CONNECTED TO CHRIST

Why Membership Matters

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The idea of membership has fallen on hard times these days. Many people prefer not to be “card-carrying members” of many organizations—or even any—and for good reason. While there are plenty of advantages involved in official membership, such as having a voice in the group’s decisions and, in many cases, receiving benefits available only to members, there are some potential downsides too—some more serious than others. These downsides go beyond the simple give-and-take, such as the fact that you only have a voice if you go to meetings, or you only get benefits if you pay dues. No, the real downside with official membership is that it is risky for your reputation.

When you officially join a group or an organization, be it a fraternity, a political party, a civic club, or a charity, you share certain things—goals, money (in the form of contributions or dues), time—with the other people in that group. And in so doing, you also share a reputation. In a sense, you represent that organization wherever you go, and it can rightfully claim to represent you, at least partially, when it acts publicly. So, if
there is anything remotely controversial or potentially unpopular about an organization, people tend to be shy about joining it even if they mostly agree with it.

Sure, anyone would be glad to officially be on the membership roster of a club dedicated to a popular and uncontroversial cause such as picking up litter or feeding poor children. We get a social boost by being associated with such groups. But what about politics, religion, or anything about which people might passionately disagree? No one wants to meet people at a dinner party or a barbecue and hear, “Oh, so you’re one of those people.” We often don’t want to be stereotyped by associations. We resent the assumptions people might make about us because of the groups to which we belong. So, we tend to be extremely guarded about membership. We might volunteer our time, appreciate others’ efforts, or support their goals from afar, but seek official membership for ourselves? That’s going a step too far for many of us.

Most traditional Christian congregations fall into this category of organizations that people, especially younger people, hesitate to join. Church membership and attendance have fallen sharply in the last few decades as many of those who grew up in these congregations never make the transition to active adult members. Sit in on a Bible study at a traditional church and you will likely notice it mostly consists of older people. When they share their prayer requests, nearly all of them have on their hearts and minds a child, grandchild, or other relative
who was raised in a church but has since stopped attending and let his or her membership lapse. Some of those younger people have transitioned into Christian groups or movements that do not bother with official membership. Some have perhaps stayed on the membership roll of their childhood church but rarely, if ever, attend. Some have let their membership lapse because they say church membership and attendance don’t do anything for their faith. And some would no longer even claim to be Christian. Membership—formal, official belonging to a recognizable organization—simply doesn’t seem like a priority anymore.

For Christians, there is good news and bad news when it comes to membership. The bad news is, you are a member of the Church whether you want to be or not. The good news? Membership in the Christian sense is unlike any other kind of membership.

Christians are by definition members of the Church, which is the people of God. We are baptized into a people, a kingdom, a body, a huge global family of Christians. To be a Christian is to be a member of a larger group. There is no such thing as Christianity that is simply one-on-one, you and Jesus, independent of other believers. You have a relationship with Jesus, of

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course, and in a sense, it is an extremely personal relationship—you know Him and He knows you. But that word personal, while true, is not exactly biblical and leaves out so much of what God gives us and how He forms us with the Gospel. Essentially, Christianity is corporate.

Consider how Jesus teaches us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer. The first words are “Our Father.” The plural is noteworthy and brings out a key point. If Jesus’ only goal for your faith was merely for you to have a personal relationship with Him and God the Father, and if personal intimacy with God was the main point of His teachings on prayer, wouldn’t He have taught you to pray, “My Father”? But He didn’t do that in His Sermon on the Mount, and He still doesn’t today. Your relationship to your heavenly Father is inextricably linked (though many try to extricate it) to your relationship to your brothers and sisters in Christ, your fellow believers. If you have Christ as King, you are part of a kingdom. If you have God as Father, you have brothers and sisters. You might not always get a chance to express that relationship to other believers, and as a sinner you might not express it very well even when you get the chance, but you have that relationship to other Christians simply by virtue of being a Christian yourself. God doesn’t want you calling on Him as your Father if you refuse to acknowledge the rest of His family as your family. Jesus won’t allow you to claim a relationship with God as His child while...
disavowing your relationship to your fellow believers, as His teachings on prayer and His parables make clear.

Refresh your memory of the parable of the prodigal son by looking it up in Luke 15:11–32. In this parable about God’s grace, look at the little verbal trick of misdirection that the resentful older brother tries to use on his father. Complaining to his father about the party for his ne’er-do-well younger brother, the older brother says, “But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!” (v. 30, emphasis added). But the father (who in the parable represents God) quickly turns it back on the older brother by saying, “It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found” (v. 32, emphasis added). Notice the italicized words, especially the pronouns yours and your. The older brother wants to claim his own sonship while downplaying or denying his relationship with the younger brother. But the father doesn’t let him get away with it. His words remind the older brother that because the older brother is the father’s son, so all of the father’s sons are brothers to one another, and they cannot get out of it just because they don’t like it.

