

## Why is Meaningless Membership Dangerous?

Meaningless membership refers to the common practice of neglecting to tie church membership to specific responsibilities, priorities, expectations, privileges, and sanctions. It is dangerous for four reasons.

- **Meaningless membership sends a confusing witness to the surrounding community.**
    - When we fail to tie membership to specific obligations, we allow people to become members without them feeling any particular obligation or accountability to live and teach as the church lives and teaches – a clear church covenant of membership.
      - Moral obligations - <sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 5:11-13** <sup>11</sup> But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone <sup>a</sup>who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler-- not even to eat with such a one. <sup>12</sup> For what have I to do with judging <sup>a</sup>outsiders? <sup>b</sup>Is it not those inside the church<sup>1</sup> whom you are to judge? <sup>13</sup> God judges<sup>1</sup> those outside. <sup>a</sup>"Purge the evil person from among you."
      - Spiritual obligations - <sup>ESV</sup> **Colossians 3:16** <sup>16</sup> Let <sup>a</sup>the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, <sup>b</sup>singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, <sup>c</sup>with thankfulness in your hearts to God.
    - <sup>ESV</sup> **1 Peter 4:10** <sup>10</sup> <sup>a</sup>As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, <sup>b</sup>as good stewards of God's varied grace:
    - <sup>ESV</sup> **Hebrews 13:17** <sup>17</sup> Obey <sup>a</sup>your leaders and submit to them, <sup>b</sup>for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to <sup>c</sup>give an account. <sup>d</sup>Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.
  - The poor behavior of many members in such a low accountability environment often taints the church's corporate witness in the community and confuses unbelievers around us about what it means to be a Christian. It makes the church look grossly hypocritical when an immature or unconverted member sins repeatedly in a publicly known way.
    - <sup>ESV</sup> **Philippians 2:14-16** <sup>14</sup> Do all things <sup>a</sup>without grumbling or <sup>b</sup>disputing, <sup>15</sup> that you may be blameless and innocent, <sup>a</sup>children of God <sup>b</sup>without blemish <sup>c</sup>in the midst of <sup>d</sup>a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine <sup>e</sup>as lights in the world, <sup>16</sup> holding fast to <sup>a</sup>the word of life, so that in <sup>b</sup>the day of Christ <sup>c</sup>I may be proud that <sup>d</sup>I did not run in vain or labor in vain.
- **Meaningless membership causes division due to the sin of unconverted members.**
  - When we uncritically (i.e. without agreement to the statement of faith and without a membership covenant) make people members, such members can become sources of division within the church. The church is a web of mutually sanctifying relationships. One quarrelsome "unbeliever" can sow many seeds of division by slavery to sins like gossip, anger, lying, and covetousness.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Titus 3:9-11** <sup>9</sup> But <sup>a</sup>avoid foolish <sup>b</sup>controversies, <sup>c</sup>genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for <sup>d</sup>they are unprofitable and worthless. <sup>10</sup> As for a person who stirs up division, <sup>a</sup>after warning him once and then twice, <sup>b</sup>have nothing more to do with him, <sup>11</sup> knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

<sup>ESV</sup> **James 4:1-4** What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions<sup>1</sup> are <sup>a</sup>at war within you?<sup>2</sup> <sup>2</sup> You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup> You ask and do not receive, because you ask <sup>a</sup>wrongly, to spend it on your passions. <sup>4</sup> <sup>a</sup>You adulterous people!<sup>1</sup> Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? <sup>b</sup>Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

- **Meaningless membership causes ambiguity regarding the duties of membership.**

- When we fail to tie church membership to specific duties, new members don't have any concrete understanding of that to which they are committing. Or, Christians remain ignorant of their biblical duty in the local church.
- When members do not understand exactly what their responsibilities are, they are left without a practical yardstick by which to faithfully examine their own behavior or to which they can hold their Christian brother or sister accountable.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Galatians 6:1-2** Brothers,<sup>1</sup> <sup>a</sup>if anyone is caught in any transgression, <sup>b</sup>you who are spiritual should restore him in <sup>c</sup>a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. <sup>2</sup> <sup>a</sup>Bear one another's burdens, and <sup>b</sup>so fulfill <sup>c</sup>the law of Christ.

- **Meaningless membership leads to the self-deception of irresponsible members.**

- Church membership is a local church's commitment to each individual bearing fruit that evidences repentance. Failing to tie church membership to duty and obligation communicates to the lazy and unconverted that the diligent killing of indwelling sin is unnecessary, and that observable growth in practical holiness is for the few, not for all.

<sup>ESV</sup> **John 15:5** <sup>5</sup> I am the vine; <sup>a</sup>you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that <sup>b</sup>bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing...**8-10** <sup>8</sup> <sup>a</sup>By this my Father is glorified, that you <sup>b</sup>bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. <sup>9</sup> <sup>a</sup>As the Father has loved me, <sup>b</sup>so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> <sup>a</sup>If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as <sup>b</sup>I have kept <sup>c</sup>my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

- Such failure wrongly communicates the church's tacit approval of the idea that a person can be a genuine Christian and anticipate entrance into the Kingdom of God while simultaneously indulging complacency with spiritual inactivity and disobedience.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Luke 6:46** <sup>46</sup> <sup>a</sup>"Why <sup>b</sup>do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?"

