

SESSION 1: CONNECTED IN CHRIST

SMALL GROUP MEMBER BOOK



CONNECTED

MY LIFE IN THE CHURCH



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Question #1: When have you been interested to join a group or a cause?

The POINT

Church membership is a privilege made possible through Christ.

The Bible Meets Life

Membership has its privileges.

Join Yellowstone Club in Big Sky, Montana, and you can golf, ski, snowboard, ride horseback, fly fish, hike, bike, kayak, and more among some of the most beautiful scenery in the country. You can dine in luxury. You may even rub elbows with celebrities. Of course, you'd expect these kinds of perks from a club that requires \$300,000 to join and \$30,000 in annual dues—and that's after you buy a multi-million dollar condo, mansion, or ranch.

Most people can't relate to forking over millions of dollars for such perks, but we do get the idea of membership. We've all belonged to organizations where we pay our dues and are entitled to certain benefits in return. The problem occurs when we bring this same mentality to the church. Church membership isn't about having our needs met, but there is great value in being a church member.

Let's begin our study with an important truth from the Book of Ephesians—that belonging to the body of Christ is a gift.

What Does the Bible Say?

Ephesians 2:17-22 (HCSB)

¹⁷ When the Messiah came, He proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ The whole building, being put together by Him, grows into a holy sanctuary in the Lord. ²² You also are being built together for God's dwelling in the Spirit.

Key Words

Foreigners, strangers (v. 19)—“Foreigners” refers to non-citizens who are short-term in a country; “strangers” to longer term residents. Neither had citizenship or full rights.

Cornerstone (v. 20)—The foundation stone that anchors the whole structure. It sets the angle and the bearings for the structure that will rise from the foundation.

Ephesians 2:17-18

If you or I went to the White House in Washington D.C. and requested an audience with the president, we'd likely receive a formal reply that could be translated as, “Yeah, right.” It wouldn't happen. Not for ordinary citizens like us. But if the president's wife or children appeared with the same request, the response would be different. Of course they have unqualified access to the president—they're his family!

To put things in perspective, Ephesians 2:17-18 is not about the elected leader of any one country. It's about the sovereign, eternal Ruler of the universe. We may not have access to the U.S. president, but we do have access to God.

In Ephesians 2, Paul wrote that at one time the believers had been far away from God (see 2:13). He reminded them they had been disobedient, living in sin, and subject to God's anger (see vv. 1-3). They were without hope and without God in the world (v. 12). Cut off. No access. Excluded.

But then Jesus arrived. When He died on the cross to pay the penalty for sin, He made a way for those who were separated from God to be reconciled to Him. Jesus opened the door and gave the excluded—which includes us—access to God. The gift of salvation is for all who believe in Jesus and trust Him as their Savior.

Question #2: What emotions do you experience when you think about having direct access to God?

Scripture makes it clear: no one can earn this right standing with God by his or her own good deeds. “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—not from works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

By grace alone, we who had no relationship with God have now become sons and daughters with unlimited access to the Ruler of the universe. We're family. We're in!

The Lord of the universe is on His throne conducting business, while you and I are given access to enter and sit at His feet. We were undeserving, rebellious sinners who now have the greatest access imaginable. And that access is a gift.

Question #3: How is being part of a church like being part of a family?

Ephesians 2:19

Beginning a relationship with God is a little like going through one of those turnstiles to enter a football stadium—it happens one person at a time. God saves us as individuals. We each must come to Him through personal faith. But once we enter that relationship with Him, we immediately become part of His family.

Before coming to Christ, the Ephesians were outsiders. By dying on the cross, however, Jesus made a way for them to become a part of His family. Now, through their faith, they were joined with all believers—Jew and Gentile. Instantly, they went from being outsiders to being insiders. Access to God gave them access to the family of God.

I remember my own entry into God's family when I was a teenager. My high school football coach, Joe Hendrickson, showed me the Bible verse, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). He explained that everyone is a sinner, and none of us deserves salvation. We all deserve death (see Rom. 6:23). Coach Hendrickson helped me understand that Jesus took the punishment for me with His death on the cross (see 2 Cor. 5:21).

After hearing my coach explain the gospel, I repented of my sins and placed my faith in Jesus (see Acts 3:19). At that moment, I received the gift of salvation, which included forgiveness of my sins and adoption by God the Father. It meant the Holy Spirit came to dwell in me. And it made me part of the body of Christ. Just as it was for the first century Gentile Ephesian believers, so it is for all of us: membership in the body of Christ, the church, is a gift from God.

As a gift, membership in the body of Christ is something to be treasured. It's not a legalistic obligation. It's not a country club to provide us privileges and perks. It's not a license for entitlements.

It is a gift to be cherished.

Question #4: What prevents us from viewing church membership as a privilege?

Ephesians 2:20-22

Country clubs, health clubs, and the like exist primarily for one purpose: they are businesses designed to make a profit for the owner. So if you choose to join a club, it makes sense to consider what it will cost, what activities and services it will provide, and how well you like the other members.

By contrast, the church is not a business. It is the body of Christ, with Jesus as the head. The church is built on the foundation of the apostles who witnessed the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and declared His gospel. The church is not primarily for us; the church is for God, who founded it and sustains it to this day.

Paul called Jesus Christ the chief cornerstone of the church. In ancient architecture, the chief cornerstone was the most important stone in a building, more important even than the foundation. Covering a right angle where two walls joined, it was the binding stone that held the entire structure together. To say Jesus is the church's chief cornerstone is to say that everything in and about the church rests on His authority. In other words, Jesus is the reason for the church's existence. He is the One who connects us all together. The purpose of the church is to worship and serve Him.

God never intended His church to be a place for followers to act like consumers seeking to be served and entertained. Instead, He designed the church to be a missionary people carrying out the greatest work the world has ever known. Therefore, an invitation to join with Jesus and His followers in carrying out that mission is truly a gift that should inspire our humble gratitude and motivate our sacrificial service.

Question #5: Jesus remains the foundation of the church. What is our role in continuing His work?

Live It Out

Ephesians 2 helps us understand what the church is. So how do you apply this truth in your life?

View church membership as a gift. Thank God daily for the opportunity to be included in His family, the church.

John F. Kennedy famously challenged Americans to ask the right questions, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” This week, ask your pastor, “What can I do for my church?”

Invite others in. Identify those around you who need to be introduced to the gospel and included in Christ’s church. invite at least one of these individuals to church this week.

Church membership isn’t about our needs. It’s about meeting the needs of others. Most importantly, it’s about serving the one true God. Yes, membership certainly has its privileges.