

Do I Really Need to Be a Member of a Church?

by Thom S. Rainer

This question and its ensuing discussion continues. Do I really need to be a member of a church?

We need to first separate the concept of church membership from other types of organizational membership. Church membership is not like civic club membership, even though many civic organizations do have altruistic purposes. Church membership is definitely not like country club membership, where you pay your dues and expect perks in return. Sadly, many church members do view their membership like joining a country club.

When that attitude becomes our perspective, we then start insisting on getting things “my way.” My style of music. My order of worship. My length of sermon. My ministries. My programs. You get the picture.

Membership in a New Testament church is metaphorically like being a member of a physical body. You are but one part of a greater whole, but your part is vital for the overall health of a church. Read again 1 Corinthians 12. Look specifically at verse 27: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (ESV).

Church membership, then, is a declaration that you are a part or a member of a greater whole. It is self-sacrificing and not preference-seeking. Here are five reasons why church membership is vital to the health of the church and those who decide to join a church.

1. Church membership is a formal declaration of your commitment to a local body of believers. You are letting other members and church leaders know that you are committing to exercise your God-given gifts and roles within a local congregation. You are more than an attendee who comes and goes without commitment.

2. Church membership identifies you as a person who is under the care and pastoral ministry of the church. Ministry leaders cannot care for everyone who is in and out of the church. Their responsibility is to the clearly identified members of the church. Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus in Acts 20:28: “So guard yourselves and God’s people. Feed and shepherd God’s flock – his church, purchased with his own blood – over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as leaders” (NLT). The leaders cannot shepherd the flock unless they know who the flock is.

3. Church membership is a commitment to come under the authority of the leadership of the church. A church member is not only under the shepherding ministry of the church, they are also under the authority of the leaders of the church. And though church discipline should be rare, the concept of church discipline by the leadership affirms and complements the concept of church membership. You cannot be disciplined from something unless you have committed to be a part of something.

4. Church membership is an affirmation of the church’s beliefs and doctrine. It is not unusual for churches to have attendees who don’t fully affirm a church’s doctrine. Church membership, therefore, becomes a statement of affirmation that you identify with both the church and her members in what the church believes. One of the reasons many churches do not let non-members teach is that they have not committed to the church’s beliefs.

5. Church membership is a commitment to serve. When you become a part or member of a church, you are affirming the 1 Corinthians 12 metaphor that you will be a functioning member of the body. Read again verses 12-27 for a clear picture that the

body of Christ, the church, is to be comprised of functioning or serving members. For sure, many people will attend our churches. But those whom God leads to become members are affirming that they have a functioning role in the church.

Do I really need to be a member of a church? Absolutely. From Acts 2 to Revelation 3, the New Testament is about the local church in one way or another. The local church is God's plan A for his ministry on earth, and He did not leave us with a plan B.