

Why Church Membership?

When we join a gym or a golf club and become members it often involves paying a fee, signing some forms and sometimes, depending on the club, having a referral. Then we hear the pastor talk about 'church membership' and we assume that this refers to some 'in-crowd' within the church. Nothing could be further from the truth. 1 Corinthians 12:13 says, "For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body". The 'body' referred to here is the Body of Christ which is a powerful picture of the church. Paul says, "Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Cor 12:27). There are a couple of simple truths we can take away from these verses:

1. The Holy Spirit makes us part of the Body of Christ when we are saved.
2. The Body of Christ refers to the people of God, aka the Church.
3. Each one who has been saved is part of the Body of Christ.

I have often said that there is no such thing as a churchless Christian – it is these verses that convince me of that. Membership therefore is more about how we play out our God-given roles in a community of believers than about joining some exclusive club.

Furthermore, the Bible assumes that not only will we be part of 'The Church' – the universal body of all those who trust Jesus Christ – but we will be part of a local church.

- First of all, most of the letters in the New Testament are written to local churches. The authors of these letters assume that by addressing local churches, they are addressing the believers scattered across the nations. Asking where the Bible commands you to be a church member is like asking where the golf country club rulebook insists you be a human. The whole book is addressed to the church.
- The Body of Christ imagery assumes we will play a unique and valuable role within a local body. Not only do I contribute in my personal capacity, but I work together with others who are also contributing in unique and valuable ways. "The body is a unit, though, it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body" (1 Cor 12:12).
- The New Testament authors also assume in various ways that believers are in accountable relationships with church leaders. 1 Corinthians 5:12 argues that while church leaders are responsible for those within the church, they are not responsible for those outside of the church. In other words there is a firm understanding of 'who we are responsible for' and 'who we are not responsible for'.

"When you begin to look at these texts it becomes clear that God's plan for his church is that we would belong to a local covenant community of faith. This is for our own protection and maturation, and for the good of others. What's the bottom line? Local church membership is a question of biblical obedience, not personal preference" (Matt Chandler – The Village Church).

So why formal membership?

If you have followed the previous paragraphs, you may ask the question: "Well, IFF the church is simply those who have been saved" (TRUE), and "IFF the Holy Spirit makes us part of the church" (TRUE), and "IFF I am an active participant in a particular local church" (GREAT), why do I need to

'officially' join as a member, go to some course and sign on a piece of paper? Great question – glad you asked!

1. **All those who come to church are not the church:** Jesus said that those who gather on a Sunday will be a mixture of wheat (those who love Jesus) and weeds (those who do not). The disciples asked if they should pull out the weeds from among the wheat yet Jesus answered that if they do they might pull out some wheat by mistake (Matt 13:29-30). In other words, sitting in any congregation on any Sunday may be those who are yet to become wheat. Jesus says that they can even become extremely involved in the life of a church (Matt 7:21-23). Church membership is the 'wheat', not the 'wheat + weeds'.
2. **Church leaders need to know who they are responsible for:** 1 Corinthians 5:12 assumes that leaders know who they are responsible for (see also Heb 13:7, 17). Leaders are not responsible for unbelievers in the same way they are responsible for believers. Having formal membership allows the church (wheat) to operate as the body of Christ in all of its God-glorifying functions even while there are those who are not part of the church joining us on a Sunday – which is a GOOD thing by the way!!

So why a membership course?

If you have been following along, you may be wondering why we don't just (somehow) 'know' who the church is and simply add them to the church membership. A membership course allows us to accomplish a number of things:

1. Primarily, it allows us to get to know you and you to get to know us. This gives leaders and members confidence that when members are added to our numbers, we are adding true members of Christ's Body. This doesn't mean one has to be mature with an advanced degree in theology. Riverside will happily celebrate and welcome the youngest, newest believer into our membership.
2. It allows us to talk through a basic statement of faith. Doing this sets up a grid of important Biblical beliefs – not all who come to a membership course necessarily agree or believe all these things. We would rather have those conversations at the beginning of the relationship than years down the line where the consequences of a fall out over core doctrine can be devastating and far reaching. However, we trust that most believers will be united on these basic truths.
3. A course allows Riverside to share some of our unique emphases, our vibe and our Mission and Vision. It is important that we are united in these things so that we are all rowing in the same direction. While any believer is more than welcome to be a member if they don't fully agree with some of these things, it simply means that their expectations may not fully be met by Riverside and vice versa, making for a difficult relationship. There may be a church around the corner with a vision and a vibe that is a better fit.
4. It allows us to help transition you further into the vital functioning of the Body of Christ that is Riverside Community Church: serving, mission, small groups etc.

Why is baptism required for church membership?

From God's perspective, all believers are automatically part of the Church. God has the advantage of seeing and knowing who His people are because He sees the heart while we do not (1 Sam 16:7). But at the same time we have shown that leaders need to know who is actually part of the church they are responsible for (Acts 20:28). Remember that not all who come to church are the Church, and even unbelievers can have an appearance of serving like believers. So leaders are left with the responsibility of determining, according to biblical standards, who the real Body of Christ is among those who attend their congregation.

Now there are a number of marks that can help us determine who real believers are. For example, Jesus says that you will know a tree by its fruit (Matt 7:16). However, someone who is fruitful is often someone who has been a Christian for a while and is showing great evidence of life change. But church membership is not only for mature believers but even for the newest and youngest believer in Jesus Christ. So we ask the following question of the Scriptures: *What does God say through His Word are the most BASIC evidences of a genuine believer?* Notice, we don't ask what man says, or what culture says, or even other churches say, but what God says in his Word. We also ask what are the most BASIC evidences (not advanced or even moderate evidences). We don't want to set a bar that only some believers will reach, neither do we want to set a shifting bar. Hence: *What does God say through His Word are the most BASIC evidences of a genuine believer?* We see three things that can help us even spot a young believer:

1. Romans 10:9 says we need to be willing to confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord. Jesus doesn't encourage closet Christians but calls us to be willing to publically follow him right from the start.
2. The same verse says that we need to believe the most central elements of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
3. We have been warned that "Many will say ... "Lord, Lord"" (Matt 7:22). In other words, while God can see what is really going on, we may hear someone 'confess' that Jesus Christ is Lord and yet the possibility still remains that we may be deceived. So the next question we *ask is: "What is the most basic external act of obedience God expects of even the youngest and newest believers?"* Again, basic, not advanced or even moderate. The answer to that question is very simple: BAPTISM.
 - a. Jesus got baptized (Matt 3:16)
 - b. Jesus told us to be baptized (Matt 28:19) [If these were the only two reasons, they would be reason enough to be baptized!]
 - c. Peter said we should get baptized (Acts 2:38)
 - d. Peter and John expected that all new believers would be baptized (Acts 8:16)
 - e. Paul often references baptism in his theological writings and assumes all believers have been baptized (Rom 6:3, 1 Cor 1:13-17, Gal 3:27)

Not all believers will show the necessary fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23); not all believers will immediately show great fruitfulness in their service; not all believers will live lives of obedience; not all believers will be fervent evangelists; but God's Word assumes that **all believers** will be baptised (unless you are somehow restrained by a cross in your execution – Luke 23:42-43). Yes, we live in a culture and a time where these values have been distorted and neglected for many many reasons. But we do not ask this question of culture but of God's Word. Thus we believe that all of God's

people at all times in all places should pursue baptism as an expression of obedience to Scripture and the God Who authored it.