

Why Should I Be a Church Member? - Ephesians 4:11-16

This morning I want to address the issue of church membership. I know for some you that's like listening to a sermon about the church budget or a lecture on biblical Hebrew. I am considering joining a different gym and they're offering a \$1 membership special at a local place. I'll be honest, when I see membership specials it makes the place feel kind of sleazy because what they're trying to do is bait you in to keep you.

But gym membership is light years away from church membership - or at least it should be. And we want to address the issue of membership as a church because the issue really is important. We as elders have been inconsistent with membership for a while and we feel the need to correct that. So we apologize for the inconsistency. And we apologize that it's been somewhat an abrupt change - we could have been a little more tactful in the transition to being consistent.

When we started RBC we didn't have membership for the first year because we wanted people to learn about who we are as a church and ensure this was their church home. We allowed people to serve in ways that normally only members would serve, while being up front that eventually we would require membership for those roles. The problem was we never really transitioned from that initial stage. So after 2.5 years, we really need to transition. So we apologize and ask your forgiveness for the inconsistency and for the delay.

Having said that, we believe whole heartedly that every believer should be a member of their local church - that really is our position. I also know that many of you have strong reservations/objections to membership. And not all of you object for the same reason so we're going to cover a fair amount of ground to try to address as much as I can. If I don't address your particular objection maybe we can get some coffee sometime and talk about it.

But my goal here is to encourage all of you who call RBC your church to become members. We're not going to kick you out if you don't, you know you're welcome to be here, you're not a second class citizen in the Kingdom. But we do want to encourage you to be a member and I want to lay out the case for membership as best I can.

And to go to my joke a minute ago, we're not like the gym where we're using the old loss-leader scheme to get people in the door and then never let you leave. This isn't Hotel California where we've got mirrors on the ceiling, champagne on ice and you can never leave.

Whether you are a member or not, if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ you are his sheep, I'm just an under-shepherd. You don't belong to me/Andy/RBC, you belong to Jesus.

So I'm going to break this down into 4 questions that I hope to answer this morning.

1) Why Be a Church Member?

It's not so you can vote. We don't vote at RBC. We do want to hear what every person has to say, but we're not congregational so there's no voting. And even in churches that do vote, if the only reason someone becomes a member is to vote they have a pretty shallow view of church membership.

It's also not only so that we can do things in an official capacity on Sunday mornings or lead a Bible study or something. That is part of it - we want people who do music and read and all the rest to be members. But that's not the only reason.

Why: It's to ensure the doctrinal and moral purity of the church under the leadership of the elders.

When someone becomes a member of a church, they are saying that they want to take part in the mission of the local church on every level. They're not just showing up on Sundays, they're not just here for a sermon or 15 minutes worth of songs or the Lord's Supper. They're saying they are taking ownership of the entire local church ministry.

One of the dangers of an elder-led church government - as biblical as it is - is that people can sit back and go "Well, the elders call all the shots so I don't need to be a member to do anything. It's all on them. I don't need

to be all that involved, I can just kind come and go as I please and they'll make sure things are good." But the Bible places that role not on the elders, but on the body. **Read Eph. 4:11-12**

What is the purpose of shepherds and teachers according to Paul? It's to equip the saints - you guys - to do the work of the ministry. It's to equip you guys to build up the body of Christ.

Let me just stop right there: If you've been in the faith longer than a few years and you're not investing in anyone on a regular basis or the body as a whole, you need to be. You need to be seeking people out, finding out how to serve them, how to encourage them. I don't mean you need to start a regular Bible study - though you could. But every single Christian needs to be intentionally serving the body of Christ. Serve your family first and then serve the church family. That's the work of the ministry, building up the body of Christ. Look how Paul goes on to define this work. **Read 13-16**

So we often read that section and think, "Man, the life of a pastor is tough." He's not talking about pastors. He's talking about every believer in the church except the pastors. Every believer striving for unity within the body, striving to ensure that every other person is mature in Christ, that all those present have strong doctrine, that we are speaking truth in love, so that we're all growing like this massive body together. The pastors are designed to equip the church to do that.

So here's my question: If everyone is responsible for building up the body of Christ, to be involved in ministry, to be urging people on to maturity, how do you know who the saints are? And whether they are committed to this body? Or even agree with what the church?

