

Membership, Strengthening One Another: Hebrews 10:19-25
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This is the fourth sermon in a 5-part sermon series on the church. We've looked at Christ as the Chief Shepherd of the church, elders as the under shepherds of the church, deacons as the servants of the church, and this morning we're going to talk about membership in the church which is a means of strengthening one another in the faith. Next Sunday we'll conclude by talking about the purpose and mission of the church. We're united together in the body of Christ . . . what are we to be doing? That's how we'll conclude the series next week.

Our focus for this morning is to think about church membership. What is this all about? What does it mean for us to be committed together in a local church? As elders, as deacons, as Sunday School teachers, as evangelists, those having the gift of hospitality or service or mercy or administration or generosity . . . We all have various roles and functions and gifts within the body, we are each a certain member of the body. What are some of the implications of this?

Where is Membership in the Bible?

Let's start by asking the question: Is church membership even biblical? Is this something the Bible teaches us to practice? I'll point to 2 things.

Church Leadership

One indicator is what the New Testament says about church leadership. We are taught that elders are to teach and preach and lead, and it's clear that elders are responsible to do that in a particular flock. We know from Acts 14:23 that elders were appointed in every city. So there isn't a group of elders who are responsible for the church universal. There is such a thing as the church universal, made up of all the true believers in the entire world. But when the New Testament talks about church leadership, it is tied to local bodies of believers. And the clear intention was for there to be a plurality of elders—a group of elders—in each and every local church. And it's necessary to conclude from that that these groups of elders had a good idea of who made up their flock.

For instance, in Acts 20 Paul sends for the Ephesian elders, and he instructs them, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). The elders in Ephesus must oversee the flock in

Ephesus. Therefore they must have known who made up that flock. And this is what I'm talking about when I say church membership.

Or in Hebrews 13:17 the Bible says, “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.” That is a sobering verse for an elder to read, because elders will have to give an account for the way they shepherd the flock. And I read this verse 2 weeks ago in the sermon on elders and highlighted the exhortation here that elders are to do their work joyfully, or it won't be of benefit to anyone.

The point related to church membership is that when the believers in the early church heard this verse, they knew who their leaders were in their particular church. They knew who they were being called to submit to. Do you see the point? It's not saying submit to some Christian leader you've heard on the internet, or someone you've seen on TV, or someone you've heard about in another city. There's a leadership structure in the local church such that a particular group of leaders is responsible for a particular flock. That flock is called to submit to those leaders, and those leaders are called to shepherd that flock. In this way the structure of church leadership clearly implies church membership.

Church Discipline

Another thing that clearly points to church membership is what the New Testament teaches about church discipline. That may sound like a scary term if you haven't considered this before, or if you haven't heard it referred to in this way. Here's what we mean by church discipline. In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus says, “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. 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. 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.” That is the biblical teaching on church discipline, directly from the mouth of Jesus. And notice that the final step in the process is bringing the matter before the church, which of course is the local body of believers. The person who is unrepentant in this situation is a member of a particular local church, and if that person remains unrepentant, the church must exclude him or her from fellowship, which means the person would no longer be considered a member.

What the Bible tells us about church discipline helps us understand the meaning and the purpose of church membership.

Being a member of a church is not being part of club. It's a serious commitment to a group of believers which includes the willingness to be held accountable and the willingness to hold others accountable. Those of us who are members of this church have made a commitment to one another to live out the Christian life together. And that will include speaking the truth in love to each other, which will sometimes be very difficult to do. Because there will be instances when a person who was received into the membership of the church is no longer living as a believer. A person who gave a credible profession of faith (they were able to explain the Gospel and gave evidence in their life of being born again), and because of that profession of faith they were accepted as a member of the church. But then a time comes when that same person stops coming to church, or gets entangled in sin and doesn't seem to be struggling against sin, or they fall into some false teaching (1 Timothy 1:19-20; 2 Timothy 2:17), or they become divisive in the church (Titus 3:10). In those cases it is our responsibility to follow Jesus' guidelines in lovingly pursuing that person and pleading with them to repent. The intention is repentance and restoration. If the repentance does not come, though, the person must no longer be considered a member.

Paul discusses a case of church discipline in 1 Corinthians 5, and here it is a case of sexual immorality. He writes, "Let him who has done this be removed from among you."

Let me just pause for a moment and say that perfection is not required for church membership. We all continue to stumble into sin, and there will certainly still be pride and lust and anger and greed and selfishness evident in our lives, and many of our actions will continue to reveal that those sinful inclinations remain. The point is not perfection, it's whether or not a person is fighting against sin. The church is not expecting anyone to be perfect. As the saying goes, "If you find a perfect church, don't join it because then it wouldn't be perfect anymore." We cannot expect perfection in this life, for ourselves or anyone else in the church. What we can expect, though, and must expect, is a struggle against sin. We need to see that in our own lives and in one another's lives.

