

June 27, 2010

Church Matters – Membership Matters (Part 1)

Alright good morning. It is good to be back with you today and I'm glad that you are here. Let's pull your Bibles out and if you'd like to go ahead and turn to 1 Corinthians – that will be the first place we will be reading from. But definitely get your Message Map out and either look at the title on it or at the screen this morning and you find the words “**Church Matters.**”

I wonder as you read that to yourself, how many of you see a noun followed by a verb – Church – Matters? – in other words what God's Word calls the or a church matters – is important.

How many of you see an adjective followed by a noun – church matters? – in other words the stuff, the matters, that are a part of the or a church?

Well either way you're right - because both are applicable to what we are looking at today. So that's my attempt at quirky humor today – aren't I creative? Yeah – we'll just leave that alone. But having just spent almost a year studying through the book of Titus together – a letter where the God of the Universe reveals His blueprint for the church that is His – we know that church matters because the church matters to God.

But because of that same study throughout Titus we also know that the church that is God's – the church that fits God's blueprint – is composed of some specific parts – some particular matters – so to speak. And one part of those matters – one huge piece of the blueprint for God's church – is the structure of God's church – that it is led by elders. And so having finished that study we agreed again together a week or so ago, that **when God reveals His will in Scripture, we MOVE to line up with it as quickly as we can.** And that is true not only for us as a church, but for us as individuals.

And so here is where I'm asking you to trust and follow me today. In order for us to do that – in order for us to move to line up with the structure that we find in God's plan for His church – not because what we have is bad or wrong or broken – but because even when things are good, when God shows you something better – something He wants that is different – you listen, you follow, you obey.

But in order for us to do that, there are some other areas or truths that need to be addressed and understood by all of us together. We can't just see elders in Titus and in Timothy and other places and study that and say “Ok – Bible says elders – let's do it” – that would cause more harm than good because the Bible also has much to say about what goes along with that structure – what serves as the atmosphere so to speak in which elders operate and lead. And I am so indebted to pastors like Mark Dever, John MacArthur, John Piper, and Kevin Ueckert who God has used and so many of whose words I am using today bring these truths to light for us.

So I'm asking you to really stick with me today – this will not be normal for us. Know that we will be back in a verse by verse study of the Word soon – that's our norm – but in order to line up with God's revealed blueprint, we need to focus on us a bit. So for the next few times together in worship, we will be aimed at the unity of the Spirit and understanding that Paul calls for in Philippians because as we look at some of this – I'm warning you now – that some of you will be “sure – ok – already got that in mind.” Others of you will be “ok – this is new but not really a problem issue for me – I'll make whatever changes are needed.”

But some of you will be opposed initially – maybe because of tradition – maybe because of our church culture – but most likely your initial internal opposition will come from a personal conclusion or experience that is strongly felt but not necessarily biblically tenable. If you find yourself in the 1st two response the next few weeks – great. If you find yourself in the last one somehow – know that I'm giving you a head's up so that you can be invited to evaluate your position and your motive for it.

The first subtitle underneath the umbrella of Church Matters is Membership Matters – same play on words by the way. So let me ask you...when you think of the church, do you consider church to exist merely for your own spiritual growth?

When you gather on Sunday mornings like this with your congregational family, are you simply having your personal devotionals with lots of other people? No – you are participating in the life of a particular church.

When Christians gather as a congregation, is it merely as individual consumers who happen, by temporarily shared tastes, to be in the same room?

Well let me ask you 2 other questions that might help get to the heart of the matter for us. **What is a church in the first place?**

We've talked some about this, but by the word "church" we refer not to an organizational unit of a religion – I mean we don't refer the same to Buddhist churches or even Jewish churches. By "church" we don't fundamentally mean a building – only in kind of a secondary sense does it mean that. The building is just where the church meets which is why the New England puritan name for the church building was "meeting house" – just where the church met.

But **according to the New Testament** – if you'll let me give us an admittedly incomplete but strong seed of a definition – **the church is primarily a regular ASSEMBLY of people who PROFESS and give EVIDENCE that they have been saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone.** That is a New Testament church – not a building. The early Christians didn't even have buildings for almost 300 years after the church began.

