

CROSS & SPIRE

March 2026

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From Pastor Ryan's Desk:

Church Membership

Church membership can be a sensitive topic for some people. Far too often, believers embrace church membership with joy and excitement only to be hurt by fellow members, but even more often they are hurt by the leadership that those individuals willingly submitted themselves to. In my time in church, I have experienced healthy church membership with leaders that helped cultivate in their members the life in Christ. I've also experienced unhealthy church membership with leaders that used their position of authority to abuse members. Regardless of one's personal experience with church membership, I want to present the biblical evidence for church membership and how Scripture equips us to maintain a healthy body for believers to belong to. I will be the first to point out that nowhere in the New Testament is there a blatant command to become a member of a local church, but I think there is enough evidence to conclude that membership in a local church is a biblically healthy and necessary element to life for a follower of Jesus.

Romans 12:5 is a beautiful verse that tells us, "So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another." Here we see that we are members of two things: collectively, the body of Christ, and individually, members of one another. It is an inevitable reality that when you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you enter into membership of the universal Church, but also you become an individual member of God's Kingdom.

Acts 2:42 says, "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls." Acts 6:3 says, "Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty." From these two verses we have to ask a couple questions. After those people received the word and were baptized, what were they added to? When instructed to pick seven men, from where were they to be taken? I will admit that it is a bit of an assumption, but I think a safe one: those who were added were added to the membership of their local church. Those seven men that were chosen were chosen from the membership of the local church.

You may disagree with my conclusion, and that's fine, but I do believe that there is enough evidence to establish that church membership was and is a biblical reality. So, what's the point of church membership? The main practical reason is accountability. When you read that you might sigh, roll your eyes and think that this is just a way for church leaders to gain and hold power over their members. This is a fair point and one whose sting I have felt firsthand many times. Thankfully, Jesus spoke on this in Matthew 20:24-26. "And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you

must be your servant.” Church membership should cultivate a community of mutual accountability, leaders accountable to their members, and members accountable to their leaders. Matthew 18:15-20, Hebrews 3:12-14, and 10:24-25 all show us how vital mutual accountability and mutual encouragement are for believers.

Titus 1:5-9 and I Timothy 3:1-13 present the biblical criteria for church leaders: Above reproach, the husband of one wife, children are believers, not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination, not arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, not quarrelsome and not a lover of money, not a recent convert. He should be: hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined; he must hold firm to the teaching of God’s Word and be able to instruct and rebuke in sound doctrine, manage his own household well, and with dignity keep his children submissive, well thought of by outsiders.

Why is it important for you to know these criteria? Accountability! One of the most dangerous things a church can have is a leadership that is above accountability from its members. I have personally experienced and know many believers who have submitted to leadership that is above accountability and end up hurt and leave the church. Sometimes that hurt is so strong that a person may never come back to church again. If your leaders aren’t willing to be humble and held to account, then they aren’t leaders, they are a ticking time bomb; and when they explode, they will take other believers with them.

Members need to be held to account just like leaders. This job falls on two groups: other members and church leaders. As I already wrote, mutual accountability is fundamental to a healthy relationship with Christ. Along with that is the accountability that comes from our church leaders. The job of church leadership is to guard, guide, and grow their members in their knowledge of and relationship with Christ. It is also their responsibility to protect the doctrine taught in the church.

At FBC, we receive new members carefully. Members must meet with our Shepherds team where the Shepherds examine the person’s beliefs and hear their testimony. This gives the leaders an opportunity to get to know their potential members, but it also helps them protect the doctrine of the church. Making sure a potential member’s beliefs align with the Church helps guard against the degradation of the doctrine of the Church.

The other aspect of a leader’s role to the members is church discipline. Matthew 18:15-18 gives us the formula for church discipline, and if necessary, the local church leadership can step into a situation of a member and bring corrective discipline in hopes to fix the behavior, bring repentance, and restore their brother or sister to the members at large.

I believe church membership is a biblical aspect of the life of a believer. Church membership has spanned the life of the Church of Christ. Whether it’s FBC or the church in Corinth, we see membership into God’s eternal Kingdom, the universal Church, and the local church. If you are not a member of FBC, I would encourage you to sign up for our membership class and find out more of what it is all about. If you are not ready for membership, no worries, but I would encourage you to ask any questions you may have about membership. If you’ve been burned by church leadership in the past and are hesitant to try it again, I feel you there, but I would challenge you to work through that church hurt and maybe one day enter into the membership of a local church.

With all love in Christ,
Pastor Ryan

GET INVOLVED!

