in *three*!). Human beings were created to be his *people*, in special (even covenant) relationship with him *and* with one another.
- And he gave to these people in his presence a unique *purpose*. The first man and woman were to rule with him over his creation. They were to subdue and have dominion over it. They were to bear fruit, multiply, and fill the earth with more human beings made in God’s image and reflecting his glory (Gen. 1:28). By this, it seems, they were to expand the boundaries of Eden so that, one day, God’s glory might fill the earth like the waters cover the sea—with all humanity existing in his presence, as his people, living for his purpose in the world.

In this sense, then, we could say that humanity was created, from the start, to be the church.

But we would not have it! In our arrogance, we abandoned his presence, broke our fellowship with one another, and started living, not for the purpose of God, but for ourselves.

And so the world went dark.

The church is that blessed assembly that exists in the presence of God, as the people of God, for the purpose of God.

Jesus Christ

But God was not willing to let the story end here. He begins a counter-movement with Israel that, through many ups and downs, ultimately

culminates in the arrival of the Christ, Jesus—the light of the world (John 1:9); Immanuel, God with us (Matt. 1:23). Though we fell from his presence, in grace, God brings his presence down to us.

And—through Jesus’ perfect life, sin-bearing death, triumphant resurrection, and renewing Spirit—broken humanity can finally be put back together, restored to God’s original design. All that was lost in Adam is regained in Christ (1 Cor. 15:20-23, 45-49). Redemption is restoration of creation!

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Listen to how Peter describes the church as it has been restored in Jesus:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet. 2:9-10)

Did you hear it?

- In Christ, we’ve been restored to the *presence* of God—“called . . . out of darkness into his marvelous light” (v. 9).
- In Christ, we’ve been restored as the *people* of God—“once [we] were not a people but now [we] are God’s people” (v. 10).
- In Christ, we’ve been restored to live for the *purpose* of God—that we might “proclaim the excellencies of him” to others (v. 9). And through this gospel proclamation, as people repent and believe, we will begin again to fill the earth with men and women now renewed in God’s image, reflecting his glory.

And this work begun in Christ will someday soon be fully realized. The apostle John writes of the end of things in this way:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." (Rev. 21:1-3)

Christ has done it! God's original plan for humanity as the church—in his *presence*, as his *people*, for his *purpose*—will be fully realized in the end through Jesus and his work on the cross!

We are both an echo of Eden and a foretaste of heaven. We are the church.

The Space Between

But we're not in Revelation 21 yet, are we? No! We're back in 1 Peter 2. We're shining lights in a world that's still dark. We're calling sinners back to God through the Savior, warning them before it's too late. We have God's presence, we are God's people, we live for God's purpose, but we're not yet home. We're still somewhere in the middle of the story. And as such, we are both an echo of Eden and a foretaste of heaven.

We are the church.



Before reading this, how would you have defined the church? Have you ever thought about it as something that spans both the Old and New Testaments? What do you think of this idea? In what ways do you find the definition put forward in this section compelling, encouraging, confusing?

What Is Church Membership?

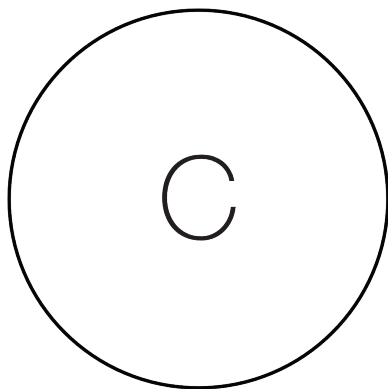
From Universal to Local

So, with this definition in view, what then is church *membership*? How do I become a part of that blessed assembly?

The Universal Church

Church membership, broadly conceived, takes place simply by coming to Jesus in repentance and faith (Acts 2:37-39; 16:30-31). When the gospel is proclaimed and we repent and believe, we are united to Christ by his Spirit, and we become members of his body, the church.

I am referring here in particular to what has been called the *universal church* (church with a capital C). The universal church is that which includes all believers, through all time, across all space. It is the sum total of all who have been united to the Son through the ages.