Paul is telling the Corinthian church to remove this particular person from among them, and he's not saying that because this person fell into sin one time and is repentant. When that's the case, Paul says "forgive him and comfort him." That's in 2 Corinthians 2, and we'll look at it in a minute. But here in 1 Corinthians 5, this man has his father's wife, the text says, and apparently he's not turning away from that heinous sin. And yet the church isn't doing anything about it. That's why Paul chastises them. So I just wanted to be clear as I explain this passage that Paul is not on the lookout for random acts of sin that the church

should discipline. None of us could be members if that was the case. The problem is when a person is living in unrepentant sin.

Paul, then, goes on to say in verses 4-5, “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.” If you haven’t read that verse before, it certainly sounds shocking. What does it mean to deliver someone to Satan for the destruction of the flesh? Well, I think it’s the same thing that Jesus is talking about in Matthew 18 when He says if a person “refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” What’s being described in each passage is the removal of a person from church membership. A person who was once considered part of the body, must now be excluded from fellowship because he or she is living in unrepentant sin.

But don’t miss the purpose clause in Paul’s statement, “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” The purpose of church discipline is not punishment. The purpose is restoration. Some people think church discipline sounds harsh and unloving, but we don’t do our brothers and sisters any favors when we ignore serious sins in their lives. That is what would be harsh and unloving. But when we follow the steps that Jesus set out for us in Matthew 18 we are showing that we love a person so much that we’re willing to do the uncomfortable thing and confront their sin. And if need be, we’ll even exclude them from the fellowship in order to show them the gravity of their unrepentant heart. But even that, especially that, is with the hope that the person will repent.

2 Corinthians 2 describes another situation in which the opposite response is needed. Instead of discipline, Paul tells the church to forgive and comfort this individual so that he won’t be “overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.” He writes, “For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.” Apparently, the church had disciplined this individual, but now the individual had repented and it was time for forgiveness and comfort.

It’s interesting that Paul refers to the majority. He says, “this punishment by the majority is enough.” The fact that the Corinthian church disciplined this individual with the consent of the majority must mean that they had a clearly defined membership. It certainly wasn’t the majority of the church universal that disciplined him. It was the majority of the believers in Corinth. In other words, the majority of the members in the Corinthian church.

The main thing I want to establish here is the point that church membership is a very clear and valid inference from what the New Testament teaches us about church leadership and church discipline. There are some who would reject the idea of local church membership. Some would say that membership in the church universal is all that matters. And if you ever talk to someone like that, I hope you'll try to show them that the New Testament teaching on church leadership and church discipline assumes the idea of church membership. The New Testament simply assumes that believers are not only members of the church universal, but are also members of local churches. And their membership in the local church shows that they are under the authority of a group of elders and are accountable to other believers, as the Bible teaches us to be.

Strengthening One Another

Now let's turn to Hebrews and talk more about what membership means in terms of our relationships within the church, how we are to strengthen one another. This is an important responsibility for all of us as members of a local church. We have certain joyful obligations to one another. We'll begin here by seeing the Good News as it is told to us so clearly in these verses. We've been brought into a relationship with Almighty God, through His Son Jesus Christ, and therefore all of us who are in Christ are also united to one another. So our obligations to one another are rooted in the unity we have in the Gospel, the unity we have in Christ.

Draw Near (verses 19-22)

Let's begin with verses 19-22 and this amazing invitation and exhortation to "draw near" (v. 22). It's an invitation to draw near to God.

Read Heb 10:19-22

Verses 19-21 show us what had to happen in order to make it possible for us to draw near. Drawing near to God is not something we can take for granted. Because on our own we cannot stand in the presence of God. He is holy, and we are sinners. And our sin stands as a great wall between us and God. Our sin separates us from God.

But look at what has happened (verses 19-20): "we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh." In order to understand this we need to remember some things about the Old Testament holy places and the Old Testament priests. Under the old covenant, the high priest would enter the holy places at specified times. In Hebrews 9 some

of this is recounted. It mentions the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place, and says in verse 6 and following, “the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.” In this way the people were reminded regularly of their sin and their need for atonement. There had to be blood. There had to be death. Sin is that serious. And the blood of those bulls and goats could not take away sins (Hebrews 10:4), but the blood was a pointer to the ultimate sacrifice—Jesus Christ. This is what we’re seeing in verses 19-20. It’s by *His* blood that we have confidence to enter the holy places. This is the new and living way that Jesus opened for us through the curtain—that curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, the curtain that was torn in two from top to bottom when Jesus died. And in verse 21 Jesus is the great priest over the house of God. Jesus Christ is the great priest, who made the ultimate blood sacrifice, and it’s because of Him that we can confidently enter the holy places.