There is no use trying to be connected to God without being connected to the rest of His family, no matter how much some of those family members may drive you nuts. God won’t disavow His other children for your sake any more than He would ever disown you for theirs. If, when you were a child,
your parents had another child, you weren’t in a position to de-
cide whether you wanted to officially be a brother or sister. You
may have acted like you were in such a position, but you soon
found out you really weren’t. You
were only in a position to decide
how good of a brother or sister
to be. That is the case as well in
the family of God. All Christians
are a group; the challenge for
each individual Christian is how
to acknowledge, express, and
realize that fact.
CHAPTER 1

TWO TYPES OF MEMBERSHIP

Membership takes many forms, but all of them fall roughly into two categories. The first type of membership consists of many identical or similar things collected together. For example, an individual brick might serve as a doorstop or bookend, but bricks serve their individual purpose best when collected together. A few thousand bricks all together can make a wall, which is the real purpose of bricks. Despite whatever differences make each brick unique, bricks are more or less interchangeable with one another; however, each brick fulfills its purpose best when used collectively. A bag of marbles, a design made of tumbling dominoes, a stack of dollar bills—all of those things represent collective membership, the kind of membership in which an individual thing achieves its purpose better as a member of a larger group of basically similar things.

The other kind of membership is organic, which means the individual members are not interchangeable but together
form an interdependent whole. A rock band might have four or five members, but the bass player is not the same as the drummer. The lead singer cannot necessarily stand in for the lead guitarist. They are all members of the band, but four drummers do not normally make up a rock band, nor do four bass guitarists. In organic membership, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and each part is more dependent on its relationship with the whole to achieve its purpose. The members’ differences play a crucial role in the larger unity of the thing of which they are all members.

Most collections of people take on aspects of both kinds of membership. In certain ways, a group of soldiers might be interchangeable parts of a larger whole, say, when charging a hill or marching in a parade. But in other ways, the group exhibits aspects of organic membership, as the unit made of snipers, scouts, medics, and supply drivers achieves a mission in which each member plays a distinct, interdependent role. The same might be said of a marching band; in one sense, it consists of a collection of more or less interchangeable members making up a pattern on the field. But in another sense, each instrumentalist plays a different set of notes that together make up the harmonious melody.

So, which kind of membership is church membership? Like most groups involving many people, church membership is both collective and organic. In terms of church attendance or the size of a particular congregation, one hundred church
members amount to one church member a hundred times over, like a hundred bricks in a wall or a hundred dominoes in a line. Expressed statistically, church membership is merely the collective kind of membership. But the biblical reality focuses far more on the organic kind of membership, as we'll see in a moment in the words of St. Paul. Even in a family with many children, each child is a unique part of the whole family. While Christians quite properly claim to be the family of God, the biblical idea of what unifies us goes much further.

In addition to the idea of a family, St. Paul uses the metaphor of one body with many parts to describe the relationship each Christian has with Jesus Christ and with other Christians. “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). It's hard to get more plain and direct than that. Christians are a collective whole and ought to recognize that fact. Christ is the head. The head controls each member and harmonizes all the movements and functions of the whole body. Each Christian is like one member of the body—a foot, an eye, an ear, and so on—who serves the head, Christ, but only does so in concert with the other members. St. Paul leads up to the frank declaration that you are a member of the body whether you like it or not with a more detailed explanation:

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. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as He chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Corinthians 12:12–26)
You can apply St. Paul’s metaphor to yourself quite easily. Wiggle your left thumb. If you can do that, then you know that your left thumb has a relationship with your head and mind. Your thumb does what your brain tells it to do. If it doesn’t, then your thumb itself or its relationship to your brain is impaired. But if you have no trouble moving your left thumb, then your thumb is healthy and the relationship between it and your brain is good.

But here is the key: if you cut your thumb off from your hand, you also cut it off from your brain. Your thumb has no relationship to your brain apart from a relationship with your hand, wrist, arm, nerves, muscles, veins, and the rest of your body. A thumb cannot serve the brain while remaining apart from the body. That is the whole point of St. Paul’s metaphor. A Christian is not called simply to an individual and personal relationship with God in Christ Jesus. A Christian is called to be a living, working part of the corporate body of Christ. The personal relationship and the corporate membership are two sides of the same coin, inextricably linked. “Corporate” really just means “bodily” or a living, working part of the corporate body of Christ. The personal relationship and the corporate membership are two sides of the same coin, inextricably linked.
“as a body” and refers to many individuals acting as one, but each contributing uniquely to the work of the whole body. Just as no body part can be a living member of the body without having a relationship with the head, so no Christian can have a relationship with Christ, the head, without being a living member of the body, the Church.