The danger of no membership is that we assume a lot about the people around us. When is the last time you asked someone about their view of the inspiration of the Bible? Do you know whether someone believes we have a sin nature or not? Believes in the bodily resurrection Jesus? Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone? Do they believe in a literal Adam and Eve or secular evolution? I mean, really, when do we ask people these things? How often do we ask one another "How's your walk with Jesus? Are you maturing?"

"Well, that's the job of the elders." No it's not. Paul says it's your job. The shepherds equip the body to minister to each other. The job of the elders is like the equipment manager at the gym. Our job is to ensure the saints are equipped - that you guys have the proverbial treadmills and free weights and training you need to make sure everyone is in spiritual shape. It's your job to ensure that the people around you are even saved and are growing in Christ and have healthy doctrine.

So the question is: what standard will you call them to? What standard of doctrine, what standard of living, how will you define for them what a church is, or what their commitment to the local church should be or why they should submit to the elders in the church?

That's what membership does. It gives you the ability to not only define for people what is important to believe - that's our doctrinal statement - but it gives you the context of the church for how that's lived out - that's our bylaws and commitment of fellowship.

So our bylaws and statement of faith and commitment of fellowship are the documents we agree as members are important to fellowship together. And they're not boring documents that help you fall asleep at night. Actually, if you wanted to disciple someone you could take them through those 3 documents - that would be a fantastic way to work through the basics of the faith as we live them out in the local church.

So membership allows us to have standard of what's important **and** everyone else knows our standard as well.

See, if you have no agreed upon standard or people don't commit to a standard, you could have 2 people who disagreed on - oh, I don't know - the importance of a specific eschatology viewpoint. Or a predestination viewpoint. Or an age of the earth viewpoint. One person says it has to be this way for you to even be a Christian, another person who says 'it doesn't matter at all,' another person who says 'can't we all just get along?' Which is it? The doctrinal statement of the church is designed to spell that out so that there is unity and purity in the church.

By the way, churches that have no membership usually fall prey to 1 or 3 things: division over doctrine within the congregation, immoral living, or fast turnover. Because without membership there's no way to know where anyone is at until it's too late. I've been part of a church with no membership - it was a train wreck.

Now, to be fair, becoming a member does not ensure someone is for sure doctrinally sound - or even telling the truth about what they believe. It doesn't ensure that someone isn't in sin or won't try to cause division. It doesn't ensure a person is even saved. But it's our best shot. It affords the elders and the congregation the knowledge that at least someone says they agree. They say they want to follow Jesus in the context of a local church.

So **why** church membership? It's to ensure the people in the local church can objectively guard the doctrinal and moral purity of the church under the leadership of the elders. It gives you a standard of doctrine, of the church, and of the expectations of a believer as you serve one another.

2) What is a church membership?

So I think it's important to define what it is we even mean by membership. We hear membership and we think gym membership, Amazon Prime membership, Costco membership.

I'll give you a technical definition here in a minute. But one time I had someone ask me: instead of membership, why not just sit down with someone, make sure their doctrine lines up with the church, make sure they're okay with how the elders operate, and make sure they know what is expected of them, make sure they believe the gospel?

Can I tell you something? That's basically all membership is. Are we on the same page theologically? Are you a Christian? Do you know how our church works from a functional standpoint? And do you know what God expects of Christians? The membership process just ensures everyone is being asked the same questions and that there is consistency in the process.

I don't care if you call it membership or commitment or vetted or partners or association or enrolled. Actually I think the word "shareholder" or "investor" is probably more accurate. An investor has buy in, has interest, wants the company to succeed, does everything to make the company succeed. They promote the company, keep the company accountable, want people to enjoy the company. Maybe we should call this shareholders.

Definition: Church membership is a formal commitment to mutual discipleship and service in the context of a local church that ensures purity of life and doctrine.

So let's break that down. **Mutual commitment.** Most of you I think are committed to RBC. At least to some extent. But what membership does is it helps everyone understand that that commitment has been made. And that's important.