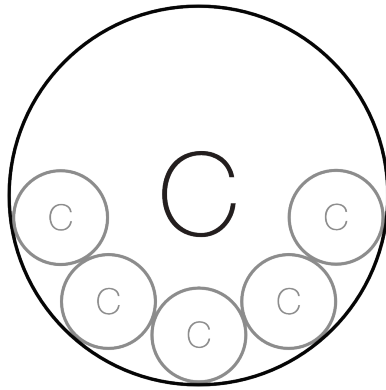
It's the universal church that the author of Hebrews has in mind when he writes:

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly [Gk. *ekklēsia* = "church"] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. (Heb. 12:22-24; cf. Rev. 7:9-12)

If you have bowed your knee to Christ, then your name is written in the roll-sheet of heaven—the Lamb's book of life—and you are a member in his universal church and granted the privilege of participating in this kind of cosmic worship service!

The Local Church

But it is not so much membership in this broad sense that we are concerned with in this booklet is it? It is doubtful that any would question the validity of church membership along these lines. But oh how things get a bit confusing, even controversial, when we start to consider church membership in a narrower sense—when we start considering membership in the *local church* (church with a lower-case c).



If the universal church is that which includes all believers, through all time, across all space, then the local church is that which is confined to a particular group of believers, at a particular time, in a particular space—like Mercy Hill Church.

So what should church membership look like at this local level? Is such a thing even important or biblical?

Distinguished But Not Divided

The New Testament would certainly lead us to think so. For, while it distinguishes between the universal and local church, it sees no division between them. To be part of the universal church necessarily meant that you would be part of a local church (and vice versa).

Indeed, one's membership in the universal church is always concretely expressed through vital membership in a local church. There are no drifting Christians; they are all anchored concretely in local assemblies. As Douglas Millar writes: "In the New Testament there is no such person as a Christian who is not a church member. Conversion was described as 'the Lord adding to the church' (Acts 2:47). There was no spiritual drifting."²

² Douglas Millar, "Should I Join a Church?," The Aquila Report, accessed May 14, 2022, <https://theaquilareport.com/should-i-join-a-church/>.

If you were coming to Christ, then you were coming into the local church. Period.

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Conversion was described as "the Lord
adding to the church" (Acts 2:47).
There was no spiritual drifting.*

And, to put it conversely, by coming into the local church you were coming into the church universal. Which is why Paul would open his letter in 1 Corinthians 1:2 as follows: "To the church of God that is *in Corinth* [local], to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with *all* those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours [universal]"³

The local assembly is the gateway into the universal assembly. Amazingly, the only way to really enter into the Hebrews 12 kind of cosmic worship, is through the little assemblies of local churches! We hope, therefore, that you never look at the fluorescent lights, stained carpets, and wrinkled curtains of our little sanctuary in quite the same way again. When you come through the doors of this elementary school, you might as well be ascending mount Zion. We're touching heaven in this place!

Now there are droves of professing Christians in our day that reject almost everything I've just said: "Give me the universal church but don't make me commit to the local church," they say. "The local church just slows me down and gets in the way of my walk with Jesus. It's an outdated institution. And, frankly, it tends to bring more shame to Christ's name than honor."

³ Any emphasis in Scripture citations has been added by the author.

I don't want you to feel that way about this or any local church. Jesus certainly doesn't. Christ shed His blood for *this* local church (Acts 20:28)!

Four Strands of Biblical Evidence for Local Church Membership

Let's quickly consider four strands of biblical evidence that seem to indicate the importance the early church placed on local church membership. While we cannot say that a formal process of church membership is clearly articulated for us here, we can say that something of the like is clearly implied.

Strand #1: It Is Implied in the Records Kept by Local Churches

Consider the New Testament church's origin there in Jerusalem. On the day of Pentecost, after the outpouring of the Spirit, and the preaching of Peter, we read that "those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). And they immediately come into the local covenant community of believers: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (v. 42).

Similar statements are made in Acts 2:47; 4:4; 5:14; and 11:24. We get this sense that, as people were added to the church, numbers were kept—not because they were concerned with numbers in themselves, but because they were concerned pastorally for each and every soul that the numbers represented. It seems they had some way of keeping track of who was coming in.

Strand #2: It Is Implied in the Leader-Member Dynamics of Local Churches

The clearest text for this is Hebrews 13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those

who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Matt Chandler, the lead pastor of a church in Dallas and current President of the Acts 29 Network of which we are a part, reflects on his own wrestling through the issue of local church membership. And he points to this verse as the lynchpin for him. He writes:

Two questions occurred to me. First, if there is no biblical requirement to belong to a local church, then which leaders should an individual Christian obey and submit to? Second, and more personally, who will I as a pastor give an account for? . . .

