

Is Church Membership the Only Means by Which We May Judge One's Confessional Stance?

By Daniel Olson

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It has happened to me in my short time as a pastor more times than I can count. I get toward the end of a Bible information class. I'm excited because it seems the biggest obstacles are behind us now. Even though they came from a catholic background they understand salvation by faith alone. Even though another came from an evangelical background they have gained a whole new understanding and appreciation for the sacraments. And even though someone else has been highly influenced by modern culture they accept the biblical teaching on the role of men and women. As I wrap up the Bible information class I then confront them with the next logical step, "Would you like to become a member?" There is hesitation. There is caution. There is uncertainty. I have promised them that the main reason we have been taking this course is for their personal spiritual benefit. My sinful nature is telling me, "For the past 20 weeks I have been giving my time and my energy solely for them. And the first time I ask for something from them, they hesitate." And yet their sinful nature is thinking, "For the past 20 weeks this pastor has been promising that he didn't have any ulterior motives for sharing the gospel with us. He promised that this course was purely for our personal spiritual benefit. Was this all along some type of a con to befriend us and get something from us? What does he want from us? What really is membership? What is going to change if we become a member?" While I pray that this is an exaggeration of the reality, the term that we use to determine a person's confessional stance may not always be understood correctly, even by those who are already members. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to understand better the reason why we use church membership. We will see what scripture says, as well as consider the practical value of the term.

The importance of a public confession

The term membership is not found in the bible. However, scripture does state the importance of making a public confession and being part of a body of believers united in a common faith. In Romans, Paul states how a confession is the natural result of faith in the heart. "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."¹ In the same way, Paul later states in the same letter that without agreement on all doctrines there can be no visible unity. "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them."² Making a public confession does two things: it unites a person with a specific group of Christians, and it separates that person from those who teach contrary to what one believes.

The Bible speaks of the vertical fellowship that we have with God through faith. 1 Corinthians gives us one of many examples in scripture when it says, "God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful."³ Scripture also speaks of a horizontal fellowship that we have with all believers.

¹ Romans 10:10

² Romans 16:17

³ 1 Corinthians 1:9

Again, here is just one of many examples. “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁴

We share something special with all those people who are part of the invisible church. We rejoice that we will be with them in heaven someday. We are thankful that souls are being saved outside of the Wisconsin Synod. And yet at the same time we have to treat the truth of the gospel with the same fear and respect that Isaiah did when he wrote, “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.”⁵ The writers of the NT as well, stressed many times the importance of upholding the truth of God’s word against false teachers. In Acts, Paul was quoted by Luke to say,

For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!⁶

While one cannot see faith in the heart, one can hear a confession. On the basis of that confession, one can assume that the horizontal fellowship exists. The importance of the details of that confession cannot be undermined. It would be nice if we could say that anyone who confessed faith in Jesus believed in all the teachings of the bible in its truth and purity. But because Satan has so thoroughly corrupted the minds and hearts of people everywhere, and since the sinful nature so often clouds human reason when one reads the bible, and since the world influences people more than they like to admit, a public confession showing complete agreement on all the doctrines of scripture is necessary. It is necessary to show the family of believers that this individual is united in faith.

While this paper will not go into detail about the unit concept⁷, it will suffice to say that the scriptural teaching of the unit concept leads to a public confession of faith. Nothing in scripture teaches us that fellowship in confession demands anything less than full agreement in all doctrines. Numerous books and papers have been written about how to apply this. Cooperation in externals, altar and pulpit fellowship, and prayer fellowship are just a few of the applications to the unit concept of scripture. These have been written because we know that our actions can speak as loudly as our words. One writer expands on this,

We may note three aspects of fellowship: 1. fellowship as it exists among all believers and their God through faith in the Lord Jesus; 2. fellowship as it is recognized and known by the confession of the mouth; 3. fellowship as it expresses itself in joint activities. We can sum this up in three words: faith, confession, action. The first is worked and known and seen only by God. The second and third are also worked only by God, but recognized and done also by us. It is with these two latter aspects that we Christians are directly involved as we live together in the world.⁸

Without a confession one would never know if this horizontal fellowship exists. In the same way, without a detailed, specific confession one would never know if there is something that they believe that is “contrary to the teaching you have learned.”⁹

⁴Galatians 3:26, 28

⁵Isaiah 8:20

⁶Acts 20:27

⁷ The Unit Concept is the scriptural teaching that 1) church fellowship requires agreement in all doctrines 2) All expressions of church fellowship require complete agreement in doctrine. For some examples of scriptural support see Matt. 28:20; Acts 20:27-31; 1 Cor. 1:10; Rev. 22:19; 1 Tim. 1:3-4; John 8:31; 1 Tim. 6:3-4.

