

## An interview with Jeremy Kimble, Author of *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*



**Does church membership mean more than simply joining a social group? Does the church have a responsibility to discipline its members — and if so, what does that look like? In *40 Questions about Church Membership and Church* (Kregel Academic/May 27, 2017), Dr. Jeremy Kimble recognizes and addresses the many puzzling questions about the critical role of the church in the life of believers.**

**Q: How did you come to write a book on church membership and discipline?**

There has been a resurgence of discussion about membership and discipline in recent years due to the ministries of people such as Mark Dever, but there is certainly more to be said. Because of this, the topic intrigued me, so I decided to write my doctoral dissertation on the subject.

After completing my degree, teaching in a Christian university setting and serving as an elder in my local church, the ideas of membership and discipline continued to make their mark on my thinking. I realized that if we want to persevere in our faith and progressively grow as disciples, church membership and discipline would be key factors in that growth. I am passionate about educating church leaders, members, and seminary students about this important subject, which is why I wrote *40 Questions About Church Membership and Discipline*.

**Q: What is the most important thing for readers to understand about church membership?**

Church membership is not solely about what you can get out of a church. Instead, membership points us toward commitment and mutual accountability. When we join the membership of a local church, we are agreeing to be overseen in our discipleship and oversee others in their discipleship. As such, the idea of membership goes beyond mere attendance and even ministry involvement. At its heart, church membership is about a group of people committed to one another, who will continually oversee and exhort one another toward ever-increasing godliness.

**Q: What are some of the biggest challenges the church as an institution faces today, both from the inside and the outside?**

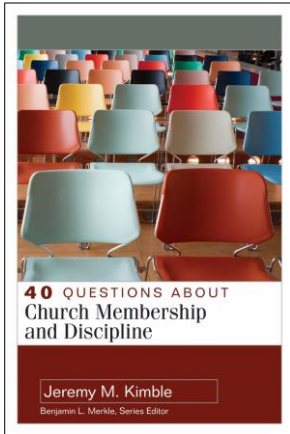
Internally, there could be any number of challenges, but I think one major issue the church must face is the inherent individualism that exists in our churches. We do not often have a culture of authenticity and openness in our local churches. Instead, we look the part, fulfill our church duties and attend what we need to, but we never get beyond the surface. A real need exists to get past all of that, and as members, commit to loving, teaching, rebuking and encouraging one another. This involves people who are open and transparent enough to share their lives with others. In this way, we can show love and pursue holiness as a community.

Externally, we see increasing pressure to conform to the standards of the world, especially in certain areas (e.g., sexuality, gender, materialism, etc.). It seems in the West that if we continue to pursue faithfulness to God's Word, the disparity between the church and the world will become more evident. Churches will likely have some difficult choices to make in the years ahead, as ostracization seems inevitable. However, this challenge is also a great opportunity for the church to display the love and holiness of God in very manifest ways.

**Q: Why is it important to be a member of a local church? Isn't being a Christian enough?**

Being a Christian is certainly the key starting point, but joining a church in membership is also crucial for a few reasons. First, church leaders are told to keep watch over their flock (1 Peter 5:1-4) and that they will have to give an account for the people they oversee (Hebrews 13:17). If this is the case, pastors must know who they are overseeing, and church membership makes clear whom they are to oversee. Second, we are told to exhort one another day after day so we are not hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:12-13). Of course, I can do this for any Christian, but it makes the most sense to do this for a particular group of people to whom I am committed. Finally, modern-day church membership adheres to the overall pattern seen in Scripture. Israel, though not the church, was a distinct nation with its own "membership" that was distinct from other peoples. The New Testament church speaks typically of local churches made up of

certain people who are committed to one another, exercising a certain kind of authority, fulfilling “one another” commands.



