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40 Questions About Church Membership and Discipline

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QUESTION 1

Why Are Church Membership and Church Discipline Important?

Throughout its history the church has experienced both moments of cultural ascendancy, as well as periods of ridicule, ostracization, and persecution. In the West we are currently experiencing what Russell Moore describes as “the collapse of the Bible belt,” as Christians find themselves less of a moral majority, and operating more as a prophetic minority.¹ Regardless of how culture views us, the church is called “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3), and if this makes the institutional church less appealing and popular in our day and age, we are not surprised (1 Peter 4:12). We know that the world may not resonate with our message and may not join in fellowship with us, seeing such actions as irrelevant and unnecessary.

We expect this kind of posture from the world around us, but when ambivalence and apathy characterize those who would claim to be Christians in regards to the importance of the institutional church, this presents reason for concern and a call for action. Most Christians are not hostile to these concepts, but at times we struggle to understand the importance or relevance of such concepts to our modern-day lives. As Leeman states, although people have a vague sense that Christians should attend and be involved with a local church, “they would also say it’s not the most important thing in the world, so we shouldn’t make too big a deal about it. If Christians spend several years hopping from church to church, or if they decide to attend one church indefinitely without joining, that’s okay too.”² The aim of this book is to refute

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1. Russell D. Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 1–10.
 2. Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 18.

such thinking and establish the critical importance of church membership and discipline in the life of the Christian.

The Importance of the Church

In terms of “theological triage”—the ordering of doctrine as it relates to its proximity to the gospel—the doctrine of the church can often be overlooked today in comparison to other doctrines.³ The deity of Christ, justification by faith alone, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the atoning work of Christ are just a few examples of issues that are more tightly tethered to the truths of the gospel. However, given the fact that the doctrine of the church is not the most important, that does not make it unneeded or unimportant. In fact, one should recognize that ecclesiology is connected to the doctrines of God and salvation and, as such, must be factored into our understanding of theology and redemptive history.

John Webster notes that God relates both to himself (immanent Trinity) as well as to his creation (economic Trinity). God is intrinsically perfect in his life and activity.⁴ But, continues Webster, “within that life and act there is a movement or turning *ad extra*, in which out of his own perfection God wills and establishes creatures.”⁵ In other words, God did not remain as a Being merely relating to himself, he also created for his glory and is relationally involved with his creation.⁶ In holy love and grace God creates humanity as his image-bearers and the pinnacle of creation (Gen. 1:26–28). Due to the Fall, humanity is in need of saving grace, and the church is “the society of those elected, called, redeemed, sanctified, and glorified in Jesus Christ.”⁷ In this way, the doctrine of the church is grounded in the perfections of God and the grace of the gospel.

Based on these points, Allison summarizes the necessity and importance of the church in the following way: “[Ecclesiology] is part and parcel of (1) the eternal purpose of God in redeeming his fallen human creatures; (2) the Father’s mighty work in regard to the exaltation of his humiliated and crucified Son; (3) the eternal divine counsel with regard to the revelation of himself and his ways; and (4) prophetic Scripture that assigns an important role to

3. For more on the concept of theological triage, see R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Conservative Evangelicalism,” in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 68–96; idem, “The Pastor as Theologian,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2014), 725–26.

4. John Webster, “On Evangelical Ecclesiology,” *Ecclesiology* 1, no. 1 (2004): 12–13.

5. Ibid., 13. For more on the connection between God as Trinitarian and the church as Christ’s bride purchased by the Father see Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies (Entry Nos. 501–832),” no. 741, *WJE* 18, ed. Ava Chamberlain (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 367–68.

6. For an extended treatment dealing with God creating for his glory, see Jonathan Edwards, “Dissertation Concerning the End For Which God Created the World,” in *WJE* 8, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 405–536.

7. Webster, “On Evangelical Ecclesiology,” 10.

the church in the outworking of salvation.”⁸ As such, while ecclesiology may not be the doctrine that holds highest importance, it is a necessary area of study due to its close connection to other crucial doctrines (e.g., God and salvation). And this in turn gives credence for understanding the doctrine of church membership and church discipline to also be of great value.