⁸ Schuetze, p. 2-3

⁹ Romans 16:17

Scripture tells us that working side by side with a group gives the impression that you have the same beliefs. 2 John 10-11 says, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.” Those who support a false teacher are accomplices with the false teacher. Our actions can be as clear of a confession as our words. Braun reiterates when he states,

In the day to day world of the visible church what a Christian does and says is to reveal what is in his heart. If a group of Christians join together, we can only perceive that they are joined together in their faith and adherence to the Word of God by their confession. This will be found in what that group of Christians teaches. If it subscribes to certain principles, it serves notice that it believes them. Public pronouncements by officials serve as its confession unless those officials are repudiated or otherwise disciplined. Groupings of Christians can only deal with other Christian or non-Christian groups on the basis of what is the confession of the group. Individuals, who belong to certain groups, profess acceptance of what the group confesses. It has, of course, happened that an individual may belong to a group and hold to only some of the teachings or principles of the larger group. Then membership in the larger group must be weighed. If belonging to a larger group means acceptance or approval or financial support of something which is contrary to the will of God, it is syncretism even if there be no expressed approval on the part of the individual, Even if there is vocal denial of acceptance of what is wrong with the larger group, the actions, here specifically the action of continued membership, speaks louder than words. We do not presume to judge the heart, but we react to the confession of words and deeds.¹⁰

If a person had a job interview and said that he was a member of the Ku Klux Klan, he could say that he doesn't agree with anything that the KKK stands for. But just by being associated with the group it is assumed that he shares a common confession. In most cases the person being interviewed wouldn't get the job for that very reason. The same could be said about someone who wasn't a member of the KKK, but was financially supporting them.

In the same way, a member of a non-denominational church may claim that he hasn't made a public confession. In fact, he may even pride himself in the fact that he is not bound by a specific creed or belief system. But that does not mean that he doesn't have a confession. He believes in tolerance. He believes in believing whatever you want to believe. That is still a confession. And being a part of that church makes that confession even more clear.

Is church membership the only means by which we may judge one's confessional stance? Scripture stresses the importance of a public confession. That public confession may be made by our words or actions. While the clearest way to make a confession is with the mouth, our actions can speak loudly as well. However, there are aspects of making a public confession that are not prescribed for us in scripture.

The way we practice church membership is adiaphora

The term membership or even confirmation is not found in the bible. The Roman Catholic Church uses Acts 8:14-17 to say that confirmation is a sacrament.¹¹ Luke writes,

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the

¹⁰ Braun, p. 5

¹¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church p. 332-333

Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

The Catholic Church has gone too far by using this passage as a basis to say that confirmation is a sacrament. Brenner responds,

We have only an apostolic example which cannot even be demonstrated to have been a consistent apostolic practice. Descriptive passages of Scripture do not determine binding practices. Only prescriptive passages can. Rome falls into the same theological error as Pentecostalism which draws binding principles from scriptural examples rather than from divine commands . . . To claim divine institution for confirmation or to give an impression that the rite of confirmation or the laying on of hands conveys the Holy Spirit is contrary to Scripture.¹²

However, this doesn't mean that our practice of confirmation or our use of church membership is against scripture. Rather, it sits in the realm of adiaphora. One writer states,

When he [Paul] says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free," and then says in the same context, "If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all," he means to say that in a time of confession (i.e. when the truth is being defended against false doctrine) even things which are in and of themselves adiaphora (such as circumcision) are no longer matters of indifference and should not be practiced if others are demanding it or should be practiced if others are forbidding it. In short, Christians are free to practice any adiaphora provided that their use does not violate the heart of God's law (love for God and love for the neighbor) and provided that their use does not compromise ones confession of the truth.¹³

While the rite of confirmation, the curriculum for preparing people for membership and even the use of the term membership is adiaphora, the idea of church membership and the importance of a public confession are found in many parts of scripture.

What is church membership?

