



Membership Matters

⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Romans 12:4-5

What is biblical church membership and why do we need it?

As Christians, we are all members of Christ's body, joined to one another in the shared reality of our salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. This is sometimes referred to as the 'Worldwide church'. This means that we share in the beautiful reality of membership across the world with all true Christians. Together, we make up the 'household of faith' or the 'family of believers' (Galatians 6:10).

Just as with any large and growing family, Jesus has organised his worldwide family into local family units all across the world. To use another analogy, churches are like embassies – small outposts or representatives of a particular nation, away from home. This is what we refer to as the 'Local church'.

Church membership in a particular local church like ours at Bethany Baptist, is a formal commitment, within a biblical framework, that enables us to best live out what scripture teaches about being in community together with other Christians in the local body of Christ. Membership is one of the ways the church displays what it means to belong to Jesus.

While the bible doesn't explicitly speak of 'being a member of a church', when we take a birds-eye view over the text of scripture, especially the New Testament, we can clearly see the evidence of church membership. Here are a few examples.

In Matthew 18, Jesus speaks of a known group of Christians referred to as "the church". Without church membership we cannot define who "the church" is as a particular group of Christians. We're left with significant questions. Does Jesus mean every Christian that lives locally within a certain post code? Is it only those that attend church services regularly?

In several places in the book of Acts (2:41, 2:47, 5:14) we read of the new church in Jerusalem being *added to* in numbers as people come to faith in Christ. Later, in Acts 16:4-5, we read specifically that churches (plural) in different towns are also growing in numbers. Without church membership, how did these churches know how many Christians were in them?

In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul speaks of removing an unrepentant sinner from among their *number*. The context of Paul's letter itself reveals that Paul writes the letter to a known and particular group of Christians that make up a church in Corinth. Presumably they know who *is* part of the church and who *is not*, who the letter is *for* and who it *isn't*. Paul instructs that the unrepentant sinner be *removed*. Removed from what? Without church membership there is no tangible, recognisable people to be removed *from*.

In Hebrews 13 the writer addresses a particular group of Christians whom he commands to submit to the authority of the leaders that God has placed over them. These leaders are those who must give an account for the church. Again, this raises important questions. Without church membership which Christians are the church leaders (pastors/elders) responsible for? Are the pastors/elders accountable for every Christian who ever attends a service? Is it just those that live within a certain radius? What about professing Christian family members who don't attend?

These, and other bible passages, and the questions they raise give us much food for thought when we consider what it means to belong to a local church in membership. The bible speaks of Christians as sheep. In this analogy we could say that church membership is much like the fence around the sheep pen. It is the visible, solid and protective guard that separates and marks off the sheep from the world as belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ. It provides a boundary within which the local shepherds (pastors/elders) know which sheep

they are to lead, feed and care for. It gives security and accountability for the sheep to know that this is where there will be guarded, loved, fed and cared for.

Differences between then and now

As we read the New Testament, especially the early church in the book of Acts, we see that to be a Christian was to be a member, baptised into God's family both *globally* in the worldwide sense of all Christians; and a member baptised into God's family *locally* within a particular church in a city, town or village.

In our modern western context, membership has taken on many different and often unhelpful connotations. For various reasons we now see the emergence of at least one extra category that perhaps did not exist in the early church. Consider these three categories. We have:

i). Christians that are members of a local church – In some way, more or less formally the Christian and the local church have committed to one another in membership.

ii). Christians that are not members of a local church – Perhaps a regular attender of one, or maybe even more than one church. Often regular attenders of one local church can indeed be faithful and committed; however, for various reasons that I won't go into here, there may have never been a formal *joining* of the church.

iii). Non-believers – They may come as visitors from time to time or may never darken the door of our church. They may be the spouses or other close family of church members. In some cases, they may even attend for years without ever being converted.

Compared to the beginning of the Christian church nearly 2000 years ago, it seems to me that we now have the regular attender, whom we don't see in scripture. I mean no offence by this – the issue is with the category – it's just not there in the bible. If you're a Christian, the bible shows us that God desires us to belong to him and to one another in a meaningful way. That's what the church is – the gathered people of God, not services to be attended. Church membership expresses our belonging in a way that is deeper than attendance can demonstrate or describe.

