

# **Belong: The What, Why, and How of Church Membership**

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Several years ago, I went to a Mission Fuge camp in Nashville with several of our students. We went to do various mission work all throughout the city. One of the things I was most excited about was going downtown to help with the soup kitchen that feeds the homeless. I was really excited about getting to serve them, as well as having the opportunity to share the Gospel with some of the homeless people there. I got to know a guy while we were there, we will call him Rick. We had a certain evangelism tool we were going to use as we ministered to the people there, and one of the questions we were supposed to ask was, "Where do you go to church?" The idea behind that question is that it would give us a reading on if they were a Christian, and if they were a part of a local church. As Rick and I were having a conversation, I asked him where he went to church. He turned to me and said, "Church? This IS my church! I love Jesus, and Jesus says wherever two or three people are, there is where He is. I don't need a place like that (he pointed up to a church building with a steeple in the distance). That's an institution, and that's not what Jesus had in mind. What Jesus had in mind was for us to love Him, love everybody, and if we do that, that is church." He's not the only one who feels that way.

To a large degree, I think our culture questions if the local church is really important, and whether it's important to be a part of it. In fact, in a recent blog, Donald Miller, a very popular Christian writer and author who wrote [Blue Light Jazz](#), admitted that he finds no need to go to church. He says he doesn't get anything out of the sermon, and he doesn't connect with God through worship. For him, everything he does is church to him. The way he works, that is how he experiences God, and he finds no need to actually go to a place to hear a sermon and sing a song.

Maybe you wouldn't say that, but perhaps some of you are wondering the same thing. Is what we're doing really important? To some of us, church really is the way Donald Miller sees it. It's just a place we come to get

something. It's just a preaching point; you come here, hear a sermon, and you go home. That's really all of the value you see in a church. The problem with that is the only value is just a preaching point. I promise you that you can hear podcasts that will sound better than this sermon I am going to preach. The Church is much more than just a preaching point. It's much more than just a place we come to hear a sermon; though it is that. It's also a body of believers who gather together to do something significant, and that is be the body of Christ. What we are saying is that we want you to formally join us to be the Church at Hardin. The whole goal of why we want you to belong, to become a member, is that we want you to formally belong to us; not just to attend church, but to actually *be* the Church at Hardin.

## **The Church & Church Membership**

I want to ask three questions as we talk about Church membership:

- 1. What is Church membership?**
- 2. Why should I be a Church member?**
- 3. How do I become a Church member?**

Those are the three questions I want to answer as we start our four week series on Church membership. As we think about these three questions in relation to Church membership, I realize there are at least two different audiences that I'm talking to. Some of you are members, and some of you aren't. The members might wonder why in the world they should sit through a four week series about Church membership. Here's what we want if you are a member; we want you to have a renewed vision for what it means to be a Church member. We want you to get excited about being a Church member and what that means. We want you to evaluate whether you are doing what a Church member is expected to do at Hardin Baptist Church.

Some of you are regular attendees. You're here all the time, you're participating, you're gathering, connecting, giving, going; you're doing all the things we expect of a member. Why not formally commit to do what you are already doing practically? It's an easy step; just join and publicly say I'm a part of Hardin Baptist Church.

Maybe you're an occasional attendee and you just come every once in a while. During this series, I hope you see the value of the Church, and the value of being a member. If you're not a member, we want to encourage you to pray about joining us. Pray about formally committing to this body of believers to truly be the Church at Hardin.

## The Church

If we are going to ask you to become a member, we have to understand what it means to be a Church member. Before we talk about church membership, we need to define the word 'Church.' What is the Church? In Matthew 16:18, Jesus tells Peter, *"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."* This is after Peter has just confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. I think he is saying yes, and on that confession, I'm going to build my Church.

