Church Membership Is an Office and a Job

by Jonathan Leeman

Jonathan serves as the President of 9Marks, where he oversees all aspects of the ministry. He is also the author of almost twenty books and teaches at several seminaries. He earned his M.Div. from Southern Seminary and a Ph.D. in theology from the University of Wales. He lives with his wife and daughters in a Maryland suburb of Washington, DC, and serves as an elder at Cheverly Baptist Church.

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED BY 9MARKS, MAY 7, 2019. 9marks.org

Christians have a long tradition of referring to elders and deacons as church "officers." The nomenclature rightly recognizes the role and responsibilities that Scripture gives to our leaders. It also points to the honor due to pastors (1 Tim. 5:17). People show respect to officers, right?

I don't want to downplay any of this.

But . . . church membership is an office, too. It's a job that comes with authority and responsibility. We can call a lieutenant an "officer" without diminishing the honor due to a general.

What's at stake here is not just academic, but pastoral and biblical. Too many Christians today view their relationship with the local church consumeristically—as if churches were gas stations. You drive around once a week looking to fill your tank spiritually. You find the station with the lowest prices and the car wash option. Maybe you join the rewards program. Church membership is that rewards program. Loyalty to their brand brings extra benefits.

People often say "Church membership is not in the Bible" because they have something programmatic like this in mind. And they're half right: this isn't in the Bible. But they miss what is in the Bible. There, church membership is a job. You're expected to show up for work (Heb. 10:24–25). You have authority to exercise, tasks to complete, privileges

to enjoy, a corporate reputation to protect, risks to endure, and profits to share. If anything, we need to think less like consumers and more like owners. You've bought in. You have a vested stake.

What's an Office?

The Presbyterian Charles Hodge defined an office like this:

> The ministry is properly an office, because it is something which cannot be assumed at pleasure by any and every one. A man must be appointed thereto by some competent authority. It involves not only the right, but the obligation to exercise certain functions, or to discharge certain duties; and it confers certain powers or prerogatives, which other men are bound to recognize and respect.[1]

So it is with every church member. Not everyone can be a church member. Only the repenting and believing and baptized can be.

No person possesses the authority to make him or herself a member. The church itself must.

And no member is without functions, duties, powers, or prerogatives. Every member possesses them, which others must recognize and respect.

Where Did This Office Come From?

Here's the biblically interesting part: the office of church member is the new covenant version of Adam's everyman office, assigned to us by Christ.

God put Adam to work as a priest-king and tasked him with watching over and working the garden. "Expand the Garden, Adam. Obey my words. And keep lying serpents out, since the Garden is where I, the Lord, dwell."

When Adam failed, the job of priest-king went to Noah, then Abraham, and eventually the nation of Israel. The mom-and-pop shop went corporate as a "kingdom of priests" (Exod. 19:6). At the same time, God separated out a class of priests and a class of kings to make their respective responsibilities clear. The priest's job, like Adam's in the garden, was to "work" and "watch over" the tabernacle/temple, keeping it consecrated to the Lord (Num. 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6). They were

charged with naming things as clean and unclean, holy and unholy. The king's work, meanwhile, was to establish order and dominion while following God's law (see Deut. 17:14–20).

When Israel failed in its corporate job and the kings and priests in their individual jobs, the prophets promised the special mediatory offices of priest and king would be "democratized" once more (Jer. 31:33–34). Christ would come as the perfect priest and king, the second federal Adam, and through the new covenant of his blood reassign a new covenant people with being:

- A chosen race—new Adams;
- A royal priesthood—a democracy of priest-kings
- A holy nation—a new Israel
- A people for God's own possession (1 Peter 2:9)

These priests should offer sacrifices of obedience in all of life, their daily activities serving as a mediating witness to the world (see Rom. 12:1–2; 1 Peter 2:5). Yet they also constitute the temple where God dwells, just as he dwelt in the Garden and the tabernacle (1 Cor. 3:16–17), which means they possess a priestly obligation to one another: to make sure they're not unequally yoked, to come out and being separate, and to touch no unclean thing, so that holiness comes to completion (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1). To this end, they employ the keys of the kingdom in priestly fashion. This enables them to keep the line between the inside and the outside of God's people clear (Matt. 16:19; 18:15–20).

Meanwhile, every member of the church has been given a kingly task: to make disciples and be ambassadors of reconciliation, bringing the territory of hearts into subjugation to God (Matt. 28:18–20; 2 Cor. 5:18–20).

