

WHY MEMBERSHIP?

"I want church to be a place where people feel included, not like they are on the outside!"

"Doesn't membership just make church feel like a country club?"

"Why do I need to become a member if I'm already doing the things that a member does?"

"Isn't membership just something our parents...or their parents...did?"

"I'm a member of the global, big 'C' Church...I don't need to join a local church."

I get it...truly I do. These are important thoughts and questions to work through because they describe the normal perception/understanding of the prevailing culture regarding church membership. Without addressing each point in particular, let me give 2 quick categories that might show a different way of thinking about this important topic.

Biblical Foundation

(adapted from Redeemer PCA, NYC)

Church in the NT usually meant a specific local church like that at Ephesus or Corinth. Did people actually join local churches formally, or was it an informal association?

Five indications:

1. *Biblical metaphors*: Flock, temple, body, and household are used specifically of local churches (Acts 20, Eph 2, 1Cor 12, 1Tim 3). Each of these metaphors has a clear distinction of who is part of the church, and who isn't.
2. *Meaning of "the whole church"*: In 1Cor 14:23, Paul says "if the whole church comes together in one place..." How would the leaders know if the "whole church" was there if no formal relationship was established?
3. *Pastoral oversight & spiritual leadership*: Leaders were to care for "all the flock" (Acts 20:28. cf. 1Tim 3, Acts 20, Phil 1:1, Titus 1). Since leaders were accountable for the souls of the flock under their care (Heb 13:17), they must have had some commitment for care and some record of membership.
4. *Meaning of the word "join"*: After the fiery end of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:13, no non-Christians "dared join them [the church], but the people esteemed them highly." The Greek word for join has strong connotations of commitment. The same word is used to speak of sexual relationships (1Cor 6:16) and joining to the Lord (1Cor 6:17).
5. *Instructions for church discipline*: Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5 talk about putting a person out of the church (remove NASB, expel NIV) and treating him like an unbeliever. Since unbelievers were welcome at worship, removal must have indicated a distinct formal association.

"In the New Testament there is no such person as a Christian who is not a church member.

Conversion was described as 'the Lord adding to the church' (Acts 2:47). There was no spiritual drifting." (Douglas Millar)

Biblical Application (adapted from University Reformed Church, East Lansing)

So, biblically, why bother with Church membership? Here are 6 reasons:

1. Visible Commitment - Most of Paul's letters are written to churches rather than individuals. All of Jesus' letters in the book of Revelation are written to churches. Here your commitment is visible...*this church, these faces, this mission to this community.*
2. Counter-Cultural - Commitment is difficult. Relationships are difficult. People are difficult. In a culture that makes it easy to leave as soon as things get hard or uncomfortable, membership makes a statement. It says, "I'm gonna work through this. I'm gonna work for change. I'm gonna seek to live like the Gospel is true. They need me and I need them."
3. Interdependence - Contrary to what we grew up believing...we were not made to be independent, but, rather, interdependent. We need each other. We also need to be a part of something bigger than ourselves.
4. Accountability - Yes, authority has without a doubt been abused in the church and ANY abuse of power should be called out, repented of, and, when appropriate, punished. Church leaders need accountability...and so do members! We need others who know us and can encourage, rebuke, challenge, and support us along the way.
5. Faithfulness/Leadership - Formal membership enables leaders to better track and care for members. It's nearly impossible for elders to shepherd the flock when they don't know who actually considers them a shepherd.
6. Promises - When someone becomes a member at Parks Church, she makes promises to pray, give, serve, attend worship, receive the spiritual guidance, obey its teachings, and seek the things that make for unity, purity, and peace. At the same time, Parks Church leadership promises care, accountability, faithful teaching, and discipleship (proactive & reactive). These are huge promises on both sides that sound in some ways like a marriage...it's no wonder that Jesus calls the church his "bride".

Final Word

There is more to be discussed, explained, and contemplated. For example...in the Bible, the church is seen as the continuation and new expression of the people of Israel. Think of what is learned about membership from that connection alone! However, the truth of the Scripture is that membership is more assumed than explained in detail. Personally, because of the commitment of church membership, we have seen marriages saved, women protected, church problems addressed and changed, expansive ministry to communities, care received in the toughest of times, and so, so much more. Member or not, you are always welcome at Parks. Still, we invite you further up and further in to take the step of membership today...to take the mantle of responsibility that comes as well as the benefits you will enjoy.