Imagine you're in high school and you decide you like someone and you want to be in a relationship. So you go around telling everyone how great this person and that you're together - and they don't know that you're together. That's going to be awkward. You need to have a DTR: define the relationship conversation. Who are you, are we compatible, where are we headed, what is the substance of this relationship? That DTR is a formal commitment to a relationship, membership is a formal commitment. And by formal all we mean is a mutual agreement that happens at some point.

And for some reason people really buckle at the idea of a formal agreement. But make formal agreements all the time. When we set up a time/day/place to meet someone- that's a formal arrangement. When we open a bank account, that's a formal arrangement. Formal arrangements are not unspiritual or sinful or even legalistic. They're helpful. Baptism is a formal arrangement.

This is a formal commitment to **mutual discipleship and service.** When you become a member you're saying I want to be discipled, and I want people to know that I am like-minded with this church and the elders and I want to disciple others like I'm commanded to do. You can trust me because I'm like-minded. You're also saying I want to be served and I want to serve others. That doesn't always mean up front. That doesn't always

mean you'll have an official role doing something. But it does mean that everyone knows your posture is to serve and be involved. You want to meet needs. And if you have needs you want to be able to trust those who are reaching out to meet your needs.

So it's a formal commitment to mutual discipleship and service.

Next it's in the context of the **local church**. Some have said "Well, shouldn't our bar for membership simply be affirming the gospel message?" Why would we exclude people from membership in the local church if they are members of the body of Christ? Aren't we making an unbiblical distinction between members and non-members?" Let me answer that question with a question.

Have you ever gone to a church and thought "Yeah, we're not going back to that one?" Are you saying everyone that church is going to hell? Are you saying they're not part of the Kingdom of God? Or that they are second class citizens in the Kingdom? Of course not. You're saying, "With what I've seen and experienced at that church, I don't think we're unified enough to stay. I don't think I'll be of help to them - I'll irritate them and they'll irritate me." What you're doing is actually promoting unity in that church by not being a thorn in their flesh. By finding a place that is more like minded.

That's actually what membership does: it actually promotes unity in the local church. We're not saying you have to believe every jot and tittle of our doctrinal statement to be a Christian. There are genuine believers who would take exception to some of our doctrinal statement. But what we are saying is that to promote unity and purity in the local church, and in other local churches, we have doctrinal statements and membership.

3) Do we see church membership anywhere in the Bible?

Before I answer that, let me ask you this: do we see the doctrine of the Trinity anywhere in the Bible? Do we have one passage that clearly spells out there is one God, three co-equal, co-eternal, co-glorious persons who operate as one God, yet with separate wills, all in harmony? No. We do not have 1 specific passage that explains all of that. We take bits and pieces from all over the Bible to arrive at the doctrine of the Trinity. And we'd die for the doctrine of the Trinity, even though it's a doctrine that takes some work to establish.

So when people ask if membership is in the Bible - and what they mean is they want a smoking gun passage that includes statements of faith and commitments of fellowship and a membership class and so on - they're asking the wrong question. If that's the threshold for belief in something, then no one would believe in the Trinity.

I would say membership is biblical - though there's no one passage that lays out the entirety of what we mean by membership and what is required for it. Some things we piece together, other things we include because we hope they are wise and prudent. What I will say is that there is nothing in our membership process that is sinful or anti-biblical. We're not asking anyone to sin. We are not asking anyone to do more than what the Bible calls every believer to do.

So let's put some elements and passages together that establish this case.

A) Baptism. Baptism in the New Testament was related to membership in the church. Or we could say involvement/investment/inclusion/service/discipleship - all those words. In the NT when you read about whether someone is part of the church or not, the entry point was almost always baptism.

Those who understand the gospel message, understand who Jesus is, understand what it means to follow him, understand who has authority in the church, understand there is a commitment to purity, understand that they are part of a local gathering, show that they are on board by submitting to baptism.

To put another way: to refuse baptism is to refuse to be identified with Jesus because baptism is a picture of one's union with Christ. Those who want to be baptized are those who are committed to discipleship and are saying "I want in!" And the one baptizing them says "Best I can tell, you're part of us." And those who watch a baptism should view it with joy because "Hey, that person is part of us!" It's a 3-fold proclamation between the baptizer, baptizee, and the congregation.