All the parts of the body are supposed to work together to achieve the goals set by the brain. Consider what some people say is the hardest thing to do in all of professional sports: hitting a baseball. To pull it off, your feet, legs, and hips have to maintain perfect balance while your shoulders, arms, and wrists swing the bat with all their might. All the while, your eyes must stay absolutely fixed on the speeding ball. Your whole body must be disciplined enough to obey your brain precisely while it triggers each separate movement to coordinate with the rest. But what if your eyes lose focus? Even if you maintain perfect balance and execute your best swing, you will miss the ball. Without your eyes, your hands can’t play baseball. Nor can your shoulders or feet. That whole goal of the brain is thwarted for the whole body. And the same would be true if the eyes stayed and the hands left.

St. Paul does not tell Christians they should seriously consider becoming members of the Church, the Body of Christ. He says we are members, whether we like it or not. In other words, for Christians, the question is not whether to be members of the body. The question is how we can best be
effective, functioning members. Every Christian has an intimate relationship with every other Christian simply by having a relationship with Christ.

While that all sounds great, the question remains: how formal or organized does that membership have to be? Christ can “organize” or coordinate and use Christians in ways not visible to us. Maybe we can all work together in conjunction with His plan despite not having any formal relationship with one another. At any rate, one thing no one can deny is that not all Christians are members of the same congregation or denomination. Still, some will ask: can’t we recognize other Christians as our brothers and sisters in Christ without formally putting our names on the list of official members of this or that congregation or denomination? Sure, we could. But is that the most effective way of being a member of the Body?

The real issue to consider is what makes us hesitant to join a church. Why wouldn’t we join a church? While it’s true that no official list of members of one denomination or church can claim to be the official list of Christians in the world, is that a reason to reject the idea of membership to such an organization? St. Paul’s words should make all Christians realize more and
more how essential to the faith it is to recognize our membership with other living, breathing, imperfect Christians. We do that most effectively when we outwardly acknowledge the spiritual connection we have with one another, which is what congregations and denominations seek to do.

Many people today, even those who think of themselves as Christian believers, reject this truth, to the church’s and their own great loss. You’ve probably heard many people say something along the lines of, “I’m a spiritual person, but I don’t believe in organized religion.” You might have even said that yourself at one time or another. It is a common enough sentiment to be a cliché. But like many common statements, it says deceptively little when you press it for genuine meaning. And for Christians, it actually makes no sense to reject “organized religion” once we realize Christianity is inherently organized, meaning that by its very divine design, it calls us to membership in a larger body. The body is organic, that is, it has different members or organs working interdependently as one. To be a member of a living body is to be organized. Certainly to be a Christian is to be organized. So let’s look at what that common sentiment really means in light of God’s Word.

PART 1: “I’m a Spiritual Person, . . .”

Of course you are. People are by definition spiritual in that they have a spirit. That’s what people are: bodies and spirits together. (“Soul” sometimes is used interchangeably
with “spirit” but can also more technically refer to the life of the body and spirit together.) You may as well say, “I’m a biological person.” Of course you are biological. And of course you are spiritual. Everyone is. But there is a big difference between a live person and a corpse, even though both of them have a body. And there is a big difference between someone who is spiritually alive in Christ and someone who is spiritually dead and not connected to Christ by faith, even though both of them have a spirit. When the Bible speaks of “you who are spiritual” (Galatians 6:1), it is referring to those whose spirits have been made alive through faith in Christ.

Most people would probably say that by claiming to be spiritual, they mean much more than that they simply have a spirit. So what do they mean? That they’re aware they have a spirit? That their soul matters to them? Most likely it means something like “I’m a spiritually alive person.” But then we have to ask ourselves if saying so makes it so. St. Paul said that a member—for example, an eye or an ear—remains a member even when it says it isn’t, though maybe not a cooperative or functional member. So what about a non-member, someone without faith in Christ who hasn’t been baptized into Him, claiming to be spiritually alive? Does claiming it make it so? What or who is the source of spiritual life?

God’s Word is clear: we were originally designed to be live bodies and live spirits together in one living person, but because of the fall into sin, mankind’s spirit died. We are born
spiritually dead, that is, slaves to sin. Only our connection to God by faith in Jesus Christ awakens that part of us to genuine spiritual life. In Romans 6:13, St. Paul tells Christians to “present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life.” In Ephesians 2, he tells us that we were dead in our trespasses and sins, but God in His great love and mercy “made us alive together with Christ” (v. 5). And in many other places throughout Scripture, the idea is the same; we’ve gone from slavery to freedom, blindness to having sight, lost to being found, dead to living—but always and only by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Apart from that, we remain enslaved, lost, blind, and dead, no matter how spiritual we feel ourselves to be.

