

Why Join?

THE BIBLICAL CASE FOR CHURCH MEMBERSHIP



Membership
at College Church

Each membership class, I present a brief rationale for membership in a local church in general, and then for membership at College Church in particular. Of course, by nature of the occasion of such a talk, most of those who hear it are already persuaded enough of the veracity of the argument to have registered to attend a membership class in the first place. A few of the staff team, then, thought it would be good (again briefly) to replicate the material I teach there in written format, to be disseminated more widely for those who attend church and are not yet members of a church.

The first point to make is that “membership” of a church is not a latter invention of a denomination, or ecclesiastical historical factoid. Membership of a church is a biblical quality, clearly taught in the Bible. We might mention that there is no instance in the New Testament of a Christian who is not a member of a local church. But, in addition to that argument from silence, Paul uses the language of membership in 1 Corinthians 12 about the body of Christ in the church at Corinth. In fact, C.S. Lewis somewhere argued, the concept of “membership” in general has Christian roots, devolved over time from this core biblical idea of church membership. The apostle Paul puts it like this: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12). In other words, being a member of a church is like being a member of a physical human body. My physical member is my hand or my foot. Similarly, in the body of Christ we are members of the body. In fact, this is true of all real, genuine, born again, converted, Christians: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27).

So this first point to make is that “membership” of a church, while it inevitably has certain bureaucratic and institutional superficial elements related to it (a list on a database somewhere; classes; and the like), the core idea and experience of membership is not organizational but organic. Christ, when he saves us, saves us not to remain as individuals but to become part of his body, the church. So it is, again, that we are told in Acts 2:41 that when the people repented and believed, were saved, they were then “added to their number”—that is, added to the number of those who were already part of the church. By reflection, then, the task of an evangelist is to perform a transplant operation: to bring someone out of the world and transplant them into the body of the church. When someone becomes a Christian, they are made a member of the church.

That said, and given that organic reality, we should be unashamed, bold, and public about our membership of a particular local church. To hide, or to avoid associating ourselves publicly, with a local body as its member, would make as little sense as a hand pretending it did not belong to an arm of a human body. When we are members of a local church, we join together for mutual edification, for the progress of the gospel, for ministry to each other, and for the great mission of reaching the world around us.

Again in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul therefore argues that an eye cannot say it does not need the hand, or a head the feet—but every part is needed. If you are not a member of a local church, deliberately, consciously, with full understanding and comprehension, you are living in a way that is contrary to biblical norms of what a saved person is like. You are also diminishing the public witness of the church, its strength and power, to

turn back the forces of darkness in our world. We are to join in then as members of church for the reason that this is what Christians do by nature of being a Christian as it is understood biblically.

(Of course, there are exceptions to this principle. I have had pastoral conversations down through the years where for various personal and unavoidable reasons, formal association is at least temporarily, and sometimes extensively, difficult and perhaps even unwise. But such “hard cases” do not disprove the general principle outlined above. To be a Christian, in biblical norm, is to be a member of the body of Christ, and therefore a Christian is to associate publicly as a member of a local church).

The second point, then, is more in terms of the practical outworkings of it all. And for that I tend to point people to Paul’s teaching in his letter to the Philippians. There he frequently uses the language of “partnership” to express the covenant commitment of one Christian to another in membership of a local church. For instance, he remarks how he gives thanks because of their “partnership in the gospel” (Phil. 1:5). This theme continues throughout the letter in various ways and is returned to again at the end when he remarks on their remarkable “partnership” (Phil. 4:15). Such partnership in the gospel is illustrated in the letter through the lives of Timothy and Epaphroditus. Their ministry, evangelism, and service (Phil. 2:19-30) are compared to an athletic contest of teamwork (“striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,” Phil. 1:27) and is most of all exemplified in the humble service of Jesus Christ our Lord (Phil. 2:1-11).

In short, our membership of a church is not merely theoretical, notional, nominal, but is active, involved, committed, covenantal, servant-like, and dynamic. We are a team, like a team of athletes. We are a partnership, like business partners. We are a group of citizens of the kingdom of Christ, working together for his glory, for the good of his church, all as members and therefore “partners” in the gospel.

Of course, the final point that needs to be made, and is made when we gather for membership classes, is why join College Church in particular. That would be another article, message, and for that I encourage you: come to the next membership class.

With love in Christ,

Pastor Josh Moody