

Why Membership? By Mark Merrell

What do you think of when you hear the words “church membership?” Does it conjure up images of old bald men in suits wearing name tags and ushering people to their seats? Maybe you think of all the so-called “members” of churches you’ve attended that haven’t stepped foot inside its walls in years. Or, maybe when you think of “church membership” you think about fellow believers in Christ, who share similar beliefs and who have made a commitment to do life together... through good times and bad.

In this day and age of the mega-church, church membership has seemingly fallen to the wayside. The question that is so often asked is: why do I need to be a member of the church if I come every Sunday? What benefit does it really bring? Below, I will briefly discuss some Biblical and practical purposes behind church membership and will attempt to proffer an argument in favor of the practice.

In discussing church membership, the first thing that has to be examined is: what does it mean to be a “church.” Millions of books have been written on this subject, so I won’t pretend to act like I have any novel ideas. That said, I think we can set forth a few characteristics of “churches” that are universal. First of all, at its heart, “church” is simply a gathering of like-minded believers. Thus, by definition, it is communal and relational in nature. There is no better picture of this than with the early churches of the New Testament. These early churches consisted of new believers in Christ, struggling to find their way in the faith. They lived together, worked together, learned together. They were truly a community of like-minded believers who did everything they could to build each other up.

The obvious question is: what does this have to do with church membership? I would say ... everything—because the true benefit of membership is that it enhances all of the communal aspects of a church. Being a member of a church allows you to identify your fellow believers. It brings people together in a way that simply “coming” to a church can’t. Being a member allows us to truly do life together because we’re able to identify who exactly we’re doing life with! This ability to identify our fellow believers is essential to our growth as Christians, to our ability to serve our brothers and sisters... and to our ability to exalt the local church.

Another practical, but less obvious benefit of church membership is the way in which it protects the integrity of the gospel. The Bible calls us to be set apart from the world, to be a light in the face of darkness. If we identify our fellow believers—and have objective guidelines that we’re intent on keeping as members—it enables us to truly put forth a unified message to the world about the gospel. We’re able to say: “this is what the Christian life should look like and this is what His local church should be about.” These objective standards also allow us to enter into deeper, more meaningful relationships with one another, by ensuring that we are all running after the same goals. Our beliefs become more transparent and our struggles easier to talk about. In short, church membership enables true discipleship with your fellow believers to really take root.

Membership also allows us to take ownership in the local church. A lot of times people view membership as an exclusionary practice. They view it in a negative light—as if the practice, at its heart, is somehow about keeping people away from the gospel. I

see it just the opposite way. Membership, to me, is about being part of something bigger than yourself—about identifying with a cause that has eternal significance. It's not a negative in the least bit. In fact, it should be one of the most positive, God-glorifying things that a Christian can do. After all, God has a sincere desire to see His church exalted. What better way to do that than having devoted followers of Christ willing to boldly proclaim their desire to be part of his local church?

In the end, I sincerely believe that church membership is simply another way to bring glory and honor to Jesus' bride...the church. It is Biblical and practical. It shows the world that we are united behind one universal cause—proclaiming the name of Jesus to a broken world. It is not about being exclusive or judgmental. It is about being willing to stand with your fellow believers and commit to doing life together. It is about exuding a servant's heart, putting others above yourself, and taking a stand for the one who took a stand for you.