

# The Purpose of Church Membership

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*Various passages*

March 9, 2014

## **Introduction:**

This morning we continue with our second message in our special sermon series entitled *Church Membership Matters*. Last week we worked on establishing a foundation for the practice of church membership. The average American evangelical has grown to regard membership in a church as an unnecessary relic of a by-gone day, seeing it at best as a “take it or leave it” option. They think, “Sure I could become a member of a church, but I could just as well not join and really, it doesn’t matter either way.” In light of such an impoverished view, we devoted our time last Sunday to demonstrating the biblical support for church membership. I would strongly encourage any of you who may have missed last week’s message to listen to the audio file or at least read the sermon manuscript, as both are available on our website.

So having established the biblical basis for church membership, today I want us to examine why Scripture calls us to church membership. What is the purpose of church membership? What goals does it aim to achieve? Why is it an essential part of being a Christian and not just an optional activity, as many today are prone to regard it? To that end I have identified four areas that I believe are key purposes of church membership. The first of which, which I believe is of primary importance, is that the purpose of church membership is...

## **1. To affirm the salvation of those in the church**

Church membership provides assurance of salvation. Ultimately church membership allows a person to have a significant reason to believe they’re genuinely saved and not just deceiving themselves. Now I know that’s probably a radical idea to many of you, but I want you to bear with me for a moment. Consider this: the basic requirement for membership in a church is that you’re a Christian. If you are a professing atheist or a devoted Muslim or if you don’t really know what you think about God, then you cannot be a member of a local church. To be a member of a local church you must be a Christian. I assume that isn’t anything you would take issue with; every organization has certain requirements for membership, which at a minimal level means you agree with the basic tenants of what they believe in order to be allowed to join. Well, the local church is no different. To be a member of a church at its most basic level means you must be a Christian whose beliefs and practices are consistent with your profession of faith.

So what happens when you are accepted as a member of a church is that the local church, that group of people both in terms of the regular members of the congregation along with the pastors and elders of the church, are giving you their formal stamp of approval. They are saying in effect, “We know Dave. We’ve heard his testimony. We’ve examined his beliefs. We’re aware of his conduct with his wife and children, how he treats others, his attitudes and actions, and we believe he really is a Christian thus we’re willing to make him a member of our church.” Every time a church accepts someone into membership they are formally saying, “We believe you are a Christian.”

This then gives Dave assurance of salvation in that people other than himself are examining his life and saying, "We believe your profession of faith is genuine." That's meant to be very encouraging. It means you aren't walking the road of faith alone. You have fellow travelers coming alongside you, affirming you, helping you, challenging you and keeping you accountable in your walk with Christ. Church membership helps to prevent the kind of self-deception we're all susceptible to by providing people outside of ourselves to serve as evaluators of our words and actions to see whether they are consistent with our profession of faith. It is a gracious gift of God that all believers ought to avail themselves to for the welfare of their souls.

The reason the church is responsible to affirm one's salvation through membership is because we have been given delegated authority by Christ to do so. We're in Christ's kingdom and as King he's the one to whom "all authority under heaven and earth" has been given. Christ in turn has given authority to his church through the "keys of the kingdom." Just as Christ affirmed Peter's affirmation of faith in Matthew, so also has Christ delegated to the church the role of affirming the profession of others.

Perhaps a helpful metaphor would be to think of the church as embassy. In Jonathan Leeman's book on church membership, he talks about being in college in Belgium when his passport expired. Since he wouldn't be able to leave the country without a valid passport, he had to go to the US embassy in Belgium and get this passport renewed. In doing so, the US embassy didn't make him a US citizen, but it did officially affirm his citizenship. Even though Jonathan Leeman was a US citizen, he didn't possess the authority himself to declare it before the nations; the embassy had to do it for him. The US embassy officially recognized before the nations that he was a US citizen.

That's what the church does through membership. As an embassy of heaven, the church has been given the authority to say, "This person is a citizen of heaven" before the nations. When people come to the church and want to become members, it's the church's job to affirm (or deny) one's profession of faith. By listening to their testimony, hearing what they believe, watching the manner of their life, the church has been given the authority to say, "Yes, we affirm that you are a citizen of the kingdom of heaven" or, if one's words and deeds are not consistent with their profession of faith say, "Sorry, we can't affirm that you really are a Christian."