Mark Your Calendar:

March 1: Fellowship luncheon in the lobby after the worship service.

March 8: Daylight Savings Time begins. Turn your clock ahead one hour.

March 29: Palm Sunday.

Ongoing Small Groups:

Coming into the Spring months, it is a great time to join a small group.

Monday evening Prayer Meeting at 6:30 p.m. in the sanctuary. Led by Betsy Wotton, the group prays for individual concerns, for requests in the lobby's prayer box, and for concerns in our community and beyond. Just come or see Betsy for details.

Tuesday evening Bible Study meets at 6 p.m. in the sanctuary and is co-led by Angie Stephens and Anne Pinilla. This study group meets every other Tuesday evening. They will continue their study of John MacArthur's *12 Extraordinary Women*. Just come or see Angie or Anne for details.

Wednesday morning Women's Bible Study meets in the sanctuary and is co-led by Carol Rataj and Betsy Wotton and studying *The Battlefield of the Mind*. Just come or contact Carol or Betsy, or email Carol at carolrataj3@gmail.com.

Thursday evening Millennial Group meets in the church from 5-7 p.m. with dinner from 5-6 and study from 6-7. Child care is provided in the 2nd floor classroom. Open to all millennials. Just come or see Pastor Ryan for details.

Thursday evening Bible Study led by Roger & Betsy Wotton meets at 6:30 p.m. to continue the study of the Book of John. See Roger or Betsy for more details and location of the meeting.

Thursday evening Bible Study led by Rick & Anne Pinilla meets at 6:30 p.m. at their home in Newport, NH. They will continue the study of

Paul's letter to the Romans. Just come or see Rick or Anne for details.

***Want to become a member?
See Pastor Ryan.***

Ministries:

The church Food Pantry and Community Dinner ministries are important outreaches for our neighbors in need. Can you or your group volunteer to make a meal and host a Community Dinner? Please speak with Deb Girdwood or Mike Barragan. Do you want to be a part of giving much needed food support for people in our community through our Raven Box Food Pantry? Speak to Catherine Souza. Currently, Community Dinners are held on the 3rd Sunday of each month from 5-6:15 p.m. in the 1st floor lobby of the church. People are welcome to dine in or take home a prepared meal. With more help, the dinners can expand to more than once a month.

The Food Pantry is open on the 2nd and 4th Saturday of each month from 10-11 a.m. outside on the Green St. side of the church where people can receive a bag of non-perishable groceries.

Opportunities to Serve:

Becoming an active member begins with serving. Among the many ways of serving at First Baptist, consider the following:

- If you love children and feel called to serve them, the Children's Sunday school is looking for teachers and helpers. This is a call, not just to women but to men, as well. Please contact Deb Girdwood or Catherine Souza.
- If you like to see the church clean and fresh, volunteer for the church cleaning crew. It's not heavy lifting or dirty work, just a 2-hour commitment to work alongside someone else to clean the church and make it ready for worship each week. They use a rotating schedule, so it's

not a commitment to work every week. The more help they get, the less often each team is called on to clean.

- If you are interested in community outreach, the Community Dinners are held on the 3rd Sunday of each month (see “Ministries” section above). As word continues to spread, this ministry hopes to grow to an additional Sunday each month. Volunteer to help prepare a meal or two, or just come and spend time with our guests and share the love of Christ. Please contact Mike Barragan or Deb Girdwood.
- Also, for those interested in community outreach, the church Food Pantry is open on the 2nd and 4th Saturday morning of each month to provide a grocery bag of non-perishable food to anyone in need (see “Ministries” section above). See Catherine Souza for more information.

Shepherds’ Report:

Bobby Souza reported that the plumbing and electrical contractors have completed their work in the basement. Bobby and Keith Davio continue to work on getting rooms ready for use. They are aiming to have the inspection for our Certificate of Occupancy before the end of March. Deb Girdwood reported that the Middle School class is expanding to three Sundays per month with Bobby and Rick helping Catherine with teaching duties. Deb also reported that the Christian Ed. Team is looking at a new Sunday School curriculum for next year. Dan Merritt reported that the worship Team is trying out a hanging microphone that will allow congregation requests to be heard over the speakers. Deb and Bobby reported that the Community Dinner and Food Pantry ministries are going strong. Pastor Ryan is working on new member classes and will be putting out the call for new members over the next several weeks.

