

MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

By Steve Wyatt



“What’s the big deal about church membership?”

I’ve been asked that question [in various forms] many times. Sometimes it’s asked with a genuine curiosity: *“Pastor, can you give me a legitimate explanation for why membership matters?”* Other times it’s a loaded question: *“What should I even bother with joining some institutionalized Jesus club?”*

For many Christians, church membership sounds stiff and ritualistic, something you do at Rotary or the country club, but way too formalized for something as organic as the church. Even among those who agree that Christianity was never intended to be a Lone Ranger existence and that every believer needs to function in community with other believers, the question persists: *Why all the hoops? And why bother joining a local church when I’m already a member of the universal Church?*

At *The Crossroads*, we unapologetically emphasize the need for individual believers to make a definite statement of intention regarding church membership. We do not believe such a decision is, in any way, a salvation decision. But pragmatically speaking? There are several legitimate reasons and several compelling benefits for why church membership really does matter.

REASONS WHY MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

The reasons for church membership are many, but I would like to limit my rationale to those reasons which are clearly supported by Scripture.

❖ **Jesus loves His church.**

And having “loved the church,” Christ died for the church, “and gave Himself up for her.”¹

The Apostle makes it clear that the church is Jesus’ bride. Therefore, if we claim to love Jesus but reject His church? It’s as though we are saying, *“I love You, Jesus. But I can’t stand Your Bride...”*

He goes on to say, “After all, people have never hated their own bodies, but they feed and care for them, just as Christ does the church— for we are members of His body.”²

❖ **The Church is instructed to discipline its members.**

¹ Ephesians 5:25

² Ephesians 5:29-30

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Jesus tells us how to handle conflict between believers when He says, “If a brother or sister sins, go and point out the fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

If there is no such thing as church membership, how do you identify the group that is assigned this sensitive and weighty matter of confronting an unrepentant person and, ultimately, rendering a judgment about his standing in the community?

The “church” must be a definable group in order for an offended member to “tell it to the church.”

And what about excommunication? Paul deals with the necessity of putting someone out of the church when he writes: “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked person from among you.”³

I see two relevant implications here.

Obviously, there is an “inside” the church group and an “outside the church” group. Therefore, the church must be a definable entity.

Paul affirms that a person can, in fact, be expelled. Such an expulsion would not be possible if there was no clear membership in the first place.

❖ **Christians are told to submit to their leaders.**

Several New Testament passages indicate that individual Christians are to be submitted to a group of church leaders. But without an identifiable membership, *who are these people the New Testament is referring to who are supposed to submit to these leaders?* Obviously, some kind of expressed willingness or covenant has to be proceed submission.

“Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account.

³ I Corinthians 5:12-13
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Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.”⁴

“Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.”⁵

“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.”⁶

It’s difficult to see how we can take such commands seriously apart from a defining church membership.

❖ **Shepherds are required to care for their flock.**

It’s true, Elders can and should extend love to everyone, but is there a special responsibility and care they are expected to provide? The Bible says, “Yes!”

“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”⁷

“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”⁸

So...how are shepherds to know who their flock is...and for whom we will give an account to God?

“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”⁹

Did you catch those key phrases? “Under your care.” “Entrusted to you.” It’s just another way of saying, “the believers you are responsible for.”

⁴ Hebrews 13:17

⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

⁶ 1 Timothy 5:17

⁷ Acts 20:28

⁸ Galatians 6:10

⁹ 1 Peter 5:2-3

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Church membership matters because it defines to your shepherds whom they are accountable for.

When you become a Covenant Member at *The Crossroads*, you join yourself to a team of spiritual leaders that are commissioned to support and encourage you in your walk with Christ. And who covenant to provide care and counsel to you *first and foremost*, teaching and guiding you as the Lord directs.

❖ **The Metaphor of the Body**

Membership is also implied in the metaphor of the Body as described in I Corinthians 12:12-31. Although I commend the entire passage to you, the theme is well summarized in verses 12 and 27: “Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”¹⁰ “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”¹¹

There is something unnatural about a Christian attaching himself to a body without becoming a member of that body. There is a unity and an organic connection implied in this imagery. In fact, the New Testament offers no distinction for Christians who are not also accountable members of a local church.

Becoming a Christian means being united to Christ and union with Christ expresses itself in union with a local body of believers.

The New Testament clearly teaches that to be excluded from the local church is to be, in no small part, excluded from Christ. And that’s why, biblically speaking, the issue of membership matters.

