

# Why Should I Consider Church Membership as a College Student?

Eric Zheng <mail@ericzheng.org>

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At PCC, there has lately been a (small) push for college students in ACF to apply for church membership. Personally, I am considering whether or not I should apply. My answer right now is “no, but only because I’m leaving soon.” I’m writing this essay to work out and clarify my reasoning to myself.

Some background: I’m a current senior in college and a member of the Asian Christian Fellowship (ACF) at Carnegie Mellon University. Among college fellowships, ACF is somewhat unusual for being directly affiliated with a local church, viz. the Pittsburgh Chinese Church (PCC). Other ministries at PCC include YF, the youth fellowship, and RISE,<sup>1</sup> the young adult fellowship. This essay is written first and foremost for myself, but I hope that other ACFers can derive some benefit from it. Other college students might also get something out of it, but I will use some ACF-specific examples.

## The importance of the visible church

Before we can consider *membership* within the church, we should first think about why the church is so important in the first place. Here, I refer to the “visible” church; Christians, and especially Protestants, typically draw a distinction between the visible church\* (as an institution, or a local gathering of believers) and the invisible Church (the universal body of believers).<sup>2</sup> When Jesus says that the kingdom of God cannot be seen (Lk. 17:20), he speaks of the latter; when Paul commends the churches in Judea (1 Thes. 2:14), he speaks of the former.

I think that this point—the importance of the church—is especially important for us to consider as college students. I have said this before in conversation to several people: I think that most college students (myself included, at times) undervalue the church, believing it (consciously or unconsciously) to be too rigid and “old-fashioned.” For us, faith is lived out in the passionate encounters we have on campus and the lively late-night discussions<sup>3</sup> that we have with our peers in our dorms, not in the stale setting of the sanctuary. But the church is vitally important: we are not called to live the Christian life on our own, but as part of the local community, and the church is the visible house of God in that community. The church is where we worship God cor-

\*The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

*Thirty-nine Articles of Religion (1571), Art. 19*

<sup>1</sup>I’m actually not sure what RISE stands for, or if it’s even an acronym, but I’ve always seen it capitalized. . .

<sup>2</sup>On the visible/invisible distinction, see also Chap. 25 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

<sup>3</sup>In the case of ACF, very late-night indeed. . .

porately, where we hear the preaching of the Word, and where we receive the Sacraments,\* in obedience to what is commanded in Scripture.

Could ACF, in a vacuum, function as a church on its own? In my mind, yes: if there were truly no other Christians around, we could be our own independent church. But given our actual context in Pittsburgh, it would be foolish of us to throw out the sound instruction and wisdom hard-won with years that the older believers in PCC can offer us. Likewise, I like to think that our presence within PCC is helpful for the other members of the church: ACFers lead prayer meetings, help serve lunch (at least a little bit), offer our perspectives during discussion groups, and hopefully model for the high schoolers in YF what faith can look like in college.

As I have learned more and more about church history and Christian doctrine, I have naturally come to a greater appreciation for the visible church and its traditions as a defender and exponent of the faith. Now I want to be clear: I consider the elevation of tradition to the level of Scripture to be in error.\* Tradition is useful only insofar as it encourages and instructs us in what Scripture teaches. Like the Reformers, we should not hesitate to jettison anything that has crept into tradition which is contrary to Scripture. But I think it is also important not to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater: it is useful to ground our practice in Scripture, with an understanding of how Christians have historically done this and continue to do this throughout the world today. As I have said, I think that this principle will naturally lead us to a deeper appreciation of the role that the visible church has in our faith.

My fear is that focusing too much on college fellowship and neglecting the church lends itself to a faith that is disconnected from its doctrinal roots and the broader Christian community, which is dangerous for several reasons. For one, many college students are not yet particularly spiritually mature, so it can become a case of the blind leading the blind.<sup>4</sup> But more subtly, the problem is that you will not always have a passionate crowd of ACFers living with you. Many of us live together in Schenley apartments; we go to each others' rooms at absurd hours of the night to vent, cry, and pray together. This support is wonderful, and yet it won't be there once you graduate from college. We should make good use of it while it is here, but at the same time we should not make it the crux of our faith.<sup>5</sup>

I do want to take the time here to offer a brief caution, namely that we ought not to become legalistic in our thinking about church. Being in the pews every Sunday does not make one a good Christian *per se*, and neither does serving much in the church. Likewise, the church *qua* institution is not what saves us. It is Christ—and Christ alone—who saves. Rather, the utility of the church lies in exalting God and pointing us to Christ. In this sense, perhaps it is useful to think of going to church as a barometer. As we grow deeper in our faith, we ought to desire to worship God together and hear his Word being preached. If

\*The nature of the Sacraments is hotly contested even among Protestants, but I don't think many would disagree with the assertion that faithful Christians ought to participate in baptism and communion, at least.

\*An example of this error lies in *Dei Verbum* II.9 (q.v.), one of the dogmatic constitutions of the Second Council of the Vatican (1965).

