

# Reframing "Membership" in the Church

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The term "membership" is misleading because of how it is commonly used. Often "membership" connotes privilege in a club. Costco members get access to deals. Country club members get reduced green fees. Jelly of the month club members get, well . . . you get the point.

If you pay your dues, membership entitles you to *get* something.

Because of these various commercial "memberships," we are conditioned to misunderstand "membership" in the church. In fact, we may even oppose it because we conceive of it in terms of economic status or social privilege. But such an aversion to membership overlays a worldly view of membership onto a biblical idea.

In one sense, Scripture doesn't speak of membership. The word "membership" is noticeably absent from your English concordance. Therefore, it might seem churches which stress membership are adding something to the text. "Membership is a matter of tradition," some might say. But this misses a rich collection of biblical metaphors that do speak of membership. Let's consider five of these metaphors.

## Five Metaphors for the Church

### 1. Ambassadors in Christ's Royal Embassy

The overarching metaphor for the church is a royal embassy. When Jesus sat down at God's right hand, he received his kingdom (Psalm 110). His authority over heaven and earth is a regal authority (Matthew 28:18). And all who are members of the church are disciples of King Jesus—we suffer with him now, so that one day we will reign with him (Romans 8:17; 2 Timothy 2:12).

In the church we do kingdom business. The ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper) are royal rites. We proclaim the Lordship of Jesus and teach his royal commands. As witnesses, we bear testimony to the king and his kingdom. To be sure, the church should not be confused with the kingdom, but we are the citizens of the kingdom, commissioned to announce the kingdom and make visible the king.

In this way, church membership is a visible identification with Christ's kingdom people. Submission to the church is a royal act. Each church is an embassy of the kingdom, and thus public identification with a local church publicly identifies a Christian with the king. And by extension, this kingdom metaphor defines membership in royal terms.

### 2. Children in the Family of God

Membership in the kingdom is also familial. We are not just citizens, but sons. The local church is a family of faith, and thus membership should be conceived in family terms.

As children of God (John 1:12), we are brothers and sisters to one another. While some lose family to follow Christ, all gain brothers and sisters; mothers and fathers; children and grandchildren (Matthew 19:29; Mark 3:34–35).

For this reason, the apostles often employed family language (Titus 2:1–8; 1 John 2:12–14) and called Christians to treat one another as family (1 Timothy 5:1–2). The church is the household of God (1 Timothy 3:15). Thus, membership in a local church should be seen as membership in the family of God.

### **3. Living Stones in the Temple of the Spirit**

We are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 2:20 describes God's people as a temple built on "the foundation of the apostles and prophets." 1 Peter 2:5 calls church members "living stones." And 1 Corinthians 3:16 speaks of the church (not the individual), "Do you [plural] not know that you [plural] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"

Because the individual is a part of Christ's temple, he or she experiences the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Holy living flows from this holy communion. And thus as "the temple of the living God," we must "cleanse ourselves from every defilement and spirit, bringing holiness to completion" (6:16; 7:1).

Church membership speaks to the way we worship and our commitment to walk in holiness with others members of Christ's body, which leads us to another metaphor.

### **4. Members in Christ's Body**

The New Testament regularly refers to the church as Christ's body. For instance, 1 Corinthians 12:12–14 describes how various members of Christ's body are united in the Spirit. Likewise, Ephesians speaks of the church as "Christ's body" (5:23, 29–30). Because individuals are part of Christ's body, they are also members one of another (see Romans 12:5).

Just as a severed hand could be kept alive for a time, it's health (and life!) are in grave jeopardy. The same is true in God's church. It is possible to find believers disconnected from the church, but this is not God's design. Their independence imperils their spiritual life.

Church membership insures members of God's body are kept alive in the fellowship of the Son's people. In truth, those who have eternal life are kept by Jesus (Jude 2), but the Son uses means. The local body is that means.

Members find nourishment from others in the body and contribute their own life-giving gifts to the church (see Ephesians 4:11–16). In truth, this bodily metaphor replaces a consumer approach to membership with a stewardship approach to membership—members of the same body, we must care for and give ourselves one to another.

### **5. Members in Christ's Bridal Party**

The church is the bride of Christ, and members of the church are participants in this blessed union. Paul speaks of this marriage metaphor in Ephesians 5:31–32. In comparing the church to marriage, he's not just searching for an analogy to help husbands and wives get along. The

reverse is actually true: every marriage is a parable of Christ and the church. And the local church, like Esther's harem, is the training ground for the day when we will be presented to our Lord.

To drop the metaphor, "betrothal to Christ" (1 Cor 11:2) is another word for discipleship. Disciples of Christ are consistently learning, repenting, and becoming more like Jesus. Just as when the "two become one" in marriage, so churches in union with Christ prepare individual believers for true "married life" (cf. Isaiah 62:4; Revelation 19:6–9). In this way, communion with and commitment to a local church ought to be seen in terms of our final union with Christ.

## **Reframing "Membership"**

At first blush "membership" may sound unattractive to committed Christians because it sounds so commercial. But in truth, membership is thoroughly biblical. Born again, we become members of Christ's royal family, members of his body, living stones in his temple, even spiritually "one" with him in marriage. From these metaphors we get an entirely new picture of membership—one that isn't foreign to the church. *Rather, the church is its membership.* Without membership, its entire existence is in jeopardy.

For this reason, we offer a membership class at OBC to help new believers, visitors, and long standing attenders know what it means to be a member. If you are interested, you are invited to attend our next class—this Sunday, February 28 from 12:30pm – 4:00pm.

We will have lunch together and look at what Scripture says about the gospel, the church, and membership at Occoquan Bible Church. If you are interested, please RSVP [here](#). I look forward to seeing you there.

For His Glory and your joy, Pastor David