The Importance of Church Membership

Church membership and church discipline are both connected to the realities of community and authority. However, in societies that possess a strong individualist impulse, consumeristic bent, or a resistance to authoritative structures, the call for joining a church formally and submitting to God-given authority is often not well-received. The question of authority is relevant to the discussion of local church membership and discipline, because membership and discipline involve a life of submission.⁹ This life of submission begins with what we might call the “front door” to the church, namely, church membership.

There are numerous reasons one should consider church membership to be an important doctrine, but three initial reasons are worth surveying here. First, as disciples we are called to persevere in the faith, and this is an ongoing community project. We are called to exhort one another day after day so that we are not hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:12–13) and not to neglect meeting together so we can stir each other up to love and good works (Heb. 10:23–25). Perseverance in the faith is not something we do on our own; it is meant to be pursued with brothers and sisters in Christ gathered around the Word of God, encouraging each other to put off sin and run the race with perseverance (Heb. 12:1–2).

Second, the covenant commitment of the local church makes the invisible new covenant visible.¹⁰ We cannot see, hear, or smell a person being united to Christ and receiving his Spirit by faith, though it is real and eternal. Christ, however, intended for the realities of the gospel as displayed in the new covenant to show up on earth. Christians join a local church in membership, show the initiation of their covenant relationship with Christ through baptism, and demonstrate continual celebration of and submission to the new covenant and that local community through the Lord’s Supper.¹¹ These acts within a local church make the truths of the new covenant manifest for other church members, as well as an unbelieving world.

8. Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 59. Allison is quick to point out that the “necessity” of the church is derivative and instrumental, not causative and foundational.

9. Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Church Discipline* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 68.

10. Question 5 will deal with this point in much more detail.

11. Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 268.

Finally, as we conceive of what a church is, we must understand that a church is its membership. In other words, the actual constitution of the church, what its makeup consists of, is people joined in covenant with one another to oversee each other's growth in discipleship.¹² With this understanding, if we take away church membership, we negate the reality of the church as a visible entity.

The Importance of Church Discipline

As one considers the cultural consequences of individualism, consumerism, and aversion to authority, it must also be noted that church discipline is a necessary reality as the “back door” of the church. Again, many more reasons will be enumerated for the importance of ecclesial discipline, but here we offer three. First, the practice of discipline, much to the chagrin of many, is mandated in Scripture. Matthew 18:15–20 and 1 Corinthians 5:1–13—along with a number of other passages—specify in detail the methodology and reasoning for such a practice. With such clear warrant and direction from Scripture it is imperative that we approach this area of church life with care.

Second, as counterintuitive as it sounds, discipline is a proper demonstration of the biblical concept of love. God disciplines those whom he loves (Heb. 12:6–11), and thus a church who claims to love its members without disciplining them contradicts Scripture and offers a different kind of love than God does.¹³ Church discipline can potentially be a painful process, but as a spiritual family we are called to work through such matters faithfully and gently. Not only are we called to go through this process in a loving manner, the very act of discipline should be seen as an act of love.

Finally, as with membership, discipline is tied to the call for a persevering faith. Part of the work within membership to encourage one another to endure in the faith includes the process of church discipline. We undergo this process not merely to punish someone, but to call them to repentance. If someone undergoes the final step of church discipline, often referred to as excommunication, the church is essentially saying about that individual that they do not see the fruits of salvation exhibited in their lives in a demonstrative way. Their stubborn refusal to repent of sin does not characterize a Christian, and thus excommunication is a declarative sign of potential end-time judgment.¹⁴ As such, the point of such an action is to call that person to repentance, and if they take that step we lovingly restore them to the body of Christ. Discipline, therefore, is a crucial practice for the life of the church.

12. See Leeman, *Church Membership*, 46–47.

13. Thomas White, “The Why, How, and When of Church Discipline,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 201–2.

