

Why Become a Church Member?

The title of this introduction raises a good question, doesn't it? Even among those who support the idea of church membership, there are valid reasons to wonder why most churches have established membership roles as well as procedures for welcoming people into membership.

For example, we cannot overlook the fact that the word "membership" is not used anywhere in the Bible. No matter how hard you look, you will never find a verse or passage in the New Testament that directly commands believers to maintain membership roles or establish membership procedures. Such direct commands are simply never given. And there are no clear examples in the New Testament of written membership lists being kept.

With this in mind, one cannot help but wonder if the whole idea of church membership isn't an unnecessary addition to Scripture—a legalistic tradition added to the simplicity of the Christian life. If church membership is seen as such an addition, it is no wonder that it has become an unpopular idea.

Then, when one introduces into this discussion the individualistic philosophies of Western (particularly American) thought, church membership becomes even more unpopular. In a culture where *self-reliance*, *self-worth*, *self-esteem*, and *self-fulfillment* are considered to be the most desirable personal characteristics, membership in a local church, where mutual submission, accountability, and interdependence are the way of life, seems foreign and even counter-productive.

By the very fact that we have written this article, you know that we do value the idea of church membership. Hopefully, you have also become aware of how highly we value the Bible, not merely as the only message for the salvation of mankind and the divine standard for personal holiness, but also as the manual of instruction for the conduct of the church. With this in mind, we hope to answer your question, *Why should I join a church?* by giving you the following three biblical reasons for doing so.

Reason #1: Personal Safety

The worst thing that can happen to a Christian is not persecution, physical injury, or death. In many respects, these are the best things that can happen to us. Jesus said that we are blessed when we are "*persecuted for righteousness' sake*" (Matthew 5:10). Paul decided to "*take pleasure in infirmities . . . for Christ's sake . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong*" (2 Corinthians 12:10). Jesus said to His followers, "*My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do*" (Luke 12:4). This makes perfect sense, because for the believer, "*to be*

absent from the body" is "*to be present with the Lord*." None of these earthly threats should hold any sway over us whatsoever.

But there is one thing that should make us tremble, and that is the prospect of being overtaken by sin. Sin is what Christ suffered for on the cross (2 Corinthians 5:21). Sin grieves the Holy Spirit of God (Ephesians 4:30). Sin in the life of a true believer invites the discipline of the Father (Hebrews 12:5-8). And sin, if it characterizes the life of a professing Christian, may indicate that the profession of faith is false (Titus 1:16; 1 John 2:3-4). Even as those whose sins have been forgiven, we must never forget that sin is the one thing that sends people to eternal torment in hell.

As Christians, we are involved in a battle. Our arch-enemy is Satan who "*walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour*" (1 Peter 5:8). The way in which he devours unwary people is by tempting them to sin—by convincing them that sin is a more rewarding master than Christ. He therefore disguises himself and his agents, and he makes the pleasures of sin appear very appealing to us. And Satan does not just attack us from the front where we can clearly see him coming; he attacks from every side.

How much better it would be, then, to have spiritual eyes in the back of our heads. If we did, we could see "*the wiles of the devil*" much more clearly. Even alone, we could guard effectively against his schemes. But we don't have such panoramic spiritual vision, do we? In fact, it often seems that we don't even have very good peripheral vision. We need help! And that is precisely the purpose of the church—the fellow Christians to whom we unite ourselves in a relationship of accountability.

That is why we are told to "*exhort one another daily . . . lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin*" (Hebrews 3:13). That is why Paul said to the church at Rome that they, being "*full of all goodness, filled with all knowledge*," were to "*admonish one another*" (Romans 15:14). And that is why, in the familiar passage in Hebrews chapter 10, we are told to "*consider one another in order to stir up love and good works*." These passages all speak of the fellowship of the church as a *preventative* measure—a means of restraining one another from sin.

