

INTRO: What if someone told you they thought they could be just as good a Christian without being a member of a local church? How would you respond? Or would you agree with them? Many Protestants say that justification by faith alone implies that formal membership in a local church is a minor issue at best, and maybe even a distraction (*Glorious Body of Christ*, p.109). Some would say that because they have a gag reflex to the maxim of the Roman Catholic Church – outside the church there is no salvation. In one sense, there’s a good reason for that reaction. What the Roman Catholic Church means by that dictum is that by doling out baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the church itself doles out salvation itself, directly. That’s bad teaching.

But the Westminster Confession also teaches that outside the visible church “there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (WCF, XXV, II). Now that grates on us a little, that a historic Protestant confession of faith would make such a big deal about the visible, local church. If the Reformation taught us anything, it taught us that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to God’s glory alone. Yet Augustine said as early as the 4th century that “He cannot have God for his father who does not have the church as his mother.” So if my faith is in Christ, then why do I need to identify myself with a particular local church?

The idea of local church membership grates on us for other reasons too. It’s become like fingernails on a chalkboard, even for many Christians. According to George Barna “While nearly half of the adult population attends religious services during a typical week, fewer than one out of every five adults believes that a congregational church is a critical element of their spiritual growth.... Only one out of every four adults who possesses a biblical worldview (25%) agreed with the centrality of a local church in a person’s spiritual growth. Just as few adults (18%) firmly embraced the idea that spiritual maturity requires involvement in a community of faith” (Leeman, 32-33). In his book *Exit Interviews*, William Hendricks says many of these Christians are “taking spiritual sustenance wherever they can find it – from books, magazines, television and radio ministries, a sympathetic friend or two, perhaps the arts and music, maybe volunteer work. Over time, they’ve become quite resourceful in finding ways to meet God apart from the local church...I don’t blame you for walking out” (quoted in Mack, *To Be or Not to Be*, 16). So what do you think? Can you blame them?

Church membership is not what most Christians would call “a salvation issue,” like the atonement, or the divinity of Jesus, or His resurrection. But John Angell James said in 1839, “although the hand be of less consequence to vitality than the head or the heart, is it of no value? Will anyone be reckless of his members, because he can lose them and yet live?” (*Church Member’s Guide*, 9; **TZ!**). So what is it about local church membership that grates on us so much? And is membership in a local church really as important as many Protestants in the past have made it out to be? I am going to make the case that it is far more important than most Christians think, primarily because the local church is far more important to Jesus than most people think.

So this morning we’re going to look at the idea of meaningful membership in the local church. This is one of our core values as a local church, it’s in our constitution, and so we want to make sure we understand why it is that we’re committed to this idea of meaningful membership local church. So this morning we’re going to think together about a few aspects of local church membership – cultural objections to it, biblical warrant for it, biblical qualifications for it, practical benefits of it, the mature expression of it, and the Christian priority of local church membership. And we’ll invest most of our time together thinking about the biblical warrant for local church membership, because we won’t make membership meaningful unless we believe it’s biblical.

Since many of you are already members of this local church, the temptation for you will be to say, “Yea, stick it to those non-members!” So if you’re a member, I want you to listen to this sermon with the intent of recommitting to carrying out the responsibilities and privileges of your membership with us. How can you make your own membership more meaningful? Could you make the local church a higher priority in your life? Should you? Are you prioritizing your membership in the local church as it deserves to be prioritized? So first, what are our objections to local church membership?

1. OUR CULTURAL OBJECTIONS TO LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Individualism. The animating principle of the American Revolution was that all men are created equal. This is what justified our revolt against the British Crown. And what was good for the goose, the new American Republic, also seemed good for the gander, the nascent American churches. It was the priesthood of all believers together, re-interpreted as the priesthood of the individual believer all by himself. So Philip Schaff and John Nevin have said of the early 1800's "Anyone who has, or fancies that he has, some inward experience and a ready tongue, may persuade himself that he is called to be a reformer; and so proceed at once, in his spiritual vanity and pride, to a revolutionary rupture with the historical life of the church, to which he holds himself immeasurably superior" (Hatch, *Democratization*, 165). That spirit of individualism is still alive and kicking.

