

Married to the Church – *Membership: An Unnecessary Formality?*

Selected Texts

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on September 23, 2012

Introduction

- ❖ I wouldn't be surprised if many Bible-loving, theologically-orthodox, Christians are surprised to learn that the word “trinity” is nowhere to be found in their bibles. We believe in the Trinity. We believe God is three in one. We don't question it. And yet we also believe all our beliefs should be rooted and found in Scripture. But here you have one of our core beliefs, the Trinity, and it doesn't show up even once in the Bible!
 - The same goes for a word like “incarnation”. We believe in the Incarnation. We believe Jesus is fully God and fully man. But you won't find that word in Scripture.

- ❖ What's my point? **My point is that there are a number of concepts that we wholly believe to be true and biblical though they're not explicitly mentioned or defined in the Bible.** There is no verse that says, “*God is a Trinity.*” There is no verse that lays out a definition.
 - And yet we believe it because we believe it's implicitly taught in Scripture. Sure, the word is not there, but the concept screams out to us page after page.
 - Well this morning I want to take this accepted principle and apply it to the concept of church membership.

- ❖ In the past couple of weeks, we've been talking about the importance of the church. **We've said repeatedly that we're living in a generation of Christians who only want to date the church. Who are adverse to any formal, active commitment to any one church.**
 - So I've been trying to cast a NT vision for the central, soul-shaping role of the local church in the life of every believer. I'm casting a vision where every Christian, upon conversion, is understood to be mystically united to the universal, global Church, and yet that invisible union is always to be expressed – rather immediately – through public baptism and the act of joining a visible local church.

- ❖ Now perhaps you agree with all of that. You now see the centrality of the local church in your discipleship to Christ and now you want to stop dating the church. You want to express your marriage to Jesus' global Church in marriage to one of his local churches.
 - But here is the inevitable question that follows: ***Do I have to become an official church member to express all this?*** If I'm regular in my attendance, if I am serving here, if I tithe here, then why do I need to become a formal member?

- ❖ **Some would argue that we should just go back to how the early Christians did church.** They want to set aside all the traditions we've added to how we “do church”, which would include things like membership. And just follow the example of the early church, which of course assumes that the early church had no concept of formal membership.
 - So that begs the question: Did the early church expect Christians to officially join a church? ***Is membership a biblical concept we should embrace or is it an unnecessary formality that suits some but not others?***

- ❖ Let's return to that general principle I mentioned earlier. Granted, the phrase "church membership" never shows up in the Bible, yet we can still affirm the concept to be true and biblical because it is assumed and practiced on countless pages in the New Testament.

Where is Membership in the Bible?

- ❖ Now you might be thinking that's a bit of a stretch. You might be willing to defend a church's practice of membership, but you wouldn't go so far as to say it is in the Bible. But yes that's where I'm going, and **I'd argue that the likely reason we don't see membership in the Bible is because we're looking for the wrong thing.**
 - **Jonathan Leeman** suggests in his book on church membership that, "*When people ask, "Where is membership in the Bible?" the problem is that they're looking for something like a club to join.*"¹
- ❖ **His point is that many Christians see the church as some sort of voluntary association to join or not join.** That is, we approach the church like we would a local gym or community center where membership is optional.
 - I have the option of joining my local community center, and if I do it entitles me to certain privileges and benefits. But even if I don't join, I can still use the facilities and some of the services they offer. Of course there might be some restrictions for non-members, and there might be other member-only privileges.
 - But I can get what I want out of the community center, and if I really want more then I have the option of joining membership. Otherwise, I'm okay (and they're okay) with a loose, informal affiliation.
- ❖ So if that's how you see the church, then it's no surprise if you don't see membership in the Bible. **That's because the Bible doesn't speak of the church as some sort of club you join. Rather it speaks of the church as a particular people of a kingdom ruled by a king that you are called to submit to in relationship with fellow citizens.**
 - Leeman goes on to say that instead of joining a club, "[The Bible] *talks instead about how God's people gather together under his supreme rule. It's interested in citizens of a kingdom, not club members. . . . When you open your Bible, stop looking for signs of a club with its voluntary members. Look instead for a Lord and his bound-together people.*"
- ❖ The point is membership is not just your way of saying you've enjoyed what this church has to offer and now you'd like to join to get more out of it, to have more privileges and benefits.
 - **No, membership is the way to declare your citizenship in God's kingdom and to express your allegiance to King Jesus – on a continual basis.** Your baptism was the initial and foundational expression of these realities, but from that day on you continue to express them through membership in a local church.

