

IX 9Marks

BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

HOW
THE WORLD
KNOWS WHO
REPRESENTS
JESUS

JONATHAN LEEMAN

Foreword by Michael Horton

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.

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. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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

Trade paperback 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	20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12			
13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

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

Do you believe it's your responsibility to help build a healthy church? If you are a Christian, we believe that it is.

Jesus commands you to make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Jude says to build yourselves up in the faith (Jude 20–21). Peter calls you to use your gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul tells you to speak the truth in love so that your church will become mature (Eph. 4:13, 15). Do you see where we are getting this?

Whether you are a church member or leader, the Building Healthy Churches series of books aims to help you fulfill such biblical commands and so play your part in building a healthy church. Another way to say it might be, we hope these books will help you grow in loving your church as Jesus loves your church.

9Marks plans to produce a short, readable book on each of what Mark Dever has called the nine marks of a healthy church, plus one more on sound doctrine. Watch for books on expository preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, and church leadership.

Local churches exist to display God's glory to the nations. We do that by fixing our eyes on the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting him for salvation, and then loving one another with

Series Preface

God's own holiness, unity, and love. We pray the book you are holding will help.

With hope,
Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman
Series Editors

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

We've Been Approaching It All Wrong

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*

We've Been Approaching It All Wrong

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.

We've Been Approaching It All Wrong

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.

We've Been Approaching It All Wrong

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).

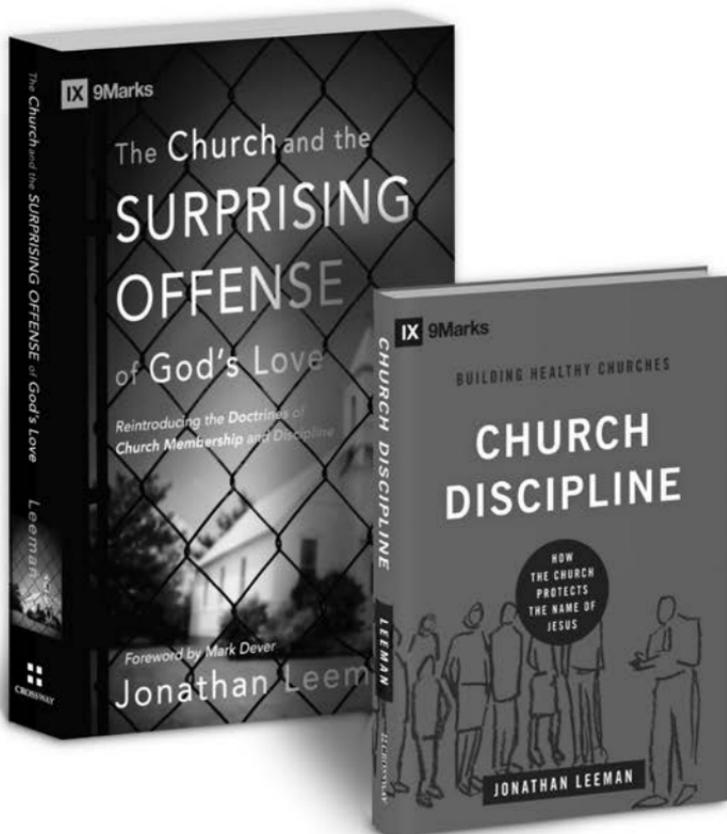
Picture, if you will, a globe with all the nations of the world mapped out on it. Now picture one little embassy of light. It's a gathering of Christians, gathered together in the name of their King, Jesus. Then the point of light divides itself into two, then four, then eight, and so it goes. A new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

We've Been Approaching It All Wrong

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.

BE SURE TO CHECK OUT THESE OTHER
BOOKS BY **JONATHAN LEEMAN**



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

