

Calvary Baptist Church
Meaningful Membership: Why Join a Church?
Open Classes, Week 2

INTRODUCTION

Four Attitudes in the Church

1. *John* follows Jesus but he's not into "organized religion." He feels he worships best by going for a hike on Sunday or sitting in his tree stand with God.
2. *Leann* is a church hopper. Here for a while, there for a while. Somewhere pretty much every Sunday.
3. *Natasha* found a great singles group. She's always there on Sunday night, but she only shows up at church in the morning if the sermon seems like it'll be interesting.
4. *Jose* loves the preaching at this church, but he tends to slip out right afterward. He's not in a small group and he never really thought about joining the church. What's the point?

What do all these people have in common? They all see themselves as _____. They all see the _____ as partially unrelated to their faith. And they all share a fundamental _____ of what it means to be a Christian.

A recent Gallup headline announced, "U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades." While membership in a church among U. S. adults hovered around 70 percent between 1938 and 1998, it proceeded to drop down to 52 percent between 1998 and 2018. The 2022 State of Theology study found most Americans (56%) don't believe every Christian has an obligation to join a local church.

What's your view of church membership? Is church membership a matter of personal preference or biblical obedience? You will not find the command in Scripture, "thou shalt be a church member." But, that doesn't mean the Bible doesn't teach church membership. If we unpack all of what Scripture teaches about the local church, we'll find that church membership is in fact in every nook and cranny of the New Testament.

A BIBLICAL CASE FOR CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

The Purpose of the Church in the Book of Ephesians

Chapter 1 of Ephesians is a beautiful description of our salvation. How is it that we're saved from our sins, to the praise of God's glory? Chapter 2, verse 4 tells us: *God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even while we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.*

And now the application: the first implication of the gospel we come to as we finish chapter 2 is that the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles is destroyed. (Eph. 2:14-15) This new unity between Jews and Gentiles is so profound that Paul calls it a mystery in 3:3—hidden for generations but now made known. Chapter 3, verse 6 says, *This mystery is that through the gospel*

the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members together of one body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Why did God do this? Why create unity between redeemed Jews and Gentiles who have nothing in common but Christ? Look ahead to verse 10 in chapter 3: *So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places...God intends to do these amazing things through the church!*

Biblical Metaphors and Membership

The Bible doesn't simply command us to join a church—it does something far better. It reveals the relationship between the church and its members with a series of metaphors that shape our identity and challenge our near constant sinful inclination to individualism, self-sufficiency, and pride. So what metaphors does Scripture use to describe the church? Consider just three of them.

1. The Church is a _____

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul refers to the church as the “body of Christ” and to Christians as “members” of that body—an image he likely adopted from Jesus himself (cf. Acts 9:4). For Paul, an individual Christian is neither isolated nor independent. A Christian is like a hand, a foot, a toe, an artery, an adrenal gland, or any other body part—we're only healthy and useful if we're in the body. This metaphor dignifies every church member. Every body part is necessary, so there's no excuse for self-pity (1 Cor. 12:15–20) or pride (1 Cor. 12:21–26).

The metaphor also suggests the danger of not being in the body. How healthy, after all, is a detached limb or a discarded organ? The metaphor ties our spiritual good to one another. As we know from our own bodies, when one member suffers, the whole body suffers (12:26).

Notice also that when we talk about church membership we're speaking the language of Paul. The phrase church “member” is a biblical term. In 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, Paul refers to the believers at Corinth as “members” of the body of Christ five times. Notably, in this passage Paul is referring to being a “member” of a local church, not just the universal church. Paul is, after all, speaking to a local church. He describes being a member of the body of Christ as being vitally connected to the life of the body—so much so that the joys and suffering of other members become your own (1 Cor. 12:26). The shared life between the members assumes that they're rubbing shoulders with one another, bearing one another's griefs, and sharing in each other's burdens.

2. The Church is a _____

Both Paul and Peter call the church God's “household” (1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 4:17)—another word for “family.” What's your family made of? Members, of course. Family members aren't simply names on a paper, or a file folder of marriage and birth certificates. A family is a network of relationships and obligations. Family members are bound to one another. They share meals, they celebrate together, they mourn together, they rejoice together, they make decisions together, and, when apart, they long to reunite. The church is a family. Our commitment to one another shows itself as we do “family things”—gathering, caring, laughing, weeping, worshiping, and serving. Once again, the New Testament conceives of membership not as an item on a checklist, but as a way of life.

