

July 4, 2010

Church Matters *Membership Matters Part 2*

Alright good morning. Welcome back. Take out your Bibles this morning and turn to John chapter 13. We will find the heart of what God has for us this morning in that chapter here in just a moment.

For those of you who were here last week, you already know the play on words on the screen and on your message maps this morning. For those of you who were gone last Sunday or who are guests today, let me very quickly bring you up to date. When we finished studying Titus a few weeks ago, we found ourselves wanting to line up with God's blueprint for His church that is laid out in that letter, specifically in terms of the leadership structure of our church. To do that, we are spending a few weeks not doing our normal verse by verse study of the Word and instead looking at some issues that many churches never look at: the fact that church matters and that there are matters that are important in the church. One of those is membership matters – and again – there are certain matters that are important in understanding membership. That's where we were last Sunday together and we continue from today.

Because the truth is that many Bible-believing Christians today deny that church membership is biblical as quickly as a Jehovah's Witness denies the Trinity or a Muslim denies the divinity of Christ. "Show us the verse" they say. But the truth that God has revealed in His Word is not limited to simple and explicit statements. Much of the most important teaching of Jesus, His relationship to His Father, and the Spirit's relationship to both the Father and the Son is best and most clearly understood when passages are compared and the teaching systematically constructed. And so it is with local church membership.

And yet if you were to ask the average Christian how important committed church membership is to his or her Christianity, you would probably get an answer somewhere between "not at all" and "sort of." Many Christians are happy to attend a certain church indefinitely without ever formally joining. Others are happy to visit different churches from one month to the next and go on in that pattern for years. Still others don't attend at all and try to grow themselves through Christian books and fellowship groups, and other forms of Christian media.

And if you try to explain the importance of joining a church to someone in that mindset, at best you get a shrug of the shoulders but more likely you get a charge of "that's legalism" or "that's not loving."

But you see when we as Christians lose sight of God's call to live out our Christian lives CORPORATELY; we tragically lose the ability to define LOVE for the world. The doctrine of the church brings the whole of Christian belief to bear on how a concrete group of God's people actually gather and organize their lives TOGETHER.

And some I'm thankful today that we are gathered on July 4th – Independence Day. A day when we celebrate our freedom as Americans – our independence from anyone else – as we remember how that was not always the case. And we rightly celebrate the lives and sacrifices of those who for generations paved the way for this freedom – a freedom that is so complete that we as Americans can use that freedom to hate America – to speak out against those who protect us – to separate ourselves from the very source of our freedom. And while there are whole sermons of opposing analogies between our freedom as Americans and our freedom in Christ, this morning what I want to connect with is one of the results of exactly what America celebrates today – the freedom of individualism.

In Western culture today, every attachment is negotiable. We are all free agents and every relationship and station in life is a contract that can be renegotiated or canceled – whether we're dealing with a government, parents, spouse, boss, judge, or even the local church. I, as the average individual, am mainly obligated to me – to maximizing my life – my liberty – my pursuit of my happiness.

And I may choose to connect with some other person, place, or thing but only as long as doing so is obviously conducive to my personal advantage. I hold veto power over everything. To use more of the American terminology – when in the course of human events it becomes necessary to dissolve the bands which have connected me to others – I dissolve them. **INDIVIDUALISM has caused us to expect a love in the church defined as that which makes much of me, whether it is received or given.**

And within that individuality that is by osmosis almost driven into us, there are at least three sub-conditions of our individualism that wreak havoc on God's blueprint for His church. Quickly think about this with me. One of the primary out-flows of individualism is consumerism. We all have a pretty good handle on what that is, so let me just put it in terms of the love that we as the church are designed to communicate to the world. **Individualism leads to CONSUMERISM which has caused us to focus on the desirability of the object of love rather than on the process of loving. Which means we view churches like products that either satisfy me or do not.**

That consumerism leads to a fear of COMMITMENT. And when commitment is taken out of love, then **love becomes about what is advantageous to me.** And, as we saw, commitment is removed from our view of churches. So **churches become places where personal SACRIFICES are seldom made so the love of the gospel is seldom pictured.** Instead individuals come and go – they 'church hop' with little care. They join lightly and leave lightly since doing so does not violate their sense of love. They don't stop to weigh the consequences to others – to feel the weight of their responsibility to others – they just go. They take their purchases back to the checkout counter and say "it's nothing personal." They ask little and give little in return.

