

From Acorn to Oak
What is the church? Why should I become a member?
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I was sitting across the table from a young man and his wife at a fellowship event in the church, and he asked me, “Why should I join the church?” He told me in the course of our conversation that all the reasons he had ever been given involved benefits he felt he could receive simply by attending, without having to join. (Where else but in our highly individualistic America would such a question most likely be asked?!)

This fellow and his wife aren’t the only ones who think they don’t need to join a church. As a college professor I talked with many students who love Christ and sincerely want to serve him but didn’t know that it is important to be members of a church. As the college’s ministry advisor, a large number of the students met with me to discuss what they had to do to enter professional ministry. Even a considerable number of those who sensed a call from God didn’t know they needed to be members of a church in order to engage in the ordination process. They weren’t aware that seminaries and individual churches don’t ordain people; denominations have that authority. Of course some are aware that Internet sites offer instant ordination, but they are spurious, gravely misleading, non- even anti-Christian, and thoroughly unbiblical.

Further, the contemporary concept of some churches that they will not have a membership list contributes to the confusion as to the benefits and, indeed, necessity of church membership. Many people think simply attending a congregation makes them members. I received a call one day from a young man who was attending the church I was serving, and he asked if we could have lunch; he had some things he wanted to discuss with me. As we began our conversation, he told me he was a member. I replied that though I’d served the congregation for over 20 years I’d never heard or seen his name, so I asked if he were in the current new member class. “Oh, no,” he said. “I’ve been coming for a couple of years, but I haven’t been to any classes [which are required for membership]; I thought that just by attending I become a member.”

What can we say to help people such as those I’ve mentioned, the students, and attendees of churches who don’t require membership, as well as our children and grandchildren, who wonder why they should become members of the church? Many reasons can be cited for why it is important to join a church.

The following are reasons for church membership drawn from the wisdom of the historic church through the ages. In addition, I’ve included findings of social science research, e.g., informing us of basic human needs that are met most fully by membership in the church, which the New Testament reveals and explains is the body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

The unconnected private life is neither personally fulfilling nor God's plan for us. In our society which is highly imbued with individualism, even to the extent of narcissism, many exceptions to the contrary notwithstanding, most people are inclined to think primarily in terms of themselves. Even for those who have come to faith in Christ Jesus, many think that being saved, and thus qualified for heaven, is all they need. However, that view runs counter to what we read throughout the Bible; there we see that salvation is always for service for God. As one Christian leader said long ago, if qualifying for heaven were all that were needed, a believer would be immediately transported to heaven; the fact that he or she is still here is an indication that God has more in mind for us. We are saved to serve. And when we do serve, for example by calling on a church member in the hospital, it is a lot easier for us, is much less awkward, and means much more to the other person if we can introduce ourselves as a fellow member of the church.

God has called us to be his people, holy (uncommon and set apart) to him for the accomplishment of his purposes through us, and he has established his covenant with us. As we read throughout the Bible, the church is the primary means God is employing in the redeeming of his creation. The covenant, a major motif or theme throughout the whole Bible, explains key theological concepts in God's Word.

The covenant is not a contract or an agreement where both partners are equal; it is not a democratic idea. As with Abraham, through whom God established the present covenant (Genesis 17, Romans 4, Galatians 3), which was renewed in and by Jesus Christ, we come into this relationship on God's terms. (See the discussion earlier in our consideration of the nature and work of the church for further information on the covenant.) The covenant is a relationship with God which involves a historical continuity, commitment, and membership based on faith and obedience. Regarding the latter, obedience brings blessings; even disobedience can result in forgiveness, healing, and restoration through corrective feedback and, when necessary, discipline. The visible manifestation of the covenant is the church.

Membership is required for these blessings to occur, both for the individual and for the church. For any meaningful membership, the church must have a standard to which all who are part of the fellowship agree in order for the congregation to have an identity. Can you imagine the Lions club, Michigan State University, or the U. S. Marines having no membership requirements or an enrollment list? Every country has a membership requirement for citizenship and the attendant benefits thereof. People place a higher value on an organization, and are more inclined to join it, if it has a high standard and requirements for membership.

For any meaningful membership, the congregation must have a roll or a list of those who are part of the communion distinguished from those who are only attendees. Some people, including some congregations, think an open membership is possible and even most to be desired. In too many cases the reason for not wanting to join are self-serving. They intuitively know if they aren't members they won't be asked to do a lot; they want the benefits offered in a congregation but without accepting responsibility to help

produce those benefits. As seen above, some think that just by attending they are members. If that were the case, leaders and many others may never know a given person or that he or she is a member. To have any significance, the corporate fellowship must know who are members and who are not.