Consumerism. We're consumers. We want, we evaluate, we shop, and then we buy. We do this for clothes, TV's, microwaves, houses, cars, everything. The problem, as Jonathan Leeman says, is that we have come to rate churches like we rate grocery stores and shopping malls. We don't ask how the Scripture and the teaching instructed or corrected or admonished us. Instead we ask, Is it convenient? Do they have a product line and a service package that suits my preferences and meets my needs? Instead of going away like the visitor in 1Cor 14:25 "*I was convicted by all, called to account by all, and the secrets of my heart were disclosed. God is truly among them;*" we go away saying "...I liked the music, except for that one song. The preacher wasn't very funny. Did you see any programs for teenagers?" (52). We shop for churches like we shop for insurance. We're looking for the best deal – give me the highest benefits at the lowest cost. And it makes us afraid to commit.

Commitment-phobia. We love how the product looks in the showroom, but we fear buyer's remorse. We like connectedness, but hate commitment. We admire decisiveness in others, but we like keeping our own options open. Again, Jonathan Leeman observes that commitment-phobia "means avoiding contracts altogether while manipulating circumstances in order to yield all the benefits of a contract" (53). The result is that our concept of love gets diluted, devoid of any concept loyalty or fidelity, especially when that loyalty is to our own hurt.

Love Misunderstood. Because our consumerism has made us reticent to commit, we have also been duped into thinking that love is more about others letting me be myself than it is about me showing loyalty and self-sacrifice to others in a committed relationship. Let me be me as I define "me." Don't make me feel like God disapproves of me. If you're going to put obligations on me, if you're going to limit my freedom of self-expression and self-fulfillment and self-realization in any way, then you must not love me for me. The best church for me becomes the church that will let me express myself however I want. And so we fill our churches with self-centered people, and by catering to all their preferences, by affirming everything in them and demanding nothing of them, we only succeed in affirming their self-centeredness. That doesn't help them become complete in Christ; it actually makes it impossible for them to grow into spiritual maturity, which is always characterized by laying self aside to love God and neighbor.

John 15:13 "*Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*" And John thinks we are supposed to imitate Jesus example of self-denying love. **1John 3:16** "*By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our loves for the brothers.*" The job of the local church is not to hand out discount memberships. It's to correct the world's misunderstandings about true love by calling them back to the Bible's definition. And when a local church does this, it seems unloving to the world, because the world is operating on a misguided definition of love. And that makes membership in the local church offensive, because it means that I can no longer expect to be loved without condition, critique, or commitment. If church membership means that I can't be unconditionally affirmed and accepted and celebrated in all my self-preoccupation, then forget it. I'll go somewhere where they will; and there are plenty of churches willing to do just that – affirm and accept and celebrate sinners without demanding any commitment to growth in repentance from sin, forgetfulness of self, and love for Christ and others. But if local church membership is so offensive, then why encourage it? We encourage it because there's biblical warrant for it, which leads us to our 2nd point.

2. THE BIBLICAL WARRANT FOR LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP (Top 10 Reasons)

What I want to show here is not that local church membership is easy to proof-text. I want to show that local church membership is a good and necessary inference from the biblical definition of a local church, from what we see in the life of the early church, and that local church membership is consistent with the broad themes of Scripture, and is even hinted at in passing statements about the church in the NT. So we're not going to see the command "Keep a list of members in every local church." But the early churches were commanded to do things that could not be done without having some way of knowing who was in and who was out.

a. God wants a clear distinction between His people and the world. Think about your kneejerk reaction to the following statement: "The boundary between those who belong to the church and those who do not should not be drawn too sharply... [After all], the establishment of clear boundaries is usually an act of violence" (Volf, in Leeman, *Church*, 27). The assumption is that love doesn't draw lines. But that's contrary to Scripture. Read through the Exodus account in Ex 8-12 and you'll read multiple times that God wants to make a distinction between the Israelites and the Egyptians. **Ex 8:23** *Thus I will put a division between my people and your people* (cf. Ex 9:4, 26; 10:23). The purpose of the Passover is to distinguish between God's people and not God's people. **Ex 11:7** *But not a dog shall growl against any of the people of Israel, either man or beast, that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel*. God's love draws lines.

