

Being a church member * Anniversary Sunday
June 11, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Given that today is our church anniversary celebration, I thought that I would take the opportunity to talk about what it means to be a member of this church. And when I say member, I don't just mean someone who is coming to church on a regular basis; what I mean is being a 'formal member' of this church. When I was younger, I remember having the impression that church membership was all about knowing how much money you had to pay in fees to your denomination; I'm pretty sure I told my mom 'don't pay for me, I'm not a member,' but in reality, church membership is much more than that. It's about belonging and contributing and participating in the life of Christ.

Now, in the past, we've used Thom Rainer's *I am a church member* which is a really good and helpful book; in my mind though, he's overemphasized a few things and missed a few others and so with the Board's permission, I wrote up new curriculum for us to use when we talk about church membership.

And when we talk about church membership, it really boils down to four ideas that we can express in one sentence. Here it is:

A church member is a follower of Jesus who is actively following Jesus in a church community that is doing the work of the Gospel together.

That's it. That's what church membership is all about. And I'd like to take today to think about that and what that means for us as members of Langford Community Church.

So, let's dive right in. 'A church member is a follower of Jesus.'

This is where it all starts. Belonging to a church means belonging to Jesus.

There is really only one qualification for people who want to belong to a church but it's an important one. It's not how often they come; it's not how big their donation cheque is. The one thing that qualifies a person to be a church member is a saving relationship with Jesus, by grace through faith.

Ephesians 2 helps us to think about this, so if you join me over in Ephesians 2, you can see why I'm saying what I'm saying. Ephesians 2, starting in verse 1, Paul is describing what people are like without God, what WE were like before we knew Jesus and he says:

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

This is humanity without God. We followed the ways of the world. We did whatever we felt like. We gratified the cravings of our sinful nature and did whatever our hearts desired. We thought we were alive and in control of our destiny, but in reality, we were dead in sin and separated from our Creator, who could by all rights wipe us out by means of His wrath.

4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,
5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.

I love how Paul says this. When we followed the ways of the world, we were dead in sin, in open rebellion against God. AND YET... because of His great love for us... God [acted]. I love how 'God' actually sits in between those two descriptive phrases; it emphasizes that what's about to be said is ALL God's doing (and if your Bible has God at the beginning of the sentence, that makes sense too. That actually reflects the Greek where 'God' is at the beginning to emphasize His initiative in this).

GOD – and here's what kind of God He is – abounding in great love for us, rich in mercy – that love motivated Him to forgive our sin at His own expense and give us new life, all by grace.

And lest we miss that it was GOD doing all the work here, Paul says it again. Verse 5, GOD made us alive; it is by GRACE that we have been saved. And then verse 8 -

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

Without God, we're separated from Him. We would have no place in His Kingdom, let alone His church. He is so rich in mercy though, so abounding in steadfast love that He redeemed freely us and restored us to Him, if we would only receive that salvation by faith.

How do we do that? Part of it is by faith – we believe that all those things are true and that Jesus has forgiven our sins and given us newness of life – but we also put it into practice in what we do.

And here we go over to Matthew 16:24. Jesus says "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24 NIV).

'Well hold on Graham,' you might say. 'Didn't you just say that we are not saved by works but by grace?' I did. But what Jesus says to do here is not earning grace; it is applying grace that has already been given.

This is how it works: God extends His forgiving grace and you receive it by faith. Then you apply it in your life – 1) denying your self - deny the cravings of our sinful nature that used to be in charge before we knew God; 2) taking up your cross – ie. committing yourself to Jesus,

identifying with Him and 3) following Him (ie., walking with Him day by day).’ When we receive the freely given grace of God, we turn from sin, trust in Jesus and walk with Him.

That’s exactly what Jesus says: we receive God’s grace by faith and then we apply that grace to all parts of our lives so that we don’t live the way we used to but as His precious, redeemed children.

Church members then are they are redeemed people, Jesus’ brothers and sisters, people who have experienced the forgiving and sanctifying grace of God for themselves. They bring a sense of humility and forgiveness to church life; they are committed to seeing God’s will done in the church, not their own.

To be a member of the church, you need to be a believing follower of Jesus.