¹ Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*, 26.

- ❖ Let's stop comparing church membership to our membership at the local gym and start comparing it our citizenship in our country. Building off that, **Leeman says we should view the local church like an embassy for the kingdom of God.** It's God's embassy situated in a foreign land. Now what does an embassy do? An embassy's job is to represent its home nation to its host nation.
 - **So like an embassy, the church's job is to represent God's kingdom to the world – to give this fallen world a glimpse of what the kingdom is like.** But for that to happen, we need a means of making sure that those who comprise the church – who are the very representatives – are actually kingdom citizens.
 - **There needs to be some way to draw distinctions so that we can say *these people are recognized as kingdom citizens.*** If you want to know what God's kingdom is like – or what God himself is like – then observe *these* people. That is basically what membership is trying to do – to draw that distinction.

- ❖ When I was living in Canada not long ago, my American passport was set to expire. Now if I let it expire and then tried to cross the border, I would've got in trouble. My own country would not have let me in. So I made sure to go to the embassy to renew my passport.
 - Now the embassy didn't make me an American citizen that day. I already was one, but what the embassy did was just as important – it officially recognized and affirmed my citizenship. You see, I don't have the authority to officially declare myself an American citizen. That authority belongs to an embassy not the individual.

- ❖ Now we would agree that I became a citizen of God's kingdom (a Christian) by the grace of God alone. Becoming a member of this church didn't make me a Christian. **But the point is that I don't have the authority to officially declare myself a Christian, a citizen of God's kingdom.** That authority belongs to the local church as God's embassy.
 - Again I don't need the church to make me a Christian. All I need is the grace of God for that. **But I do need the local church to recognize and affirm my citizenship in the kingdom using the authority God has given her.**

- ❖ If I just attended this church and never joined, I could call myself a Christian (and I very well might be one), but I have no authoritative voice to back that up. But a community of believers assembled as the church does have that voice. Now if you're not convinced, I've reserved a whole sermon next week to prove that point and flesh it out.

- ❖ **But what I'm saying today is that when a local church accepts me as a member and welcomes me to the communion table, it is declaring to the world that I am a Christian.** I would be depriving myself of that privilege and encouragement if I never joined.
 - But once I do, I have the responsibility to live up to that name. I am to faithfully represent our King and his kingdom in the way I live life together with my fellow church members. That's really what membership is all about!

- ❖ So if you're looking in the Bible for an embassy-like body of believers through which your citizenship in the kingdom is mutually affirmed and your discipleship to the King is mutually supported and shaped, then you'll find plenty of evidence for membership.

Membership Sighting #1

- ❖ Let me point out three pieces in particular, three membership sightings in the New Testament.
 - 1) **We see that the practice of church discipline in the early church required a clear distinction between those *inside* and those *outside* the local church body. And that was made possible by membership.**
- ❖ Turn with me to **1 Corinthians 5**. Here we have a messy situation in the church of Corinth. Read **v1**, "*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.*" Now that's likely a reference to his stepmother.
 - Apparently there was a brother in this church who was persisting in sin (incest) and acting like an unbeliever – content and unrepentant towards his sin. Now this became public knowledge and yet the church was doing nothing about it.
 - Remember the church is like an embassy and we are like ambassadors, so if one of us is not representing God and his kingdom and if we're unwilling to change, then it's the church's responsibility to remove our membership so that we stop misrepresenting God to the world.
- ❖ That's what Paul commands in **v2**, "*And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.* Go down to **v11**, "*But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹²For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."*"
- ❖ So the church is being told to remove this man from among them (to purge him) because he was acting like an unbeliever instead of a Christian. **But what does it mean "to remove him"?**
 - Are they supposed to ban him from their worship services? Don't let him step foot in their building? No, that wouldn't make sense. If you're to start treating him as an unbeliever, then you wouldn't ban him since unbelievers were always welcome to attend the church's meetings. Paul makes that clear later in chapter 14 (vv24-25).
- ❖ **The best way to understand what it means to "remove him from among you" is in terms of membership.** These instructions only make sense in a context where boundaries have been drawn to distinguish those *inside* and those *outside* the church. Notice Paul's reference to those *inside* and *outside* in vv12-13.

