



Introduction: Why Membership Matters

Where Does the Bible Teach We Should Become a Member of a Local Church?

There is no direct or explicit command in Scripture that says, “Every Christian must join a local church,” but there are several factors in Scripture that indicate and teach implicitly that every Christian should be a member of a local church.

1. Jesus established the church to be a public, earthly institution that would mark out, affirm, and oversee those who profess to believe in him (Matt. 16:18-19, 18:15-20). Jesus established the church to publicly declare those who belong to him in order to give the world a display of the good news about himself (John 17:21, 23; see also Eph. 3:10). Jesus wants the world to know who belongs to him and who doesn’t. And how is the world to know who belongs to him and who doesn’t? They are to see which people publicly identify themselves with his people in the visible, public institution he established for this very purpose. They’re to look at the members of his church. And if some people claim to be part of the universal church even though they belong to no local church, they reject Jesus’ plan for them and his church. Jesus intends for his people to be marked out as a visible, public group, which means joining together in local churches.

“If I had never joined a church till I had found one that was perfect, I should never have joined one at all. And the moment I did join it, if I had found one, I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us.”

Charles Spurgeon

2. Scripture repeatedly commands Christians to submit and to obey their leaders, who are to watch over their souls, and who will give an account (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12-13). The only way to do that is by publicly committing to be members of their flock, and saying in effect, “I commit to listening to your teaching, following your direction, and to submitting to your leadership.” There’s no way to obey the scriptural commands to submit to your leaders if you never actually submit to them by joining a local church.
3. The New Testament asserts that Christians are members of one another because we are all members of the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5). As individual members of the body, Scripture

commands us to edify the body (i.e., the church) with our spiritual gifts (Eph. 4:11-16). To do this, it is obvious that it is easier to build up the church as a committed member than as a detached, autonomous attender.

4. In regards 1 Cor. 5:12-13, a passage about church discipline, Paul makes a distinction between those who were “inside” and those who were “outside” the church.
5. The church in Corinth excluded an unrepentant sinner “by the will of the majority” (2 Cor. 2:6), which presupposes a defined group of people, all of whom together had the right to act as a church.
6. Even the idea of excluding someone from the church because of unrepentant sin (see Matt. 18:15-20, 1 Cor. 5:1-13, and 2 Cor. 2:6) presupposes that there is some defined body to which a person belongs. If there were no formal membership in the New Testament, then Jesus and Paul’s teaching about church discipline would be meaningless. If someone doesn’t formally belong, how can they be kicked out?
7. Becoming a member is one of the ways we can glorify God. For example, Jesus told his disciples, “A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35, NIV). We testify to the world what God is like by how we love one another—and a committed, persevering, accountable love is a far greater picture of God’s love than a picky-and-choosy, I’ll-only-be-involved-with-the-people-I-want kind of “love.” By committing to one another as members of the same church, we display the glory of God’s love—a committed, persevering, transforming love—as we reflect it in our lives together, and so bring Him glory.

Some Practical Reasons for Becoming a Member

1. **You become committed to other Christians.** It’s good to commit yourself to love and serve others. You will grow as a Christian as you commit to encourage, build up, strengthen, serve, rebuke, and pray for other Christians.
2. **Other Christians are able to commit themselves to you.** Becoming a member of a church means joining with an entire group of Christians who have now covenanted to watch over *you* spiritually. If you’re a member of a church, you have an entire church full of people who are publicly committed to loving *you* and serving you and watching over you.

3. **Elder/Pastoral protection.** By becoming a member, this provides you with pastoral care as a believer. This means that you have a pastor/pastors who will care, pray, counsel, teach, and equip you as you grow in the Lord (Eph. 4:11-12; Heb. 13:17).
4. **Safety net.** In his book *Stop Dating the Church*, Josh Harris points out that it's comforting to know his church would kick him out rather than tolerate his unrepentant sin. By becoming a church member, this means that you now have a whole church full of people who are committed to helping you live a life that's pleasing to God, even to the point of excluding you from the church if you stop repenting of sin. While this sounds harsh to some, to those of us who know the deceitfulness of sin, this is an immensely comforting and encouraging reality (Heb. 3:12).
5. **Assurance.** Membership is the church's affirmation of the validity of someone's profession of faith (Matt. 16:19, 18:18). The church looks at a person's life, hears their explanation of the gospel and how they came to believe it, and says, "You look like a Christian to us. So join us. Watch over our lives and we'll watch over yours." So, while membership in a church doesn't guarantee that someone is a Christian, it should assure believers of the genuineness of their faith.
8. **Evangelize the world.** We can preach the gospel to our community and the world much better together than we can apart. Not only that, but as we covenant with other Christians to love, encourage, and admonish one another, we display a living, breathing image of the gospel to the world.

"It is both foolish and wicked to suppose that we will make much progress in sanctification if we isolate ourselves from the visible church. Indeed, it is commonplace to hear people declare that they don't need to unite with a church to be a Christian. They claim that their devotion is personal and private, not institutional or corporate. This is not the testimony of the great saints of history; it is the confession of fools."

R.C. Sproul

What Membership Isn't

1. **Church Membership is Not an American Idea.** As we have seen, the New Testament repeatedly asserts that Christians are members of one another because we are all members of the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5).
2. **Church Membership Does Not Save a Person.** No. Turning from your sin and trusting in Christ makes you a Christian, not being a member of a church.

3. **Church Membership Doesn't Wrongfully Exclude.** All people are born sinners and therefore are excluded from the favor and fellowship of God. All people are born children of God's wrath (Eph. 2:3). So, before we start arguing about whether or not church membership is wrongly exclusive, it needs to be said that the Bible portrays God as excluding all of us from fellowship with Himself because of our sin. And the Bible teaches that all those who do not turn from their sin and trust in Christ will experience not only God's exclusion after they die, but his active punishment for their sins.
4. So, is church membership exclusive? Yes, of course it is. Church membership is intended to draw a clear, bright line between the church and the world.

Questions for Application

1. Have you ever been an involved member of a local church? Have you ever had a season in your Christian life without a church home? How did your relationship with God differ in these seasons?
2. In what ways are you tempted to relate to the local church as a "renter" rather than "owner"? Have there been times when sinful attitudes in your heart kept you from pursuing membership in a local church? (e.g., selfishness- "I don't want to make inconvenient sacrifices of my time and resources in the church. I'd rather just attend on Sundays." pride- "I don't really see the need for others to be involved in my life." fear- "I don't think I can commit to a church. I've had a bad experience in the past.")

3. Re-read Ephesians 4:11-16. What benefits are described for those who are participatory members in the church? What responsibilities are described for those who are participatory members in the church?

4. In 1 Peter 4:10-11 we see that God is glorified as we serve others in the church. What gifts has God given you? How can you employ your gifts to serve others at Grace Church for the glory of God?

5. Consider Spurgeon's quote at the beginning of session 1. In what way is God's church the "dearest place on earth" for you?

HOW TO BECOME A MEMBER OF PROVIDENCE BAPTIST CHURCH

See Article 3: Section 1-4 of Constitution & By Laws, pg. 7-9

Note: Baptism is not required for those who have already been immersed as believers.