Membership in the church family is analogous to the difference in benefits experienced by being a member of a regular family contrasted with being a visitor in the home of that family. The family is there for its members, not nearly as much for a visitor; there are limits to which the family will go to meet the needs of an acquaintance, but a family, especially a family in Christ, will do all it can to help any of the members of their family whenever he or she requires their succor.

Further, those who are not members usually have reasons for not joining, and those reasons typically involve important matters that affect the life and work of the church as well as the individual involved. See the discussion below regarding the differences between members and nonmembers.

Once they become familiar enough with a congregation, knowing about what the congregation stands for and does as well as developing some relationships within the church, most Christians want to join and become members. They feel more a part of the church by joining.

More Benefits of Church Membership

Church membership meets and satisfies humankind's deepest needs and longings, including the need to be loved and to belong. We sense keenly that we belong to God and to one another in the special fellowship in the Holy Spirit the Bible calls *koinōnia*. We also learn how to give and receive this love more effectively.

Both on the horizontal and on the vertical level we need to belong. As members of the body of Christ, we have the most special relationship of all in our connection with God. *We experience and grow in our sense of what it means to belong to God.* We even catch a glimpse of what it means to belong to something, and especially Someone, so huge that it (creation) and he (God) are beyond containment!

In God's worship we learn that we are in the presence of God who is not only holy but holy, holy, holy, which is the Biblical way of saying, Most Holy. (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8) We come to worship to meet the one true God, who is triune: the Father; his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ; and the Holy Spirit, three distinct Persons who share one substance. Since God is redeeming his creation in and through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; since God has put all things under the feet of Christ (Psalm 8:6; 1 Corinthians 15:25-27; Ephesians 1:22; Hebrews 2:8); and since we come into the presence of God only in Christ, (John 14:6) we fix our eyes on Jesus in our worship. We learn to sense more of his presence in worship, to grow ever closer to him, and to serve him in the high and holy calling he is giving us. In worship that is true to God's Word, we enter God's presence with Jesus and grow in our relationship with the risen and reigning Christ! And

we are doing so with the church triumphant, our fellow faithful loved ones and others in Christ who are already with him! (Revelation 4-5)

Part of what it means to be created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-28) is that we are social beings. We are created to be in fellowship with one another. We help one another by being in relationship with each other and in the ensuing interactions that take place. Left alone in isolation from others, especially fellow believers in Christ, we are vulnerable to the residue of sin in our nature and to the oppression of Satan and his demonic forces, which can have severe negative effects on us that are counterproductive not only to our mission to which God has called us, but also to the joy he wants us to have. (See, e.g., Galatians 5:22; Romans 15:13.) Alone, our minds play tricks on us, but those tricks are exposed, put in perspective, and overcome through relating to God's people through whom he works for our benefit. We need ongoing fellowship with the church, God's people in Christ, the body of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, in order to "be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18) and live life in Christ Jesus to the fullest (John 10:10), including accomplishing a more healthy and effective service for the Lord which is our calling, our vocation.

Sense your belonging even more keenly and fully by volunteering for work that needs to be done. Do any kind of work in the church, no matter how menial because it is important, and do it well, knowing it is the Lord you are serving. (Cf. Colossians 3:23-25) Remember also what the Apostle Paul said in Romans 15:58, when he wrote "...stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." Of course, you can serve in some limited ways in the church without becoming a member, but the experience is much deeper and more meaningful, fulfilling, and extensive with the sense of belonging you have as a fellow member of the church. Accordingly, you are also obeying the Lord (Hebrews 10:25) and reaping the benefits of doing so.

The Holy Spirit uses our consciences to convict us of our sins. (John 16:8; Romans 2:15) We feel guilt. Yet, we are relieved of our sin and guilt. How do we overcome our sin and guilt and experience forgiveness, from God and from those we've offended? Those blessings come in God's corporate worship services and in the special Spirit-infused *koinōnia*, fellowship, of the church—not out in the trees by ourselves. Even when we are in a wonderful quiet (for us) place in nature, and even when we remember in our solitude the promises of God for forgiveness, we can't come close to the balm of the assurance and experience of forgiveness and relief from our guilt as we can when we hear in the worship services those precious words of forgiveness as proclaimed by the ordained and authorized representative of God through whom God is speaking to assure us of our pardon. Similarly, though on a different plane, we are comforted by the forgiveness extended to us by other humans who know and view us as we are: flawed, but contrite with a sincere desire to not repeat the offense, and renewed in Christ Jesus.

