

# JAKE BURRIS SERMON ON PLACING MEMBERSHIP:

**Is "Placing Membership"**  
**Biblical?**



## **A Deeper Look At Placing Membership**

June 11, 2023

In this lesson... I want to address a topic that is not taught on as often within the Lord's church as I believe it could and should be... But... Is one that I believe we would all benefit from by considering it more in-depth.

The topic I am referring to is what some brethren call "placing membership." After a Christian or a Christian family begins attending Bible class and worship services at a congregation for a few weeks in a row... Perhaps...

You have heard a preacher or elder of that congregation get up and announce before the congregation that this Christian or Christian family has decided to "place membership" at this congregation.

If you have observed this before... It has likely caused you to ask yourself or others questions about it. For instance... You may have asked,

"Why did that Christian or Christian family have it announced that they were placing their membership here at this congregation? Aren't they already members of the Lord's church? Is 'placing membership' Biblical?

If it is Biblical, what is the purpose for doing it?" Furthermore... You may have asked, "Must I 'place membership' at the local congregation I attend?"

These are all great questions... And this is why I have put this lesson together... To address some of these important questions.

I want to begin by saying that this topic and practice is Biblical... It is Biblical in pattern, principle, and practicality... And I want to show this to be true by discussing various passages and truths taught in the Bible.

Some Christians argue that since the phrase "placing membership" is not found in the Scriptures... It is not Biblical... But...

While it is true that you will not find this phrase in the Bible... The concept and pattern certainly are found taught in it... And therefore... It is Biblical. The Bible teaches many things in principle... And this practice is one of them.

Sadly... Some Christians get so upset over the use of the phrase "placing membership" that they end up rejecting the Biblical concept and pattern of it! Some Christians do not like the phrase "placing membership" because...

To them... It sounds denominational. Listen... If you do not like the phrase “placing membership” for this practice... You do not have to call it that.

You can call this practice multiple things... Such as “identifying with a local congregation” ... Or... “placing yourself under the oversight of a local congregation’s eldership” ... But... Here is the crux of the matter...

The Bible reveals that every Christian has a responsibility to be an active member of a local body. Sadly... Some Christians get upset with this teaching... And try to argue that... Since they are members of the Lord’s universal church...

They do not have to identify with a local congregation... And thus... They argue that they are simply “members-at-large.” In this lesson... I will show from the Bible that choosing to be a “member-at-large” ...

Wherein a Christian continually floats around to various congregations... Instead of identifying with a local congregation... Is not something a Christian can do and be pleasing to God. In preparation to preach this lesson...

I listened to two sermons and read through some helpful Bible articles on this topic from various brothers in Christ... And have used many thoughts and points from them in this lesson. Let us now move into the main discussion of this lesson.

For the remainder of this lesson... I have three main sections. In the first main section... I believe it will be beneficial to discuss and review that there is a difference between the universal and local church.

In fact... We must understand this distinction in order to properly understand the topic of placing membership. Whereas the universal church is the collective body of Christians worldwide who make up Christ’s one church...

The local church is a group of Christians that assemble in a specific location to accomplish the work of God. The Bible reveals that there is only one universal church that Jesus built (**Ephesians 4:4**) ... But...

There are thousands of local congregations worldwide that make up that one universal church. Let us now consider some passages that speak about the universal church. In **Matthew 16:18**... Jesus said,

“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” This is an obvious reference to the universal church. If Jesus was speaking of the local church there...

Then all Christians would have to be members at that one geographical location. Next... Listen to **Ephesians 5:25**. That verse says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her.”

If Paul was teaching that Jesus only died for the local church in that verse... Then only that one particular congregation would be saved... But... Again... This is a reference to the universal church. For every Christian listening to this lesson...

When you and I obeyed the Gospel... Christ added us to His one universal church. **Acts 2:47** says, “praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

Many Christians have wondered, “Can I simply be a member of Christ’s universal church and never identify with a local body?” The Biblical answer to that question is “no” ... And I will continue to discuss why as I move through this lesson.

In the second main section of this lesson... I will read and discuss various passages that show us the pattern of Christians in the first century identifying with a local congregation... But... Before we move into it...

I want to share three important facts concerning the local church that we must understand. First off... We must understand that God has authorized the local church. Again...

The local church is a group of Christians that assemble in a specific location to accomplish the work of God. In **1 Corinthians 1:2**... Paul wrote, “to the church of God which is at Corinth.” He wrote to a local congregation.

