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# Why Formal Membership in a Church?

Many benefits of a vital congregation are available to anyone who becomes involved, members or not. But there is a rationale for formal membership<sup>1</sup>:

I. SCRIPTURE  
INDICATES  
CHURCH  
MEMBERSHIP IN  
NEW TESTAMENT  
TIMES

*Church* in the NT usually meant a specific local church like that at Ephesus or Corinth. Did people actually join local churches formally, or was it an informal association? Five indications:

1. The biblical metaphors used to describe local churches  
Flock, temple, body, and household are used specifically of local churches (Acts 20, Eph 2, 1Cor 12, 1Tim 3). Each of these metaphors has a clear distinction of who is part of the church, and who isn't.
2. The meaning of "the whole church"  
In 1Cor 14:23, Paul says "if the whole church comes together in one place..." How would the leaders know if the "whole church" was there if no formal relationship was established?
3. The instructions for pastoral oversight and spiritual leadership  
Pastors/overseers/shepherds were to care for "all the flock" (Acts 20:28. cf. 1Tim 3, Acts 20, Phil 1:1, Titus 1). Leaders of the citywide churches must have had some listing of believers. Since leaders were accountable for the souls of the flock under their care (Heb 13:17), they must have had some commitment for care.
4. The meaning of the word "join"  
After the fiery end of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:13, no non-Christians "dared join them [the church], but the people esteemed them highly." The Greek word for *join* has strong connotations of commitment. The same word is used to speak of sexual relationships (1Cor 6:16) and joining to the Lord (1Cor 6:17).
5. The instructions for church discipline  
Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5 talk about putting a person out of the church (*remove* NASB, *expel* NIV) and treating him like an unbeliever. Since unbelievers were welcome at worship, removal must have indicated a distinct formal association.

"In the New Testament there is no such person as a Christian who is not a church member. Conversion was described as 'the Lord adding to the church' (Acts 2:47). There was no spiritual drifting." (Douglas Millar).

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church*, 1996.

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2. BIBLICAL  
REASONS FOR  
JOINING A  
CHURCH

1. You have the benefit of receiving the care of, and being accountable to, spiritual leaders.  
Every believer must “obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls” (Hebrews 13:17). This command assumes that you have a covenant with certain spiritual leaders. They are responsible for you and you to them. Some people may say, “I am accountable only to God.” Ultimately, only God has authority over you. But the doctrine of sin should sober us about making ourselves the sole judges over our own hearts, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). Hebrews 3:13 says we need others to exhort us “daily” lest we become hardened by sin.
2. You have the benefits of church power to shape the ministry of the congregation.  
Members choose officers and guide the direction of the congregation. Officers are elected (Acts 6:1-6), by “the people.” Formal membership entitles you to voting rights within the government of our church. While congregational meetings are open to anyone who wishes to attend, only members may pass resolutions, vote for changes to the by-laws or nominate and elect the officers. Members officially call the pastors to the work of the church and recommend the annual budget to the Elders.
3. You are not ashamed to identify with Christ or His people (Mark 8:38).
4. You stop being an independent Christian (Matt 18:15-17, Heb 13:17).
5. You participate in a stronger, more unified effort of God’s people.
6. You have greater opportunities to use spiritual gifts (1Cor 12, Eph 4).
7. You openly demonstrate the reality of the Body of Christ (1Cor 12:27).
8. You encourage new believers to a commitment to the local body (Heb 10:24f).
9. Informal membership privileges may include priority in pastoral and private counseling, church ceremonies such as marriage, and opportunities to lead church ministries or serve as church officers. Members may baptize their infant children into the covenant family as well.