This forgiveness is much more meaningful for those who are members of the church, who belong to each other as family, and who know and are committed to each other, rather than only being attendees who lack, or who cannot make, the commitment. The

forgiveness is much more meaningful when those who know us, with our imperfections, still forgive and love us. We can experience God's love and forgiveness through those who know and still love us. An analogy is marriage, which metaphor God uses for his relationship with the church throughout the Bible. (E.g., Jeremiah 3:1-25, esp. v. 20; Ephesians 5:21-33, esp. v. 32) The Biblical one flesh marital bond, in which a man and a woman experience the deeply profound physical, psychological, and spiritual oneness in Christ, enables, facilitates, and fosters the ability and desire to actively care for the other, including to forgive, which is far more satisfying than is typically experienced in the commitment-less cohabitation that leaves so much to be desired.¹

Church membership ensures receiving the prayers and other support of God's people, whose prayers are powerful and effective. (James 5:16) Though a church will gladly pray for someone who is not a member, the needs of persons who are not part of the church may not become known by the whole church, or even a smaller number. Each local church has a system for caring for its members in need, e.g., praying for and bringing meals to those who are ill. Those who may have attended the church or even be attending on a regular basis, may have needs arise that no one in the church will discover, especially if it is a larger church. To receive the prayers and other support of God's people, prayer needs are usually listed in the church publications for members, especially in larger congregations.

One of the most significant differences between nonmembers who just attend the worship services and other events and programs of a congregation and those who are members is commitment to the congregation, corporately and individually. Corporately, the level of support for the congregation's mission, vision, objectives and other values (see below) is much higher among members; *they have more of a vested interest in the church, for they recognize they are part of the body.* They know they are doing it (whatever that is) not only for others but also for themselves and most of all, for God.

Individually, members sense and share a common bond in the commitment to one another over time, a lifetime, which is typically deeper than with those who attend but do not commit. The commitment is sometimes consciously but usually unconsciously appreciated and respected. Consciously, the question occasionally emerges, "What is there about us and what we stand for that John [or Mary] doesn't like? What is keeping him [or her] from committing to our fellowship?" Of course, then it is good to ask John or Mary those questions, but sadly many people are reluctant to do so for a variety of reasons. Moreover, those who cannot or will not commit to the congregation, as in other relationships, usually don't stay for "the long haul." Except for those attendees who are church shopping with the intention of finding a church home, the presence of people who want to attend but not join is typically not as steady as that of members. Sensing that

¹ In addition to God's Word, which reveals fornication to be a sin, careful social science research reveals why cohabitation harms those who do it. See the evidence from both Scripture and science in my essay, "Is Cohabitation an Option for God's People?" on the Marriage page of my Web site. This essay can be accessed at <http://www.fromacorntooak12.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Is-Cohabitation-an-Option-for-Gods-People.pdf>.

attendees may not be around regularly or long, and not be as dependable, members and others tend to not invest in the relationship, resulting in a less satisfying and enjoyable friendship over time.²

Commitment frequently motivates reciprocity. The converse is also true. Without commitment to a relationship, such people tend to move off, or farther and farther from the center on, one's already busy, demanding, and cluttered "radar screen."

Further, *since commitment is one of the bases of a lasting, rewarding, and fulfilling relationship, it enables members to walk together with a growing level of care that is much deeper than a more superficial acquaintance provides.* As members walk together through the life stages, they share common experiences and offer help in coping with and managing the challenges of life. For example, caregivers for spouses with chronic afflictions, offer understanding, compassion, time, encouragement and a host of other resources, including praying for one another. People need to feel cared for, and membership in the body of Christ meets that need more than in any other organization.

"I have your back" is a nice-sounding saying, but when the chips are down most people don't come through or follow through all the way. Except in the church. Because the church is not just a human institution; it is the body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:27) Recall not just the pleasant words but the promises of God to his faithful³ people: "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Joshua 1:5. Cf. Deuteronomy 31:8; Joshua 1:5; Hebrews 13:5) Never forget what Jesus said, "...surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:20)

Membership has many privileges, including *the availability of more staff time.* A person who is not a member will receive attention to his or her needs from staff members, but the staff member is obligated to meet the needs of the church members to whom he or she is called by God, directly and through the church, and who have hired him or her. For example, a member is entitled to a certain amount of counseling from a pastor. Because of this obligation, a staff member will be limited in what he or she can do for nonmembers. The staff members are glad to serve nonmembers but can only do so after having met the needs of the members whose requirements are their priority. By becoming a member, an attendee now has a right to more of the staff members' time.

Many if not *most leadership positions are open only to members*, as they should be. In many cases the values of church members are different in significant ways from those of nonmembers, especially on some issues that are important to the church. That is often why the nonmember has made the decision not to join.