In **Revelation 1:4**... John specified that he was writing “to the seven churches which are in Asia.” **Revelation 1:11** reveals that these local churches included Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Next... And second... We must understand that each local congregation is composed of various members. In **1 Corinthians**... Paul mentioned several Christians who identified with the church in Corinth. For instance...

He mentioned “Chloe’s household” in **1 Corinthians 1:11**... Crispus and Gaius in **1 Corinthians 1:14**... And “the household of Stephanas” in **1 Corinthians 1:16**.

All of these Christians lived in Corinth... And were affiliated with the local congregation there.

The third fact is that God's word instructs each local congregation of the Lord's church to seek out qualified men to become elders who will feed and oversee the local church (**1 Timothy 3:1-7**; **Titus 1:5-9**). In **Acts 20:17**...

We read this about Paul... "From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church." Paul called for the elders who oversaw the local church at Ephesus. In **Acts 20:28-31**... Paul gave those elders these instructions...

"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this,

that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears."

These verses make it clear that Paul was giving these elders in Ephesus specific instructions to watch over and protect the local church in Ephesus.

Regarding those elders... The phrase "among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" in **verse 28** shows that their authority and responsibility to shepherd was limited to the local "flock" or "church" in Ephesus.

Paul then warned that savage wolves would come in to harm the local church at Ephesus... But... Not only that... He warned that even some brethren within the local church at Ephesus would rise up and teach false doctrine...

Which would also cause spiritual harm to that flock. Lastly for this first main section... Some other important distinctions between the universal and local church are that... Unlike local churches... The universal church has no assembly.

In fact... The universal church cannot assemble together because it is impossible for all Christians worldwide to be physically assembled together in one place. The universal church also does not have a treasury...

Nor a governing body of men overseeing it. In other words... There is no Scriptural authority for a "brotherhood eldership" overseeing the universal church. Let us now move into the second main section of this lesson.

In this main section... I will read and discuss some passages that show us the Biblical pattern of Christians identifying with a local congregation.

As Jesus gave instructions concerning church discipline... In **Matthew 18:15-17**... He said, “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.” When a Christian fails to motivate repentance in a fellow brother or sister who has sinned on two separate occasions...

They must take it before the church. Well... In what sense was Jesus referring to the church in this passage? This is an obvious reference to the local church.

A Christian must take this information before the brethren who make up the same local congregation as the delinquent brother or sister. In fact... It is impossible for a Christian to inform the universal church of a delinquent brother or sister.

Next... Consider with me **Acts 9:23-27**... And what it says about Paul after he became a Christian. Those verses say, “Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. But their plot became known to Saul.

And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket. And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.” In **verse 26**... We read that Paul “tried to join the disciples” in Jerusalem. Well... What does this mean?

Was Paul trying to join the Lord’s universal body? No... Of course not... Because he was already added to the Lord’s universal church when he obeyed the Gospel.

He was already a Christian... Even though some brethren in Jerusalem initially questioned the legitimacy of his conversion. Thankfully... Though... Barnabas vouched for the legitimacy of Paul’s conversion before the apostles.

Paul was trying to “identify” or “join in” on the fellowship and the Lord’s work with the local church in Jerusalem. Paul always wanted to be involved in the local work of all the churches he attended over the years. Next up...

**Acts 11:26** says, “And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”

This text describes the local church in Antioch... And reveals that Paul and Barnabas assembled with that local congregation for a year. Next up...

**Acts 14:23** says, “So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

During Paul’s journeys... Elders were ordained in every church.

Since no elders are overseeing the universal church... This verse makes reference to every local church. Next... I want you to pay close attention to **Romans 16:1**.

As he wrote to the local church in Rome... Paul said,

“I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea.”

It is of note that Paul referred to her as “a servant of the church in Cenchrea.” This sister was not from Rome. She would be visiting Rome... But...

Her home congregation was in Cenchrea... Which was southeast of Corinth. In

**Romans 16:2**... Paul told the brethren in Rome to receive her and assist her in her labors because she was a faithful member at Cenchrea.

With Paul’s description of Phoebe being “a servant of the church in Cenchrea” ... Consider these two questions...

Is one a servant of a local church when they simply visit that church? No. Is one a servant of a local church when they do not work with the brethren of that local church? No. If a Christian does not identify with a local church...

They cannot accurately be called a servant of that local church. The next passage I want us to consider is **1 Corinthians 14:23**. While discussing speaking in tongues... Paul discussed the local church meeting in Corinth.

In that verse... He made this statement: “Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place.” “The whole church” is not referring to the universal body because the universal body cannot assemble together.

