

Church Membership

Intro: God has a plan to reach the world for Christ through local churches of gifted Christians bonding together, using their spiritual gifts to build up and equip the saints in order to reach out to the lost world with the gospel. We can contextualize this plan to each original setting, but we cannot compromise this plan at all.

Is church membership Biblical and is it beneficial? As we say here in Minnesota, “You betcha!”

God’s plan is to bring the Gospel to the world through local churches. The Bible refers to both the universal church and local church with the word *ekklesia*; however, *ekklesia* is predominately used to refer to the local church – the church at Corinth, the church at Ephesus, the church at Harvest Fellowship. Today, many Christians have been influenced by Western individualism where they don’t see themselves as a part of a local family; they mainly focus on their loose affiliation with the universal church. So, they hop from church to church, sometimes even staying at home and having “church” in the backyard. This western idea would be completely foreign to the 1st century church and to the apostles, and to Jesus. In the early church you got saved and baptized into a local church, which helped you grow up as a believer. Another western view is that of autonomy – I don’t need anyone, and I don’t want anyone having authority over me. I want to be my own boss; I want to be God - this influence originally came from the garden by a snake. Westernism in many ways has subverted the plan of God. God has a plan to reach the world for Christ through local churches of gifted Christians bonding together, using their spiritual gifts to build up and equip the saints in order to reach out to the lost world with the gospel. 1 Co 12:27 says, “Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it.” See, church membership is Biblical.

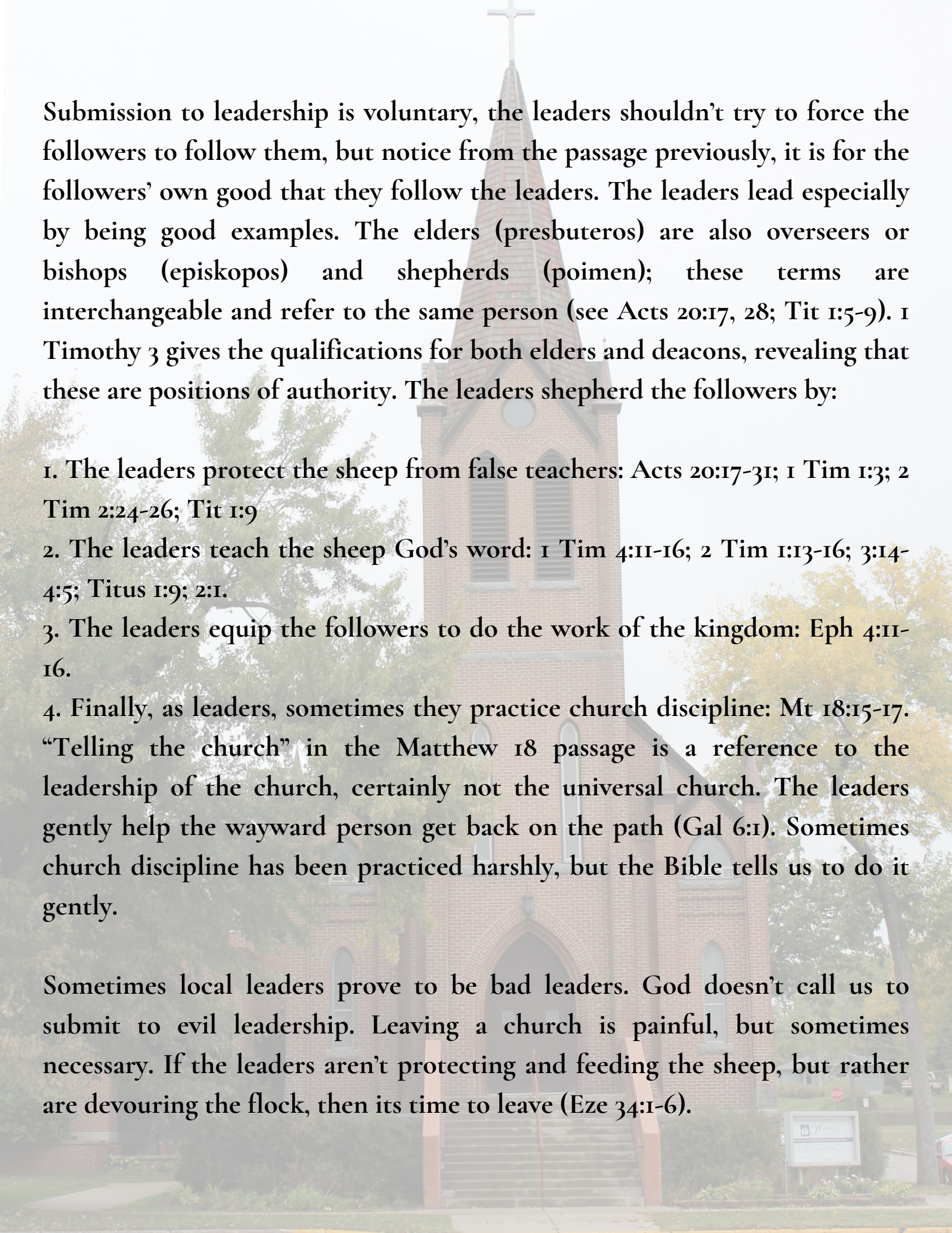
What is church membership? Church membership is when individual Christians covenant with a local church, a local body of believers. What is a covenant? A covenant is a binding, relational agreement between two parties, in this case, the individual believer and the body of believers in a local church. We commit to each other as a family. In many ways, we surrender our autonomy. A covenant is not a club. We don't shop around to find out which church will best meet my needs and if it stops fulfilling me, I just move on. God calls each of us to a local representation of His body – the church is the body of Christ.

