

## Married to the Church – *Membership: Holding the Keys of the Kingdom*

Matthew 16:13-20

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on September 30, 2012

### Introduction

- ❖ People today are into anything organic. Organic food. Organic farming. Organic clothes. Organic baby products. It's all about organic. If the word "process" is in it, no thank you. They want nothing to do with it. And this new attitude extends beyond just food and clothing.
  - Just consider the way people look at marriage. **People today prefer to speak of marriage as an organic, living relationship and they focus on the wonderful things a couple gets to do together** – live together, travel together, be intimate together, raise a family together, etc. This is what we want out of marriage.
  
- ❖ **But there is another aspect of marriage that tends to get overlooked. We don't speak much of marriage as an institution.** Marriage is not just an organic relationship between lovers. It is an institution with a process, a ceremony. Vows are exchanged. A pronouncement is made. There is a covenant full of duties and obligations that now binds the couple together.
  - But people today chafe at such things. **They want the organic aspects of marriage but want nothing to do with its institutional ceremonies and duties.** That is why more and more young couples are bypassing marriage, bypassing weddings, and jumping straight into living together. They don't need the institution since they already have the organic relationship – which is what really matters to them.
  
- ❖ Well in the past three weeks we've been drawing the comparison between our attitude towards marriage and our attitude towards the church. We're in a series called "Married to the Church", which I'm wrapping up today. **The overall goal has been to challenge Christians to stop casually dating the church and to make a formal, active commitment to one local church and enter into a marriage-like relationship with her.**
  - And I realize this is quite a challenge because just like in marriage, **Christians today would rather bypass the institutional aspects of church – like a process of membership – and jump straight into the organic.** They're all for being part of an organic body of believers that worships together, prays together, serves together, and grows together. But they could care less for the church as an institution.
  
- ❖ **But what I've been trying to say is that, though the institutional is not an end in itself, it is necessary to sustain and give shape to the organic.** We'd agree that just having a wedding ceremony and making vows is not an end in itself. But if you want a flourishing, organic relationship, then a high view of marriage as an institution is important.
  - And that is not just a theological argument. It's statistical. Studies have shown that couples who move in together before marriage (suggesting a low view of the institution) have a higher divorce rate and report a poorer-quality of marriage compared to couples who marry before living together.<sup>1</sup>
    - What that suggests is a high view of marriage as an institution actually sustains and gives shape to the organic aspects of marriage everyone wants.

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<sup>1</sup> see Meg Jay, "The Downside of Cohabiting Before Marriage" in *The New York Times* (April 14, 2012), <http://nyti.ms/J3F1Bu>

- ❖ So in the same way, just formally joining a church and becoming a member is not an end itself. But it is important if you want a flourishing, organic relationship with other believers.
  - **My point is that everything you want in a church – the relationships, the discipleship, the growth, the intimacy – all these organic aspects are sustained and shaped by the institutional aspects of the church.** Bottom line, it is important that you formally join a church and embrace membership and all that it asks of you.

### Why difference does membership make?

- ❖ Now last Sunday, I tried to show that membership was a biblical practice in the early church (whether they called it that or not). We saw how certain commands in the NT make no sense outside the context of formal membership.
  - **Now seeing that it is in the Bible is important, but membership won't be dear to your heart until you're convinced it actually makes a difference.** So let's raise the question: *What difference does membership make in your life and the life of a church?*
  
- ❖ Some of you are members and yet you would be hard pressed for an answer. What difference has it made? You might be thinking: *I don't know. Outside of an occasional vote, I'm not sure what difference it makes to be a member or even if there should be a difference.*
  - Well like last week I'm going turn again to **Jonathan Leeman's book on Church Membership** to help us think through this carefully.<sup>2</sup> He would tell us to think of two Christian friends, one is a fellow member of your church and the other is member of some other church. Picture real people, real friends.
    - Now ask yourself this: ***What's the difference between two Christians who are members of the same church and two Christians who are members of different churches?*** Does your biblical obligation towards your fellow church member differ in any way from your obligation towards your friend who belongs to another church?
  
