

MEMBERSHIP



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CONGREGATIONAL MEMBERSHIP

INTRODUCTION

Some would argue that church membership is not explicitly scriptural and to that we would agree, however there is enough evidence in scripture to suggest that freedom is given for those in oversight to structure the local church as they feel led, to encourage the health and growth of the local body.

At RBC we believe that congregational membership is implicitly biblical and choose before God to apply membership based on explicitly biblical principles.

We have chosen to use the term congregational member over church member because we believe that when a person is saved, they become a member of the Church (**1 Cor 12:12-13**). We believe that a more helpful term is 'congregational member', a term that is not in relation to the universal body of Christ but in relation to the local body at RBC.

The aim of this document is to clarify the theological convictions held by the leadership team at RBC regarding congregational membership.

A QUESTION OF BELONGING

God did not create us to live in isolation but to be in fellowship and to exist in community.

Hebrews 10:24-25 instructs us to not neglect meeting together but to meet and encourage one another, especially in the turbulent times in which we live as the return of Christ draws closer. This encouragement takes place most effectively in the context of relationship & commitment to a congregational body.

Jesus has called us to go and make disciples. Discipleship most effectively take place in the context of community.

A Christian community was never about creating holy huddles but about putting the love of Christ on display for others to see. In **John 13** Jesus encourages us that people will know that we are His disciples by the love we have for one another. This observable love will most effectively take place when we belong to a local church.

Congregational membership in the local church is a way of voluntarily committing yourself to being in community and “doing life” with a specific group of believers.

A QUESTION OF ACCOUNTABILITY

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.”

Two questions that arise from this verse concerning congregational membership. First, if there is no biblical requirement to belong to a local church, then which leaders should an individual Christian obey and submit to? Is it right to submit to anyone with the title of pastor or elder in any church?

Secondly, and more personally, as elders we will have to give an account before God of those whose souls we have watched over. Who will we as those who have been given the responsibility of shepherding give an account for?

Peter tells us in chapter 5 of his first Epistle to shepherd the flock of God that is among you. So the question can be asked, who is among us? This is a good question to be answered for an elder/pastor to exercise effective oversight. Congregational membership is a way in which those with oversight responsibility can know who is “among them”.

A QUESTION OF DISCIPLINE

Consider Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth, to whom Paul is writing? He is writing to the local body at Corinth and in chapter 5 is challenging the local church at Corinth concerning sexual immorality. Here Paul is instructing them to exercise biblical discipline and put the unrepentant man out of the local church. To be put out from the local church, he first had to be in the local church.

Another question that can be asked is are the elders at any given congregation allowed to exercise discipline over any believer regardless from where they are from? Scripture would suggest not because Peter tells the elders to shepherd the flock that is among them. It therefore leads to the conclusion that congregational membership in a local church is a way of voluntarily placing yourself under the care and spiritual authority of those in oversight.

A QUESTION OF ORGANISATION

Congregational membership can have a valuable organisational purpose, there are certain issues where the mind of Christ is sought through the congregation and on occasion votes are taken over a matter.

In Acts 6 we read how the apostles instructed the people to appoint from among themselves seven men who would serve as deacons. It was the local church that was given this instruction to appoint from among themselves. It is therefore important that as much as is possible we know who are believers and are committed to the local church before asking them to make vital decisions based on the future direction of the local church.

In Timothy 5 Paul writes to Timothy concerning the church at Ephesus that a list was kept of the widows. This strongly suggests that there was a process by which they knew who was a part of the local church and what pastoral needs that they may have had.

Therefore having a list of those who have placed themselves under your care, especially in larger congregations can be of great benefit.

DANGERS OF MEMBERSHIP

Membership within a local church has sadly been an area that has caused much division over the years therefore, we never want to place more of an expectation on a person than the bible does. By doing so membership could easily become unhealthy and could cause unnecessary hurt and upset.

ELITISM

It is essential that a culture of elitism is not created. We should never see someone who is a congregational member as being more spiritual or of greater importance than a non congregational member. It is of vital importance that nobody ever feels hurt or rejected because they are made to feel like a second rate Christian based on their belief about membership.

