

The Commitment of Community

Various Scriptures

Big Idea: Church membership is simply the natural fruit born of a commitment to the community of Christ — the “household of God.”

Introduction:

After six weeks of unpacking what the Scriptures teach about the church, I have to confess that I feel like we are still only scratching the surface. There is so much more that needs to be said. We have learned that the church is God’s most precious possession. It is the only institution that Jesus promised to build. It is the bride for whom He gave His life that she might be saved. It is, in the words of both Paul and Peter, the “Household of God.” And we learned that Paul used that term not so much in speaking of the universal church, but rather of the local church where there are elders who lead, deacons who serve, widows to care for, and truth that is taught and defended.

We have learned the importance of viewing the church NOT simply as a club, but as community and that - far from being an optional component of the Christian life - it is one of the main pillars of our purpose for existence. We were created to “image forth” the glory of God. That is, we were created to show the world what God is like. What is God like? He is “Persons in Community.” For all eternity he has existed as “God in three Persons.”

Moreover, He created humans to live in community. God Himself declared that it was not good for man to be *alone*. So He made Eve, and brought about the genesis of human community. And though sin temporarily killed the community God had made, Jesus resurrected it by His sufficient sacrifice.

Now the church stands as the “Community of Christ,” the restored “Household of God.” And it is a kind of community whose unifying power is generated in the hearts of the redeemed by the indwelling H.S. So powerful is the H.S.’s ministry to His church, in fact, that enemies are made brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow members of one body and members of one another.

This is what the church is. It is a unified community of men that “images forth” the glorious community of God. And is a glorious thing! And it is a priceless privilege to have been made a member of this community not because we have somehow earned it, but simply because God has been gracious.

The question that we need to wrestle with this morning, then, is “How should we - who are the beneficiaries of such infinite privilege - respond to what God has done? What does our love for Christ, gratitude to the H.S. and faith in the Father demand of us who have been so graciously and undeservedly blessed?”

Well, we might say, an appropriate response would be worship. I mean, if there is ever was reason enough to raise our hearts and hands in wonder, awe, and praise it is for this. We might say the appropriate response is thanksgiving. And certainly that is true. But there is another response that God clearly teaches in His word that many seem to be wary of embracing. It’s one that in our generation... just seems rubs the wrong way. But it’s a response that makes our

worship and thanksgiving something that is pleasing in God's sight. In a word, it is the response of commitment.

If you are a Christian, then you should make an objective and decisive commitment not simply to the extended family of God, but to the "nuclear" family of God in a local church.

Now for many believers, this is as obvious as the nose on their face. They would never entertain the idea of moving into a community and not quickly settling in and making a commitment to a local church. But we have to understand that as the church in America becomes weaker and weaker, the obvious can become obscured to the point that even people whose hearts are truly devoted to Christ may find themselves in the fog on such issues. And that's why we need to discuss it this morning.

So why should you get serious about making a commitment to a local church? What biblical reasons are there to support such a proposition?

I. All Institutions Require a Committed Community

1. Let's begin with something very basic and fundamental. God has established four essential institutions in the world. They are the Government, the Employer/Employee relationship, the Family, and the Church. Each of the four institutions is based on commitment.

Government is committed to administering and protecting the citizens under its care. The citizens of that society are committed to obeying the laws and fulfilling their duties as citizens. In society, both the leaders and the citizens are clearly identifiable. There are always people living in a certain society who are not citizens, but they lack they are not granted the rights and privileges of the citizens. The very fabric of this institution requires a clear delineation of who is in and who is out. Otherwise, it will fall apart.

The Employer/Employee relationship is also founded on commitment. The Employer commits to paying his workers for the work they do, and the employees commit to working diligently for the pay they will receive. Once again, in this case there is no ambiguity as to who the employer is and who the employees are. Even when a store is filled to capacity with people (both customers and employees) the employer is never confused about who of them relate to him as his employees. The very fabric of this institution requires a clear delineation of who is in and who is out. Otherwise, it will fall apart.

The third institution is the family. In the kind of family that God designed, parents are committed to leading, feeding, and providing for their children, and the children are committed to obeying their parents. Once again, even on holidays when the home is full of people - many of whom may even share the same last name - there is never any ambiguity as to who the true members of that home are. The parents have unique position of authority over their children and the children are uniquely privileged as members of that household. The very fabric of this institution requires a clear delineation of who is in and who is out. Otherwise, it will fall apart.

