



why local church membership matters

"I know there are some who say, "Well, I have given myself to the Lord, but I do not intend to give myself to the church." Now why not? "Because I can be a Christian without it. " Are you quite clear about that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord's commands as by being obedient? What is a brick made for? To help build a house. It is of no use for that brick to tell you that it is just as good a brick while it is kicking about on the ground as it would be in the house. It is a good-for-nothing brick. So you rolling-stone Christians, I do not believe that you are answering your purpose. You are living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live, and you are much to blame for the injury you do." –Charles Spurgeon

Introduction

This paper is intended to highlight why being a member of a local church matters. This is not intended to be a defense of the biblical warrant for church membership (though I do that elsewhere), nor is it to serve as a comprehensive definition of what the church is. Rather my intention is to detail why church membership is important - why it matters.

It is my contention that commitment to the local church in my city and our western society at- large is an **atrocit**y.

The result is lackadaisical Christians that are not held accountable to be living out the gospel in community and on mission. Instead of having and holding a high-view of ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church), Christians are more prone to treat church membership like a membership at the YMCA where it simply indicates, "this is where I go." Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the oft-heard question, "Where do you go to church?"

Here's the problem: The church is not a place that you *go to*. Likewise, the church is not a building. It's a people. It's God's people - sent on God's mission to proclaim God's message.

We are the church.

The local church is a collection of committed followers of Jesus banded together to live out the gospel in community and on mission. With this in mind, I here offer three



reasons (there are many more) why local church membership matters:

1. The One Another's of Scripture

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament reveals God's people living in radically other-centered ways (see Acts 2:42-47, for example). Throughout Scripture we read of Christians being instructed to exercise the "one another's of Scripture" and, in turn, see them living out these "one another's" in accord with those instructions. As we read these, we are also to heed these.

As Christians, we are commanded to love one another (John 13:14, Romans 12:10, 1 Peter 1:22, et al), instruct one another (Romans 15:14), comfort one another (2 Cor. 13:11), serve one another (Galatians 5:13), bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), forgive one another (Ephesians 4:22), admonish one another (Colossians 3:16), exhort one another daily (Hebrews 3:13), stir one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24), confess our sins to one another (James 5:16), and at least twenty-five other "one another's" that I can easily count.

Local church membership matters because the local church is *where* we live out these "one another's" of Scripture – with real people. People with personal and spiritual and missional discipleship needs. People with real problems, real burdens, real sin.

2. Commitment to One Another

Some will read that first point and argue, "yeah, but we can do that without being members." In fact, I recently had a conversation with a pastor friend of mine who loves Jesus and whose friendship I prize, yet whom does not employ membership in his church.

As we talked about the topic of church membership, he posed the question, "What do you say to the guy that asks, 'So if I'm not a member does that mean you treat me differently?'"

My answer to my friend was, "You tell him 'yes'." That may sound haughty and aloof in our egalitarian-saturated society, but let me explain.

Jesus Christ died for the church. He obtained it with his own blood (Acts 20:28). One of the many metaphors Scripture uses for the church is the bride of Christ (see Ephesians 5:25-27, Revelation 19:6-8). If a man tells a woman he loves her and wants to spend the rest of his life with her and yet refuses to commit to her in marriage, she ought not



take him seriously. If he simply showed up at the house whenever he felt like it or needed something, never emotionally invested, never demonstrated his love for her, never sacrificed for her, never put her needs in front of his own, never financially supported her, that wouldn't be much of a commitment.

In the same way, "Christians" who fail to commit to the local church treat Christ's bride like a whore. Local church membership matters because our commitment to one another – the church – matters (remember, *we are the church*).

If we are truly to live out the "one another's" of Scripture together, we must be **committed** to one another and we must know who is committed to us. Who can we trust to not run away and hide when things get difficult? Who can I really confess my sins to? Who can we count on as we live on mission together? As we storm the gates of hell and charge the hill to reach the unreached for Christ in our city, who is with us? Who can we count on to support the mission with their time, their talents, and their finances?

3. Commitment to Christ and Obedience to His Word

As you read the pages of the New Testament, something that you will never find are Christians that did not belong to the church. If you were a Christian, you were part of the church. If you were not a part of the church, you were not a Christian. Paul never writes a letter to the "churches of Galatia... and all those who aren't really a part of the churches in that region... but still love Jesus."

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul refers to the church as the body of Christ. We are all members of the body. An arm that is not connected to the body ceases to be a part of the body. That's why the Apostle John says, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19).

By committing to the local church, we *demonstrate* our commitment to Christ, who is the head of the body (Ephesians 5:23).

Finally, it is impossible to live in obedience to God's Word without being a member of a local church. Now, we're not legalists and if one were to find himself in a community with no true expression of the local church, we would not be quick to call that person a non-Christian, but that is not the community in which we live.



Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” The only group of leaders in Scripture who are responsible to “give an account” for leading God’s people are the pastors/elders/ overseers in a local church. If you are not a local church member, how can you obey this command?

What body of elders are you submitted to? Further, it must be implicitly recognized that elders are not accountable for every person who darkens the door on Sunday morning, but only for those who have formally committed themselves to their care and thus have become apart of the flock (the local church) whom they are commanded to pay careful attention to (Acts 20:28).

A Final Word

If someone is not committed to living out the “one another’s” of Scripture, if they are not committed to doing that with a specific group of real people, how are we to judge their commitment to Jesus Christ?

If someone is trying to function apart from the body, is Christ their Head?

If a failure to commit to the local church is equated to disobedience to God’s Word (and thus sin), what do we make of someone who is not a member of the local church?

Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church and author of *What is a Healthy Church*, is bold enough to postulate an answer, “If you are not a member of the church you regularly attend, you may well be going to hell.”