EXCLUSIVITY OF EXERCISING GIFTS

Some of the arguments against membership would say that non members do not have the same opportunity to exercise their gifts. Biblically gifts are given to the body of Christ to be used in the body of Christ (1 Cor 12) and therefore should not necessarily be reserved to be used by those in congregational membership.

UPSIDE DOWN LEADERSHIP

Upside down leadership is when the congregation are leading the church and not the leaders. God created leadership. All the way through the bible we can see that individuals and groups of people were called and set apart by God to lead. Leaders of the church are called to be servant hearted shepherds. Shepherds did not drive from behind but led from the front. Neither did the shepherds follow the sheep but the sheep followed the shepherd. Members meetings provide a great opportunity to hear the wisdom of God through the congregation but it is those in oversight who have been appointed by God to set the direction and to lead the local church forward.

EXPECTATIONS OF MEMBERS

As said above we never want to place more expectation on a person than the bible does. We believe that these are biblical expectations for one who chooses to belong and commit to a local congregation.

- I will seek to live a life of devotion to God through prayer and the study of His Word. I realise that holiness of life is real evidence of my conversion. (**Matt 6:33; Luke 18:1; Acts 17:11; Matt 6:5-15**).
- I will seek to submit to the authority of the Scriptures as the final arbiter on all issues of life. (**Psalm 1; 2 Tim 3:16-17; Heb 4:12**)
- I will seek to submit to the elders of the church and seek to pursue unity and peace within the church. (**Eph 4:1-3; Heb 13:17; 1 Peter 5:5**).
- I will seek to be a good witness to unbelievers in both word and deed. (**Acts 1:8; Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Cor 5:17-21**).
- I will seek to worship regularly at RBC and make every effort to attend the main meetings of the church, especially breaking of bread and if physically able, attend congregational member meetings. (**Acts 2:42-47; Hebrews 10:23-25**).
- Wherever possible I will seek to share in the life of the fellowship of RBC, by developing my gifts to help build up the local body of Christ. (**1 Thes 5:11; Eph 4:11-12; 2 Tim 1:6**).
- I will seek to join a small group/home group to aid my growth and encourage other believers.
- I will take seriously the financial needs of the Lord's work and contribute as He directs. (**2 Cor 9:6-7**)
- I will seek to love my fellow members and all who come to worship. (**John 13:34-35; 1 John 3:11-18;**)
- I will not engage in gossip, fault finding or slander. (**Prov 11:12-13; Prov 20:19; Eph 4:29**)
- I will seek to be reconciled with all who offend me or cause me offence. (**Matt 18:15-20**)

EXPECTATIONS OF THE ELDERSHIP

Those who have been appointed oversight of a local congregation are not above correction and will one day give an account to God for those who they have had responsibility for. We also look to the word of God to see what is expected of us as elders.

- We will seek to care for the flock that God has placed in our care (**Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2**)
- We will seek to be faithful in the teaching of scripture (**1 Tim 3:2, 2 Tim 4:1-4, Heb 4:12**)
- We will seek to guard the congregation against false doctrine (**1 Tim 4:1-5, 1 John 2:18-23, Acts 20:29-30**)
- We will seek to watch ourselves, seeking to be men of prayer and guarding our daily walk with God. (**Acts 20:28, Gal 6:1, 1 Tim 4:16**)
- We will seek to live by example, not just “teaching the way” but “showing the way”. (**1 Tim 4:12, 1 Cor 11:1**)
- We will where necessary, for the good of the individual and for the greater benefit of the body exercise discipline in a biblical manner. (**Heb 12:5-11, Matt 18:15-17, 1 Cor 5:1-13**)
- We will seek to encouraging gifts in individuals and seek for those gifts to be used for the edification of the body of Christ. (**Eph 4:11-16, 1 Peter 4:10 1 Cor 12**)
- We will seek to maintain and encourage other to maintain a gospel witness in our communities. (**Matt 28:18-20, Acts 1:8, Rom 1:16**).