



1 - Becoming Family

The differences between being a Houseguest and Being a Member of the Family

While the title of this brief summary introduces the obvious implications of the metaphor, we want to address the idea more thoroughly in the following articles. Before we move to those, let's look broadly at some of the implications of becoming a member of a family. One thing is certain, everyone is looking for some place to belong. We see it displayed in the daily vivid evidence of our culture and media. Much of the unrest and brokenness we see around us comes from individuals or groups who are either isolated or enmeshed in various associations, virtual or actual, that are defined by our differences rather than our commonality. What we are most often left with is a self-centered perspective of our world and others.

The isolated individual(s) may have a belief that it is "me (or us – often found in cliquish, romantic, marriage or small family relationships) against the world" which is largely unhealthy for those inside and outside of that definition. Ingrained in all of our fallen human instincts is what is often referred to as an "orphan mentality" in the context of spiritual conversations.

- The larger social groupings based on common cause or beliefs.
- Most of what the world defines as individual rights or group rights, is in reality a result of the separation we experience from being fallen, separated & sinful.
- Death is the ultimate separator for all human life & relationships.
- Not so in God's Kingdom – we are not family because we look alike, act alike, have common interests or agendas – we are family because we are all part of one Family made up of the redeemed people of YHWH (why do we sometimes use God's personal name?) called the church.
- "Doing Life Together" or as Jim Pearce often says "one Anothering" means sharing the load and responsibilities for a healthy family in healthy relationship with each other.
- A houseguest is not expected to reliably and consistently invest in the financial and daily practical activities such as contributing income, fulfilling roles, completing "family chores", providing hospitality to guests, etc.
- The church is an organism, not an organization. It would be impossible to run your family relationships like an institution where severance is an option when things don't work out or members do not fulfill their responsibilities. However, we can learn from healthy corporations. For example, this church family has hired a staff who are compensated to render certain services to assure some continuity and structure for a large family. Some employed by the family (even if the ones employed are actually family) are not being compensated for being family, but for services that must adapt to the changing needs of the family.

2 - Why Membership?

Why it is important for Christians to become Church Members?

That question is becoming much more common: partly due to a growing distrust for institutions and authority, a shift away from denominational loyalty and increasing awareness of the failures and abuses of churches. Another reason may be that our culture has embraced open options as a primary default value. Unless compelled otherwise, we naturally shift to keeping all our options on the table. One result is that people today are much more irregular about attending corporate worship and more prone toward what some call church hopping or double and triple dipping (connecting to more than one church at a time).

While there's nothing necessarily wrong with leaving options open, there are certainly areas of life where most agree it is unhealthy or damaging. Marriage, citizenship, and parenting would be quick examples where commitment is necessary to the relationship. Even joining a sports team entails an intention of loyalty that limits one from playing for opposing teams. This is because there are certain relationships where a defining commitment has positive effects that cannot otherwise be achieved. Here is a brief summary of why we believe the church is one those areas of life where God has encouraged commitment as the heart of what membership means. Additional resources are recommended below if you would like further study on the topic and passages.

Whose idea is it anyway?

From Genesis to Revelation God consistently deals with His people not only personally but as a community. He always calls us into relationship with Himself and then also with one another. He never leaves it optional. Instead He commands us to be a "people" and to not relate to Him only individually. Jesus confirmed that plan to Peter when he declared that He would build His church and even Hell would

not overcome it (Mt. 16:17-19).

The church is Christ's chosen vehicle for accomplishing His purposes, however messy his followers (such as Peter) may make it. Beginning in the book of Acts, groups of believers identified themselves in keeping with that vision. As the apostles and missionaries spread the Gospel, more churches were started in each local region for worship, discipleship, fellowship and outreach. Therefore, the concept of church really isn't a human invention but Christ's application of how God has always worked.

Why membership though?

"Jesus didn't die for a voluntary organization. He died for His body, His bride. We belong to Him. It's a glorious thing to be a church member." - Thabiti Anyabwile

While the church described in the New Testament sought authenticity and freedom, it was also organized and valued the authority and accountability that Christ taught His disciples. It is quite evident that their commitment and loyalty to their local congregations were highly valued. Consider, for example that –

- Many letters reference and identify churches in specific locations which indicate a sense of permanence. Paul stayed with some of them for extended periods.
- Individuals are often named in these letters, demonstrating that there was a reliable sense of who belonged.

