

# Church Membership

For some Christians, membership sounds stiff and unnecessary, something you have at your bank or the country club, but too formal for the church. Why bother joining a local church when I'm already a member of the universal church? Why all the hoops? Why is local church membership such a big deal? Here are several reasons.

1. *Our God is a keeper of lists and names.* The Bible is full of membership rolls with names of covenant families and covenant heads. There is even a book called Numbers that contains an authorized census of God's people.

2. *Membership is a biblical category.* The church did not steal the idea of membership from the guild or the country club. "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). Christians are members of the body of Christ. Unpopular as it may sound, you can belong or not belong to the family of God (Matt. 18; 1 Cor. 5). As Cyprian famously said, "Outside of the church, there is no salvation" (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*).

3. *In joining a church you make visible your commitment to Christ and his people.* Membership is one way to raise the flag of faith. You state before God and others that you are part of *this* local body of believers. It's easy to talk in glowing terms about the invisible church—the body of all believers near and far, living and dead—but it's in the visible church that God expects you to live out your faith. Real fellowship is hard work, because most people are a lot like us—selfish, petty, and proud. But that's the body God calls us to.

4. *Church membership keeps us accountable.* When we join a church, we are offering ourselves to one another to be encouraged, rebuked, corrected, and served. We are placing ourselves under leaders and submitting to their authority. We are saying, "I am here to stay. I want to help you grow in godliness. Will you help me to do the same?"

5. *Joining the church will help your pastor and elders be more faithful shepherds.* Hebrews 13:17a says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them." That's the part for the congregation. Here's the part of the leaders: "for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those will have to give an account" (13:17b). The pastors and elders should take seriously their responsibility before God to care for the souls of their people. They must be diligent in getting to know their members, in following up with them, in praying for them, and in being available in times of distress. If the elders are to "shepherd the flock of God" that is among them (1 Pet. 5:2), they must know who belongs to that flock.

6. *Joining the church gives you an opportunity to make promises.* When people become members at your local church, they make promises to pray, give, serve, attend worship, accept the spiritual guidance of the church, obey its teachings, and seek the things that make for unity, purity, and peace. These are solemn vows. And we must hold each other to them. When Christians don't join a local church, they miss an opportunity to publicly make these promises and commit before God to be a blessing to the church and to each other.