

Week 2 Regenerate Church Membership

Welcome to Week 2 of our sermon series describing what a healthy church should look like. Today, we're going to talk about the second characteristic of a healthy church. That characteristic is Regenerate Church Membership. I know that sounds like a mouthful to say, but let me explain what it means in the hopes that I can introduce it into your vocabulary and into the bloodstream of our church today.

RCM simply means that in order to be received for membership into a local church, a person must be regenerate or born again. Sometimes, this model is called the "believers' church" model, meaning that membership is reserved for believers only. The way this works itself out in practice is that while everyone is welcome and encouraged to attend church services, membership is different from attendance, and membership is reserved only for those who are born again and give convincing evidence of that to the church. The doors of attendance are thrown wide open for everyone, but the doors of membership are guarded carefully, and the password to get in is the gospel and evidence of a life changed by Christ.

But I don't want you to buy into RCM simply because I told you it was a good idea. I want you to be convinced from Scripture itself that it is God's design for church membership. So, what I'm going to do today is a bit different from the ordinary sermon you might hear me preach. Ordinarily, I would teach verse by verse through one passage of Scripture, but today we're going to pull together a number of passages from different places in the Bible to show Scripture's consistent endorsement of this principle of RCM. And after that, we're going to talk a bit about some recommendations for safeguarding RCM that your elders recommend.

Biblical Basis for Regenerate Church Membership:¹

1.) Biblical imagery for the church:

- church as the people of God (1 Pet. 2:10; Rom. 9:23-26) – they belong to Him
1 Peter 2:10 for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.
- church as saints/holy ones (1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:2) – they are holy, set apart
1 Corinthians 1:1-2 Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,² To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:
- church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 4:12; Col. 1:18; Rom. 12:5) – the members of the body must be joined to the Head
1 Corinthians 12:27 Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.

¹ Adapted from John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 83-87.

- church as the temple of the Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:19-22) – the living stones (believers) must be connected to the Cornerstone (Jesus), and the temple must be indwelt by the Spirit
Ephesians 2:19-22 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household,²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone,²¹ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord,²² in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.
- 2.) The greetings to the NT churches (1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1):
- **1 Corinthians 1:2** To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:
 - **Colossians 1:2** To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.
 - **2 Peter 1:1** Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ:
- 3.) Assumptions about the spiritual condition of the members of the NT churches (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4-6; Eph. 2:4-5; Col. 2:13):
- **1 Corinthians 12:13** For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.
 - **Ephesians 4:4-6** There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism,⁶ one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.
 - **Colossians 2:13** When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions,
- 4.) The Acts record (Acts 2:37-47; 11:19-26):
- **Acts 2:41** So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.
 - **Acts 2:47** ...And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.
 - Notice that in order to be “added” to the church’s number, a person had to “receive [Peter’s] word” (the gospel), or put more directly, “[be] saved.”
- 5.) Church discipline:
- **1 Corinthians 5:11,13** But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or

a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler-- not even to eat with such a one...Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.

- Why is he removed? He is removed b/c by failing to repent of his sin, he fails to give evidence of truly being born again. He is only a “so-called brother.” He gives us no evidence that he is a genuine brother. And here is the connection to RCM: Notice that the person who fails to give evidence of salvation is not allowed to be a member of that local church. And if he is not allowed to be a member of that church, then church membership must be reserved only for those who do give evidence of being born again. So church discipline provides one of the strongest arguments for RCM.

Here’s the argument from church discipline:

1. A person gives no evidence of salvation (1 Cor. 5:11).
 2. That person should be removed from membership (1 Cor 5:13).
 3. Therefore, a person who gives no evidence of salvation must be removed from membership. Put differently, we might say that membership is reserved only for those who give evidence of salvation.
- **Matthew 18:17** If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

6.) Church as a corporate witness:

- **1 Peter 2:9** But you are a chosen race, A royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

(All Scripture references taken from NASB)

