

Life Together...



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What About Church Membership? Colossians 4:7-18

"I'm committed to the mystical body of Christ; I can't be bound to just one church!" So went the response of a young believer upon inquiry as to why he wasn't plugged in to a local church after so many months. Yet when he turned around to request some money of the same brother who asked him the question, the wiser brother offered a classic answer. "Do you know what 'mystical' means?" "Not really." "Mystical means 'invisible.' Now since you're committed to the mystical body of Christ, let me offer you some mystical money to meet your need." With that he handed him the invisible cash with a nod and a wink" (*Brent Detwiler*). Certainly this illustration could be endlessly played upon. Since you're committed to the mystical body of Christ, our mystical pastor will call on you in the hospital. Since you're committed to the mystical body of Christ our ladies will prepare some mystical food for you the next time illness visits your family.

The Church *is* a spiritual body whose Head and only King is the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 12:5); I Cor. 12:12-14; Eph. 5:23). In order to fulfill its divine purpose - the gathering and perfecting of the saints to the glory of God - this spiritual body assumes a visible, organized presence in the world. At the

foundation of this visible organization are local congregations of believers in Jesus Christ (Acts 14:23; Rom. 16:5; I Cor. 4:17). These local congregations are not entirely disconnected from the invisible church. Rather, the local assemblies are visible manifestations of the spiritual reality.

Rev. Don Kistler says, "When a person becomes a true Christian, he [or she] is automatically made a member of the invisible Church (all true believers of all the ages). It stands to reason, then, that this person would also automatically desire to become a member of that which is the visible manifestation of that reality, the local church" ("*Blest Be the Tie That Binds*", *Onward, Christian Soldiers*, p.97). Such a desire was present in the young and newly converted Charles Spurgeon. "[Mr.] Spurgeon once told his congregation this story about church membership: 'I well remember how I joined the church after my conversion. I *forced* myself into it by telling the minister, who was lax and slow, after I had called four or five times and could not see him, that I had done my duty. And if he did not see me, I would call a church meeting myself and tell them I believed in Christ, and ask them if they would have me.' Why was the young Spurgeon banging on the door of the church to get in? No doubt he knew that commitment to a local church and obedience to leaders were necessary to his spiritual growth, and he greatly feared the God who had issued those commands. But there also may have been another compelling reason for him to force his way into membership in the church – the benefits he would gain by being a part of it" (Wayne Mack, *Life in the Father's House*, p.27).

What do we mean by the term 'church membership'? Membership is a formal process by which professing Christians (after appropriate instruction) are interviewed by, received into, and publicly identified with a specific

congregation of believers. Membership is a status confirmed by covenant vows. What I will be arguing today is that such “membership in a confessing body is fundamental to the faithful Christian life” (Colson, *The Body*, p.46). Indeed, church membership is the first step in discipleship” (Colson, p.47).

Just as with the young man in our opening story, many who would profess to know Christ object to the idea of a formal membership process and status. I believe the common objections to be Biblically, historically, and theologically indefensible. Here’s a sampling. “The Bible does not explicitly command it.” Granted. However, the Scriptural inferences are substantial and argue strongly against this objection. “I belong to the mystical, invisible church.” This objection betrays the false notion that there is no essential relationship between the visible and invisible church. “Church membership is not necessary for salvation.” R. B. Kuiper responds, “The Scriptural rule is that, while membership in the church is not a prerequisite of salvation, it is a necessary consequence of salvation” (*The Glorious Body of Christ*, p.111-112). “Jesus did not join a church. Why should I?” One guy responded to the objection like this: “That is sheer ignorance.” Indeed, Jesus is not a member of the Church. He is the King and Head of the Church. The Church is His bride, His body. He is its cornerstone. “Formal membership is ‘an unnecessary and legalistic requirement’ ” (Wayne Mack, *Life in the Father’s House*, p.18). “Church membership is an antiquated tradition.” Certainly such an appeal to long-standing custom would seem to argue *for* church membership rather than *against* it. Finally, “the institutional church is full of hypocrites.” Such an excuse is nothing more than the rotten fruit of unthinking pride and arrogance.

It didn't take very long to recognize that this sermon on church membership would be structured much like the sermon on weekly communion. That sermon consisted of fourteen reasons why we administer the Lord's Supper every Sunday in public worship. So this morning we address the question, "Why should I commit myself to church membership?" There are many reasons all of which are not equally significant. So I'm going to elaborate on some while simply mentioning others. I want you to see one more thing before we review these reasons. The focus of the New Testament is clearly on the local congregation. The New Testament pulses with interest in the local assembly of believers. "The vast majority of times the word "church" is used in the Bible it has to do with the local congregation. In fact, the word *ekklesia* occurs 114 times in the Greek New Testament (depending upon your source). Ninety-four times - 82% of the time - *ekklesia* is used with reference to the local assembly of believers gathered for worship and instruction. Why should I commit myself to church membership?

