

# Why Church Membership Matters

- 1 Peter 5:2
- We are in a series called “Church Foundations,” and so far we have seen the five reasons why Antioch in Acts 13 could be a good model for us as a church. We have seen the eight signs of a healthy church as on display in Acts 2 and the first church in Jerusalem. Last week we looked at Romans 14 and talked about how God has instructed us to love one another when we disagree about the nonessentials. That’s an understanding that you almost need to have on the doorstep of a church before you enter in. Otherwise, you come in with a high need to get everybody in the church to agree with you on every single point of doctrine and that’s just not going to happen. What can happen, as a result, are broken relationships and cold wars between families and sometimes even church splits. Or a family leaves the church, not just the local church but any church and goes home, pulls down the shutters, and does church as a family. There’s only one problem with that. You cannot do church as a family. The Bible just doesn’t have a picture of that anywhere that I can find, but makes a strong case for membership in a local church. What I find in Scripture are families and singles, widows and widowers, joining together as one flock in a local expression of the body of Christ. John Piper says, “Sanctification is a community project.” Charles Spurgeon had an even stronger word picture for this:
  - I know there are some who say, “Well, I’ve given myself to the Lord, but I don’t intend to give myself to any church.” I say, “Now why not?” And they answer, “Because I can be just as good a Christian without it.” I say, “Are you quite clear about that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord’s commands as by being obedient? There’s a brick. What is the brick made for? It’s made to build a house. It is of no use for the brick to tell you that it’s just as good a brick while it’s kicking about on the ground by itself, as it would be as part of a house. Actually, it’s a good-for-nothing brick. So, you rolling stone Christians, I don’t believe that you’re answering the purpose for which Christ saved you. You’re living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live and you are much to blame for the injury you do.”
  - And that brings us to this text today, which I wanted all of us to memorize for two reasons. The secondary reason is that it gives you a picture of what the elders are called to do: the elders are to the church body what shepherds are to their flock of sheep. They lead, feed, take care of and protect the flock. But the primary reason is because this verse makes a very strong argument for the importance of church membership. Not church-hopping. Not church-dating, as Josh Harris describes it in his book, “Stop Dating the Church.” But church membership, which is a way of identifying with a local body in a way that expresses belonging to, commitment to, submission to, and especially a love for that group of people who make up a local expression of the body of Christ.
  - Mark Dever goes even further than Spurgeon. Josh Harris quotes Dever as saying that he often addresses college students with this comment: “If you are not a member of the local church you regularly attend, you may well be going to hell.” That usually quiets the room. Then Mark Dever adds, “I don’t mean for a second that you literally have to have your name on a membership card in a church somewhere to go to heaven. I believe in justification by faith alone in Christ alone by God’s grace alone. At the same time, in the New Testament it seems that the local church is there to verify or falsify our claims to be Christians. The man in 1 Corinthians 5 who was sleeping with his father’s wife thought of himself as a Christian....(Then he goes on to say) “I don’t care how much you cry during singing or preaching. If you do not live a life marked by love toward others, the Bible has no encouragement for you to think that you’re a Christian. None.” 1 John 2:9-10

says, "He who says he is in the light and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him." Mark Dever says this, finally: "Do you want to know that your new life (in Christ) is real? Commit yourself to a local group of saved sinners. Try to love them. Don't just do it for three weeks. Don't just do it for six months. Do it for years. And I think you'll find out, and others will, too, whether or not you love God. The truth will show itself."