Regarding the first question, the Scriptures clearly command Christians to submit to and honor an elder body (Heb. 13:17, 1 Tim. 5:17). If there is no understanding of local church membership, then who are we to submit to and obey? Is it anyone with the title elder from any church? Should you as a Christian obey and submit to those loons at Westboro Baptist? In order to obey Scripture, must you picket soldiers’ funerals, as the pastor of Westboro seems to imply?

Regarding the second question, the Scriptures clearly command an elder body to care for specific people (1 Pet. 5:1-5; also, Acts 20:29-30). Will I as a pastor be held accountable for all the Christians in the Dallas Metroplex? There are many churches in Dallas that I have strong theological and philosophical differences with. Will I give account for what they teach in their small group, how they spend their money, and what they do concerning international missions?⁴

For Hebrews 13:17 to make any sense, it seems that the early church members must have had a clear idea of who these leaders were to whom they should submit. And, likewise, it seems that the early church leaders must have also had a clear idea of who these members were for whom they would give an account to God—those whom God had put “in [their] charge [‘lot’; ‘share’]” (1 Pet. 5:3).

⁴ Matt Chandler, “Is Church Membership Biblical?,” 9Marks, accessed May 14, 2022, <https://9marks.org/article/journalchurch-membership-biblical/>.

It seems they had some way of drawing these lines.

Strand #3: It Is Implied in the Practice of Church Discipline and Excommunication by Local Churches

Mathew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5 in particular talk about putting a person out of the church due to clear, consistent, calloused, unrepentant sin. But how can you formally put someone out if they were never formally brought in?⁵

Strand #4: It Is Implied in the Metaphors Used to Describe Local Churches

Local churches are described as:

- *Flocks*—composed of sheep (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2-3).
- *Temples*—composed of living stones (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5).
- *Households*—composed of family members (1 Tim. 3:15).
- *Bodies*—composed of body parts, or members (1 Cor. 12).

Each of these metaphors push us to see the local church as composed of distinct yet vitally connected members.

Whether there was a formal membership process or not, it is clear that these individual believers had joined together in some radically significant way.

- When one sheep goes missing, the Good Shepherd recognizes it right away and leaves the ninety-nine to go after him.
- When a stone is pulled from the wall of a temple, who wouldn't notice the gaping hole left in its place?
- When a family member has gone AWOL, family meals around the table just aren't the same.
- When a hand is removed from the body, every body part suffers the loss.

⁵ For more on this, see Jonathan Leeman's little book: *Church Discipline*.

Formally Encouraging What the Scriptures Already Require

It might be that all this evidence finally implies is that the early local churches of the New Testament had some sort of informal understanding of church membership. Certainly we are not to suppose that they had some database on their computers where they saved applications, interview notes, signed covenants, and directory info. Whatever they did, they did it differently than we are going to do here.

But it does seem clear that they did something, that they approached the issue in some way. And we should do the same.

With covenant membership, we are not trying to go beyond what the Scriptures teach. We are simply attempting to formally encourage in our church what the Scriptures already require of us.

With covenant membership, we are not trying to go beyond what the Scriptures teach. We are simply attempting to formally encourage in our church what the Scriptures already require of us.

- We're supposed to know who's being added to our assembly by the Lord.
- Members are supposed to submit to, obey, and honor their leaders.
- Leaders are supposed to oversee, shepherd, and care for the members under their charge.
- When members or leaders are hardened in unrepentant sin, we're supposed to have clear ways of removing them from the

communion of this church so as to warn the sinner, protect the church's purity, and preserve the honor of Christ.

- Every believer is supposed to be in intimate, committed, accountable relationships with other Christians.

A formal process of church membership encourages all of these things and helps to provide a framework for developing them in our church.

So What Is It?

With all of this now in view, how would I define church membership here at Mercy Hill? Well, I don't have a punchy one-liner, but here goes:

Church membership is a way of formalizing your commitment to this church—its members, leaders, mission, and ministries. It's a way of going all in with us as we commit to *"be the body"* here and now together in the beautiful and broken city of San Jose. It's a promise we make to one another—that we will participate meaningfully in this local assembly as we pursue God's *presence*, grow together as His *people*, and live for His *purpose* in the world.