b. The meaning of the word *evkkhlhsi,a*. The verbal form of *evkkhlhsi,a* is *evkkale,w*, to call out. That very idea of being called out assumes a publicly recognized distinction – called out from what? Called out into what? An *evkkhlhsi,a* in NT times was always taken to be "an assembly legally called together or summoned..., an assembly of persons bound to act together as a body for some specified object" (Dagg, *Manual of Church Order*, 80, 81). This is clear from 1Cor 11:18 "*when you come together as a church.*" Coming together as a church is coming together as a convened assembly of known individuals who are expected to attend.... It's become fashionable to talk about the universal church. We feel sophisticated and big-hearted when we can talk about the church in the abstract and ideal. But of the 114 NT occurrences of *evkkhlhsi,a*, at least 90 of them (as many as 93) clearly refer to the local church, 18 to the universal church, and 3 to a pagan assembly (Acts 15:22?). Just based on numbers alone, the NT strongly emphasizes the local church more than universal church, and the local church as a group of particular people, known to each other, regularly gathering for worship (cf. Dever, *Display*, 46).¹

c. Church Discipline is impossible without membership. Jesus says in Matt 18:17 that if a sinning brother refuses to listen to you or a couple of you, then "*tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*" Who is "the church" there? It's not the universal church. It's the local church. But how is that local church identified? Who exactly is to be told? All people attending the church, both Christians and non-Christians? All the Christians attending the church, both members and non-members? No. Jesus assumes that the identity of "the church" is clear to everyone. And when He tells them to treat this unrepentant person as a tax collector, he's not saying to keep that person out of the public services of the church. Unbelievers are always welcome to attend the public meetings of the church (1Cor 14:24-25; Bill James, *Baptism and Church Membership*, p.21). He means that this person is no longer counted as a member, no longer identified as being part of the local church, even though he's still welcome to attend. Paul makes the same distinction between insiders and outsiders in **1Cor 5:12-13** "*Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you.*" There is a definite inside of the church, and a definite outside. You're either in or you're out. Paul expects every member of the Corinthian church to know who is who. And when he says "purge the evil person from among you,"

¹ *evkkhlhsi,a* translates the Hebrew word *qahal*, which meant assembly. But it never translated *edah*, congregation. *Qahal* represented the people as convened or assembled, whereas *edah* had in view the people whether they were assembled or not. So *evkkhlhsi,a*, as a translation of *qahal*, indicates an assembly. The Greek version of Dt 4:10 reads "*form the people into a church before me*" (P.T. O'Brien, *Colossians* WBC 44, 1982, pp.57-61). The word church signifies an assembly..., a congregation of Christians meeting for worship in one place....It's a number of professing Christians, united to each other by their own voluntary consent...meeting in one place for the observance of religious ordinances...." A society that cannot associate, an assembly that cannot assemble, are [oxymorons]" (James, *Guide*, 13, 14).

again he doesn't mean "exclude them from public services." He means, don't count them as insider the church. Count them as outside the church – outside the membership, even if they are inside the public meetings. The possibility of exclusion from the church implies that there is a way of being included or counted as being in the church. You cannot exclude someone from a delimited or undefined group. Somehow, the local church in Corinth had a way of knowing who was in and who was out, and Paul wanted the church to be publicly agreed on who was in and who was out at any given time.

2Cor 2:3 "*The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is enough.*" The question is, the majority of what? The Greek word translated "majority" there is pleio,nwn, which is a mathematical word, a quantitative word. To know that you have a majority, you have to know the full and exact number. You can't know whether or not you have an accurate majority if you don't have an accurate idea of the full number. Somehow, the church in Corinth kept an accurate, ongoing record of the full number of individuals that made up their local church.

d. The church in Jerusalem distinguished between members and non-members. Acts 2:41 *So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.* Again, added to what? Those who receive the word weren't just baptized. They were added to an already existing number, which was apparently known among the early church. If you were baptized, you were also added. There was no category for a baptized person who was not also added to the number of the first local church in Jerusalem. And again in **Acts 4:4**, after Peter is arrested for his second sermon, "*the number of the men came to about five thousand.*" The early church had some way to keep track of their numbers and updating them.²

e. Paul assumes that the Corinthians know when their whole church is present in 1Cor 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?*" Paul distinguishes between "the whole church" and "outsiders or unbelievers." So there's a way of knowing when "the whole church" is present, because the word "whole" assumes a definite, known number. And there's a way of distinguishing "the whole church" from "outsiders or unbelievers."³

f. The corporate metaphors for the church assume that the corporate whole is made up of known individuals. The church in the NT is known as a flock, a temple, a vine, a household. Sheep are supposed to be in a flock. It's dangerous for a lone sheep to be walking around trying to find a green patch anywhere he might find himself. And it's irresponsible for a shepherd to not know which sheep belong under his care. Living stones are made to join together into one temple in 1Pet 2. Listen to Charles Spurgeon on this one.