Never in the New Testament are Christians told to "tough it out" on their own. On the contrary, for the person who thinks he can do that, in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, Paul gives a number of Old Testament examples of failure—of sin that led to destruction. Then, in verses 11-12, he says that "*all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition . . . Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall*."

We are not called to live the Christian life apart from the protection of the church. The fellowship of a group of committed believers is vital to our spiritual health and to our endurance in the faith. The church, in the midst of this "*crooked and perverse generation*," is just as important for our survival as the ark was to Noah and his family; they simply would not have survived without it.

This need for the protection of committed brothers and sisters is seen most clearly in the fact that even with it, many Christians fall into sin. In Galatians 6:1, Paul writes, "*Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.*"

What Paul is describing here is a rescue mission. A soldier is down behind enemy lines having been wounded by enemy gunfire, and those who are able are to carefully, yet courageously rescue him. Paul is not describing a callous and prideful rebuke; he doesn't want us to ridicule the soldier for getting himself shot. In another place he writes, "*Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*" (2 Thessalonians 3:15). What he tells us to do is gently, cautiously pull this wounded soldier back to safety, watching that we don't get picked-off by the same enemy sniper who shot our brother. In this context, the lone soldier, apart from the protection of his platoon, has no chance of survival.

Likewise, when a person who maintains that his Christianity is "a private thing" is overcome by sin, he has no one to rescue him through such accountability. He may simply withdraw from the church he has attended, but never joined. If he has not committed himself to a particular body of believers, and they to him, he may weaken and die with no one ever realizing that he was even wounded.

Why should you join a church? Because your spiritual survival depends on it. In those churches where the fellowship always seems positive and upbeat, but no membership procedure is established, there may be a willingness to confront sin in a biblical manner, but there is no authority to take Christian accountability to its final degree when necessary. That kind of authority—the ability to properly and consistently exercise such loving accountability—is the subject of the next section.

Reason #2: Simple Obedience

We did say that membership is never directly commanded in the New Testament. But while it is never *directly* commanded, it is most definitely implied and also taught by example. This is most clearly seen in the commands given by Christ and the Apostle Paul regarding the removal of an unrepentant member from the church. In Matthew 18, verses 15-17, Jesus gives the church step-by-step instructions for dealing with a "*brother*" (a professing Christian) who falls into sin. If that "*brother*" persists in his

sinful behavior even after being confronted privately, the matter is to be told "*to the church*." Unless there is some kind of established dividing line—some way of knowing who is part of the church and who is not—we have no way of properly obeying Christ's command.

Further, if the brother still does not repent even after the matter is told to the church, he is to be considered "*a heathen and a tax collector*" (in other words, a non-Christian). Christ's clear meaning is that such a person is to be cast out of the fellowship of believers (the term "excommunication" is commonly used to describe this church action).

Paul uses even stronger language to describe the removal of an unrepentant "*brother*" from the church. In 1 Corinthians chapter 5, regarding a professing Christian who was leading a grossly immoral life, he tells that church to "*deliver such a one to Satan . . .*" (v. 5). He goes on to say that they were "*not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral . . . not even to eat with such a person*" (v. 11). Then, in verse 12, Paul makes a very interesting distinction. He writes, "*For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside?*" What did Paul mean by distinguishing between those who were "*outside*" and those who were "*inside*"? It seems clear that he was referring to some sort of separation between groups. Those who were "*inside*" must have been a recognized group—a list (even if it was not written down) of the people who comprised that local church. This group must have been bound together by more than just an informal relationship—not just a bond among people who *said* they were Christians (remember that the man who was cast out was "*named a brother*").

In other words, there must have been some system by which they *affirmed* one another as Christians—as members of that church. In what other way could these people have obediently followed Paul's instructions in verse 13 when he said, "*Therefore 'put away from yourselves the evil person?'*"? If a person were never affirmed or accepted as a member of that particular group, there would be no way to obey the command to remove him from that group.