Any reference to an assembly must be a reference to the local body. This verse pairs well with **Hebrews 10:25**... Which commands us not to “forsake the assembling of ourselves together.”

Since the universal church never assembles together... This command only makes sense when we understand it as a command not to forsake assembling with the brethren of the local congregation we are a member of.

I now want us to consider how the role of elders helps show the necessity of Christians identifying with a local congregation. **Hebrews 13:17** talks about elders... And says, “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive,

for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”

The Bible teaches that elders rule over and will have to give an account to God for every member of the local church they oversee. However... They will not have to give an account for every visitor who walks through the door.

If this congregation had elders... And a Christian who is not from this area was to be in town visiting for work or a vacation... And attended Bible class and worshiped here one Sunday... The elders here would not be his or her elders.

The elders here also would not be responsible for this visitor’s soul. Instead... The Bible teaches that elders have a responsibility to watch out for those Christians who are part of the flock that is “among them” ... As **1 Peter 5:2** teaches.

With that said about elders... We must be reminded that all of us are personally responsible for getting and staying prepared for Judgment Day. **Romans 14:12** plainly says, “So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.”

I now want to read **1 Peter 5:1-4**. Those verses say, “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed:

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;

and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.” This passage reveals that elders are to shepherd the Christians who make up the local flock they oversee...

And only that local church. They are not to feed and shepherd any other local church besides the one they were appointed to oversee. Since the eldership is responsible for shepherding the local flock that they oversee...



They must know every single Christian that makes up their flock. The question that remains is, “How does an eldership determine who is part of their local flock” ... And that is where the practice of “placing membership” comes in.

Whatever you want to label it as... There must come a time when all Christians let the elders of a congregation know that they want to be identified as a member here... And work alongside the brethren here.

Placing membership helps elders to identify whose souls they must watch out for. Furthermore... It helps them know whom they can depend on to help in the Lord’s work in that area. Since this is a duty of every Christian...

Some might be wondering how they go about placing membership at their local congregation. Some might be wondering, “Do I have to come before the church and have an announcement made about my desire to place my membership here?”

While that is one way in which it could be done... The Bible does not specify some exact formula that a Christian must follow to place membership. However... What needs to be done is for the elders... Or... In the absence of elders...

The leading men of a congregation to be made aware of your desire to place your membership there... And then... As long as you are faithful to the Lord... The brethren of that congregation must accept you as a member there.

As long as you are “walking in the light” as a faithful Christian and do not have any sins that you have not taken care of with God...

The brethren have no option but to accept you as a member of the local congregation. You do not need to be voted in to become a member... As some denominations do for their members... Rather...

As long as you are a faithful member of Christ’s universal church... You can place your membership at any faithful local congregation that you desire to work with.

When placing your membership at a local congregation... It is wise to have an elder or preacher get up and make a statement on your behalf that you have “placed your membership” with that local congregation...

So that no other member there is left wondering whether you are one there or not. Listen... When you place membership somewhere... You are not becoming a member of the universal church... Because you already are one...

You are already a Christian... Instead... You are simply identifying the local congregation wherein your membership will reside. When a sinner is baptized...

He or she becomes a member of the Lord's universal church. The Lord then expects him or her to become a member somewhere... That is... Locally.

Of course... On the same day that a sinner obeys the Gospel... They could make it known to the local congregation that they desire to be a member there and labor with the brethren there. One last thing before moving into the next main section...

The error of trying to merely be a "member-at-large" is different than moving to a new area... And... For a limited time...

Visiting different congregations to locate one that is sound... And that would make you confident in placing your membership there. There is nothing wrong with that! Let us now move into the third and final main section. In this main section...

I will share a helpful list that brother Don Blackwell put together of six realities of not placing membership at a local congregation. The first reality on the list is this... Such Christians are not under an eldership.

They do not have experienced Christian men who meet God's qualifications watching for their souls. Second... They make it difficult to know if they are faithful in attendance. If such Christians are not here this week...

The brethren here will be left wondering if they are attending another congregation. Third... They do not become active in the local congregation as they should. They do not become teachers, deacons, or elders... I mean...

How could they if they are not members here? How could the brethren at a local congregation depend on them to serve if they do not know whether they will be here for Bible class and services or not? Fourth...

They do not encourage the other brethren as they should. They likely do not know what is going on in the lives of other brethren in the local congregation... And if they do... It will likely just be in a very limited sense!

They do not know if the brethren at the local congregation have been faithful in attendance themselves... Because it is hard to keep up with those things if you are just a "floater Christian." Fifth...

