

“Membership Matters”

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Have you made any New Year’s resolutions? Have you broken any yet?

If you do make New Year’s resolutions, what kind do you make? A lot of people resolve to diet and exercise, or to read more, or to save money. Resolutions often require commitment and discipline. Not all resolutions do, however. When I think of New Year’s resolutions, I can’t forget what my college friend, Seth, once said. He said he never makes a resolution he can’t keep. So, one resolution was to never say “oh” in place of “zero” when saying a number, such as when giving someone a phone number or an account number. That’s a trivial resolution, and one you can easily keep.

New Year’s resolutions are usually about commitment. I think we realize that in order to achieve something valuable, or to become the people we want to be, we need to commit. But often, that word, “commit,” is one that makes people uncomfortable. It’s like the word “submit.” These words aren’t comfortable for us because we don’t like to commit and submit. We like to keep our options open. We like to think that by not committing and submitting, we have more freedom. But if we’re free from commitment and submitting to others, we won’t be free to love, to grow, and to be part of something larger than yourself.

Some of us have heard of a man named Jonathan Edwards, a theologian and pastor of the eighteenth century. He lived most of his life in Massachusetts. When he was a young man, he made several resolutions. This is the first one in a long list:

Resolved, that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God’s glory, and my own good, profit and pleasure, in the whole of my duration, without any consideration of the time, whether now, or never so many myriad’s of ages hence. Resolved to do whatever I think to be my duty and most for the good and advantage of mankind in general. Resolved to do this, whatever difficulties I meet with, how many and how great soever.¹

Edwards resolved to live for God’s glory, as well as the good of other people, no matter the cost. That’s a great resolution, though it’s very different from the ones that most people make.

¹ “John Edwards’ Resolutions,” *A Puritans Mind* (<http://www.apuritansmind.com/the-christian-walk/jonathan-edwards-resolutions>).

Today, I want to encourage us to a greater level of commitment to God and to one another. And I want to do that by talking about the importance of the church. Specifically, I'm going to talk about the importance of membership.

What do you think of when hear the word “membership”? If you Google the word “membership,” you'll see three definitions; the fourth result is a link to Costco. If you keep scrolling, you'll see links to memberships for businesses, associations, and gyms. Think about what membership means at Costco. If you want to be a member of Costco, you pay an annual fee. Once you pay that fee, you get a Costco account and a card with your name on it. That card gives you access to the store. You can now go into any Costco and shop there.

But if you're a member of Costco, you have no obligation to Costco. You can become a member of Costco and never shop there. Even if you shop at Costco, you really don't have any obligation to the store, other than paying for the items in your cart. You don't need to get to know the people who work there. You don't have to worry about their lives. You don't have to serve them. After all, you're giving them your money. They are there to serve you. The customer is always right.

A gym membership works the same way. You can join a gym as long as you're willing to pay the membership fee. You can show up or not. But if you show up, you don't need to interact with the other members or the people who work at the gym. You don't need to serve anyone.

Churches have members, too. But membership in a church is not like membership at a warehouse store or a gym. Membership in a church means you are a part of this local manifestation of the body of Christ.

This morning, we're going to read several passages from the New Testament. The main one is 1 Corinthians 12:12–20. This comes from a letter written by the apostle Paul to a church in a city called Corinth. This is what he writes in that passage:

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is,

God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.²

Paul says that Christians are “members” or “parts” of the body of Christ. That’s what we mean when we talk about membership of a church. We’re talking about being a part of the body of Christ. Paul says that all Christians are a part of the body of Christ. This is certainly true of all people who have been born again of the Holy Spirit. But Paul is also writing to a particular church, the church in Corinth, a city located in what is now known as Greece. He’s encouraging particular Christians in a particular local church to use their spiritual gifts in a way that builds up the entire body of Christ.

Throughout the New Testament, the church is described in various ways. It is the body of Christ (Eph. 4:4, 12). In that metaphor, Christians are members, or body parts. The church is also described as a temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21) or a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5). In that metaphor, Christians are living stones. The church is sometimes described as a flock (John 10:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). In that metaphor, Christians are sheep. The church is also described as the family or “household” of God (Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 4:17).³ In that metaphor, each Christian is a child of God. The point in each metaphor is that Christians not only belong to God, but they belong to each other. Christians belong to something larger than themselves. They belong to something that includes other Christians.

I think that’s an important point to make, especially in our individualistic culture. It’s not uncommon to hear people talk about their faith in Jesus as if it’s just Jesus and them. You know, they come to the garden alone and walk with him and talk with him. But God’s word, the Bible, clearly indicates that though each of us must have our own individual faith in Jesus, we do not live the Christian life alone. We have an obligation to love God with everything—heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mark 12:30). But we also have an obligation to love each other. We are supposed to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:31). And the love that we have for each other in the church should be even greater than our love for just anyone (Gal. 6:10).