And a huge part of that is how individualism has twisted the very idea of love so that the opposite of love is judgementalism, intolerance, exclusivism. **That fear of commitment leads to a SKEPTICISM towards any system of truth that claims absolutes** (which supposedly would by nature be judgmental, intolerant, and exclusive). Love is supposed to be whatever works for you. And the expectation that is carried into churches then is that I know you love me if you accept me as I am – if you tolerate whatever I say or think without condemning it. **In fact, 'love' in the church must mean not only accepting me – it means accepting and AFFIRMING my lifestyle – my choices – my beliefs as legitimate and good.**

Individualism, consumerism, fear of commitment, skepticism. It is no wonder then, that **the world at large then looks to the Christian church and HEARS about Christ's love but it SEES nothing different from what is has already known** – our commitments to each other are cheap and easy so why would the non-Christian bother unless he's just being entertained?

And yet here is where it flips, church: **biblical Christianity in so many ways stands in stark contrast to that individualism. Christianity is personal but it is not PRIVATE.** Truly following Jesus is committed and regular – not casual, occasional, or convenient.

And the practice – listen – **the PRACTICE of church membership among Christians occurs when Christians grab hold of each other in responsibility and biblical love.** By identifying ourselves with a particular local church, we are telling that church's pastors and other members not just that we commit to them – but that we commit to them in gathering, giving, prayer, and service. We are telling them to expect certain things from us and to hold us accountable if we don't follow through. Joining a church is an act of saying "I am now your responsibility and you are my responsibility." And that is as counterculture as it can get.

While we can say that all Christians are to be characterized by obeying certain duties to each other, individual Christians cannot live out these duties to all other Christians. In reality, we live them out most fully to those we are regularly around and especially to those we have committed to work with in our local church. And it is in this context that we see how the Word pictures this commitment over and over again – just for example:

Romans 12:10 says we are to honor each other

Revelation 3:19 says we are to correct each other

James 5:16 to pray for each other

Hebrews 3:13 to encourage each other

1 John 1 to build each other up by speaking God's Word to each other

Colossians 3:16 and **Ephesians 5:21** to be open and accountable to each other

Philippians 1:5 that we work together to spread the gospel

1 Peter 4:10 that we use whatever gifts we have to serve others – to administer God's grace in its various forms.

On and on it goes – all the “one another” commands of Scripture. But when we go back to Jesus, He ties what we saw last Sunday to where we are today. Of course **there are many marks of true discipleship, but one mark is SINGLED OUT by Jesus as signifying to the watching world that we belong to Christ.** Now – keeping all of this in mind, finally look with me at **John 13:34-35.** (TEXT)

The mark of Christian discipleship is love – love of the kind that JESUS exercised toward His followers – love visible enough that men will recognize it as belonging to those people who FOLLOW Jesus.

So we should not be surprised today that a healthy Christian is one who is committed to expressing that kind of love toward other Christians. And the best place for Christians to love this way is in the assembly of God's people called the local church. **The LOCAL CHURCH is where love is most visibly and compellingly displayed among God's people. It is where the body of Christ is most plainly represented to the world.**

I think it is obvious today why this topic is a must for our churches – and for us as individuals. Joining a church will not save you any more than your good works, your education, your culture, your friendships, your contributions, your baptism, or even your citizenship in America will save you. Instead, in joining the church we put ourselves in a position where we ask our brothers and sisters to hold us accountable to live according to what we speak with our mouths. In fact, when we remember what God showed us last Sunday – that the church by definition in the New Testament is a regular assembly of people who profess and give evidence of having been saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ to the glory of God then again we see that membership in a local church is not for salvation, but it is a reflection of salvation.

And we understand this crucial point then that **our membership in a local church is that congregation's public TESTIMONY that our lives give evidence of that salvation.** And we can see then why in a church that matters, membership matters. We understand even better what God showed us last Sunday – that if the local church – defined as those who profess and give evidence of salvation – is to be the manifestation – the picture – of the living God in this world – then **membership in a local church is a reflection of a living COMMITMENT or it is worthless – and even more than worthless, it is dangerous.**

Why dangerous? Why should we be broken that – as Mark Dever explained in his book What Is a Healthy Church – that in one recent study it was shown that the typical Southern Baptist Church has 233 members with only 70 attending in corporate worship?

What's so dangerous about non-attending, responsibility-shirking members? **Uninvolved 'members' CONFUSE both real members and non-Christians about what it means to be a Christian.** And active members do the voluntarily inactive members no service when they allow them to remain members of the church since membership as God designed it is the church's corporate endorsement of a person's salvation. You get that? By calling someone a member of your church, you are saying that that individual has your church's endorsement as a Christian.

So if a congregation has not laid eyes on a person for months – even years – how in the world can they testify that that person is faithfully running the race? **1 John 2:19** would ask if a person is

missing in action but has not joined some other Bible-believing church, how can you even know if he or she was ever even really a part of us?

Listen – let me be clear here – **we don't necessarily know that such uninvolved people are not Christians; we simply can't AFFIRM that they are.** When a person is perpetually not a part of the church – perpetually absent by choice – a church endorsement is naïve at best and dishonest at worst.