First, "membership clarifies the difference between believers and unbelievers" (Mack, p.23). In his book, *Life in the Father's House*, Wayne Mack opens the chapter on church membership with this. "Several years ago, Dr. Jay Adams was fielding questions at a counseling conference in San Diego. One man raised his hand and asked, "Should we enact church discipline on people who are not members of our church?" "No, of course not," answered Jay ... "Church discipline is only for believers." A questioning rumble passed through the room, and so he explained further, "People who are not members of a church should be treated like unbelievers, because they are treating themselves as unbelievers" (Mack, p.18). If you think that's shocking, listen to John Calvin, who sets the issue before us in even more forceful terms. "For the Lord esteems the

communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments" (*Institutes*, IV, I, 10).

Mack explains, "[Formal church membership] helps us to know who should be treated as believers and who should be treated as unbelievers" (p.23). Now, you realize that when he uses the word "treated" he is not referring to whether we are kind or unkind to others. He has in mind how we understand their status relative to the visible church. Mack continues, "Membership will never tell us who is and is not a true Christian, because unfortunately there will probably always be non-members who are saved and members who are unsaved (cf. Matt. 7:21-23; 13:36-43). But it is important to have some criteria by which to decide whether or not someone should be considered a professing Christian (or a 'brother' or 'sister,' as the New Testament puts it)" (Mack, p.23).

This is an extremely important and relevant matter. Spiritual oversight and ministry in the day-to-day life of the church require that some determination be made as to whether or not an individual is, in fact, part of the covenant community of faith. Admission or exclusion from the Lord's Table requires such a determination. The pastoral decision to marry or not to marry a particular couple requires such a determination. Whether or not a person may assume a particular ministry requires such a determination. Church discipline, particularly the judicial actions of the elders, requires such a determination. This leads us right into the second reason for church membership.

Second, without formal membership Biblical church discipline is gutted of its power either to restore or to censure. How, for example, is one to be suspended

from the Lord's Table who has never been admitted to it? How is one to be excommunicated from a fellowship into which he has never been received? How is one to heed the counsel of elders to whom he has never declared his submission? Indeed, to escape liability to discipline is one reason many believers refuse church membership or resign their membership altogether.

Third, maintaining a membership roll enables the church to better conduct its business in an orderly and responsible manner. **I Corinthians 14:40**, in the context of spiritual gifts, says, *let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner*. The New Testament insists that individually and corporately the children of God be *above reproach*.

Fourth, formal church membership is consistent with the organized, visible character of the church in the world. The visible church is a structured organization with by-laws, officers, trustees, procedures, organizational structure, committees, and so on.

Fifth, formal initiation into and identification with the visible church has been the pattern and practice of church history. Water baptism has always been the initiatory rite of the church. Historically this initiation or reception into the visible church has been preceded by a period of catechetical instruction.

Sixth, in the Bible external attachment to the visible people of God is always portrayed as a precious thing - one to be desired not despised. The Psalmist loved the visible place of worship. **Psalm 26:8**, *O Lord, I love the habitation of Thy house, and the place where Thy glory dwells*. He loved and delighted in the corporate worship of God's people. **Psalm 122:1**, *I was glad when they said to me,*

“Let us go to the house of the Lord.” This same spirit is characteristic of the early church as well. **Acts 2:42-47**, *And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer ... And all who believed were together ... And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house ... praising God, and having favor with all the people.* Affection for the church, the people of God, has historically been considered a mark of the redeemed soul. This is expressed in our hymnody. Listen to these verses from Timothy Dwight’s hymn *I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord* (Trinity Hymnal, #353):

*I love thy kingdom, Lord, the house of thine abode,
the church our blest Redeemer saved with his own precious blood.
I love thy church, O God; her walls before thee stand,
dear as the apple of thine eye, and graven on thy hand.
Beyond my highest joy I prize her heavenly ways,
her sweet communion, solemn vows, her hymns of love and praise.*

Seventh, the mutual accountability inherent in church membership is a strong inducement to continuance in the way of obedience and orthodoxy (*pillar of truth*, **I Tim. 3:15**). Free-lance, Lone Ranger believers are more susceptible to doctrinal error and a sinful lifestyle. A keen appreciation of this fact may be behind such verses as **Hebrews 3:13**, *But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.* **Hebrews 10:24-25**, *let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.* Church membership then serves as something of a preservative protecting the believer against spiritual declension and a stimulant promoting

spiritual vitality. How could anyone possibly justify an unwillingness to be accountable to other Christians for life and faith?