² Some exceptions to this practice exist but are exceptional, atypical, and rare. For example, a very involved and committed attendee of a church I served for many years answered my question of why he was so involved for so long but wasn't joining by informing me, "As much as I love this congregation and consider it my church home, I can't join while my 85-year-old mother is alive. She's a charter member of the Community United Methodist Church, and she'd die if I joined another church."

³ Notice I said "faithful people." God has not promised to bless disobedience and rejection, which harms the people he loves. See, e.g., 2 Chronicles 15:2; Proverbs 3:3; Jeremiah 17:13.

I observed an illustration of this principle on one occasion when I was meeting with the volunteer board of a singles organization in one of the churches I served. We were planning the next month's program, one of the events of which was a favorite called "Ethnic Dining," where the group would eat at a restaurant featuring the cuisine of a selected culture, e.g., Chinese, Italian, French. At this meeting, one of the members of the board, the only one who was not a member of the church, decided to challenge the church's policy that official programs of the church would not involve the consumption of alcoholic beverages. The other board members patiently explained the rationale of the policy, that the church cares for those struggling with alcoholism and wants to provide a safe environment wherein those with that struggle and who want to attend need not fear exposure to temptation and possibly losing their control over alcohol. The Biblical basis of the policy, the freedom we have in Jesus Christ to limit our freedom due to love and for the sake of another who is struggling (1 Corinthians 8-10), was also explained and applied to the matter under discussion. The nonmember would have none of it. She proceeded to press her point and took up 45 minutes of a board meeting, arguing that alcohol should be permitted at church-sponsored events, when the board had already made the decision not to do so and to comply with the church's policy years ago when it agreed to become a part of the church's program.

The other board members were at first pleased to try to help the nonmember understand and become sensitive to the needs of those who struggle with the difficult disease of alcoholism. However, when the nonmember demonstrated an unwillingness to cooperate with the church, its program, its values, and its understanding of the Lord's will, the board concluded such a situation was neither the wisest nor most productive use of its limited time. The nonmember, who was usually a pleasant person and a good worker in those matters to which she agreed, was allowed to serve out her term on the board. Providentially, there were no other occasions of opposition like this one. The church subsequently made the policy that only members would be permitted to hold positions of authority in the church.

Not only I but many others have observed that there is a difference between members and non-members. The latter typically have values, theological or other opinions, personnel problems (with the staff or others in the church), or additional concerns that keep them from membership. When such people are permitted to serve on committees or teams, especially in any form of leadership, they frequently want to set a policy that is in opposition to one in place in the church or to set one that opposes the positions held by many if not most in the church, or to change a current policy or practice that has been established to meet human needs and to serve the Lord most effectively. This is not about unwillingness to make necessary changes; what it is about is doing God's will.

Further, the historic Christian church has always had a standard for determining membership. Adherence to the Bible as God's Word and ultimate authority has been the standard from the beginning. As the early church encountered problems in interpretation of the Scriptures regarding membership, they turned at first to the apostles who helped

them define and operate the standard, as Paul did in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5. In this text we see clearly that the apostle firmly believed that to allow a person to continue to be a member of the church while conducting his life in opposition to the teachings of God's Word would be destructive not only to himself but also to the whole church, so Paul commanded the church to put the member who had sinned so extraordinarily, egregiously, and publicly outside the church with the goal of not only preserving the holiness of the church to which God called it (Leviticus 19:2; Ephesians 5:3; 1 Peter 1:13-16) but in love for the one being excommunicated so that he would come to his senses, change his ways, be readmitted, and function according to God's will. Without such action, the church and the individual would suffer and God's redemptive purposes would not progress as well will please him. He will not be thwarted; he will accomplish his purpose; but if he were to allow gross disobedience without it being disciplined, people would suffer unnecessarily.

After the apostles died and issues arose about specific key theological understandings and commitments, the church established standards in the creeds and confessions, such as the Apostles' Creed, which was likely not written by any of the apostles but was a summary of the cardinal teachings of the apostles in the New Testament writings. When further questions and heresies arose, the church explained their common belief in additional creedal standards, such as the Nicene Creed which specified who Jesus Christ is and what he will do, focusing on the presenting issues, which issues still exist today and will until Christ returns, which is why the church still uses these creeds in its worship and educational programs.

Subsequently, since the Reformation, many denominations have found it helpful, indeed necessary, to write confessional statements called standards of unity, including catechisms, that address not only historic but contemporary issues, the adherence to which results in congregations that agree on the most important matters in the Christian faith. That agreement fosters unity, peace, maturing in Christ, and joy in the church. Since these issues occur not only in the United States but all over the globe, such standards have been developed by the church worldwide.