Now please don't misunderstand me here. The fact that a church formally recognizes someone as a Christian by means of church membership doesn't mean they always get it right. We all see through a glass darkly; neither I nor anyone else can say with absolute authority that such and such a person is a Christian or conversely that someone is not. Not everyone who's a member of a church is actually a Christian and there are many people who aren't members of any church who are born-again. That is certainly the case, no doubt about it. Nevertheless, though a church won't always get it right, it is the church's job to identify and affirm to the best of its ability those who belong to the kingdom of God and those who do not.

So then, the primary purpose of church membership is to corporately affirm the salvation of those in the church. It is a God-ordained means by which we can avoid the kind of self-deception that we are all prone to, that readily excuses sin and unbelief. Church membership provides us with outside voices that can far more objectively evaluate our words and deeds and call us to repentance as needed.

But now we need to move on to the second purpose of church membership that we only just briefly touched on but which is vitally important for us being able to live in obedience to God's Word. So the second purpose of church membership is...

## **2. To allow for the practice of church discipline**

I'm not going to spend a lot of time on church discipline here because we're going to be discussing it in far greater detail in a couple of weeks, but I do need to at least touch on it because it is closely connected to the purpose of church membership. My point here is simply this: because we're called to practice church discipline, there must also be church membership because we cannot *exclude* those whom we did not first *include* into the church. Without any formally recognized church membership, there can be no church discipline. Church discipline presupposes church membership.

What this means is this: when a member of the church begins believing false doctrines or starts to live in a manner inconsistent with Scriptural commands, then that individual has a group of people present to confront him about it. He's not just out there living alone in some shack in the woods where no one can challenge his aberrant doctrine or behavior: he's among those who should call him back to the truth. That's what Jesus talks about in Matthew 18 when he says you should go to your brother who sins against you. It's what Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 5 when he instructs them to remove a man from the church who was in an inappropriate relationship with his step-mother. It's what James mentions at the end of his letter, saying, "*My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*" Being a church member puts you in a place where you're formally surrounded by other believers who have both the knowledge of you and relationship with you to confront you about your sin and potentially save your soul from death.

But if you remove yourself from the church, or if you refuse to become a member of a church, then you rob yourself of this God-given grace that is meant to act as spiritual guard rails in your life. Let's say you don't attend a church: who do you have to confront you about your sin? Most of us surround ourselves with those who tell us what we want to hear. There's a good chance if you don't go to church and yet consider yourself a Christian, then you don't have those people in your life that can really confront your sin. You can easily write off that odd individual off who occasionally dares to tell you you're wrong. You can decide not to reply to their e-mail or unfriend them from Facebook. You roll your eyes and accuse them of judging you. Failure to be part of a local church where you are known and people can challenge you and confront you about sin in your life is a high-risk endeavor. It isolates you from the Body of Christ which has been given to you to help you avoid being self-deceived about the state of your soul. Add to that fact that

by not being a part of a local church you are already disobeying the clear and consistent pattern that has been true of the people of God throughout both the Old and New Testament that we talked about last week, it's frightening place to be.

We'll talk more about church discipline in a few weeks, but hopefully you can see that church membership is necessary in order to have church discipline. We can't formally exclude someone from fellowship unless we first have formally included them, and the way we determine who is included in any local church is through membership.

Moving on now, the third purpose for church membership is connected to the role that elders have in shepherding the church. So then, the purpose of church membership is...

### **3. To delineate who the elders are responsible to shepherd**

The New Testament gives a consistent pattern of government for churches which is a plurality of elders. Among the responsibilities elders have, these godly men are given the charge to "shepherd the flock of God that is among you" (1 Peter 5:2) and are called to "[keep] watch over your souls" (Hebrews 13:17). Furthermore Scripture teaches that the elders will need to give an account to God for those under their care (1 Peter 5:4; Hebrews 13:17).

Since that is the case, these responsibilities assume there is a clearly defined, mutually understood membership in the local church they serve. I like what John MacArthur has to say about this matter. He says,

*"Elders can shepherd the people and give an account to God for their spiritual well-being only if they know who they are; they can provide oversight only if they know those for whom they are responsible; and they can fulfill their duty to shepherd the flock only if they know who is part of the flock and who is not."*

*"The elders of a church are not responsible for the spiritual well-being of every individual who visits the church or who attends sporadically. Rather, they are primarily responsible to shepherd those who have submitted themselves to the care and the authority of the elders, and this is done through church membership."*

Think about this: I have a friend named Nathan who lives in Chicago who is a Christian. I am an elder here at Grace Fellowship in Waterloo, IA. Am I responsible before God for the care of Nathan's soul? Am I to give oversight to Nathan's spiritual walk? Will I need to answer to God for how I shepherded him? No, not at all. Nathan isn't a part of the flock at Grace Fellowship. He is a member of Immanuel Baptist Church in Chicago and is under the care and authority of the elders of his church there. My responsibility is for the people who have covenanted to live in submission to the elders of this church, who we have identified as part of this flock as members. Membership makes it clear exactly who we as elders are called to shepherd. Without it, the call to "shepherd the flock under your care" becomes meaningless: it can mean everyone and nobody.