There are two things I want to point out in this about the Church:

- 1. Jesus built**
- 2. Jesus owned**

Jesus said, "I will build..." This is Jesus' doing. We didn't create, or come up with, the Church; He owns it. Not only that, He said I will build MY Church. What does Church mean? In the Greek, it's ***Ecclesia***. You've heard that word used in reference to the Church. ***Ecclesia*** means 'a gathering; an assembly.' In Greek culture, it's used to say there is a civic organization that is gathered; a collection or body of people. Jesus is saying that He will build His gathering; His assembly. Later, it is actually referred to as a body, and a bride, among other things.

So, what exactly is the Church? Bro. Ricky defines the Church as this, "It's a body of baptized believers who meet together to carry out the agenda of heaven." The Church is a people; it's not a place. That's very important for you to know about the Church. It's not this building that is Hardin Baptist Church. It's not the walls, the stage, the chairs; it is you that is

Hardin Baptist Church. We, as baptized believers who have gathered together, are the Church.

There are several metaphors that describe the Church: a body, a bride, a flock, and a family. There are more metaphors that describe the Church, but I want you to see how these really encompass that it is a people, not a place. Paul calls it a body; individual members who come together as a body. It is a bride; a living thing that Jesus loves, and died for. It is a flock. It is a picture of all these sheep coming together. It's also a family; adopted children who come into this new family of God.

Jesus called it a gathering, not a place. The biblical metaphors show that it's not a place. It's a people gathered to be the Church; the Ecclesia of Christ. That's what the Church is. It is not just a preaching point, not just a place you come to sing, it is you being something. You are being the Church; you are being the body of Christ. That's why it's important to be a member of the local Church.

- **A Local Church and the Universal Church**

There's the universal Church and there's a local Church. If you are a Christian, you are part of the universal Church; the bride of Christ. Everyone is part of that as a believer. As we see in the New Testament, there is significance in being a part of the local church. The local church is us; HBC. What you see in the New Testament is that is inconceivable to be a Christian and not be part of a local Church; to be part of a local body to show and express who you are, which is the body of Christ. The Church is an assembly that Jesus built, and Jesus owns; both universal and local. It's important to join and be part of that local body to express who you are.

## **What is Church Membership?**

It is formally belonging to a local fellowship of believers to be the Church. That's what we believe Church membership is. It is saying that yes, I am part of you, and yes, you are part of me. It is an understanding; a known thing. It is something that we have to make public among one another to formally say yes, I belong to this Church. Membership is all about formally being a member of that gathering that Jesus is putting together.

1 Corinthians 12:27 says, *"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."* He is writing to the Church at Corinth, to a specific local Church, and he said, *"You are the body of Christ."* In other words, you guys together are the body of Christ. Then he says, *"And individual members of it."* He is saying this Church is the body of Christ, but each person that's part of that gathering is a part of the body of Christ. If you look at that whole text, he says there is an ear, a nose, and a foot, and everyone has to come together to do their part to truly be the body, to build up the body, and to be that expression of the body of Christ. Paul would say to us at Hardin, hey Hardin, you guys are the body of Christ. You, in this community, are an expression of the body of Christ. Individuals who are members of this Church, you are individual members of this body.

Are you doing your part? Are you doing your part to help grow this body, to help nurture this body, and to help advance the kingdom through this body? One of the things we see in Church membership is mutual commitment. That's the big idea; mutual commitment, mutual accountability, mutual submission, and mutual encouragement that happens through Church membership.

Paul says the Church at Ephesus is submitting to each other out of reverence for Christ. The Church at Ephesus is submitting to one another. Members are submitting to other members; they are accountable to one another. They are connecting with one another and encouraging one another. When there is a wrong that is done, they are forgiving one another. They are in it for one another, not for themselves. There is mutual commitment between the members at the Ephesus Church; that is member to member. Also, there is a commitment from member to leadership, and leadership to members.

- **The Role of Leadership**

As a member, you are also submitting to the leadership of the Church. And as the leadership of the Church, we are entrusted to watch over you. The question is, without Church membership, how does this play out? Hebrews 13:17 says, *"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."* If you are not a member among us, then what does it mean when it says submit to your leaders? Who are your leaders? Does that mean every Christian leader? Is that every Christian leader throughout the country and across the world? Paul is saying that there is a specific group of leaders, your leaders, which implies you belong to the group that the leaders are over. Those leaders are supposed to be entrusted and have care over the flock that is under them. It says they are to give an account for you, so who are the leaders responsible for? There has to be some sort of membership going on there where the members know these are my leaders, and the leaders know these are the people under me. We see in Church membership that there is mutual commitment between members and leadership. That's why it's really important to join and to be a member of a local Church.

