

Valuing Church Membership

What does it mean to be a “member” of a church? Is there any difference between church membership and membership in any other organization? Is church membership necessary? These are important questions for every Christian to consider and to understand the implications that these answers have on their lives.

In the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church each congregation (local church) and Session (the board of ruling elders moderated by the pastor) are governed by the Standards (our constitution comprised of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms, Form of Government, Directory of Public Worship, Book of Discipline). In particular, the Form of Government (FOG) functions as the standing by-laws by which the church’s actions are ordered. The Session is obligated by virtue of the oath that they have vowed to uphold and act according to the FOG (along with the rest of the Standards).

Furthermore, anyone who wants to join and be a member of an ARP congregation (as well as those who are already members) is required to affirm their acceptance of the Standards, as far as they understand them, and seek to abide by them:

FOG 4.5.A.

(6) Do you accept that the doctrines and principles of the Standards of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church are founded upon the Scriptures?

(7) In loving obedience, do you submit yourself to the government and discipline of this church, promising to seek the peace, purity, and prosperity of this congregation as long as you are a member of it?

These two questions relate particularly to the definition and function of a church member. It would be helpful for us to consider how these questions apply to what is happening in our day and the challenges that the church is being confronted with in our anti-Christian culture.

Gone are the days in which the church holds a place of respect and prominence in our world, as we witnessed last year during the “pandemic lockdown.” We learned that the church is viewed by the civil authority as being no more “essential” than hair saloons or restaurants, if not less. Consequently, church members were forced to evaluate and respond according to their convictions. Sadly, recent studies reveal that in-person (corporate) attendance is 36% of what it was pre-COVID (cited in <https://careynieuwhof.com/3-statistics-that-show-how-quickly-radically-and-permanently-church-is-changing-in-2020/>). Even if the current percentage is better, the current trend of rising government restrictions and ongoing coronavirus variant transmission will likely lower attendance again. For those who do not have a clear, biblical understanding and conviction about church membership, corporate worship will be an inevitable casualty.

By way of reminder and encouragement, here is what our FOG (4.4) states specifically regarding the church member’s responsibility as it pertains to corporate worship:

A. Make diligent use of the means of grace. The preaching of the Word, the Sacraments, and prayer (WSC Q. 88) are essential elements to corporate worship and are available each Lord’s Day. These graces cannot be duplicated in private. It is to your own spiritual demise and deprivation that you forsake the exercise of these means of grace.

B. Share faithfully in the worship and service of the Church. Participating in corporate worship is a visible expression of your faith in Christ. Indeed, worshipping God is not limited to corporate worship but it must *include* it. Corporate worship is vital to what it means to be a Christian and how your faith is made public. All throughout history, Christians have risked their lives to gather with other believers to worship God. It appears that that privilege and responsibility will be more and more costly in our lives.

C. Give of their substance as the Lord may prosper them. The Session does not know nor want to know how much each member gives or how they give (some may still be mailing their giving to the church), but each week in corporate worship, we are given the opportunity to respond to God’s grace by presenting our tithes and offerings. This expression of worship

is not a “fee” or “due” for being a church member but an act of biblical stewardship and worship. We give out of the overflow of our hearts in joyful adoration for the eternal gift of God to us in His Son.

E. Continue in the peace and fellowship of the people of God. The spiritual relationship that is envisioned in this statement is nearly impossible apart from personal gatherings and interactions. As human beings created in the image of God, we need to be *with* one another and share *in* one another’s lives. This normally happens in each other’s presence. Coming together as the people of God is an expression of membership in the body of Christ and of this congregation.

Your Session is charged with the spiritual care and nurture of this flock. We would be negligent to you and unfaithful to God if we did not promote the value of church membership. We will have to stand before God on judgement day and give an account of our shepherding of your souls. Pray that we are grace by the Holy Spirit to fulfill our callings with joy and faith.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'S. Y.', located below the main text.

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