Church membership facilitates commitment and discipline, two key characteristics of maturity in Christ-likeness. Many people think they can worship God out in their garden, in the woods, or on a beach, just as well, if not better, than they can in a church service. Of course it is not only possible but desirable to worship God alone in private; we should read the Bible and pray in solitude every day. (Psalm 63:6; Matthew 6:5,6) However, part of worship includes edification that encourages maturing in the sanctification process. And sanctification involves serving as part of a body, the body of Christ, where each part is important in the use of one's gifts given by the Lord. (1 Corinthians 12) Recall the story in the previous essay on why attend church about Dwight Moody and the man he visited.

Sanctification, maturing in Christ-likeness, involves reaching our potential in our calling from the Lord to serve him. The church facilitates that development in many ways,

including providing corporate educational ministries and individually encouraging, advising, and, when needed, gently and lovingly admonishing us to modify an aspect of our behavior, making a change or changes in accord with God's will as we read in the Bible. (Ephesians 4:15; 2 Timothy 3:16-17) Members receive this caring for the person's own good (1 Corinthians 5:5) and because God has given the church the responsibility to do so. The church's reputation in the community, its helpfulness for others, and its witness for Christ is at stake. Attendees' behaviors do not impact the church and its witness as much as that of members.⁴

In our interactions with others in the church we experience a refreshing Christ-like humility that we typically don't see in the world, except from other people who turn out to be Christians when we come to know them better.⁵ In the world we see arrogance, pride, manipulation, power playing, narcissism, one-upmanship, pecking orders, kowtowing, grudge-bearing, and other forms of selfishness. Similarly, and as a result, we experience in the church the peace that transcends understanding (Philippians 4:1-13, esp. v. 7), peace that Jesus gives, which, as he said, is not as the world gives. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:27)

As Paul indicates in the first part of the Philippians 4 passage, sometimes conflicts occur in the church, but they usually are, and always can be, short-lived. Further, when a conflict due to our human sin and immaturity occurs in the church, we have help on the vertical plane from God and on the horizontal plane from many others who will help us resolve the matter. *Again, such human resources are more forthcoming with membership, as analogous in marriage and family relationships, contrasted with visitors in a family context. Commitment provides the dynamic that facilitates the effective communication required to resolve conflict.* In church relationships, when a conflict involves people who are not members, members will be reluctant to engage the nonmember(s), and especially be hesitant to initiate corrective feedback, due to the concern the nonmember will misunderstand, leave, and not return. In so doing, the nonmember and the congregation lose more than they gain, and the cause of Christ in that congregation receives a temporary and unnecessary setback.

⁴ However, if attendees do misbehave significantly, especially in ways that become public knowledge, they also should receive admonition out of love in a caring manner. (See, e. g., Leviticus 19:17b, Luke 17:3; Galatians 6:1)

⁵ This statement is not to say there are no nice non-Christian people in the world. As God the Father out of his great love and grace, grants blessings to the righteous and the unrighteous, (Matthew 5:45) some unbelievers can have an extra measure of grace that results in their being pleasant people—nice enough to be considered fine from our horizontal perspective, a norm reference—but not meeting God's criterion for an eternal relationship with him in his holy, holy, holy, albeit all-loving and most gracious, presence. Since all humans have a sinful nature and have sinned, we are unable to enter God's presence, and the only way he has provided for us to be fit for being with him is to be cleansed by being credited with Christ's righteousness by faith. Also, exceptions to the contrary notwithstanding, God's redeemed people growing in their relationship with God in sanctification, maturing in Christ-likeness, stand out and are wonderful to live with in the church's unique Spirit-infused *koinōnia*, fellowship.

Marriages are strengthened and maintained, especially for those who were married in the church. For those who were married with a traditional liturgy, they took their vows “before God and these witnesses.” A considerable percentage of the witnesses were members of that church with whom the couple is still in a relationship, and the couple is accountable to them if they don’t live up to those vows. *They are especially accountable to God. For those couples who now are part of another church, their present congregation serves to help them stay on the right path.* (See for example, Leviticus 19:17b; Luke 17:3; Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 4:15; James 5:19-20.)

The children of a married couple are also blessed together with their mother and dad. Families are strengthened and blessed in countless ways, each family member individually, and the whole family together corporately. Each person experiences the work of the Holy Spirit in his or her mind and heart directly during worship and in other activities, as well as indirectly through brothers and sisters in Christ in the life and work of the church, for example in conversations while working together on a service project, at choir or music team practice, when being visited in the hospital, or in Bible study, youth groups, and Sunday school classes. *When children hear other adults voicing and living the same values as their parents, they and their parents are all strengthened and encouraged.* Even in nursery little children experience the special love and caring of Holy Spirit-inspired believers in and followers of Jesus Christ. *If it has been a regular part of their lives, that special milieu facilitates the development of an “at home” feeling for which they will long if they are away from it as adults.*

Church membership facilitates doing work decently and in good order (1 Corinthians 14:40) and most effectively and efficiently, such as in national and international mission work. Even the U. S. federal government has recognized this reality and has sought the help of church organizations to accomplish the meeting of human needs where governments cannot, e.g., by asking international mission agencies to move supplies into areas of other countries to feed those who are starving, whereas by using government channels the supplies have been siphoned off into the black market and/or into private use by government officials and their friends, stolen by rebel raiders, or left to rot on the loading docks, illustrating the differences in the behavior and effects of the regenerate (born again) vs. the unregenerate mind and heart.

