A Case for Church Membership

Michael d'Offay 24 July 2024



Joining a local church is one of the most important decisions you will ever make. Church membership is fundamental to Christianity, and those who call themselves followers of Jesus without belonging to a church need to understand why.

The Big Idea

The moment we received Christ as Lord, we became part of God's universal household of faith all over the world. It means that I am connected to believers everywhere, no matter the denomination or movement to which they belong. But joining a local church gives evidence and substance to that universal reality.

> You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your Mother. – Cyprian, 250 AD

Committing to Jesus and committing to fellow believers and leaders go hand in hand; anything else is regarded as abnormal Christianity. We see this idea lived out in Acts 2:47, where it says,"and the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."Those

who were saved joined the local believers. It was the logical step after becoming a Christian. After you are 'positioned' in Christ, you begin to 'participate' and commit to a local church.

Reading through the New Testament, you simply do not find a Christian who is not part of a church. It is an anomaly. It's like a soldier without an army or a baby without a mother.

Being on a List

Although Scripture doesn't explicitly say "thou shalt have church membership", the principle is scriptural. It is about keeping a list of who is 'in' so that the leaders know who to care for and lead. While the heart of every Christian must be to do good to all, the Apostle Paul encourages us to prioritise those in the household of faith. He says, "let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."(Galatians 6:10, ESV) How is it possible to know who is in your "household of faith" unless there is a distinction or list? Similarly, Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:9 to keep a list of widows and to support only those on the list.

In Revelation 21:27, Jesus Himself keeps a list of those who will inherit eternal life. The idea is that God has a clear distinction between the world and His people. We see Paul commanding the Corinthian church to put a man in persistent sexual sin out of the local church (1 Corinthians 5:12-13). Putting the unrepentant sinner out of the church could only happen if he were 'in' it. In other words, there must have been a clear sense of who was part of the local believers and who was not.

> We also desire to live differently to the world... Distinct and welcoming, not exclusive and closed.

In ancient Israel, there was to be a clear distinction between God's people and the world. The Jews were marked by circumcision and the keeping of the Mosaic law. But the intention was never to create an exclusive type of membership. It was rather to be a distinct membership that modelled God's character and love to the nations around them through the way they lived and worshipped.

We also desire to live differently to the world. That difference can be an inviting, attractive beauty to those who are lost and broken. Distinct and welcoming, not exclusive and closed.

Being Under Authority

If there is no membership, how would leaders, whom God entrusts to care for the sheep, know exactly who to care for and lead into maturity? Hebrews 13:17 speaks about submitting under the

authority of godly leaders (plural). This is not a popular Scripture in today's individualistic and self-centred culture. Church membership is the heartfelt commitment to fleshing out Hebrews 13:17. Recognising God's delegated authority and being willing to submit to it is a big deal to Him.

Raising Up Leaders

If there were no membership, we would never be able to effectively identify, train and release leaders. Paul tells Timothy to train reliable or faithful men to lead in 2 Timothy 2:2, but it is only possible to identify faithful people who are gifted to lead if we are in a committed, ongoing relationship with them. We also see the pattern in Acts when Paul the Apostle was released into ministry. It was God who called him, but it was the local leaders in Antioch who recognised this and released him (Acts 13:1-3).

Objection!

Some Christians protest all of this. They vehemently argue that the problem with church membership is that it divides the body of Christ and puts Christians in 'camps'. They quote 1 Corinthians 1, where the Apostle Paul rebukes the Corinthians for dividing themselves up into various factions, with some following Peter, some Apollos, and some Paul. So, they say, we should only have Jesus as our head, not man or a church group.

Yet if one reads the whole context of 1 Corinthians 1, Paul also criticised those in the 'Jesus party' (1:12) – the 'super-spiritual' Christians who had swung to the other extreme and pledged loyalty only to Jesus. In Chapter 4, we see that Paul defends his authority, reaffirms his relationship as their spiritual father, and even urges the Corinthians to imitate his faith.

> Look for leaders with a heart after God (and a healthy fear of Him), sound theology and a genuine love for His people.

The Apostle Paul didn't have a problem with Christians submitting to and following other godly leaders. He had a problem with Christians who elevated Christian ministers to a place of infallibility. Pastors are "only servants through whom you came to believe" (1 Corinthians 3:5). I have noticed that Christians who are critical and negative about joining a local church and submitting under local leadership are often those who have had negative or painful experiences with authority figures.

Of course, which church you join is important, as there are unfortunately leaders who are out for selfish gain. You would be wise to look at the theology and fruit of the church before deciding on which one to join, as it can lead you into or away from your inheritance in Christ. Just don't look

for perfection, because churches are made up of imperfect people (like you and me) so there are no perfect churches. Look for leaders with a heart after God (and a healthy fear of Him), sound theology and a genuine love for His people.

> Church membership is not a leash to control us, but a cord of love that binds us together.

Personally Speaking

Yes, I have also been hurt and disappointed by other Christians, but I've learned to work through the conflict and have come out the other side all the better for it. I have grown and benefitted so much from being part of local churches over the years.

I've also had to learn to love, serve and forgive others who I wouldn't naturally want to spend time with. This is a powerful witness to the world – a people who can love and like each other despite their many differences.

God has given us His church for our good and His glory. Make sure you are an active part of a biblical church near you.

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*Note: This article focuses on the scriptural case for church membership only. In addition to the biblical reasons for joining a church, there are also legal reasons why a church may require its members to sign a membership form of sorts. So, for example, the law may require written permission for a church to communicate with its members, take photographs at church events, etc. The legal case for church membership is not the subject of this article, however.