

IX 9Marks

BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

HOW
THE WORLD
KNOWS WHO
REPRESENTS
JESUS

JONATHAN LEEMAN

Foreword by Michael Horton

“Church leaders across many denominations will find this little book filled with practical ideas and good arguments that will help us cure Christians in our culture today of their allergy to church membership, pastoral authority, life accountability, and any limits to their personal freedom.”

Tim Keller, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church,
New York City

“Brief, fresh, entertaining, and, above all, biblical. This is the explanation and defense of church membership you’ve been looking for.”

Mark Dever, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,
Washington, DC

“Practical. Convicting. Biblically faithful. Leeman reminds us that church membership is not a choice but a demand. The book is punchy and provocative, but at the same time it is permeated with the gospel of grace.”

Thomas Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of
New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

9Marks: Building Healthy Churches

Edited by Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman

Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus,
Jonathan Leeman

*Sound Doctrine: How a Church Grows in the Love and Holiness of
God,* Bobby Jamieson

Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus, Jeramie
Rinne

Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus, Mack Stiles

Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today, David
Helm

The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ, Ray
Ortlund

Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus, Mark Dever

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

HOW
THE WORLD
KNOWS WHO
REPRESENTS
JESUS

JONATHAN LEEMAN

Foreword by Michael Horton

 **CROSSWAY®**

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus

Copyright © 2012 Jonathan Leeman

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Dual Identity inc.

Cover image(s): Illustration by Wayne Brezinka for brezinkadesign.com

First printing 2012

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4335-3237-5

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3238-2

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3239-9

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3240-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leeman, Jonathan, 1973-

Church membership : how the world knows who represents Jesus / Jonathan Leeman ; foreword by Michael Horton.

p. cm. — (9Marks)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-3237-5 (hc)

1. Church membership. I. Title.

BV820.L44 2012

254'.5—dc23

2011045124

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19

24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12

To the members past and present of the
Capitol Hill Baptist Church

CONTENTS

Series Preface	11
Foreword by Michael Horton	13
Introduction: A Bigger Deal Than We Realize	17
1 We've Been Approaching It All Wrong	19
2 Membership Sightings in the New Testament	35
3 What Is a Church? What Is a Church Member?	49
4 What Are a Church and Its Members Like?	67
5 What Are the "Standards" of Membership? (Becoming a Member)	83
6 How Does a Christian Submit to a Church? (Being a Member)	91
7 What Happens When Members Don't Represent Jesus?	107
8 Must Membership Look the Same Everywhere?	121
Conclusion: How Church Membership Defines Love	131
Further Resources	133
Special Thanks	135
Notes	137
Scripture Index	139

SERIES PREFACE

The 9Marks series of books is premised on two basic ideas. First, the local church is far more important to the Christian life than many Christians today perhaps realize.

Second, local churches grow in life and vitality as they organize their lives around God's Word. God speaks. Churches should listen and follow. It's that simple. When a church listens and follows, it begins to look like the One it is following. It reflects his love and holiness. It displays his glory. A church will look like him as it listens to him.

So our basic message to churches is, don't look to the best business practices or the latest styles; look to God. Start by listening to God's Word again.

Out of this overall project comes the 9Marks series of books. Some target pastors. Some target church members. Hopefully all will combine careful biblical examination, theological reflection, cultural consideration, corporate application, and even a bit of individual exhortation. The best Christian books are always both theological and practical.

It's our prayer that God will use this volume and the others to help prepare his bride, the church, with radiance and splendor for the day of his coming.

FOREWORD

“It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me,” quipped Mark Twain, “it is the parts that I do understand.” Sadly, Twain’s remark might be said to indict many “Bible-believing” Christians, especially when it comes to biblical passages on the responsibilities of church members.