- **Is it Biblical?**

The big question is this; is this really biblical? Your first motivation for joining the Church should be this: if it's biblical, I'm going to do it. If Jesus wants me to do this, I'm going to do it no matter what. For me, that was my big step. I want to be a person who lives by the Word of God. I would say absolutely, Church membership is biblical. Look at the Book of Acts. From the very beginning, we see a pattern of conversion and connection. We have 120 disciples of Jesus who come together, Peter preaches the gospel, and 3000 are added to that number. They are keeping track of how many, and they are adding people to that number. Peter doesn't say, now go live out your Christian life. He says connect to us! It says day by day they are adding people to their number. They are keeping track of how many people are coming to Christ, and how many people are now connected to their Church.

We see Paul in his missionary journeys and every town he goes into, when people come to Christ, he connects them and puts leadership over them. They become the Church at Ephesus, at Corinth, and at all the various places. Everywhere he goes he sets up a local Church. In Acts 20:28, he says this to the elders at the Church of Ephesus, *"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.*" He's writing to the elders at Ephesus and he tells them to watch over the flock; take care of the flock. The question is, who is their flock? There are a lot of Christians at this point. Paul is saying, watch over your flock, not all Christians. You are to watch over the ones who belong to this specific flock. You are an overseer of them; not everyone. This would be impossible if there were not some formal way of identifying the formal Church at Ephesus. It's not that the elders are to look over all the people at Ephesus; it's the Church at Ephesus. It is those who said yes, we belong to Jesus, we belong to you; I am part of the flock, therefore, watch over and guard me because I am part of this Church.

We also see biblical support in the New Testament. Most of the New Testament letters are written to a specific church, for instance, to the Church of God that is in Corinth. The letters are not to anonymous Christians everywhere, but they are to a specific church; a specific gathering of people which shows there were local churches all throughout the New Testament. In Revelation, Jesus addresses seven specific local churches and speaks of their deeds; what they've done, and how they are behaving. Again, that gives evidence that it is a local church that Jesus is really speaking about.

- **Church Discipline**

We also see Church discipline. I Corinthians 5:1-2 says, "*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.*" Church discipline gives strong evidence of Church membership. Without Church membership you can't have any form of Church discipline. Paul is addressing a specific group of people; the Church. Paul says, "*It is actually reported...*" that these things are happening inside the Church, and these things aren't even tolerated outside the Church. There is an inside/outside mentality. This was a person who belonged inside the Church. This is an unrepentant, blatant, public, horrific sin, and Paul said that he needs to be removed from among you. How can he be removed from someplace he didn't first belong to? This guy formally belonged to the Church, therefore, they could formally remove him from the Church as an act of loving grace because the goal is for this guy to repent and come back to the Church.

Paul makes a statement in Verse 12, *"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."* Paul says look, I'm not judging those outside the Church, I'm not judging out of town people, our community, or nation; I'm judging the insiders, those who belong to us. Those are the ones who we are holding accountable. We are making sure they are following after Jesus Christ.

We see this inside/outside mentality that shows the biblical support for Church membership; not only regarding the disciples, but regarding Church decisions. In Acts 15, we see a decision has to be made. They gathered the Church, made their case, the Church approved, and then sent letters to other gathered churches. We see the Church coming together as a local Church.

For all of these reasons, we see a strong biblical support for Church membership. The ones who belong are the ones who gather, and formally say yes, I am a part of you. It is formally belonging to a local fellowship of believers to be the Church. It's important to BE the church; not just show up, not just attend, not just to think about it, not just to come to it, but to BE the church. That's what we really desire for you. We think it's extremely biblical.