I don't know about you, but I'm inclined to think Scripture makes a pretty strong case for RCM. And if RCM is a biblical principle, then we quickly see that membership means something in the Bible. Membership doesn't just mean your name is on a church roll somewhere. It is a local church's corporate endorsement of your salvation. It's a local church affirming that you are indeed giving evidence of being born again. Now, given what we've seen so far in Scripture, you might figure that every local church, or at least every Baptist church, would practice RCM. Sadly, that's not the case. John Hammett cites 2004 statistics from the SBC, whose churches claim a total membership of 16.2 million members. Strangely, however, only about 6.0 million were found to be present on a given Sunday morning worship hour. That's about 37%. Where are the rest? Certainly, some may be sick, or out of town, or shut-ins, or on military deployment, or college students living elsewhere, or even perhaps only able to come on Sunday and Wednesday nights, but 10 million of them? The inescapable conclusion is that most of these people simply do not choose to act as functioning members of that local church. What's wrong with this picture? Simply this: These people are consistently disobeying the biblical command not to forsake the assembling together (cf. Heb. 10:25). And the fact that they are consistently doing so without repentance shows that they are failing to give evidence of conversion. But let's assume that you and I don't want to simply have a status-quo church; we want to have a healthy church that obeys Christ's commands. The next thing we have to ask is: How can we put RCM into practice in our church? How can we safeguard it so that we don't have the problem of not being able to find 63% of our members on Sunday morning? That's what we'll talk about next, how to safeguard RCM in our church.

Two general categories for safeguarding RCM:

1.) Receiving new members

Consider this story that I have heard that illustrates how the way churches often receive members can lead to some serious problems:

Suppose Harry walks forward at the invitation, and tells the pastor he would like to join the church. The pastor is elated, and after praying for Harry, he promptly spins him around on his heels to present to the congregation: "Come back tonight. We'll baptize brother Harry, and make him a member." That night, as the congregation is filing in, the pastor and Harry are sitting in the baptismal area waiting for the service to start. The water has been poured in the baptismal, and both men are dressed in their baptismal robes. Harry looks at the pastor and says, "I'm so glad I'm finally being baptized into the Christian faith. You know, I don't have any idea which of the major world religions is true, so I figure that if I join each one of them, one way or another, I'll have all my bases covered. I've become a Hindu, a Roman Catholic, a Muslim, a Jew, a Buddhist, and now, I'm becoming a Christian too." How would you like to be that pastor at that moment?

In an effort not to make a similar mistake, here are 4 proposals that your elders would recommend to you in order not to fill up a membership roll with those like Harry:

1. Prospective members' classes – primarily, these serve to assess a person's spiritual condition over a period of weeks, rather than in a 15-minute or 15-second snapshot.

The person conducting the class will want to listen for whether this candidate shows a clear understanding of the gospel and gives testimony of faith in Christ. He will also want to look for fruit in his life, which is evidence of conversion. PMCs are also good for teaching prospective members the basic truths of the Christian faith, introducing them to the various ministries of the church in which they may serve, and acquainting them with the church's Constitution, Bylaws, and covenant. In essence, it allows them to get to know us, and us to get to know them.

2. Membership interviews – after a candidate completes the prospective members' class, he or she will next schedule a membership interview with the elders. They will listen to the person's testimony and for their understanding of the gospel. If all goes well, the elders will arrange to present the person for membership before the church.
3. Making the church aware of the candidate's testimony – my favorite way to see this done is for the church to hear a testimony of salvation from the candidate himself (either in person or on videotape), upon which they can base their decision to receive or not receive the person as a member. This avoids the corporate "rubber stamp" vote for membership, and allows the congregation to vote intelligently and discerningly. We've started doing this at OMV, and the comment I have heard over and over again is how much others' testimony of God's grace in their lives is a blessing to hear. And some of the very best testimonies that we've heard have come from those most apprehensive about even being videotaped.
4. Reserving baptism (and therefore, membership) to those who give evidence of conversion – A 1993 survey by the Home Mission Board of the SBC (now NAMB) reports that in a study of adult baptisms (those over 18 yrs. old), 36% had been previously baptized in an SBC church. (I'm one of those statistics.) Part of the reason is a failure to require evidence of conversion in the young children that we baptize (understand gospel, testimony of faith in Christ, fruit). We certainly believe that God can save children at a young age; we simply don't want to baptize any who fail to convince us that He has saved them. Parents, the very worst thing we could do for your child is to give them false assurance of salvation. No one missed heaven because their church was careful before baptizing them. But people have been mistakenly assured that they were going to heaven when they weren't. There's more to be said here about how to shepherd your children when they begin to express interest in the gospel, and we'll say more later, but for now, know that our pledge is that with God's help, we intend to give no one here a false assurance of their salvation.