Just think of how Western culture affects all of us. Movie star John Wayne is often quoted as saying that he liked God until he got under a roof. Our singers croon, “Don’t fence me in!” and “I did it my way!” And advertisers appeal explicitly to our narcissism: “Have it your way” and “You’re in the driver’s seat.” With all this in the air, it’s easy to want the benefits but not the responsibilities of belonging—to friendships, to marriages, to the workplace, and certainly to the church.

In part, the images of self-made individuals who pull themselves up by their own bootstraps have made us suspicious of institutions. Also, a regular succession of major public scandals, as well as a politics of resentment, impersonal and ineffective bureaucracy, and broken promises have shaken public confidence in leaders and institutions. Even people raised in churches have been let down, bruised, and abused by those who claimed to be Christ’s shepherds.

But it’s not just the culture outside the church that is to

Foreword

blame. Much of evangelicalism has been forged in a piety that pits a personal relationship with Jesus against the visible church and its public ministry. In part, that's because evangelicals have wanted to avoid nominal commitment and formalism, which are good things to avoid. But in the process, we have tended—especially since the nineteenth century's Second Great Awakening—to criticize formal church offices and the ordinary means of grace in favor of charismatic leaders and extraordinary movements. “Quick and easy” has beaten “tried and tested.” Rapid growth in numbers has counted more than slow growth in grace. Pragmatic results, not formal structures, have been viewed as keys to success. Along the way, many of us were raised with the evangelistic appeal, “I’m not asking you to join a church, but to accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior.”

It's not surprising that, after successive movements of this kind, “getting saved” would have little to do with joining a church. And now there are even evangelical movements that drop church membership out of the picture entirely. They say to just show up . . . or not. One evangelical leader celebrates the dawn of the “Revolutionaries” who have somehow decided that *being the church* means *not joining a church*. Instead, these revolutionaries find their own spiritual resources on the Internet and in informal gatherings.

Then along comes Jonathan Leeman, not only reminding us of those many passages that we had pushed aside, but also having the audacity to say things like, “Christ does not call us to join a church, but to submit to a church.” The church is not simply another voluntary society, like the Boy Scouts or the

Sierra Club. It's an embassy of Christ's kingdom. And kings do not offer suggestions, sell products, or provide resources that people can take or leave.

Leeman finds the ground between lawless individualism and legalistic authoritarianism, and Christians today need desperately to hear him out. He shows us that Christ's kingdom is the only antidote to these extremes. Christ rules us in order to save us and saves us in order to rule us. Unlike the rulers of this age, Jesus doesn't ask us to shed our blood for his empire; he instead gave his own life for his realm. Then he was raised in glory as the beginning of the new creation, and now he is gathering coheirs into his kingdom who belong to each other because, together, they belong to him. The visible church is where you will find Christ's kingdom on earth, and to disregard the kingdom is to disregard its King.

Some readers need to be convinced of the biblical requirement—and blessing—of church membership. Others, already convinced, may wonder how the theory becomes practice on the ground in the church's life. What are the criteria of membership, and how do we negotiate legitimate “judgment calls” in a pastorally sensitive manner? What are the consequences, especially in cases where discipline is called for in doctrine or in life? What are the limits as well as the responsibilities of the officers in exercising their ministerial authority? These are big questions. And the author does not circle in the clouds, but lands on each of these practical issues raised by his scriptural arguments.

Regardless of whether you end up agreeing in the end, Leeman simply packs too much biblical wisdom into these

Foreword

brief pages for any Christian to easily dismiss. Not being a Baptist, I cannot go along with everything! However, I found myself shouting a hearty “Amen!” to the main arguments for church membership. More importantly, I found myself delighting once again in the marvelous provision of a Good Shepherd who has not only redeemed his sheep but also has figured out how to feed and lead them to the end.

Michael Horton

J. Gresham Machen Professor of
Systematic Theology and Apologetics
Westminster Seminary, California

INTRODUCTION

A Bigger Deal Than We Realize

You don't really want to read a book about church membership. I understand. Maybe someone handed this book to you. Maybe you wonder if it would be a useful resource for others. But honestly, the topic of church membership does not seem terribly interesting. You become a Christian, and you join a church. That's about it, right?