The fourth institution is the institution of the church. And once again we find that God designed it to have duly appointed leaders and a clearly defined membership. The elders

of the church are charged with the responsibility to lead, feed, and protect the flock, and the members of that local church are committed to serve, obey, support, and perform all the duties of members of that church. The very fabric of the church as God designed it requires a clear delineation of who is in and who is out. Otherwise, it will have serious problems..

2. What I want you to see here is simply that God has designed the church to run like the other institutions in the sense that there are duly established leaders and identifiable members. If this is not the case, than some really important biblical mandates for the church don't make any sense.

II. The Commitment of Community Leadership:

1. In every local church the apostles planted, they made it a point to establish biblical leadership. God has gifted the church with certain kinds of men who are called and spiritually empowered to built up the church to maturity.

2. That was Paul's meaning when he explained in Ephesians 4, "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to *the building up of the body of Christ*; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."

3. Everywhere Paul went he established elders to lead local churches. And those elders were entrusted with the task of shepherding God's flock. They were the established leaders of the first local congregations. And so, we see in God's plan for the church there were to be biblically qualified leaders.

4. On the other hand, God has also given clear instruction to the members of a church to follow their leaders. The author of Hebrews writes, "Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

5. Who was the author of Hebrews writing to. He says that "your leaders... keep watch over your souls." Who is the "your"? It has to be an established group of people otherwise there can be no such mutual claim made. The leaders lead a specific group of people, and the people obey a specific group of leaders. If there is no identifiable membership, there is no one for the leaders to lead. Submission to authority that this Scripture becomes nonsense if the leaders are not responsible for specific people and those people are not in some way formally attached to those who lead.

6. Whenever we have new members join our church, I typically stand before the congregation and explain that Calvary Bible Church has a membership process is because the elders believe it is necessary. So the issue of membership here is, in part, an issue of submission to authority. But it is not a blind and meaningless submission. There are good reasons why a membership process is necessary.

A. Membership clarifies the community:

1. This is nowhere more obvious than in the duty of church discipline. In Matthew 18, Jesus says, If a “*brother*” of “*sister*” sins and refuses to respond to private confrontation, then the church is commanded by God to deal with the sin (18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5). But how can we be sure whether a person is truly a brother or sister without a system by which one can officially join the church. And how can we officially put an offending part *out* of the church if he or she has never officially enter *in*.
2. Remember in 1 Cor. 5, where a man was discovered to be in an immoral relationship? Paul wrote (5:12) “For what have I to do with judging *outsiders*? Do you not judge those who are *within the church*?”¹³ But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.”
3. Listen, when an unbeliever sins our job is *NOT* to kick him out, but to evangelize him. Church *discipline* is only for believers who have officially committed themselves to a local body. And to *NOT* make such a commitment in a reasonable amount of time is too keep one’s self out from under the biblical accountability church discipline offers.
4. So membership clarifies the community.

B. Membership Protects the community:

1. **It helps the leadership protect the church from false teaching.** Listen, if everyone who claims to be a Christian is allowed to just jump in and lead ministries and say whatever they think is right, the church will be plunged into all kinds of doctrinal confusion. In fact, I think this is exactly what is happen in many churches today. There’s little discernment in the body because the leaders are not protecting the church from every wind and wave of spiritual thinking that blows through.
2. **It helps the leadership preserve the churches unity.** Paul told Titus reject a factious man after the first or second warning (Tit. 2:10). In other words, when someone joins the church and then begins causing trouble, warn him once, warn him twice, then kick him out.
3. **It helps the leadership guard the church’s purity.** One of the things we have to be very careful of in our society is the kind of harm that can happen to our children when proper safe-guards are not in place. Membership helps us with this because at our church no one is allowed to serve in our children’s ministry unless they are a member of the church who has submitted to having a criminal background check. In practical terms this means that if you attend this church with your children, you probably ought to be helping out in the ministry. But until you become a member you are barred from doing so. What’s the solution? Become a member. Obey the Scriptures by placing yourselves under the authority of the leadership of the church you have been attending.

C. Membership Grows the Community:

1. The main purpose of a membership process is to determine whether or not a person truly understands the gospel and knows the Lord Jesus Christ. There have been many occasions

in this church when people have come to know Christ in the process of attempting to become a member of Calvary Bible Church. If there is ever a time that a religious unbeliever is going to come face to face with their misunderstanding of the gospel it is here. And what a marvelous privilege it is to help such people come to understand who they are, what they need, and all that God has provided for them in Christ.

