

Title: The Beautiful Gift of Church Membership
Text: Hebrews 13:17
Theme: How membership helps a church be a church
Series: Reset, refocus and renew
Prop Stmtnt: Membership in a local church is necessary for the church to be healthy.

Read Text:

The boundaries of commitment and faithfulness are wonderful gifts. To any meaningful relationship. They provide structure, definition, understanding and the basis for sharing hearts and perhaps life together. A doctor is responsible for his/her patient. An attorney is responsible for his/her client. A police officer is responsible for those in his jurisdiction. A teacher is responsible for the kids in his or her class. A husband is responsible for his wife and a wife is responsible for her husband. A parent is responsible for his kid and the kid to the parent. If a doctor tried to be responsible for everyone, he wouldn't be able to really take of anyone. And while a husband is to be loving to all, he is to love his wife exclusively like no one else and the wife to the husband. This commitment is a wonderful gift.

From just that perspective, I could argue that membership in a local church is a wonderful gift that defines the relationship so that believers know what to expect from one another. But, is that enough to emphasize it like we do and require it like we do in order to fully participate in the life of this church? I don't think so. So, why do we make such a big deal about church membership? I think it is taught in the Bible and therefore I don't think you can be a healthy church without it. So yes,...

1. **Membership in a local church is biblical.**

A. **Membership defined.**

Let's define some terms and let's start with what membership is not. Cathi and I are members of Sam's Club. We have a card that gains us admission to the store, where we can buy industrial sized packages of light bulbs, paper towels and Lucky Charms. That is not the same as church membership. Church membership is not paying an annual fee that gains you a seat in the church or a backstage pass to hanging out with the band, or a discount at the cafe and bookstore.

1 Corinthians 12.12 defines what church membership is based on and how we are to think about it. *"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."*

How is membership understood in this text? A member is a part of the body. This is different than a gym membership, a country club membership or a Costco or Sam's Club membership. The Scriptures speak of our relationship in a local church like it does of the relationship of our hands to our body, our feet to our body, our eyes and ears to our body. There is a function, a unity, a commitment and mutual dependence. What good is an eye if it is not providing sight for a body? What good is a foot if it is not connected to a leg and helping a body move? What good is a hand if it is not connected to an arm? Without the eye, the hand wouldn't know what to pick

up and without the hand, the eye couldn't get anything done. Following Christ is congregational and a congregation is described as being members of the same body. Therefore, we are to understand membership as: a church's official affirmation and continued oversight over a believer's profession of faith, and it is a believer's submission to that affirmation and oversight. The church affirms and oversees and the believer commits to living the Christian life inside of that affirmation and oversight.

When you think of the church, what comes to mind? More specifically, when you think of Cornerstone Baptist Church, what do you think of? What is the church? We, the members are the church. Who has the authority? It is the members. More on this in another sermon, but the congregation is made up of her members who organize themselves according to God's design for the church. Ultimately the affirmation of a believer's profession of faith and continued oversight over that person is the responsibility of the congregation. Over and over the Scriptures command us to be responsible for one another. Membership is clearly implied.

B. Membership implied.

The NT uses a number of metaphors to describe the church such as: the family of God. Families are defined. We know who is in and who isn't. The church is described as a nation. We know who are citizens and who are not. This was a very big issue in the NT. The church is described as a body with different parts and you know whether or not if your hand is connected to your body or not - right? Some have said that there are over 90 different metaphors in the Bible for describing what the church is: a flock, a temple, a people, a vine, a pillar and buttress of truth, a Lady and her children. The picture is that of a self-identifying group of people who are committed to one another, and who have a way of knowing who is part of the church and who isn't.

In 1 Timothy 5, Paul gives Timothy instructions on how the local church is to care for her widows. The church is to maintain a list of widows who are enrolled into the widow care ministry. Was Paul telling Timothy that the church in Ephesus was responsible for all of the widows in the world? No. All of the widows in the Roman Empire? No. All of the widows in the city of Ephesus? No. All of the widows in the church who meet the qualifications. How do you know whether or not a widow is actually in the church or not to be included in this ministry? There has to be a way of determining who is in the church and who isn't. That is membership. Akin to implying membership is the description of church-life that describes relationships committed to one another.

C. Membership described.

1 Corinthians 10.17 says, "*Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*" When Paul is writing to the local church in Corinth, he identifies them as, "we who are many are one." There is plurality (we who are many) and unity (are one). Did Paul know who the "we" were? Did the church at Corinth know who the "we" were? Yes. They obviously had a means by which they were able to determine who was part of the church and that means was a profession of faith and baptism which inducted them into the church. There is no category in the NT for a professing believer who is not baptized and not a member in a

local church, with the exception of the Ethiopian eunuch, who's conversion likely led to the formation of the church in Northern Africa.

In 1 Corinthians 5, the church has to deal with an unrepentant man who was living in sin as a member of the church. I say member because the church is called to remove him. The language is clear, "Purge the evil person from among you." You cannot do this unless you have a means by which you know who is in the church and who isn't. I could spend the next 45 minutes giving you example after example from the NT that describes life in the church that cannot happen unless there is a clear definition of who is in the church and who isn't. But, I suspect that this isn't the real issue for many. Let me make two more points and then I will address what I think is the heart of it.

