



Belong: God Enjoins You

"Why should I join the church? I mean, what's the point of becoming an official member? I come to church regularly, and I'm actively involved in a small group. Is there really any need for me to put my name on a membership roll?"

That's a good question. In a country where nearly 20 per cent of the population moves every year, the idea of putting your roots down in any one place seems a little old-fashioned. And now that people in the new generation think of themselves primarily as consumers — whether of food, clothes, cars or religion — the belief that you stick loyally with the same brand has gone out the window.

Everything, including the Christian faith, is now marketed as a product to satisfy some unfulfilled need. We are encouraged to see others as service-providers who are meant to satisfy our desires and fill our emptiness. The result is that we are learning to treat relationships in much the same way as transactions in a shopping mall — convenient and impersonal. The idea of sticking with other people through thick and thin seems a weird notion. We live in a changing world, so the theory goes, and you don't tie yourself down anywhere.

So much for the theory. The question is: is it biblical? Or does the Scripture require us to take on a formal commitment to the local church?

I want to suggest to you that there are several good reasons why, as Christians, we should consider becoming formal members of a congregation.

First, the very nature of Christian fellowship calls for a promise of commitment. God's plan for each one of us is that we will enter into a never-ending fellowship with Him and other believers. That's why the apostles preached the Gospel (1 John 1:3). God wants a fellowship between us that's eternal.

The interesting thing about this is that God, for His part, underwrites this fellowship with promises. And these promises are promises to remain faithful and committed to us. *"I will be your God, and you shall be my people"* (Jer 31:33). In other words, God's fellowship with us is always secured by a promise of commitment. He is always making promises to those He loves.

The same should be true of God's children. If God has saved us for a life of fellowship with Himself and one another, then we should be as committed as God is to love and serve our fellow Christians. And that commitment requires a promise — in the same way that God gives one. It's a promise to be faithful to each other and to protect the fellowship that exists between us. That's what we do when we become formal church members. This means being committed to our church in both the good times and the bad. We should only leave reluctantly, and when all else fails.

Second, the New Testament assumes that believers enter into in-depth relationships with one another.

The Christian faith is not a private religion. It is relational and community-minded. The apostle Peter urges us to *"love one another deeply"* (1 Pet 4:8). Elsewhere, Paul tells us to *"serve each other"* (Gal 5:13), *"bear each other's burdens"* (Gal 6:2), *"submit to one another"* (Eph 5:21) and *"encourage each other"* (1Thess 4:18).

We do all these things because “*we are members of one another*” (this is how the Greek reads in Ephesians 4:25). Clearly, true Christian faith requires us to be loyal, caring and devoted to other believers.

Doesn't this mean that we should formally commit ourselves to the other Christians who are part of our fellowship? What message are we sending out if we don't commit ourselves to others who are part of the same body?

Third, when the New Testament speaks about the church, it often uses images that imply that Christians ought to be members of a congregation.

One of these images is of a family. The idea that Christians have family relationships with one another is a prominent theme in Paul's first letter to Timothy. Paul often compares the relationships within a church to a family in order to help Timothy understand the obligations that believers have towards one another. In 1 Timothy 3:14-15 he says: “*I am writing you these instructions so that you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household.*”

Clearly, in Paul's mind, the Church was a family. And the members of the Church family were to treat one another as they would treat members of their natural families (1 Timothy 5:1, 2). The obligations that they had to their own flesh and blood were similar to the obligations that they had to members of their own church family. Do ordinary family members need to treat one another with respect, honour, and sensitivity? Then church members, as part of God's family, need to do the same (1 Timothy 5:1-6:2).

Implicit in this idea of Christians being part of God's family is the notion that believers must be committed to one another (1 Tim 5:8). For Paul, the thought of Christians treating one another as simply quarries from whom we mine whatever satisfies our needs, and then moving on, is unthinkable.

In the Bible, the only person who is emancipated from community obligations and wanders the earth as a rootless vagrant, is Cain. Christians who crave anonymity, and for personal convenience shun the psychological and social connections that link them to a church, have not yet realised the family implications of the Gospel. They are behaving like Cain.

The image of the Church as a household reminds us that we are either members of the church or we are not. If I am a child in a family, I am committed to my family, and my family is committed to me. The same principle operates in church life.

In short, it would have been inconceivable to Christians in the early church not to have joined a congregation. The Gospel called them to it (Acts 5:13). And just as it called them to a life of deep fellowship and loyalty to each other, so it calls us. The question is: will we take the step?

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