

Church: What It Is & Why Membership Matters

I. What is the church & why is it important?

When it comes to the Christian life, the church's importance is often something that is overlooked. Church is usually something we just assume should be important to us. But, how often do we stop and ask, *Why is the church so important? What is the purpose of the church?*

In this session, we will explore the “big picture” for the church, the critical role of the local church, and the importance of membership in a local church. In so doing, we hope to see more clearly the glorious purposes God has for his church and the unspeakable privilege we share together.

A. God's intentions for the church span through the whole Bible & all of history, as God works out his eternal purpose to make a people his own.

1. CREATION. In Genesis 1-2, God created the heavens and the earth. The high point of his creation, though, was the creation of man and woman in his image to enjoy unhindered fellowship with their Creator (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:7,15-17; 3:8)

Of all the blessings Adam enjoyed in the garden—including safety, provision, human companionship, etc.—the greatest blessing was fellowship with God.

2. FALL. After man sinned, man lost the privilege of fellowship with God (Gen. 3:24). Nevertheless, God promised to undo the curse on creation and restore this fellowship (Gen. 3:15).
3. PROMISE. God called Abraham and promised to make from him “a great nation” (Gen. 12:2). This promise to Abraham was a pivotal step in God's commitment to gather a people for himself.

Gen. 17:7: *And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*

4. NATION. After Abraham's descendants were enslaved in Egypt, God delivered them and made them into a nation—the nation of Israel—among whom he would dwell, and who would represent him in the earth.

Ex. 19:4-6: *You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.*

5. EXILE. Despite receiving many blessings from God (his presence in the tabernacle and temple, possession of the promised land, etc.), Israel's rebellion and idolatry finally brought judgment upon the nation. Nonetheless, God did not abandon his people, but remained faithful to his covenant promises.

During the exile, God pledged to restore the nation to the land and renew the hearts of his people.

Ezek. 36:22-28: *Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name . . . I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you . . . You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.*

After the return from exile and the partial fulfillment of his promises, God promised to act again to dwell personally with his people.

Mal. 3:1: *Behold, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek, will suddenly come into His temple.*

5. JESUS' BIRTH. In the incarnation, God revealed himself most fully and dwelt among his people in the most personal way possible through his Son, Jesus Christ.

John 1:14: *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

6. CHURCH. After Jesus' ascension to the Father's right hand and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), the church now becomes the place where God uniquely dwells on earth.

1 Cor. 3:16: *Do you not know that you [plural; i.e., the church] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*

7. JESUS' RETURN. When Christ returns, God's people will once again dwell with him and experience unhindered fellowship in his presence. God's eternal purpose to dwell among a people he has made his own finds its consummation in the New Jerusalem.

Rev. 21:1-4: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God..."*

B. Until Jesus returns, the people of God exist as *the church*—joined to Christ by faith & indwelt by the Spirit.

1. The church exists as the people of God, belonging to him and representing him on the earth.

1 Pet. 2:9-10: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

2. The church is the unique dwelling place of God on earth.

2 Cor. 6:16: *For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."*

3. The church is the body of Christ: deriving life from him, vitally united to him, and finding identity in him. As a result, members of Christ's body are intimately related to each other as well.

1 Cor. 12:27: *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

C. The church, therefore, has a unique role in God's purposes.

The church is God's chosen means for carrying out His purposes until He returns. He has commissioned no other organization or structure for this purpose.

Matt. 16:18: *I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*

1 Tim. 3:15: *If I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.*

II. Why should I join a local church?

Why go to all this trouble to learn about this church? Does it really matter if I actually join a church? Am I not already a member of the church? Isn't my personal relationship with Jesus what really matters?

Such questions are common and not altogether surprising. However, such questions also reveal a misunderstanding about the church and God's purposes in and through the church. The Scriptures make it clear:

God's specific purposes for His people are accomplished as individuals join themselves to and participate in local churches. While all genuine believers are members of the universal body of Christ, they are to express this practically through membership in a specific local church.

A. Church membership is biblical.

1. Theologically, conversion implies inclusion: inclusion into the Body of Christ—the church. Conversion by definition joins an individual to a community.

Rom. 12:5: *We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.*

2. Membership—the recognition of a clearly defined community of people—was the clear practice of the early church.

Acts 2:47: *And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Converts were "added" to a specific group of fellow believers that was numerically defined).*

Acts 5:13: *None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. (Believers were an observable group of people to which other believers "joined" themselves).*

1 Cor. 14:23: *If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? ("The whole church" implies a group of specific individuals).*

3. An identifiable membership is the necessary condition for pastoral care.

Acts 20:28: *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. (Pastors are responsible to care for a defined group of people, for whom they will give an account.)*

1 Tim. 5:9: *Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband . . . (A specified "widows' list" indicates that the church had responsibility for a specified membership.)*

4. Membership is the assumed context for church discipline.¹

Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5 both describe situations in which believers are to confront other believers who are persisting in a sinful way of life. This can only refer to a situation in which Christians are joined together in a defined membership that is committed to live a godly lifestyle distinct from the world. In addition, the final stage of church discipline ("excommunication") involves the removal of an unrepentant person from formal membership in a visible, organized group (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:2, 9-13; cf. 1 Tim. 1:19-20; Titus 3:10-11).