14. This point will be receive further elaboration in Question 39.

Summary

Though it can be argued that the doctrine of the church is not the central topic of Scripture, it must be noted that the theme of God's people across the Testaments holds ample significance. God purposed to save a people through the redeeming work of his Son, and thus the church is connected in noteworthy ways to the doctrines of God and salvation. Bearing this in mind, church membership and church discipline define in greater detail key doctrinal truths such as regeneration, perseverance of the saints, God's love and holiness, and end-time judgment. These are not mere cultural monikers dreamt up by people who thought it would be helpful in organizing the church more efficiently. These doctrines have real biblical warrant and theological import, and thus are worthy of further investigation for the good of the church and the fame of God's name.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Though the doctrine of the church may not be central, why is it still important?
2. What is the concept known as "theological triage"?
3. What is the importance of church membership?
4. What is the importance of church discipline?
5. How is God's love and holiness evident in the practices of church membership and church discipline?

QUESTION 2

What Is a Church?

In conceiving of the essence of what (or who) the church is, understanding the identity of the church as seen in the OT and NT is of great importance. This reflection on the people of God across the Testaments serves as a great test case in considering the continuity and discontinuity that exists within Scripture. It also clarifies what marks identify the church in terms of its origin, orientation, and mission. As such, in this section will offer a definition of the church, followed by a brief foray into the way in which the OT and NT identify the people of God, and finally highlight seven marks of the church.

Definition of the Church

The term “church” derives from the Greek word *ekklēsia*, which connotes the idea of “assembly.” The term is found in the NT 114 times. Of these three refer to a secular assembly, and two refer to the OT people of God. The remaining usage of this term refers to the NT church, at times in a general sense (i.e., universal church) but often describing a gospel-centered assembly in a specific locale (i.e., local church). Thus, to offer a succinct definition, *the church is the people of God who have been saved through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and have been incorporated into his body through baptism with the Holy Spirit.*¹ Additionally, these people assemble in local gatherings to

1. See Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 29. This definition takes into account the distinctiveness of the new covenant as it relates to the church. Wellum asserts the church “is *new* in redemptive history precisely because she is the community of the *new* covenant.” He continues, “the church, unlike Israel, is *new* because she is comprised of a *regenerate, believing* people rather than a ‘mixed’ group” (Stephen J. Wellum, “Beyond Mere Ecclesiology: The Church as God’s New Covenant Community,” in *The Community of Jesus: A Theology of the Church*, ed. Kendall H. Easley and Christopher W. Morgan (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 194. However, one must also rightly note that there are points of continuity between the people of God

worship, hear the preached Word, observe the ordinances, affirm and oversee one another's membership, exercise discipline when needed, and encourage one another to live faithfully as Christians and be on mission in the name of Jesus Christ.

Many images are used to describe the church, but three have been used preeminently: the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Spirit. This set of images connotes important details regarding the nature of the church. The "people of God" imagery connects us to Israel in the OT (cf. 1 Peter 2:9–10) and reminds us that we are called to live as a family with God as our Father. The "body of Christ" is a picture of the unity in diversity we have within the church as people with different gifts care for one another, all in relation to their union with Christ (1 Cor. 12:1–26). The imagery of the "temple of the Spirit" reminds readers of the dwelling place of God in the OT (e.g., Eden, tabernacle, temple), Jesus as the temple (John 2:13–22), and the fact that believers now operate as the dwelling place of God (1 Cor. 3:16–17), mediating God's presence and worshipping God by offering spiritual sacrifices (Rom. 12:1–2; 1 Peter 2:5). Each of these images contributes to our understanding of the definition of the church.

The People of God Across the Testaments

In understanding the nature of the church, one must also consider the people of God in both the OT and NT.² The relationship between the OT and NT in general is filled with complexity.³ While apparent similarities and parallels between the Testaments occur on a number of themes, a degree of

(as will be seen). For a brief article on these points of continuity, see D. A. Carson, "When Did the Church Begin?" *Themelios* 41, no. 1 (2016): 1–4.

