

Mat 16:18-19 18 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. 19 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.”

Church Membership- Why is it necessary

For a long time I have been fuzzy about church membership. Personally, I have usually been committed to being part of a single church. except for a short period when I came down here and was looking for a church. But I rarely seriously considered the **importance** of **formal** membership. I think I have been suspicious that anything that is **established** and **formal** is not reflecting authentic Christianity. After all, there was no mention of a formal church membership role in the New Testament. So I held it as not being terribly important. I very much **valued** being part of an authentic church. But I didn't see why membership was a big deal.

I have gradually changed my mind about **formal membership** based on the **implications** from scripture about **what** a church **is** and **how it is to work**. There is a deep accountability **OF** all the church **TO** all the church in the biblical record. There is no sign of a “**Jesus and me**” mentality where going to church is primarily to feed **my** soul and the **souls of my family**. A mentality where I can **take it** or **leave it**, depending upon my **preferences**. The church, in scripture, is a corporate expression of Jesus Christ and it is meant to be lived out as such.

Our environment is very much different than what we read about in the church of Acts. In Acts, there was one church at each town. If you identified with that church, you were taking a **risk of persecution** in most towns. It was **that** church that was going to **Baptize** you and **once Baptized** you were **part** of that church. Your Baptism confessed it to the world. You were coming to Christ and part of coming to Christ was being committed to the church. In our world, somehow, we have largely **lost** that connection. We view our personal salvation as something primarily between me and God. And my highest priority is to grow as an **individual, spiritually**. So to hop from one church to another to best meet that need makes perfect sense. The problem is that scripture does not convey it that way. All of scripture assumes that saved people will live in a community of saved people in a way that they are deeply committed to each other's welfare.

The idea of an evangelist saying:

“I’m not asking you to join a church, but to accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior.” Is deceiving. When you come to Christ you **BECOME** part of the church because that is how God has chosen to deal with His people. Christ was the chief **cornerstone** and you are built **onto** that. To think of it differently is to fail to understand how God plans to **represent Himself** in our world. And it is to misunderstand the **priorities** of our Savior. It is to rob ourselves of **His means** of building and sustaining us. And it will rob us of the meaning we experience when we love the church like He did.

So in our world, where there are so many things that are called “churches”, and many of them are quite good and true to Jesus Christ, we must do **something** to recapture the Biblical model of **body of believers** who are committed to living in the body in such a way that everyone understands **who those people** are who are **IN** this church.

So rather than having church membership be a sign of **inauthenticity**, it is actually a sign that a church takes its call by its Master to **BE** a church **seriously**. In our world it is a necessity to **define** who will take their responsibilities and privileges of being a part of the church seriously. A church that takes **membership** seriously may actually be showing itself to be an authentic church. Christ calls Christians to submit to a church. We do not get the right to come up with a different path. But God does give us the opportunity in **our environment** to **chose** which church we commit ourselves to.

That is the introduction to our topic. And it is why we need to be very intentional about all of this.

I also hope to paint a vision of church membership that might be very different than what **we think** it is. I would like to do this in a way that if we all understand how the Bible views church membership it might improve how we **live out our Christianity**.

OK let’s start with authority.

Who has been given all authority in heaven and earth?

Matthew 28:18 Jesus says, **All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me**.

Jesus is Lord of His church just like He is Lord of our lives. The church is not a social club. The church is not a service agency. The **church is what Christ says the church is**. Some of us grew up assuming personal spiritual growth is my only calling, and I can fit the church piece in however it pleases me. If I

can best worship in the woods, then go to the woods on Sunday morning. And that is all wrong. No. Jonathan Leeman says it most clearly.

The local church is the authority on earth that Jesus has instituted to officially affirm and give shape to my Christian life and yours.

Jonathan Leeman, Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus, 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 24.

I want to take a moment here to let you know. Much of what I will be saying in the next two weeks follows the outline of Jonathan Leeman's book on church membership. He is part of the group called 9 marks, and it is based on the 9 marks that identify a biblical healthy church.

The church begins with **this fact**. Jesus is Savior and Lord.

This whole study of membership could easily go offtrack because we look for the **Bible** to spell out membership like a **club** would have a membership. Do you want to join the extracurricular activity called church? Then read the document about what **you give** and what **you get** and sign up. Well we will not find that anywhere. Because that is nothing like church is. We need to look for something different. We need to open our Bibles and look for a Sovereign authority, a Lord or King and His bound-together people. When we look at it **that** way, we see church membership **everywhere**. We cannot come to Christ without entering His kingdom. We are immediately a member of His kingdom which is made up of a bunch of people. For someone to say, I want to come to Christ, but I certainly do not want to be a member of **His kingdom** would be absurd. And more than that, it is impossible. When we talk of church membership we are more talking about **adapting to the reality** of what Christ has already saved us **to**, than we are talking about a club membership.