Two general categories for safeguarding RCM:

- 2.) Watching over one another as members

Consider this anecdote that illustrates some of the problems many churches are currently having in safeguarding RCM with regard to the way they watch over one another as members:

Harriet has been a member at her local Baptist church since she was 5. She's now 45.

Most everyone is aware by now that Harriet has had a lifelong addiction to alcohol of which she is unwilling to repent. And the whole town knows about her numerous acts of marital infidelity. Church members often wonder what to do about Harriet. Should they share the gospel with her? That idea seems strange to them, since after all, her

name is on the church's membership roll. Their outreach team leader has also noticed that the church seems to lack credibility in the eyes of the community, which is hampering its evangelism efforts. On several occasions, lost people have used Harriet's name when they say the church is full of hypocrites.

The problem here is that the church has apparently allowed someone to become a member who gives no evidence of conversion. Sometimes, even our most careful efforts at screening prospective members will fail. However, God has made provision for this by a process called church discipline.

1. Recovering restorative church discipline – Church discipline, about which we'll say much more next week, was widely practiced in Baptist churches up until the mid-1800s. At that point, it began to decline in frequency, and by the 1900s, it was in sharp decline. Today, Scripture's command to "remove the wicked man from among yourselves" is sadly not often heeded, allowing those like Harriet to remain as members while living in open rebellion to Christ's commands. As a result, Harriet is not lovingly confronted with her sin, the church's corporate witness is harmed, and Harriet's sin becomes a polluting influence within the whole church. As Paul says, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." Therefore, he tells them, "Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened."
2. Seeing membership as a responsibility to hold one another accountable – It gives me great comfort to know that I belong to a church that loves me enough to discipline me if I fall into sin and refuse to repent of it. They aren't being vindictive or judgmental of me in an ungodly way; instead, they care about my soul. If I continue on in sin, I give no evidence of conversion, and if I'm lost, the kindest thing someone could do is point this out to me. And if I am saved, but I'm headed off in some destructive and God-dishonoring direction, I want my church family to come after me, speak the word of God to me, and beg me to repent. That's what we mean by saying that membership is really a responsibility to hold one another accountable. If we truly love one another, we will watch after one another and if necessary, go after one another if we stray.

Reasons to pursue RCM²:

1. to honor Christ and His commands and intentions for the church
2. church's corporate witness is preserved (hear less of the "hypocrite" excuse)
3. church's corporate health is strengthened (improves worship, fellowship, congregational decision making, etc.)
4. evangelistic tool for unregenerate members who may be on our rolls (we owe it to them to tell them the evidence placed before us doesn't give us reason to affirm their salvation)

I often tell the people at OMV that I'm almost positive that everything they love about their church is connected directly or indirectly to having a regenerate church membership. Let that begin to erode, and so will the love, unity, and peace within a church. (Love, unity, and peace are hard enough to maintain with a regenerate church!) Take that away, and watch the church's fervent worship be reduced to half-

² Hammett, 114-16.

hearted singing. Take that away, and don't be surprised when the church's decision making becomes poorer and church business meetings become much less pleasant affairs. Take that away, and watch immorality rise and our common resolve to watch over one another in our fight against sin weaken. In short, all the things you have come to treasure about your church will be weakened, compromised, and perhaps even lost altogether if we don't pursue RCM.

And here's where you should understand what a commitment to RCM means. It will take hard work and a commitment from all of us that we want to be a part of a church that is faithful to our Lord in this way. Sometimes, it may be even be unpleasant to safeguard RCM. I don't know of any cases of church discipline that have ever been pleasant for the church. But we don't do church to the end that we might enjoy comfort and ease. We do church to the glory of God. Our church does not exist so that we might be made comfortable at the expense of faithfulness to the Lord's commands. It exists to obey them. In other words, it's not about us; it's about Him and His glory.