While we don't see the term "church directory" in the bible we definitely see the idea being practiced. In Romans 16 we see that some people were simply recognized as being united with a group of believers in faith while others were separated. While this chapter is not a membership list, he does start the chapter by greeting a number of people because of the bond that they had in Christ. This greeting is counter-acted by verse 17 where he lists those whom the people should "watch out" for. Since those whom he should watch out for are defined by teaching something that is contrary to what they learned, obviously those, whom he greeted, believed and taught what was in accordance with what they had learned. The Apostle Peter, as well, says to the elders to "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care."¹⁴ The pastor isn't responsible for all the Christians living in one area around him, in the same way that he is responsible to those Christians who are a part of the flock that is under his care. This is an identifiable group that is in his care.

The command to obey your leaders also requires local church membership. The writer to the Hebrews says, "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life

¹² Brenner, p. 18

¹³ "TheHistorical, Traditional, Scriptural Basis for our Practice of Youth Confirmation.", p. 2

¹⁴ 1 Peter 5:2

and imitate their faith.”¹⁵ Earlier in the book the same writer also states very clearly that Christians are to join together, just as a modern day local congregation would do. “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”¹⁶

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for not removing a man who is involved in a sin. In verses 11 to 13, he writes,

But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.¹² What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?¹³ God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you.¹⁷

Notice how Paul refers to “those outside the church” and “those inside.” The only way that Paul was able to draw such a definite line is because it was well known who was formally a part of the church and who wasn’t. That’s really the only way that Paul’s “expel” makes any sense. How could the church expel someone who was never part of the group? The church could only legitimately remove from the church those who made up the church. Later, in 2 Corinthians, we see that the church followed Paul’s advice and expelled the man. He apparently repented of his sin sometime after that, because Paul says in 2:6 that, “The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him.” Look at that sentence carefully, and especially the word “majority.” That is important because you can’t have a majority of anything unless you know who gets counted and who doesn’t. Paul must be talking here about a majority of a well-defined whole, that is, a majority of those people who were known to be members of the church. Who knows, maybe they even had a list.

Whether or not past believers used the term “member” or had a church directory is difficult for us to say. What is important to note is that they always followed the biblical principles of church fellowship. They knew who was in agreement with them and whom they should watch out for.¹⁸ They knew who could preach in their church and who couldn’t.¹⁹ And they knew who could take communion and who needed more instruction.²⁰ In this sense they knew who members were, whether they used that term or not.

Church Membership today

As time and culture continues to change, God’s Word always remains the same. However, the way that we apply the biblical principles of fellowship may change. Today we use confirmation and membership so that people can study and learn that what the Bible teaches is in agreement with what our church teaches. Shepherd under Christ states, “Confirmation is a church rite, not a divinely instituted sacrament. It has neither the command of Christ nor any specific promise of grace. Hence the church can define the concept of confirmation and determine the purpose it is to serve.”²¹

Since church membership is not divinely instituted most churches typically define it in the church constitution. The WELS model constitution defines it in this way.

Communicant members are those baptized souls who confess Jesus Christ to be their Lord and Savior and have stated their adherence to all the canonical books of the Old and New Testament, without qualification, as the only rule and norm of faith and life, and have declared their

¹⁵Hebrews 13:7

¹⁶Hebrews 10:25

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 5:11-13

¹⁸ 2 John 10,11

¹⁹ Galatians 1:6-8

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 10:17

²¹ Habeck, p. 118

agreement with the chief parts of Christian doctrine as written in Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism.²²

The main point in this paragraph is that there is a confession of faith so that everyone understands that unity in the faith exists between this new confirmand and the rest of the congregation. Paul made it known to the Romans who to greet and who to keep away from. Our practice of confirmation does the same. We are able to know, from the basis of a confession only, who to greet and who to keep away from. This is the primary purpose of church membership for our church today. This is the reason why after confirmation a person may receive the Lord's Supper with the rest of the congregation. They have become a part of the one loaf, a body of Christians who are united by their public confession. Their confession is being expressed in words as well as actions. In fact, admission to the Lord's Supper is part of the definition of confirmation in Kuske's small catechism. "Confirmation. A ceremony following instruction in which Christians confess their faith and are acknowledged as sufficiently instructed to receive Holy Communion."²³

Since membership indicates that we are united in faith in all the doctrines of the bible we may share with that person not only a communion at the Lord's table but other areas of fellowship as well. We may pray with that person knowing that we are praying to the same God and we aren't giving a false impression of our beliefs. Membership extends beyond a singular church and is recognized in other churches and synods of the same fellowship. Therefore, even if a person never heard the public confession of another, he can be confident from the fact that he is on a membership list that a confession has been made which joins them in faith.