\*Cf. the famous dictum of Cyprian of Carthage (c. 210–258 AD): *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* ("there is no salvation outside the Church").

<sup>4</sup>I will be honest and say that I have seen this in ACF at times; depressed college students do not always make ideal counselors for other depressed college students.

<sup>5</sup>If you'll excuse the pun, one might even say that the crux of our faith ought to be the *Crux* itself.

we find ourselves neglecting church, it may point to a deeper spiritual problem that needs to be addressed.

## What membership does

Honestly, I don't think that membership is absolutely essential, given that most ACFers will only be at PCC for the four years of college. It is important that ACFers recognize the role that the church plays in the Christian life, but formal membership may not be necessary for every student. But I do think that officially becoming a member is useful in many cases, for a couple of reasons.

The first is symbolic: we are officially recognizing that we are part of this local congregation of believers and making a commitment to attend and be active within it. When someone is baptized at PCC, for example, we promise *as a congregation* to uphold and encourage the candidate in his or her Christian walk. One of my favorite things about ACF is that it is directly a ministry of a local church; membership in PCC makes this connection more explicit. I am deeply thankful for the spiritual guidance that PCC, and particularly Elder Gordon, has provided to ACF over the past few decades and to me personally over the past few years. PCC membership would serve as a good reminder that I am part of a much broader local community of Christians who care for me spiritually and to whom I have a commitment as well.

Perhaps some feel that such symbolism is meaningless. They have a point, in the sense that the symbol has no significance of its own: its importance derives solely from what it symbolizes. But I do think that symbolism is useful and important. For instance, baptism is merely a symbol of our professed faith,<sup>\*</sup> and yet we hold it dear.<sup>6</sup> We are frail and our faith is weak; we are therefore given such symbols to aid us in the Christian life.

The second—and perhaps more important—reason to pursue membership is that considering membership will naturally force you to consider what you really believe and what things you find important in a church. The former is especially helpful during a formative time like college, and the latter is very important once you graduate and need to find a new church to call home. Having experience being fully committed to a church while in college will, in my view, help make the transition to post-college life substantially easier. If nothing else, going through the ritual of membership at PCC serves as good practice for doing the same at your next church.

There is an aspect of membership that is, I imagine, unpopular with college students: membership formally places you under the discipline of the church. As a church, we want to encourage each other to live in a manner which glorifies God, and although it is rare, sometimes this encouragement must come in the form of real rebuke. I do not want to dwell on this point too much, because frankly I find it hard to imagine that serious, formal church discipline would ever be required for a student at PCC, and the “right” way to discipline with love could be the topic of an entire essay on its own. But I do think that this

\*Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance [baptism].

*London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689), Chap. 29*

<sup>6</sup>I can hear some pitchforks being sharpened right now. . .

ought to be mentioned; the Reformers felt strongly that the proper exercise of church discipline is one of the marks of a healthy church.\*

## Why should I *not* become a member?

Now, I don't think that membership at PCC is for everyone. An obvious reason: if you disagree with what PCC teaches on some core issue, I do not think that you should pursue membership. For example, if you have a strong paedobaptist conviction, PCC may not be the church for you.

Another is commitment to the church: some ACFers are very busy and find the five-hour time commitment of attending PCC every Sunday too onerous. Again, let us avoid legalism here: you don't get brownie points for having a perfect attendance record at church. Likewise, I am not here to lecture about prioritization of church and school. My point is merely this: if your basic expectation is non-attendance rather than attendance, it may be wise to consider membership at a church that is closer to you than PCC, which will hopefully encourage you to attend more regularly.

Yet another possible reason is brevity of time. This is the one that I feel most acutely as a senior: I will be leaving Pittsburgh for the foreseeable future in just three months. I will, of course, keep attending during this time, but I do not think that it makes sense for me to formally join PCC right now only to leave so soon. Had I considered membership more seriously as a freshman, sophomore, or even junior, I may have come to a different conclusion; as it stands, it seems better for me to refrain from applying.

Of course, these are only three of the many possible reasons that might give one pause when considering membership, and each one could be examined in greater detail. For instance, there is a whole space of possibilities between disagreeing with PCC on a core issue (such as baptism) and believing that everything that comes out of Pastor Hans's mouth is divinely inspired. It takes some introspection and prayer to determine to what degree you agree with PCC and whether you ought to become a member; it is precisely this introspection and prayer that I find especially valuable for college students, perhaps even more so than the membership itself. I don't think that everyone in ACF needs to become a member of PCC, but I do think that most ACFers would benefit from carefully considering membership, and more broadly thinking about what the role of the church should be in their lives.

## Colophon: Version history

This is the second version of this essay; the first was published on February 1, 2023. At that time, I had not come to the conclusion that my short remaining stay in Pittsburgh should mean that I ought not to pursue membership.

The latest version of this essay can be found at [https://www.ericzheng.org/files/pdf/church\\_membership.pdf](https://www.ericzheng.org/files/pdf/church_membership.pdf).

\*The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: the church engages in the pure preaching of the Gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the Sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults.  
*Belgic Confession (1561), Art. 29*