This is why we require a person to have been baptized before becoming a member. Because if you're claiming to be a disciple of Jesus, your first point of obedience is baptism. Some churches make baptism and membership hand-in-hand. I can see that working in certain situations but it doesn't have to.

But Jesus says that discipleship and following him are wrapped up in the act of baptism: Go into all the world and make disciples, what? Baptizing them.

Let me hit you with a slew of verses you can jot down:

Acts 1:14 The people praying before Pentecost. How many were there? 120. And it says of them they were of one accord. What was the accord? They were agreed together about their mission and what they were doing. The word means unanimous or officially partnered.

Acts 2:41 How many people were baptized? 3,000. How did they know that? They counted. Who did they baptize and include into the church? Those who the apostles affirmed were believers and were committed to repentance.

Acts 4:32: The full number comes together and were of one heart and soul. How did they know they were of one heart and soul? They would have had to establish what the basis of agreement was.

Acts 6:1: They're increasing in number. How do they know? Because people are making a public commitment to the gospel in the context of the local church at Jerusalem. They could identify who was committed and who was not.

1 Cor. 11:17-18: Lord's Supper - when you come together as a church. How do you define the church?

1 Cor. 10:17 One bread, one body - how do you know what the one body is? How do you know who is part of the body? You have to define that.

1 Cor. 14:24 Insider/outsider language - they knew who was and was not part of the church.

2 Cor. 2:6: The majority of the church is punishing a guy who is repenting from sin. How do they know who the majority is? There was a defined body of committed believers.

1 Pet. 5:1-3. So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Peter gives a couple of commands that only make sense if there's some sort official identification.

Shepherd the flock of God that is among you. Flock means a defined group of sheep. How would an elder know who the sheep are? You would need to know a fair bit about them. What they believe, what they understand conversion is. Is their life committed to purity and holiness.

Peter also says elders need to exercise oversight because these people are in our charge. There's an authority structure he's getting at, isn't there? Elders have authority over the sheep in their care. How would an elder know if said sheep were actually under their authority? You can't domineer them. You can't force them, Peter says that. Authoritarian pastors are a contradiction.

You actually have to have the sheep willingly place themselves under your authority. They have to acknowledge: "Hey, you have authority in my life. You're a great example to me and I am submitting to you." Submission in the Bible is never forced by the one in charge, it is always incumbent on the one submitting. Well, how would the elders know a sheep is part of their flock and wants to submit to their authority? I'll give you one guess at the answer: membership.

Heb 13:17 basically says the same thing: there's authority in the leadership of the church but it's not an authority that is taken force. It is an authority freely received by those who willfully and joyfully submit. Elders can't know if that's happened unless there's been some official arrangement.

1 Cor. 12:12-14: For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many.

Paul actually calls us members. And not members in the church universal, although that's true. Paul is talking about members in the specific context of the local church. How would you know if someone is a member? A body part of the church? There has to be some sort of official recognition.

So is there a smoking gun verse? No. But when you put all that together it seems like you have a defined body of committed believers using their gifts to serve one another and uphold the purity of the local church.

4) How do I become a member at RBC?

There are 19 steps to become a member at RBC. Not really, there are only 6 things we require. The membership process from church to church will vary - but this is what we've settled on to be as wise as possible.

- 1) A credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ - you need to be a Christian.
- 2) You need to have been baptized - this is the first command every follower of Jesus is called to obey.
- 3) You need to have been in regular attendance at RBC for 4 months. That's a somewhat arbitrary amount of time but it allows us to get to know new people and them to know us to ensure RBC is a good fit for them.
- 4) You need to attend a membership class. Many of you were here for Sunday School for the first year at RBC when we taught through our bylaws, statement of faith and commitment of fellowship. That counts as the class. A more abbreviated class is available Feb 16th at 5-8pm if you haven't been to a class. If for some reason you can't make that class, let me know and we can work out something else.
- 5) You need to fill out a membership application and turn it in. This tells Andy and I that you desire to be a member.
- 6) You'll need to have a membership interview where we ask you about your testimony and get to know you better. The interview isn't scary, it usually involves food or coffee.

We really don't want membership to be a difficult thing. Our desire is that as many people as possible can become members and are not hindered in any way. And our desire is to protect the flock of God here at RBC, to keep us pure doctrinally and morally for his glory.

Pray