



## COVENANT MEMBERSHIP

What is the difference between an audience and a church? Deep commitment, covenant, and partnership. Why do people struggle with this? Some people may have trouble believing that God loves them enough to be truly committed to them (Matt 28:20). Without the security of God's love, why would we take the risk of loving others? Some may struggle from hurt done by other Christians and need to find healing from the Lord. Some may be confused about Christ-centered commitment and simply need clarification.

### I. What the Scriptures do not teach about membership

First, membership is not about getting to a second level of spiritual commitment where some people are the "haves" and others are the "have nots." There is only one level of spiritual commitment needed to be a member of Christ's church – faith in Jesus the King expressing itself in love and good deeds (Gal 5:6)! Second, membership is not merely about getting your name on a roll or a list. Please realize, however, that there is nothing sinful about lists. Paul mentions a list of widows for which the church was responsible (1 Tim 5:9). A good pastor will make every effort to administrate well because he wants to know his sheep personally and by name (John 10:14). Lastly, membership is not about joining an organization or club. In those cases, members are consumers or audience members and the organization exists to serve them. The church is the opposite! The Holy Spirit transforms us from being a consumer of goods and services to becoming a provider of God's love and care to others. We are a church not for ourselves, but for Christ and his people!

### II. What the Scriptures do teach about membership

A. Believers in Jesus are members of God's family. The key point of membership is family relationship! The apostle Paul said, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph 2:19-20). We are a family, not a show. If you are looking for a masterful performance, a rock concert, or a motivational speaker, we will surely disappoint you. But if you are looking to know God with a group of loved sinners who are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus, we would love to have you join us.

B. Believers in Jesus are members of Christ's body. The apostle Paul said it like this, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom 12:3-5; cf. 1 Cor 12). This is countercultural. Biblical membership does not elevate individual personal fulfillment like the culture surrounding us. Jesus invites us into a love and life relationship with Him and others. He invites us to stop being independent and to give ourselves away!

C. Believers in Jesus are members of a "new humanity." "For [Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made the two groups (Jew and Gentile) one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility . . . His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace. . ." (Eph 2:14-15). "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9). We all may have started looking for a church like shoppers and consumers. But God was directing something grander and deeper. He was fitting us into a new family, a new body, and a new humanity. It is in discovering Jesus and the larger reality of his Kingdom that we come alive. We don't get our own way. We do even better! We belong to something sacred, ancient and enduring. Church membership is massive and miraculous!

D. Being a member of Christ's church (his family, his body and his new humanity) also means that we are not ashamed to identify with Christ or his people (Col 1:18; Mark 8:38). We want to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" and to "encourage one another and build each other up" (Heb 10:24; 1 Thess 5:11). We want the Spirit to use us in the church with his gifts (1 Cor 12; Eph 4). We want to encourage and be an example to new believers to make a commitment to the local body (Heb 3:13; Phil 3:17; Heb 10:24-25).

### III. Why should we become formal members of River Valley Church?

Though the title of "formal" membership isn't in the Scriptures, the concept of covenant clearly is. We invite people into a covenant process for two important reasons: to clarify the biblical idea of membership and to commit to membership.

A. Clarifying Membership. Formal membership helps us clarify biblical membership. It is a simple reminder of God's grace and our responsibility to Christ and to each other. Its purpose is not to count our numbers but to assess our lives. Formal membership is an invitation to admit that we are weak and need help from pastors and other believers. When we commit we are saying we want someone to care enough to call us should we stray from the Lord. By becoming formal members we publicly agree that life in Christ is not loose and flaky. Our desire is to be a growing, powerful and faithful presentation of Jesus' life, death and resurrection through the power of the Holy Spirit.

B. Committing to Membership. Becoming a Christian means that we commit ourselves both to Christ, as Lord, and to other Christians. Paul mentions these two different types of commitment in 2 Cor 8:5 — "but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us."

Jesus didn't come to date a church. He came to bring home a bride — a covenant people who know their creator intimately. A covenant is a relationship wherein two or more parties mutually pledge themselves to one another. We enter into covenant relationship with God by trusting in Jesus as our Savior and our Lord. By entering into covenant with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we also receive a new family. These relationships are not

always easy or smooth. Sometimes relationships are messy, yet God in Christ entered a messy world and died for his enemies. Now we are to have the same love for our brothers and sisters in Christ (John 13:34-35).

Of course, this love isn't to be kept to ourselves. God has also given the church a commission to "...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). In order to accomplish these things we must be mutually committed to this command!

#### IV. What steps are necessary to be a member at River Valley?

Step 1: Be a Christian by entrusting your life to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior (Acts 16:31). Members should be able to say with the apostle Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20)

Step 2: Complete the Starting Point Class. We want to build a friendship with you and help you establish friendship with others. Remember Jesus was with the apostles, teaching, eating, and drinking for over 3 years. He still abides in relationship with us through the Holy Spirit.

Step 3: Tell your testimony to a pastor so we can know you and confirm that you understand the gospel and know the Lord's grace.

Step 4: Be baptized. Baptism is important but should not become a divisive issue. The mere act of water baptism does not save us (1 Pet 3:21). The most important baptism is not an external cleansing of water but a cleansing of the Holy Spirit and fire – complete life transformation from the inside out (Titus 3:3-7)! Baptism is an image of being joined and identified with Jesus and his cleansing life, death, burial, resurrection and enthronement as King (Rom 6:1-7). Though the book of Acts emphasizes the baptism of the Holy Spirit, examples are given of people baptized with water to publicly declare their new identity. The pastors/elders will teach and encourage every new believer and potential member to be baptized by immersion as a believer.

If prospective members have entrusted their life to Jesus and have been previously baptized with a mode other than immersion as a believer, then the pastors will leave the mode and timing of water baptism to the conscience and will of the new member. If prospective members are clearly members of Jesus' family, we will be careful to welcome them into our family at River Valley.

Step 5: Commit to abide by our Statement of Faith and Membership Covenant. ([CLICK HERE](#) to download a copy of the Membership Covenant)

V. What if you chose not to become a formal member of River Valley?

We want to invite every follower of Christ to commit to his family. We realize you can do this at River Valley without becoming a "formal" member. The pastors would rather you be a member of Christ's family in life, reality and action than to gain a rubber stamp or false title. Again, the point of formal membership is not to get you signed up. Our desire is to share in the joy of knowing Jesus and the new identity He has given us. We want to clarify, renew and commit to biblical membership because that is what the apostles did.

Be encouraged! If you are a Christian, then you are a member of a global enterprise. We have outlets in almost every country of the world. We have hospitals, hospices, and homeless shelters. We are part of massive endeavors like marriage counseling, building orphanages, and education from elementary school to doctoral studies. We seek justice and reconciliation for rich and poor, young and old, black and white, and male and female. Basically we look out for people from the womb to the tomb. We even work in the realm of the impossible — total life transformation! What is this global enterprise called? The church! It is not only global but intergalactic because it includes everyone who has gone before us and dwells with Christ in the heavenly places. It is led by Christ, the good shepherd, through little shepherds called pastors. We are proud to be a part of Christ's church! Will you join us?