

Membership Matters: Why Join a Church?¹

Prospective Members' Class

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Sunday School

Acts 2: 41-47

Introduction: Welcome to our two week "jump start" course on Church Membership. The title of this mini-series is called "Membership Matters." We'll be asking ourselves today "Why Join a Church?"

These classes are primarily for prospective members, but I believe every member of our church needs to know the truths we are going to cover in the next couple weeks.

Before we ask why join a church, we need to establish

"What is a Church?"

1. A church is not a physical building.
2. A church is a called out group of people
Ro 1:6 Among whom are ye also the called of Jesus Christ
3. A church is the Body of Christ
1Co 12:27 Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.
Eph 4:12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

Acts 2: 41-47

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added *unto them* about three thousand souls. 42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. 46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, 47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

- a. Regenerated—Only believers are members.
Verse 41 they that gladly received his word
Verse 41 the same day there were added *unto them* about three thousand souls
Verse 47 the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.
- b. Practicing Baptism
Verse 41 they that gladly received his word were baptized
- c. Where people have fellowship in the apostles doctrine—where the Word of God preached
Verse 42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship

¹ This material is adapted from Mark Dever's books *9 Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway: Wheaton, 2004) and *The Deliberate Church* (Crossway: Wheaton, 2005).

1Ti 3:15 But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

d. Practicing the Lord's Supper
Verse 42 and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

e. Practicing church discipline (I Cor. 5)

So the next question we are asking this morning is...

Why Join a Church?

It seems like such an unusual topic doesn't it? Perhaps for a number of reasons:

- Many people today don't think about church membership.
- Maybe they just take it for granted.
- Maybe they just spend a lot of time looking and hopping around.
- Maybe people ignore it, or simply are opposed to the idea.

Church membership is important

It is unusual today but I'm convinced that in our day and age there is a real need to address it. I don't have to convince you that we're in a very consumer driven culture where we are brought up and cultivated to think that we are consumers to be serviced. I hate to say it but even some church leaders are pushing consumerism, but that is not what a church is about.

If you are a Christian, you are to join a church: either this one or some other one that preaches the Bible. You are to become, not a consumer, but a provider there. You are not a consumer. We, as in the leadership, are not here in that sense to tailor the church to meet the needs of the consumer. We don't do that. We will however, look to scripture to see what is there and assume that if we keep doing what is biblical, that all our needs will be met in the church.

What does the consumer Christian look like?

- In the extreme—a church for consumer Christians would base its services on whatever every one wants—Willow Creek mentality—whatever we can offer to the consumer. We market the church. We as a church have recognized that this is not a reflection of true Biblical Christianity. This is an unbiblical and unhealthy way for church growth.
- A consumer Christian goes to church for what's in it for him. I pray that none of us would be that kind of Christian.

What we want in our church are Provider Christians

- A. One way is how we commit ourselves to attend regularly.
- What if everyone were to have the church hoppers attendance pattern?
 - Would the church close down because half the time, it wouldn't even be here?
 - Would 2 out of 3 meetings vanish immediately?
 - I mean what would happen if that were to be the case?
 - So we stress regular attendance.
- B. What about being here punctually?
- I realize I may be preaching to the choir, but do you slip in the morning service, at 11:10, because "Oh well, you got up late"?

- Isn't it good that a lot of other people don't do that?
 - Isn't it good that you can actually come and something is provided for you?
 - That's because there are brothers and sisters that consider themselves providers who come early in order to get things ready, and to try to make it a welcoming place.
- C. We need to see ourselves as providers, not just consumers.
- As providers, we understand that we are committing ourselves to each other.
 - One incredibly practical way we do this is by encouraging members to pray through the church directory for our brothers and sisters.
- D. I feel too often, church attendees fool themselves about the fellowship they claim to have with God because they have nothing to do with other Christians.
- Obviously church membership never saved anybody, but I do think that as fallen people, we can deceive ourselves.
 - The main thing in scripture that God has set up for us to deal with self deception, is the local church.
 - The church is kind of like an assurance of salvation co-op. It is being in a community of people where we get to know them and we allow them to get to know us. That's how we see whether or not we are living out this Christianity we profess with our lips.

New Testament References to the church

- I. When you read through New Testament references to the church you'll see that there are various images used for it.
- A. Sometimes Paul uses the image of building (1 Cor. 3:9, Eph. 2:21, 2 Cor. 6:16)
 - B. Sometimes of course the very famous image of a body (Rom. 12:4-5, Heb. 12)
 - C. Sometimes the church is a flock (1 Peter 5:2).
 - D. Sometimes the image of a family (1 Tim. 3:15, Eph. 1:5).
- II. But in all these things, we have to ask, "If we are Christians, what should our relationship to the church be?" Using those images...
- "Where are the bricks? They are in a building, and if they aren't in the building then they can't really identify with it.
 - If we are members of physical body, then how can we not be attached to it?
 - If we are sheep, we are going to be in a flock.
 - If we are called to be God's children, we are going to be in his family.

All the images that are used about being a Christian in the New Testament have this corporate aspect to it. So, let's move on and let me give you five particular reasons to join a church.

