

Responsibilities of Church Membership

Church membership is not an option for Christians. It is a requirement because it is impossible to obey many of the commands of the New Testament, such as the use of spiritual gifts as a constituent part of a full-orbed ministry, according to the figure of different parts of a body contributing different things to the needs of the whole (I Corinthians 12-14), and submission to church officers (Hebrews 13:17; I Peter 5:1-5), apart from an official and formal association with, commitment to, and submission to a visible, discernible, coherent body of Christians, which is the local church. This is the definition of church membership.

The following questions summarize officially the understanding of the Presbyterian Church in America of the qualifications and duties of membership in a particular church expression of the visible community of God's covenant people. Under each one is an explanation of and elaboration on what each question means. You should read and consider them carefully, as they will be the questions presented to you in both your interview with the Session and the formal service in which you are received as a member. You will answer them as part of a public profession of faith, and in doing so you will be entering into a solemn covenant with God and His Church.

As such, these constitute membership vows. Ecclesiastes 5:4-7 says. "When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity, but God is the one you must fear." We do not take such vows lightly and neither should you. Again, please take time to read and understand how and to what you are committing yourself.

Questions for Prospective Members

These questions fall into three main categories. The first two questions relate to one's basic profession of faith and deal with matters related to one's identity as a Christian and conversion to the faith. The third question is something of a bridge question, and the fourth and fifth questions deal with one's relationship and commitment to the local church.

- 1) Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?**

This question is a statement of faith concerning one's understanding of his need of a Savior. It is a testimony of sinfulness, one's consequent liability to punishment, and his utter inability to do anything to save himself or contribute anything to his salvation.

- 2) Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?**

This is a statement of faith concerning who the Savior is and what he did. The content of the Gospel should have already been expressed by you to officers in a church before this question is put to you.

3) Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?

As stated above, this is a bridge question, because it looks backward to and is related to the first two questions, as well as looking forward to and being related to the last two questions. This is because it deals with one's intention with respect to remaining sin in his life.

It would be easy to misunderstand this question. Perhaps the most important word in it is the word "endeavor," because without it one might think that it was asking if one promised to straighten up and fly right from now on. Such a promise would be impossible to keep in consideration of the problem of remaining indwelling sin (I John 1:8; James 3:2). However, it rather deals with one's intention with respect to his remaining sin. As such, it looks backward to the conversion experience inasmuch as true conversion always includes repentance, which is a response of the whole man, mind, emotions, and will, in turning from sin to God. It is regarded as the flip side of faith and essential to one's being a Christian, and must be present at the beginning of the Christian life (Acts 20:21). But it also looks forward inasmuch as repentance does not occur only at the beginning of the Christian life, but throughout its duration again and again. This is because the goal of salvation is the elimination of sin in its entirety from the Christian (Romans 8:4), and putting sin to death in the process of sanctification is what will be happening until glory for every genuinely converted individual (Romans 8:13-17). To become a Christian is, in part, to commit oneself to such a process (Romans 8:29, 30).

This points to perhaps the second most important part of the question, which is the phrase, "...in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit," which involves a commitment to dependence upon the power of the Holy Spirit to deal with sin and put it to death (Romans 8:13). This means that a big part of what one is promising in this vow is to avail himself of the means of grace that God has given (the Word of God preached, taught, read, and discussed, private and corporate prayer, private and corporate worship, fellowship with other Christians, the sacraments, and accountability to and discipline/oversight by church officers), through which the Holy Spirit works, building these things into his life on a regular basis. Please note that most of these things are experienced through involvement with and commitment to the local church.

4) Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?

This is the first of two questions that deal specifically with one's commitment and relation to the local church. Like some of the others, it could easily be misunderstood. One potential misunderstanding is related to a common misconception regarding what

“supporting the church in its worship and work” requires. It is often assumed by many that this means involvement in virtually every activity of the church. The flaw in this thinking involves a failure to understand the spirituality of all of life, and a tendency to equate the church and God. Indeed there should be a hierarchy of priorities for Christians, and God should come first. Commitment to church should probably come somewhere after one’s commitment to family and his calling (work). This means that involvement in every activity of the church is impossible given the responsibilities one has in other spheres, which are God-given and thus just as spiritual as those with respect to the church.

