



Marks of a Healthy Church

Mark Six: A Biblical Understanding of Church Membership

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For the past few weeks we've been looking at what it means to have a biblical understanding of the Gospel, and of conversion, and of evangelism. The logical next step is church membership. But this is a place where a lot of churches struggle, because we live in an age of commitment-phobia. We're all looking for the bigger, better deal, which means we all hesitate to commit to anything. What if I commit and a better deal comes along tomorrow? In the last few years it's been popular for many churches to simply do away with formal church membership. The bigger problem is probably the fact that in many, probably most, churches today, membership doesn't really mean anything. In the average Anglican or Episcopal church the membership rolls usually have two or three times the number of people who actually show up on Sunday morning and participate in activities. Neither of those situations is right. Membership is vitally important. As I said when we looked at what the Gospel is: there is no bigger or better deal than God offering his Son on the cross in our place. The same goes for church membership. So this morning I want to ask—and answer—three questions: First, What is a church? Second, Why should we join a church? And third, What does Church membership mean?

So what is a church? Notice that it's more than just an organisation. The Legion Hall or the Rotary or the curling club aren't "churches". And notice that the church is something unique to Christians. We don't talk about Buddhist churches or Jewish churches or Muslim churches. A church is Christian—or at least it should be. And by "church" we aren't fundamentally talking about a building. We do refer to buildings as "churches" but we do that because the building is typically where the church *itself* meets. This is why some Christians choose to call their buildings "meeting houses" and things like that, because they don't want anyone to confuse the meeting place with the actual church.

The New Testament tell us that the church is a body of people who have put their trust in Jesus Christ and in the grace he offers at the cross and who, in obedience to his command, have been baptised as the outward sign and seal of the new life they have in him. This is what a New Testament church is. It's not a building. In fact, in many cases those early churches didn't even have buildings. No. The collection of people committed to Christ in a city or town *were* a church.

All those local bodies together make up *the Church*—with a capital "C"—the *universal* church. But most of the time the New Testament talks about the church in terms of local, living, and loving collections of people who are committed to Christ and committed to each other. That's what the word means over and over in the New Testament. And it's a body from which you can be excluded, therefore it first has to be a body in which you can be clearly included. Think about it: If there is no way for you to be excluded from the local church, it may be because you have never formally included yourself in it as the Bible tells us to do.

So, again, what is a church? A church is the collection of people committed to Christ in a local area, and we see their commitment as they live out the Gospel and are obedient in preaching God's Word and administering the Sacraments he commanded us to celebrate.

Question Two: Why should we join a church? Let me start by asking: If you are a confessing Christian, what does it mean to live the Christian life? Do we live it alone? Is it just a matter of you, your Bible, and Jesus? Is just you alone being a good person alone? Maybe you know that the Christian life should include others, but who are the "others"? Are they people you work with or family or the other people in your Bible study? Which Christians are we called to relate to? The Church is for everybody who is a Christian, not for a certain ethnic or socio-economic group, not for a specific ministry or mission. The Church is for everyone. So let me give you five good reasons to join a Church that preaches the Gospel and models Christian living. (And that's not to say there aren't other good reasons too.)

First, *joining a church helps us to be sure of our salvation*. Now, I said a couple of weeks ago that church membership does *not* save you...and it doesn't. But being a church member can help us to be sure we are saved. Let me read some of the things that St. John tells us Jesus said:

Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him....If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love....You are my friends if you do what I command you...If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. (John 14:21; 15:10, 14; 13:17)

We could go on and on with quotes from Jesus where he teaches us how he wants us to follow him in obedience and that if we are being willfully disobedient, we're deceiving ourselves. When we join a church, we put ourselves in a position where we ask our brothers and sisters to hold us accountable to live according to what we say with our mouths. We ask our brothers and sisters to encourage us, sometimes by reminding us of the ways God has been working in our lives and other times by pointing out where we aren't obeying him and can do better.

By our baptisms we are all members of the *universal* Church, but membership in the local church isn't just an optional add-on to that. Membership *here* is a witness to our membership in *the* Church. Membership here doesn't save you, but it is a reflection of the salvation we have in being part of the Church Universal—and if there is no reflection of our salvation, how can we be sure we are really saved. St. John tells us, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20).

When we join a church, we are grasping hands with each other to know and be known by each other. We're agreeing to help and encourage each other when we need to be reminded that God is at work in our lives or when we need to be challenged because our walk doesn't match our talk.

Second, *we should join the local church for the sake of evangelising the world*. Together we can do a better job of spreading the Gospel. A local church is, at its core, a missionary organisation, and we back up this missionary outreach with our actions as we show God's love by meeting the needs of others. We promote the Gospel by cooperating to take it to the people who haven't yet heard it, and as we make the Gospel visible to the world by the lives we live together. Even as imperfect as we are, if God's Spirit is at work among us, he will use our lives to show unbelievers the truth of the Gospel.