3. The Church is a _____

Finally, Paul calls the church the “temple of God” (1 Cor. 3:16–17). Peter calls Christians “living stones” that build up a “spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:4–5). As the fulfillment of both the garden and the temple in the Old Testament, Jesus now pours his Spirit on the church. As we await the coming of Christ, the local congregation is now the dwelling place of God. Like bricks mortared together, the local church is composed of individuals built into a single temple. As we work for the “common good” of the congregation, we manifest the Spirit that resides in us (1 Cor. 12:7).

Implications of These Metaphors

First, church membership is biblical. If you belong to God, then you’re a part of a body, a sibling in a family, or a brick in a building. It’s simply impossible to read these metaphors describing the church and assume a Christian can somehow “opt out.”

Second, instead of simply commanding Christians to join a church, the Bible portrays the Christian life in such a way that it can never be separated from the church. The biblical metaphors for the church show that membership means having a vital connection to a local congregation. This connection shapes our everyday life.

Third, these metaphors provoke our imaginations to consider how we might more fully integrate our lives with others in our local congregations. It’s useful to enumerate the specific responsibilities of church membership found throughout Scripture. But consider for a moment the larger principle at play in these biblical metaphors. They ought to create dispositions of the heart. New Testament metaphors for the church don’t just mandate that we join a church, they shape our character and our values. They don’t just tell us what to do, they tell us who we are.

These biblical metaphors for the church teach one big principle: we should strive to build up the spiritual well-being of our local church, not just our personal spiritual health. If you’re part of a body, a sibling in a family, and a brick in a building, how could it be otherwise?

More Scriptural Evidence for Church Membership

1. Matthew 16 and 18

We learn in Matthew 16 and 18 that Jesus gives the local church keys to the kingdom. In Matthew 16:13-20, Jesus teaches that the keys are used to affirm right confession of the gospel. In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus teaches that the keys are used to affirm true confessors of the gospel. He hands the keys of the kingdom to the church as grounds for removing from membership anyone whose life and profession don’t match.

2. Hebrews 3:17

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. - Heb. 13:17

This is a command to Christians. Two questions arise from this verse. 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, who will our elders give an account for? The answer to these questions comes through local church membership. The Scriptures clearly command an elder body to care for

specific people (1 Pet. 5:1-5; also, Acts 20:29-30). Hebrews 13:17 doesn't work if everyone is just a church consumer, hopping around from one place to another.

3. 1 Cor. 5:1-12

But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? (1 Cor. 5:11-12)

Another issue we have to consider regarding church membership is the biblical teaching on church discipline. In this text Paul confronts the church in Corinth for approving of a man walking in blatant, unrepentant sexual immorality. The Corinthians are celebrating this as God's grace, but Paul warns them that this type of wickedness shouldn't make them boast, but rather mourn. He calls them arrogant and tells them to remove this man for the destruction of his flesh and the hopeful salvation of his soul.

The question here is simple: How can you kick someone "out" of the church if there isn't an "in"? If there is no local commitment to a covenant community of faith, then how do you remove someone from that community of faith? Church discipline is a command from God, but it won't work if local church membership doesn't exist.

4. One-Another Commands

One third of the one-another commands deal with the _____ of the church.

1. Be at peace with one another (Mk 9:50)
2. Don't grumble among one another (Jn 6:43)
3. Be of the same mind with one another (Ro 12:16, 15:5)
4. Accept one another (Ro 15:7)
5. Wait for one another before beginning the Lord's Supper (1 Co 11:33)
6. Don't bite, devour, and consume one another (Ga 5:15)
7. Don't boastfully challenge or envy one another (Ga 5:26).
8. Gently, patiently tolerate one another (Ep 4:2)
9. Be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving to one another (Ep 4:32)
10. Bear with and forgive one another (Co 3:13)
11. Seek good for one another, and don't repay evil for evil (1 Th 5:15)
12. Don't complain against one another (Jas 4:11, 5:9)
13. Confess sins to one another (Jas 5:16)

One third of them instruct Christians to _____ one another.

1. Love one another (Jn 13:34, 15:12, 17; Ro 13:8; 1 Th 3:12, 4:9; 1 Pe 1:22; 1 Jn 3:11, 4:7, 11; 2 Jn 5)
2. Through love, serve one another (Ga 5:13)
3. Tolerate one another in love (Ep 4:2)
4. Greet one another with a kiss of love (1 Pe 5:14)
5. Be devoted to one another in love (Ro 12:10)

About 15% stress an attitude of _____ and _____ among believers.

