

Seed Partnership Step 1 - Understanding Why Church Membership Matters

Seed's church membership process is called Partnership. As a family Partner of Seed Communities, members commit to supporting our mission: *to gather to Christ, grow in Community and to go into Culture*. Specifically, we commit to submit to the Word of God, respond in the worship of God, live in the community of God, and join in the mission of God.

1. CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IS IMPLIED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament contains at least five strands of evidence for local church membership. Each one reveals something vital to Christian faith which would be minimized or denied if there were no definable local church membership.

I. Body Life & Benefits

Church membership is implied in the metaphor of the body of Christ.

"The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." 1 Corinthians 12:21-26 ESV

There is a unity and organic relationship implied in the imagery of the body. There is something unnatural about a Christian attaching himself to a body of believers for mutual edification and upbuilding in Christ and *not* choosing to be a functioning covenant member of that body.

There are at least 5 distinct benefits to Partnership at Seed.

1. **It commits you, the Christian.** It's good to commit yourself to love and serve others. You will grow as a Christian as you commit to encourage, build up, strengthen, serve, rebuke, and pray for other Christians.
2. **Others are committed to you.** Becoming a Partner at Seed means joining with an entire group of Christians in Ventura County who have now covenanted to watch over *you* spiritually. When you're a member of our church you have an entire church full of people who are publicly committed to loving *you* and serving *you* and watching over *you*.
3. **Elder protection.** If you're a Partner at Seed, the elders and pastors commit to care for you, pray for you, and personally counsel and teach you. As a member of this local church, the elders are accountable to God for how they lead you. (Heb 13:17)
4. **Safety net.** In his book *Stop Dating the Church*, Josh Harris points out that it's comforting to know his church would kick him out rather than tolerate his unrepentant sin. We like that. Being a Seed Partner means that a whole church full of people are committed to helping you live a life that's pleasing to God, even to the point of excluding you from the church if you stop repenting of sin. While this sounds harsh to some, to those of us who know the deceitfulness of sin, this is an immensely comforting and encouraging reality (Heb. 3:12).
5. **Assurance.** Partnership at Seed is our church's affirmation of the validity of someone's profession of faith (Matt. 16:19, 18:18). The church looks at a person's life, hears their explanation of the gospel and how they came to believe it, and says, "You look like a Christian to us. So join us. Watch over our lives and we'll watch over yours." So while membership in a church doesn't guarantee that someone is a Christian, it should assure believers of the genuineness of their faith.

It is also important to note that this is the context where church leaders are recognized, developed, and appointed.

II. **Shepherding**

Church membership is implied in the way the New Testament requires elders to care for the flock in their charge. Obviously, elders can extend their focus and care to anyone within the limits of their ability. However, the question is whether or not the Bible gives elders a special responsibility to care for a specific group or community of people within the church they oversee.

On the premise of New Testament passages like those below, Seed Elders hold the position that it is the responsibility and stewardship as under-shepherds to care for the Christians joined together as a “flock” gathering at Seed.

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to *all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” Acts 20:28 ESV

“Shepherd *the flock of God that is among you*, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” 1 Peter 5:2-3 ESV

“Obey *your leaders* and submit to them, for *they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account*. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” Hebrews 13:17

Servant leadership and joyful submission characterize the relationship between members and the Shepherds of a local body.

III. **Submission**

Church membership is implied in the biblical requirement of all Christians to be submitted to a group of church leaders (elders/pastors). Without church membership, who is it that the New Testament is referring to who must submit to a specific group of leaders?

Seed operates under the notion that some form of expressed willingness, agreement, or covenant has to precede a person’s submission to a group of leaders according to these passages.

“Obey *your leaders* and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. *Let them do this with joy and not with groaning*, for that would be of no advantage to you.” Hebrews 13:17 ESV

“We ask you, brothers, to *respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord* and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace *among yourselves*.” 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 ESV

How is this leadership and submission going to work if there is no official membership set in place to define who has made the commitment to be led and who has been chosen to lead? If we neglect the importance of membership, it is difficult to see how we could take these commandments seriously and obey them practically.

Furthermore it is also difficult to see how discipleship, accountability, and discipline can be in operation.

IV. Discipline

Church membership is implied by the way the church is supposed to discipline its members. The church appears to be the final court of appeal in matters of church authority as it relates to membership.

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Matthew 18:15-17 ESV

“Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.” 1 Timothy 5:19-21 ESV

If there is no such thing as church membership, how do we define the group of people who will take up this extremely delicate and important matter of exhorting those who are unrepentant and finally rendering a righteous judgment about their standing in Christian community? It’s hard to believe that just anyone who shows up claiming to be a Christian should be a part of this process.

Surely, “the church” must be a definable group in order to handle such weighty matters so that we know who the Scripture is referencing when it says “take it to the church.” In the unfortunate circumstance that a brother or sister persists in sin that dictates their removal from fellowship, there must be a defined body and group of leaders who will carefully and prayerfully follow the biblical process.

V. Excommunication

Church membership is implied by the simple fact that excommunication even exists. Paul implies this where he deals with the necessity of putting someone out of the church. He says:

“For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’” 1 Corinthians 5:12-13 ESV

“This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” 1 Timothy 1:18-20 ESV

There are two significant implications here: One is that there is an “in the church” group and an “outside the church” group. Being in the church is definable. The other implication is that a person can be removed from being “in the church.” Such a formal removal would not be possible if there were no such thing as a clear membership. The question is, who is an accountable and committed part of this body, and who is not?

2. CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IS GOSPEL-CENTERED

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:35 ESV

Becoming a part of a church is first and foremost a covenant with God. It is to commit to being a genuine and passionate disciple of Jesus. Discipleship requires context. Just as fish requires water and plants require soil, so a disciple of Jesus requires the context of the loving local church. Therefore, a person’s commitment to the local church is always first a commitment to Jesus as one of his followers.

Many people view churches as an unnecessary, or even manipulative institution not particularly valuable for spiritual growth or personal well-being. This mindset has only increased in our postmodern and post-Christian society. Because of this, joining a church is one of the most counter-cultural things a person can do. Becoming a Seed Partner means leaving behind the comfort of individualism and consumerism and voluntarily allowing yourself to be bound to others. Why do we ultimately do this?

Because Jesus joyfully left behind his comfort and bound himself to us in the gospel.

In the gospel, Jesus bounded Himself to humanity for our good, motivated by his love for his Father and his love for his neighbors. We therefore, joyfully do the same.

3. NEXT STEPS

Sign up online for our next Partnership class. We hold them infrequently and typically have information on the next class date available at the connect cart. We cover our theology, our ministries, and leave room for Q&A with some of our leaders.

The final step involves an informal meeting with a Pastor, before we welcome you to the Seed Family! Please contact sross@seed805.com for any additional questions.