² All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

³ There are also many examples of Christians being called “brothers” (with the intended meaning “brothers and sisters”) or “children.”

Think about all of these commandments that are given to Christians. Most of these come from Paul and nearly every one of them comes from a letter written to a specific church. These are some of the many “one another” passages in the New Testament.

Romans 12:10

Love one another with brotherly affection. *Outdo one another* in showing honor.

Romans 12:16

Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

Galatians 5:13

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love *serve one another*.

Galatians 6:2

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Ephesians 4:1–3

¹ I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, *bearing with one another in love*, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (See also Col. 3:12–13.)

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving one another*, as God in Christ forgave you.

Ephesians 5:18–21

¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ *addressing one another* in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, ²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ *submitting to one another* out of reverence for Christ. (See also Col. 3:16.)

1 Thessalonians 4:18

Therefore *encourage one another* with these words.

1 Thessalonians 5:15

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to *do good to one another* and to everyone.

Hebrews 3:13

But *exhort one another* every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Hebrews 10:24–25

²⁴ And let us consider how to *stir up one another* to love and good works, ²⁵ *not neglecting to meet together*, as is the habit of some, but *encouraging one another*, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

James 5:16

Therefore, *confess your sins to one another* and *pray for one another*, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

1 Peter 4:9

Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

I think the point is clear. Christianity is a “one another” religion. We can’t faithfully live our lives as Christians unless we are committed to each other. Christianity is not a solo sport, and it’s certainly not a spectator sport.

I think there are a number of reasons why church membership matters and why every Christian should officially join a local church. Here’s the first one: Throughout the Bible, God’s people are numbered. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were numbered. That’s why the book of Numbers is called Numbers. It begins with a census (Numbers 1–2). Then another census is given forty years later (Numbers 26). The point of each census was to count the number of men eligible to fight for the nation. But still, the people were numbered.

This is true in the New Testament as well. The book of Acts starts with a group of Christians who number about a hundred and twenty (Acts 1:15). At Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is poured out on the disciples and Peter gives an impassioned sermon, about three thousand people were added to the number of Christians (Acts 2:41). Soon, the number grows to about five thousand (Acts 4:4). The point is that the church was growing. But still, there is a sense that certain people belonged to the church. And those people did life together. Acts 2:42 says, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” And Acts 2:44–45 says:

⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.

More to the point, in 1 Timothy, Paul tells Timothy that in a church, the widows should be listed. Widows over sixty should be listed so that the church can take care of them (1 Tim.

5:9). But for that to work, the church has to know which widows belong to the church and which widows do not.

And, finally, all of God's people are listed in the "book of life" (Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). The Bible teaches that God has always known his people. From before he made the universe, he had a book of life, and the names of all the people of God throughout the ages are written down in that book.

So, the principal is that God knows who his people are, and the church should know who God's people are.

Here's a second reason why church membership matters: Christ gave the church authority. Let's look at Matthew 16:13–19.

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ 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. 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."

Here, Peter recognizes who Jesus really is. He is the Messiah, the Christ, and the Son of the living God. And after Peter makes that confession, Jesus says, "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." Peter's name is *Petros* which is Greek for "rock." So, Jesus is doing a bit of wordplay. Peter is the rock upon whom Jesus will build the church. Now, Jesus does not mean that Peter is the first pope, or the bishop of Rome, as the Roman Catholic Church teaches. But Jesus means that he will build his church upon the apostles and their teaching. In Ephesians 2:20, Paul says that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone."

Jesus says that his church will not be overcome by the gates of hell. In other words, the church will not die. But here's the really interesting part: the church will have the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The church is not the kingdom of God, but it's related. The church is the visible representation of the kingdom of God on earth. And the church has the power to admit people into the kingdom. This is done through preaching the gospel, baptizing people, and

making disciples. Now, to make this abundantly clear: the church doesn't save anyone. The church doesn't decide who is saved. God is the one who saves. It's his decision and his action. But what is done in heaven should be reflected on earth in the church. The church has the obligation to recognize who are Christians and who are not. It's possible that local churches can get this wrong.⁴ Still, the church's duty is to help people understand if they are Christians or not.

So, the church has the opportunity to open the doors of the kingdom of God to people by preaching the gospel, by baptizing people, and by making disciples. Jesus also says, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." This refers to forbidding and permitting certain things. Specifically, it refers to forbidding and allowing certain behaviors of people who have entered into the kingdom. Rabbis used the words of binding and loosing to refer to ethical behavior.⁵ Here, it seems that Jesus is saying, "Peter, you and the disciples will be able to say what a citizen of the kingdom of God can and cannot do." They will do this because they are led by God.