But here’s the thing. In the past, I think some wings of Christianity been a little too free and loose with grace. Some churches have narrowed salvation down to ‘The Sinner’s Prayer.’ You pray ‘Lord have mercy on me a sinner’ and then you get your ticket into heaven and that’s that.

But that’s *not* that. A Christian is not simply someone who’s had their salvation ticket punched; a Christian is a follower of Jesus who is *actively* following Jesus. And that means that a church member will also be a follower of Jesus who is actively following Jesus.

Have you ever signed up for a gym membership thinking ‘This is great! I’ll go to the gym every day, I’ll get my work out on and I’ll be ready to show off my beach bod before you know it!’

But then you get home from work and you’re so tired. You just want to sit on the couch. Get your jogging pants on but not for jogging.

Now listen, technically, you’re a member of that gym. You’ve signed the paper work, you’ve paid your fee; but are you going to see any benefit? You have to apply it and actually live it out.

Same with the church. A church member needs to be actively following Jesus in order to be effective.

In fact, we saw that just a few weeks ago in 2 Peter. Remember that? 2 Peter 1:3?

3 His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness...

5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;

6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness;

7 and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.

Peter says ‘if you are a follower of Jesus, invest in your faith, apply your faith, cultivate your faith so that it produces character,’ so that your faith becomes visible in who you are. And then in verse 8, he literally says:

8 For if you possess these qualities *in increasing measure*, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:5-8). (Flip that around, if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, then you will be effective and productive in your walk with Christ).

As members of Jesus’ church, we want to be actively following Jesus in all aspects of life. In fact, I’m convinced that that is how church growth happens: when we are all actively following Jesus, listening to Him daily in prayer and Bible reading, responding in obedience to what He says and what He is doing – that’s when things happen in a church, when everybody is actively following Jesus.

So a church member is a follower of Jesus who is actively following Jesus...

In the context of a church community.

When I became a Christian, I really thought that I could be a ‘lone wolf Christian,’ just me and Jesus without anybody butting their noses in. In reality though, I was missing out on one of the most crucial pieces of faith and avoiding the interactions that I desperately needed. Proverbs 27:17 – as iron sharpens iron, so one believer sharpens another.

I thought I was good on my own but in reality, I needed other Christians to support me and strengthen me and pray for me, I needed believers to call me on my garbage and straighten out my theology; I needed other followers of Jesus to help me as we all followed Jesus.

And that’s exactly how God intended it to be. God doesn’t just save us FROM sin; He saves us INTO community, into a fellowship of faith where we can strengthen and challenge and support each other.

A church member is a follower of Jesus who is actively following Jesus in a church community.

Which means a few things:

1. We make being at church a priority because it’s not just sermons that help our faith; it’s those intangible interactions that you have at church, where you support one another, where you pray for one another, where you listen to what’s going on in another person’s life and faith and that inspires you to keep on in your life and faith. I have to admit, I don’t remember a single sermon I heard twenty years ago when I lived in France, but I remember every act of kindness, every time somebody went out of their way to support me. Church members do that for each other.

2. We each have a role to play within this community. Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, Paul explains that God has given us each spiritual gifts, unique to us as individuals for the benefit of the church. Maybe you are an encourager, maybe you're good with organization, maybe you're a gifted speaker or great behind the scenes helper, maybe you are committed to praying for our congregation; these are all gifts that God has given each of us for the benefit of that whole church. In my interview way back when, I joked about making a sign like this: (no loafers).

And 3. We make Jesus' example of humility our guiding principle in our community. I mean, just look around. In what other world would we all come together from our various walks of life, professions, classes? In theory, this shouldn't work, but it does because we are committed to living the way that Jesus did. Philippians 2:5:

5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!

And so we look not only to our own interests but also the interests of others. We sacrifice our preferences in terms of music and décor knowing that someone else is being built up by them and trusting that they'll do the same when the roles are reversed. We treat one another in our church community with the same humility and self-sacrificing love that Jesus treated us in His life and on the Cross.

A church member is a follower of Jesus, actively following Jesus in a church community.

And then the fourth part of our big idea: a church member is a follower of Jesus, actively following Jesus in a church community *that is doing the work of the Gospel.*

This, I think, is where a lot of churches stumble. They're following Jesus, they're gathering for church on Sundays but they're not really doing anything to benefit the Kingdom. Intentionally or not, they've turned the church into a social group, a nice opportunity for friends to get together. You know, I had a conversation once with someone who said 'I just want my kids to grow up in a nice supportive community like church, but I don't want anything to do with the spiritual stuff.'