Church membership is in the Bible:

A. We submit to the leadership of the local church: Heb 13:7 and 17 states: Remember your leaders who have spoken God's word to you.... Obey your leaders and submit to them, since they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

If you are not a part of a local church, how could this verse work? In the NT, all baptized believers were members of local churches, submitting to the local leadership. What leaders is he referring to? Elders and deacons (Phi 1:1; 2 Tim 1; Tit 1). 1 Pe 5:1-3 tells us how they lead:

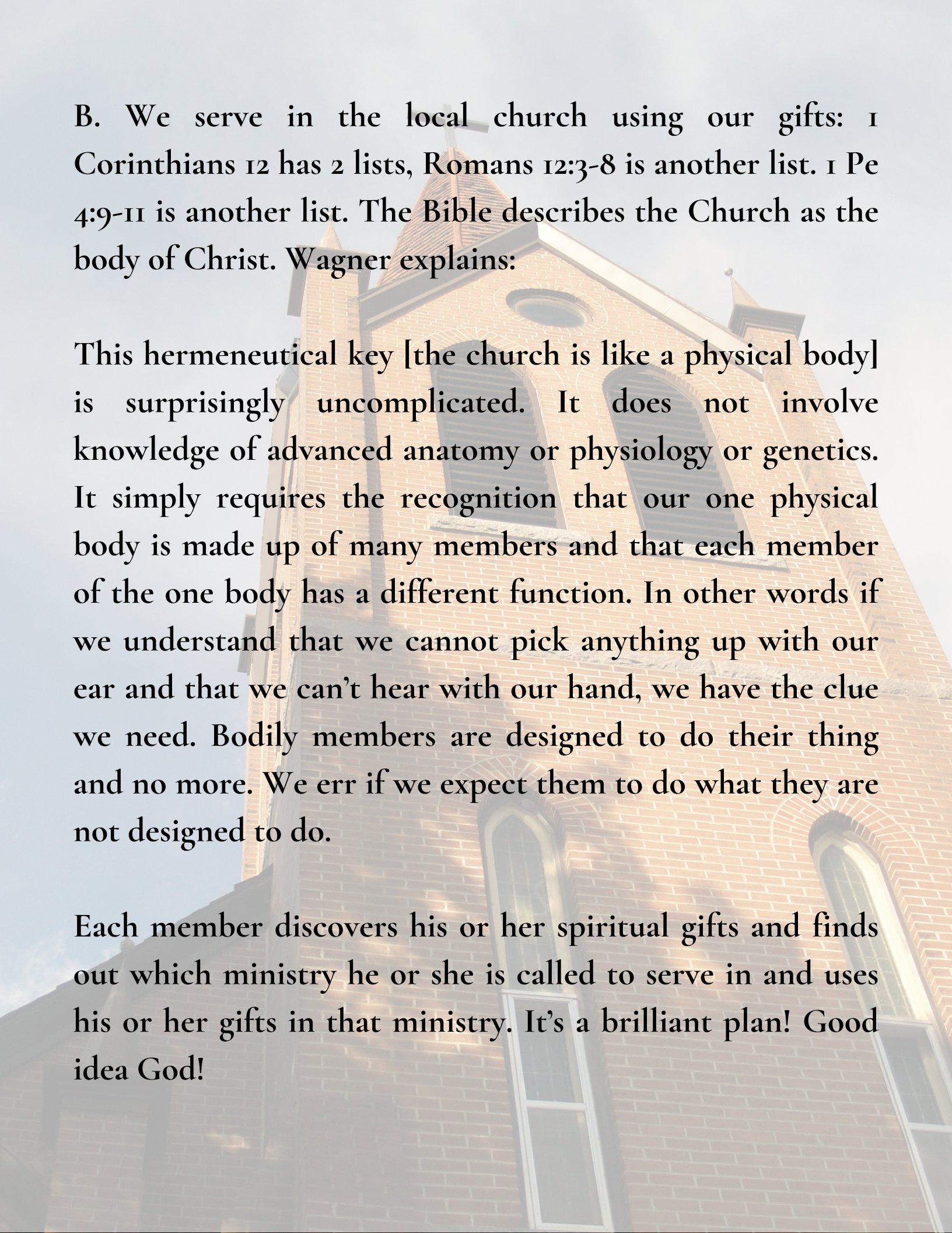
I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder and witness to the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory about to be revealed: Shepherd God's flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but willingly, as God would have you; not out of greed for money but eagerly; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.