## FIVE REASONS TO JOIN A LOCAL CHURCH

### 1. *Join for God(Christ). The Best Reason to Join a Church*

- **Join a Church for the sake of God's name.**
  - The building up of the church is ultimately GOD'S work. *The LORD added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:42, 47).*
  - *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute ME (Acts 9:4).* Jesus so closely identifies Himself with His church that He said Saul was persecuting *Him* when he was persecuting the church.
  - If Jesus identifies Himself closely with the church, we should too. By our being together in a church, we are giving testimony and praise to God through our lives as we live and love each other together.
  - We could service people socially (not a social club, but an important relational community), but will they be committed to pray, give, serve, love, and attend? These are the marks of a faithful Christian, and these are the characteristics and actions that give God glory in the church.
- **Join a Church for the sake of God's cause.**
  - God wants His glory displayed and His Gospel spread to all the nations.
  - *"It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make you a light to the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa 49:6).*
  - We can take God's glory and Gospel to the nations better if we band together than if we remain alone.
  - Being part of God's plan to spread His glory and Gospel to all nations is a privilege that we will not have in heaven. We seize the privilege of evangelism best if we work together as one diverse unity.

### 2. *Join For Other People*

- **Join a church for the sake of non-Christians.**
  - Church membership helps make the Gospel clear to non-Christians by providing a unified witness of what it means to be a Christian.
  - Membership provides this unified witness by implementing a statement of faith, encouraging unity in doctrine, and a church covenant, encouraging unity in lifestyle.
- **Join a church for the sake of weaker Christians.**
  - God is not merely concerned about our own private piety, but also about our care for the other sheep. This is a whole aspect of godliness that privatized Christians ignore. If we don't love God's people, then John says we have reason to question our love for God Himself (1 John 4:8).

- God wants us to encourage weaker Christians and run the race with them. Don't leave it to other people to care for those outside your circle of friends. This is your responsibility.
- Members should see themselves as providers - coming to serve others, not to be served.
- **Join a church for the sake of the church leaders.**
  - If regular attenders don't eventually make themselves known to the pastor as members of the church, then the pastor cannot take responsibility for them as part of his particular flock. Pastors need to know for which sheep God will hold them accountable so that they can tend to them most responsibly and effectively (Heb 13:17).
  - If regular attenders don't join churches, then pastors cannot be freed to do what they ought to do. Pastors can only devote themselves to the ministry because they are set free to do so by members who fund their work. Regular attenders benefit from the commitment of other people who have become members and who give and serve and pray regularly.

### ***3. Join For the Corporate Health of the Church***

- **Join a church to expose false gospels.**
  - The best defense is often a good offense. God wants us to band together in love so that we can model Christianity for the world. This is often how we best debunk messages that masquerade as biblical Christianity but are really different messages altogether.
  - Christians are called to differentiate the true Gospel from false ones, to defend it against distortion, and to prevent it from being perverted. We do these things best together because we are sharpened by each other's insight, encouragement, and correction.
- **Join a church to edify the church.**
  - Some people refuse to join a local church because they feel they would be slowed down in their spiritual growth if they joined. Perhaps. But maybe God wants such people to join a church to help speed other people up. Membership doesn't stop with M-E.
  - Joining a local church counters wrong individualism, helping us live out the corporate nature of Christianity. The New Testament is full of injunctions to care for each other. This is part of what it means to be a Christian. So if we think we are mature, yet lack a care for Christ's body that evidences itself in carrying out the responsibilities of local church membership, we hurt the church, and we are not yet as mature as we presume to be.

### ***4. Join For Your Individual Health as a Christian***

- **Join a church for your own spiritual protection.**
  - We can't always read our own souls perfectly. We can deceive ourselves, and we therefore need other people to help us walk as individual Christians (Jer 17:9; Ps 19:12).

- The Bible speaks of people as sheep. Sheep aren't meant to be wandering around on their own recognizance between folds. Sheep are dumb. We fall into ravines when we are by ourselves. We need to be shepherded into folds. So we need to exercise the humility to view ourselves as sheep and submit ourselves to a local body of believers for mutual encouragement, protection, and examination. It is our wisdom and safety to humbly stay within the flock and near a good shepherd who grazes, guides and guards us.

**5. *Join a church for your own spiritual assurance, faithfulness and growth.***

- In joining a church, we are asking our church family to hold us accountable to live according to what we confess. Membership in a local church is that congregation's public testimony that your life gives continual evidence of regeneration.
- In joining a church, we are taking hold of one another to know and to be known in mutual responsibility and care, so that we can make sure we are bearing the fruit of holiness, "without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14; cf. John 14:21; 15:10, 14).

**Some closing thoughts of our personal consideration and family discussions.**

- Does the Bible make explicit and implicit mention of membership rolls in a local church? Where is it..... also re-read 1 Cor 12:14-26. How can church membership help us as Christians to live out these obligations we have to one another as Christ's body?
- Do any 'Christians' you know view membership as a loose affiliation useful only on occasion, or more as a regular responsibility involving them in each other's lives for the purposes of the Gospel? What are the responsibilities of a church member? How can the fulfillment of those responsibilities contribute to the work of the Gospel?
- Why might it be true that church membership is dangerous unless it is the reflection of a living commitment to Christ? What does a living commitment to Christ and His church look like?
- Church membership is a church's corporate testimony to an individual member's salvation. Read Hebrews 13:17. The Bible teaches that church leaders will be required to give an account for those under their care. Do you think this "account" will simply be a statement that a person once made a decision for Christ, or is it a knowledgeable testimony that a person is faithfully bearing fruit in the Gospel? How does this affect our understanding of who should be on our membership rolls?
- How would a biblical understanding of church membership make our witness to non-Christians clearer? How would it make it more difficult for weaker Christians to stray while still considering themselves Christians? How would it help to give shape and focus to the discipleship of mature Christians?

\*Much of these notes have been adapted from the hard work of the Elders at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington DC, USA.