It’s only through Him that we can draw near to God. Jesus, Himself, said in John 14:6 “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” He is our only hope. Those who are not trusting in Jesus remain separated from God, far from God, condemned by God. But those who are united to Christ by faith can draw near. We can draw near to the most glorious, exciting, satisfying, awesome Being in the universe. We can be drawn into the infinite enjoyment of our Triune God, and we will spend eternity in His presence.

Let me say to you, if you are not walking with the Lord, please turn from your foolish ways. Turn from the world. Turn from the fleeting pleasures of this life and draw near to God. I pray that God will open your eyes to see the path of destruction that you are on and to see the pleasures of drawing near to Him. You can’t draw near to Him in your sin. You can’t enter His presence unless your sins are covered. And it’s only by the blood of Jesus that you can be cleansed. We must come to Jesus in faith, as verse 22 points to, “let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.” And we can come with this kind of assurance because we are sprinkled clean, we are washed with pure water. Jesus Christ, the righteous one, died in the place of unrighteous sinners like me and you, in order to cover our sin and clothe us in His righteousness. As our fighter verse this week says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” This is how we can draw near to God, because Jesus bore our sins. By His wounds we have been healed.

That is the first exhortation in Hebrews 10:19-25. It is this wonderful invitation to draw near, with the reminder that it's only possible because of the blood of Jesus.

Hold Fast (verse 23)

The second exhortation is found in verse 23, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." This is a command to persevere, and specifically to persevere in hope. The word for "hold fast" is found two other times in Hebrews. In 3:6, "but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope." And in 3:14, "For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end." We must hold fast, and true believers *will* hold fast. By God's grace, we will keep hoping in Him. Our sinful inclinations will continue to draw our gaze toward the things of the world. We must lift up our eyes to behold the glory and the majesty of God Almighty. This is something we each need to strive for in our own lives. We need to fight the fight of faith on a daily basis, spending time in God's Word and in prayer. Searching for hope. Meditating on our great hope. Pleading with God to help us see more and more reasons for hope. We must each pursue this in our personal lives. But we are not able, and God did not design us in such a way, that we can do this by ourselves. And this leads us to the third exhortation in the passage, which is so applicable to us as members of a local church and our obligations to help and strengthen one another.

Consider One Another (verses 24-25)

We are to draw near to God. We are to hold fast the confession of our hope. And next we're given an exhortation that reveals God's intention for the community of believers. The command in verse 24 is, "consider one another." The translation says, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works." It's difficult to bring out in an English translation the fact that "one another" is the direct object of "consider." A more literal, but awkward, translation would be, "And let us consider one another unto the stirring up of love and good works." This word "consider" means to consider closely. It's not just noticing one another. It's studying one another. The writer of Hebrews uses this word in 3:1, "consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession." We are to give close attention to Jesus. Consider Him closely. Study Him. And now we're instructed to consider one another.

Do you do this? Do you take the time to think about other people? Do you consider your brothers and sisters in Christ? Do you pray for them? Do you think about evidences of grace in their

lives, areas of weakness, joys, struggles, triumphs, temptations? This is how we should consider one another. We need to know each other. We need to share life together. And since there's only a certain amount of time in each day and in each week, it's not possible to have this kind of relationship with every Christian you know. Therefore we need to be intentional about meeting together in smaller groups in order to do this. Of course, this can happen to some extent on Sunday mornings. But we need to be meeting in small groups, Bible studies, one-on-one conversations, where we can have the time to really share about our struggles and pray with one another about the details of our lives. I encourage you to pursue those relationships within the church.

The verse goes on to show us the purpose of considering one another. The command is: consider one another. And as we consider one another, as we spend time with each other and learn more about one another, our responsibility as fellow believers is to stir up one another to love and good works. We need to study one another with the intention of stirring up love, stirring up good works.

God doesn't intend for us to live the Christian life in isolation. He doesn't want you to close yourself up by yourself and try to fight the fight of faith on your own. He has given us this amazing means of grace called Christian fellowship, and what I want you to see this morning is how desperately you need this. Each and every one of us, if left to ourselves, would shrivel up and die spiritually. Our love would become cold. Our good works would fade. There would be no passion for the Lord, no delight in Him. The things of God would become less and less appealing, and the things of the world would become more and more appealing. That's why we need to stir up one another to love and good works.

As we're commanded in Hebrews 3:13, we must "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Sin is deceitful. It lies to us. And we need the insight and honesty and boldness of our brothers and sisters in Christ to exhort us continually. We need people who love us enough and love the truth enough to tell us, "I'm concerned about the decisions you've been making. I'm concerned that you are compromising in this area of your life. I'm concerned by your lack of passion for the Lord. Don't be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin!" We need people in our lives who are attentive enough to notice these things, and are committed enough to ask the hard questions and say the hard things.

