

Why Membership at the Avenue?

We understand people's hesitations about church membership. At The Avenue, we have always desired to be a church where people can take refuge and work out their spiritual questions. That's why we want to meet the question "Why church membership?" with grace and compassion.

Membership to Stay on Mission

By God's grace, we have been called to a great mission at The Avenue. Rather than focusing on the "politics" and sticking points that can trap us and sidetrack our vision, we want to be focused on the work God has called us to – presenting Jesus to transform lives and impact culture. Membership is simply the best way to lay a common foundation for all of us who are on that joint mission together. We have seen and experienced that God uses those who are unified and banded together in Biblical community. By creating "membership" at The Avenue, it is not our heart to control or pin down those at The Avenue, but to unify around a same heart and mission in loving, grace-filled accountability with one another.

If you want to dig a little deeper in to the topic, please consider listening to the sermon on membership from "[The Church](#)" Week 4. In this sermon, I go over five key areas that show us the Biblical evidence for church membership. The sermon not only explains the Biblical context, but speaks to some of the practical ideas behind membership.

Membership in the Early Church

Some might wonder if the early church had membership. We believe that some form of a known, local partnering of community members for the sake of the Gospel existed and was important to people in the New Testament. They not only needed it, they relied upon it. We even see from early church history that inclusion into the community of believers wasn't an easy process and required an agreement on doctrine and teaching even before baptism. Around 147AD (less than 50 years after the death of the Apostle John²), Justin Martyr (103-165) wrote extensively on early church practices. He described the benefits of church membership, ordinances (like baptism and communion) that were restricted to members of their community, and practices of demonstrating a knowing of who is and who is not a member.¹

"Post-biblical histories of the early church dating back to the 3rd century mention them keeping a membership roll called a diptych.

- Dr. Joseph Hall, Mid-America Reformed Seminary

The New Testament doesn't say "you must be a member, this is what membership looks like, and here is how to do it." The "what's" and "how's" as far as membership goes is certainly not dictated in Scripture, but it is clear from Paul's letters that there was a local visible church and that they knew who was a part of that church. It is true that they probably didn't have a well-defined process like we have. But, just because we cannot see what their process was doesn't mean we shouldn't have one. It simply means that the process isn't more important than knowing who is in our church community. The process of how to get there is what God has left up to us local churches to do, depending on what makes most sense for our context.

What Matters Most

The important part is to be obedient to commands in Scripture about Biblical community. It seems almost impossible to do that without knowing who is attaching themselves and joining that very community. Where does the Bible explicitly require Christians to establish church membership? While this may not reach the level of explicitly, two passages are worth considering:

Heb. 13:17 “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.”

Eph. 5:21 “Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.”

These two passages define the essence of church membership. Membership is essentially accountability to the elders and to fellow members.³

Asking “Why?” Is Healthy

When it comes to membership, we believe the discussion of “why?” is healthy and needed. We want everyone to be comfortable with membership and not feel coerced into signing the covenant. We want to be understanding of feelings and viewpoints and want to embrace it with compassion and understanding. But through membership, we also want to lay a good foundation to propel us into ministry to our community together.

I have included three resources. Two of them are from very well-respected men often seen as fathers of the faith (Piper and Keller). To be honest, both of their churches and The Avenue are doing membership a little differently from each other. What we do agree upon isn’t so much a process as it is that we should covenant together as local members of the body of Christ.

The attached Word document is from Tim Keller, popular author and Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in New York. (will be attached to The City post.)

The following link is an interview of John Piper, Author and Pastor for Preaching at Bethlehem Baptist in Minneapolis. John Piper does an amazing job of explaining answering this question in the video.

http://www.desiringgod.org/Blog/2420_is_church_membership_important/

<http://marks.9marks.org/Mark6/LessonA/Slide1of1>

Hope this helps and please let me know if I can help in anyway.

Thanks,
Orion

1.) See Justin Martyr – *The First apology of Justin*

2.) Auchincloss, Louis (1964), *The Rector of Justin*; Houghton Mifflin Company

3.) Pastor Brenton C. Ferry, *paper on Church Membership* pg. 6