What is church membership? It's undertaking Adam's job, thanks to our inclusion in Christ. It's the public recognition that we have stepped into the office of priest-king. "Expand the church, church member. Obey my words. Give witness to me in all of life. And do not recognize lying serpents as members, since the church is where I, the Lord, dwell."

Irenaeus put it succinctly one hundred years after the New Testament was written: "For all the righteous possess the priestly order [*sacerdotali ordinem*]" (*Against Heresies*).

Almost two millennia later Herman Bavinck said something similar: "And just as all believers have a gift, so also they all hold an office. Not only in the church as organism but also in the church as institution, they have a calling and a task laid on them by the Lord" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.375).

What's the Member's Job?

That's the biblical-theological backdrop. Concretely, then, what is the authority and work of every church member? Our work is to share and protect the gospel, and it's to affirm and oversee gospel professors—church members.

Think about Paul's "amazement" in Galatians 1: "I am amazed that you are so quickly . . . turning to a different gospel" (v. 6). He rebukes not the pastors, but the members, and tells them to reject even apostles or angels who teach a false gospel. They were supposed to have protected the gospel.

Or think of Paul's astonishment in 1 Corinthians 5: the Corinthians were accepting sin "not tolerated even among pagans" (v. 1). "You are to remove the one who has done this thing," he says to the whole church (1 Cor. 5:2). He even describes how this should happen—not on Thursday evening behind the closed doors of an elders meeting, but when the whole church gathered and could act together: "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus, with my spirit present and with the power of the Lord Jesus, hand this man over to Satan so that his spirit may be saved" (vv. 4–5). The power of the Lord Jesus is actually there when they're assembled in his name. With that power, they were supposed to have protected the gospel *by* removing the man from membership.

Every member of a church should recognize, "It's my responsibility to protect the gospel, and it's my responsibility to receive and dismiss members. Jesus has given it to me." To use the business lingo again, we're all owners. We all have a share in the losses and the profits.

Therefore, pastors who fire church members from this job, whether by formal church structure or by turning them into consumers, undermine the members' sense of inclusion and ownership. They

cultivate complacency, nominalism, and eventually theological liberalism. Kill church membership today and you can expect biblical compromises tomorrow.

Of course, the job here is bigger than showing up at members' meetings and voting on new members. The church member's job lasts all seven days. Ours is the work of representing Jesus and protecting his gospel in each other's lives every day.

So we must study and work to know the gospel better and better. We must study the gospel's implications and consider how they relate to repentance. Further, we must work to know and be known by our fellow members seven days a week. We cannot affirm and give oversight to a people we don't know, not with integrity anyhow. We try to start including more of our fellow members into the regular rhythm of our lives. This is not a gas station rewards program: fill out a form and drive away.

What's the Pastor's Job?

What then shall we say about the pastor's office? What's his job?

Ephesians 4 says it's the job of the pastors to equip the saints for the ministry of building up the church (vv. 11–16). Notice the two jobs in this passage. Job one is the pastors': equip the saints. Job two is the members': the ministry of building up the body of Christ.

The weekly church gathering, then, is a time of job training. It's when those in the office of pastor equip those in the office of member to know the gospel, to live by the gospel, to protect the church's gospel witness, and to extend the gospel's reach into one another's lives and among outsiders. If Jesus tasks members with affirming and building up one another in the gospel, he tasks pastors with training them to do this. If the pastors don't do their jobs very well, neither will the members.

When you put the pastor's office together with the member's office, what do you get? Jesus' discipleship program.

Conclusion

When someone wants to join the church where I pastor, I'll say something like the following in the membership interview:

> Friend, by joining this church, you will become jointly responsible for whether or not this congregation continues to faithfully proclaim the gospel. That means you will become jointly responsible both for what this church teaches, as well as whether or not its members' lives remain faithful. And one day you will stand before God and give an account for how you fulfilled this responsibility. We need more hands for the harvest, so we hope you'll join us in that work.

The membership interview is a job interview, after all. I want to make sure they know this. I want to make sure they're up for the task.

* * * * *

Author's note: To think further on this topic, see the very short Understanding the Congregation's Authority *(B&H). For a more thorough academic treatment, see* Don't Fire Your Church Members *(B&H Academic).*

NOTES

1. Charles Hodge, Discussions in Church Polity (1878; repr., New York: Westminster Publishing House, 2001), 346.