- First reason for church membership: it is needed because of identification and belonging. Back to what Peter says in this verse, "elders, shepherd the flock which is among you." How would a shepherd know which sheep to tend if they were not his? A shepherd in New Zealand does not leave his house every morning and just go "take care of some random sheep." "How did your day go, dear?" "It was great! I found two sheep in the neighbor's pasture, lured them down to the stream, and took care of them all day. Now they belong to me!" No, that would be sheep rustling, which by the way happens a lot in our churches these days. The shepherd with integrity will know the sheep that are his, just as Jesus said in John 10. He will even call them by name and they will follow him. In the same way, the elders who lead must know who is following. They will know them by name because these "sheep" have come and identified themselves with this particular "flock."
- This is one Scripture I would point to as evidence in the New Testament that local churches had some kind of membership. There was a way for the elders to know who was here and committed.
- Second reason for church membership: for the purpose of accountability and discipline. Another passage we have referred to already, but let's look at **1 Corinthians 5:12-13 in the ESV**. Expelling someone from the church only makes sense if that person is a member, someone who has made a commitment and submitted himself to the authority of the elders and to the church. When Paul writes to them again in 2 Corinthians, most scholars believe he is referring to this case of church discipline in Chapter 2 when he encourages them to embrace this man who has repented. "This punishment, which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man..." (2:6ff). The "majority" in this verse makes sense only if there is a local body of believers who are committed to and submitted to one another under Christ. No one would be expected to submit to church discipline if he is not even aware that he is a member of the church. And I would add, that he is greatly LOVED by the church. "For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives." (Hebrews 12:6)
- Third reason for church membership: for the purpose of interconnectedness, or body life. There is another passage of Scripture that points to church membership, and David has already read it to us. **Turn to 1 Corinthians 12:12-27**.
- Paul is using a metaphor there to help us understand the interconnectedness of the body of Christ. Each individual member of the body of Christ is compared to a body part: an eye, a foot, an ear, a hand. But what is interesting is that he also lists the head as one of the body parts, as if it is just another part. Do you see the difference between that picture and the picture Paul paints with Colossians 2:18? "And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence." This is a picture of the universal church, and Jesus is the head. But 1 Corinthians 12 lists head as a body part in verse 21. This is a picture of the local body, the church in Corinth, the church in Ephesus. Or Antioch Community Church. What do we see then that is important in this picture?
- We need to be connected to one another. If we take the metaphor to its logical conclusion, a body part disconnected to the whole body dies. The hand needs the body. In the same way, the body without its constituent parts cannot do its work effectively. Hope is experiencing that right now

as one of her feet is out of commission. The body cannot do all that it is designed to do when one of the members is not able to carry its weight, so to speak. Thankfully, God has so designed the human body to be able to continue even if one member is down. We're not like the string of Christmas tree bulbs that, if one doesn't work, they all go dead! And the church, by the grace of God, can continue to function and bring glory to God when one member leaves or is in sin. But because we are interconnected, it still hurts. Look at verse 26: "And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it." Don't believe it? Smash your thumb with a hammer this afternoon, you know, just as a biblical experiment. See if the whole body doesn't suffer along with it. See if the whole body doesn't stay awake half the night with the thumb! But there's another truth in this text that points to a local church.

- Verses 23-25. "That the members should have the same care for one another." That's not possible in the universal church. It is only possible in the local church, where the members take care of one another.
- Fourth reason for church membership: for the purpose of protection and covering. One final argument I would make for church membership has to do with being under the protective authority of the leadership in a church. When a family or single stands down front at Antioch and states their intention to join the church that day, having gone through the New Members' class and having prayed and heard from the Lord that this is the church He wants them to commit to, they are announcing that to the elders. They are announcing that to the congregation, their brothers and sisters they will be locking arms with in battle. They are *also* announcing that to the "principalities" and "powers" and the "rulers of the darkness of this age," the "spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12). Now don't get me wrong. We don't spend any time talking to demons, nor should we! But we do wage war against them. Our war is not with flesh and blood. Our enemy is a ruler and he has an army, if you will, and a strategy and a battle plan. When a believer announces before God and His people that he is standing under the authority and the covering of a local fellowship and her elders, I believe hell trembles. That family or that single person is announcing that he is not a lone ranger, he is not an isolated individual just trying to serve "my Jesus." He is announcing that he is taking up arms under the Captain of the Lord of Hosts, and under the elders the Lord has raised up in this particular local fellowship. That is an important step for believers to take, saints. It is not just foolish for a believer to get so disgusted with church that he decides to "chuck it all" and go home. It is deadly. It is not just a bad idea for a family to wander from pillar to post for months and sometimes years, searching for the church that will be just right for their family. It is dangerous.
- The elders are called to shepherd "the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." (Acts 20:28). Church membership is possible only because Jesus took your place and mine on the cross. He suffered and died not so you and I could wander but so that you and I could find rest in Him and a home in His body.
- Church membership matters. One, we identify with a local body and belong to one another. Two, we are committed to people who we know will love us enough to discipline us, if necessary. Three, we will be connected with a church family whom we can love and serve and care for, as the body of Christ is called to do. Four, we will be stating to the Lord, to the local church, and even to the powers and principalities that we are under authority.