Sometimes church membership involves programmatic elements, such as classes and an interview. And the topic gets entangled with questions about the Lord's Supper and baptism. But beyond all this, is there much to discuss?

The first time someone told me that I should join the church I had been attending, I didn't feel too strongly one way or another. Maybe I was a little averse to the idea? I don't quite remember. Here's what I do remember: joining would allow me to move into the church-owned "men's house" for inexpensive rent in a desirable neighborhood. So I joined. No, I didn't mention this reason to the pastors who interviewed me. They didn't ask.

Still, my take on membership was easy come, easy go. It's not that important either way. What do you think: is church membership a big deal or not?

Introduction

There are a few people who say that church membership is necessary, and a few who say that it's optional. But the majority of Christian folk, I assume, are somewhere in between. They have a vague sense that Christians should be involved with a local church. But 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.

If you belong to this majority in the middle, I'm writing this book for you. I'm *not* writing it primarily for the person who is skeptical of church membership, though, if that's you, it might prove helpful, too. I'm aiming for the average church goer, church member, and church leader who have been going along with the crowd on this topic. You're not sure what the big deal is, but fine, you say, let's do membership.

It's you I am after. I want to answer a question that you are not asking but should be asking.

My primary purpose is to show you *what church membership is*, because it's not what you think it is. I'm not going to defend it, not directly anyhow. I'm going to present a vision for it. And here's my prediction: if you grab hold of how the Bible views church membership, it just might change the shape of your Christianity.

Membership in the Bible is an astounding reality. Aren't you just a little curious? You're not even wholly convinced it's there, are you?

WE'VE BEEN APPROACHING IT ALL WRONG

Imperium. I recently discovered this word. It's not a word you would pull out while chatting with friends over coffee. It sounds socially clumsy, like an overly intelligent thirteen-year-old. But I think it's a useful word.

It's what you get when you turn *imperial*, a word that you just might hear in coffee-time conversations, into a noun. Imperium means supreme power or absolute dominion, and it gets at the idea of where the buck stops in a society. Who is the authority to which all other authorities must answer? Who can make heads roll, literally speaking, without threat of reprisal, because it's in the job description? That's who has imperium.

Imperium is what Caesar had in Rome, as well as those kings in the medieval days who were always shouting, "Off with their heads!" In modern times, we would say that the state has imperium. There is no higher power than the state. The state is where the buck stops. The state alone has the power over life and death—the power of the sword.

So if you want to start a business or a school, you need

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

the state's permission. The same is true for soccer clubs, trade unions, or charity organizations. They exist by permission of the state, and the state regulates them. They don't regulate the state. They don't have imperium.

Okay, what about local churches? Do local churches exist by permission of the state? Now that brings us to an interesting topic. In fact, it's a topic that just might turn our present ideas about the local church and its membership upside down.

JESUS HAS IMPERIUM

Most people in Western societies lump churches into the same category as soccer clubs or charity organizations. Churches are one more kind of voluntary association, we say.

Alternatively, we regard churches as a service provider, like a mechanic who services your soul or a gas station that fills up your spiritual tank.

But are local churches clubs or service providers that exist by permission of the state, one more supplicant who depends on the mercy of the lord of the land?

It's true that you as an individual Christian should submit to the authority of the state. But remember that the state is God's "servant" and God's "agent" for bringing judgment (Rom. 13:4). Yes, the state possesses the "sword," but it does so only at God's behest.

It's also true that churches should abide by the laws of the land when it comes to regulations such as adhering to building codes (if it has a building) or paying any taxes on staff

salaries (if it has a paid staff). In that sense, churches are like every other business or organization.