I know there are some who say, 'Well, I've given myself to the Lord, but I don't intend to give myself to any church.' I say, 'Now why not?' And they answer 'Because I can be just as good a Christian without it.' I say, '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's a brick. What is the brick made for? It's made to build a house. It is of no use for the brick to tell you that I's just as good a brick while it's kicking about on the ground by itself, as it would be as part of the house. Actually, it's a good-for-nothing brick. So, you rolling stone Christians, I don't believe that you're answering the purpose for which Christ saved you. You're living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live and you are much to blame for the injury you do' (quoted in Mack, *To Be*, 71).

Multiple body parts make up a corporate body in Rom 12 and 1Cor 12. Multiple family members make up a single household in Eph 2 and 1Tim 3:15. Eric Lane, in his little book *Members One of Another*, says "A

² J.L. Dagg observes that "The church at Jerusalem is clearly distinguished... from the loose multitude that heard Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. Many of these became 'added to the church;' but the church [according to Acts 2] was a distinct and separate body..." (J.L. Dagg, *Manual of Church Order*, 81).

³ "Had the church been a loose or unorganized assembly, these visitors who came in would have formed a part of it. But the distinction between them and the church is marked and clear. Moreover, the phrase 'If the whole church comes together' clearly implies that there was a definite number of persons who were expected to convene, and who, when convened, constituted the entire body. Let it be further noted, that the word ekklh,sia is here used to denote the body, not as actually assembled, but as a body of which it was possible for some of the members to be absent when others were present... The term clearly applied to the church, not as a body actually assembled, but as organized" (Dagg, *Manual of Church Order*, 81). Paul also seems to make a further distinction between outsiders and unbelievers. The word "outsiders" is ivdiw,tai, ignorant or unlearned, and it's distinguished from "unbelievers" with the word "or." Those seem to be two groups – one is unlearned and possibly Christian, the other is clearly non-Christian, unbelievers.

family which sat down to its meal-table or locked its doors at night, not knowing who was supposed to be there and who not, would be an extremely strange phenomenon... If the church is to be a true family... it needs to know exactly who belongs to it” (p.19). Christian man, what kind of dad would you be if you didn’t know who belonged in your house or at your table?

g. The covenantal nature of Jesus’ love for the church is answered in the covenant of local church membership (Eph 5:25ff). *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.*” Jesus marries the church. Husband, what if you asked your wife over and over for 25 years to marry you, and she said over and over, “Why do we have to formalize it, honey? We love each other, right? Let’s just be common law.” That’s not quite the response you were going for when you asked her to marry you. Now, what if you had spilled your own blood for her, took a bullet for her, and she still wouldn’t go through with formalizing your marriage? How would you take it then? **Luke 22:20** *This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.*” Jesus cut a marriage covenant with the church in his own blood. Baptism and local church membership is how you say yes to Jesus. It’s how you publicly commit to Jesus and visibly identify yourself as part of His corporate Bride. It says, “I’m off the spiritual market. I don’t want to keep my options open. I belong to Jesus now. I’m part of His Bride. ”

The risen Christ said to Paul in **Acts 9:4**, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Jesus identifies so clearly and closely with His church that He considers Himself persecuted when His church is persecuted. So how can we say that we are committed to Jesus, without committing ourselves to a visible, local church?⁴ You can’t say you’re committed to Jesus without committing to a visible church, because Jesus is committed to the visible church. Committing to Jesus means committing to what Jesus is committed to.

h. The one-another’s of the Christian life imply visible church membership (Mack, 30). “The identifying law of Christ’s kingdom is love to one another [John 13:34-35; 1John 4:20]; and in order that this love may be more perfect in its exercise, we are united in visible communion. When, therefore, we join a Christian church, we enter a society of believers for the purpose of giving and receiving every suitable expression of mutual love.” (*Guide*, 23). Who are your “anothers”? How will you decide if you’re not a member of a local church? And are you someone else’s “another”? How will they know if you don’t join? And notice that every Christian, every church member, is supposed to be doing this one-another-ing. The 80-20 rule should never apply to any local church, and we should not be content to see it prevail in ours. I don’t care how common it is, it is wrong when 20% of the people have to do 80% of the work in any church. [Refer to Mack, “Do You Want a Ministry” List, 45ff; cf. Rom 12:5; Eph 4:25 “members one of another.”