3 Reasons to Join a Church

- I. First, join a church for ourselves.
- A. For accountability.
 1. The Lord's Table

Acts 2:41-42 Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added *unto them* about three thousand souls. 42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

2. Correction by the body

Matthew 18:15 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 16 But if he will not hear *thee*, *then* take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. 17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell *it* unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

3. To live a Christian life (1 Corinthians 5)

- i. One of the reasons that we join a church is because it is there to help you understand if you are truly living as a Christian.
- ii. I assure you that the man in 1 Corinthian 5 thought of himself as a Christian.
 - a. I'm sure he went to church regularly.
 - b. I'm sure he did all the things a person would do in that community.
- iii. And that precisely the reason why Paul had to write and tell them to take action. Somehow they had to make it clear to him, for his sake, that his life's actions were that of a non- Christian.
- iv. That is a loving thing to do. One reason why you need to join a church is because the Gospel is made clear. It is defined and made visible by Christians who gather together to form congregations of believers.
- v. One of the most important results is that non Christians will be able to see "Oh- I'm calling myself a Christian, but I'm not really living like one. Perhaps I'm not a Christian." Or those who are outside the church can see "Ah... this is what Christians are like. Not like this."

So we should join a church for accountability.

II. Join a church for weaker fellow believers.

I am sure we all know people who we think are Christians, but have been badly wounded and have been taught the American Christian consumer mentality. They take it upon themselves to be their own shepherd, wandering, trying to go it alone, for months or even years. Their attitude is, well, the people in the church are so inconsistent, they'll never get it together.

But all Christians are to be part of a church: where there is baptism and the Lord's Supper, where the Word of God is rightly preached, where there are people you can respect spiritually. That is the normal way to be a Christian. Sometimes it is not possible to be a part of a Gospel preaching church because of location, etc. What that means is you need to either be a part of a church planting effort, or move to somewhere in which there is a Gospel preaching church.

What I am saying is that I've seen many sheep wandering outside the fold and in great danger because they have accepted a wrongly selfish idea of what it means to be a Christian. One of the reasons you should join a church is because church is not about you as an individual. It's about Christ's body.

Brethren you are called to help not just yourself, but others grow spiritually. You can do something alone, but your efforts multiply exponentially when join into Christ's body. What good is a brick outside of the building—a hand not connected to the body—a sheep lost in the wilderness?

Illustration

I read about a guy who kept slipping into church just in time to hear the sermon. And the brother in the church asked him and said, "Well, why don't you come any earlier? Why don't you come for the whole service?" And he said, "Well, I don't get anything out of it."

The brother in the church said, "So have you every thought of joining the church?"

This was his response..."No not really, why would I do that?"

"Why would I do that?" by which he meant, "What would I get out of it if I did do it?" Then he used the expression, "If I joined the church and linked arms with them, I'm scared they would just slow me down." This was a man was very earnest Christian, involved with some ministry outside of the church, in evangelism and discipling.

The church to him just seemed like a needless peripheral thing. Finally the brother in the church said to him, "Well... did you ever think that maybe if you link arms with these other people, that yeah perhaps they'll slow you down, but maybe you'll help to speed them up and that maybe that is part of God's plan?"

So maybe God's plan is not all about you in an individualistic sense, about how can you make sure you witness to 7.2 more people on average each month, and your quiet times get 16 minutes longer over the year, and your individual holiness is in some measure developed. Although those things worth going after, but maybe God is concerned about something larger and grander than that.

It is something that he wants you to be a part of. Perhaps by you, throwing your lives into other people in a committed fashion, those who may be weaker in the faith, will be strengthened. That is part of what God is about in the church. I would encourage you to join a church for the sake of other Christians.

It is very interesting what Jesus says in John 13, *"A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. 35 By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."* How can that happen outside an assembly of believers?

John says in 1 John that *"If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? 21 And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also."* (1 John 4:20)

III. Finally join a church for God.

- A. It's interesting if you look through the book of Acts, it is the Lord who adds people to their number and being added to the Christians number meant being identified as the church. And who identifies with the church?
- B. If you look at chapters 2 and 4, it is fascinating that when Paul, or Saul is on the road to Damascus he has the vision of the risen Christ. He appears to him and Saul falls to the ground. Do you remember what Jesus says to him? He doesn't say "Saul, Saul, why are going to persecute those Christians". He doesn't even say "Saul, Saul, why are you going to persecute the church." He says, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" Jesus so clearly and closely identifies with the church that he refers to the congregation of Christians as Damascus as "me." That's why I think Paul got his image of the church as the body of Christ. His first Christian conversation I think- had that in it. In Acts 20, it says that the church is the body of Christ, and that God bought the church with his own blood. We are Christ's body!
- C. I don't know all the bits of your life and how you have been brought up to regard the church but in the New Testament I can tell you, the church is regarded as the body of Christ bought with God's own blood. This is what God is about.
- D. So many of the things that we understand to be Christian are not simply individualism but are actually virtues that express themselves in relationship with other people.

Conclusion

To conclude "Why Join a Church?" 1) Join a church for accountability 2) Join a church for fellow Christians and lastly 3) Join a church for God. Well, there's a lot more I could say about this.

If after next week's class, you are interested in membership, we will have available a prospective member form which you can fill out, and we can set up a time for a membership interview. This will help the leadership better shepherd you, if you are interested in joining.

Next week we will discuss the responsibilities for church membership.