

Why Church Membership?

1 Pet 5:1-3. We've been working our way through a series on our core values this Fall, talking about the characteristics of our church that define us and drive us. The qualities and attributes that describe who we are and what we do, at the core. (**Core Values**) From bold preaching, passionate worship, and fervent prayer; to courageous evangelism, intentional discipleship, and strategic church planting. Those are our core values.

And while that list is complete, there's one *more* aspect to all this, one more practice, that ties them all together and helps us live them out. Church membership. (**Intro**)

➤ You might think of it as the sides of a sandbox; that keep the sand and toys *together*; the things we *value* as kids. Remove the sides, and all you have is a mess. A little sand here, a few toys there, and no place to play. At least not a good one.

Unfortunately, some people *object* to membership because the word is not *found* in the Bible. But in so doing, they ignore the *principles* of membership. It's like denying that birds who swim, waddle, quack, and fly are *ducks* because they're not labeled.

Others, *recognize* the principles and benefits of membership, but think of it like Sam's Club; or a country club. If you pay your dues, you get special treatment.

But such a view superimposes a worldly *perspective*, on a biblical issue. It's a consumer mindset that asks, "What can I get, instead of what can I give?"

If that's you, I hope to change that. And if you're *not* a member, either by objection or complacency, I hope you join. And if you are, I hope you'll be encouraged by this.

➤ The *first* reason for church membership is based on the principle of the church, as a flock. 1 Pet 5. Having just told us to do good even in the midst of suffering, Peter says . . .
*So I exhort the elders among you [the leaders of the church], as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed [in other words he has the authority and credentials to say this]: [2] shepherd the flock of God that is among you [as in watch over it; help those who comprise the flock; care for them, teach them, love them], *exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; [3] not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.**

Shepherd, *the flock* he says. The flock of *God*, v2. And be *examples* to the flock. Referring to who? Believers. Those who confess and follow Jesus as Lord and Savior, in a local church. A local church, because v2 says – *shepherd the flock of God that is among you*. Around you. Beside you. Not *every* believer in a city or region; just those in your church. And not *every* person who darkens the door; just believers. The sheep.

Which means, we need a way to *identify* them. A way to differentiate between those who pay *lip* service to Jesus, and those who truly *follow* him. A way to determine who is and who isn't, part of *the flock of God* among us.

Enter church membership.

It's a necessary means of identifying the flock (1 Pet 5:1-3)

A necessary means of identifying those who are sheep instead of goats, Mt 25 (32ff).

Without a formal membership, and a formal membership *process*, it's often impossible to know who the flock *is*, let alone shepherd them. Especially in a larger church. Leaving us to guess, and inevitably *miss* some. Failing to honor God's command, as elders.

Church membership helps prevent that. Helps us discern who's a genuine believer, and who we should extend *the right hand of fellowship* to. (Gal 2:9) Who's *serious* about their faith and wants to live under the authority of God's Word. Committing to serve, abide, love and tithe.

If our elders are going to shepherd the *flock* like Peter says, if we're going to live in obedience and take his admonition seriously, we have to know who *comprises* it. We have to *identify* the flock. That's the first reason for membership. The first side of the sandbox.

The second, is that . . .

It's a tangible demonstration of a spiritual reality (1 Cor 12:27; Gal 6:10)

4 realities in fact. Realities that guard our hearts against a lone ranger mentality, and spare us from the aches of loneliness. Starting with the body of Christ.

Having embraced God's free gift of salvation, membership is a tangible demonstration of the spiritual reality . . .

• **That we are members of the same body**

Like Paul says in 1 Cor 12:27, speaking to the local church in Corinth. *You are the body of Christ [he said] and individually members of it*. And Rom 12:5 says – *We, though many, are one body in Christ*.

Paul uses the metaphor of our body, to show that while we are unique and different, we're also connected. Just like the unique parts of our *physical* body. It's a spiritual reality. And membership is a tangible demonstration of it. When you become a member here, you're confirming and *displaying* your spiritual connection to this body.