- ❖ Granted, all three of you are members of the big-C Church. And you're called to love each other, to serve each other, to rebuke and encourage each other as brothers/sisters in Christ.
  - But if you answer "*No, there is no difference. I relate to both friends in exactly the same way.*", then membership is meaningless. There would be no reason to formally join a church if there is no distinguishable difference in your relationship with the members of your church from all other Christians who happen to be in your life.
    - **But that would be like me saying that my relationship with my wife is no different than my relationship with any other woman in my life.** We know that's not true because I *did* formally commit myself to my wife and her alone. We got married and so there should be a difference.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (see also his longer work *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*)

- ❖ **In the same way, if you formally committed yourself to a church (if you married her), then there should be something distinct, something different, about your relationship with a fellow church member from your relationship with any other Christian.**
  - Now the rest of this message is my attempt to answer that, but let me just give you a hint at where I'm going. I'd sum it up with just one word: *authority*.
- ❖ Now we don't like that word. It makes us cringe. I think it's because we've made the mistake of uncritically embracing the Western value of individualism, which has produced a mistaken view that we are solely responsible for our own Christian lives.
  - Our personal walk with Jesus is seen as our personal responsibility. Now we may still involve ourselves in a church and even seek out fellowship and accountability. But just ask yourself this: ***Would you consider the Christians in your church responsible for your Christian life? Would you consider yourself responsible for theirs? Would you say they have any authority over your discipleship to Christ? Would you say you have any authority over theirs?***
    - The way you answer will determine if membership has any real meaning and purpose in your life and in your church.

### **Who represents God on earth?**

- ❖ Last week we used an analogy where we described the local church as an embassy for the kingdom of God. **And just like any embassy, we said the church's primary responsibility is to represent its home nation to its host nation, so that means giving this fallen world a glimpse of what God's kingdom is like and what his ambassadors look like.**
- ❖ Now to really understand this connection between the church and the kingdom, we need some background from the Old Testament. **The Bible begins by telling us that God created the first pair, Adam and Eve, to be his representatives (his ambassadors) to the world.** They were made in his image and given a unique authority to speak on behalf of heaven.
  - But sadly they failed their job, and along with their progeny, Adam and Even began to grossly misrepresent God and his kingdom. **But just when it seemed like all was lost, God stepped in and mercifully chose another man and his family to be his chosen ambassadors.** Abraham and his line, Israel, was authorized to represent God on earth. But Israel failed miserably.
    - Instead of representing their King with holy and distinct lives, Israel was more concerned with fitting in and looking like all the other nations around them.
- ❖ **But again, just when it seemed like all was lost, God mercifully chose another man.** He sent his Son Jesus to do Israel's job because, in a sense, he was firing Israel. They would no longer be his ambassadors. **Instead, Jesus would be the Perfect Ambassador, God's perfect reflection and representation on earth.**
  - But not only was he an ambassador of the kingdom, he was its King. Jesus reigns over a kingdom of ambassadors (or as Scripture calls them "*a kingdom of priests*" who speak on behalf of heaven). I'm talking about Christians.

- ❖ **Now Jesus' kingdom is unique because it is without borders – no geographic, ethnic, or cultural borders to mark off its citizens.** It's a kingdom of people purchased by the King's own blood and identified (marked off) by a common faith and allegiance to the King.
  - But if the kingdom of God has no borders (based on geography, skin color or cultural practices like circumcision) then the kingdom faces a dilemma. **Anyone can simply claim to be a citizen.** Anyone could claim to represent King Jesus, which means anyone can potentially misrepresent the King and drag his name in the mud.
  
- ❖ *So how does a landless, borderless kingdom mark off its citizens? How does such a kingdom distinguish who is a genuine representative of its King? **Answer: the local church and specifically her practice of membership.***
  - As we said, the local church is God's embassy on earth with the unique authority to speak on behalf of heaven. She has the authority to declare individuals to be official representatives of the King. And she exercises that authority through membership.
    - **Membership is the way God's embassy draws a sharp line of distinction around kingdom citizens and declares, "These people are recognized as Christians. These people are ambassadors and they represent the King."**
  
- ❖ Now I said last week I would expand on this point because I realize it may be new to you and may not sit right initially. To clarify, I'm saying the local church has been authorized by God with a unique authority and responsibility over those within her membership.
  - And when I say "local church" I'm not just referring to the church leaders. I'm referring to the membership. **So if you've joined yourself to local church, you and your fellow church members have a God-given authority to affirm and oversee each other's discipleship to Christ.**
  
- ❖ That means you and your friend who is a fellow church member have an unique authority over each other's discipleship and a unique responsibility to support each other's spiritual lives in a way that you don't share with your friend who belongs to another church.
  - Your best friend may belong to another church, and you two will naturally love each other and encourage each other and call each other out when necessary. But you have a unique authority and responsibility over fellow church members that you don't have over that best friend. If this wasn't true, then there really is no reason for a church to practice membership.
    - But I do believe it's true and I want to show you that in Scripture. We'll spend the remainder of our time in two passages in Matthew, starting in chapter 16.

### **Matthew 16:13-20 – The Authority of the Keys**

- ❖ Here in **chapter 16:13-20** we see Jesus giving first to his apostles this authority to affirm and oversee the discipleship of others. **Notice that prior to our passage, Jesus warns them not to trust the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders of the day.** They claimed the authority to speak on behalf of heaven, but Jesus refutes that claim. He says they don't speak for God anymore. He's looking for new ambassadors.