Meaningful membership speaks

First and foremost, meaningful church membership is about affirming a person's saving faith in Jesus Christ, followed by their one-time, public, symbolic display of this in baptism. We as a church are saying, 'Yes, you're a Christian!' This is at *least* what church membership is, but there is more.

In Romans 12:4-5 Paul addresses the local church in Rome in this way:

⁴For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

By church membership the church is saying, 'Yes, you're a Christian!' but follows this up with the comforting words, 'and you're *our* Christian!' The believer being formally received into the church replies, '*I belong to you, and you all belong to me too!*' As Paul writes, 'each member *belongs* to all the others.'

Meaningful membership in action

Meaningful membership is *at least* attendance i.e. Christians physically assembling together. But it is so much more than that. Meaningful membership is the '*why*' and the '*how*' and the '*who*' of our gathering. It is a commitment to use our gifts and resources to love and serve Christ by actively loving and serving his people, the church.

Here are just *some* of the ways the bible encourages us to action as members of the local church. We are to confront one another in our sin (Matthew 7:1-5 & 18:15-20.) Be devoted to one another (Romans 12:10). Carry each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2). Be humble, gentle and patient with each other (Ephesians 4:2). Bear with and forgive one other (Colossians 3:13). Encourage and build one another up (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Don't give up meeting together (Hebrews 10:24-25). Confess our sins to each other and uphold one another in prayer (James 5:16). There are many others you can find. God reveals these commands to members of local churches as how they are to relate to one another.

A membership metaphor

We could say that meaningful church membership is symbolically similar to marriage. Our culture has swung from holding marriage in high esteem to many now saying that they don't need the 'official bit of paper' of marriage in order to be together and love each other. While this might be technically true in one sense, it's not biblically true. When we boil this down, what this is really saying is: Love, commitment, accountability between people in relationship should be ours alone to define on our own terms.

Biblical marriage, however, is where God shows us *his* terms. He reveals the proper context for being together and loving each other in this way. He defines what love *is* and what love *does* and therefore instructs us to submit to one another in this way, because of what marriage *represents*; namely Christ and the church as we read in Ephesians 5:31-32.

Church membership is similar because it is a small, local-scale picture of what God has done in Christ, reconciling people to himself and to one another. He hasn't saved individuals who occasionally get together to attend services, no. He has created a covenant community called 'The Church' which is expressed locally where believers belong to one another on his terms as revealed in scripture.

So, can't we just belong to each other without the official membership bit? No, I don't think so but why would you want to? That's the more important question to answer. Despite the growing contempt in society for traditional marriage, why do countless people *still* opt for the 'stuffy traditional institution' over something more casual? The principle is the same – people deeply desire meaningful belonging.

Just like in marriage, God has prescribed in his word, the bible, what belonging and commitment to one another looks like as we practice meaningful membership in the church. Therefore, we must not think dismissively of membership, as some do about marriage. In a world that champions self-sufficiency, independency, and personal autonomy – to be and do whatever we chose – we all have to adjust our thinking when it comes to membership of the local church.

What if I have reservations?

Now, you may still want to ask the question, 'Can't I just be a Christian and come along without being a member?' This is not a hypothetical question for the purpose of building my argument. I have been asked this question many times and know well that there are a thousand deeply personal and sometimes painful reasons for a question like this.

Perhaps you've experienced pain and hurt in a church. Maybe you've suffered abuse from other Christians or a Christian leader. If so, it might be that the thought of membership stirs up past anxieties and fears. Or maybe you struggle with commitment and for various reasons you want to keep yourself separate with the church at arms-length.

If that's you, I want to encourage you that God's good plan for his people is *still a good plan* because His word is still true and unchangeable. Like a family, belonging to other Christians in membership will be messy at times and painful too, but it is still profoundly beautiful.

An invitation

So, whether you've been a Christian for a short or a very long time, God's unchanging and infallible word reveals to us that the best way to live as Christians is gathered in meaningful, beautiful covenant accountability to Him and to each other.

I invite you to consider meaningful church membership with us at Bethany Baptist Church.

Yours in our Lord Jesus Christ

Pastor James Scott