From the earliest times, though, local Christian churches were clearly congregations of specific people. Certain people would have been known to make up this assembly and others clearly known as outside it. And **the idea of a CLEARLY DEFINED community of people is central to God's action in both the Old and the New Testament.** From God working with Noah and his family to Abraham and his descendants to the nation of Israel – **God has chosen to maintain a distinct and clearly separate people – listen – in order to DISPLAY His character.**

In fact – just in terms of history – this concept of the church as a gathered community – a clear and distinct people of God – is something that has distinguished Baptist Christians from many others. During the Reformation the relationship between the state and the church was very close and very complicated. Basically discipline by either brought consequences from the other. Kind of like growing up in my home – maybe you were like me – where the reality was that if I got swats at school – I was probably getting swats at home – that kind of idea – but even more formalized between church and state. To the point that it was assumed that everyone born within a certain political jurisdiction would be a member of the state church.

It was the recovery of the baptism of believers in the Reformation that threatened that connection at its core as Baptists recovered and emphasized the New Testament truth of the church as a congregation of those both personally professing and giving evidence of regeneration – of salvation by faith.

Which gets me back to the other key question – not only what is the church – but **what is the use of the church?**

See we talk a lot about the vision for this church – for Fairway – that God wants us to be doing life in Christ one step at a time together. But that vision for this church only makes sense in the context of an answer to the question what is the use of any church at all? Otherwise, who cares?

When we understand something more of the church and what it's about, then the Christian life becomes a lot more than a simple sustained effort to cultivate a list of private virtues or steps in one direction and avoid a list of private vices or steps in the other direction. You begin to understand this reality: **the church is the MANIFESTATION of the living God in this world.**

And from there to the practical – if membership matters within church matters – is church membership a biblical idea? In one sense, no. You won't open the Bible and find a story about Priscilla and Aquilla moving to the city of Rome, checking out one church and then another and finally deciding to join still another one. From what we see on the pages of the Book – nobody went "church shopping" because the realities of the newness of Christianity as it spread – the numbers of believers themselves – the relative sizes of cities – etc. – there was generally just one church in each community. So it may seem like a stretch to say local church

membership is a biblical concept – that is until we actually start looking for it in the Bible. Given – it is not as pronounced as the atonement or justification by faith – but the evidence is there and it is consistent.

Sometimes theologians refer to a distinction between the universal church (all Christians everywhere throughout history) and the local church (those people who meet down the street from you to hear the Word preached and to practice baptism and the Lord's Supper). But as I mentioned two weeks ago – other than a few references to the universal church (like in Matthew 16:18 and much of Ephesians) most references in here are to local churches – as when Paul writes “To the church of God in Corinth” or “To the churches in Galatia” (which would indicate as the Christian population increased in an area, more churches grew up there.)

But to see an example of what we are looking for today, in **1 Corinthians 5** we find an implication of public knowledge of who is in and who's not. If you have your Bibles open there, look at **verse 1** (TEXT) Got a guy in the Corinthian church living in immorality – big time. Skip down to **verses 12-13** (TEXT). “Expelling” only makes sense in the context of visible belonging. I mean stop and think about it. You cannot formally exclude someone if he is not formally included in the first place.

Now turn to **2 Corinthians chapter 2** and look at **verse 6-8** where most scholars see Paul addressing the same dude (TEXT). Stop and think – the punishment inflicted on him by the majority. “Majority” only makes sense in the context of a recognized whole – when there is a defined group of people, in this case a defined church membership.

There are other examples throughout the Word like that and we see evidence as well that the early church kept lists of members – like we know in Acts and 1 Timothy that the churches kept lists of widows and there were even rules about when within the church they could be added to that list. But again – **the evidence of church membership is not overtly abundant, but it is clear and it is CONSISTENT. And never does the New Testament conceive of the Christian existing on a prolonged basis OUTSIDE the fellowship of the local church.**

In addition – what we see everywhere - **the church across the board is really not a place – it is a people – it is a group of GOD'S PEOPLE in Christ.** And that's where we get to the meat of the subtitle today – that membership matters.

When a person becomes a Christian, he doesn't just join a local church because it is a good habit for growing into spiritual maturity. Listen – he joins a local church because it is the EXPRESSION of what Christ has made him – a MEMBER of the body of Christ.