What does this mean for church membership? Jonathan Leeman, who wrote a book on the subject, says that Jesus gave the church "the authority of the keys to continue building itself—effectively to receive and dismiss members. The authority of the keys is the authority to assess a person's gospel words and deeds and to render a judgment."⁶

Jesus didn't limit this authority to Peter. In Matthew 18, Jesus also talks about the church. And this brings me to another reason why membership matters: The church has the authority to discipline its members. Let's turn to Matthew 18:15–20:

¹⁵ "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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about

⁴ Jonathan Leeman (*Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 62) writes, "Will the local church exercise the keys perfectly? No. It will make mistakes just as every other authority established by Jesus makes mistakes. As such, the local church will be an imperfect representation of Christ's end-time gathering. But the fact that it makes mistakes, just as presidents and parents do, does not mean it's without an authoritative mandate."

⁵ According to Leon Morris, "The metaphor of binding and loosing was used by the rabbis for declaring forbidden or permitted." *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 426.

⁶ Leeman, *Church Membership*, 59.

anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Here, Jesus tells the church how to deal with someone who has sinned. If someone in the church has sinned against you, it’s your responsibility to tell that person about it. The goal is to bring about repentance and reconciliation. But if the person who sinned won’t listen, then you should bring one or two others. In the Old Testament, the principle of having at least two witnesses was established. If the sinner still refuses to listen, then he or she must be brought before the whole church. And it’s in that context that Jesus says, again, “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Again, the idea has to do with the behavior that is associated with a Christian. If the church agrees that a person is sinning and isn’t repentant, they have the authority to remove that person from the church. God promises to be in the midst of this difficult decision. That’s what Jesus means when he says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” That has nothing to do with a worship service or a Bible study or a prayer meeting.

This may all be a bit abstract, so let’s think about a hypothetical situation. Say I know someone in the church—let’s call him Joe—who is sinning in a very obvious, repeated, and public way. When he is rebelling against God and his word, he’s hurting himself. But he’s also bringing dishonor on the church and, more importantly, on Jesus himself. Say he’s been lying, or he’s caught up in some sexual sin, or he gets drunk regularly. So, I go to Joe and I say, “Joe, you have to stop doing that. It’s against God’s will.” And if Joe says, “No, I don’t have a problem, and God doesn’t care that I do it,” then I have to bring him before others. If Joe keeps saying, for example, that cheating on his wife isn’t a problem, and when he’s confronted he refuses to repent, then we wouldn’t have any reason to believe Joe is really a Christian. He may be, but from what we can tell, he doesn’t look like it, and he’s certainly not living like it. (Remember that the Bible warns about false professions of faith.) You can assume that we approached this issue prayerfully and we confronted Joe with love and care. And if we agree that Joe isn’t repentant and must leave the church, then God has affirmed us in our decision.

Now, churches can get these things wrong. There are a lot of churches that call themselves churches but are not. Yet still, God has given the church the authority to carry out such issues, and he has given the church his word, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit to guide them.

If you look at 1 Corinthians 5, we see an example of church discipline. Paul says that a man has been having a sexual relationship with his father's wife—most likely his stepmother—and the church has tolerated this. Paul tells the Corinthians that they should have removed this man from their church (verse 2). Of course, the understanding is that if this man stops doing what he is doing and confesses his sin, the church could readmit him to their fellowship. But Paul's concern is that such sinful activity is like a bit of leaven that works its way through the whole lump of dough (verse 6). Paul's concern is for the holiness of God and the holiness of God's people. And Paul tells the whole church to do this, not just the elders or pastors.

Paul comes back to the issue of church discipline in his second letter to the Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul is either referring back to that case of church discipline or to another one. But regardless of the case, Paul writes this in 2 Corinthians 2:5–8:

⁵ Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. ⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

Notice how he refers to “the majority.” It seems that the majority of the church had voted to discipline this person. And now Paul says this punishment has been enough, and the church should forgive him.

Now, why do I bring up this whole business of church authority and church discipline? One reason is that it shows that to be a member of a church is not like joining a gym, or a store, or some club. You don't just join a church. You submit to a church.⁷ According to Jonathan Leeman, “the local church is the authority on earth that Jesus has instituted to officially affirm and give shape to my Christian life and yours.”⁸ If that's true, and I think it is based on Jesus' own teachings, then we should gladly come under the authority of a local church. Doing so helps us become better followers of Christ.

The second reason I share these passages is that if a person can be removed from a church, it stands to reason that the person belonged to the church in the first place. And if, in at least one case, a majority of the church approved of a man's discipline, it stands to reason that there was a list of people who were able to vote on such an issue.

