

BLOOM

Where You're Planted

What does it mean to be a “member” of the church? What do we mean when we talk about “church boundaries”? And is there anything about these things in the Church Order? No, not if you look for a separate article that would give us a definition and a list of rights, privileges, and obligations of such membership. That being said, when called to run the church well, we will be confronted with questions around membership and church boundaries. In fact, the word “members” is used several times throughout the Church Order. And whenever the Church Order mentions “the congregation” or “members of the congregation,” it refers to a defined group of people, distinct from others, which implies boundaries.

MEMBERS IN THE CHURCH ORDER

Let’s have a closer look at some of these references. A brief survey shows that our church order stipulates that church membership is required for serving as office bearers (Art. 3 and 4) as well as for voting for office bearers when that may be called for (Art. 3). Church members must receive pastoral care (Art. 16 and 22), which also implies responsibility to accept the authority of the elders. When you make public profession of your faith you even promise to submit willingly to this kind of supervision and authority, as a *living member* of the church. Article 61 implies that such membership includes admission to the Lord’s Supper. The matter of mutual spiritual accountability and the elders’ authority comes out in particular in the section on Christian discipline. Here the Church Order uses terminology like “anyone,” “someone,” or “the sinner,” but in this context it obviously refers to members of the church, in distinction from others.

In Article 62 we have agreed that by moving from church A to church B people end their membership in A and join B as a new member. Among the sister churches we accommodate this

transition by giving an attestation. For that purpose, the churches keep track of their members. That’s mentioned in Article 64 which points at the significance of church records.

All of this leads to the question: how do you become a member of the church? There are a few ways in which this can happen. When you are born of parents who are church members, you are a member yourself from the very beginning, as confirmed in your baptism.¹ Your public profession of faith later in life admits you to the Holy Supper but it does not *make you* a member of the church since you were a member since birth. This is the distinction between what we often call “communicant members” (i.e. those members with permission to commune or fellowship at the Lord’s Table) and “non-communicant members” (i.e. those who have not yet received this permission as they have not yet publicly professed their faith).

Another way of becoming a church member is by professing your faith when you join the church as an adult. If you have been properly baptized as a baby in another church (but for whatever reason did not grow up in the faith or perhaps left it for a time), you won’t need to be re-baptized. Following a period of instruction in the Reformed faith you would simply make profession of faith. However, if you have never been baptized, immediately after your profession of faith you would then receive baptism.

MEMBERS OF CHRIST

Before we get lost in the formal aspects, it’s good to remember that all of this is rooted in the spiritual reality of belonging to Jesus Christ. Answer 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism says that being a Christian means that “I am a member of Christ by faith.” This is where it all starts. At the same time, this is not where it ends. “Being a member of Christ” is not just what I feel to be my personal Christian identity. It is more than that. The New Testament makes

¹ This is the Reformed conviction, based on the character of God’s covenant. In Q/A 74 of the Heidelberg Catechism we confess that “by baptism, as sign of the covenant, infants *must* be incorporated in the Christian church.” In line with this, parents agree in response to the first question in the Form for Infant Baptism that “our children as members of Christ’s church *ought* to be baptized” (emphasis mine).

abundantly clear that you cannot separate being “a member of Christ” from being “a member of the body of Christ.” And this “body of Christ” is not just some vague or elusive entity. In 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 the apostle Paul describes how, as a member of the body of Christ, I am called to embrace my responsibilities towards my fellow believers, to share my gifts, to submit to the church leaders, to commit to mutual accountability, to accept financial obligations.

Many of these things are not spelled out in the Church Order. That makes sense. After all, the Church Order is not a detailed lawbook. It is a mutual agreement between churches about the responsibilities of office bearers, councils, and consistories, and not so much about responsibilities of local church members.

NEW MEMBERS

Nevertheless, the Church Order does reflect some of the things expected from members of the congregation. In other words, the Church Order assumes or expects some form of regulated, formal church membership. In our ecclesiastical practice today, that can be a challenge for some of our consistories.

More than in the past, many of our churches see an increasing number of visitors attending the worship services. Some of those stick around for a long time and become regular guests who feel very much at home and get engaged in other church activities as well. There is much reason for joy and gratitude here. But does all of this make them “members”? They may think so. They may even declare to family and friends: “This is now my church. I feel that I belong here.”

However, there is no accountability towards the elders; there is no real commitment towards fellow believers. Should elders try to change this and work towards full membership after profession of faith? I believe that should be the goal. It will often require much patient teaching and faithful discipling before your guests may be ready for this step. As such that’s okay, and not a reason to question the sincerity of their faith. But the North American love for individual liberty, enhanced by today’s culture that tells you to do what you feel like doing and only as long as you are comfortable with it, does not help.

MOBILE MEMBERS

This culture of the day also affects our “regular” church members. Reformed church polity respects the integrity and autonomy of the local churches. This implies that each church has its own area or territory with geographical ecclesiastical boundaries.² In the not-so-distant past people would respect those boundaries. If you moved to a neighbouring town, you would also join the church in that place. When churches are far removed from each other, that will naturally still be the case, but in areas where we find a cluster

of Canadian Reformed churches in close vicinity, this is no longer as self-evident as it used to be.

We see people moving from one congregation to another without moving physically. I’m a member in church A, but I don’t like it here, so I’m going to join church B. It’s more than 20 km down the road, but I feel more comfortable there. We simply ignore the old boundaries, and the result is that congregations living in reasonably close proximity are drawing their membership from the same geographical area. At times people drive by one or more churches of the federation to worship where they wish.

Is this an improvement? I don’t think so. It leads to an unhealthy spirit of competition between popular and less popular churches and preachers. The result is that you find yourself in a church with likeminded people where our unity is more in what we all like, prefer, or feel comfortable with than in Christ. That’s not very healthy either. You look for a church where you can be involved in a way that suits you, a church that you think will live up to your expectations when it comes to preaching, liturgy, style of leadership, emphasis on this or that aspect. But in the end the church is about “me.”

ONE BODY

However, the Bible teaches that the church is not about me. The church is about glorifying God and serving others. It means that we are called to be faithful and loyal towards the congregation God has placed us in, with all the colourful and rich variety of gifts, ideas, and views people have. Imagine the picture of the church in 1 Corinthians 12:4–27.

Article 28 of the Belgic Confession echoes this Word of God when it comes to our attitude towards the church. Believers “must submit themselves to [the church’s] instruction and discipline, bend their necks under the yoke of Christ, and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body.”

Are we still talking church polity? Think about it. Perhaps consistories should not readily accept that members want to leave (or join) without moving physically, just because they think that the spiritual grass looks greener at the other side of the ecclesiastical fence.

So, yes—bloom where God has planted you. 



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² It is good to note here that this territorial principle with geographical boundaries is not prescribed in Scripture. But it is something we see growing throughout the New Testament.