

Membership Matters . . .

As a non-believer in my early teens, I knew nothing about church. My family did not attend church, nor did I have any desire to do so. When God graciously saved me, though, He placed in my life a believer who quickly encouraged me to “join” the church. I did not yet understand the importance of the local church, but I did know that I wanted to do whatever God expected of me. If He required me to join a church, I was ready to be obedient. Only later did I realize *just how important* membership in a local church is.

What Does the Bible Say about Membership?

To argue that the Bible clearly teaches local church membership would be difficult indeed. No text indicates that believers officially “joined” a congregation. On the other hand, numerous texts imply that local churches at least knew who was a part of their congregation. For example:

- Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:1, 9-13 – these and other passages concerning church discipline indicate that the church held members accountable and could exclude them; if so, they must have known officially who had been *included*.
- Acts 6:1-6 – a particular group of followers chose from among themselves those who would minister to neglected widows.
- 1 Tim 3:5; Heb 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2 -- the pastoral oversight noted in these passages assumes that shepherds knew who belonged in their flock.
- 1 Tim 5:3ff – the church apparently kept a list of widows under their care.
- Heb 10:19-25 – those who were in the church were to encourage each other to be faithful; thus, they must have known who others in the church were.

At a time when church “shoppers” often attend a church for a long time without

Lawless

joining, we must re-emphasize these texts.¹ Even if the Bible does not expressly mandate church membership, the weighty evidence in that direction suggests that we must not take membership lightly.

Why Does Membership Matter?

Given that the values of church membership are too numerous to be covered in this brief article, I will address five of them. First, *church membership is our public commitment to serve with a specific group of believers*. God places members in His body as He wishes (1 Cor 12:18), mandating that we fulfill our calling and responsibilities within that local body. We thus agree through membership to use our God-given gifts alongside others who have joined the same body. This body is so connected that what happens to one member affects all other members (1 Cor 12:26). By joining a local church, we affirm that we intend to relate to other believers with this level of intimacy and responsibility.

Second, *church membership is our vow to be part of God's family in a local area*. The picture of the church as a family is implied in several places in the New Testament (e.g., 2 Cor 6:18; Eph 3:14; 1 Tim 5:1-2). As a family of God, believers are to love, support, challenge, and encourage one another. This family is to be consistent and stable, even as our families of origin are often falling apart. Brothers and sisters in Christ are sometimes closer to us than those related to us by blood. In fact, our love for one another in God's family identifies us as followers of Christ (John 13:34-35). Through church membership, we officially commit ourselves to this family.

Third, *church membership is our agreement to be accountable for our Christian growth*. Hebrews 10:19-25, noted above, mandates that believers spur each other toward

Lawless

love and good deeds. Disciplinary passages in the New Testament (e.g., Matt 18:15-17) show that the church must hold members accountable to this righteous living. Indeed, it is through loving confrontation from other believers that we may be restored when “caught in wrongdoing” (Gal 6:1). Uniting with a church is an official step to give permission for other church members to confront us when needed—so that we might more fully experience the joy of obedience.

Fourth, *church membership is our pledge to get directly involved in God’s work.* Many church attenders have made a habit of simply sitting in a church service, listening to a sermon, and then quickly departing for lunch. These attenders are, in the words of Mark Dever, more “pampered consumers” than faithful church members.² When we join a church, however, we no longer have permission to sit, listen, and leave. The church helps us to identify our gifts and then calls us to serve, and we must then serve. Church membership allows nothing less.

Fifth, *church membership is our official commitment to the work of the Great Commission.* Five times in the New Testament, Jesus called His followers to the difficult work of taking the Good News to the world (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-47; John 20:21; Acts 1:8).³ Evangelism and missions are not easy tasks, but we need not tackle these challenges alone. Church members pray for us as we develop relationships with non-believers and seek opportunities to share the gospel with them. Others travel great distances to support missionaries who are planting seeds on difficult soil. Joining a church is thus one way to say, “I am committed to the Great Commission, and I will work with this local church to reach others for Christ.” We are undeservedly privileged to be used by God so that others might join the Body of Christ.

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The Rest of the Story ...

I did join that Ohio Southern Baptist church when God saved me over three decades ago. Looking back, I hardly appreciated all that church did for me as a young believer. A faithful bus driver picked me up every Sunday. Sunday School teachers introduced me to the Word of God. Concerned church members contacted me when I did not attend worship for two consecutive weeks. An assistant pastor challenged me to consider if God was calling me to ministry. My pastor invited me to preach as I sought confirmation of my call. This church genuinely became my Christian family.

Regrettably, the church did not have a systematic discipleship plan in place, yet they gave me a strong belief in the authority of the Word of God, an intense passion for evangelism, and a deep love for the Southern Baptist Convention. How grateful I am today for that believer who told me that joining a church was a non-negotiable step in my spiritual journey!

¹ Our Graham School study on membership classes affirmed this tendency to postpone joining a church. See my book, *Membership Matters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 93-96.

² Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 157.

³ Mark 16:15 is a disputed text. It does, though, reflect the Great Commission message of other undisputed texts.