- Then he goes on, in our passage, and asks his disciples what people are saying about him. And after rattling off a few mistaken identities, Jesus asks them a pointed question, in **v15**, “*But who do you say that I am?*”
    - Simon Peter is the first to reply, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” And Jesus answered him, “*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*”
  
- ❖ **Peter has been blessed to have his eyes opened by the Father to see Jesus for who he really is – the Christ.** And for that reason he’s a fitting ambassador for the kingdom. Obviously you can't be a representative of Jesus unless you can perceive his identity. And here we see the blinders starting to come off the eyes of the apostles.
  - So Jesus has twelve ambassadors. That's pretty great but he won't settle with twelve. **Jesus wants embassies scattered over the earth all filled with ambassadors. He wants to build a global Church comprised of countless local embassies.** So look at what he goes on to say in **vv18-19**, “*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*”
  
- ❖ This is a notoriously difficult passage to interpret. It raises a host of questions: **1) Who or what is the rock upon which Jesus' Church will be built? 2) What are the keys of the kingdom and what are they for? 3) What is being bound and what is being loosed?**
  
- ❖ Let’s address each one briefly. **1) Who or what is the rock Jesus speaks of?** Now historically Protestants have been against the idea that Peter is the rock out of fear that it would legitimize Catholic claims to papal authority. Catholics trace their popes back to Peter and use this verse to say Peter had a greater authority over the other apostles. Protestants respond by saying the rock upon which the church is built is simply Peter’s confession.
  - But the most natural reading of the text would point to the man himself. There’s a play on words here. His name is Simon Bar-Jonah (Son of Jonah) but here Jesus gives him the name he’s best know by, Peter, which in Greek means “*rock*”. **So it’s hard to see how the rock can be anything other than Peter himself.**
  
- ❖ But this doesn't mean you have to come to a Catholic conclusion. **It’s just a fact of history that God used Peter, as a first among equals, to build his Church.** In the book of Acts, Peter is the first to stand up and preach the truth of his confession – that Jesus is the Christ – and three thousand were baptized and added to the church that day.
  
- ❖ And then in the rest of Acts, we see the other apostles take on the same role as they went about preaching the truth of Peter’s confession, and wherever they went embassies were built. Which is why Paul says in **Ephesians 3:20** that the Church is “*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets [not just Peter], Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.*”

- ❖ So the rock is Peter but the foundation of the church is all the apostles with Jesus being the chief stone. **2) So then what are these keys of the kingdom of heaven and what do they have to do with building the Church?** Keys in Scripture often symbolized authority (Isa. 22:22; Lk. 11:52; Rev. 3:7). If you had the keys, you had the authority – the authority to figuratively open and shut doors/gates, which meant the authority to welcome or to expel. By receiving these keys, Peter was given the authority to do what Jesus just did for him.
  - Remember in **v16**, Peter rightly confessed Jesus as the Christ, and in response, Jesus affirms his gospel confession to be true and granted from heaven. He was functioning here in **v18** as God’s Ambassador, as one on earth who spoke for heaven.
    - And now here in **v19**, Jesus authorizes Peter and the apostles to do the same – to be his representatives on earth and speak for heaven. **He gives them the authority to declare what is bound and loosed in heaven by binding and loosing on earth.**
  
- ❖ **3) So what are they binding and loosing on earth?** Answer: People. Jesus’ church is not a place. It’s a people. It’s church members. In his book Leeman keeps stressing the point that **a church is its membership**. A local church may have non-believers in its midst. There may also be members of other churches who are passing through. And there may be church daters in its midst who have yet to commit. But the local church proper is its membership.
  - *And how does a church receive its members?* By using the power of the keys. **A local church exercises its God-given authority to affirm whether or not a person’s confession of Christ is true and granted from heaven.** And then that person is either baptized into membership or received through a transfer of membership.
  
- ❖ Now I intentionally say “to affirm” and not “to acknowledge” because anyone can acknowledge that so-and-so is a Christian. **But I’m arguing that only a local church has the authority to make formal affirmations on behalf of heaven just as a press secretary has the authority to make formal affirmations on behalf of the President.**
  - I can simply acknowledge his words if I heard him give an interview or speech. But I can’t affirm his words. I don’t have that authority because the President hasn’t given it to me. You have to be given that kind of authority.
    - My point is that the local church has been given that kind of authority. It has the authority to affirm your confession of Christ to be genuine and from the Father himself.
  