At the same time, there is one thing that should be utterly clear in a Christian's mind: the local church does not exist by permission of the state. It exists by the express authorization of Jesus. After all, Jesus has imperium, not the state.

To be a Christian is to know this: Jesus is where the buck ultimately stops. Jesus is the authority to which all other authorities must answer. Jesus will judge the nations and their governments. He is the one with final power over life and death. The state exists by Jesus's permission, not the other way around. States typically don't acknowledge this fact, of course. But churches know it's true (John 19:11; Rev. 1:5; 6:15–17).

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, and he gave his church the authority to march on the nations. His church will therefore advance like an army that cannot be stopped. The boundary lines of the nations won't stop it. The executive orders of presidents and prime ministers won't stop it. Not even the gates of hell itself will slow it down.

Jesus has imperium.

WE NEED TO CHANGE OUR THINKING

In case we are tempted to overestimate the authority of the state, the fact of Jesus's imperium should diminish it. The state is merely one of his agents with a specific mandate.

But the fact of Jesus's imperium should have the opposite effect on our view of the local church: it should raise it. The

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

local church is also one of Jesus's agents, and he gave it an authority that you and I as individual Christians do not have. And this has radical implications for what the local church is and what it means to be a church member.

If you are a Christian living in a Western democracy, chances are that you need to change the way you think about your church and how you are connected to it. Most likely, you underestimate your church. You belittle it. You misshape it in a way that misshapes your Christianity.

We've all been thinking about the local church and its membership as if it's one thing, when really it's another. It's as if we've been looking at our immediate families (dad, mom, children) and calling them businesses. And now I'm coming along and saying, "They are not businesses; they are families! We need to start treating them differently."

Let me try in this chapter to put the whole vision out there with five big ideas, all building on the universe-sized reality of Jesus's imperium. Then I'll spend the rest of the book cleaning up the mess I make here: justifying, elaborating, and applying.

We'll start with what a local church is not. If you are a Christian, the local church is not a club. It is not a voluntary organization where membership is optional for you. It is not a friendly group of people who share an interest in religious things and so gather weekly to talk about the divine.

Nor is a church a service provider, where the customer has all authority. It's ironic that we refer to church "services" (yes, I do this, too). As I already said, it's as if we are telling people to pull into the church parking lot at 11:00 a.m. and

get themselves serviced—“Tune-ups for your soul in sixty minutes!”

Maybe we acquired this understanding of the local church from the Protestant emphasis on the location of preaching and the ordinances. Maybe we've been duped by Western democratic society into viewing churches as voluntary associations. Maybe it's a century's worth of practice at being consumers. I'm not sure. But here are some of the symptoms of our wrong thinking:

- Christians can think it's fine to attend a church indefinitely without joining;
- Christians think of getting baptized apart from joining;
- Christians take the Lord's Supper without joining;¹
- Christians view the Lord's Supper as their own private, mystical experience for Christians and not as an activity for church members who are incorporated into body life together;
- Christians don't integrate their Monday-to-Saturday lives with the lives of other saints;
- Christians assume they can make a perpetual habit of being absent from the church's gathering a few Sundays a month or more;
- Christians make major life decisions (moving, accepting a promotion, choosing a spouse, etc.) without considering the effects of those decisions on the family of relationships in the church or without consulting the wisdom of the church's pastors and other members;
- Christians buy homes or rent apartments with scant regard for how factors such as distance and cost will affect their abilities to serve their church;
- Christians don't realize that they are partly responsible for

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

both the spiritual welfare and the physical livelihood of the other members of their church, even members they have not met. When one mourns, one mourns by himself. When one rejoices, one rejoices by herself.

The basic disease behind all of these symptoms, the disease which, I admit, courses through my own veins, is the assumption that we have the authority to conduct our Christian lives on our own. We include the church piece when and where we please.

That is to say, we treat the local church like a club to join—or not. And this assumption leaves us conducting our Christian lives somewhat aloof from the local church even when we *do* join one: “Sure, I’m a member, but why in the world would I ask the church to help me think through accepting that job in Albuquerque?”