## **Why should I be a Church member?**

Why should I do this? Why should I join Hardin Baptist Church? The first thing I want to say is that it is not for perks; but it is for privilege. You're not joining the Church for the privileges or the perks that you get from joining. You join the Church because it is a privilege. I love what Tom Rainer says in his book *I Am a Church Member*, "Church membership doesn't simply have privileges; it is a privilege." It's a great book and I recommend it to you. A lot of times when we join a civic organization, we join for the perks. We join Southwest Airlines because the more we fly the more free tickets we get. We join Starbucks because we get little stars and free drinks. It's all about the perks. We join this certain country club because we get the perks that go with it. You wouldn't be joining Hardin for the perks, but because it is a privilege to be a Church member. With a



civic membership you are the consumer; it's all about you and what you can get out of it. The difference in the Church is that you are a producer, not a consumer; you are not here to consume. You are not here to get, you are here to give. It's actually a privilege to just be the Church because you are expressing who Christ has made you to be; the body of Christ. My appeal to you is not that you will get discounts, or first place seating, or free coffee if you become a member, although there are some perks of being a member. As a member, you can vote in business meetings, you can serve in certain leadership roles, or you can be an ABF teacher. We're not going to go for all those perks to compel you to be a member. It should be appealing for you to want to join the Church because it is privilege.

There are four reasons why we believe it's really important to join.

## **1. Commitment**

Why should I join the Church? You should join the Church for commitment. When you join, you are saying I believe and commit to the mission of this body. That is the big thing you are saying when you join the Church. You are saying I'm in; I commit to it! I believe we're going somewhere. I believe this is worth my time and I want to buy into it. I want to be part of that. I believe in the mission and the vision of Hardin Baptist Church. Our mission is to be a growing disciple who makes disciples, and that's what we want to do. We believe Jesus wants us to connect together and grow each other to be more like Jesus, but also to make more disciples of all nations. That's what we want to do as a Church, and becoming a member says that's what you want to do as well. It says I believe that's what Jesus wants me to do, so I'm going to formally say yes; I'm committed to this Church and the vision behind it for the sake of Christ.

## **2. Partnership**

Why should I join? You should join for the sake of partnership. You are saying, I will do my part to fulfill our mission. When you join, you are saying that you not only believe it, but you are going to do it. Not only do I believe in growing and making disciples, I'm going to actually do my part to grow disciples who make disciples. I'm going to do my part in the vision

and the mission of Hardin Baptist Church. You can hold me accountable to make sure I am doing my part because I really want this Church to make a difference in the world for the sake of Christ.

I want to pause here and ask, what exactly does it mean to do my part? What do we expect from our Church members? In the next two lessons, we will be talking about five things we expect from you: Gather, Connect, Serve, Give and Go. We feel that these five things are what you should be doing as a disciple of Jesus who desires to make disciples. That is how you partner with us to truly be about the mission of the Church and the mission of Jesus.

### **3. Accountability**

I should become a member for accountability. I need accountability in my life because I know I am prone to become apathetic about the gospel, about missions, and about growing in my personal walk. I need a group of people who will make sure I stay on fire for the Lord; people who will make sure I am encouraged with Scripture and prayer. If they see me falling away, they will come to my side to rescue me. They want to make sure that we are saying to one another as members and leadership, I've got your back and you've got my back. We are going to hold each other accountable to live out a life that glorifies God. Hopefully, if you are a believer in Christ, you desire this. You know that you're prone to wander. You know you are prone to get out on your own and do your own thing and neglect the things of God. You want people that come together and say, make sure you encourage me, make sure you hold me accountable, and make sure you push me in my walk with Christ because I want to do the same for you. This is accountability. There are some who don't like authority; we want to do it on our own. That's the flesh within us! We need to put to death the flesh and allow the Spirit to overwhelm us. Church membership helps the Spirit to really rule and reign in your heart.

