In a day when commitment is a rare commodity, it should come as no surprise that church membership is such a low priority to so many believers. Sadly, it is not uncommon for Christians to move from church to church, never submitting themselves to the care of elders and never committing themselves to a group of fellow believers.

To neglect—or to refuse—to join a church as a formal member, however, reflects a misunderstanding of the believer’s responsibility to the body of Christ. And it also cuts one off from the many blessings and opportunities that flow from this commitment. It is essential for every Christian to understand what church membership is and why it matters.

The Definition of Church Membership
When an individual is saved, he becomes a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Because he is united to Christ and the other members of the body in this way, he is therefore qualified to become a member of a local expression of that body.

To become a member of a church is to formally commit oneself to an identifiable, local body of believers who have joined together for specific, divinely ordained purposes. These purposes include receiving instruction from God’s Word (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2), serving and edifying one another through the proper use of spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-31; 1 Pet. 4:10-11), participating in the ordinances (Luke 22:19; Acts 2:38-42), and proclaiming the gospel to those who are lost (Matt. 28:18-20). In addition, when one becomes a member of a church, he submits himself to the care and the authority of the biblically qualified elders that God has placed in that assembly.

The Basis for Church Membership
Although Scripture does not contain an explicit command to formally join a local church, the biblical foundation for church membership permeates the New Testament. This biblical basis can be seen most clearly in (1) the example of the early church, (2) the existence of church government, (3) the exercise of church discipline, and (4) the exhortation to mutual edification.

The Example of the Early Church
In the early church, coming to Christ was coming to the church. The idea of experiencing salvation without belonging to a local church is foreign to the New Testament. When individuals repented and believed in Christ, they were baptized and added to the church (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 16:5). More than simply living out a private commitment to Christ, this meant joining together formally with other believers in a local assembly and devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42).

The epistles of the New Testament were written to churches. In the case of the few written to individuals—such as Philemon, Timothy and Titus—these individuals were leaders in churches. The New Testament epistles themselves demonstrate that the Lord assumed that believers would be committed to a local assembly.
Testament (e.g., Heb. 10:24-25) and exercising their spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-7; 1 Pet. 4:10-11). Mutual edification can only take place in the context of the corporate body of Christ. Exhortations to this kind of ministry presuppose that believers have committed themselves to other believers in a specific local assembly. Church membership is simply the formal way to make that commitment.

**Conclusion**

Living out a commitment to a local church involves many responsibilities: exemplifying a godly lifestyle in the community, exercising one’s spiritual gifts in diligent service, contributing financially to the work of the ministry, giving and receiving admonishment with meekness and in love, and faithfully participating in corporate worship. Much is expected, but much is at stake. For only when every believer is faithful to this kind of commitment is the church able to live up to her calling as Christ’s representative here on earth. To put it simply, membership matters.

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