To do this, we have to meet together, which is what our text goes on to say in verse 25, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some." It certainly is the habit of some, both then and

now, to neglect meeting together with other believers. And that is a very scary position to be in. It leaves a person susceptible to sin and to Satan. Therefore one of the key ways that we can stir up one another to love and good works is simply by making sure we don't neglect meeting together. If you notice that someone has been missing from corporate worship, has been missing from small group, don't ignore that! Go after that person. Let them know that they have been missed. Warn them of the danger they are in if they neglect meeting together with other believers.

Verse 25 concludes in an interesting way. We are given these instructions to consider one another and stir up one another to love and good works, not to neglect meeting together, but to encourage one another. And then it says, "and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." The Day is the final Day of Judgment that will happen at the end of the age when Christ returns. And as we see that Day drawing near, which every generation of Christians must see—we must always be looking with anticipation to that great Day—we will see the importance of meeting together. We will realize the impossibility of making it on our own. As we see the increasing evil on the earth, we will want to be meeting together more and more.

More "One Another" Commands

Let me read you several more "one another" commands of the New Testament. We're commanded to be involved in each other's lives, and not just in a superficial way.

Be at peace with one another. (Mark 9:50)

Love one another. (John 13:34)

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. (Romans 12:10)

Live in harmony with one another. (Romans 12:16)

Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15:7)

Care for one another. (1 Corinthians 12:25)

Through love serve one another (Galatians 5:13)

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2)

With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2)

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32)

Encourage one another and build one another up. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another. (James 5:16)

Love one another earnestly from a pure heart. (1 Peter 1:22)

Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. (1 Peter 4:9)
 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7)
 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:11)

Are you getting the point? As believers we are not merely called to living out a life of faith personally and individually. We are called to live out a life of faith together with one another. We are to love one another, encourage one another, confess our sins to one another and pray for one another. One of the ways this is glorifying to God and edifying to us is that it combats pride and fosters humility. Each one of us needs to acknowledge that we cannot make it on our own. None of us is strong enough spiritually to go off on our own and fight the fight of faith. That is a recipe for disaster. The world, the flesh and the devil will wage war against us, and we need the fellowship of other believers in order to withstand those attacks.

Doctrine

There are many more things I could include in a sermon on membership. We had a good discussion about various things on Thursday evening at our Table Talk on polity. Let me just close with 2 more brief things. I'll mention one more important responsibility of church membership, and then I'll commend a short book to you on the topic of church membership.

Another area of responsibility that we all bear in the church has to do with the doctrinal purity of the church. This is an area where the elders provide leadership and have a unique role in protecting the flock. But we also see in the Bible that this responsibility is something we all bear: not only the elders, but all of us (elders, deacons, and the rest of the members as well). One place we see this is in Paul's very solemn exhortation to the churches in Galatia.

Read Galatians 1:6-9

This is serious. This is about the doctrinal purity of the church. It's about the faithful Gospel witness of the church. The church as a whole is to be on guard against false teaching. In the sermons, in the SS lessons for adults and children, in small group lessons, in one-on-one discipleship, we must all be striving for biblical, joyful, faithful communication of the Gospel. We can all be praying for this doctrinal purity in the church, we can be laboring to grow in our own personal understanding of God's Word . . . When you have opportunities to lead, teach, disciple in some way, you should take that very seriously and be careful in your preparation to study and maybe ask others to give you some feedback. And if any of us hear things being taught that don't

seem to line up with Scripture, we should question it. This is a commitment we have to one another and to Christ—to pray and labor for the Gospel purity of the church.

What Is a Healthy Church Member?

Lastly, I want to commend this book to you, entitled *What Is a Healthy Church Member?* It's by Thabiti Anyabwile who is a pastor in Washington, D. C. If you're familiar with Mark Dever's book, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*, this book follows the same outline but specifically applies each point very personally to all of us as members of a local church.

I'll just read you the chapter titles. He has a ten.

A healthy church member is . . .

- 1) An expositional listener
- 2) A biblical theologian
- 3) Gospel saturated
- 4) Genuinely converted
- 5) A biblical evangelist
- 6) A committed member
- 7) Seeks discipline
- 8) A growing disciple
- 9) A humble follower
- 10) A prayer warrior

The take away from all that we've looked at this morning is this: We're all in this together. Christ is our Head, our Chief Shepherd, our Cornerstone. He has assigned elders and deacons to serve in specific ways. But we all have very important responsibilities here. We have eternally significant obligations to one another. So let's unite around the Gospel and together follow our Good Shepherd, and let us consider one another and how to spur one another on to love and good works, that our church might shine the light of the Christ into a dark world.