

# CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”

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## Church Membership is an Office

by Jonathan Leeman

Christians have a long tradition of referring to elders and deacons as church “officers.” The nomenclature rightly recognizes the role and responsibilities that Scripture gives to our leaders. It also points to the honor due to pastors (1 Tim. 5:17). People show respect to officers, right?

I don’t want to downplay any of this.

**But . . . church membership is an office, too. It’s a job that comes with authority and responsibility.** We can call a lieutenant an “officer” without diminishing the honor due to a general.

What’s at stake here is not just academic, but pastoral and biblical. **Too many Christians today view their relationship with the local church consumeristically—as if churches were gas stations.** You drive around once a week looking to fill your tank spiritually. You find the station with the lowest prices and the car wash option. Maybe you join the rewards program. Church membership is that rewards program. Loyalty to their brand brings extra benefits.

People often say “Church membership is not in the Bible” because they have something programmatic like this in mind. And they’re half right: this isn’t in the Bible. But they miss what is in the Bible. There, church membership is a job. You’re expected to show up for work (Heb. 10:24–25). You have authority to exercise, tasks to complete, privileges to enjoy, a corporate reputation to protect, risks to endure, and profits to share. If anything, we need to think less like consumers and more like owners. You’ve bought in. You have a vested stake.

### WHAT’S AN OFFICE?

The Presbyterian Charles Hodge defined an office like this:

The ministry is properly an office, because it is something which cannot be assumed at pleasure by any and every one. A man must be appointed thereto by some competent authority. It involves not only the right, but the obligation to exercise certain functions, or to discharge certain duties; and it confers certain powers or prerogatives, which other men are bound to recognize and respect.

So it is with every church member. Not everyone can be a church member. Only the repenting and believing and baptized can be. No person possesses the authority to make him or herself a member. The church itself must.

And no member is without functions, duties, powers, or prerogatives. Every member possesses them, which others must recognize and respect.

### WHERE DID THIS OFFICE COME FROM?

Here’s the biblically interesting part: the office of church member is the new covenant version of Adam’s everyman office, assigned to us by Christ.

God put Adam to work as a priest-king and tasked him with watching over and working the garden. “Expand the Garden, Adam. Obey my words. And keep lying serpents out, since the Garden is where I, the Lord, dwell.”

When Adam failed, the job of priest-king went to Noah, then Abraham, and eventually the nation of Israel. The mom-and-pop shop went corporate as a “kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6). At the same time, God separated out a class of priests and a class of kings to make their respective responsibilities clear. The priest’s job, like Adam’s in the garden, was to “work” and “watch over” the tabernacle/temple, keeping it consecrated to the Lord (Num. 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6). They were charged with naming things as clean and unclean, holy and unholy. The king’s work, meanwhile, was to establish order and dominion while following God’s law (see Deut. 17:14–20).

When Israel failed in its corporate job and the kings and priests in their individual jobs, the prophets promised the special mediatory offices of priest and king would be “democratized” once more (Jer. 31:33–34). Christ would come as the perfect priest and king, the second federal Adam, and through the new covenant of his blood reassign a new covenant people with being:

- A chosen race—new Adams;
- A royal priesthood—a democracy of priest-kings
- A holy nation—a new Israel
- A people for God’s own possession (1 Peter 2:9)

These priests should offer sacrifices of obedience in all of life, their daily activities serving as a mediating witness to the world (see Rom. 12:1–2; 1 Peter 2:5). Yet they also constitute the temple where God dwells, just as he dwelt in the Garden and the tabernacle (1 Cor. 3:16–17), which means they possess a priestly obligation to one another: to make sure they’re not unequally yoked, to come out and being separate, and to touch no unclean thing, so that holiness comes to completion (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1). To this end, they employ the keys of the kingdom in priestly fashion. This enables them to keep the line between the inside and the outside of God’s people clear (Matt. 16:19; 18:15–20).

Meanwhile, every member of the church has been given a kingly task: to make disciples and be ambassadors of reconciliation, bringing the territory of hearts into subjugation to God (Matt. 28:18–20; 2 Cor. 5:18–20).

What is church membership? It’s undertaking Adam’s job, thanks to our inclusion in Christ. It’s the public recognition that we have stepped into the office of priest-king. “Expand the church, church member. Obey my words. Give witness to me in all of life. And do not recognize lying serpents as members, since the church is where I, the Lord, dwell.”

Irenaeus put it succinctly one hundred years after the New Testament was written: “For all the righteous possess the priestly order [*sacerdotali ordinem*]” (*Against Heresies*).

Almost two millennia later Herman Bavinck said something similar: “And just as all believers have a gift, so also they all hold an office. Not only in the church as organism but also in the church as institution, they have a calling and a task laid on them by the Lord” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.375).