2. For further detail concerning the relationship between Israel and the Church, see Jeremy M. Kimble, *That His Spirit May Be Saved: Church Discipline as a Means to Repentance and Perseverance* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 16–20.
3. A divide has typically been driven between covenant and dispensational theology. For the covenant position, see Michael Scott Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 503–44; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000). A traditional dispensational view would be represented by Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. and expanded (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995). For the progressive dispensationalist position see Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1993); Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993). For a mediating position between covenant and dispensational theology, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012) and Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker, eds., *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies* (Nashville: B&H, 2016).

differences also exists.⁴ Thus, for our purposes, both continuity and discontinuity between the Testaments must be acknowledged when speaking of Israel, the church, and the subjects of membership and discipline.

One should note that the shape of the visible church today bears a clear continuity—though not identity—with the visible people of God in the Old Testament.⁵ Thus, a pattern is seen beginning in the OT where God is interested in blessing a group of people, beginning with the saving of a few families from the flood (Gen. 6–8) and coming into greater focus in the covenant made with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). God promises a land and blessing for Abraham’s descendants—as well as all the nations—and this promise comes to fruition in the nation of Israel, whom God leads out of Egypt and calls his own people (Exod. 1–20). God shows great interest in calling a particular people to be his own.

In noting further continuity between Israel and the church, one can observe that the two primary terms used to refer to God’s people in the OT are *qahal* and *ēdah*. In the NT the word translated “church” is *ekklēsia*, which has three primary usages, all connoting an assembly of people.⁶ The translators of the Septuagint used *ekklēsia* to translate *qāhāl* nearly one hundred times, but never to translate *ēdah*. For *ēdah* they usually used the Greek term *synagōgē*, which is used only once in the New Testament to refer to the church (James 2:2).⁷ Taking this data into consideration, one can see a rich association between the assembly of God in the OT and the NT church by virtue of the etymological connection that exists, as evidenced by the Septuagint.

Another evidence for continuity includes the way in which the NT associates Israel and the church. In Galatians 6:16, Paul referred to “all who follow this rule” in the Galatian church as “the Israel of God.” While some

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4. For an excellent study on this topic see John S. Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988).
 5. Millar summarizes: “The entire Bible speaks of God’s plan to create his people, in his place, under his rule. He commits himself to working with one people, and follows this commitment through to the end, though he extends the scope of his people through the work of Christ” (J. G. Millar, “People of God,” in *NDBT*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000], 687). See also Elmer A. Martens, “The People of God,” Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House, eds., *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 225–53.
 6. Walter Bauer, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 303–04. Hereafter referred to as BDAG.
 7. John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 27. Hammett derives this data from L. Coenen, “Church,” in *NIDNTT*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1:292–96.

suggest this title refers to ethnic Jews in the congregation,⁸ others believe that earlier Paul referred to all Christians, Jew and Gentile, as “Abraham’s seed,” and thus the link between Israel and the church is deliberate.⁹ Peter also uses OT language specified for Israel to refer to the church as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Peter 2:9; cf. Deut. 10:15; Exod. 19:5–6; Deut. 7:6). Acts 15 is also a significant passage dealing with this issue. At the Jerusalem Council, James quotes Amos 9:11–12, a prophecy promising that David’s fallen tent would be restored and that Israel would come to possess the nations. Thus, according to the affirmation of the apostles, a prophecy made to Israel in the OT includes in its fulfillment, at least in part, Gentile believers coming into the church.