I agree, the church is a wonderful place for kids to grow up in – oh that more people would feel that way! – but if you take the spiritual out of the church, then what you're left with is a community group. Which is fine and good and community groups do important work in our communities. But Rotary isn't going to take the message of sin and salvation out into the world. 4-H isn't going to share the Gospel.

Nor should they! That's our job! The Church has uniquely been given the responsibility of taking the message of Jesus into the world to unlock the shackles of sin and give people a chance to experience the redeeming love of God for themselves!

That's what Jesus said when He went back into Heaven. He said 'you have ONE JOB':

19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mat 28:19-20 NIV).

That's job number one for us as a church. Help people to know Jesus, help people to grow in their relationship with Jesus and help people to go out and pass it on. Church members are always thinking: what are we already doing in our church and how can we intentionally leverage it for the benefit of the Kingdom? What are the things that we do as a church, and what is it about what we do that sets us apart from a secular organization? We may not be a big church but I think that we can have a big impact by keeping Jesus front and centre in our mission.

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So there you have it - a church member is a follower of Jesus who is actively following Jesus in a church community that is doing the work of the Gospel together. Let's think about those in practical terms, applying them in our own lives:

First, if you're a church member, are you a follower of Jesus? Have you received the grace of God by turning from sin and walking with Jesus? If you are already a member at Langford, I assume that you are, which then begs the second question:

Second, if you're a church member, are you actively following Jesus? Are you intentional about growing in your relationship with Him? Our church grows when we all grow.

Third, if you're a church member, are you following Jesus in our community of faith? Is church a priority for you? Are you looking for ways to serve and to pray for other members of our community? I think it would be great if we could all pray on Saturday night not just 'Lord, bless me through the service tomorrow' but 'Lord, help me to be a blessing to someone' too.

And finally, as church members, are we thinking about how we can leverage all that we do for the sake of the Gospel? Are we intentionally communicating the grace of God through what we do?

Good questions for us to ask.

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Now as we wrap up our message on church membership, I think it's important for us to come back to the truth that makes us church members in the first place. None of us would be here, all of this would be moot, unless Jesus laid down His life to redeem His sheep. And He did.

So we are here this morning to celebrate His sacrifice that saved us out of sin and into a community of faith that would help each other as we follow Him together.

Let's take a minute to prepare our hearts as we come to the Table.

Music – When I survey

Let's take a look again at a passage that I just breezed over – Philippians 2, starting in verse 5. Paul writes:

5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!

Did you ever stop to consider what Jesus did to save us from sin? There are lots of stories in history of knights getting down off their horses in a sign of solidarity to fight side-by-by with their peasant brothers. Jesus didn't just get down off a horse; He came down out of Heaven. He took off His armour. He became human and humbled Himself to the point of being a slave. He even put Himself in harm's way and laid down His life to benefit us.

These are the footsteps in which we walk. The way He died restored us to God and the way He lived shows us how to live, knowing that we too will be resurrected to eternity with God.

And notice what it says next:

9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,

10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Let's pray together.

Jesus, we bow before You now to acknowledge that you are above all things; your name, your reputation are higher than any other. You deserve all the glory and honour and the praise –

just by virtue of who You are – but then You took it a step further and died on our behalf! We can never thank You enough.

And so Lord, we remember. We remember that You allowed Your body to be broken in our place. You bore the wrath for sin on Your own shoulders so that we might be forgiven. We thank You for that. We thank You for the bread that reminds us of Your sacrifice for us. May we receive it with the pure hearts that You died to give us. Amen.

On the night – bread

Let's pray:

At the Last Supper, Jesus said: 28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

29 I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom (Matthew 26:28-29).

That means Lord that we don't just look back and remember; we look forward to seeing You in all Your glory, indeed proclaiming that You are Lord to the glory of God the Father. We thank You for the cup, the reminder of Your blood, and we receive it looking forward to drinking it anew with you in our Father's Kingdom.

In the same way –

As this bread began as scattered grains that came together to nourish us, so may we be bound together by the Body and Blood of our Saviour Jesus.

Benediction

2 Corinthians 13:11 - Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.