i. The accountability of the elders for the sheep assumes that the elders know which Christian’s God expects them to oversee in Hebrews 13:17 “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” **Peter also assumes that elders know which sheep are under their care in 1Pet 5:2-3** “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under

⁴ In Acts 9:26 (cf Mt 19:5; 1Cor 6:16 w/r marriage). Luke says of Paul, “When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.” That word for join is *kolla,w*, join yourself to, cling to, associate with. A literal translation would be that Paul “tried to join himself to the disciples” (YLT). William Tyndale translated it by saying Paul tried “to couple himself with the disciples.” Associate is too loose, because this is the same word used of marriage in Mt 19:5 “a man should leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” It’s the same word in 1Cor 6:16 of sex with a prostitute. “Do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, the two will become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.” (cf. Acts 5:13; 8:29; 10:28; 17:34). In Acts 5:11-13 “And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.” There again, the phrase ‘the whole church’ distinguishes itself both from part of the church, and from others who heard. And the others who heard are referred to in v.13 when Luke says “None of the rest dared join them (*kolla,w*), which may well mean not that they didn’t simply associate with the people, but that they didn’t join their number. The reason is that multitudes of men and women were still being added to the Lord, apparently based on the spiritual power that was visible in the healings of the sick and demon-possessed. Unbelievers were still associating with the apostles and the church, but some were scared to join their number, because of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira. They feared church discipline for un-repentant sin.]

compulsion, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” We are shepherds over not the whole flock in the whole world, but over the specific flock that is *among you*. And the phrase “those in your charge” is literally “the allotments, the inheritances.” These are the specific sheep that have been expressly allotted to you by the Great Shepherd Himself. **1Thess 5:12-13; Gal 6:6; 1Tim 5:9**

j. The Nature of the Universal Church Requires Local Church Membership. “It is the duty of Christians to attempt to make the boundaries of the invisible church coincide as far as possible with the boundaries of the visible church,” meaning that “none who is unregenerate should be admitted to membership in the visible church...and all who are regenerate should be enrolled as members of the visible church” (Lane, 23). Christians who refuse to join a local church are “denying by their action (or rather inaction) what they are believing in their hearts.” “To remain outside the visible church implies that one wishes to be regarded outside the church and even outside Christ. A person who seeks church membership is simply declaring himself to be a Christian. One who withholds is virtually denying he is a Christian” (Lane, 24). John Angell James agrees. “Fellowship [membership] is the instituted way of making a public profession of the faith and hope of the gospel.... Until [a man] has connected himself with a Christian church, he is not considered, either by its members or the public, as one of their number... [and] has not professed himself to be a Christian. It is by that act that he declares to the world his faith and hope as a believer in Christ” (*Guide*, 27). “Conversion to Christ meant incorporation into Him, and thus membership within a Christian community” (K&O, 180; cf. James, *Guide*, 27-29).

These then are the biblical reasons that Hezekiah Harvey wrote in 1879 that “every believer in Christ is under obligation, if Providence permits, to unite with a [local] church, since it is an institution ordained by Him and neglect of it is dishonor put on him. As each church has ordinarily its own special field, it is entitled to the membership of all believers who live within its natural boundaries, unless either providential disability prevents a public profession or special reasons exist for membership elsewhere. A church may not enforce this right by discipline or penalties, but it is evidently one which the believer is under obligations to respect” (Harvey, *The Church: It’s Polity and Ordinances*, 44). **TRANS:** In the little time we have left, I want to very quickly apply what we’ve just been studying. How does meaningful local church membership work itself out?

4. THE BIBLICAL QUALIFICATIONS FOR LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

A Credible Confession of Faith. In Acts, the apostles took in new members immediately, no questions asked. The reason for that immediacy was that the apostles had supernatural discernment, and the culture around the church had not yet been Christianized, so to identify yourself with the church was to invite physical danger. Today, our circumstances are different. Local church elders do not have supernatural discernment, and the culture, especially in America, has become inoculated to the gospel. People have gotten just enough of the gospel to make them think that they’ve been cured from sin; but in reality their system has built up a resistance to the gospel, so that when they taste the gospel medicine, their soul rejects it because it thinks it doesn’t need it. That’s why today, when we take new members into the church, we are looking for both a biblical understanding of the content of the gospel, and some good fruit of repentance and faith as a saving response to that gospel.

