

## Why Is Membership in the Local Church Important?

In *Acts 2:41* Luke records that after Peter's message delivered in Jerusalem on the Pentecost that some three thousand believers were baptized and "*were added to their number that day.*" This, along with other Scriptures, implies that once a person has received Jesus Christ as Savior that he/she becomes a part of His Body, the Church. There is no need for some kind of further ritual or test or probation period. Receiving Christ means being received by God into His Bride, the Church.

So why do local churches have membership rolls and requirements? Aren't disciples of Jesus already "in"?

In the early days of the Church the "Way" was unified enough that to be in Christ was to automatically become a part of the local church in your hometown. As time passed and a variety of local churches inhabited each community, suddenly the unsavory business of having to declare allegiance to one local church over another became a necessity. Or so it seems. But must it be that way? Can't a disciple of Jesus Christ simply consider that they are a member of the Church and so they are a member of any local church that they happen to be attending?

I and others have wrestled with this question. My desire to have the Church be uncomplicated and Biblically-rooted would suggest that no requirements beyond what the New Testament demands should be pressed upon people desiring to be affiliated with a specific local church. And yet, because we live in a world in which multitudes of assemblies bear the name "\_\_\_\_\_ Church" local church leaders and those seeking to worship, serve and support a local church struggle with defining which Christians "belong" to which congregations.

I would suggest five reasons for placing your membership with a specific local church:

1. It declares the member's agreement with the doctrinal beliefs of a specific congregation. Not every assembly bearing the name "Church" is necessarily faithful to Scripture. The letters of the New Testament reveal how quickly false teaching began to infiltrate the Church. Each local church should have some kind of declaration of basic beliefs to which her members can assent. In so doing, neither leaders nor members are in the dark as to the foundation of the belief structure of that congregation.
2. It declares the member's agreement with the vision and mission of a specific congregation. Because of the unique giftedness and vision of leaders and members, and the unique environments in which each local church finds itself, the specific approach and direction of ministry for each congregation can be very different. One is not necessarily better than the other, but no one local church can be effective using varied models of ministry, or can be effectively involved in every type of ministry. Each local church must choose a path, stay on it, and have members who agree with that vision for effective ministry to occur.
3. It places the member under a specific team of elders for nurture and protection. Moses learned early in his ministry that one man cannot lead a multitude (see *Exodus 18*). His father-in-law pointed out the wisdom of breaking down the masses into smaller groups and supplying each group with a spiritually-able leader. Elders in a specific congregation can shepherd the flock more effectively when they have a manageable number and they know who they are. This also is a blessing to the member, in that, he/she is accountable to a specific leadership team and not prone to wander to another "flock" when their shepherd/elder seems unsuitable.
4. It commits the member to support a specific congregation in prayer, ministry and financial giving. This does not prohibit the member from providing support to other ministering bodies of the Church, but establishes his/her local church as the priority of their support. The efforts of the member can then become concentrated and more effective.
5. It provides the member a loving family. It is one thing to have extended family across town, in another state or even on the other side of the world. But the family in your own home is what provides consistent encouragement, strength and joy. So it is in the local church. As disciples of Jesus we have extended family in every place on the globe, but those in our local church family are the people with whom we share life on a consistent basis. There's no place like home.

In a perfect world, church membership would cease to exist. Then again, in a perfect world, the Church wouldn't be needed. Until God makes all things new, we seek to establish a healthy local church which is one among many congregations, all linked together by our commonness in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.