It's obvious from the fact that we are studying certain aspects of church fellowship that we value the importance, not so much of membership, but rather the importance of the public confession. However, this importance is by no means stressed in all Christian churches. The rest of this paper then is going to discuss not only why we have to use a term, like membership, but also the strengths and weaknesses of the term.

Church membership today - Why we use the term and why others don't

Above we discussed what the term membership means. But that doesn't explain why we use the term. In essence we use the term because of the effects of sin and to separate ourselves from false teachers. Satan is the reason why there are heterodox churches. The sinful nature is to blame for misunderstanding scripture and jumping to conclusions that scripture never intended. Satan is the one who wants to convince people that a lackadaisical attitude toward scripture is fine. As was stated earlier we cannot assume that just because a person claims to be a member of the Holy Christian Church that they are in agreement with all the doctrines of scripture. Being a member of a WELS church means that a person has publicly confessed his faith to show that he is holding hands doctrinally with the bible and other members of the WELS.

We use the term to celebrate our unity in the faith. However, as the ecumenical movement is numbing the world's appreciation for the truth of God's world, it seems that membership in a specific church is becoming just a name. Therefore the importance of a public confession is underestimated, to say the least. Stephen Prothero, a professor of religion at Boston University comments on the current trend of religious tolerance,

A new Pew study, released last week, shows that Americans are swingers as well as switchers, flirting with religious beliefs and practices other than their own without officially changing their religious affiliation. Catholic leaders have long denounced "Cafeteria Catholics" for going down the line and picking and choosing the Catholic beliefs and practices they choose to uphold. According to this new study, Americans as a group are now bellying up to what my Boston University colleague John Berthrong has referred to as the "divine deli." . . . The new Pew data

²² WELS Model Constitution, Article 5, section 1B

²³ Kuske, p. 329

provide further evidence for the death of denominationalism in American life and for the enduring power of the ideal of religious tolerance. Once upon a time, Baptists and Lutherans and Disciples of Christ fought bitterly over such matters as when to baptize Christians and just how Jesus was present at the Eucharist. But that stuff is so last century. Today even the distinctions between Jews and Buddhists, or between Hindus and Christians, are starting to blur, not least because most Americans have almost no idea what these traditions stand for. . . . As a scholar of religion, I am supposed to simply observe all this without rendering any judgment, but I can't help feeling that something precious is being lost here, perhaps something as fundamental as a sense of the sacred. Harvard philosopher George Santayana once observed that "American life is a powerful solvent," capable of neutralizing new ideas into banal clichés. I worry that this solvent is now melting down the sharp edges of the world's religions, bending them toward purposes other than their own.²⁴

Schuetze agrees with the current situation in America and the world.

The church mergers and fellowship practices that aim at uniting all Lutheran churches, if not all who call themselves Christians, are evidence that the Biblical doctrine of fellowship generally is not recognized, understood, or taken seriously. Scripture is either ignored or interpreted to say what human reason, feelings, and emotions want to hear.²⁵

At the same time it seems that as the world sees less and less of a reason for a public confession, we in the WELS are viewed as unloving because we do take a stand on the side of truth.

False teachers always try to blame the division in the church on the truth teachers who oppose them and who separate from them, but scripture places the blame for division in the church where it belongs – on the false teachers who depart from the unity produced by obedience to God's Word.²⁶

The reason I've brought this topic up is because we live in the world. And so we and our members are influenced by the world. We know that a public confession is important from what the bible tells us. But does the word "membership" contain a negative connotation that may scare some away? Can that public confession be recognized in another way other than membership? Let's first look at the strengths and weaknesses of the word "membership" to answer this more clearly.

Strengths and weaknesses

The main strength of the term membership is that it gives us a way to know who has and who has not made a public confession of faith. We are able to transfer someone's membership to another congregation in the WELS knowing that a person has been taught and has confessed that faith, even though we weren't physically there to hear the confession. They are then able to be under the spiritual care of a congregation and be a part of a body of believers.²⁷

There are a few weaknesses of using the word "membership". To some it may sound like we are part of a club or worse yet, a cult. We want to make sure that people realize that membership means more than your

²⁴ Wall Street Journal – Dec. 11, 2009 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1000142405274870424050457458583404726>

²⁵ Scheutze, p. 1

²⁶ Brug, p. 42

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 12

membership at Sam's Club. But we also want them to realize that becoming a member doesn't open up member-only rooms or some secret of the religion.