Eighth, formal membership promotes an atmosphere of unity in the local church through a common confession and common commitment. **Psalm 133:1**, *Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!* **Amos 3:3** (KJV), *Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*

Ninth, assurance for ourselves is an essential reason to commit ourselves to church membership. In joining a church we voice our testimony of faith in Jesus and we have the comfort of knowing that the church recognizes that profession as credible. Joining a church reflects a measure of affection for the people of God and a desire to openly identify with those who are followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Joining a church and sincerely fulfilling the requisite membership vows promotes ease of conscience. By that I mean you can lay down on a Sunday night knowing that you are rightly related to the visible church of Jesus Christ. These and other things tend to the comfort of our souls. Let me add. While church membership contributes to our assurance and comfort, at the same time, careful attention to this matter of membership helps to guard us from self-deception as to the credibility of our profession of faith, the sincerity of our affection for Christ and His body, and the strength of our commitment to Christ and His kingdom.

Tenth, formal church membership with its attendant covenant commitments is a powerful antidote to the harmful cultural forces of individualism and consumerism that have permeated the church.

Eleventh, the specificity of the New Testament letters suggests formal identification with the local church. In the passage from Colossians 4 read this morning did you notice the specific people mentioned by Paul? He refers to ten individuals by name. Following two of them, *Onesimus* and *Epaphras*, he adds the phrase *who is one of your number* (**4:9, 12**). This language strongly suggests some sort of formal identification with the fellowship. Paul addressed his letters to specific churches – *to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints* (**Rom. 1:7**), *to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons* (**Phil. 1:1**), *to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae* (**Col. 1:2**). And in Colossians 4 Paul mentions *Nympha and the church that is in her house* (**4:15**). On the Day of Pentecost *about three thousand souls were baptized and added* (**Acts 2:41, 47**). To what were these added? Pastor Mark Dever suggests that such passages “imply definition and clear boundaries to a church’s membership. Churches knew those who composed their membership” (*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, p.35).

Twelfth, church membership promotes the fulfillment of the mutual obligations to which we are commanded in Scripture. In **John 13:34-35** Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another.” **Hebrews 10:24-25**, *And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.* “Paul used the Greek word “*allelon*” (*one another*) nearly 40 times to instruct Christians regarding their mutual responsibilities to their fellow believers” (Getz, *Measure*, pp. 189-190). Beloved, these mutual responsibilities are fulfilled, not in our intentions or imaginations, but in real life, in real relationships, in real ministry to real, flesh-and-blood people. Church membership establishes a definite sphere or context in which we live these things out. Membership specifies real flesh-

and-blood saints to whom you are bound. Look around you. For all practical purposes the objects of your Christian concern and sympathy are seated right here with you.

Thirteenth, submission to church membership reflects a correct and healthy understanding of the corporate nature of the Christian life. Formal membership in a local church gives concrete expression to the Biblical images of the church. The Bible portrays the church as a building. Someone unattached to the church is like a brick lying on the ground not having been laid into the wall with all the others. The church is portrayed as a body. Someone unattached to the church is like a finger severed from the hand. There's a third image that is striking. "Eric Lane says that the believer's relationship to the church is analogous to a marriage. He likens Christians who refuse church membership to a man and woman who merely declare themselves married and move in together without ever submitting to a legal marriage ceremony" (Mack, p.30). Lane writes, "They have only thought of themselves and not of the society of which they are a part. Marriage is a public affair, because, however private a matter individuals may think it to be, other members of the community have a right to know who belongs to whom and who is whose wife or husband" (Lane, *Members of One Another*, p.66).

Fourteenth, the reciprocal covenant commitments of church membership open up wonderful benefits. There is the benefit of ministry opportunities for the believer (**I Pet. 4:10**). Granted, certain ministry areas are open to non-members and serve as "side doors" into a church. They allow Christians to exercise their gifts during transition periods or periods of temporary residence. Here at APC ministries such as teaching, mentoring, leading a small group, ordination to the offices of elder and deacon, committee leadership, certain discipleship classes,

and so on are restricted to communing members of the church. Available to the members of a church are pastoral care and oversight, the privilege of participation in the Sacraments, financial assistance, helpful services of pastors and people in the big events of life like weddings and funerals. There is the benefit of loving accountability which, for the believer who is serious about growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ, is not a burden but a blessing.

Certainly, one of the most profound benefits of church membership is admission into the Sacraments of the church; to be able to present your children for baptism; to be able to gather around the Lord's Table for weekly communion with Him and with His people. This we shall do after we sing.

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