And on the other side – in the individual, an underdeveloped grasp on what we are talking about – that church matters – that membership matters – can conspire with the very individualistic instincts we talked about to deceive us into claiming that we love all Christians everywhere equally – while excusing ourselves from loving any of those Christians specifically, and even less submissively. And unsurprisingly, churches are shallow – Christians are weak – and God's people look just like the world.

But what if we take this seriously?

What if local churches were to recover the understanding that each stands as a proxy for Jesus?

That each church is Christ's representative on earth?

Consider then the weightiness of accepting new members.

Consider the weightiness of saying goodbye to those who move to another city.

If churches were to undertake such considerations, receiving new members would be more like an adoption: "Are the child's papers in order? Have all the necessary questions been asked by both sides of the adoption? How can we best serve and protect this child?"

Saying goodbye to members as they move cities would feel like saying goodbye to a precious son as he leaves home. "let us know when you arrive safely. Let us know if you need money. Find good friends. Remain steady in what we've taught you. We love you."

See that brings the clarity we talked about last Sunday. God has always been very clear about those with whom He identifies Himself – that He distinguishes. He wants His image – His nature of love - to be clearly displayed in His people.

Think about a couple who live together but do not join their lives together through the covenant of marriage. They don't want to identify their names with one another. She doesn't want his and he doesn't want hers. They don't want to commit to distinguishing one another as their lifelong one and only. They don't want to give public record of their oneness – because there really is no oneness. They certainly don't want to be called to account by one another – or others.

In other words – there is no love. Or at least their love is sadly deficient.

Not the picture Jesus wants of Him and His bride. No the picture that He intends – the picture that unfolds across the letters of the New Testament writings to churches and their members across time – distinguishes a commitment that protects His name and facilitates the believer's good.

Jonathan Leeman in a recent book called The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love offers one way to list those things in biblical church membership. That it:

- 1. Identifies us with Christ.**
- 2. Distinguishes us from the world.**
- 3. Guides us into the righteousness of Christ by presenting a standard of personal and corporate righteousness.**
- 4. Acts as a witness to non-Christians.**
- 5. Glorifies God and enables us to enjoy His glory.**
- 6. Identifies us with Christ's people.**
- 7. Assists us in living the Christian life through the accountability of brothers and sisters in the faith.**
- 8. Makes us responsible for specific believers.**
- 9. Protects us from the world, the flesh, and the devil.**

There may be a better way to organize or present such reasons to join a local church and Leeman himself says as much. But at least these send us in the right direction. And that direction is back to the words of Jesus in **John 13:34** – “This is my command for you – I want you to love one another – but not how the world defines love – not by what it means in America to love – but I want you to love each other the way that I have loved you. And the world will know that you belong to me when you love each other the way I love you.”

Should any of us decide that we can appropriately call ourselves Christians without being in committed loving relationships with other Christians, we must carefully consider something else Jesus said through the writings of John – in **1 John 4:20**.

“If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.”

Given our admitted – and almost nationally endorsed – propensity to deceive ourselves – to over-estimate our own goodness, thank God that He has given such checks on our own pride and blindness.

There is no doubt in the Book that church matters. And **because the church matters – because of what the church is – because of the purpose of the church – membership in the church that fits God’s blueprint has got to be MEANINGFUL membership.** Because of what the church is – an assembly of people who claim and give evidence of having been saved through Jesus Christ – because of what that church is to be – a picture of the living God in our world – then membership in that church must be meaningful membership.

And when it is – it makes the witness of our churches to non-Christians more clear. It makes it harder for weaker sheep to stray from the fold and still call themselves sheep. It helps shape and focus the discipleship of the more mature Christians. It helps church leaders know exactly for whom they are responsible. And in all of this God is glorified.

So let me bring this home today by focusing us again not only on the love by which Jesus says we as His church are to be defined and be known – but the very freedom we celebrate today to publicly live in that love. Dietrich Bonhoeffer – the German-born English pastor who spoke out against Hitler and was hanged after spending multiple years in prison having lost the freedom we are talking about for the sake of the very gospel that binds us together – offers this admonition:

“It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God’s Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the gospel in heathen lands stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing. They remember as the Psalmist did, how they went “with the multitude...to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday (Ps. 42:4)...Therefore let him who until now has had the privilege of living in common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.”

Hear that again. **“It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in COMMUNITY with Christian brethren.”**

May that heart echo in us. May that be our understanding of church membership. May our freedom as Americans not so confuse us that we miss the difference between it and our freedom in Christ – a freedom to choose to be the slave of our Savior and a freedom to be connected in life and love with His family through the local church – so that the world might see what love is and that He might be glorified through us.