

Church Membership

WHY BOTHER?



Jeff Johnson

Church Membership, Why Bother?

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Church Membership, Why Bother?

1. The Priority of Worship

God calls His people to be active and faithful members of a local church. Going to church is not to be squeezed into the Christian's weekly schedule, but rather it is to be the principal activity and focal point of the Christian life. Entertainment, hobbies, work, and family are secondary to the worship of God in the assembly of the saints. In other words, Christians are to rotate their schedules around the life of the church.

This is because the principal reason for going to church is not to become a better parent, spouse, worker, or citizen, but rather to worship God. Those who go to church only to gain coping skills with life's problems have misunderstood the purpose of the church. Sure, church will help the Christian in all areas of life, but the ultimate goal of the Christian is not self, work, or family—but God. Christians are to go to church to glorify God, and if God is to be the center of the Christian life (and the center of the Christian family), then church is to be center of the Christian schedule.

Yet sadly, this seems too extreme for many professing Christians. Even if they admit that

worship is to take priority over every other activity of life, they still feel that they can worship God just as well privately apart from other Christians in their own homes or by going for a walk in the woods as they can in any gathered assembly.

2. A Secular Culture of Individualism

The individuality and personal freedom of postmodernism has won over today's Christianity. Today's postmodern believer views the Christian life, for the most part, independently of the body of Christ. And when church attendance is factored in, a peculiar flavor of church that fits one's own individual personality and particular set of desires must meet the match. The "young and restless" are looking for a church that is on the cutting edge. Senior citizens are looking for traditional worship. Parents are looking for a nursery. The youth are looking for cool activities. Singles, too, are looking for "love." Viewing the church through the lens of "self" leads people to judge a church based upon how well the church meets their personal expectations.

Many churches have compounded the problem by catering to this type of individualism. To satisfy man's free spirit, individualism has been exalted above corporate community, and creating an atmosphere where people can enjoy their own individual "experience" has become more important for the church than upholding and promoting their

doctrinal standards and confessions. “Church” has become a place for people to get a “spiritual experience,” rather than a place for mutual accountability and biblical instruction. Church has become like a fast-food restaurant—drive in, get fed, and drive out with no commitments attached.

This type of individualism, of course, is undermining church membership. With a low view of accountability, Christians have begun to believe that church membership is optional—a good thing maybe, but not a biblical necessity. Many people are content to church-hop their whole life, or simply stay at home. Option B is to go to the woods to worship God in their own way, or attend a church but never join it.

Even when people do join a church, remaining committed and faithful is not to be expected. No longer are people leaving a church because of doctrinal error or other biblical concerns, but because they hear about all the excitement that is coming from the “new” church down the road. Rather than remaining faithful to their own church, they eagerly run down the street to join the enthusiasm. If it is not over a new church bringing fresh excitement, people will also jump ship if they get their feelings hurt. Postmoderns are quick to change membership for the slightest reason. Gone are the days where Christians remain faithful to a church and seek to work out their differences with love and humility. Paul’s advice for Euodia and

Syntychē “to be of the same mind” (Phi 4:2) is no longer worth it, for we now hear, “You’ve got to find a church that is right for you.”

I guess this individualism is not all that new. Even the great theologian John Owen complained of church-hoppers in the late sixteenth century:

Nor do we in the least approve of their practice, who, upon every failing in these things in the church, think themselves sufficiently warranted immediately of their own minds to depart from its communion. Much more do we condemn them who suffer themselves in these things to be guided by their own surmises and misapprehensions; for such there may be as make their own hasty conceptions to be the rule of all church administrations and communion, who, unless they are in all things pleased, can be quiet nowhere.”¹

This type of independence is distressing, because it is contrary to the truth of God’s Word and the unity of the brethren. Although all Christians have an individual and personal relationship with Christ, they are also all called by God to live out their Christianity within the community of God’s people. The same Spirit that unites believers to Christ has

¹ John Owen, *Discourse on Christian Love and Peace in The Works of John Owen*, vol. 15, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 96.

also united believers to each other. To love Christ is to love His people, and to submit to Christ is to submit to a local church.

Some Christians, who live great distances from a solid church, may have no alternative but to listen to recorded sermons at home with other believers, for a season. But, Christians should never become content with this as a long-term solution.

As we will see, the Christian life is not designed to be experienced independently of faithful and active membership in the local church.