Do Not Cut Yourself Off from this Blessing!

As we now bring this booklet to a close, I'll leave you with the pleadings of seasoned pastor, John Piper. Read his words carefully. Take them seriously.

I [urge] you to pray and to think this through for your own life. The New Testament knows of no Christians who are not accountable members of local churches. . . . "Lone-Ranger Christians" are a contradiction because becoming a Christian means being united to Christ, and union with Christ expresses itself in union with a local body of believers. . . .

Are you an accountable member of a local church? Not just: Is your name somewhere? But, are you committed to discipline and being disciplined according to biblical standards? Have you publicly declared your willingness to be shepherded and to be led by the leaders of a local church? Do you see yourself and your gifts as part of an organic ministering body? Do you show by your firm attachment to Christ's body that you are attached to Christ? Church membership is a blood-bought gift of God's grace. More than most of us realize, it is a life-sustaining, faith-strengthening, joy-preserving means of God's mercy to us. I urge you not to cut yourself off from this blessing.⁶



Think back to the very first question in this booklet. I asked you to share your initial thoughts on church membership and try your best to define it. Now that you've read your way to this point, how has your understanding of membership in the church changed? What are some key takeaways from this study for you? What questions do you still have?

Read back over the definition of church membership I offered up in that last section (p. 21). What stands out to you here? Are you ready to press in and make this commitment? Why or why not?

Want More?

If you are wanting to engage the subject matter found in this booklet further, you might consider the following resources:

⁶ John Piper, "How Important Is Church Membership?," *Desiring God*, accessed May 14, 2022, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/how-important-is-church-membership>.

- *What Is a Healthy Church Member?* by Thabiti Anyabwile
- *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever
- *Church Membership* by Jonathan Leeman
- *Mercy Hill's Covenant Membership Handbook*⁷

Need Help?

Our leaders at Mercy Hill would love to help you take this next step! If you'd like someone to chat, pray, or read with along the way please don't hesitate to reach out to us at info@mercyhillchurch.org.

What's Next?

If you are wanting to become a covenant member of Mercy Hill Church, you can let us know by either filling out a Connection Card⁸ or simply emailing us at info@mercyhillchurch.org. We'll get you into the next Covenant Membership Class where you can learn more and find additional help as you seek to take this next step.

If you've already become a covenant member and committed yourself to "be the body" here and now with us, great! We encourage you at this point to consider further plugging into our church community. For this, check out the next step: *Join a Home Group*. Find more info at the Next Steps Table on a Sunday or online at mercyhillchurch.org.

⁷ You can find this online at <https://mercyhillchurch.org/community/covenant-membership>.

⁸ You can find the Connection Card online at <https://mercyhillchurch.churchcenter.com/people/forms/124506>.

It's easy to keep the church at arms length. We come in and engage when it's convenient for us, but then pull away when it's not. But such a "marketplace mentality" towards the church misses God's heart and goal for us here entirely. He doesn't want us to be mere consumers. He wants us to be vitally connected members.

Covenant membership at Mercy Hill is a way of going all in with us as we commit to "be the body" here and now together. It's a way of formalizing your commitment to this church—its members, leaders, mission, and ministries. It's a promise we make to one another—that we will participate meaningfully in this local assembly as we pursue God's presence, grow together as his people, and live for his purpose in the world. If you want to learn more, this Next Steps Resource is for you!



Consider Jesus

For those skeptical or curious about Christianity and the claims of Jesus.



Be Baptized

For those ready to say yes to Jesus and "go public" with their faith.



Walk the Sacred Path

For those wanting to grow in their devotional lives (e.g. Bible reading, prayer).



Become a Member

For those interested in going all in with this local church and committing to "be the body" here and now together.



Join a Home Group

For those wanting to move towards community and live on mission for Jesus with others in the church.



Pursue Discipleship

For those interested in going deeper in their faith and growing more in the image of Christ.



Use Your Gifts

For those interested in identifying the gifts God has given them and using those gifts to serve in the church.



Spread the News

For those interested in evangelistic training and opportunities.



Serve the City

For those interested in getting their hands and feet dirty in love for others in our city and world.

Our leaders at Mercy Hill would love to help you take this next step! If you'd like someone to chat, pray, or read with along the way please don't hesitate to reach out to us at info@mercyhillchurch.org.