Third, *we need to join the local church for the edification and building up of other believers*. Joining a church helps counter our proneness to spiritual individualism and helps us realise the corporate nature of Christianity.

A real Christian has a vital relationship with Jesus that is life-changing and that changes the lives of the people around them. Being part of the church helps us to see whether or not we've got that life changing relationship. Ask this question: Do you understand your following Christ fundamentally to involve how you treat other people, especially the ones who are members of your church? Have you covenanted together to love them, and do you give yourself to that? Or have you claimed that you know the love of God in Christ and yet live in way that makes that claim a lie? Do you claim to know a love that knows no bounds, and yet in loving others you have set boundaries, basically saying, "I'll go this far, but no farther"?

That kind of claim of love, without a life that backs it up, is a bad sign. And yet if you just hang out by yourself and refuse to join a church, other Christians can't help you. You're sailing your own little ship your own little way. You'll come to church when you like the sermons or when you like the music or when you like some programme or activity, then you'll sail on out to wherever else you may go when you want something else.

Brothers and sisters, if you commit yourself to a church, you commit yourself to a local body of people who will try to help you work through those kinds of problems. So for example, if you've got a problem with gossip, your brother and sisters will try to talk to you about that. If you're discouraged and falling away, your brothers and sisters will try to encourage you. That's what the New Testament shows us over and over: following Jesus means having care and concern for each other. That's part of what it means to be truly Christian, and though we do it imperfectly, we should be committed to doing it.

A few years ago I took my car in for service and while I was waiting I got to talking to a lady who was also waiting for her car. I was in clericals and so she started talking about faith. She said she was a Christian, but when I asked where she went to church she said that she didn't go. I asked why and she said with great disdain that she tried every once in a while, but she was spiritually so far above the people in the churches she knew, that they'd just drag her down from her

spiritual peak. Of course, my first thought was that talking that way was really a demonstration of her lack of spiritual maturity, but I asked her if she'd ever considered that maybe God wanted her to be part of a church so that she, in her maturity, could help them grow to greater maturity. That's God's plan when it comes to our life together in Christ. We all bring something to contribute and we all bring our problems, but the Holy Spirit is alive and at work in each of us and as we live together the gifts and Spirit-filled attitudes that you bring go to work on me and help me to overcome my problems and vice versa

There is no room in Christ for a self-centred and individualistic faith. There's no such thing as a Christian "loner". Christians cannot be self-centred, even in the name of Christ. God is just as concerned about how you treat others as he is about what you do in your devotional times—and that includes how you treat others with whom you having *nothing* in common aside from Jesus. That's why you need to invest your life in others and allow others to invest their lives in you. Being a member of a church should give you a concern for others. Growing as a Christian is not just an individual thing, it's something that concerns the whole church and it's something we all do *together*.

Look at Hebrew 10:19-25. This a good passage to meditate on in light of our very individualistic age:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Church membership is our opportunity to grab hold of each other in responsibility and in love. By identifying ourselves with a particular church, we let the pastor and the members know that we intend to be committed to attendance, giving, prayer, and service. We let our brothers and sisters have greater expectations of us in those areas, and

we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving with them, and we call for the commitment to serve and encourage us as well. We see this in St. Paul's use of the body imagery when he writes about the local church and we see it in all the "together" and "one another" passages in the New Testament.

Joining a church increases our sense of ownership of the work of the church, of its community, of its budget, and of its goals. It turns us from being pampered consumers to becoming joyful proprietors. We stop coming late and complaining that we don't get exactly what we wanted; instead we come early and try to help others with what they need. We stop thinking about what we "don't get out of it" and what we don't like, and start focusing on adding our gifts, our enthusiasm, and our love for God and each other for the benefit and growth of our brothers and sisters.

We went through 1 Corinthians pretty recently. Remember St. Paul saying that the purpose of spiritual gifts is to build up the church? As Christians, using our gifts to build up the body should be one of our main goals in life. If you're thinking there's nothing for you to do as a Christian, you've completely missed this one. According to Paul, this applies to *all* of us. Are you looking for ways to help your brothers and sisters? In the church we can hold each other accountable in times of temptation. We can study God's Word together so that we'll be prepared for spiritual warfare. We can sing praises together and pray together. We can encourage each other's joy and share in each other's burdens. As Jesus told us, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.... These things I command you, so that you will love one another (John 15:12, 17)" John wrote, "Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18).

