

Session 1

The Priesthood of Believers

INTRODUCTION

This message is intended for those of us who are members of this local church and those who want to be. It requires a different approach if you are like many who view the whole notion of church membership as starchy, formal, perhaps even carnal. That is another topic, another message. The assumption in this message is that you have come to understand membership in the local church, that which is mandated by Scripture and practiced historically throughout the Church and the logical application of what is wise and prudent.

I - Church Membership Is A Job Given To All Believers

In our Church By-Laws we refer to the Elders and Deacons as “officers”. It is not a bad term because it recognizes that these officers hold an office, a responsibility, a job, within the local church. Undoubtedly when you look at your Elders and Deacons you will have certain expectations. You would think that they have responsibilities to perform. You would think they had a job to perform and were doing it. All that is true, but what we don’t often think about is that church membership is an office, too. It’s a job. It comes with authority. It comes with responsibility. It also comes with honor and respect.

Mark Dever writes, in his book: *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*: "In becoming a member of the church, we are grasping hands with each other to know and be known by each other. We are agreeing to help and encourage each other when we need to be reminded of God’s work in our lives or when we need to be challenged about major discrepancies between our talk and our walk."¹

The theological category that describes church membership is called “the priesthood of believers”.

III - The Priesthood of Believers

We get this doctrine primarily from 1 Peter 2:9 (ESV), ⁹ *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

Our text starts with the word “but”, so it is common sense that this verse stands in contrast to what has just been said. “Using many Old Testament quotations and allusions, Peter continues to encourage his readers in their Christian conduct. Christians should respond to God’s saving act in Jesus with behavior

¹ Dever, Mark (2013-08-31). *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (3rd Edition) (9Marks) (p. 164). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

that honors Him—they should act like they are indeed His people and representatives.”² Peter has been writing scattered Christians who have been dispersed due to persecution. “Peter’s primary message is to trust the Lord, live obediently no matter what your circumstances, and keep your hope fixed on God’s ultimate promise of deliverance. Suffering is to be expected, but it is temporary and yields great blessings for those who remain steadfast.”³

“Since the recipients of his letter were primarily Gentiles, Peter explicitly teaches that the church of Jesus Christ is the new Israel—God’s new chosen people.”⁴

God has appointed the disobedient to destruction, but on the contrary believers have a different appointment, a different calling, chosen for a different purpose. That purpose is to be “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.”⁵

Being a priest in the Old Testament meant offering worship to God, interceding for people. The priest was a minister. Every child of God has been placed into ministry the moment you are saved. You are enrolled in a priesthood. The New Testament priesthood is a people of God on a mission. The doctrine of the priesthood of believers teaches us that as a member of Christ’s body we have a job – we are ALL ministers within the household of faith. Or as Dr. Schreiner comments, “Christians exercise priestly functions but always as members of a group who all exercise the same function.”⁶

Herman Bavinck wrote, “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).

Notice this very clear distinction: “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,” (Ephesians 4:11–12, ESV). The role of the shepherds (pastors) and teachers is to equip the saints **FOR THE WORK OF MINISTRY**.

Now in the breakout session for those who are considering membership I plan to cover the biblical expectations of church membership, but let me walk you through some passages to show you some of the extremely significant responsibilities of a church member:

1. Turn to Matthew 18:15–17 (ESV).¹ In this passage it is clear that when a private confrontation between a sinning saint goes unresolved, it is not the Elders that are the final authority. It is the Church. Can that mean anyone and everyone who attends a Church service?

² Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). [Faithlife Study Bible](#) (1 Pe 2:1–12). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Pe). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁴ Crossway Bibles. (2008). [The ESV Study Bible](#) (p. 2405). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Pe 2:9). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁶ Schreiner, T. R. (2003). [1, 2 Peter, Jude](#) (Vol. 37, p. 115). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

2. Turn to Acts 6:3–5 (ESV).ⁱⁱ In regard to the selection of what may have been the first deacons, it was the “whole gathering” that made the selection. It was not the Apostles. Could that mean just anyone who happened to be there in Jerusalem; or was that a certain number, a certain group as indicated in verse 1?
3. Turn to 1 Corinthians 5:1–2 (ESV).ⁱⁱⁱ When a man was “removed from among” the Church for unrepentant immorality, who did the removing? Verse 4 tells us that assembled did. That was the task of the Church. Can that mean anyone and everyone who attends a Church service?
4. Galatians 1:6 (ESV).^{iv} 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. 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.”

We could look at verse after verse and point out time after time God the Holy Spirit calls the members of the local church to share and protect the Gospel; to affirm and oversee other church members; and even to the selection of leaders. And that does not count the 59 “one anothers” in the Bible that truly spell out our job description.

Every child of God has been placed into ministry the moment you are saved. You are enrolled in a priesthood – **YOU ARE NOT AN INDIVIDUAL PRIEST!** Biblical ministry cannot exist in isolation from the Church.

Summary

“Membership in a local church is not an antiquated, outdated, unnecessary add-on to true membership in the universal body of Christ; membership in a local church is intended to be a testimony to our membership in the universal church.”⁷ Membership in the Church is a office within the local visible church with an accompanied ministry.

There is not a stitch of evidence in the New Testament for a private, individualized ministry. The entire New Testament is written to Churches. From the Lord’s Prayer (“Our Father . . .”) to the Spirit-indwelt Temple the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16–17⁸) communicates plurality.

In church membership there is a covenant:

- #1. There are covenant responsibilities to a group of people.
- #2. There is a covenant relationship to the elders/pastors for spiritual care.
- #3. There is covenantal faithfulness to doctrinal beliefs and values.

⁷ Dever, Mark. *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (3rd Edition) (9Marks) (p. 164). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

⁸ ¹⁶ Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.

APPLICATION

Let's be clear: church membership is a job – a job given to every true Believer. “You're expected to show up for work. 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.”⁹

For those of us who are church members, like me make this appeal through the words of Dr. Charles Swindoll:

"Where do I really stand regarding the work of the local church? Is my participation halfhearted or wholehearted? Does my walk reflect its purity? Does my giving reflect its generosity? . . . Have I taken the Ordinances seriously as He planned them to be taken? Have I prayed for the church's mission and ministry? Do I support it in active service, not passive presence . . ."¹⁰

^{i 15} "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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.

^{ii 3} Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

^{iii 1} It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

^{iv 6} I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—

⁹ <https://www.9marks.org/article/church-membership-is-an-office-and-a-job/>

¹⁰ Swindoll, Charles, R., Growing Deep in the Christian Life, Multnomah Press, Portland Org., 1986, Page 366