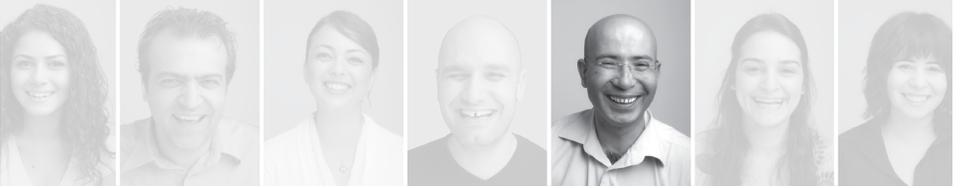


## Chapter 1



### **I Will Be a Functioning Church Member**

**I**t was a big deal for this young boy living in the small Southern town. I didn't know what a country club was, but I knew one was coming to town. And it included a swimming pool, a dining area, and meeting rooms. The owners also promised to build a small golf course, a promise they would fulfill a couple of years later.

Now don't get the wrong impression. This country club was not the typical upscale clubs we often envision. It was really a small private enterprise trying to make a few bucks in a small town by offering a few amenities.

But I was overwhelmed. My parents were middle-class in income, so they could afford the small monthly fee. From my perspective, though, I had it made. I could now go to a swimming pool. I didn't know of anyone who had their own pool in town, so this amenity was exciting. I could order a burger from the dining area. And we could have birthday parties in the pool or the meeting rooms.

I began to learn a lesson. Membership means perks. Membership means privileges. Membership means others will serve me. Just pay the going rate, and you can have others taking care of you while you enjoy a life of leisure.

And, tragically, this understanding of membership is what many church members hold.

"This is my church, so you have to play the music just the way I want it."

"Look pastor, you need to remember who pays your salary."

"If you don't do this program, I'll withhold my check to the church."

"I've been a member of this church for over thirty years, so I have a right to get what I want."

"I don't pay good money to this church to listen to sermons that long."

Okay, you get the picture. Those unfortunately typical comments come from members of churches who have an

unbiblical view of membership. Their view of membership is more aligned with country club membership.

For them, membership is about receiving instead of giving, being served instead of serving, rights instead of responsibilities, and entitlements instead of sacrifices. This wrongful view of membership sees the tithes and offerings as membership dues that entitle members to a never-ending list of privileges and expectations, instead of an unconditional cheerful gift to God.

So, what does the Bible say about church membership?

I'm glad you asked.

## **Membership Means We Are All Necessary Parts of the Whole**

There are a number of places in the New Testament where we can see a clear picture of church membership. One of the more voluminous sections is 1 Corinthians 12 to 14. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul explains the metaphor of the church being a body with many members. In 1 Corinthians 13, he established love as the central attitude and action all members should have. And in 1 Corinthians 14, he returns to the messed-up church at Corinth that has the concept of membership all wrong.

Some church leaders and members view membership as a modern business or organizational concept, so they reject the label as unbiblical. Membership, to the contrary, is very biblical.

The Bible explains “members” differently than secular culture. For example, look at the term in 1 Corinthians 12:27–28: “Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it. And God has placed these in the church.”

Do you get the difference? Members of a church comprise the whole and are essential parts of it. The apostle Paul would carry the body metaphor further and explain that members are individual parts of the body. Some are eyes; others are ears. Some are feet; still others are hands. That is why he concludes: “For as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many are one body—so also is Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12).

## **Membership Means We Are Different but We Still Work Together**

With a country club membership you pay others to do the work for you. With church membership, everyone has a role or function. That is why some are hands, feet, ears, or eyes. We are all different, but we are necessary parts of the whole.

Each part, therefore, has to do its work, or the whole body suffers. There is a beautiful diversity in the midst of unity in

church membership. The Bible makes it clear that if one part does not do its job, the whole body does not function well. But if one part does its job well, the whole body rejoices and is stronger: “So if one member suffers, all the members with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Cor. 12:26).

## **Membership Means Everything We Say and Do Is Based on a Biblical Foundation of Love**

Most Bible readers will speak glowingly of 1 Corinthians 13, commonly known as “the love chapter.” It is read at weddings. It is used for a husband to declare his love for a wife, or vice versa. It is preached to demonstrate a fuller meaning of *agape* or unconditional love.

While there is nothing wrong with using the love chapter in these contexts, its original meaning was to demonstrate how church members relate one to another. Can you imagine 1 Corinthians 13 being read at an acrimonious church meeting? In its full biblical context that might be the best place to read it.

If we could just abide by the principles of the love chapter, we would have completely healthy churches. It would be a revolution!