Similar situations involving human sin that thwart government efficiency and effectiveness exist also in the United States. Thus, the federal government has decided to use church organizations as a means of helping people here in this country as well.

The many services provided by global and stateside missions cannot be done by an individual, and without the corporate church, the body of Christ, such organizations would not exist to facilitate such accomplishment. If a group of people gathered together only to worship with no commitment to a permanent membership, such mission work would not likely occur and not likely as effectively and over the desirable extended timeframe. Denominations bring together the vast resources of many churches, including the gifts the Lord has given to their members, effectively and efficiently coordinating the

individual efforts. Interdenominational collaboration and cooperation empowered by the Holy Spirit accomplishes great outcomes.

Truly, there are outstanding parachurch Christian organizations that also do such excellent work. Nevertheless, these organizations are part of the church by extension. They receive most of their funding from the church, individually and corporately; the people doing this work are Christians who are typically members of a church and who are maturing in Christ in the sanctification process in and through the church as described above; and the parachurch organizations typically work through the local churches in the areas where they are serving.

Members have considerably more influence on the decision-making of the church. Sound cross-cultural research in the field of communication, the subfield of the diffusion of innovations, shows that people in a social system, including a church, trust and allow themselves to be persuaded by a person who is most like them, represents their values, and is well-grounded in their social system.⁶

The church cannot accomplish its mission and enabling objectives as effectively and efficiently with an amorphous gathering that comes and goes. The following quote from Leslie Newbigin's book, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, links God's calling of his people to membership in the local church.

[A]ll human thinking takes place within a "plausibility structure" which determines what beliefs are reasonable and what are not. The reigning plausibility structure can only be effectively challenged by people who are fully integrated inhabitants.... A Christian congregation is a community in which, through the constant remembering and rehearsing of the true story of human nature and destiny, an attitude of healthy skepticism can be sustained, a skepticism which enables one to take part in the life of society without being bemused and deluded by its own beliefs about itself. And, if the congregation is to function effectively as a community of truth, its manner of speaking the truth must not be aligned to the techniques of modern propaganda, but must have the modesty, the sobriety, and the realism which are proper to a disciple of Jesus." (Pp. 228-229)

A key reason why Newbigin says that "The reigning plausibility structure can only be effectively challenged by people who are fully integrated inhabitants," is due to what social psychologists observe as the essential basis of relationships:

⁶ I explain this research in detail and relate it to facilitating change in churches in my essay, "Defusing Fear of Innovations: Facilitating Change in the Church." Previous versions of this essay have been published in *With an Eye on the Future: Development and Mission in the 21st Century*, Duane H. Elmer and Lois McKinney (eds.), Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1996, pp. 223-229 and the international journal, *REC FOCUS*, Vol. 3, No. 3, September 2003, pp. 40-61. The most recent version of this essay is on the Church Leadership and Administration page of my Web site at <http://www.fromacorntoak12.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Defusing-Fear-of-Innovations-Facilitating-Change-in-the-Church.pdf>.

basic trust. The members of a church, or any other organization, know that the challenges from within regarding a needed change, come from those of like mind, who share the most important values, and are committed to the institution's success and continuity. Moreover, in the church is the bond of love that holds the members together, while at the same time permitting the stretching needed to consider opposing viewpoints, all of which are put forth with the positive desire to accomplish the church's mission for the Lord.

The church must be able to evaluate itself, be open to corrective feedback, and make the changes that need to be made in accord with God's Word. Attendees, who are able to be more objective, who will more easily observe flaws that we members overlook, can tell members with whom they have a good relationship what they see. But the members will almost always have more influence on the leadership and others who have the authority to make the desired changes.

Church membership links us with saints and experiences in the past. We enjoy precious memories with loved ones and others we knew who have gone before us, and we anticipate meeting and sharing eternity with the wonderful people God has redeemed, sanctified, and glorified.