It is our hope that, as the Lord leads, you will decide to take the necessary steps toward covenanting with us to become a visible part of *The Crossroads* church family.

BENEFITS OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

In addition to a solid biblical rationale for church membership, there are also several cultural benefits that underscore its value.

- ❖ By becoming a covenant member you make a visible commitment to Christ and to His Body. It’s easy to speak in glowing terms about the invisible church, but authentic biblical community is fleshed out in

¹⁰ I Corinthians 12:12

¹¹ I Corinthians 12:27

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the visible church...and membership is one way you can raise the flag of your faith.

- ❖ By becoming a covenant member you reflect a character of commitment in an uncommitted culture. The local bowling league requires more from their members than most churches...*and church membership is one way to reject the consumer-driven mindset that infects many modern believers.*
- ❖ By becoming a covenant member you actively resist hyper-independence and openly acknowledge that you are part of something bigger than yourself. Out here in the wild west, we are free spirits and critical thinkers. We get an idea and run with it. But who is running WITH us? And is anybody running in the same direction? *Church membership is one way I say, "I am part of something bigger than myself...doing 'church' is not just about me."*
- ❖ By becoming a covenant member you willingly make yourself accountable to godly leaders. There is a divine protection that comes from the spiritual covering of church leadership. But more than protection, I willingly offer myself to church leadership to be encouraged, rebuked, corrected and served. *Membership is one way of saying, "I am here to stay. I want to grow in godliness. Will you help me...?"*
- ❖ By becoming a covenant member you make it easier for your pastors and elders to be 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 your pastor, I take very seriously my responsibility before God to watch care for your soul. *Member is one way you make that awesome responsibility a bit easier, because it's nearly impossible to shepherd a flock that hasn't clearly asked me to be their shepherd.*
- ❖ By becoming a covenant member you give yourself the opportunity to make promises regarding your personal holiness and spiritual maturity. By identifying with a local church, we let the pastors know that we intended to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer and service. We allow fellow believers to have expectations of us in these assures and assure them that we want them to call on us to serve and encourage them as well. *Church membership is one way we grasp hold of each other in our pursuit of Christian maturity.*

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MEMBERSHIP REALLY DOES MATTER

I truly believe that church membership stimulates spiritual growth. It is my experience that accountability is heightened, fellowship is strengthened and involvement is more consistent when a believer makes a personal decision to join the fellowship of a local church.

Members who enter into a covenant with our church are called to a higher degree of responsibility, service and sacrifice.

Membership at *The Crossroads* isn't about joining a club or initiating you into fraternal rites of passage or even conferring special privileges. We call you into a movement, an army of like-minded fellow soldiers who, functioning in biblical community, love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength — and love our neighbors as ourselves {See Mark 12:30-31}.

It is not our ambition to lure people into our exclusive sub-culture, but to convert and challenge people to become devoted disciples, sold-out followers of Jesus.

God's agenda matters too much for us to be involved in hawking club memberships. And people matter too much to reduce the agenda of "following Christ" into some organizational involvement. But true church membership is a step of growth, not some institutionalized ritual.

Membership matters more than most believers think. I close with these questions I urge you to ask and then answer:

Question #1: *Am I currently an accountable member of a local church?*

I'm not asking if your name is on some list...but are you committed to the biblical standard of what it truly means to be a member of Christ's Body?

Question #2: *Have I publicly declared my willingness to be shepherded, protected and led by the leaders of my church?*

Question #3: *Am I engaging my gifts to organically minister to the other parts of Christ's Body?*

Question #4: *Do I show by my firm attachment to Christ's Bride that I am unquestionably attached to Christ?*

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If your answers are answered with anything less than an enthusiastic, “YES!”, let me ask this: *When you gave your life to Christ, didn't you want to become truly counter-cultural in your faith? Wasn't it your ultimate ambition to be a true revolutionary for Jesus? And isn't that still your passion?*

If so, then please! Stop taking the heavily-trampled path of cynicism and non-participation. Instead, make your move!

The first move I suggest is: Sign up for *The Crossroads' Covenant Membership Class* right now.

Church membership really is a blood-bought gift of God's grace. And it matters. More than we realize, I'm afraid. But it is truly a life-sustaining, faith-strengthening, joy-preserving vehicle of God's mercy to our hearts.

I urge you: *Don't cut yourself off from this blessing!* Sign up today!