3. The Spiritual Glue of Church Membership

Scripture teaches that when believers are united to Christ by the new birth, they are also mutually united together into one body. This union is not merely symbolic or hypothetical, but is purposeful in the productivity and functioning of every Christian. Christians are interwoven together in such a fashion that they cannot properly function apart from one another (1Co 12). Consequently, the notion that a Christian can operate and please God apart from the rest of the body of Christ is not only a prideful misconception, but an impossibility.

Because of our spiritual union, Christians are drawn together by an internal force. They love one another, they care for one another, and they feel closest to heaven when they are assembled together.

In the past, persecution, distress, and various threats could not deter Christians from regularly assembling together. Christians of old often met in the forests, fields, or even in dark dens or caves. They did not mind traveling many miles in difficult conditions. All they knew was that they loved the Lord and desired to meet with the brethren to worship the living God collectively and enjoy the fellowship of the saints.

Furthermore, the New Testament was written under the assumption that Christians are members of local churches. In fact, the New Testament was written primarily to church congregations, and not to disconnected individuals. In many ways, the New Testament is a history of the early church. Therefore, to seek to serve God alone, independent of a local church, is to refuse to follow the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. James Bannerman understood this when he stated:

Alone with God, I must realize the Bible as if it were a message from Him to my solitary self, singled out and separated from other men, and feeling my own individual responsibility in receiving or rejecting it.

But the Bible does not stop here: it deals with man, not only as a solitary unit in his relation to God, but also as a member of a spiritual society, gathered together in the name of Jesus. It is not a mere system of doctrines to be believed and precepts to be

observed by each individual Christian independently of others, and apart from others: it is a system of doctrines and precepts, designed and adapted for a society of Christians.²

4. The Necessity of Church Membership

Those who have a heart for God and His people need no other reason to meet together. But with today's reservations, here are a few additional reasons why being formally dedicated to a local church is a biblical necessity:

1. Christ instituted the church for the saints; to shun it, therefore, is to view oneself wiser than God (Mat 16:18).
2. There are biblical commands which cannot be obeyed outside the membership of a local church:
 - A. One could not obey ruling elders (Heb 13:17; 1Ti 5:17).
 - B. One could not properly partake in the Lord's Supper.
 - C. One could not come together with other Christians for corporate worship (Col 3:16).
3. Christians are mutually interdependent (1Co 12; Eph 4:16).

² James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (1869; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 1:2.

4. The church is a means of sanctification (Eph 4:11-13); therefore, to neglect the church is to neglect the care of one's soul.
5. There are promised blessings for those who assemble together (Mat 18:19-20).
6. Scripture commands us not to forsake the local assembly (Heb 10:25).
7. The local church brings God glory (Eph 3:21).

5. The Seriousness of Church Membership

Church membership is more than getting our names on the church roll along with our phone numbers and pictures in the church directory. It is more than just the outward acknowledgement that we will make a particular church our new church home. Serious commitments and sobering consequences are involved in church membership.

If we jump from church to church and move our membership from here to there so casually, it reveals that church membership means little to us at all. What is behind this take-it-or-leave-it mentality? It is the perspective that the church is to be handled in the same way as the favorite local movie theater. Church has become nothing more than a spectator sport, another place of entertainment to go on Sunday with no strings attached.

The fact that Christ died for the church must elevate it as more than just a Sunday morning

punch-in, punch-out activity for us. It has to remain a body of believers who are united together in Christ and are dedicated to the worship of God and the propagation of His truth. The church is called to love one another, submit to one another, care for one another and be dedicated to one another for the ultimate purpose of aiding one another in spiritual growth.

To join a church, therefore, is a compulsion to carry out these functions and purposes of the church. It is a voluntary desire to place oneself under the care of the church; to place oneself under the rule of the elders, to commit oneself to be faithful in attendance and a regular supporter of the ministry; and it is to make oneself responsible for the spiritual well-being of others within the church body.

6. The Responsibilities and Privileges of Church Members

Every Christian has both the privilege and responsibility of partaking and sharing with the spiritual giftedness that God has given the church. Every Christian has been engrafted into the body of Christ and personally gifted by the Holy Spirit (Rom 12:6) for the purpose of assisting the spiritual growth of the greater body of Christ (Eph 4:16).

The church is designed by God in such a way that every member of the body is interdependent.