- ❖ So to sum it up: Here in this passage a regime change is happening before us. The King has rejected the representatives of the old regime, the Pharisees and Sadducees, and now he has authorized new ambassadors to speak on behalf of heaven. **These ambassadors have the authority to make declarations and to draw lines of distinction around kingdom citizens to say that *these particular people are Christians.***
  - Listen to how Leeman concludes his analysis of this passage, *“I’m not saying that Jesus established a “church membership program” in Matthew 16, but he indisputably established the church (which is its members), and he gave it the*

*authority of the keys to continue building itself – effectively the authority to receive and dismiss members. The authority of the keys is the authority to assess a person's gospel works and deeds and to render a judgment.”<sup>3</sup>*

### **Matthew 18:15-20 – The Keys in Action**

- ❖ Now what I want to show next is that the authority of the keys first given to Peter and the apostles was then extended to the whole church. **If we look over in Matthew 18, we see these keys put to use.** We see the authority of the keys exercised in the life of a church.
  - Turn with me to **chapter 18:15-20**. You probably know this passage for its instructions on how a church out to practice discipline. *“<sup>15</sup>If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. <sup>16</sup>But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup>If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup>Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup>Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup>For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”*
  
- ❖ The passage begins with a scenario where a brother in your church is sinning against you. **He is misrepresenting the King you both claim to represent, so what do you do?** Jesus instructs four steps of godly discipline. First, you go privately and bring the sin into the light, and if your brother repents and your relationship is restored then the end goal is met. Your brother is rightly representing Jesus once again.
  - But if he refuses to listen, then Jesus instructs you to invite one or two others into the process. But if the brother still refuses to listen, then in v17 Jesus says to “*tell it to the church*”. Now that doesn't mean just the church leaders. The “*church*” means the members. You bring this issue to the membership.
  
- ❖ And if he still refuses, if he continues to misrepresent Jesus then the members are to remove him from among them and to start treating him as they would a non-believer. “*Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*”
  - Now of course that means treating him with love and respect as you would any non-believer and constantly holding out to him the gospel of reconciliation. **But it also means drawing a clear line so that he knows he's living like a non-believer and is now being declared one by the church.**
  
- ❖ **On one hand, you do this for the sake of the world** since this brother is misrepresenting Jesus, and you don't want to send the world the wrong message – that this is what a kingdom citizen looks like.

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<sup>3</sup> Leeman, 59.

- **But on the other hand, you do this for his sake since you don't want to give false assurance.** You don't want him thinking he's in right relationship with God if he's so deep in sin and so far from repentance. But if you keep treating him like a member, then that's exactly what you'd be doing.
- ❖ So on the most practical level this means barring him from sharing in the communion table, which is an expression of our unity in the one body of Christ. That's why this practice has historically been called *excommunication*.
  - Again I must stress that the purpose is corrective and not punitive. The hope is that he comes to his senses, repents of his sin, and starts representing Jesus rightly again.
- ❖ Now notice in **v18** that Jesus alludes to the keys of the kingdom by once again speaking of binding and loosing. But notice now whose doing it. It's not the apostles. It's the church and specifically a local church. **Apparently the authority of the keys have been extended to individual local churches.**
  - That means each local church has the authority to declare on earth who represents heaven. **Each local church has the authority to affirm and oversee the discipleship of its members.**

## Conclusion

- ❖ So think back to your two Christian friends. ***What's the difference in your relationship with the two of them? It comes down to authority and responsibility.***
  - Now if your friend from another church fell into a pattern of sin, then I'm certain you would feel a degree of responsibility as a brother/sister in Christ to confront and urge your friend to repent. It might even get to the point where your friend is so deep in sin and so far from repentance that you might confront and say, "*Friend, given your present behavior, I don't see why you even call yourself a Christian. You're certainly not living like one.*" But that's pretty much all you can do.
    - But if your friend who is a member of your church fell into the same situation, then you can do more. **You and your church have been authorized to wield the keys of the kingdom by exercising corrective discipline over this member, your friend.**
- ❖ The more you think about this, the more it makes sense. It makes sense that if we commit ourselves formally to one another as fellow members of the same church family, then we have more responsibility and authority over our members than members of other churches.
  - We experience this all the time among our biological families. **It's not like I, as a father, would ignore your kids just because they're not a part of my family.** If the occasion arises, I would readily look out for your children. If they're in need I'll help them. If they're hungry I'll feed them. If they're misbehaving I'll gently rebuke them.



- **But at the same time, God has made me uniquely responsible for my own child**, so I'll prioritize my time and love in raising her and not other children. As well, God has given me a unique authority to discipline and correct her in a way other fathers do not have. This makes sense in parenting. It also makes sense in membership.
  
- ❖ So ask yourself: *Is there anyone in my life who is looking out for my soul?* And I don't mean just anyone. I mean someone who has been authorized by God himself to take responsibility for your discipleship to Christ. Do you have anyone with that kind of authority over you?
  - If not, then you're depriving yourself of the joy and soul-shaping benefit of church membership. I urge you to attend our next membership class. Come and join us.