Please understand, I’m not just pointing the finger. These are my cultural instincts, too. I confess that I want to do things my way. I want to avoid taking responsibility for others.

But this is not the biblical picture. We need to take off one set of glasses and put on another. Are you ready?

THE HIGHEST KINGDOM AUTHORITY ON EARTH

What is the local church? I’m going to say a number of things to answer that question, but let me start here: the local church is the authority on earth that Jesus has instituted to officially affirm and give shape to my Christian life and yours.

Just as Jesus instituted the state, so he instituted the local church. It is an institutional authority because Jesus *instituted*

it with authority. Now, I'm doing my best to avoid getting into a conversation here about the relationship between church and state, but here is what you must understand if we're going to have a paradigm-shifting discussion about church membership:

Just as the Bible establishes the government of your nation as your highest authority on earth when it comes to your citizenship in that nation, so the Bible establishes the local church as your highest authority on earth when it comes to your discipleship to Christ and your citizenship in Christ's present and promised nation.

So Jesus has instituted the state by giving it the power of the sword. Narrowly, this means the state can take your life (under the authority of God's Word). By implication, this means it has the enforcement mechanism necessary for establishing the basic structures of society, such as deciding who is publicly recognized as a citizen.

Similarly, Jesus has instituted the local church by giving it the "power of the keys." Narrowly, this means it can remove a person from church membership (under the authority of God's Word). By implication, this means it has the enforcement mechanism necessary for establishing the basic structures of the kingdom life, such as deciding who is publicly recognized as a citizen.

LOOKING FOR THE RIGHT THINGS

So instead of starting with the idea of a church as a voluntary association, we need to start with the idea of it as the people

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

of a kingdom or nation. Do you see what I mean by a category switch, like moving from a business to a family?

When people ask, “Where is *membership* in the Bible?” the problem is they’re looking for something like a club to join, because the word *membership* is a club word. Clubs and political parties and labor unions have memberships. But you don’t often use the word *membership* in relation to governments and the citizens of nations. You don’t say, “So how’s the membership of the British nation doing? Aren’t you guys running, like, sixty million members these days?”

Clubs begin with a point of common interest. Service providers begin with a common need or desire. Churches have all this, but they have something more: a king who requires the obedience of his people. The church begins with this fact: Jesus is Savior and Lord. He has died on the cross for the sins of everyone who would believe and follow him.

This means the Bible doesn’t talk about church membership quite as you might want it to. It talks instead about how God’s people *gather together under his supreme rule*. It’s interested in the citizens of a kingdom, not club members. Beyond this, the Bible talks about a church’s unity with a number of other metaphors (family, vine, etc.). This brings us to the second big idea:

When you open your Bible, stop looking for signs of a club with its voluntary members. Look instead for a Lord and his bound-together people. Look also for other forms of unity (brothers and sisters in a family, branches on a vine, etc.).

Is church membership in the Bible? If you’re looking for

the right thing, it's everywhere. I'll try to show you in chapters 2, 3, and 4.

NOT A CLUB, BUT AN EMBASSY

Now, there's more to the church than its institutional authority over you and me. We need the idea of a church as a family, and flock, and temple, and so forth. But all of these other realities have to be set inside the authority structure of the local church, which is why I'm starting there. A church's authority *gives shape* to the family aspects of church life, the body aspects of church life, and so on.

So I'm going to use a number of biblical metaphors for describing what life inside the local church looks like. But I want to start with one that we can then build on, one that replaces the "club" or "service provider" idea: it's the metaphor of an outpost or an embassy.

Where am I getting the idea of an embassy? I'm getting it from the biblical idea of Christ's kingdom. A church is not the kingdom; it's an outpost or embassy of that kingdom.