- There is personal awareness of the needs of individual widows in Acts 6.
- Elders and deacons were elected by those belonging to various congregations.
- New Testament authors continually assume the churches they are addressing consist of individuals committed to carrying out their challenges and commands and who were able to receive their praise.
- Leaders are continually called to serve their people and it is assumed they had regular contact with them and an understood authority. Likewise, congregants are instructed to submit to leaders whom it is assumed they know.
- These churches are viewed as a testimony to the surrounding community, which presumes that the neighborhood knows the persons identified with them.
- They met in the homes of committed families, often at substantial risk.
- Constant warnings and themes of persecution imply that enemies could identify who was associated with churches in a particular city.
- These communities were urged to exclude false teachers, divisive people and trouble makers, which indicates a defined group protecting the integrity and unity of its community.
- Appeals for merciful generosity assume a measure of personal loyalty and awareness of one church group about another.

We could go on, but the picture of the church as a group of believers committed to worshipping and serving together is quite clear. They belonged to Jesus but also to one another and that mutual belonging involved a commitment to sharing mission and care that was often at the risk of life.

The same Peter that Christ first addressed about building His church also writes about it as a “belonging”. “A holy nation, a people belonging to God.” (1 Peter 2:9). Note that he is not only saying believers belong to God but to a people or “nation.” He begins the same letter by identifying some of the local versions of it: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, etc. He then continues by outlining their responsibilities to the Gospel and one another.

Although it is perhaps as counter-cultural as it ever was, and admittedly has been abused, commitment to the local church is God’s idea and should be considered carefully. Church membership today is simply our way of honoring God’s vision by demonstrating our commitment to belong to a specific group of believers. As in many areas of our society, commitment becomes most real not when it is simply felt or suggested, but when it is publicly declared through promises. Most churches have some way of expressing that concept.

Saved from ourselves

Many have taught that selfishness and pride are root sins that feed all other sins and inhibit the love of God and neighbor. In a sense, a core part of what God is saving us from is getting lost in ourselves. By calling us out of our individualism and independence to commit to a definite group of believers, God is providing another piece of healing and sanctification. In community we are encouraged to see the larger picture and to deny ourselves in healthy ways. Worshipping with a body we have linked with does something that praying or singing alone can never do, which is bring us past or above ourselves. In connecting with a congregation, I receive a unique perspective and encouragement as well.

Another part of all this is the beauty and power of accountability. We all not only need care but spiritual accountability to help inhibit our laziness and sometimes our waywardness. Having us to commit not only to a congregation but its leaders is one important way God invites such accountability. Sometimes we need a voice beyond our own to help us stay on track.

Committed to all, committed to none

Through its vows, church membership also mirrors marriage. It is one thing to say you love people but another to publicly promise to love one person. It is easy for Christians to say they care about other believers when there is no commitment to anyone in particular. It is not difficult to say we love the idea of “church” but then we pick and choose what we want and like from different churches. That is like being engaged to the qualities you like in a bunch of people instead of being engaged to one person.

What is missing is that love is most real not when it is easy but in the difficulty of real life, conflict, and relational growth. The scriptures often view the church as God’s primary model for uniting and reconciling people that otherwise wouldn’t belong together (Jews, Romans and Greeks, different races, classes and genders).

When we marry, God’s desire is to teach us to love through the inevitable tensions and something similar is true with church. If you jump around or simply avoid commitment, you short-circuit this part of God’s plan as well. The church is supposed to be a place where belonging to each other is built around the Gospel not around our comfort zone.

An Army of One or Many?

Years ago, the theme of a military ad was about being an “army of one”. We understood the point to be helping recruits feel like they could be themselves and become even more. But because it seemed to undermine the intimidation factor of the full force of the military as a whole. Try to imagine an enemy saying, ‘Oh no, here comes the army of one, run away!’