Second, membership demonstrates the spiritual reality . . .

• **That we are part of the same household**

The household of faith. Like Paul refers to the church in Gal 6:10. *Let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith*. Or as Peter says it – *You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house*. 1 Pet 2:5.

It's a metaphor. Intangible and invisible, but every bit real. And membership reveals it; demonstrates it. That we comprise a *visible* house, a local church, just like we comprise a spiritual house; the household of faith.

Third, membership demonstrates the spiritual reality . . .

• **That we belong to the same family**

We're not just servants with similar roles, but sons with the same inheritance. Daughters of the same king. Brothers and sisters in Christ. We don't just coexist, we're connected. Because those who believe in Jesus are given the right to become *children of God* the Bible says. (Jn 1:12) Children of the same Father. Children in the same family. With an *abundance* of brothers, mothers, sisters, and children Jesus said. (Mark 10:29-30)

All of which is demonstrated and portrayed by church membership. Belonging together in *this* family with an abundance of brothers, mothers, and sisters.

And last, church membership demonstrates . . .

• **That we are citizens of the same kingdom**

Having been delivered *from the domain of darkness and transferred* to the kingdom of light, we're in this together. (Col 1:13) We've entered *the eternal kingdom* [the eternal rule and reign] *of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* Peter says. (2 Pet 1:11)

And membership demonstrates it. Declaring outwardly, that we're in. Fellow citizens. *Partnering* together, to do more than we could alone. Pooling our resources to advance the kingdom. Right here.

4 spiritual realities that are tangibly demonstrated by church membership. And deserve our emphasis and participation. That's the second reason. The second side.

Third, is that . . .

It's a public expression of a personal commitment (Rom 15:1-6)

An outward way, to convey what's inward. A formal way, to convey what's important. Not only *because* it's important, but because personal commitments made public tend to stick. At least for those who take them seriously.

It starts with love. Church membership is a public expression of a personal commitment . . .

1. To love one another

1 Jn 3:11 says – *We should love one another*. We should put the interests of our brothers and sisters in Christ ahead of our own. And show brotherly affection to one another. And bless each other. Because a love for Jesus means a love for his bride; the church. And just like he expressed his love for *us* publicly, at the cross; we ought to express our love for another publicly. Not *just* in membership, but certainly including it.

Second, membership is a public expression of a personal commitment . . .

2. To bear with one another

Rom 15:1-6. V1 says – *We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves*. Meaning we have an obligation to be *patient* with each other. Bear *with* one another. Stay the course when people fail us; or disappoint us; or offend us. Hefty obligations for sure. Requiring personal commitments and public expressions to keep them.

Third, it's a commitment . . .

3. To build one another up

Rom 15:2-3 – *Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up*. [3] *For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”* Jesus not only took our *sins* on himself, but the *accusations* of sin. Reproaches from the evil one to tear us *down*. And he did so for 2 reasons: to build *us* up, and serve as our example to do the same. Just like it says in v2. *Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up*.

Of all the people who qualify as your *neighbor*, shouldn't your brothers and sisters in Christ sitting next to you be near the *top* of the list? People with whom you worship, and do ministry, and live life? And wouldn't *publicly* expressing your commitment to them help move you from good intentions to good fruit? To *actually* build them up instead of just thinking about it? Membership encourages us to build one another up.

4th, membership is a commitment . . .

4. To live in harmony

After just quoting the Old Testament in v3, Paul tells us why. *For whatever was written in former days* [referring to the Old Testament] *was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope*. It's a key verse in the Bible, telling us that the Old Testament is still useful. And still applies. From the example of those who've gone before us, to the principles found in the Law. Encouraging us to keep on, full of hope.

But it's the next verses, where Paul riffs off that, where we find the point.