Fourth, if you're a Christian, *you should join a church for the glory of God*. The way we live can bring glory to God. St. Peter wrote, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see *your* good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:12 NIV). That's an amazing thing to think about, but Peter was just restating what Jesus said: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). So if this is true of our lives as individuals, it's all the more true

when it comes to our lives together as Christians. God intends that the way we love each other will identify us as followers of Christ. Think of Jesus' words in John 13:34-35: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Our lives together mark us out as his and give him glory.

Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). If Jesus is committed to the church, how can we be any less committed? How can we profess love for Christ and yet forsake his body? If you call yourself a Christian, but neglect or refuse to commit to the church, your profession of faith has little, if any, credibility.

Finally, let's look at the question: What does Church membership mean? Well, at it's most basic, church membership means living a life of repentance and belief. The church is the community of those who have been born again. God's grace in our life, granting us repentance and faith, is signalled by two things:

First, it's signalled in action by baptism. Baptism is the first step for the Christian, and the New Testament assumes that all Christians have been baptised, because Christ commanded baptism in his Great Commission. The book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament show us that baptism is the first act expected of every new Christian. I've met a lot of people over the years who claim to be followers of Christ and yet refuse to take this first step that he clearly commanded. What's even more disturbing are the groups that call themselves churches, but reject baptism (not to mention the Lord's Supper). We cannot reject the clear commands of Scripture and call ourselves followers or disciples of Christ.

But baptism itself doesn't necessarily affiliate us with a local church, and so as a second step we formally covenant with a local group of fellow Christians. That covenanting means that we are committing ourselves to a common life with our brothers and sisters, so let me give you a few of the more important things that life together involves:

First, it means that we regularly attend the services in our church. Hebrews 10:25 reminds us not to "forsake the assembling of ourselves together." It means that we ought to have a desire to gather with our brothers

and sisters, because we love them and because it's our great joy to gather with them to express our love for God in praise. Again, if you claim to love God, but forsake his body, you're a liar.

Second, it means that we partake of Communion with our brothers and sisters when it is offered. In our case that's pretty much at least every Sunday. I've been asked in the past why I don't do altar calls. Friends, we have an altar call every Sunday here. When Jesus invites you to his Table you receive the greatest altar call ever—the only one that's the real deal and the only one that really matters. Anything else is a cheap caricature of the commitment you make to him and to your brothers and sisters when you come to the Table. And remember, that to come to the Table regularly means that you're taking care of business with your brothers and sisters, confessing your sins to them and asking forgiveness, exhorting them, and loving them as Christ loves us.

Third, it means that we've each pledged to support the local church. It means we pray for each other and for our ministry here. As you pray each day, pray through the phone list for a few names each day—and get to know those people so that you can know what to pray for. It means coming to the meetings we have, like the AGM, not only so that you can stay informed about what's going on, but so that you can give your input. The church is by no means a democracy, but it does require input from each of us. It means putting your God-given gifts to use for the building of the Kingdom. Your gifts may not be "Sunday morning" gifts, but that doesn't mean that God hasn't gifted you for ministry. As you use your gifts here, in your work, in your family, or some other way in the world, you support the work that the body is doing. And it means giving regularly and generously for the financial support of the church.

Friends, if the church is a building, its made up of bricks; if it's a body, it's made up of body parts; if it's the household of faith, we're each part of that household. Sheep are in a flock. Branches are on a vine. Biblically, if we are Christians we must be members of a church. Church membership means being incorporated in practical ways into the body of Christ. It means travelling together as aliens and strangers in this world as we head to the New Jerusalem.

Finally, let me say that joining a particular church is an outward reflection of an inward love—for Christ and for his people. And, just as we see in other aspects of life, the

greatest love isn't usually spontaneous; it's more often planned, premeditated, and characterised by commitment. In Ephesians 5:25 we read that, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Acts 20:28 reminds us that he "bought his church with his own blood." If we are Christ's followers, we too will love the church that he gave himself for...and love it more than anything else.

So, don't just attend church (which you should), but join. Link arms with other Christians and do it so that non-Christians will hear and see the Gospel, so that weak Christians will be cared for, so that strong Christians will use their energy to build the Kingdom, so that church leaders by encouraged and helped, and so that God will be glorified. It's as we commit to showing our love for each other, that God's love is seen by the world and he receives the glory that is his due.

Please pray with me: Father, thank you that by your Spirit you have made all who trust in your Son for eternal life one in his body. Forgive us for the times when we fall into a self-centred and individualistic attitudes that undermine the unity of your church. Remind us that if we are to love you as you have loved us, we demonstrate it by loving our brothers and sisters, exhorting them and holding them accountable as they do the same for us. We ask that you would instil in each of us such a love for the body of Christ, that there would be no question in our minds of forsaking our brothers and sisters, and that in loving them as you do, the world might give you glory and be drawn to your love. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

(Note: This sermon series has been adapted from Mark Dever's book, "Nine Marks of a Healthy Church, Crossway, 2004.)