What is an embassy? It's an institution that represents one nation inside another nation. It declares its *home nation's* interests to the *host nation*, and it protects the citizens of the home nation living in the host nation. For instance, I spent five months of college in Brussels, Belgium. During that time, my US passport expired. If I had tried to leave the country without renewing my passport, I would have gotten in trouble. I no longer had valid documentation affirming that I was a US citizen. One afternoon I went to the US Embassy in Brussels and had my passport renewed. The embassy didn't *make me*

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

a US citizen that afternoon, but it did officially *affirm* it. Even though I'm a US citizen, I don't have the authority to officially declare myself as one before the nations. Yet the embassy's affirmation gave me the ability to continue living in a foreign city protected by all the rights and benefits of my citizenship.

So an embassy represents one place in another place of the globe. But what if I told you there's another kind of embassy, one that represents a place *from the future*? That's what the local church is. It represents the whole group of people under Christ's lordship who will gather at the end of history.

A Christian's citizenship, Paul tells us, is in heaven. He even calls us "fellow citizens" with Israel, which is interesting when you consider what citizenship meant in Israel.

Unlike Israel, however, Christians' homeland is nowhere on planet Earth. We're strangers and aliens. Christians must look forward to their homeland. They wait for the day when the "kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ," when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Rev. 11:15 ESV; Phil. 2:11).

But hold on. There is a place on earth where the citizens of heaven can, at this moment, find official recognition and asylum: the local church. Churches represent Christ's rule now. They affirm and protect his citizens now. They proclaim his laws now. They bow before him as King now and call all peoples to do the same. Here then is a third big idea:

A local church is a real-life embassy, set in the present, that represents Christ's future kingdom and his coming universal church.

The idea of church membership immediately follows from this picture of the local church. What is a church member? It's someone who walks through the embassy doors claiming to belong to the kingdom of Christ. "Hello, my name is Christian." The embassy official taps a few keys on his computer and then says, "Yep, I see your records here. Here's your passport." The individual can now enjoy many of the rights, benefits, and obligations of citizenship even though living in a foreign land. But not only that—and here's the crazy part—the individual becomes part of the embassy itself—one of the officials who affirms and oversees others. To be a church member is *to be* the church, at least a part of it.

A church member, therefore, is someone who is formally recognized as a Christian and a part of Christ's universal body. That's not to say that churches always get it right, but it's their job to identify and affirm who belongs to the kingdom and who does not. This is the fourth big idea:

A church member is a person who has been officially and publicly recognized as a Christian before the nations, as well as someone who shares in the same authority of officially affirming and overseeing other Christians in his or her church.

Church membership is more than this. Again, we need to talk about the family-ness, and the body-ness, and the flock-ness of membership, and a host of other things, as we'll see in chapter 4. But we start here because it represents the kingdom authority that Christ has given not to us as individual Christians but to us as local church members. Jesus didn't leave us to govern ourselves and to declare ourselves his

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

citizens. He left an institution in place that both affirms us as believers and then helps to give shape and direction to our Christian lives.

The embassy-like authority of the local church gives individuals who mouth the words, “I’m with Jesus,” the opportunity to demonstrate that those words mean something. The local church guards the reputation of Christ by sorting out the true professors from the false. The local church enables the world to look upon the canvas of God’s people and see an authentic painting of Christ’s love and holiness, not a forgery. And the local church lays down a pathway with guardrails and resting stations for the long journey of the Christian life.

The kings and governors of the nations are not careless about whom they recognize as their citizens. Would the King of the universe care less?

SUBMITTING, NOT JOINING

If Jesus instituted the local church with authority over us, we don’t just join one like we join clubs or voluntary associations; we submit to them as we do to governments. And this is the fifth big idea:

Christians don’t join churches; they submit to them.

Both church and government, after all, represent the authority of Jesus, albeit in different ways. Even pastors and church leaders must submit to the church in this way. They, too, must have their citizenship affirmed from the church through the Lord’s Supper.