### **4. Identity**

I am part of something bigger than myself; I am part of the body of Christ. It's not just my identity and who I am, but I am part of something bigger

than me; something outside of me. I am part of the body of Christ. I want to show that! I want to declare that! I want to say that through formally joining this Church. Mark Dever says, "When a person becomes a Christian, he doesn't just join a local Church because it's a good habit for growing in spiritual maturity, he joins a local Church because it is the expression of what God has made him; a member of the body of Christ." Why join? Because it is an expression of who God made you. He made you part of the body of Christ when you became a believer. When you connect to a local body of believers, you are saying that you want to fulfill what he made you to be; a member of a local body of believers.

You should join our assembly publicly and formally for commitment, partnership, accountability, and for identity. In a sense, it is saying I want to be the Church, not just come, not just attend, not just participate, but I want to be the Church. Yes, I am committed, yes, I'm partnering, yes, I'm accountable, and yes, I am you, the body of Christ.

## **How do I become a member?**

Some of you have been asking that question for a long time. How in the world do I join HBC? It's kind of a running joke. We have some confusion on what to do to join, and new people might find it difficult to join. We are going to provide a very easy, three part process in becoming a Church member. Whether you do that at the end of this series, or six months down the road, you will know how to become a member at Hardin Baptist Church. When you know you want to join, here are the steps:

### **A. Listen to the Belong series.**

Great news! You're already doing this! There will be three more sermons; it's going to be easy. New people that come into the Church are going to get a new membership packet that will have these four sermons in them so they can listen to them. Everyone at Hardin will be able to know that this is what it means to be a member, this is what members do, and this is what members are expected to do so we are all on the same page of membership. We will try to make that very easy for you!

## **B. Meet with a pastor.**

This is a step we already do currently in Church membership, but this is the step we want to keep. In meeting with the pastor, there will be a conversation between you and one of us, and we will ask you if you are a Christian. To become a member, you have to be a Christian. We want to hear your testimony. We want to know if you have been biblically baptized. We want to get to know you. We want to know who you are and where you are from. We want to know a little more about you, and we want you to know more about us. During that meeting, we will have that connection where we get your testimony and your baptism information. We talk through questions, and fill out paperwork that goes with membership. You can call Casey at the office, 270-437-4868, to set the meeting up. It will be a very easy next step to take.

## **C. Attend a New Member Gathering.**

We are really excited about this step. Every other month, on Sunday afternoon, we will have a new member lunch. During that new member lunch, all the new members who have listened to the sermons, and met with a pastor will meet together as a group for a new member gathering. At that gathering, we will have some of the staff, the pastors, and deacons that you will want to meet, and that want to meet you. You're going to get some more information on who we are, and things about what membership is. You are also going to get to see the other people joining the Church along with you. I think it's going to be a really neat thing. You're going in this together with others who are joining, so you're not solo. One of the things we will do during that meeting is we are going to covenant together. We are going to make promises to each other concerning membership. The promises will be around those five things: gathering, connecting, serving, giving, and going. We are going to commit to one another to do our part to be a Church member.

## **Conclusion**

We will have a card to fill out at the end of our four week series. It will be an opportunity for you to take a step towards becoming a member. This card is going to have a side for members, and a side for non-members.

For non-members, you will fill it out and check, ***I want to become a member***, drop it in a bucket, and we will contact you about a meeting and the new member fellowship. We are going to do a lot of legwork to make it easy for you to become a member. We are going to walk you through it. If you are a member, we really desire for all the members at Hardin to also check, ***I am a current member and I have a renewed vision for membership. I want to recommit to be the church.*** If you're a member and after these four weeks, you discover you had no idea what membership really is, we want you to say I'm on board again; I recommit to this church and renew my membership here at Hardin Baptist. If you don't do that, it doesn't mean you're not a member anymore. As a member, we hope that you catch a new vision for membership. We want you, in a sense, to renew your membership vows.

Hopefully, we've answered your questions about what membership is, why you should join, and how you can join. We want you to start to pray about joining Hardin Baptist if you are not a member. I hope and pray that God will use this series to really create a new passion for membership here at Hardin Baptist church. We would love for you to join with us as we try to do what Jesus wants us to do; grow disciples and make disciples of all nations.