**Q: What qualifications of church membership are universal across denominational or doctrinal lines?**

While there will be differences of opinion regarding baptism and the timing of granting someone membership status in a church, denominations would generally agree full members of their church be people who are regenerate. If a church is its membership (i.e. the church is not a building, but a people), then this is especially important. There would also be widespread agreement that particular responsibilities are inherent to church membership. Pastors do want to see passive consumers in their churches. There is founded expectation members will be involved in the work of the church and the lives of other members.

**Q: What responsibilities does each member have to one another and their local church?**

There is great responsibility inherent in church membership. We are responsible to submit to elected leadership, all the while knowing God has granted the keys of the kingdom to the entire membership (Matthew 16:19), thus striking a balance in authority. We must be proactive as members in working for others in their progress and joy in the faith (Philippians 1:25). The entire body of believers must exercise their spiritual gifts for the good of others (Romans 12:3-8) and regularly attend the gatherings of the church (Hebrews 10:24-25) so as to edify others and be edified themselves. One could name off other responsibilities as well, noting members should be good listeners to sermons, biblical theologians and devoted to pray for one another. Finally, one must confront unrepentant sin in the lives of their fellow members, in the hopes they heed that rebuke and repent.

**Q: What is church discipline, and why is it necessary for the church to function properly?**

Church discipline is divine authority delegated to the church by Jesus Christ to maintain order through the correction of persistently sinning church members for the good of those caught in sin, the purity of the church and the glory of God. Discipline is a practice that should occur regularly within the church, and it is intended to keep God's people on the path of perseverance and to exhort the one under discipline to repent. This can be thought of in both formative and corrective terms, the former referring to typical church life and practices intended to help all Christians grow in their faith (e.g., preaching, teaching, counseling, small groups, etc.), the latter referring to specific correction meted out to those involved in ongoing, unrepentant sin. Discipline is necessary and vital for the health of the church because it reminds us what we are doing as members, namely, pursuing growth in love and holiness.

**Q: Explain what you mean when you write, “As counterintuitive as it sounds, discipline is a proper demonstration of the biblical concept of love.”**

Love is not mere tolerance. Love is the overflow of joy in God that gladly meets the needs of others (2 Corinthians 8:1-15), the biggest need being conformity to the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:28-29). To that end, God disciplines those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:6-11), and thus a church who claims to love its members without disciplining them contradicts Scripture and offers a different kind of love than God does. Church discipline can potentially be a painful process, but as a spiritual family we are called to work through such matters faithfully and gently. As such, not only are we called to go through this process in a loving manner, the very act of discipline should be seen as an act of love.

**Q: Many people may argue excommunication, the final step of church discipline, is harsh, but why it is sometimes necessary? How is excommunication often misunderstood?**

When people think of church discipline in general, they often just think of excommunication, which they understand as “kicking people out of the church.” What fails to be understood is typically churches follow a process from Matthew 18:15-20 before excommunication ever happens. There we are told we should confront the individual multiple times, long before excommunication is considered, with the hope they will repent of their sin. If repentance never happens after this process, with grief and sorrow the church must obey the teachings of Jesus and remove this person from membership. However, this is to be done in love and with the hope the person under discipline will repent and be restored. Thus, it is not merely “kicking

someone out." If excommunication does occur, people should fervently pray and take opportunities to encourage the person toward repentance since restoration is the real goal.

**Q: How are church membership, discipline and discipleship all interrelated?**

Church membership is the front door of church life, and discipline (especially excommunication) is the back door. When one comes into the front door of membership they are ushered into a community that fellowships around the truths of the gospel. They are committed to one another, encouraging each other to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. We seek to imitate God, walking in love (Ephesians 5:1–2), and we aim to be holy because God is holy (1 Peter 1:15–16). All that is described here could also be deemed discipleship, as we continue in community to learn from Jesus to live like Jesus. Discipline comes into play because at times we are not in step with what Jesus is calling us to do, pursuing sin instead. When this occurs, sin must be confronted with the hopes that the rebuke is heard and the pursuit of faithful discipleship is taken up with renewed vigor.

**Learn more about *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline* and the other books in the *40 Questions* series at [www.kregel.com](http://www.kregel.com).**