Now don't misunderstand. From the non-Christian's standpoint, a local church is a voluntary association. No one has to join. From the standpoint of the Christian life, however, it's not. Once you choose Christ, you must choose his people, too. It's a package deal. Choose the Father and the Son and you have to choose the whole family—which you do *through* a local church.

Also, a church exercises its Christ-given authority very differently than the state does. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them,” Jesus said, “and their high officials exercise authority over them” (Matt. 20:25). Christian authority, he says in the next phrase, works by giving our lives up for the sake of others as he did for us (vv. 26–28). Christian authority also works by the tender, effective, and heart-changing power of the Word and Spirit, not by the manipulative powers of persuasion and coercion.

Still, Jesus means for Christians to willingly give themselves—submit themselves—to a local church. What this does and does not look like we will consider in chapter 6.

WHY CHURCHES ARE A NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL THREAT

My sense is that many Christians don't understand what membership is all about and why it's a big deal. But that's because we've been approaching the subject all wrong.

I can, however, point to two groups who understand the subject's importance really well. First, think about all the governments who have persecuted churches and their members. These governments have been wrong to view churches as a threat to their institutional power—Jesus did not give

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

churches the power of the sword. But such governments have been dead right to believe that church members won't give final allegiance to them. They give it to Jesus.

Listen to how the fourth-century Roman historian Eusebius described one early Christian named Sanctus, when Sanctus stood before his torturers in the year AD 177: "With such determination did he stand up to their onslaughts that he would not tell them his own name, race, and birthplace or whether he was slave or free. To every question he replied, in Latin, 'I am a Christian.' This he proclaimed over and over again, instead of name, birth place, nationality and everything else, and not another word did the heathen hear from him."²

The second group who understands this topic's importance is all the Christians like Sanctus who have lived under persecution, especially state-sponsored persecution. These brothers and sisters have put their lives at risk by being baptized into a church. Don't talk to them about "voluntary membership," as if the church is a bowling league. They know the price of their new allegiance. That's why I almost wonder if this book will make more sense to them than to Westerners like me. "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:10).

Picture, if you will, a globe with all the nations of the world mapped out on it. Now picture one little embassy of light. It's a gathering of Christians, gathered together in the name of their King, Jesus. Then the point of light divides itself into two, then four, then eight, and so it goes. A new nation is growing, a nation set inside the nations. This new

nation leaves the boundary lines on the map where they are, but it cannot be contained by the map's lines. The line makers don't have the authority to stop these unworldly citizens. The points of light cross all boundaries, spreading everywhere like yeast through dough, or like stars appearing one by one as the night sky darkens.

These are the churches of Christ and their members. The world has never known anything like them.

WHY SHOULD YOU JOIN A CHURCH?

Becoming a member of a church is an important, and often neglected, part of the Christian life. Yet the trend these days is one of shunning the practice of organized religion and showing a distaste or fear of commitment, especially of institutions.

Jonathan Leeman addresses these issues with a straightforward explanation of what church membership is and why it's important. Giving the local church its proper due, Leeman has built a compelling case for committing to the local body.

“Filled with practical ideas and good arguments that will help us cure Christians in our culture today of their allergy to church membership, pastoral authority, life accountability, and any limits to their personal freedom.”

TIM KELLER, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City

“Brief, fresh, entertaining, and, above all, biblical. This is the explanation and defense of church membership you've been looking for.”

MARK DEVER, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC

“Leeman reminds us that church membership is not a choice but a demand. The book is punchy and provocative, but at the same time it is permeated with the gospel of grace.”

THOMAS SCHREINER, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

JONATHAN LEEMAN (MDiv, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is a member at Capitol Hill Baptist in Washington, DC, and the author of *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*. He also serves as editorial director for 9Marks Ministries and is the editor of its *eJournal*.

**This volume is part of the 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches series.*

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