While one should note that these continuities are present, it is crucial also to consider the differences that exist between Israel and the church. For example, God’s people in the OT are ethnically distinct, while the NT church includes both Jew and Gentile. Israel in the OT lived as a separate nation with its own laws; the church in the NT lives among the rulers of the nations, called to obey God’s commands, but also subject to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1–7). A covenant sign for Israel was physical circumcision, while in the NT baptism and the circumcision of the heart marks out the church. Discontinuity also exists because of the coming of Christ and all that he accomplished, as well as the inauguration of the new covenant and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ Finally, there is a distinct future marked out for the nation of Israel at the end of the ages (Rom. 11:25–28).¹¹

Thus, discontinuity must be maintained, even while one can rightly see the relationship between Israel and the church. Though Israel and the church are not identical, they are closely connected through Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:12–13;

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8. See, for example, S. Lewis Johnson, “Paul and ‘the Israel of God’: An Exegetical and Eschatological Case-Study,” *MSJ* 20, no. 1 (2009): 41–55; John F. Walvoord and Roy B Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 611.
 9. So Andreas J. Köstenberger, “The Identity of the *Israel Tou Theou* (Israel of God) in Galatians 6:16,” *FM* 19, no. 1 (2001): 3–24. Schreiner states the entirety of the letter to the Galatians is dealing with whether one must become a Jew to be saved. Paul has argued throughout that circumcision is unnecessary and that those who put their faith in Christ belong to the family of Abraham. Seemingly, it would be very confusing to argue for the equality of Jew and Gentile in Christ (3:28), assert that all believers are Abraham’s children, and then conclude that only ethnic Jews who believe in Jesus belong to the Israel of God. See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, ZECNT 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 381–83.
 10. For an excellent study on the indwelling of the Spirit as a new reality in the NT, see James M. Hamilton, *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old & New Testaments*, NAC Studies in Bible and Theology (Nashville: B&H, 2006).
 11. This final assertion is still debated as a point of theology that affects other areas of biblical interpretation. Further inquiry goes beyond the purview of this section, but for more detail on the topic see Benjamin L. Merkle, “Romans 11 and the Future of Ethnic Israel,” *JETS* 43, no. 4 (2000): 709–21; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 710–39.

cf. 2 Cor. 1:20) With this in mind, one can affirm that, through the work of Christ, the church has parallels with Israel but is also “new” as the new covenant people of God consisting of both Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11–22).¹²

The Marks of the Church

Traditionally, the marks of the church have come from the Patristic era and the Reformation period. The Patristic marks affirm that the church is one (unity of the church), holy (the church is set apart and called to moral purity), catholic (the church is universal), and apostolic (faithful to apostolic teaching). The Reformation marks of the true church claim that the true church include the right preaching of the Word of God, the right administration of the ordinances, and the right practice of church discipline.

Allison affirms these marks as having relevance for the modern church but also offers seven marks he believes helps the church to understand its nature and role in a more comprehensive and biblical manner, taking into account the ontology, or essence, of the church.¹³ He affirms that the church is doxological (oriented to the glory of God), logocentric (focused on the Word of God, both Christ and the written Scriptures), pneumadynamic (created, gathered, gifted, and empowered by the Spirit), covenantal (gathered as members of the new covenant community in covenant with one another), confessional (united by confession of the Christian faith), missional (divinely called, divinely sent ministers of the gospel), and spatio-temporal/eschatological (historical location with a future orientation). These marks give helpful clarity regarding the nature and role of the church, inclusive of historic marks, but offering a more comprehensive vision.

Summary

Defining the reality of the church is an essential task. It invites the reader to consider the nature of the people of God, the imagery associated with the church, the relationship of the people of God across the Testaments, as well as to think through the essential marks of the church. Such reflection helps us to understand the flow of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, and offers helpful warrant for the kinds of practices we see in church life on a weekly basis. At root, we do not think of the church in functional and pragmatic categories; rather we begin with the essence of the church as described in Scripture, which will then give rise to the way we are called to operate within local churches.

12. To see further elaboration on this last point, see Stephen J. Wellum, “Beyond Mere Ecclesiology: The Church as God’s New Covenant Community,” in *The Community of Jesus: A Theology of the Church*, ed. Kendall H. Easley and Christopher W. Morgan (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 183–212.

13. See Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 103–6.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How would you define the term “church” in one sentence?
2. What areas of continuity exist between Israel and the church?
3. What areas of discontinuity exist between Israel and the church?
4. What are the historic marks of the church?
5. What are the seven marks of the church that Allison offers?