

MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

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 committing themselves to a group of fellow believers or to the care of elders.

To neglect to commit to a church family as a formal member cuts one off from the many blessings and opportunities that flow from this commitment. It reflects a misunderstanding of the believer's responsibility to the body of Christ. It is important for every Christian to understand what church membership is, and why it is essential.

When you consider church, think community, and think family. Belonging to the body of believers, (the church) is to participate with the commitment of a family member in a community of shared faith, interests, and goals.

To accept Christ as Lord is to accept that one is to be transformed. Transformation occurs from our inner world to then overflow to our outer world. Spiritual transformation is a non-negotiable expectation. So how does that happen? What is necessary for spiritual transformation? Spiritual transformation is God-led and requires:

1. The presence of God
2. The submission to him as the one and only master
3. Mature spiritual guides
4. Community

The model Christ gave his followers was living in community. He had unlimited options available to him for how to spread his gospel, so the fact that he chose to do it in a community setting cannot be overlooked. It is easier to love people from afar, on our own terms, coming and going as we please. There is no denying that living in a committed family setting, our character is formed and tested.

The Definition of Church Membership

When an individual professes faith in Jesus Christ as the one and only God, the redeemer and savior of their life, that person becomes a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-13). United to Christ and the other members of the body in this way, the Christ-follower becomes 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 making disciples of Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:18-20), helping each other grow in the likeness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16; Colossians 1:28-29), 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), encouraging one another through corporate gatherings (Hebrews 10:24-25), and participating in the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19). In addition, when one becomes a member of a church, he/she submits to the care and the authority of the biblically qualified overseers (1 Tim 3:1-7) recognized by that local church.

The Basis for Church Membership

The biblical foundation for committing to a formal church family 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.

There is also evidence in the New Testament that just as there was a list of widows eligible for financial support (1 Tim. 5:9), there may also have been a list of members that grew as people entered Christ (cf. Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 16:5). In fact, when a believer moved to another city, the former church often wrote a letter of commendation to the new church (Acts 18:27; Rom. 16:1; Col. 4:10; cf. 2 Cor. 3:1-2).

In the book of Acts, much of the terminology fits only with the concept of formal church membership. Phrases such as “*the whole congregation*” (6:5), “*the church in Jerusalem*” (8:1), “*the disciples*” in Jerusalem (9:26), “*in every church*” (14:23), “*the whole church*” (15:17), and “*the elders of the church*” in Ephesus (20:17), all suggest recognizable church membership with well-defined boundaries (also see 1 Cor. 5:4; 14:23; and Heb. 10:25).

The Existence of Church Government

The consistent pattern throughout the New Testament is that a group of elders is to carry the burden for oversight of each local body of believers. The specific duties given to these elders presuppose a clearly defined group of church members who are under their care.

Among other things, these godly leaders are responsible to shepherd God's people (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2), to labor diligently among them (1 Thess. 5:12), to have charge over them (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17), and to keep watch over their souls (Heb. 13:17). Scripture teaches that the elders will give an account to God for the individuals allotted to their charge (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:3).

Those responsibilities require that there be a distinguishable, mutually understood membership in the local church. The elders of a church are not responsible for the spiritual well-being of every individual who visits the church or who attends sporadically. Elders can shepherd the people and give an account to God for their spiritual well-being only if they know who they are; they can provide oversight only if they know those for whom they are responsible; and they can fulfill their duty to shepherd the flock only if they know who is part of the flock and who is not. This is accomplished through church membership.

Conversely, Scripture teaches that believers are to submit to their elders. Hebrews 13:17 says, “*Obey your leaders, and submit to them.*” The question for each believer is, “Who are your leaders?” Those who do not join a local church and entrust themselves to the care and the authority of the elders have no leaders. For that person, obedience to Hebrews 13:17 is impossible. To put it simply, this verse implies that every believer knows to whom he/she must submit, which, in turn, assumes clearly defined church membership.

The Exercise of Church Discipline

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus outlines the way the church is to seek the restoration of a believer who has fallen into sin—a four-step process commonly known as church discipline.

The exercise of church discipline according to Matthew 18 and other passages (1 Cor. 5:1-13; 1 Tim. 5:20; Titus 3:10-11) presupposes that the elders of a church know who their members are. For this reason, the Bible's teaching on church discipline assumes church membership.

The Exhortation to Mutual Edification

The New Testament teaches that the church is the body of Christ, and that God has called every member to a life devoted to the growth of the body. In other words, Scripture exhorts all believers to edify the other members by practicing the "one-anothers" of the New 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 encouragement, instruction, and learning, can only take place in the context of the communal 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, faithfully and participating in corporate worship. At Journey Christian Church (JCC), membership also involves participating in corporate meetings to approve budgets, select elders, select the Lead Pastor, and other matters pertaining to the church functioning as a 501C3 corporation. These specific membership functions are outlined in the JCC Bylaws. 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. In other words, membership matters.