So if people claim to be spiritual or spiritually alive, that can only mean they have faith in Christ, in which case they are Christians. Otherwise, they are mistaken, since no one without faith can please God with their meditations, good deeds, spiritual feelings, or religious observances.

This observation is a great scandal, of course. Jesus, St. Paul, Martin Luther, and Christians through the ages have had to acknowledge the difficult truth that Christianity makes exclusive claims. Christianity can never be one acceptable religion among others. Consider what Roman Catholic writer G. K. Chesterton said about Christianity’s claim to exclusivity: “Nobody understands the nature of the Church, or the ringing note of the creed descending from antiquity, who does not re-
alize that the whole world once very nearly died of broadmindedness and the brotherhood of all religions” (G. K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993], 178). At first, this quote sounds absurd. But the more you explore the idea behind it, the more sense it makes. Chesterton rooted the whole issue of whether many and contradictory religions could all be equally valid, quite rightly, in the Old Testament. Pagans all had their local gods, and when the people came into contact with one another and formed larger nations and empires, they pooled their gods and filled Pantheons with them. Everyone’s god fit in somewhere; it wasn’t as though the Egyptians thought their gods existed and the Persian gods did not. It was that their gods were theirs and the Persian gods were not—they could all coexist and get along if need be. The Greeks and Romans simply took all the various gods they encountered and said they were all part of the same grand, heavenly world.

The God of Israel, by way of contrast, refused to ever share His throne with any other god. He claimed He was the only God and the rightful God of everyone. All other worship,
even of angels, was idolatry. All other gods were imposters, demons, or inventions of people. But even the Israelites created gods, which inverted the relationship of Creator and creation.

When Queen Jezebel married King Ahab of Israel, she offered an enlightened and tolerant solution to the problem of two nations with differing religious traditions sharing the same space. She simply brought her god, Baal, with her and set up her people’s god for worship alongside the God of Israel (1 Kings 16). The prophet Elijah (who today would be labeled a narrow-minded, intolerant zealot), refused to allow it. His message was the original, “There can be only one” (see 1 Kings 18). And the same has been true of Christians from day one. Back in the days of the Roman Empire, believers in any and every religion, or no religion at all, had to offer a pinch of incense to Caesar acknowledging his divinity. These people didn’t have to believe it, they just had to bow to Caesar. The right people, the people with a future, the enlightened and tolerant, all figured that it didn’t matter much and doing so without protest would help everybody get along. The Christians, however, insisted they would rather be tortured to death than do any such thing.

This might seem like an insignificant point, but it makes a huge difference. Imagine the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob taking His place in a pantheon or family of other gods and goddesses. The Jewish God who revealed Himself as the Christian God would have simply become a pagan myth and
died out along with all the other pagan gods whom no one believes in anymore. The Christian God is not the last of the Olympians, persisting long after everyone stopped believing in Zeus; but that is because God never dwelt on Olympus—He was never just one of several equally valid pagan gods. It was critical, absolutely necessary, for the God of Israel to be understood not as one god among many but as the God. Nothing else would make sense in the long run. Jesus, as the Son of the God, is not a way, a truth, and a life, but the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And as He added to those claims, “No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). Again, this claim scandalizes the world, especially for those who cannot see any crucial, essential differences between religions and would prefer not to let any such differences divide people.

Of course, none of this means Christians can coerce anyone into becoming a believer in Christ. That is impossible. And none of this means Christians should be rude or nasty to people of other religions, or that we can’t be good neighbors to them. No modern nation is the theological equivalent of ancient Israel. Unlike Elijah, we do indeed have to share space with worshipers of other gods. The exclusive claims of Christ simply mean that one cannot accept the claims of Christianity and also accept the claims of any non-Christian religion when they contradict the Truth as revealed in Christ.

If nothing else, the world’s rejection of the scandalous
claim that salvation is only found in Christ shows that the common complaints against Christians today are not recent phenomena. Because Christians have refused—and continue to refuse—to acknowledge every religion as equally valid, they are considered narrow-minded and intolerant. They are reminded that their constant evangelism efforts make it harder for people to coexist, and that their confidence in Christ amounts to bigotry against non-Christians. These criticisms were happening a century ago, a millennium ago, and even two and three millennia ago. Nothing has changed in that regard. It remains as important today as it was in Elijah’s and Jezebel’s day that Christians realize the Church was, is, and until Judgment Day will be, a scandal to the world.

It remains as important today as it was in Elijah’s and Jezebel’s day that Christians realize the Church was, is, and until Judgment Day will be, a scandal to the world. But the scandal of Christ is a necessary, salvific scandal, not put there to be mean and bigoted but to shine light into the darkness. Being connected to Christ by faith is what makes us spiritually alive. And if we are connected to Him, we are connected to one another, and ought to recognize this fact.