Maybe a better way to look at this is an **outpost of a kingdom**, or an **embassy of a kingdom**. When you are in a foreign kingdom, if you get into trouble with the law, where do you go? You go to the US Embassy. Why? Well it is because that is the authority that you are under. The strength of your **home country** comes to bear in the dispute. You don't suddenly join the country as a member by going to the embassy. You already are a citizen. They simply **affirm** that you are. And **you** affirm that you are as well. It is only then that you **gain the advantage** that the embassy can give you. Can you imagine being in another country needing your passport renewed and saying, I really don't want to show any commitment or loyalty to my country. I really don't care if I am stuck here as a fugitive and alien. I simply don't see why I would

need to submit to the authority of my embassy to affirm my citizenship. That is what those who choose to not be affiliated with a church are doing.

Church is more like an **outpost** of a **kingdom** we are part of than a **club** or a service agency we have the **option of joining** or not. We have a citizenship that is heavenly. And the **outpost** of that kingdom is **the church**. Joining a church is not saying that I will bless them with my contribution. It is more like saying I will rejoice when they affirm **I am one of them**.

Now, how do we know that the early church kept some kind of record of who was in and who was out?

Acts 2:41 (NKJV)

41 Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.

These people were not just added. They were added **to them**. They were joined to the church at Jerusalem. They had a list. There were names and faces of those people who Jesus had won to Himself. And it kept growing.

Acts 4:4 (NKJV)

4 However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.

Very clearly the early church was **keeping track** of those who **were in**. It mattered to them. Not only that. In the book of Acts, look up the word Church. It is listed 17 times. Instead of saying the Christians in such and such a place did this or that, it uses the word **church**. That is the word to describe the Christians in a certain area.

Then Paul speaks of the gathering of the church almost mystically.

1 Corinthians 5:4 (NKJV)

4 In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ,

It seems like the **power of the Lord** is not the same in their **individual** lives. When they gather there is something that happens, something that God causes to happen.

There are very many New Testament references that teach us that the Christians were all **baptized church members**. None of them were free floating Christians. All of them were in active communion with a local church. Rom. 12:4–16; 1 Cor. 5:11; Gal. 2:11–12; 1 Tim. 5:9–10; Heb. 10:34; 1 Pet. 4:8–11

So scripture in Acts gives us an idea that the churches knew exactly who was **in** and who was **out**.

1 Peter 5:2 (NKJV)

2 Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly;

Paul says the same kind of thing in Acts 20:28 (NKJV)

28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

And just like 1 Thessalonians 5, Christians are told to submit to their leaders.

Hebrews 13:17 (NKJV)

17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

How can this be true if these people are not in a body that has leaders. Both the **leaders** and the **flock** knew who the **leaders** are and who the **flock** is.

In 1 Corinthians 5:13 (NKJV) Paul tells the church to **put someone away**. This means they had to know who was inside and who was not.

13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person.”

All of these passages and many more say one thing. **To be a Christian is to belong to a church.** There aren't any examples of people having a difficult time deciding whether to join a church or not. Mr. Leeman says it well when he says that **It's automatic, like being adopted means you'll quickly find yourself at a dinner table with brothers and sisters.**

Jonathan Leeman, Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus, 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 46.

Christians everywhere in the New Testament belonged to a church. If there was no church where they were, they were used in the process to **start one**. They were the first member in one.

So church membership was practiced from then until now. Maybe they had no membership **rolls** or membership **classes**. They had less need of that than we do. There was less ambiguity. But they all knew **which church** God had made them members of. And the leaders of the churches knew the names of the people they were responsible for. Some people were **in** the church and many people were **out of** the church.

Now, what is different between all of you who are members of Ferndale and those friends I have at Pleasant View and Deep Creek Baptist? Are they less Christian? And the answer is, of course not. Should I treat them like they are

not a Christian? Surely not. I am obligated by their profession of Christ to treat them like a believer.

So what is different?

The biggest difference is that this church at Ferndale has no authority over the members of the church at Pleasant View. We cannot include them nor exclude them from our fellowship. Neither can we endorse them as a Christian to the world like their home church can.

I love my friend Wally Weeks, the pastor at Pleasant View. But if my brother was fallen into sin, (which I truthfully have trouble imagining) but if he was, I would be able to **do nothing** but approach him and tell him about my concern. Whereas his elders of his church could actually **do something** about it. They could begin the process of excommunicating him. And they could serve notice to the onlooking world that he is **not currently** acting like a believer.