[5] *May the God of endurance and encouragement* [the one who wrote the Scriptures] *grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus* [in harmony with him], [6] *that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

It's a prayer of sorts, to say, “God, give them the peace and unity you *desire* in your church. Give them the harmony that's so attractive to others, and glorifying to you.” Something no doubt God will do if we *yield* ourselves to him, and commit to it. Commit to *live* in harmony.

Isn't that how it often works in God's design? That when we commit to his desires, he grants them? And when we go *public* with those commitments, he solidifies them? It is. And it leads to harmony.

And then 5th, membership is a public expression of a personal commitment . . .

5. To serve one another

Like 1 Pet 4:10 says – *As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another*. In your church. The New Testament was written to local *churches*. And once again, publicly expressing such a commitment, leads to its fulfillment. It's a way of saying, “Not only *can* you count on me, but I *want* to be counted on. I want to be as involved in God's work here as I possibly can.” (Summary)

5 commitments, that every single one of us should make. Hide behind a shroud of anonymity no longer. Remain in the shadows no more. Step out in faith, and go *public*.

And then last, the 4th reason for church membership, is that . . .

It's a valuable means of sanctifying our lives (Heb 13:7,17)

A valuable means of conforming us more and more into the image of Christ. A valuable means of keeping us spiritually healthy and on the right track; spiritually connected and full of life. Church membership isn't just about us, but you. Because when you're fully connected, when you're all in, there's life and growth. For 3 reasons. First . . .

• **Because it encourages us to acknowledge and imitate our leaders**

Membership is a valuable means of sanctifying your life, because it encourages you to acknowledge our leadership, and imitate them. The very thing we're commanded to do.

Heb 13:7. *Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith*. Remembering your leaders requires acknowledging them in the first place. And considering the outcome of their way of life requires reflecting on what got them there, and then replicating their faith to get there

yourself. Mature yourself.

All of which church membership fosters and encourages. Because it clearly *identifies* our leaders, both in our church and in our hearts, and reminds us that we need them. If we don't, why are we commanded to remember them, and consider them, and imitate them?

We *have* leaders, and we need leaders. We *have* pastors, and we need pastors. We *have* elders, and we need elders. Because left to ourselves, we don't grow.

Second, membership is a valuable means of sanctifying our life . . .

- **Because it measures our willingness to submit**

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

Membership is a valuable means sanctifying our lives because it measures our willingness to *submit*. Our willingness to joyfully yield to the discretion and direction of the men God has ordained to *lead* our church. Our willingness to listen and *obey* them; do what they say in matters of life and godliness.

Which *none* of us come by naturally. Every single one of us has an authority issue. And membership addresses it. First by exposing it, and then by giving us an opportunity to counter it. To formally place ourselves under the loving guidance, and loving care, and loving instruction of those who lead. And whether we do or not, measures our willingness to submit. It's a valuable means of sanctifying our lives.

And last, it's valuable . . .

- **Because it holds us accountable**

Not that we're the morality police, going around *looking* for things that are wrong. But responding to the open *invitation* that church membership is. An invitation to be prayed for. And encouraged. And challenged. And spurred on. And sometimes *pleaded* with. All to live a life worthy of our calling. Membership is about *that* kind of accountability.

Or to think of it another way, it's a constant call for help. An open line to say, "Help me. Help me grow, help me learn, help me avoid temptation, and help me glorify God."

Membership is an open invitation and constant call for help, to be held accountable to God's standard of living. And as such, it's an extremely valuable means of sanctification.

➤ 4 principles, 4 reasons, 4 sides of the sandbox of church membership. And I hope you step in. I hope you make the commitments and join. For our sake *and* yours. And if you already have, I hope you're encouraged.

Prayer – Lord, build your church. Build *our* church. Add to our number those who are being saved, and those who are being sanctified; especially in membership. Break down walls, break through fear, and break hard hearts. For your glory and our joy.

You Are Loved