It may also give the impression that membership is membership in the Holy Christian Church instead of just the visible congregation.

The LCMS hymnal *Lutheran Worship* has an order for confirmation. The order asks the confirmands this question: "Do you desire to become a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and of this congregation?" After all the catechumens have answered several questions and received the blessing, the minister declares: Upon this your profession and promise I invite and welcome you, as members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and of this congregation, to share with us in all the gifts our Lord has for his Church and to live them out continually in his worship and service. The wording leaves the impression that these young people were not members of the church by virtue of their baptism, but have now become members by virtue of their confirmation. The LCMS Commission on Worship warns that these statements must be carefully explained so that they are not misunderstood. *Lutheran Worship: Altar Book* offers this definition of confirmation: Confirmation is a public rite of the Church that is preceded by a period of instruction designed to help baptized Christians identify with the life and mission of the Christian community. Having been instructed in the Christian faith prior to admission to the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:28), the rite of Confirmation provides an opportunity for the individual Christian, relying on God's promise of Holy Baptism, to make a personal public confession of faith and a lifelong pledge of fidelity to Christ.²⁸

God-willing, with instruction those under our care will better understand this term.

Membership can also be viewed as a scary word, depending on the culture or the family situation. It can be equated to changing your last name. As one Latino who is now a member of our congregation put it, "Being Latino means being catholic." Another member in our congregation waited to become a member of our congregation only until after her father died. The father didn't have a problem with her daughter attending our church or taking bible classes at our church. He had a problem with her becoming an official member. Because that would mean that she would no longer be Catholic. In that final respect, he is exactly right. That's what membership means. It means you are in agreement with the teachings of the bible and our church, and not the teachings of the Catholic Church or any other denomination outside of our fellowship. Missionaries in Asia are experiencing a similar, sometimes even stronger objection to this term. Depending on the family, this may even happen in our own culture. A family with strong ties and a long history to the ELCA may, in some way, look down on or even disown a relative who left that church to go to the WELS.

The problem, therefore, is not necessarily with the word, "membership" but with a commitment to a specific confession of faith, which will inevitably join you with some and separate you from others. Jesus doesn't hide the fact that making a specific public confession of faith will have its consequences. He says in Mark 8,

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?³⁷ Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.²⁹

²⁸ Brenner, p. 14

²⁹ Mark 8:34

One person who has been worshipping in our church for 2 years now recently told me that he wasn't ready to be a member yet. He has gone through the BIC course. He has privately told me that he is in agreement with all the doctrines of our church. But he does not want confirmation or membership. He said that for the two times a year that he attends his LCMS church back home he wants to take the Lord's Supper. He doesn't want things to be awkward at home for his brothers. Also, once a year he plays an instrument at an ELCA church. It's not that he loves doing it so much. Rather, he's afraid of telling his friend why he can no longer play at the church anymore. One writer comments on situations like this:

The confession of faith which is asked for as evidence of belief still is difficult for some people to make. It's hard to separate from members of other Lutheran synods if the ties are close. But it is definitely best - for the sake of those we are separating from and for our own sakes. We can do more by not joining with those whose church bodies allow false doctrine than we can by joining with them. At least it shows there is a difference and calls attention to the difference, rather than going along as if everything were fine. It is not that we enjoy admonishing. If we want to do the easiest thing, we would not take a stand against error. It's for the benefit of the people exposed to the error that we do it, contending for God's truth and holding it up as the only basis for agreement and unity of practice.³⁰

So, is church membership the only means by which we may judge one's confessional stance? A church may decide to use the word "partner" instead of "member". Nevertheless, the same meaning is implied. You are publically confessing your faith and uniting yourselves to a specific group of believers. At the same time, you are separating yourselves from those who do not teach the same. You are also putting yourself under the spiritual care of the congregation and pastor(s).

Semantics aside, is church membership the only means by which we may judge one's confessional stance? While the way we practice church membership is adiaphora, Scripture speaks clearly about the importance of a confession of faith and being united with a group of Christians. Uniting with some, inevitably means that you are keeping away from others. A confession of faith can be made by the mouth and by your actions. However, a confession by your actions may not always be as clear as a confession with words. Finally, for our time and culture, our practice of church membership serves us well. If something would change in the future so that we would abandon the term, the scriptural principles would remain. Scripture clearly lays out the importance and joy of being united in faith with a specific group of Christians. May God continue to strengthen the bond of faith uniting us to him and to each other!

³⁰ Noffsinger, p. 8

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