⁷ This point is made clearly by Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

All of the above is related to a third reason why church membership matters: The church makes disciples, baptizes, and cares for the souls of its members. In the Great Commission, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives his disciples their marching orders.⁹ This is Matthew 28:18–20:

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The disciples—and the church that is built upon their foundation—were to proclaim the gospel. They were to make disciples. A disciple is literally a student. A disciple is a follower of Jesus. They were to baptize anyone who repented of their sins and put their trust in Jesus. And they were to teach these disciples everything that Jesus taught.

Baptism is an outward sign of a transformation in a person's life. It represents cleansing of sin. It's also a picture of the old person dying and the new person emerging. You'll find that Paul writes about this at the beginning of Romans 6. In that letter, as in all Paul's letters, he's writing to Christians. He assumes that Christians have already been baptized. Baptism is a public way of identifying yourself with Jesus. It's therefore a prerequisite for belonging to a church. If you haven't been baptized yet, we would love to baptize you here.

The church continues to care for those who have come under its authority. You see that in the many “one another” passages I read earlier. We also see this in passages that are written or about pastors. For example, we see that idea in Hebrews 13:7 and 17. Hebrews 13:7 says, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” The leaders here are obviously church leaders, because they are speaking the word of God. Now look at verse 17: “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.”

Before I became a pastor, I didn't think that church membership was such a big deal. But after I became a pastor, and I read verses like this one, I came to realize that church membership is very important. After all, I am supposed to keep watch over people and give an account for

⁹ Leeman (ibid., 21): “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, and he gave his church the authority to march on the nations.”

how I've done that. But how can I watch over your souls if I don't know who belongs to the church? I can, in a broad way, care for the souls of people here just by teaching them God's word. But it makes my job far more difficult when people don't really get involved in the life of the church. There's a similar idea in 1 Peter 5:2, which is directed towards pastors. It says, "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight." The idea of a defined church membership helps establish who is part of the flock that is under a pastor's care.¹⁰

A fourth reason why membership matters is that much of the Christian life is lived out in the life of the church. How else can you obey all those "one another" commands that I read earlier if you're not plugged into the life of the church? How can you use your spiritual gifts? It is certainly possible to love other Christians who aren't part of your church, and it's possible to use spiritual gifts to serve other Christians and even non-Christians who aren't part of your church. But it seems that we can best love and serve each other in the context of a local church. I believe that the way people in a church love and serve one another is a powerful witness to the world. It should make the church an attractive alternative to the selfishness and lack of commitment found in the world. Jesus himself said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

Finally, here's a fifth reason that membership matters: Your commitment to the local church is an antidote to the selfish, individualistic, commitment-phobic culture that we live in. Who commits to anything these days? Where can loyalty be found? People don't commit to marriages, families, jobs, or much anything else. But Christians should be different. We belong to a forever family. Think about it: your relationships with other Christians will outlast all other relationships. Your commitment to God and his people will outlast your commitment to your job, your hobbies, your political ideology, and your support of the Red Sox and the Patriots.

Also, Christianity is more about giving and serving than getting. So many people look for churches and think, "What can that church do for me?" They think, "What am I going to get out of it?" That is anti-Christian thinking. It's just incredibly selfish, and it reveals how much we can get caught up in the consumerism around us. Jesus came not to be served, but to be served, and that should be our goal, too.¹¹ Jesus died for the church (Acts 20:28). The church is his bride

¹⁰ Acts 20:28 is another verse that stresses the pastor's need to care for the flock.

¹¹ See Matthew 20:28; John 13:14–15; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Philippians 2:1–11.

(Rev. 19:7; 21:2, 9). How can we not want to commit to Christ's church? We should ask not what our church can do for us, but rather we should ask what we can do for our church.

That being said, I will say this: The more you put into a church, the more you'll get out of it. If you just show up for this worship service and leave, it will be hard to get to know the people of the church. If you come to our class at 9:15, or to the evening worship service at 5:00 p.m., or join us in person or at least online during our Wednesday night prayer meetings, you'll know others in the church and you'll be known. And you will receive much more. If you go through the membership process, the same is true.

One more thought about church membership, one that is more practical: If people weren't committed to local churches, there would be no local churches. Churches exist because in the past there were members of churches who gave their time, service, and money to build those churches. People who come and go to churches, who never commit, are able to attend churches because of the work and sacrifice of others. If everyone just came and went as they pleased, if everyone sought to be served rather than to serve, there would be no churches.

There's much more to say about church membership, but I'll wrap up things up by saying this: If you're not an official member of this church, please consider becoming one. Join us this Saturday at 9:00 a.m. If that time doesn't work for you, let me know and we'll arrange something else. If you are a member of the church, I would ask that you recommit to serving the church. Some of you are already doing that, and I am very thankful for you. Imagine what this church would be like if everyone here became a member and actively served. That's what I would like to see happen here.