1. Give preference to one another in honor (Ro 12:10)
2. Regard one another as more important than yourselves (Php 2:3)
3. Serve one another (Ga 5:13)
4. Wash one another's feet (Jn 13:14)
5. Don't be haughty; be of the same mind (Ro 12:16)
6. Be subject to one another (Ep 5:21)
7. Clothe yourselves in humility toward one another (1 Pe 5:5)

Here's the rest:

1. Do not judge one another, and don't put a stumbling block in a brother's way (Ro 14:13)
2. Greet one another with a kiss (Ro 16:16; 1 Co 16:20; 2 Co 13:12)
3. Husbands and wives: don't deprive one another of physical intimacy (1 Co 7:5)
4. Bear one another's burdens (Ga 6:2)
5. Speak truth to one another (Ep 4:25)
6. Don't lie to one another (Co 3:9)
7. Comfort one another concerning the resurrection (1 Th 4:18)
8. Encourage and build up one another (1 Th 5:11)
9. Stimulate one another to love and good deeds (He 10:24)
10. Pray for one another (Jas 5:16)
11. Be hospitable to one another (1 Pe 4:9)

You cannot "one-another" yourself. And you cannot "one-another" every Christian on the planet. These "one-another" commands are meant to happen in a local body of believers.

5. Church Membership is a _____ for the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is a meal for the gathered church, that is, for members (see 1 Cor. 11:20, 33).

6. Church Membership is how to _____ represent Jesus.

Membership is the church's affirmation that you are a citizen of Christ's kingdom and therefore a card-carrying Jesus Representative before the nations.

7. Church Membership gives _____ to the Christian life.

It places an individual Christian's claim to "obey" and "follow" Jesus into a real-life setting where authority is actually exercised over us (see John 14:15; 1 John 2:19; 4:20-21).

8. Church Membership builds a _____ and invites the _____.

Membership puts the alternative rule of Christ on display for the watching universe (see Matt. 5:13; John 13:34-35; Eph. 3:10; 1 Peter 2:9-12). The very boundaries which are drawn around the membership of a church yields a society of people which invites the nations to something better.

MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP

What are the consequences of meaningless membership?

1. It Gives a _____ of Salvation to Multitudes

The failure to practice church discipline and maintain integrity in our church rolls gives the multitude of “inactive members” a false assurance of salvation.

2. It Harms Our _____

The fact that so many Southern Baptists live in open disobedience to God’s commands and have little involvement with their fellow members greatly harms our denomination’s gospel witness.

3. It Hinders our _____

Meaningless membership in Southern Baptist churches hinders our efforts to declare God’s glory to the nations.

If we, as a church are going to practice meaningful membership, here are some things that have to be true of your relationship with the church: it’s got to be a _____ relationship; it’s a relationship with a _____ group of people; and it’s a _____ association.

Good question to keep in mind: What would Calvary be like if everyone acted like you do?

MEMBERSHIP AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

God’s will for you is your transformation into the image of Christ. The best context for transformation is not isolation or church hopping, but local church membership. While there are New Testament texts that describe the individual, New Testament scholar Darrell Bock observes, “Interestingly, it’s the community that is described...more often than the individual. For God, it is our position together and our task together that stands at the core of spiritual formation.”

Paul tells the Corinthians, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). The same Spirit who joins the church to Christ also joins its members to one another. Your spiritual growth is not just about you; it’s about the edification of the entire body of Christ and the glory of God. Paul Pettit concludes, “The goal of my spiritual growth is not my own individual growth *apart from* the body, but my maturity and development *within* the body and *for* the body.”

CONCLUSION

In Acts chapter 9, the apostle Paul—or Saul at the time—has a fascinating run-in with the risen Christ that tells us volumes about this. Jesus appears to him and Saul falls to the ground. Do you remember what Jesus says to him? He doesn't say "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting those Christians?" He doesn't even say "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting the church?" He says, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Jesus so clearly and closely identifies with the local church that he refers to the congregation of Christians in Damascus as "me."

Eph. 5:25 tells us, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Acts 20:28 reminds us that he bought his church with his own blood. It's impossible to have a high view of Christ and a low view of His Bride, the church, at the same time. If we are Christ followers, we too will love the church that Jesus gave himself up for. Joining a local church is a reflection of love for Christ and His people. Church membership is a blood-bought gift of God's grace. More than most of us realize, it is a life-sustaining, faith-strengthening, joy-preserving means of God's mercy to us.

Pastor Scott Sauls said, "Church is family. Membership in a local church means nothing more and nothing less than this: Joining your imperfect self to many other imperfect selves to form an imperfect community that, through Jesus, embarks on a journey toward a better future...together."

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:23-25)

SOURCES

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER READING ON CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

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I Am a Church Member by Thom Rainer

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Why Should I Join a Church? by Mark Dever

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