

Is Church Membership Important?

I get that question sometimes and I think many other people wonder about it who never ask. Sometimes it's said with genuine curiosity—"So explain to me what membership is all about." Other times it's said with a tinge of suspicion—"So tell me again, why you think I should become a member? Is membership even Biblical?"

I think for many people membership sounds stiff, something you have at your bank or the country club, but too formal for the church. Even if it's agreed that Christianity is not a lone ranger religion, that we need community and fellowship with other Christians, we still bristle at the thought of officially joining a church. Why all the hoops and classification? Why box the Holy Spirit into member/non-member categories?

Well, I do believe church membership is important. In addition to some very tangible benefits to membership (for example, only members can hold church office or lead ministries), here's some reasons and benefits I'd ask you to consider as to why membership matters to Christians and to the church, especially in our world today.

1. In joining a church you make visible your commitment to Christ and his people. Membership is one way to raise the flag of faith. You state before God and others that you are part of this local body of believers. It's easy to talk in glowing terms about the invisible church—the body of all believers near and far, living and dead—but it's in the visible church that God expects you to live out your faith.

How many of Paul's letters were written to individuals? Only a handful and these were mostly to pastors. The majority of his letters were written to a local body of believers. We see the same thing in Revelation. Jesus spoke to individual congregations in places like Smyrna, Sardis, and Laodicea. The New Testament knows no Christians floating around in "just me and Jesus" land. Believers belong to churches.

2. Membership is also a way to let the rest of the congregation know that they can trust your ministry to them and to their family members. It is quite likely that some in the congregation will already know your Biblical commitments and beliefs. But it is also likely that others will not know. Suppose you are serving the Lord by teaching a class of children or youth. When you do that as a member, even those parents who do not know you personally know that you are committed to the same core doctrines of the Christian faith and are also committed to the church family. Thus your membership gives every other member a level of assurance that you are a trusted person in the congregation. Without membership and what it stands for, that level of trust is not possible.

3. TWO QUESTIONS FROM HEBREWS 13:17

Consider the passage: *"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."*

As a leader I realize that I have a very important responsibility to God and to God's people. Leaders are called to care for and nurture the spiritual life of those they lead. They are shepherds not bosses. But two questions occurred to me from the text. First, if there is no biblical requirement to belong to a local church, then which leaders should an individual Christian obey and submit to? Second, and more personally, who will your pastors give an account for?

Regarding the first question, the text clearly command Christians to submit to and honor the recognized elders (see also 1 Tim. 5:17). If there is no understanding of local church membership, then *who are we to submit to and obey?* Is it anyone with the title “elder” from any church? That seems unlikely and in fact spiritually dangerous.

Regarding the second question, the Scriptures clearly command the elders (pastors) to care for specific people (1 Pet. 5:1-5; also, Acts 20:29-30). Will I as a pastor be held accountable for all the Christians in the Hartford Area? Will I give account for what they teach in their small groups, how they spend their money, and what they do concerning international missions? Again, that’s quite unlikely.

It is hard enough to follow these biblical commands in a modern church where there is constant turnover, *but it’s even harder when we don’t know who is really a part of this flock??*

This is very practical. For example, at almost every deacon’s meeting we seek to determine whether any members of the congregation are in need of special care regarding their spiritual or personal condition and we try to be diligent in following up with people who haven’t been at our church for a while. But if you never became a member, it is difficult to tell if you are really gone, because we might not be sure if you were ever here! It’s nearly impossible to shepherd the flock when we don’t know who really considers this their flock and really considers us their shepherds.

4. Making a Church commitment also makes a powerful statement in a low-commitment culture. Most bowling leagues require more of their members than most churches. Ours is a consumer culture where everything is tailored to meet our needs and satisfy our preferences. When those needs aren’t met, we can always move on to the next product, or job, or spouse.

Joining a church in such an environment makes a counter-cultural statement. It says “I am committed to this group of people and they are committed to me.”

But’s it’s not just about being cared for, it’s about making a decision and sticking with it—something my generation and newer ones, with our oppressive number of choices, finds difficult. Our natural tendency is to “date the church” –have her around for special events, take her out when life feels lonely, and keep her around for a rainy day. Membership is the way to stop dating churches, and marry one.

Even if you will only be in town a few years, it’s still not a bad idea to join a church. It lets your home church (if you have one) know that you are being cared for, and it lets us know that you want to be cared for here.

5. Church membership is making a commitment to each other. When we join a church we are offering ourselves to one another to be encouraged, rebuked, corrected, and served. We are saying, “I am here to stay. I am here to give, not just to get. I want to help you grow in godliness. Will you help me to do the same?”

So please think about why membership might matter more than you thought. And if you are looking to make a counter-cultural commitment and invite more accountability and responsibility into your life as a Christ-follower, why not join a church?

Pastor David Saylor