The doctrine of church in the Bible embraces our individuality but emphasizes the power of our unity and community as well. When Jesus told Peter that Hell could not stand up against the church, it was because it is His church and also because it is a force of many in whom He dwells through His Spirit. That church has withstood the onslaught of persecution every century since.

Why would we think we need more than our individualism when it comes to belonging to an insurance group but not a church? Our faith and our endurance need the many. Our theology, our morality, and our service need a whole body of believers.

What we accomplish together is almost always greater than what we do alone. Commitment to His church is part of God’s plan for greater impact. Looking back over history, there would be tremendous losses to society were it not for the church. Critics enjoy pointing to the failures but without churches many hospitals, relief organizations, and universities would have not existed.

This Little Light of Mine

Another aspect that stands out is how the Bible often speaks of the church, and not just individual believers, as a testimony or model to the world. No matter how poorly you think churches have generally done with that role, it remains the will of God to demonstrate His work through communities of committed believers and not only or even primarily through individuals.

Any sense that the church has fallen short should only be greater motivation not less. God calls Christians to commit to creating a community that illustrates the Gospel at work in broken but healing people. To opt out because the church is too messy is a prideful denial of our own mess and a contradiction of God’s vision. To believe our faith is better on its own and that we are best served by

keeping our options open is to be an oxymoronic church of one. It is not better for the world to witness

Christian consumerism, independence, and individualism than to witness the real flaws of churches; especially if those churches are honest, humble and seeking Christ together.

Experience confirms the Bible's theology of church. As many of us witnessed the church's lifelessness, hypocrisy and irrelevance growing up so we, in many cases, completely rejected it (along with the Gospel). After being redeemed we can see even more flaws but now we can also see the value, beauty and vision. The church is not ideal but it is real. It is sincere, yet its people are in process and includes a very wide spectrum of spiritual maturity. The Holy Spirit is at work transforming us as we learn to rely on the finished work of Jesus alone.

Responsible for whom?

Finally, membership is the only way we leaders really know who we are most responsible to serve and pastor. Although we care about and welcome anyone who worships with us, and though we try to respond to needs the best we can, members are the ones who have given us permission and offered commitment. Anyone may feel they belong but these are the folks who have signed on and the ones we know we can count on. They are also those whom we have signed on to spiritually assist with the work of the church.

Resources:

Philip Yancey, *Why Church?* (PDF) Yancey, writes as someone who was wounded from his fundamentalist church background and rejected it. He shares his journey by referring to the church as a flawed but glorious vehicle of God. *Church Membership*, by Jonathan Leeman, 9Marks. Leeman provides more of a systematic approach to the topic and provides ample scriptural support.

Here is a briefer summary from the same group:

<http://www.9marks.org/answers/according-scripture-why-should-every-christian-join-church>

According to Scripture, Why Every Christian Needs to Join a Church?

Every Christian should join a church because Scripture requires it. Granted, there is no direct command in Scripture that says, "Every Christian must join a local church," but two factors in Scripture indicate that every Christian should be a member of a local church.

1. Jesus established the church to be a public, earthly institution that would mark out, affirm, and oversee those who profess to believe in him (Matt. 16:18-19, 18:15-20). Jesus established the church to publicly declare those who belong to him in order to give the world a display of the good news about himself (John 17:21, 23; see also Eph. 3:10). Jesus wants the world to know who belongs to him and who doesn't. And how is the world to know who belongs to him and who doesn't? They are to see which people publicly identify themselves with his people in the visible, public institution he established for this very purpose. They are to look at the members of his church. And if some people claim to be part of the universal church even though they belong to no local church, they reject Jesus' plan for them and his church. Jesus intends for his people to be marked out as a visible, public group, which means joining together in local churches.

2. Scripture repeatedly commands Christians to submit to their leaders (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12-13). The only way to do that is by publicly committing to be members of their flock, and saying in effect, "I commit to listening to your teaching, following your direction, and to submitting to your leadership." There is no way to obey the scriptural commands to submit to your leaders, if you never actually submit to them by joining a local church.

If you are interested in pursuing membership at Grace Mills River, please contact Allison Rickman at allison.rickman@gmail.com.