That is the difference between the universal church and the local church. Those who appeal to the idea that the universal church is **all that you need** are mistaken. Because we are all **like sheep**. And we need individually tended to. When Christ saves us, He not only saves us into the universal church. He saves us into the local church as well. And the local church is where the rubber meets the road. The **local church** is where God sends instructions to tell us how He wants His church to be.

If you meet someone who claims to be a **minister** of some sort and is not under the leadership of a **local church**, run from that person. They are claiming something for themselves that no one in the New Testament did. Everyone was under the authority of some church. They may have been leaders of that church. But they were not solely in charge of the church. There was always a **plurality of leadership**.

Here is brother Leeman's definition of church, and I think he is right.

a local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ's name to officially affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances

Jonathan Leeman, Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus, 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 52.

The problem we have is that it takes a whole lot of **study** of a whole lot of **passages** to verify this truth. We do not have a single scripture that makes this clear. But all of scripture does. The church is more an **assumption** in scripture than a **teaching** of it. Scripture does not tell us that every Christian

should be a member of a church. But it tells every Christian what they should do **as** a member of a church.

Let's jump here to a passage.

Matthew 16:18–19 (NKJV)

18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 19 And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Notice that Christ is building His church on this rock. And the rock is the confession by Peter that **Jesus is the Christ**.

Now Jesus says He will give the keys to the kingdom of heaven. I think we should think of this as the local church and the universal church. The local church does the business of pronouncing **who is in** the universal church, the kingdom of heaven.

So it is the local church that is saying based on everything we know, Jeremiah Zeigler is a believer. He is submissive to the body of Christ and there is no known unrepentant sin in his life. We hold him as a true believer in our body of believers and we represent him as such.

I think that is what the keys are. If there is someone in the church that we must cast out, that is a big deal from heaven's perspective. If we do it properly we are accurately representing **who is in** and **out** of the kingdom of God. The church has heaven's authority for declaring who on earth is a citizen of heaven. Those are the keys.

That is the **authority** of the church. That is the **duty** of the church. That is the **privilege** of the church.

The only other time Christ used the word church is here.

Matthew 18:15–20 (NKJV)

15 “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ 17 And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. 18 “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything

that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

I am not sure how so many people cannot see that these verses are referring to the church business of church discipline. The passage is used most often when talking about prayer. But none the less, this is very similar to the passage we just looked at. The local church is where the business of determining **who is in** or **out** of the universal church happens. Those who think they can freelance need to completely disregard these passages. If there is no local church that is doing its best to understand and submit to scripture, a failure to join a church is understandable. But if there **is** such a church, a Christian is ignoring or denying scripture if they will not submit to such a church.

We really need to get this. To deny a person membership in a church is in effect, giving testimony to that person **not** being in the kingdom of God. It is that serious. Do you think that church membership is not biblical? Evidently God thinks it is **very biblical**. The local church carries with it the highest authority given on earth. The government can kill us for being in the kingdom of God. But they cannot **pronounce** that we are **outside** of the kingdom of God.

Now let's get back to what a church is.

I will again borrow from brother Leeman.

A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ's name to officially affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances. Notice the five parts of this definition:

- **a group of Christians**
- **a regular gathering**
- **a congregation-wide exercise of affirmation and oversight**
- **the purpose of officially representing Christ and his rule on earth—**

they gather in his name

- **the use of preaching and ordinances for these purposes**

Jonathan Leeman, Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus, 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 62–63.

God wants his people to be identified to both the church and the world. And this is one of the methods of achieving this identification. We gather with each other regularly. We submit to the word and to the leadership as they

submit to the Word. And we look forward to hearing from God's word so we can better submit to God.

Then we partake of baptism and the Lord's supper through the local church to identify ourselves with Christ and His people.

So what is church membership?

I will close with this quote from brother Leeman.

It's a declaration of citizenship in Christ's kingdom. It's a passport. It's an announcement made in the press room of Christ's kingdom. It's the declaration that you are an official, licensed, card-carrying, bona fide Jesus representative.

To offer another clunky definition, we can say that church membership is a formal relationship between a church and a Christian characterized by the church's affirmation and oversight of a Christian's discipleship and the Christian's submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.

Jonathan Leeman, Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus, 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 64.

We will continue next week, Lord willing, with the **conclusion** to this topic. I believe we will then have an opportunity to **reaffirm** our commitment to this church. I realize that for many of us, church membership is a staple of our lives. But I believe that, in the world we live in, we must have great clarity about this topic. The local church is vitally important to our Lord. And He intends for everyone in His kingdom to be an integral part of one.