“God’s Light for Dark Times” **by Rick Pinilla, Pastor Emeritus**

Unless your head is in the sand, you have noticed that we are living in a country that is increasingly divided. It is only a minor exaggeration to say that half the country hates the other half. Now there is a trend noticed by news outlets of families divided and adult children estranged from parents because of voting choices. It is not hard to see how this has happened.

For most of the history of Western Civilization, society, including the United States, was united by a commitment to moral absolutes coming from the Bible. This “covenant view of life” collapsed in the universities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and that collapse hit the streets in the 1960’s. Two things have replaced it. The first is seeing life as self directed instead of being God or truth directed. Now, the highest good is individual self expression in the world, not doing God’s will. I now have values instead of a commitment to moral absolutes. This means my moral commitments derive from the things I value. They have authority for me, as long as I value them. The moral license that has followed was predictable.

The second is seeing ourselves as good people, not because we conform to absolute norms of personal behavior coming from God, but because we adhere to a political and social ideology, including how we vote. This has led to the modern phenomenon of “virtue signaling.” People express opinions in public, or on lawn signs, or bumper stickers, or in snide comments in conversations that display their allegiance to a particular ideology complete with their talking points and favorite targets for insult. Through the medium of social media and news outlets and entertainment they design an echo chamber that enables them to hear only from people who share their ideology and affirm their views. Part of the virtue signaling is hatred

for those who disagree with them. We consider them stupid and evil because they disagree with us and vote like they do. In fact, hatred for those who disagree with us seems to have become expected of us and enforced by social pressure.

Politicians, news outlets, social media, and even comedians have taken advantage of the situation to promote themselves by “rage baiting.” The phrase means content intentionally designed to provoke anger. They know that outrage and insults get clicks, audiences, donations, and votes. The bait is appropriate triggers of anger toward those we disagree with and consider stupid and evil. So the division deepens, with its hatred and increasingly unhinged speech and behavior.

One of the most profound pair of sentences in the Bible states: “Be angry, but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger and do not give the Devil a foothold” (Ephesians 4:26-27). We shouldn’t let the mention of the Devil cause us to stumble. The experience of his influence is universal. How can we explain our temptation or the force of evil which seems so apparent that completely secular people acknowledge it? The Bible just makes the point that this force is personal, powerful, intelligent, and pervasive. Think about the text cited above. Here is the explanation of the myriad outbreaks of hostility and horrific, irrational violence and deep seated animosity bubbling beneath the surface of human society. Think of the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians; or the murderous outbreaks of violence among African tribes in Rwanda, the Congo, or Kenya; or all the seething hostility of divorced couples and divided families in which the anger and bitterness has long ago become the issue, not the ancient incidents that began the split. Each new slight becomes the excuse for the next act of spite as others look on in bewilderment at the sheer irrationality of the hate.

Paul’s point is that anger left to burn is the breeding ground of so much of the hatred and division across the world that so often excuses malice, distorts moral perception, and blights human relationships. These conflicts are the Devil’s favorite tools for sowing hatred and inspiring violence. Anger is the devil’s cocaine. It is not evil in itself, but as James says, “The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” Can anyone wonder at the existence of division and rising hostility in our country?

Anger has become a badge of honor, a virtue. Ambitious or greedy people harness it and inflame it to fuel their ambition and gain a following, and we suck up the cocaine without a thought of the cost to our peace of mind or to our relationships with our neighbors.

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We are asking the question: “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Psalm 11) We have already looked at two fitting replies to this question that fit our topic today. First, we need to remember that as sinners (1 John 1:8), we are part of the problem. We have no standing to judge others, and we must admit that our perceptions will be distorted by our own sin, so righteous indignation is completely excluded for us. Second, we must remember that “the God of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ.” They are not the enemy; they are the beloved objects of God’s love. On the cross, Jesus said, “Forgive them Father, because they do not know what they are doing.” He died to make it so.

This is our way, as well. Paul went on to tell us how to keep the sun from setting on our anger. “Get rid of all bitterness and rage and anger and clamor and slander along with all malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another,

forgiving one another just as God in Christ forgave you." We are to replace the anger which we cannot help with kindness and compassion for those lost and groping for truth. We are to forgive their insults, hatred, and malice just as Jesus forgave the Romans and the religious leaders who crucified him and the crowds who called for his execution and all of us when we were still sinners when the love of God sent Jesus to the cross. We must give up the Devil's cocaine and replace it with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, just like Erika Kirk, who publicly forgave her husband's executioner because of the love of Jesus.

The *Cross & Spire* is published and sent out during the last week of each month. Copies are also available in the church lobby. All articles, announcements, and updates are due in the church office no later than one week prior to publication.