6 Reasons Why Membership Matters

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“Why bother with church membership?”

I’ve been asked the question before. 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 do you think I should become a member?”-as if joining the church automatically signed you up to tithe by direct deposit.

For many Christians 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? Why box the Holy Spirit into member/non-member categories? Why bother joining a local church when I’m already a member of the universal Church?

Some Christians–because of church tradition or church baggage–may not be convinced of church membership no matter how many times “member” actually shows up in the New Testament. But many others are open to hearing the justification for something they’ve not thought much about.

Here are just a few reasons why church membership matters.

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.

Sometimes I think that we wouldn’t all be clamoring for community if we had actually experienced it. Real fellowship is hard work, because most people are a lot like us-selfish, petty, and proud. But that’s the body God calls us to.

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. Making a commitment makes a powerful statement in a low-commitment culture. Many bowling leagues require more of their members than our churches. Where this is true, the church is a sad reflection of its culture. Ours is a consumer culture were 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. I am here to give, more than get.”

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

But it’s not just about being cared for, it’s about making a decision and sticking with it-something my generation, with our oppressive number of choices, finds difficult. We prefer 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 one way to stop dating churches, and marrying one.

3. We can be overly independent. In the West, it's one of the best and worst thing about us. We are free spirits and critical thinkers. We get an idea and run with it. But whose running with us? And are any of us running in the same direction? Membership states in a formal way, "I am part of something bigger than myself. I am not just one of three hundred individuals. I am part of a body."

4. Church membership keeps us accountable. When we join a church we are offering ourselves to one another to be encouraged, rebuked, corrected, and served. We are placing ourselves under leaders and submitting to their authority (Heb. 13:7). We are saying, "I am here to stay. I want to help you grow in godliness. Will you help me to do the same?"

Mark Dever, in his book Nine Marks of a Healthy Church, writes,

Church membership is our opportunity to grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. By identifying ourselves with a particular church, we let the pastors and other members of that local church know that we intend to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer, and service. We allow fellow believers to have great expectations of us in these areas, and we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving with them, and we call for their commitment to serve and encourage as well.

5. Joining the church will help your pastor and elders be more faithful shepherds. Hebrews 13:7 says "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority." That's your part as "laypeople". Here's our part as leaders: "They keep watch over you as men who must give an account." As a pastor I take very seriously my responsibility before God to watch care for souls. At almost every elders' meeting the RCA Book of Church Order instructed us "seek to determine whether any members of the congregation are in need of special care regarding their spiritual condition and/or not making faithful use of the means of grace." This is hard enough to do in a church like ours where there is constant turnover, but it's even harder when we don't know who is really a part of this flock.

To give just one example, we try to be diligent in following up with people who haven't been at our church for a while. This is a challenge. But if you never become a member, we can't tell if you are really gone, because we might not be sure if you were ever here! It's nearly impossible for the elders to shepherd the flock when they don't know who really considers them their shepherds.

6. Joining the church gives you an opportunity to make promises. When someone become a member at University Reformed Church, he makes promises to pray, give, serve, attend worship, accept the spiritual guidance of the church, obey its teachings, and seek the things that make for unity, purity, and peace. We ought not to make these promises lightly. They are solemn vows. And we must hold each other to them. If you don't join the church, you miss an opportunity to publicly make these promises, inviting the elders and the rest of the body to hold you to these promises-which would be missing out on great spiritual benefit, for you, your leaders, and the whole church.

Membership matters more than most people think. If you really want to be a counter-cultural revolutionary, sign up for the membership class, meet with your elders, and join your local church.