2. Membership in a local church is practical.

The NT pattern is consistent. Declare the gospel. People who profess faith in Christ are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit because they are identifying themselves as being part of the followers of Jesus who follow Jesus together. Baptism is the front door. The Lord's table is the dinner that we have together as a family. We eat this meal together because we are reaffirming our commitment to Christ. Baptism is the means by which we know who is in and the Lord's table provides the opportunity for the family to fellowship. Baptism and membership in the local church go together.

Let's say that you bring your 7-month-old to church and after a few Sundays of trying to be in the service with him, you decide to take advantage of the nursery. Does it matter to you who is going to be caring for your baby in the nursery? Absolutely! Do we go to Walmart down the street on Sunday morning and ask for volunteers to come and help out in the nursery? Do we offer to pay them to come and take care of your kids? No. We know our care-givers in the nursery. How do we know them? They have to be members of the church. Therefore,

A. We know that we profess a common faith.

This is the foundation for all ministry to one another. Our faith in Christ is the grounding for our love for one another. We have policies and procedures for our nursery that are rooted in our love for God, for you and for children.

Why do we require membership before we allow someone to teach children, students or adults? At its core, membership defines our relationship so that we all know that we believe the same thing and therefore will teach the same thing. Our membership class covers what we believe and we require people to believe what we believe in order to be a member. This is hugely important.

An acquaintance of mine was applying to work at a Christian organization in a teaching position. The application asked about her profession of faith and she was not a believer and had no idea what this was and asked me about it. I explained the gospel to her, but she didn't care about that, she just liked the organization and wanted to work there. I knew that she wouldn't get the job because she would be asked to teach something that she didn't understand. But she did! And it

was very confusing for the other employees and disingenuous because the claim was that the employees were Christians.

Do you think that we ought to run background checks as part of the hiring process for police officers? Do you think we ought to know what a person believes who is going to be teaching our children, students or adults? Of course! That is why membership is so practical. It is the means by which we know that we are believing and practicing the same faith.

B. We know who we are responsible for and to.

Consider this command. Hebrews 13:17 tells you to obey your leaders. Which leaders do you obey? We get a clue from verse 7 which says, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." No radio, TV or YouTube preacher can fulfill that. This is describing a relationship between leaders and people based on the faithful teaching and hearing of God's Word. The leaders are teaching God's Word and they are accountable to the congregation. "Consider the outcome of their way of life." The congregation is responsible to the leaders to listen to the Word of God and follow it. The leaders only have authority to tell people what God has said. The leaders cannot bind your conscience with their opinions or wants. I have to know who I am responsible for if I am going to lead you as I should and you have to know who your leaders are by committing yourself to them. I do not see how you can do that without being a member of a local church. How can you build up one another by speaking the truth in love. How can you speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs and submit to one another as Ephesians 4 and 5 tell us without a local church? You can't!

3. Membership in a local church is loving.

This is the point that really gets to the heart of it all. Many people want about \$3 worth of Jesus. You know, enough to get out of hell, enough to have a friend to help out when you need a hand, enough to feel good about yourself at Christmas and Easter, enough to pull a string or two when you need a job or are facing a medial test result, enough to keep your kid from doing dumb stuff, but not enough to actually make any demands on your life, not enough to be inconvenienced for, not enough to actually care that much about others or to take to heart the fact that people are really dying without hope because they do not know the gospel. If you play it cool, a little detached, never committed, you do not have to love anyone, but yourself.

If you only want \$3 worth of Jesus, you don't understand Jesus and you don't understand the gospel. Jesus did not give \$3 of himself, he gave up his life. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, may all.

A. Love demands commitment.

Do not pretend that you love Jesus if you will not commit yourself to that which Jesus died for. He died for the church (Eph. 5.25). Paul describes the local church in Acts 20 as that which Christ obtained with his own blood. For the genuine believer, life in a local church is not optional, it is how we and others know that we are truly following Jesus.

B. Love demands sacrifice.

Listen to the “one another’s” in the NT as they describe our life together as a church. Love one another, pray for another, encourage one another, exhort one another, help one another, provide for one another, counsel one another, etc. These things are rarely convenient to do. People do not get sick or have crisis situations based on your calendar and when you think you have about 5 minutes to help out. Loving one another demands that we give up living for ourselves and you know it! The happiest people around are those who love others and sacrifice for others the most! They are the happiest because they look like Jesus and Jesus is the happiest person ever.

Why would you not join a local church? Ask yourself that. Why would you want to be non-committal, no strings attached, friends with benefits attitude? One possible reason is that you really are not a Christian. You need to consider that. Another is that you are afraid. The opposite of love is fear. What is it that you fear? Rejection? Commitment? Accountability? Expectations? Having to face some issues?

Every congregation has a choice. We could be a bag of marbles. We could choose to be loosely affiliated, non-committal and always thinking, “what’s in it for me?” Or, we can be a bag of grapes, where we spend time together in committed relationships, where our skins rub off and our hearts are exposed and where we all are part of the stuff. Belonging together is a beautiful thing because it is ultimately a gift from God. We pursue that and experience in our life together as a church.