In what other way could a Christian obey the command given in Hebrews 13:17, "*Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive . . .*"? How would a particular Christian know whom to obey, if not by committing himself to the leadership and care of a particular elder or group of elders? We certainly would not expect a Christian to follow the instructions or submit to the leadership of any and every person in his city, or state, or nation, who is considered a pastor. Think of the implications of that; think of the utter confusion that would certainly follow.

How else could a particular elder properly obey Paul's command in Acts chapter 20 when he passionately implored those in Ephesus to "*shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood*"? How would those Ephesian elders have known who in particular was under their care as a shepherd if not for some system of membership? For a moment, put yourself in the position of an elder. How else could you know which people comprise the group that Peter referred to as "*those entrusted to you*" (1 Peter 5:3)? What other way could you have of knowing those for whom you will be held accountable (cf. Hebrews 13:17)?

In addition to the commands to discipline and shepherd, believers are commanded to diligently care for one another—to "*do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith*" (Galatians 6:10). "*Love one another,*" Jesus says, "*as I have loved you,*" giving a command for Christians to love other Christians (John 13:34). The writer of Hebrews exhorts Christians to "*consider one another in order to stir up love and good works*" (Hebrews 10:24). How do we know who these *one anothers* are? How do we know who belongs to this "*household of faith*" if not for some system of membership?

The true intent of these commands is to demonstrate to the world that the church, in a given locality, is an intimately unified family—sons and daughters of God who rejoice together, struggle together, learn together, and grow together. These commands for commitment to "*one another,*" to the well-being of "*the household of faith,*" lose much of their emphasis when the church is nothing more than a loosely knit group of professing believers (and even admitted unbelievers in many cases).

Why should you join a church? Because it is an act of obedience to the commands of Christ and His New Testament Apostles. Where people come and go as they please, never demonstrating any kind of dedication or true commitment to a particular body of brothers and sisters in Christ, the church cannot be in subjection to Christ its Head; Christians cannot fulfill their purpose.

Reason #3: Christian Purpose

Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, instructing them to "*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling . . .*" (Philippians 2:12). In using the term "*work out,*" Paul was *not* telling those Christians to come up with their own plan for salvation (work out your own arrangement). He was also *not* telling them to work off a debt (like paying off a credit card) after it *seemed* that they had gotten something for free. Paul's meaning here comes from a single Greek word that is translated by the two English words, "*work out.*" It means, in simple terms, to fulfill your purpose—to accomplish that which you were meant to accomplish. Understanding, then, that every Christian was created by God for a purpose, we must ask ourselves what that purpose is.

Initially it seems that Christians have several purposes. We are meant to live a righteous and holy life so that God will be glorified (Matthew 5:16; Ephesians 2:10; Titus 3:1, 8, 14). We are commanded to do the work of evangelism (Matthew 9:36-38; 28:18-20; Mark 16:15). We are supposed to seek spiritual growth (2 Peter 3:11-18; Hebrews 5:12-14). We must be teachers and guardians of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Peter 3:15; 1 Timothy 6:20). And we are told to care for those in need (Matthew 25:31-46; Galatians 2:10; 6:10; James 1:27).

These various Christian behaviors and qualities are undeniably commanded in the Bible. But is the core of the Christian purpose really so varied? Should we merely seek balance as we try to be and to do all of these things? Or can our purpose be reduced to a more central idea?

We believe that the purpose for the Christian and for the church is better understood as a singular purpose—one that promotes balance and stimulates obedience to all these other commands. That singular purpose is love.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is love—to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. "*There is no other commandment greater than these*" (Mark 12:30-31). When Paul referred to the commandment to love our neighbor, he concluded by saying, "*Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law*" (Romans 13:10). And when Jesus gave His disciples "*a new commandment,*" it was that they should love one another as He loved them (John 13:34-35).

So it seems to us that our highest purpose—the one that encompasses and encourages all of the others—is the purpose of love. That is our supreme mission. And how are we to accomplish that mission? Are we supposed to be innovative? Should we strike out on our own initiative? Or do we have instructions to guide us in fulfilling our purpose? Have we been given a context in which love will be learned, taught, and lived according to God's design?