Submission to leadership is voluntary, the leaders shouldn't try to force the followers to follow them, but notice from the passage previously, it is for the followers' own good that they follow the leaders. The leaders lead especially by being good examples. The elders (presbuteros) are also overseers or bishops (episkopos) and shepherds (poimen); these terms are interchangeable and refer to the same person (see Acts 20:17, 28; Tit 1:5-9). 1 Timothy 3 gives the qualifications for both elders and deacons, revealing that these are positions of authority. The leaders shepherd the followers by:

1. The leaders protect the sheep from false teachers: Acts 20:17-31; 1 Tim 1:3; 2 Tim 2:24-26; Tit 1:9
2. The leaders teach the sheep God's word: 1 Tim 4:11-16; 2 Tim 1:13-16; 3:14-4:5; Titus 1:9; 2:1.
3. The leaders equip the followers to do the work of the kingdom: Eph 4:11-16.
4. Finally, as leaders, sometimes they practice church discipline: Mt 18:15-17. "Telling the church" in the Matthew 18 passage is a reference to the leadership of the church, certainly not the universal church. The leaders gently help the wayward person get back on the path (Gal 6:1). Sometimes church discipline has been practiced harshly, but the Bible tells us to do it gently.

Sometimes local leaders prove to be bad leaders. God doesn't call us to submit to evil leadership. Leaving a church is painful, but sometimes necessary. If the leaders aren't protecting and feeding the sheep, but rather are devouring the flock, then its time to leave (Eze 34:1-6).



B. We serve in the local church using our gifts: 1 Corinthians 12 has 2 lists, Romans 12:3-8 is another list. 1 Peter 4:9-11 is another list. The Bible describes the Church as the body of Christ. Wagner explains:

This hermeneutical key [the church is like a physical body] is surprisingly uncomplicated. It does not involve knowledge of advanced anatomy or physiology or genetics. It simply requires the recognition that our one physical body is made up of many members and that each member of the one body has a different function. In other words if we understand that we cannot pick anything up with our ear and that we can't hear with our hand, we have the clue we need. Bodily members are designed to do their thing and no more. We err if we expect them to do what they are not designed to do.

Each member discovers his or her spiritual gifts and finds out which ministry he or she is called to serve in and uses his or her gifts in that ministry. It's a brilliant plan! Good idea God!

C. We attend the local church regularly: Back to that Western tendency to be autonomous, many either don't go to church at all or casually attend when they feel like it. God calls us to regularly attend church. In Hebrews 10:23-25 he reveals the importance of regularly getting involved in church:

Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, since he who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.

How do we hold to confession of our hope and provoke love and good works with one another? By not neglecting to regularly gather together for church. The word for gathering together is *episunagoge*, which refers to gathering together for worship; you can hear the word "synagogue" in it. The passage tells us to increase our attendance or at least be more serious about regularly gathering together for worship in the local church we are members of, especially when we see the Day of the Lord coming soon. We need each other. There is no such thing as Lone Ranger Christians. Acts 20:20 as well as 2:46; 5:12, 42 tells us the normal practice of the local church members was to gather Sunday morning (Sabbath practice switched from Saturday to Sunday according to Acts 20:7; Jn 20:19, 26; Rev 1:10; 1 Co 16:2; Didache 14:1) in the large group setting, and from house to house during the week. Going to church is a blessing to the individual and to the church; we need each other.

D. We support the local church financially and prayerfully: 1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:6-9; Acts 4:35-37; Malachi 3:7-12; Colossians 4:2-6 are passages that reveal the importance of giving and praying for one another in a local church setting.

The benefit of church membership is that each individual Christian will benefit from all the other Christians who use their gifts to build up the church and reach out to the lost and dying world in so desperate need of Jesus. Sometimes we bump into each other, upset each other, and even hurt each other. No one is perfect yet. I always tell people who are looking for the perfect church, "Don't join it because you will ruin it." We are all in process, wounded and imperfect. But Jesus is using us to bring Him glory and advance His kingdom. Jesus knows what He is doing. Will you consider covenanting with us at Harvest Fellowship? If you are a born-again believer, you can join us in our mission to help people follow Jesus and share Him with others. Becoming a member is simple. First, read our covenant and statement of beliefs. If you agree and want to join our family, schedule to meet with an elder. He will go through the covenant briefly, ask you to share your story of how you became a Christian, and then you will both sign the covenant if you feel comfortable. It's that easy! We don't make you jump through a bunch of hoops to become a member. After you sign the covenant, we will schedule a Sunday to bring you up to the front of the church so the family can celebrate the new members of the family. We take this seriously and joyously, because we want to take care of the sheep God has entrusted us with. At Harvest Fellowship we want to help people follow Jesus and share Him with others!