No congregation can count on their financial support for the work of that congregation. The eldership of a local congregation must rely on the financial support of the members of that local congregation so that they can say,

“This congregation can support this or that work” ... And, “We plan to support this or that work.” Sometimes... When Christians are “floaters” ... They will not even give a contribution to a local church... But... Instead...

Will only give their contribution to a certain work in the church... Perhaps to a missionary only. Did you know that this is not Scriptural? This is not the Lord’s plan... To only give towards certain works in the church...

Without giving to a local congregation. In **Acts 11:30**... The New Testament example is that the money was collected... And it was taken to the elders for them to make the decision of how it would be used.

I cannot just bypass the local congregation with reference to my giving! Sixth and lastly... Just imagine if everyone did it... If every Christian practiced being a “floater Christian” ... Or... A “Christian-at-large.” If it was Scriptural...

Then every Christian could do it. Imagine if every Christian just floated from one congregation to another... Never placing membership... Never identifying... Never committing themselves to one congregation.

If you are a Christian man... How would you like to be an elder with this taking place... Where you would never be able to pinpoint exactly who you would have to give an account for on Judgment Day as an elder?

Brethren... With such a setup... I would never want to be an elder... Because I would always be afraid of having to give an answer for Christians that I did not even know I would have to give an answer for!

But... Thankfully... This is not the setup we find in the New Testament! One major reason why some Christians do not like identifying with a local congregation is that they do not like accountability and responsibility.

They like not having brethren check on them when they are absent. They like not having duties assigned to them by the elders or brethren at the local congregation.

Sadly... Being a “Christian-at-large” is a way of distancing oneself from the work of the local church. As I conclude... If we will not tolerate a “brotherhood eldership” ... Or... An “at-large-eldership” ...

Then why would we tolerate Christians having an “at-large-membership?” A faithful Christian must be not only a part of the universal church... But... Also... An active member of a local body.

If God did not intend for His people to be a closely bonded Christian family... Then why did He organize the local body the way He did?

Why did He reveal that we must work towards and maintain a faithful local eldership in each local church? So... That is the lesson... Brethren. I am sure that I have given you a lot to think about concerning this topic.

If you have questions about this topic... Or... Would like for me to share some of the resources I studied to prepare to preach this lesson... Feel free to let me know!

If you are listening to this lesson... And are not a New Testament Christian... To be saved... You must obey the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Here is how you do that... To get saved... All sinners must: Hear the Gospel (**Romans 10:17**) ...

Believe the Gospel message that Jesus Christ is the Divine Son of God who died, was buried, and rose again on the third day... Thus...

Defeating death (**John 8:24**) ... Repent of their sins (**Luke 13:3**) ... Confess their faith in Jesus Christ as the Divine Son of God before others (**Romans 10:9, 10**) ...

And they must be baptized (immersed) in water for the forgiveness of their sins (**Acts 2:38**; **Acts 22:16**). After becoming a Christian... That is...

A member of the one church of Christ... To go to Heaven... We all must remain faithful to God until death... As **Revelation 2:10** teaches!

If you are not right with God currently... Please choose to get right with Him today! If you have a need... Please come forward and make it known... As together... We stand and sing the invitation song.

## **A Deeper Look At Placing Membership Handout**

**The crux of the matter**... The Bible reveals that every Christian has a responsibility to be an active member of a local body.

**Main Section 1**: Differences between the universal and local church.

Ephesians 4:4; Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 5:25; Acts 2:47.

Three facts concerning the local church:

1) God has authorized the local church.

1 Corinthians 1:2; Revelation 1:4, 11.

2) Each local congregation is composed of various members.

1 Corinthians 1:11, 14, 16.

3) God's word instructs each local congregation of the Lord's church to seek out qualified men to become elders who will feed and oversee the local church.

1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; Acts 20:17, 28-31.

**Main Section 2**: Passages that show the Biblical pattern of Christians identifying with a local congregation.

Matthew 18:15-17; Acts 9:23-27; Acts 11:26; Acts 14:23; Romans 16:1, 2; 1 Corinthians 14:23; Hebrews 10:25; Hebrews 13:17; Romans 14:12; 1 Peter 5:1-4.

**Main Section 3**: Six realities of not placing membership at a local congregation.

1) Such Christians are not under an eldership.

2) They make it difficult to know if they are faithful in attendance.

3) They do not become active in the local congregation as they should.

4) They do not encourage the other brethren as they should.

5) No congregation can count on their financial support for the work of that congregation (Acts 11:30).

6) Just imagine if everyone did it! If it was Scriptural... Then every Christian could do it.