We need Christ-like role models to visualize what becoming "mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13) looks like in the context of the culture in which we live, with its pressures, temptations, and challenges that we face. We need to see and, having seen, to be reminded regularly that it is possible, realistic, and most beneficial to obey Christ as he requires. (See, e.g., John 14:15-21; 15:1-17; Matthew 7:13-23) Christ-centered commitment is a key personality characteristic that bears fruit for the Lord in countless ways.⁷

We need to see this maturity over time, and that usually occurs most in members who are committed to the long haul through thick and thin, and which usually outlasts the uncommitted who only attend, often more occasionally than regularly. Members see this maturity easier. Many people are less reserved with other members than with nonmembers, who they don't know as well; they aren't sure that what they do will be acceptable in the judgment of the nonmember. Just as in a family: members know they'll

⁷ Again, what I am saying about uncommitted attendees in contrast to the commitment of members, applies to those who are just attending after several years. I know it can take time, now as much as, if not more than, in years past, especially in certain locations, to find a church congregation that is a good fit. Nevertheless, if you are looking for a church home, for your sake, for the sake of the church, and especially to accomplish the Lord's purposes in and through you and the church, don't let too much time go by for the above reasons and those that follow. One caveat: examine your presuppositions. Are you assuming that there is a perfect church? Remember that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) Therefore, there is no perfect church here on earth. Also keep in mind with regard to pastors and other church staff members, they come and go; none will be around forever. If you like just about all of the most important aspects of a particular congregation, but not the pastor or another staff member, that person will be moving on sooner or later. The converse is also true; if you like all the staff members, they will leave at some point, but as a member you'll have more influence on who takes their place.

be loved and accepted no matter what they do; they don't have that assurance from those outside their family.

Our giving is more effective. Well planned by the authorized leaders of the church it is targeted, purposeful, and joined with others it is more helpful, e.g., in meeting the needs of the poor. Members are typically more motivated to such giving over time than those who don't commit to membership and the congregation's attendant stewardship program. Members trust those who manage the money, who they've known for many years, and as volunteers, the overhead is virtually nonexistent, the money thus going to those for whom it was given.

The church is a very helpful resource for people new to the community, as well as others, who need a trustworthy professional. The Yellow Pages, other advertisements, and people appearing at your door are risky, since insufficient or no prior screening is done, and frequently lead to a scam. I prefer to contact the pastor of my church home, a minister who has been in the community a long time, and ask him or her who is a good plumber, electrician, physician, attorney, etc. The pastor talks with many people and over time hears who does good work and who is to be avoided. Frequently, the minister has hired these people him or herself and is a trustworthy resource for finding the professional who will do good work for you. Often such labor, business, and professional people are trusted members of the congregation, and I can help them in their livelihood as they help me. *As a member of the church, you have relationships, based on trust, which will provide many helpful contacts that will meet your needs, and whom you will be able to help in special ways as well.*

As I wrote in the companion article on reasons to attend church, preparation for the end of life here on earth should be mentioned as one of the first reasons, but I put it at the end, as here, since many if not most people may not read farther if this were one of the first points. Sadly, those who ignore preparation for eternity are the least prepared and find the end of this phase of life most difficult when it comes.

To do well in the challenges facing all of us in our final days in this world requires a life-long walk with the Lord, maturing in Christ via the time honored means of God's grace, which include hearing the proclamation of his Word and receiving the sacraments in his sanctuary where he meets with his people and dialogues with us, drawing us closer to him and to our church family, whose support is huge when our death, and the death of our loved ones, draws near and comes.

Regarding the sacraments, churches in the historic Christian tradition baptize children and adults in a worship service in the church. An essential part of the meaning of baptism is that the recipient becomes a member of God's covenant with Abraham renewed in Christ. Baptism is usually done in the church, during a worship service, signifying that the church has a responsibility to the one(s) being baptized, specifically to be the main indirect conduit of God's care for the needs of the baptized person(s), most importantly spiritual maturity in Christ. *Baptism is a sign and a seal of membership in*

the covenant, and the church is the visible manifestation of that covenant. (Genesis 17:7, 10-12; Romans 4:11; Galatians 3:26-29; Colossians 2:9-12) For attendees of a congregation over time, it becomes *inconsistent with the meaning of baptism to reject membership.*

In many churches one can only partake of the Lord's Supper if he or she is a member, and a member in good standing, as defined by that congregation. The congregation cannot be criticized for this stand; they should be affirmed, for they are taking seriously the Biblical warning in 1 Corinthians 11:27-34 to protect not only themselves but anyone who might wrongly partake in holy communion and thus “eat and drink judgment on himself.” (v. 29)

Further, *when we are members of a church home, a congregation of brothers and sisters in Christ, we experience the monumental blessings of our commitment to one another as members, similar to the difference mentioned above in benefits experienced by being a member of a family rather than a visitor in the home of that family.* Members often refer to the others in their congregation as “my church family.”