- Outside of what? We just noted that he can't mean outside the worship service or outside the church building. It only makes sense in terms of being outside the recognized membership.
- ❖ If everyone in the early church was only loosely affiliated with each another – if there was no concept of formal membership as some would suggest – then how would they know who is on the inside and who is on the outside?
 - **If there was no formal membership, then no one would have authority to discipline anyone.** What authority would you really have to remove someone who doesn't even see himself as a member of your group?
- ❖ **Donald Whitney** writes, *"You can't fire someone who doesn't work for you. You can't vote to remove a government official elected by another country. You can't appeal to a court to discipline someone who isn't within its jurisdiction. In the same way, you can't formally discipline someone who is in an informal relationship with you; you have no authority to do so. These people in Corinth had voluntarily committed themselves to a formal relationship, and they knew who were official members of the church and who were "outside"."*²
 - His point is that church discipline assumes church membership.
- ❖ **There's another argument to consider based on the fact that discipline was to be carried out by a recognizable group.** Look at vv4-5. *"For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."*
- ❖ Notice first that the practice of discipline is not punitive but corrective. It's not done to punish but, Lord-willing, to restore. *"So that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."*
 - But secondly notice that it is a specific recognizable group that carries out the discipline. *"When you are assembled"*.
- ❖ So who is a part of this assembly? **How do you determine who does and does not have the authority to participate and discipline this man?**
 - Is it anyone who feels like coming? What if a person used to attend the church years ago? Can he come back and join in disciplining this man? What about a Christian who only comes on Easter and Christmas? Can he participate?
 - Or can the man under discipline invite his family or friends to speak on his behalf? What about a newcomer who showed up that morning?
- ❖ **Obviously not just anyone is authorized to be in this assembly and to carry out church discipline.** It must be limited to a specific recognizable group – the church members.

² Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church*, 45.

- ❖ So ask yourself: *Have I joined myself to a body of believers in such a way that they have a right to discipline me and remove me if I persist in unrepentant sin?* If you don't have that kind of a formal relationship with a church, then no one is watching your back spiritually with the kind of authority over your life that actually makes a difference. This is why membership matters.
- ❖ My point is that church discipline, as taught in the NT, would be impossible to practice if not for some way of recognizing who does and does not belong inside a particular local church. Who knows if the early church called it "membership" or not. We don't have to call it that. But clearly the concept was there and practiced from the beginning.

Membership Sighting #2

- ❖ Let's consider another place in the New Testament where a practice of membership can be seen. **2) We see that Christians in the early church knew specifically which leaders they were to submit to and obey.**
 - One of the defining marks of a local church is being led by qualified elders (you could call them pastors). These elders were given charge and spiritual leadership over a specific body of believers, a flock. And the sheep of the flock were likewise commanded to submit to and follow specific shepherds.
- ❖ Let's consider a couple of these biblical commands. Listen to **Hebrews 13:7**. *“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”*
 - And **v17**, *“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”*
- ❖ So believers are to remember their leaders, to imitate their leaders, obey their leaders, and submit to their leaders. *But who are their leaders?*
 - If there was no concept of formal membership – if believers came and went between different churches as they pleased – then how would you know which leaders to imitate and which to obey?
- ❖ **Let me give a practical example of how confusing these commands would be without the concept of membership.** Imagine if you were in a loose affiliation with two churches, one Baptist and the other Presbyterian. And imagine you have a newborn child. The pastor of the Presbyterian church urges you to baptize the newborn. The pastor of the Baptist church tells you to wait until the child grows up and comes to saving faith.
 - If you're supposed to imitate the faith of your leaders and obey and submit to them, then which pastor do you listen to? In this scenario it's hard to say. But if you factor in the boundary lines of membership, then the answer becomes clear.
 - **You obey and submit to the pastor who is accountable for your particular flock.** Membership is simply assumed in these commands.