7. So you see, church leaders can't lead as God wants them to without a body of people who have committed to joyfully follow and obey. This is the way the church was designed to function.

8. So we've seen the commitment of community leadership. Second...

III. The Commitment of Community Fellowship:

1. What kind of commitment are the members of the church suppose to make in relationship to one another? Well, first of all, they commit to regularly meeting together. Let's see once again what the author of Hebrews says about this. Hebrews 10:24-25.

2. The clear message of this text is that everyone in the community should be committed to assembling together with the other members of the community. It seems the author of Hebrews is writing this to correct a problem in the church. Apparently "some" were habitually absent whenever the local body assembled together. They weren't taking their duty as members of the local church seriously. So the apostle is rebuking them. How can you call yourself a member of the community and not assemble when the church assembles for worship and the ministry of the word?

3. I think there are some in every church who consider themselves members but who fail to fulfill their basic duties relative to the other members. Their relationship to the church is very selfish. They want the privilege of membership without the responsibility. But that's like an employee who wants to get paid by his employer but doesn't want to work. When that happens, the institution of the church is harmed.

4. And notice what kind of commitment the apostle demands of the members of a local church. It not just about assembling together. Its about getting deeply involved in one another's lives. There is not only a commitment to the Lord and to the leadership of the church, there is also a strong commitment to one another. He doesn't just say "Assemble together." He says, "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds... encouraging one another all the more as we see the day drawing near."

5. In other words, we are to put effort into planning how we can stimulate (i.e. provoke, prod) one another to love and good deeds. The implication is that we know one another well enough to understand one another's needs, desires, and gifts. We know one another's failings and weaknesses. We see when people are down and depressed, or indolent and lazy in the things of the Lord and we are able to bring the word of God to bare in order to motivate, encourage and stimulate one another to live in a way that pleases the Lord.

6. The point is, membership in the institution of the church requires commitment *NOT* just

attendance. We can't fulfill this command if we don't commit ourselves to a specific group of believers in a local church over a significant period of time. And the NT is filled with such commands.

- A. James 5:16 *Confess your sins to one another.*
- B. 1 Pet. 4:9 *Be hospitable to one another.*
- C. 1 Pet. 4:10 *Employ your spiritual gifts in serving one another.*
- D. James 5:16 *Pray for one another*
- E. Rom. 15:14 *Teach (admonish) one another.*
- F. Eph. 5:19 *Speak to one another in Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.*
- G. Eph. 5:21 *Submit to one another*
- H. Rom. 12:10 *Be devoted to one another.*
- I. 1 Cor. 11:33 *When you come together to eat, wait for one another.*
- J. Gal. 5:15 *Don't bite and devour one another.*
- K. Rom. 14:13 *Don't judge one another.*
- L. 1 Cor. 12:25 *Don't let there be divisions among you.*

This is just a sampling of all the things God commands us to do (or avoid doing) as a local a body of believers committed to one another for Jesus' sake.

7. We are left to ask "How can a Christian demonstrate that he loves the church as God loves the church if he/she is unwilling to officially commit themselves to the body and take part in the privilege of ministering together?"

8. As John MacArthur recently wrote: "The church is the only institution Christ promised to build and bless. Christ is only doing one thing in the world - building His church... [And] the corporate functions of the body of Christ all take place in the church. I *want* to be with God's people when they share the Lord's Table, when they sing the hymns, when they pray. I *want* to be ministered to by God's people as they exercise their spiritual gifts on my behalf. I love to be a part of the flock, embracing all that the life of the church involves" (Master's Seminary Mantle, Sep. 2003, Vol. 10:2; p. 1)

9. Does that kind of thinking resonate in your heart? Do you realize what a privilege it is to be a fully functioning part of the body of Christ in the local church? It's a great privilege. But it cannot be fully enjoyed apart from a formal commitment to the local church. Not joining the church is like saying, "I don't want to serve the only institution Christ ever built."

8. Belonging to a local church is at the very heart of the Christian life. We are not called to independence, but inter-dependence upon one another, functioning together under Christ as God has called and gifted each one of us for His eternal glory and our eternal joy.

9. Why should you make a commitment to a local church? Not only because of the theological importance, but because its practical importance as well. God exists in community, man was created for community, and church is Christ's community. Why would we hesitate to commit to the one thing that God loves most outside the Trinity itself?

Big Idea: Church membership is simply the natural fruit born of a commitment to the community of Christ — the “household of God.”