Just look at some of the relational principles of 1 Corinthians 13: “Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not conceited, does not act improperly, is not selfish, is not provoked, and does not keep a record of wrongs” (vv. 4–5).

The principles of these two verses alone are sufficient to cause a revival in most churches!

We are not to love fellow church members just because they are lovable. We are to love the unlovable as well. We are not to pray for and encourage our pastors just when they are doing things we like. We are to pray for and encourage them when they do things we don't like. We are not to serve the church only when others are joining in. We are to serve the church even if we are alone in doing so.

Church membership is founded on love. Authentic, biblical, unconditional love.

## **Church Membership Is Functioning Membership**

Do you know how to remain a member of a country club? Pay your dues. Do that and people will be available to serve you.

Do you know how to remain a *biblical* member of a church? Give abundantly and serve without hesitation.

Note the italicized word: *biblical*. Sure, you can remain on the rolls of many churches and never show up or give. You can remain an “active” member in other churches by being a CEO Christian: Christmas and Easter Only. You can even be a revered member in a number of churches by giving a nice sum to the church each year, even though you never lift a finger in service or ministry.

But please understand. That type of membership is not biblical membership. That approach to membership is man-made, man-centered, and man-maintained. It is totally contrary to what the Bible teaches. It has no place in our churches.

Biblical church membership gives without qualification. Biblical membership views the tithes and offerings as joyous giving. There are no strings attached. Biblical church membership serves and ministers as a natural way of doing things.

Biblical church membership is *functioning* membership.

Again, let’s return to 1 Corinthians 12 to grasp this concept more fully. When Paul was using the metaphor of the body to speak of the church, he did so for two primary reasons. First, the body is a unified whole. Likewise, the church is to be unified in its mission, purposes, ministries, and activities.

Second, the body is not only unified, it is made up of many parts. Think about the parts noted in 1 Corinthians 12:12–26:

- The foot.
- The hand.
- The ear.
- The eye.
- The nose (at least indirectly by referring to the sense of smell).

Each of these parts is supposed to function. The foot is to walk. The hand is to grasp and hold. The ear is to hear. The eye is to see. The nose is to smell.

We who are church members are all supposed to function in the church. The concept of an inactive church member is an oxymoron. Biblically, no such church member really exists.

Such is the reason we are exhorted to know our gifts and abilities, so we can use them best to serve the church for the glory of God. The fact that there is so much diversity in our church is our strength. Everyone has a function. Everyone should be functioning. Everyone should have a role.

Because we are all different with different gifts and abilities, we will function differently from other members. But if we are true and biblical church members, we will be functioning members.

One of the ongoing questions you should ask yourself and God in prayer is: “How can I best serve my church?” You should never ask yourself if you *should* be serving your church.

If you are a member, you must be a functioning member.  
It's just that simple.

## The First Pledge

It's hard to know for certain. Church membership rolls are not always easy to research, and some churches just refuse to face reality. But, by our best estimates, we think most church rolls are overinflated by a factor of three.

That's big. Really big.

What that means is, if your church has three hundred members on its rolls, it probably only has a hundred real biblical members. Only one-third are functioning members. Only one out of three gives abundantly and serves without hesitation.

In fact, I bet many people will question our own numbers as being overstated. They will question if *as many* as one out of three members are biblical, functioning members.

But you are making a different commitment.

You are making a pledge to be a member the way the Bible speaks and the way God designed it.

You are committing to giving cheerfully and abundantly. You are committing to serving and ministering without hesitation.

You are pledging to be a functioning church member.

*The First Pledge*

*I am a church member.*

*I like the metaphor of membership. It's not membership as in a civic organization or a country club. It's the kind of membership given to us in 1 Corinthians 12: "Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). Because I am a member of the body of Christ, I must be a functioning member, whether I am an "eye," an "ear," or a "hand." As a functioning member, I will give. I will serve. I will minister. I will evangelize. I will study. I will seek to be a blessing to others. I will remember that "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Cor. 12:26).*

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Sign and Date

## Questions for Study

1. Explain how country club membership and church membership are so different. Give scriptural references to support the differences in church membership.

2. Explain why church membership is a biblical concept, using 1 Corinthians 12 as your biblical foundation.

3. How is the “love chapter,” 1 Corinthians 13, related to church membership? Explain using all 13 verses of the chapter.

4. How are the different parts of the body (ear, nose, mouth, hand, foot, eyes, etc.) related to church membership? How do the parts play out in your church?

5. In relation to church membership, why is it important for members to know and use their spiritual gifts? Relate your answer to 1 Corinthians 12.