Somewhat like a watch, every part is needed for it to function properly. Likewise, each member of the body of Christ is needed for the mutual growth and edification of the whole. Thus, Christians need each other. Just as “the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee,” Christians cannot say they have no need of one another (1Co 12:21). To go at it alone is like the foot severing itself from the rest of the body and thinking it can hop on to heaven by itself.

It is not a coincidence that every member of the body of Christ has been gifted differently. Spiritual gifts should not be wasted on independent self-consumption. For Christians to refrain from the fellowship of believers and remain inactive in the body of Christ is simply to misuse the measure of grace that has been deposited in them by God.

The benefit for each member of the body of Christ is enormous. All the foot needs to do is help the body to walk, and in return, the foot has the eyes to help him see, the hand to help him work, and the rest of the body, attached to its life-giving Head Jesus Christ, to assist him in becoming a complete man, lacking nothing. Since these gifts of God are designed for the edification of the body of Christ, the local church, which is the only visible and tangible reality of that body, is the only proper setting for Christians to exercise their gifts (Rom 12; 1Co 12).

Besides the exercising of one's spiritual gift(s), the additional responsibilities and privileges of church members are:

I. Responsibilities toward God

1. Be baptized (Act 2:38).
2. Participate regularly in the Lord's Supper (1Co 11:24).

II. Responsibilities toward one another

1. Active in loving one another (1Pe 1:22).
2. Active in accountability (Jam 5:16; Gal 6:1).
 - a. Submitting to one another (Eph 5:21).
 - b. Edifying one another (Rom 14:19; 1Th 5:11).
 - c. Exhorting one another (Heb 3:13; Heb 10:25).
 - d. Admonishing one another (Rom 15:4; Col 3:16).
 - e. If necessary, following through with church discipline (2Th 3:14-15).
3. Active in fellowshiping with one another (1Jo 1:7).
4. Active in caring for one another (1Co 12:24-26).
5. Active in attendance (Heb 10:25).
6. Active in supporting the work of the ministry (1Co 9:11).
8. Active in prayer (Jam 5:1).

III. Responsibilities towards the elders and leadership of the church

1. Honor them (1Ti 5:17; 2Th 5:12-13).
2. Submit to them (Heb 13:17).
3. Support them (1Ti 5:17-18, 1Co 9:9-11; Gal 6:6).
4. Pray for them (2Th 3:1).
5. Be slow to accuse them (1Ti 5:19).

IV. Responsibilities towards unbelievers or those outside the church

1. Pray for them (1Ti 2:1).
2. Do good to them (Gal 6:10).
3. Evangelize them (1Co 9:22).
4. Love them (Rom 13:8).
5. Do not be unequally yoked to them (1Co 7:39).
6. Be honest with them (1Pe 2:12).

7. The Terms of Church Membership

Although faith is the only requirement to join the universal body of Christ, something more is needed to join a local church: visible holiness. To join a local church, faith must be tangibly demonstrated. Because the local church cannot see the heart, it must judge one's profession by their works of faith. In other words, not only does a person need a profession of faith, he or she needs a life that is in agreement with that profession (Mat 3:8).

It follows that church membership is exclusively for believers. As the Book of James plainly teaches, the only way for the church to see this inward faith is by observing a changed life—a life that is characterized by obedience to God and a love for the brethren. This is why believers should be baptized because it demonstrates to the church body a willingness to be submissive to God.

The Scriptures also teach that the church is required to carry out church discipline for all members who fall into habitual sin. It is only those who join themselves to the church and are seeking after personal holiness that can benefit from the assistance of church discipline and restoration.

With this in mind, professors of Christ who have not demonstrated a desire to follow the Lord in baptism and a willing spirit to be in subjection to the local church should not be considered as viable candidates for church membership. Moreover, if a church member is living in habitual, unrepentant sin and refuses to take heed to the admonishment of the church, the church is required (by the authority invested in her by Christ and His Word) to discipline the unrepentant member in hopes of restoration. It goes without saying that church membership should be taken seriously.

Review Questions for Group Discussion

1. Why should the worship and functions of the local church take priority in our weekly schedule?
2. What are some reasons why Christians do not remain faithful to a local church?
3. Is church membership optional? Why or why not?
4. What are some biblical commands that require church membership?
5. What are some of the responsibilities of church membership?
6. What are some of the benefits of church membership?
7. What role does Christian fruit play in church membership?

