

Why bother with church membership?



Kevin DeYoung

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I get that question a lot. 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.

I think for many people 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 and classification? Why box the Holy Spirit into member/non-member categories?

Well, believe it or not, membership matters. In addition to some very tangible benefits to membership (for example, only members can hold church office), here's five good reasons why Christians should join a church.

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 clamouring 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 kind of group 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 Church commitment makes a powerful statement in a low-commitment culture.

Most bowling leagues require more of their members than most churches. The church is often a sad reflection of its culture. Ours is a consumer culture where 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 a few years, it's still not a bad idea to join a church. It lets your home church (if you have one) know that you are being cared for, and it lets us 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 the way to stop dating churches, and marry one.

3. Church membership keeps us accountable to each other.

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 (Hebrews. 13:17). 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."

4. Joining the church will help your pastor and elders be more faithful shepherds.

Hebrews 13:17 says "*Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.*" That's your part. Here's ours: "*They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.*" We take seriously our responsibility before God to watch over your souls. At almost every elders' meeting, as per our denomination's Book of Church Order, we "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 are trying to be more diligent in following up with people who haven't been at our church for a while. But if you never became a member, it is difficult to tell if you are really gone, because we might not be sure if you were ever here! It's nearly impossible to shepherd the flock when we don't know who really considers this their flock and really considers us their shepherds.

5. **Joining the church gives you an opportunity to make promises.**

When you become a member here, you make 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 may miss an opportunity to publicly make these promises, and in so doing, invite 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 and for us.

Think about why membership might matter more than you thought. And if you are looking to make a counter-cultural commitment and invite more accountability and responsibility into your life, why not join a church?

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