Conversely, the Bible tells believers to submit to their elders. In Hebrews 13:17 it says to believers, "Obey your leaders and submit to them." That of course begs the question, "Who exactly are your leaders? Who are the elders you are to obey and submit to?" For the one who has refused to become a member of a local church, entrusting himself to the care and authority of the elders, he can't obey this passage. Such a person has no leaders to obey thereby making obeying Hebrews 13:17 impossible. We aren't expected to submit to every church leader in every church everywhere: no one can do that. Thus in order to answer the question, "To whom am I to submit?" one must bring oneself under the care and authority of elders of a particular local church they are a part of, and the way they become a part of that is through church membership.

So then, we've seen the purpose of membership is to provide assurance of salvation, to allow the church to practice church discipline, and to clearly delineate who the elders are to shepherd (and conversely what leaders in particular Christians are to submit to). That brings us now to our fourth and final purpose of church membership which is...

#### **4. To protect the reputation of Christ**

Church membership, properly done, serves to protect the reputation of Christ before a watching world. When churches retain members who in their daily words and deeds live in a manner in line with God's Word, we proclaim to the world: here is what a Christian looks like. When we remove people from membership, we are saying, "We can't vouch for him." Church membership is the way we say to the world, "These are the people who speak for Christ, who represent him."

When that doesn't happen, when membership is given to anyone who wants it and isn't removed for those who are no longer walking in a manner worthy of the gospel, we cause people to doubt the claims of Christ. Instead of being a proper witness to the transforming power of the gospel, people are given reason to doubt, to question, to disbelieve. Consider for a moment what Paul says about the Jews in Romans 2. He says in v. 17, "You call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God... but you who teach others, do you teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal?... As it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'" When we don't practice membership properly, God's name is blasphemed because people see wicked behavior and say, "Wait, doesn't she go to that church? Isn't he a member there? Ah, see, those Christians are just a bunch of hypocrites. They're all pious on Sunday morning but live like the devil the rest of the week."

Perhaps an illustration would be useful here. When Karen and I go out to a restaurant, occasionally we're witness to some very obnoxious, poorly-behaved children. I'm sure you've all experienced this. The kids are climbing over everything, talking loudly, not obeying their parents, and so on. But I never get personally embarrassed by it or feel the need to apologize to my waitress for it. Why? Simple: because they aren't my kids. They aren't members of my family. I'm not responsible for them so their bad behavior is no reflection on me. The children who are members of my family aren't

acting that way, so I'm in no way concerned about my reputation in the eyes of the other customers of the restaurant because it's clear those kids aren't my kids.

Membership is the way the church says to the world, "These are children of God." It is these men and women that represent Christ. They belong to the family of God and we recognize it as such through membership. Without it, we have no way of saying to the world, "These are children of God and those are not." If we retain the membership of a person we know isn't living in line with the gospel, or even if we aren't sure about them because they are never around and so we can at best only guess at the witness of their life, we risk damaging the reputation of Christ before a watching world.

### **Conclusion:**

So then let me wrap this up by saying that I recognize that some of what I had to say this morning about membership isn't going to be instantly agreeable to some of you. We have an incredibly impoverished view of church membership in our American culture and so it wouldn't surprise me that you might listen to this message and think to yourself, "Well, I dunno about that Pastor Rob." But I ask that you don't reject it just because it doesn't sit well with you. Church membership is biblical and, if I can be frank, it may be that your view of church membership may very well be more influenced by our culture than what Scripture teaches about being part of the people of God. My hope is that between this message and the message from last week, I have elevated in your minds the biblical foundations for and the importance of church membership in the life of every Christian. The doctrine of the church is an area of theology we are often weak in our understanding and my hope and prayer is that this sermon series helps to strengthen us in that regard.

As our sermon series title says, "Church Membership Matters." It is a means by which our salvation is affirmed by others, it is necessary for the practice of church discipline, it clearly delineates who the elders are responsible to shepherd (and to what leaders a Christian is to submit), and it protects the reputation of Christ in the world. May it be as important in our hearts as it is in the heart of God.

Please join me now in prayer by bowing your heads with me.

**This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2014.**