- ❖ So ask yourself: *Do I know who my spiritual leaders are?* **Have I joined myself to a local church with such regularity and intentionality that I can know the leaders and observe the leaders enough to be able to imitate their faith and submit to their leadership?**
 - The point is that can't happen if you remain in a loose and casual affiliation with your church. Membership is what you need.

Membership Sighting #3

- ❖ Let me point out a third and final membership sighting in the New Testament. Just as Christians knew specifically who their leaders were, **3) We see that Christian leaders in the early church knew specifically whom they were accountable for.**
- ❖ Listen to **1 Peter 5:1-2**, *“So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you.”*
 - And recall again what we read in **Hebrews 13:17**. The leaders are called those who keep *“watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”*
- ❖ **I think it's obvious that elders can't watch over the souls of all the Christians in the world or even just in your city.** It only makes sense if elders are only responsible for the souls of a specific, recognizable group of Christians they've been called to oversee – their own flock.
 - But if their flock was amorphous, if it had no boundaries, then how would elders know whom they are to oversee and whom they are accountable for?
- ❖ You may not think church membership is all that important, but I can assure you that your elders and pastors are very much concerned with it. **If you know God is going to hold you specifically accountable for the spiritual health of your flock – then you will want to know precisely who is in your flock and who is not.** You don't want to overlook anyone if you know God is overlooking you.
 - If I'm a church leader I'm asking, *“Who is my flock?”* Is the Christian who is casually dating this church, who comes and goes at his own leisure, is he part of the flock? I need to know if I'm accountable for him when I stand before God.
- ❖ This is why membership matters, and why it's safe to assume it was being practiced even in the early church. **The biblical responsibilities for shepherds and their sheep require a clear understanding of who is a member and who is not a member of a local church.**

Application

- ❖ So let me conclude by addressing a few questions you may be asking. **First, I'm going to assume some of you are now curious about membership.** I'm also going to assume some of you didn't even know there was such a thing as church membership.
 - A recent survey suggested that less than half of church-goers in American (48%) are aware of the membership process in their churches.

- ❖ So I'm not surprised if some of you are not members – not because you have anything against it – but because you didn't know it existed. And now that you do you'd like to become one. ***How do you become one?*** That starts by attending the next membership class, which is happening two Sundays from now (Oct. 7th). Let Pastor Fred know you're coming.
 - But some of you might be wondering if you have to be a mature Christian in order to become a member. Perhaps you're concerned you're too new or too weak in your faith to become one. Well don't worry. **You don't have to be a mature Christian to become a member. In fact, you become a member to grow up into maturity.** Remember the NT pattern: converted to Christ, expressed in baptism, joined to a local church.

- ❖ **Now perhaps some of you are well aware of membership, but it has never been a priority.** You always saw it as something optional in your discipleship to Christ. Never as something central and soul-shaping. But if God has been convicting you over the past few Sundays and now you want to marry a church – perhaps this church – then come and make that commitment formal through membership. Come to that class.

- ❖ **But then some of you here are *not* members of a church and yet you're *not* casual in your attitude or actions.** You're regular in attendance. You serve. You tithe. In your heart you're totally committed to this church, and you feel like your actions speak for themselves. *So why do I need to make this official? Why do I need to become a member?*
 - I hope you see that is the same as a man telling his girlfriend, *"I'm faithful to you. I serve you. In my heart, I'm totally committed to you, and I feel like my actions speak for themselves. So why do we need to get married and make this official?"*
 - **If you're willing to commit – if you already consider this your church family – then what's holding you back from becoming a member?** Why are you resisting when clearly you're not adverse to the commitment and duties of membership?

- ❖ **Lastly, some of you may be thinking, "*Well I don't plan on being in Houston longterm. I'll probably only be here for a few years. So it's not worth it to become a member.*"**
 - Perhaps you've been relocated here for work and they might send you somewhere else when the project is done. Or you're a student here for four years and who knows where God is calling you after graduation.

- ❖ But the one thing we do know is that he has you here right now. So if this is the church you want to call home while you're here in Houston, then why not demonstrate that commitment through membership? And if God calls you elsewhere in the next few years, then we'll joyfully send you off. It's not complicated.

- ❖ Come and let's express our love for Jesus' Bride through church membership. Let's demonstrate our commitment by joining ourselves to one another as members of the same body and citizens of the same kingdom.