To be the strongest and best prepared, we need to meet with God in his sanctuary regularly, ideally at least weekly, throughout our whole lives. As I mentioned in the companion essay on why one should attend church meetings, especially corporate worship services, as a retired pastor I've observed the very significant difference in countless people who have faced their death and the death of loved ones: those who have given little thought to matters pertaining to God and his weekly worship throughout their lives have a much harder time coping in these situations. On the contrary, those who've nurtured their faith in Christ, and the faith in Christ of their loved ones, do grieve, including weeping, (John 11:35) but “not as those who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13) Those who are members of a church congregation have additional support and succor.

I have experienced the death of both of my parents, who were wonderful and whom I loved dearly; I grieved for both of them, and also for my wife's parents. I have also experienced the death of my precious wife of 48½ years. The death of a spouse is much, much harder.⁸ As Jesus explained, “at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh...So they are no longer two, but one.” (Matthew 19:4-5) That Biblical one flesh marital bond is such a deep and profound oneness, that when separation occurs, especially where abundant love exists, enormous sadness emerges. Nevertheless, in Christ we can say with the apostle Paul,

⁸ I have learned a lot in the years since my wonderful wife died in how to cope with this temporary, but still sometimes painful, period apart until we are reunited in glory with God in heaven where she is already! I have posted a brief video where I explain what I've learned that is most helpful, and I've also written what I have learned in order to help others who lose a spouse in an essay, both of which are on the Marriage page of my Web site at www.fromacorntoak12.com. The title of the video is “Managing Grief: Thanking God in and for Everything.” The essay is titled, “Preparing for Living again as an Unmarried Person: Begin Now.”

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:54-58)

God helps us stand firm in two main ways: (1) He works directly himself in our minds and hearts, a blessing both members and attendees in Christ experience. (2) He works in special ways indirectly through brothers and sisters in Christ to whom we are mutually committed as members of the body of Christ, the church.

As a final answer to the question with which this essay began, which the no longer young man’s wife will find especially significant, consider the following story. I’ve had this anecdote in my files a long time, but it no longer contains the name of the original author; I don’t think I ever knew who that was. It is nevertheless an insightful illustration of a profound and relevant truth.

Someone wrote a letter to the editor of the local newspaper complaining about how he had been going to church each week for thirty-some years, and had heard about 3,000 sermons, but since he couldn’t remember any of them, he figured he was wasting his time and the pastors were wasting their time. A considerable controversy erupted on the op/ed page for several weeks until someone penned a striking analogy.

I’ve been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this: They all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me these meals, I would be physically dead today. Likewise, if I had not gone to church for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today!

Very significantly, in both cases commitment is key. He and his wife made a life-long commitment to God and to each other. His wife gave him those meals as part of his commitment to her, her commitment to him, and the commitment of both to God. How many of those 32,000 meals do you think she would have been willing to prepare for him if he were a “fly-by-nighter,” who only showed up periodically, unexpectedly, and without anything much for her? Likewise, he received life-giving spiritual nourishment due to his commitment to God and his church, and God’s and the church’s commitment to him.⁹ In fact, his wife, her

⁹ Human learning research also explains why we don’t remember all the points in a sermon or in any other presentation we hear. We all have our different cerebral systems of mentally sorting and filing the information we receive. The systems we’ve developed have a lot to do with our values, our sense of

meals, and all her other blessings to him were also from God the Father, the giver of every good and perfect gift. (James 1:17)

In this series we've been focusing on the teaching of God's Word regarding the church, those whom God has called to be holy to him and who constitute the body of Christ. Our calling is to serve God, and in the process we receive many blessings that equip us to serve him most effectively. In this segment we've seen that those who engage the process of membership in a local church congregation are especially well equipped and blessed in so doing, now and forever.

vocation, and other cognitive filters we use in quickly deciding what we need and don't need; what to keep and what priority it has; how to organize what we keep; and what to toss. Those of us who hear or read a presentation in the systematic organization, including the categories and order, given to us do not necessarily store that information in the same way in our own cognitive classifications. We're different people with different needs. Therefore, neither should we at all be discouraged if someone can't recall the three points we made in a presentation, much less the order of the points, nor should that person feel bad if unable to recite the points and in the order received. The only exception regarding order would be if the information required certain steps to follow others, such as in a mathematical, automotive repair, or surgical procedure. Relevant research indicates that one does retain that information, but depending on his or her needs, each point is either closer to conscious recall or farther back in the recesses of our mental filing cabinet. That doesn't mean the information is inadequate or useless. It's available if needed, and it likely helped shape other understandings when heard and filed. Most importantly, God enables us serve him in the calling he has for us by helping us employ the resources he is giving us.