

# DOES MEMBERSHIP MATTER?

## ENCOURAGING A DEEPER COMMITMENT

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The concept of church membership has gone through some dramatic changes in the last couple of generations. There was a day when for churches, as for certain elite credit cards, "membership had its privileges," and people wanted to be members of a church. It was good for business. They liked the association. It was "my family's church," even if they didn't attend more than once a year. In such churches membership rolls were much larger than weekly attendance.

With the emergence of casual, come-as-you-are churches, the dynamic shifted. More people were happy to attend but not to commit themselves to anything. These congregations, not wanting to put unnecessary barriers in the way of people hearing the gospel and feeling welcome in the church, downplayed membership. In these churches, attendance is often several times the size of the actual membership.

All of this reveals the confusion about what church membership actually means. If people see church membership as just another social club or fraternity they're joining, then that's a problem. If people don't see the need to join a church, if they can attend and enjoy the services and ministries without further commitment, that's a problem too.

Becoming a member of a church is a step of maturity. It's identifying with a group of brothers and sisters who have committed themselves to Christ and to one another. While the Bible doesn't refer to church membership in the technical sense, it certainly describes the importance of being "a member of the body." And that's the spirit of the key biblical concept of membership; it means we are vital members of a larger body. This body is both the congregation to which we belong and also the mystical (though very real) body of Christ. "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" ([Romans 12:4-5](#)).

There are some important by-products of this relationship. For the church, having a clear step of membership is the church's primary opportunity to define the type of community it wants to be. It's "define the relationship" time. Every relationship that goes beyond a casual, no-expectations, just show up (or don't show up if you don't feel like it) level eventually has to have some understandings in place. What is this community all about? What do we hope to accomplish? Who can we count on to help us? How will decisions be made? What behaviors are encouraged? What behaviors are unacceptable? How will differences be handled? These are all aspects that require people's consent. This is what the membership process clarifies.

I've appreciated what Ken Sande, who is both a church leader and a lawyer, has said about his church's membership process: "Our first priority is making sure a person has a credible profession of faith and understanding of the gospel. We also cover the theology of the church, our polity, our vision, how we handle conflicts, and an understanding of

church discipline. Finally, it is helpful to discuss expectations for members regarding giving, respecting leadership, and serving in the community. The membership process will be different in every church, but it is important to treat it as a significant event. When we treat it casually, it sends the message that membership is casual."