

What Does The Bible Say About Placing Membership?

Introduction. Every member of the church has heard the expression, “placing membership,” but the words are not used in the New Testament, although the concept does exist. Divine wisdom has determined that His people would not worship and serve Him in isolation, but in union. The hope is that by mutual assistance we might grow and develop, and work together for the furtherance of the cause of Christ. This was shown in the very inception of the kingdom, when disciples united together for worship, edification and work (Acts 2:42-47).

While salvation is obtained by means of obedience to the truth (1 Peter 1:22; Romans 6:17-18), and enrollment with the universal body of Christians takes place at the same time when God adds us to His company of saved believers (Hebrews 12:23), membership in the local church must be chosen, as we identify ourselves among other Christians and are accepted into their fellowship for worship, edification and work.

I. ***The Need Of Local Church Membership***

- A. There is no such concept in the New Testament scriptures described as “membership at large” in the Lord’s church. Furthermore, when the Lord adds one to the universal church, it is impossible to serve the Lord in a universal way (i.e., we cannot give to the universal church, we cannot sing with the universal church, we cannot partake of the Lord’s supper with the universal church, we cannot submit to elders of the universal church).
- B. Since the congregation is the only unit of organization known in the New Testament for advancing the work of the church, it follows that for a Christian to be in full fellowship with the Lord, he or she must be associated with or be a part of a local church.
- C. When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he identifies and addresses them as one (cf. 1:27; 2:1-2), because they not only lived in relative proximity to one another, but they also acted together in concert (4:15). How had they become such?
 1. It is evident that they became the church at Philippi because they agreed to work together as one (a collectivity).
 2. Because fellowship in a local church is begun and maintained by mutual, voluntary agreement, I must choose to enter into fellowship with them and they must agree to accept me into their fellowship. It is a two way street!
 3. While entering into fellowship with a specific group of Christians is voluntary, fellowship with a local church is not!

D. We confess Christ with our mouth before being baptized (Romans 10:10). We use our mouth when we repent to those we have sinned against (Luke 17:3-4). We do this so that others will know our purpose and intent. Why would someone say that it is unnecessary to declare our intention to work in conjunction with the saints in a local congregation?

II. ***How Does One "Place Membership"?***

A. "Placing membership" simply means that a dignified "introduction" of a previously unknown Christian to the members of a local congregation has taken place.

B. An example of "placing membership" is seen with Saul. When Saul went to Jerusalem, "he assayed to join himself to the disciples" (Acts 9:26). Being a member of the church of Christ, he let the church know he wanted to "associate" (NASB) with the disciples in that place. Notice the following points:

1. The action was immediate.
 - a) There was no long delay on Saul's part before seeking to identify with God's people. It seems obvious that Saul knew the benefit of close association with faithful brethren. He had experienced it in Damascus just before coming to Jerusalem.
 - b) Now people wait months, even years, before identifying with a local congregation. Clearly, local church membership is part of God's plan. We miss out on something important when we fail to follow Saul's example of immediately seeking to join ourselves with a faithful church.
2. It was Saul who took the initiative in this matter.
 - a) He made the effort. He did not wait for others to approach him.
 - b) It was his responsibility to accomplish this, and he did not neglect to do so.
3. The church put him to the test.
 - a) The Christians in Jerusalem needed to know of Saul's conversion and his faithfulness. Evidence was presented to them to verify that Saul was a faithful Christian.
 - b) They were not obligated to receive him into their fellowship until they were convinced of his proper standing before God. Also, observe that Saul was not "put off" or turned away by their desire to know about his former life.
4. As soon as he was a part of that congregation, he got actively involved in the work, as he had done on other occasions when he associated himself with a congregation of Christians (Acts 13:1-3; 14:25-28).

- C. Since there is a necessary implication of being known and identified with a local church, let's examine several ways in which this desire can be made known.
1. One who is well-known by the local brethren may orally introduce the one who is not so well-known (Galatians 1:21-22; Acts 9:26-27).
 2. One mutually recognized person may write a letter of introduction to brethren about one with whom they are not familiar (Colossians 4:10; Romans 16:1-2).
 3. Several brethren may write a letter commending the faith of another (Acts 18:27).
 4. One who is unknown may present himself or herself to a local congregation and by self-commendation ask to be received into the fellowship of a local group.
 - a) The person who comes by the route of self-commendation should not be averse to brethren checking at the place of his or her previous membership to ascertain their past record of service.
 - b) Brethren must check because there are some who would have fellowship with us, but we must not have fellowship with them (1 Corinthians 5:9-13).

III. ***An Earnest Participant***

- A. My part (and yours) in the local church must involve more than membership. We must be earnest participants.
- B. In the local church there are different tasks to be accomplished. God has so designed us that we, working together as one, might be able to accomplish His work and ascribe to Him our worship in the church.
- C. The analogy that Paul uses of the human body to illustrate what is true in the local church demonstrates not only individual diversity among us, but it also emphasizes the necessity of each one's individual work (Romans 12:3-5).
 1. Just like our physical body, the optimum functioning of the spiritual body is dependent upon the proper working of each individual part (Ephesians 4:16).
 2. It is not enough to be a member of the local church, we must have fellowship in the work that God designed for the church. Someone once told me that the "church roll" does not equal the Lamb's book of life! Our part is not discharged by filling a pew during worship, even if we attend all the services!

Conclusion. Sometimes the privilege of identifying oneself with the local congregation is abused. Some will say that their membership lies with a

congregation hundreds of miles away or with a place with which they have not had contact for many years. These are people who “float” from place to place without making any detailed contribution to the good of the cause locally.

In His infinite wisdom, the heavenly architect has designed the church so that by means of our individual talent and unique personality we can play a significant part in the building of the kingdom of heaven. It is accomplished through our efforts in the local church. Are you identified with one? The Bible teaches that this is a part of your responsibility!