

Let's Raise the Bar on Membership

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

1 Corinthians 12:27 (ESV, emphasis added)

Why are churches struggling? Thom Rainer, in his book I Am a Church Member, says we need to stop looking around for someone to blame.

“I am proposing that we who are church members need to look in the mirror. I am suggesting that congregations across America are weak because many of us church members have lost the biblical understanding of what it means to be a part of the body of Christ.

We join our churches expecting others to serve us, to feed us, and to care for us...

God did not give us local churches to become country clubs where membership means we have privileges and perks.

He placed us in churches to serve, to care for others, to pray for leaders, to learn, to teach, to give, and, in some cases, to die for the sake of the gospel.

Many churches are weak because we have members who have turned the meaning of membership upside down. It's time to get it right. It's time to become a church member as God intended. It's time to give instead of being entitled” (p.5-6).

Rainer is on to something. From my vantage point as an observer of churches, I see four phenomena regarding membership. First, I see churches that are down-playing the term “member” and in some cases doing away with the concept of membership. I understand why. For many people membership means entitlement and privileges. It means ownership and control. It means “I've paid my dues” and someone is supposed to serve me and make me happy. This unbiblical, country-club concept of membership has infected churches so much that the idea of membership itself has been poisoned. Some churches are abandoning the word “member” as a way to get rid of all the unbiblical connotations. However, the Bible says, “You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” We cannot escape the connection between the local church and membership. So whether we use the word or not, we must have a biblical teaching and practice about what it means to be a member. Every church is teaching its people something about what it means to be a member of the church. What is your church teaching?

Second, I see membership made too easy in most cases. To become a member of most churches all a person has to do is fill out a form and say they are a baptized believer or they are a member of another Baptist church and want to transfer. That's it. The person is granted membership whether or not they understand how that church functions or what it believes. They become instant stakeholders in the church with no commitments or accountability. Zip. Zero. Just fill out a form, check the appropriate boxes, and then comes a perfunctory “voting in” as new members. This is insane! What other organization has such low membership standards? What other group empowers new

stakeholders who don't even know how the group functions and have made no commitments to the group's welfare?

Third, I see the issue of membership in many churches discussed only when there is another contentious issue at hand. In other words, membership is only seriously considered when some big, divisive vote is coming up or when someone wants to use the fellowship hall for their family reunion. Membership has been downgraded to the point that it's about who gets to vote and who doesn't, or who gets to use the church facilities and who doesn't. Other than that, the concept of membership is pretty well neglected. Nothing about responsibilities or service or discipleship. Virtually no accountability for behavior. Members are simply ones who get to vote or use the building.

Fourthly – and happily! - I see some churches raising the bar on membership. Whether or not the word “member” is used, healthy churches are defining membership biblically and teaching what it means to be a biblical church member. These churches are not afraid to have high standards. Church leaders speak unapologetically about the responsibilities of a church member. Required new members classes teach the commitments, practices, and accountability that go with membership. The focus of church membership isn't voting or privileges; it's behavior as a follower of Christ in the body of Christ for the cause of Christ. Churches that are raising the bar on membership are okay with someone who says, “No thanks. That's not for me.” They would rather lose a prospect than gain them as a contentious country-club member.

I hope to see more of this. I hope to see more churches that are teaching and practicing biblical church membership. God has placed us in his family to serve, give, pray, love, and sacrifice for the sake of the gospel. We are being unfaithful to the Lord when we perpetuate an unbiblical practice of church membership. Let's raise the bar!

=====

I Am a Church Member: Discovering the Attitude that Makes the Difference by Thom Rainer is an extremely practical little book. Rainer challenges us to six commitments that form the foundation for biblical church membership. The book is short (79 pages) and easy to read. It is designed for small group discussion. It could also serve as the core curriculum for a new members' class, supplemented with material unique to the individual church. If you want to raise the bar on membership in your church, I Am a Church Member is a good place to start.