The New Testament speaks of the church as the context where biblical love should be given and experienced in its highest form. And most biblical references to the church are to the *local* church. When the New Testament writers speak of love, they use language that brings to mind unity among members and reliance upon one another. Nowhere do we find language that would encourage or affirm individuality.

For example, in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus he spoke of Christ the Head of the church, "*from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love*" (Ephesians 4:16).

Paul also pleaded with the Philippian Christians, saying, ". . . *fulfill my joy by being likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind*" (Philippians 2:2). After instructing the Colossians to "*put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering . . . forgiving one another . . .*," he said in conclusion, "*But above all these things put on love which is the bond of perfection*" (Colossians 3:12-14).

So the love of the New Testament is a "*likeminded*" love, a love that knits Christians together in fellowship and purpose, a love that bonds us together like the strongest glue. And all of this understanding is further affirmed by the New Testament metaphors used to describe the church—the metaphor of a building with individual Christians being building stones, and that of a body with every Christian being an integral and functioning body part.

When we relate Paul's description of the church as "*God's building*" (1 Corinthians 3:9) to Peter's description of individual Christians as "living stones" who are "*being built up a spiritual house*" (1 Peter 2:5), we can easily see the need for a strong glue (or cement if you prefer) to hold this building together. Love, as Paul says, is that perfect bond.

When Paul describes the church as a body in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, he consistently refers to the individual Christians as members of that body (vv. 12, 14, 18, 19, 20, 23, 25, 26, 27). Never does Paul, or any other biblical author describe a Christian as one who functions or exists in isolation from the whole. Paul closes 1 Corinthians chapter 12 by mentioning spiritual gifts given to individuals as the Holy Spirit wills. But then, in his very last sentence he writes, "*And yet I show you a more excellent way*" (v. 31). The entire next chapter speaks of the perfection of love—a thing that exceeds even faith and hope in greatness (1 Corinthians 13:13). "*Without love,*" Paul writes, "*I am nothing*" (13:2).

Where the New Testament presents love as "*the bond of perfection,*" and where the consistent metaphors that picture the church describe things which must be bound together in order to exist (a body or a building), love must represent something much greater than personal goodness or the idea of being nice to others. Even if an individual who remains uncommitted to a local church is loving on a personal level, the Bible still informs us that such a person cannot be exercising true Christian love according to its design. This is because Christian love is described as the bond that holds the building or the body (the church) together.

Why should you join a church? Because by committing yourself in that way you will help to fulfill your purpose as a Christian. It seems pretty obvious from these biblical metaphors of building stones and body parts that the Christian life was not meant to be lived alone. You, as a Christian, were designed and created by God, not for a life of individuality and self-will, but to fill a niche in the spiritual building called the church. And as any police officer will tell you, individual bricks that are left lying around, unattached to a building, are more often used for vandalism and burglary, than for their intended purpose.

With that in mind, consider the words of Charles Spurgeon regarding the obligation of every Christian to unite with a church in membership:

"I know there are some who say, 'Well, I have given myself to the Lord, but I do not intend to give myself to any church.'"

"Now, why not?"

"Because I can be a Christian without it."

"Are you quite clear about that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord's command as by being obedient? There is a brick. What is it made for? To help build a house. It is of no use for that brick to tell you that it is just as good a brick while it is kicking about on the ground as it would be in the house. It is a good-for-nothing brick. So you rolling-stone Christians, I do not believe that you are answering your purpose. You are living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live, and you are much to blame for the injury you do."

If you desire to be used by Christ in the building of His body the church, then carefully and prayerfully find a local body of believers with whom to unite in membership. There, in the committed relationship of a local church, you can be protected from the deceitfulness of sin. There you can be fully obedient to the Law of Christ, enabling and encouraging others to be obedient as well. And there you can "*work out your own salvation*" in the manner described in the pages of God's Word.

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