

Tell Me About CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

HOW DOES ONE BECOME A MEMBER OF THE CHURCH? Are there certain age limits, annual dues, initiation rites, attendance requirements, or acts of spiritual discipline? Do you have to be invited to become a member? All of these are important questions. **The church** is the community of people who believe in and follow Jesus Christ. In the first century, the church referred to itself as “called out” (Greek *ekklesia*) people because Christians have been called out of sin into salvation, out of darkness into light.

Peter refers to the church as “God’s own people” (1 Pet 2:9). Jesus described these people of faith when he said, “Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18 kjv).

WHO IS THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH? God the Father made Christ “the head of the body, the church” (Col 1:18). Through the Holy Spirit, he carries out God’s purpose and mission for his people. The Christian community is ultimately governed by Christ rather than a pastor, priest, or prelate. All authority and power are in Christ (Matt 28:18).

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WHO ARE THE MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH?

The church is made up of everyone who professes faith in Christ. The New Testament often refers to Christians as “brothers” and “sisters” because they are a spiritual family, with God as their Father. They are individually different, yet they work together in harmony (Rom 12:4–5). As family members they share one another’s burdens, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep (1 Cor 12:26). Rather than a creed or discipline, God’s love binds the members together. As the “cornerstone” (Eph 2:20), Christ maintains the unity of believers (Eph 4:2–3). Christian unity leaves no room for preferential treatment, age discrimination, or racial prejudice, for we are equal members of the household of faith (Gal 3:26–28).

WHAT ARE THE STANDARDS OF THE CHURCH?

Jesus left us an example of how we should live (1 Pet 2:21–24). This requires that we forsake all (Luke 14:26, 33), understanding that as disciples we are “not of the world” (John 17:16 kjv) as he is “not of the world.”

Local congregations may have their own standards of conduct growing out of their culture. However, God establishes certain universal and eternal standards that are applicable to each member of the Body. If one truly believes in Christ and follows his example,

we will be formed in his likeness. “As He who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct” (1 Pet 1:15).

HOW DOES ANYONE BECOME A MEMBER? The Bible clearly explains how one enters the church. Jesus said, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved” (John 10:9). As we believe and accept Christ, we become members of God’s church. “Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Neither baptism, catechism, confirmation class, nor congregational vote was required to become a member of the New Testament church. Various rites have been instituted in the intervening centuries, but if human rites can make one a member, then Christ died in vain. The Bible says that Christ died for the church (Eph 5:25) so that anyone may become a member by believing in him. Salvation is the only requirement for church membership. Our membership is in both the universal and local church, because we are united in Christ with “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:5–6). **Church records** are kept for a variety of reasons (e.g., legal requirements, denominational statistics, yearbook listings), but when you are born again, your name is written in the Lamb’s Book of Life (Rev 20:15). That’s the only record of eternal significance. Membership in God’s church is clear: “The Lord records, as he

registers the peoples, ‘This one was born here’” (Ps 87:6). “Rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20).

WHAT IS EXPECTED OF CHURCH MEMBERS?

Church membership carries with it a corresponding responsibility. There are no inactive members in the Body; each part must function properly (Eph 4:16). As individual members of the body (1 Cor 12:27), God arranged each one of us as he chose (1 Cor 12:18). We are placed in the Body where we can serve according to the gift that God has given us (Rom 12:6). The church has a variety of ministries where we can exercise the gifts entrusted to our care (Eph 4). **Early church** members demonstrated four common characteristics. Together, they practiced fellowship (Acts 2:46), leadership (Acts 6:1–6), discipleship (Acts 2:42), and stewardship (Acts 4:32). Let’s look more closely at each of these.

Fellowship means coming together regularly to build one another up in the faith. To fail to do so weakens the members and the whole body. One cannot be a member of the universal church without participating in the church locally (Heb 10:25). **Leadership** is the God-given ability to help other Christians in carrying out the ministry of the church (Eph 4:11–13). To recognize, cooperate with, and pray for such leadership is a mark of maturity and unity within the Body.

Discipleship, or lifelong learning, characterized these church members as well. The Bible was

their textbook for growth. Peter said, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow” (1 Pet 2:2). And Paul told Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly applying the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

Stewardship of personal possessions was also characteristic of the first church members. They were a giving people. “They gave themselves first to the Lord” (2 Cor 8:5). Then, “they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing” (2 Cor 8:3–4). Financial stewardship is expected of God’s people; however, stewardship involves more than money. God expects us to be equally generous with our time and abilities.

To be a member of God’s church is truly a privilege. Even the duties of church membership become a joy as we voluntarily commit ourselves to Christ, the head of the church.

HOW IS MEMBERSHIP MAINTAINED? What about members who fail to maintain a vital relationship with God? Are they to be expelled from the church? Are they put on probation? Do they lose their membership—or is it eternally secure? **Membership in God’s church** is like our salvation. So long as we “walk in the light as he himself is in the light” (1 John 1:7), so long as we hear his voice and follow him (John 10:27), then “the Lord is longsuffering toward us” (2 Pet 3:9 nkjv) and “as a father has

compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.” (Ps 103:13). **As Head of the church**, Christ says, “I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut” (Rev 3:8), so no human authority can excommunicate you or put you out of God’s church. Membership can be forfeited only by sinning against God. He warns us, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book” (Ex 32:33).

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