*Of course, support of the church in its worship must include **attendance at and participation in stated meetings of God’s people for worship on the Lord’s Day unless providentially hindered**, because this is commanded by God in Scripture. Beyond this, the support required by this vow almost certainly varies from person to person and is related to the role ordained for one in the church. Perhaps the best way to approach the question is through citation of a triad of aspects of relationship to the church. It is commonly said that we support the church with our **time, talent, and treasure**. Certainly it takes time to participate meaningfully and fulfill our responsibilities in the life of the local church. But aside from the participation in Lord’s Day worship mentioned above, determination of the proper proportion of time commitment relative to one’s other time commitments is sometimes difficult. We believe that a key guideline is that **one’s responsibility for time commitment in the church should be, broadly speaking, whatever is necessary to develop the relationships required to minister to others in the church according to one’s calling by God**. We do not all have the same gifts, roles, or callings, so the time required to be faithful to these varies from person to person*

This leads naturally to consideration of the second aspect, talent. Actually, what is being referred to is spiritual giftedness, not talent, although these are related—just how we won’t get into just now—but the term talent is used because it alliterates. Support of the church is to be exercised in part by ministering to others in what amounts to a body; we all have responsibility to minister to and serve one another in terms of distinct and varying gifts with which the Holy Spirit has endowed each individual (Romans 12:3-8; I Corinthians 12:4-31; I Peter 4:8-11). We all need what every other individual has to give us through our interaction with them, and they need what we have to give them, and this ministry occurs through the establishment of relationships. So each person must, in order to be obedient to Christ, the Lord of the Church, exercise his gift(s) in ministry to others in the local church.

One bit of advice is in order at this point. Often, in attempting to fulfill this responsibility, church members assume that they must first determine exactly what their giftedness is—from a finite list of gifts mentioned in the Bible—before they can begin to serve. However, this is not the best way to think of what is involved in this responsibility, for several reasons. In the first place, the lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament are almost certainly not comprehensive, even if taken together; rather, they represent lists of examples of gifts (the lists are not identical, yet they contain some of the same gifts). This means that there are gifts that are not explicitly mentioned as such in the New Testament.

So in determining one's gift(s), a person cannot simply choose from a definite list. In the second place, trying to determine giftedness prior to service places undue focus upon oneself from the outset rather than upon those who are to be served. One typically and too easily becomes preoccupied with his gifts and their nature instead of the needs around him. A much better procedure is simply to become involved in the activities of the church while asking, "Where are needs I can meet?" and, "How can I help the church realize its purpose and goals in ministry?" Then one simply begins to do what he can to serve the church and its people. Such a procedure will almost certainly lead a person to ministry in accord with his giftedness, since he will naturally, at least over time, gravitate toward those areas of ministry in which he has some competence, ability, and success. Furthermore, part of the nature of most spiritual gifts is not only the ability to meet certain needs, but also a sensitivity to them and ability to recognize them. How one answers the above questions will thus usually be an indicator of those areas in which he is gifted.

*The third aspect of support mentioned above is treasure. Obviously, financial and other resources are needed to carry on the ministry of the Church. Even a cursory look at Scripture indicates that God has ordained that these resources are to be provided by God's people. The principle that God has given in His Word as a guideline for giving is the **tithe**. The principle of the tithe is that we give a tenth of our income to God in acknowledgement that all that we have comes from Him and is ultimately His. Furthermore, the tithe is to be given to the local church. Other giving above the tithe may be given wherever we choose, but the tithe is to be given to those to whom administration of the resources of the Church have been entrusted, the officers of the church (Malachi 3:10; Acts 4:34-37). This is the minimum requirement for giving laid down in Scripture, and there is no indication whatsoever that the principle of the tithe is for the Old Testament era only.*

This threefold summary of members' obligations to support the church is but a guideline, and the fundamental meaning of this vow is much deeper. For the ultimate obligation in any vow to support the worship and work of the church is to commit oneself to that work, devoting himself to the accomplishment of God's goals in that work, making them his own in owning that work himself. It is to adopt the spirit of owners rather than hired hands in an enterprise, which means constantly asking what the goal of the church's enterprise is (to make disciples), whether it is being accomplished, and what one can do to contribute to its effective realization.

5) Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

We will deal with second half of this vow first. In the promise to "study" the purity and peace of the church, one is not saying that he will read a book about purity and peace. The word "study" is used here in its archaic sense of "to work to bring about or to endeavor to promote." Thus one is promising here to promote the purity and peace of the church. The wisdom of this is seen when we consider how rare it is to see commitment to both of these ideals at the same time in the same person or people. We tend to gravitate

toward one or the other, but God requires us to be committed to and work for both at the same time.

The meaning of working for the purity of the church is perhaps best understood by asking what it is that makes the church impure, and the answer is, of course, sin. Thus this vow obligates one to deal with sin in the church, and since our Lord instructed His people to get the log out of their own eyes before they tried to remove the splinter from someone else's, it is clear that this means that we are in the first instance obligated to put our own sin and sins to death. This means that part of what one is vowing here is exactly the same as what he vowed under question 3, namely that he will involve himself in those things which God has provided to give ability and power to deal with sin, the means of grace, especially those dispensed by the church.

But having established this priority, one is also vowing here to commit himself to helping others deal with their sin. Christ taught that we are to wash one another's feet, and a close examination of this passage (John 13:1-17) indicates that what he is requiring here is more than just a willingness to engage in menial tasks on behalf of one another. The figure is of the nastiness of the task of becoming involved in and getting close to the sin of others in order to participate in their cleansing from it. This might involve many different things, such as admonition (warning), confrontation, empathy, encouragement, or listening at length. It is seldom pleasant or convenient. But the teaching of all of Scripture is that we are indeed our brothers' keepers, and that true religion is anything but private. We are responsible for one another (Philippians 2:4), and this vow takes that truth seriously.

Now it is possible to be committed to purity in the church in an ungodly way, specifically by neglecting the peace of the church. One may attempt to deal with the sins of others as if he has no sin, that is, with a self-righteous spirit, or he may talk to others about a person's sin (gossip) before or without speaking to that person, when Scripture requires that we speak first and usually only with the person who has sinned. Part of the commitment of this vow should include giving whomever I am helping with sin the best chance to receive what one is doing or saying positively, considering how to avoid conflict or defensiveness if at all possible. Such considerations represent a pursuit of both purity and peace in the church at the same time.

Yet it is also possible to promote peace at the expense of purity. This usually occurs when one is never really willing to deal openly with sin or conflict, but simply covers it up or pretends that it is not present. This is not true peace, however, but an illusion, for the sin and conflict that really exists is never dealt with, and continues under the surface. So the obligation spoken of here is to pursue peace as far as possible, but not at the expense of truly dealing with sin in oneself and others (Romans 12:18).

Now for the first part of the question. The most fundamental way to promote both purity and peace in the church is to submit oneself to the authority and oversight of those with whom the buck stops with respect to responsibility for the purity and peace of the church: its officers, particularly the elders. As in every other God-ordained institution of society,

the Lord has established an authority structure in the church and commanded submission to it (Hebrews 13:17), and this part of the question addresses and seals that obligation.

*Two clarifications are necessary with respect to the nature of this authority and the required submission. First, church authority is **ministerial**. This is simply to say that it is for the purpose not of requiring others to serve those in authority, but so that those in authority might exercise it and make decisions which serve the best interests of those under it (I Peter 5:1-3). It is not a “fetch my slippers” sort of authority, but rather a service to those over whom it is wielded. Second, church authority is **declarative**. This is to say that it does not include power to do anything other than declare what God has said is true, and is invalid or valid to the degree to which it accurately expresses God’s truth as revealed in His Word. Although not all in the history of the Church have understood this well, church officers may not legitimately execute persons, or fine them, or punish them corporally. The authority of the church is to be wielded through its declaration and application of the Word of God, including its sanctions. But lest someone think that this is of no force or consequence, he should consider that when the church’s officers’ declarations are in accord with the Bible, including that a person or persons are outside of the Kingdom of God, Christ Himself backs them up in Heaven, and this is by no means trivial (Matthew 16:13-20; 18:15-20; John 20:19-23; I Corinthians 5; I Timothy 1:20). The flip side of this truth is that when even church authority is not in accord with God’s Word, it is not binding. That is to say that if church officers require one to do what God has forbidden, or forbid what God requires, one is not only not required to submit, but is obligated not to submit. This is because no human authority is absolute, but all is delegated by God, so that it cannot be legitimate if it contradicts His revealed will in the Bible (Acts 4:18-20; 5:27-29).*