Baptism as a Believer. We should also baptize people as believers before we bring them into the membership of the church. Baptism is the first act of obedience for any new disciple of Jesus. It’s part of making disciples in Matt 28:18-20, and so it’s part of becoming a disciple as well. Only obedient disciples of Jesus should be members of the local church, and if someone is refusing to be baptized, something’s wrong.

A Covenanted Commitment to the Church’s doctrine and practice. This simply involves signing the local church’s statement of faith and church covenant. The statement of faith tells us what we’re committed to believing in doctrine, and the covenant tells us how we’re committed to living in practice. These are the basics – a credible confession of faith, baptism as a believer, and a commitment to the church’s doctrine and practice.

5. THE PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Assurance of Salvation. Continued membership in the local church is the endorsement of both the congregation and its leaders that you really are, as far as we can tell, a genuine Christian. That's what it means when we take the Lord's Supper together every month. We're all saying to each other, "The rest of us see no reason that you should be barred from the Lord's Table." **Prov 18:1** says "*Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.*" Membership says that we're offering ourselves to the elders and to the congregation to hold us accountable for the commitments we've made in doctrine and practice. We know our own weakness. We know how easily our own hearts can deceive us. So we need the eyes of the congregation and the elders to watch over us and tell us if we begin to drift from the truth. [Just list the rest].

Help in bearing our burdens and sorrows (Gal 6); Equipment for Ministry (Eph 4:11-16); Concrete others to "one-another" with; Display God's Glory (Eph 3:10).

6. THE PRACTICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Attend. Eric Lane suggests that prospective new members be asked, "Do you promise to make the meetings of the church a priority – especially the Lord's Supper, the services for public worship and preaching, the meetings for prayer and the business meetings?" Now of course there are extenuating circumstances, but **the worship and prayer meetings of a local church should be a priority for every member.**

Pray. Pray for the corporate holiness and spiritual growth of the church. Pray for the other members by name.

Pursue relationships. Look for people to encourage. Work at know others and being known by them.

Provide. Serve and give. Come to church not simply as a consumer, but as a provider. Look for needs and meet them. Make a line item in your family budget. Give off the top, not from what's left over.

7. THE MATURE EXPRESSION OF LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Read Thabiti Anyabwile's book *What is a Healthy Church Member?*

CONCLUSION: THE CHRISTIAN PRIORITY OF LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

We could believe all these things, and yet membership in GCC could still be meaningless; because what makes membership meaningful is prioritizing it. Your membership in a local church should be one of the highest priorities in your life. It should be a priority that organizes your other priorities. When the church holds a service, you attend. You support the initiatives of the church. You display a willingness to sacrifice other priorities in order to participate in what God is doing as He is building this particular local church, even when it's not convenient. Prioritizing membership is what makes it meaningful. Membership is not meaningful if every other priority in your life trumps the local church. Membership is not meaningful when your aim is to participate in the church as little as possible, or when you try to give it as low a priority as the other members of the church will allow you to give it. What makes membership meaningful is the willingness of **all** the members to voluntarily sacrifice their own time and energy and resources in order to attend, participate, pray, and serve for the corporate good and growth of their own local church. The local church is supposed to be more than a preaching point, more than 2 hours when we hear the same sermon and sing the same songs. John Angell James said "We are not only to worship with them in the same place, not only to sit with them at the [Lord's Supper], but we are to consider ourselves as one of their fellowship, to identify our best feelings with theirs, and in all things to consider ourselves members one of another (Guide, 23). So build your (weekly) life around the local church, not vice versa. View yourself as a living stone in the temple, a sheep in the flock, a part of the body, a member of the household. Don't be a rolling stone Christian. And don't let membership at Grace Covenant become meaningless. Make your own membership meaningful – **prioritize** it. Let's pray....

Heb 12:22 You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus....

Ps 25:22 Redeem Israel, o God, out of all his troubles.” The Psalmist ends his prayers of individual trouble with concern for the corporate people of God.

Ps 27:4 One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.

Ps 45:10 Hear O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear: forget your people and your father’s house, and the king will desire your beauty.” The daughter is the church, and the king is Jesus.

Ps 48:12-14 Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever.” The idea here is, look at the church to see who God is, and what he is like.

Ps 50:2 Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.

Ps 51:18 “Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Ps 63:1-2?

Ps 84:1 How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord...Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

Ps 84:10 For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

Ps 122:1 I was glad when they said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord!”

Ps 122:9 For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.