5. Committed members are the primary source for the regular funding of gospel ministry. Believers are commanded to financially support the local church where they receive care and equipping.

1 Tim. 5:17-18: *Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'*

6. The commitment represented by membership is the clear implication of Biblical metaphors describing the church.

The primary NT metaphors for the church—body (1 Cor. 12:27), temple (Eph. 2:21), household (1 Tim. 3:15), and flock (Acts 20:28)—have as a key characteristic the idea of separate individuals joined together into a single, identified group.

"God has given us four pictures of the church, not one. This is not just to emphasize and prove the point by repetition, but also to say four different things about what it means to be a member of a church. To be a stone in his temple means to belong to a worshipping community. To be a part of a body means to belong to a living, functioning, serving, witnessing community. To be a sheep in the flock means belonging to a community dependent on him for food, protection, and direction. To be a member of a family is to belong to a community bound by a common fatherhood. Put together you have the main functions of an individual Christian. Evidently we are meant to fulfill these not on our own but together in the church. Now can you see the answer to the question why you should join a church?"

Eric Lane

¹ See our statement on Church Discipline in the Commitments addendum.

B. Church membership identifies us with Christ and His people.

Mark 8:38: *For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*

1 John 2:19: *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.*

C. Church membership is vital to our spiritual health and growth.

Without being joined together with other believers, we will lack the strength and encouragement each member is to supply to one another in the whole body.

Eph. 4:15-16: *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

Heb. 3:12-13: *Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (We need other believers to help us in our fight with sin.)*

Heb. 10:24-25: *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (We are each calling to encourage others.)*

In addition, the New Testament includes over 31 one anothers—*encourage one another; love one another; build one another up; bear one another's burdens; serve one another*. Each of these imply close relationship and the shared commitment found in the local church.

D. Church membership enables us to use our spiritual gifts for the good of others.

The Holy Spirit has given every Christian spiritual gifts that are to be used in service of the church and its mission. One of God's purposes for organizing believers into local churches is to deploy their diverse gifts for the good of the body.

1 Cor. 12:4-7,18: *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. . . . But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.*

E. Church membership enables us to be spiritually nourished through the preaching and teaching of God's word.

God calls pastors to care for and equip his people, and the primary way they do this is through the teaching of God's word.

Eph. 4:11-14: *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of*

the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

"We see how God, who could in a moment perfect his own, nevertheless desires them to grow up into manhood solely under the education of the Church. We see the way set for it: the preaching of the heavenly doctrine has been enjoined upon the pastors. . . . Many are led either by pride, dislike or rivalry to the conviction that they can profit enough from private reading and meditation; hence they despise public assemblies and deem preaching superfluous. This is like blotting out the face of God which shines upon us in teaching."

John Calvin

F. Church membership enables us more fully to glorify God: the church as a distinct & separate people proclaims the gospel, cares for its own, & through its life & witness displays the character of the One who saved us

1 Pet. 2:9-10: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

1 Pet. 4:10-11: *As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

All Christians have the privilege and responsibility to be a vital member of a specific local church.

"I know there are some who say, "Well, I have given myself to the Lord, but I do not intend to give myself to any church." Now, why not? "Because I can be a Christian without it." Are you quite clear about that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord's commands as by being obedient? There is a brick. What is it made for? To help build a house. It is of no use for that brick to tell you that it is just as good a brick while it is kicking about on the ground as it would be in the house. It is a good-for-nothing brick. So you rolling-stone Christians, I do not believe that you are answering your purpose. You are living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live, and you are much to blame for the injury you do."

Charles Spurgeon

III. Why should I join *this* church?

We don't assume that you should!

However, we're grateful to God that you are interested in exploring this, and we want to do all we can to help you make an informed decision as to whether God would have you join Trinity Grace Church.

Over the next three sessions we'll be considering the doctrine and values of this church, along with exploring what membership at TGC should involve.

While it does involve a process, becoming a member of TGC involves a few straightforward requirements:

1. A clear testimony of personal faith in Jesus Christ
2. Completion of the Exploring Trinity Grace Church class & general support of its contents
3. A meeting with a pastor to discuss church membership
4. Commit in faith to join Trinity Grace Church through affirming the Membership Agreement

Although we do hope that you will find in TGC a church home where you can thrive, our primary concern is not that you become a part of this church, but that you become a part of some church. It is our desire that you develop a biblical conviction about the importance of active involvement in the local church, and with this conviction find a church home where you can worship God, grow in your relationship with Him, and serve in ways that glorify Him. If that church home proves to be TGC, then it will be our joy to serve with you. In any event, we count it a privilege to walk through this class and material with you.