We know - we talked about two weeks ago **how being united to Christ means being united to every Christian. But the evidential background of the letters of the New Testament shows that that UNIVERSAL union must be given a living, breathing existence in a LOCAL church.**

Stick with me here – this is important.

The relationship between membership in the universal church and our membership in the local church is a lot like the relationship between the righteousness God gives us through faith in salvation and the actual practice of righteousness in our daily lives. You follow me?

We looked at this in depth in our study of Titus chapter 3. When we become Christians – when God saves us by faith – God declares us righteous – He justifies us – as a judge declaring us not only not guilty but righteous – the perfection of Jesus is applied to us as if we had lived His life.

And yet we are still called to actively be righteous – to walk – to live – to act in righteousness day to day to day – to, as Paul wrote again in Philippians, to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Follow me here – a person who happily goes on living in unrighteousness calls into question whether he ever possessed Christ's righteousness in the first place. That is all through the Word, but we studied it clearly in James chapter 2.

It is along the same lines for those who refuse to commit themselves to a local church. Committing to a local body is the natural outcome – it confirms what Christ has done. If a person has no interest in actually

committing himself to an actual group of gospel-believing, Bible-teaching Christians, you might question whether that person belongs to the body of Christ at all. We've looked at it so many times together, but turn back to **Hebrews chapter 10 again. Verses 23-27** to tie this together again. (TEXT)

Our state before God – if it is authentic – will translate into daily decisions. Even if the process is slow and full of mistakes. God really does change His people. And folks – that's good news!

So as much as the Word would challenge us not to grow complacent through some vague idea that you possess the righteousness of Christ if you're not pursuing a life of righteousness – likewise please don't be deceived by a vague conception of the universal church to which you belong if you're not pursuing that life together with an actual church.

Put it in terms now of the vision God has given Fairway – that as we do life in Christ one step at a time together, we demonstrate in real life you might say the fact that God has reconciled us to Himself and to one another - as we worship Jesus together and learn truth together and build community together and reach your world together.

We demonstrate to the world that we have been changed not primarily because we memorize Bible verses or pray before meals or tithe a portion of our income or listen to Christian radio stations – but because we increasingly show a willingness to put up with – to forgive – and even to love a bunch of fellows sinners.

You and I cannot demonstrate love or joy or peace or patience or kindness sitting all by ourselves on an island. No we demonstrate it when the people we have committed to doing life with – the people we have committed to loving give us good reasons not to live them and yet we continue to do so anyway!

Do you see that? Right there – in the midst of a group of sinners who have committed to loving one another – the gospel is displayed – God's glory is manifested on earth. **The church gives a visual presentation of the GOSPEL**

- when we forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us
- when we COMMIT to one another as Christ has committed to us
- when we lay down our lives for one another as Christ laid down His life for us.

See the truth is that **TOGETHER we can display the gospel of Jesus Christ in a way we just can't by ourselves or even without that shared commitment.**

Listen – I hear this a lot – I think we should just love all Christians and fellowship and serve with all believers. Well of course – no one is arguing against that. But if your goal is to love all Christians, let me suggest working toward it by first committing to a concrete group of real Christians and all their foibles and follies. Commit to them through thick and thin for eighty years. Then come back and we'll talk about your progress in loving all Christians everywhere.

If you're wondering how all this fits together with where we are going, it is because **if elders are going to make any difference at all in God's structure for the church that is His, MEMBERSHIP must matter.** Church membership is not simply a record of a box we once checked on a card or an aisle we walked down. It isn't a sentimental feeling. It isn't an expression of affection toward a familiar place. It isn't an expression of loyalty or disloyalty towards your parents. It should be the reflection of a living commitment – or it's worthless.

So let me challenge all of you – wherever life may take you – **don't just ATTEND a church** – though you should attend – join a church. Link arms with other Christians.

When you find a church you can JOIN, you do so – and you do so for so much of what we saw in Titus:

- so that non-Christians will hear and see the gospel
- so that weak Christians will be cared for
- so that strong Christians will channel their energies in a good way

- so that church leaders will be encouraged and helped

but mainly so that God will be GLORIFIED – so that the local church will exist as the manifestation of the living, saving God in this world in ways that are not possible WITHOUT it – so that God is glorified in you – through you – and in the world around you – as a part of the church together.

That's the first step we must understand as we move to line up with God's blueprint for His church. Will you pray with me?