

## The Nature of the Church - Part 1

We have a church directory, and some months ago, maybe even a year, there were several people that wanted to underline within the church directory the formal members of the church. As you know, according to the constitution and bylaws of the church, we have a voting membership. In order to get into the voting membership you have to be voted in. So there is that distinction between what some people would call a member versus non member, or voting member versus non voting member. And there were several who wanted to underline the voting members, and I resisted it. And it caused a bit of a flap, to be completely honest, without getting into all of the details or names or anything. And so just in the process of discussing it, it came to a point where if I were going to create a whole new constitution for the church, how would I do it? I said ok, I can get to that, but we are right in the middle of the house project and I said it will probably be six months before I get there. And so it's been a while, but now we're there.

So I'm going to do several messages about the church, or to put it another way, about the body of Christ. And I don't mean for this to be an exhaustive study, yet I do want to take my time. There are things about the body of Christ, our part in it, and its nature that are deep and rich and I'd like to tap into and experience some of those riches together with you. And I'd like to identify a few things that might curtail the experience of some of those riches. I will address such issues and not exhaustively, but such issues as placement within the body of Christ, spiritual giftedness, church membership, church leadership, church discipline, spiritual commitment, and probably a few other things along the way that I haven't even thought of. And to the best of my ability, I will base all of this upon Scripture. How does God in Scripture define the body of Christ, the church, and how is it to function, and I must admit that in doing this, there will be some conflict between a few of the things that I say and our own church constitution that we have here at Mabana Chapel.

Ideally, a church constitution with its bylaws is to be based upon scripture and the principles therein. Not just based upon the pattern of other churches or the traditions of other churches that have been developed over the decades and even centuries. And in organizing a church there is always danger in the fact that man has a great gift for making simple things complicated. Just compare, for example, the structure, the hierarchy, the layers of authority within the Roman Catholic Church. Compare that with the biblical definition of the church and what we find is a man-made structure that is so weighty and so oppressive, as to almost completely overshadow the biblical definition of the nature of the church. But the Bible defines, God does through Scripture, defines the nature of the church. The church did not define its own nature. The Bible defines what it really is, and no amount of human tinkering or additions can change the true nature of what the church is. But what human tinkering and additions can do is oppress the church and inflict oppression upon its members. God has defined the nature of things. And we cannot change the nature of things, including the body of Christ, the church. And any time humans superimpose upon the church rules and additions and traditions that in any conflict with Scripture, or in any way conflict with its nature, then damage is done to some measure, and freedom is lost to some measure, and that damage is felt by individual people, at some point, it hurts.

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And so as I speak about the body of Christ in the context of our own constitution, I'm going to approach it as if it were a blank slate. In other words, if I, Greg Summers, according to what I know of the Scriptures today, if I was going to write up a church constitution, how would I do it? I will answer this question, but I'm going to be a while getting there. Because first I want to look at the biblical definition of the body of Christ.

First, and I'm going to take a little bit of a long runway here, but first, there is an issue of distinction. The body of Jesus Christ, and the individual members that make it up, is exceptionally distinct from the world, the sons of disobedience, the children of wrath, as they are described in Ephesians chapter 2. The starkness of this distinction is well expressed in a few brief words in 2 Cor 6:14-16 which begins by saying, "Do not be bound together with unbelievers." Do not be unequally yoked. And we often apply this to marriage which is I think the proper and very sound application. But the reason for not being bound together is the immense separation in both nature and behavior between what a believer is, versus an unbeliever. The passage says, "For what partnership has righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness, or what harmony has Christ with Belial or the devil, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? Those are huge differences. You can't express them any better than that. The difference between a genuinely saved person and an unsaved person is like the east from the west. A saved person is defined as being in Christ. An unsaved person is defined as being in Adam in 1 Cor 15:22. In Romans 5:15-19 defines the vast difference between those two emersions. To be in Adam is to be identified with and a recipient of all of the unforgiveness, the fallen nature, the death, the curse, the condemnation that Adam experienced and handed down to us. To be in Christ is to be identified with and a recipient of all of the forgiveness, the grace, the spiritual birth, the new nature, the justification, the righteousness, the eternal life that Jesus accomplished through his death and resurrection and has extended to each of us who believe. And the transition between being in Adam to being in Christ is that salvation experience. And some of this is going to be fairly basic to some of you because you have been through it before. And that salvation experience is absolutely huge. It supplies all. It makes us complete in Christ because Christ himself is full and complete. And that salvation experience involves the drinking in of the Holy Spirit, and His bringing us to new birth resulting in our being a new man with a righteous nature possessing eternal life. And this new man is vastly different in its very nature from what those still in Adam are, and it is vastly different from what the old man was. And this is part of the uniqueness of what I call genuine biblical Christianity. At the individual level, biblical Christianity is not the superimposing over the old human mind man originated philosophy, tradition, or religion. Rather, it is a genuine spiritual regeneration within, resulting in a whole new spiritual being. And this is why in John 3 Nicodemus was so astounded by the words of Jesus, "You must be born again to see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus was thinking, I would assume by his mind set, all I need to do is keep the rules better or make up new ones. But Jesus said all of that is vain, you must experience inner spiritual regeneration. And Nicodemus had no clue how that could be accomplished. And so for instance, Tom Cruise, the actor, can plug along in life, and at some point superimpose over that old nature of his, scientology. He thinks he's ok. But no, he's not ok. He must be born again. He must be regenerated within through the Holy Spirit if he is ever to see the kingdom of God. And so within the New Testament we find two threads of identity. The identity and the nature of the unsaved, and it's well defined, and it's not very

bright, versus the identity and nature of the saved. And the difference and nature and identity is nothing less than the difference between light and darkness, or Jesus and the devil. And the proper understanding of the body of Christ is based upon this distinction. We can understand the body of Christ, only, I am convinced, as we comprehend and come to know the true nature of our own regeneration, and therefore separation from the world. Distinction. The body of Christ is not just another human organization, business, or corporation. It is not just a cultural phenomena or a (\*word I don't know that sounds like fant) or philosophy. It is a spiritual union of spiritually transformed individuals which transcends everything cultural in this world. And just as a born anew individual is now starkly different in nature from all of those still in Adam, so the body of Christ is starkly different in nature from any other human grouping. And so in defining the body of Christ, I begin with the individual. Titus 3:5 says He saved us, God saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing in or by the Holy Spirit. Regeneration speaks of restoration and new birth. Or I might say, new birth that is restoration. So it refers to the regeneration, the coming to life of the individual soul. Regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit. Renewing means that through or by regeneration spiritual birth we have become something that is qualitatively new. Not just something chronologically new, but qualitatively new, meaning that the new creation that we have become in Jesus possesses the quality of newness forever, eternal life. Now this verse, Titus 3:5 is applied to everyone who is saved. Meaning that each saved person has experienced the same thing, a common birth among us. Each one of us received the same Holy spirit, and each one of us had been born again, regenerated, renewed, from the same source, the same Holy Spirit and through him from the same father. And so we all have a common birth as if to say we are all of the same womb. Therefore, we truly are brothers and sisters. Brethren. And not just in this life, but forever. There is a spiritual connection and union among us, between us that can never be broken. We're stuck with each other. And the apostle Paul in 1 Cor used the human body as an object lesson by which to explain and define the body of Christ, the spiritual organism. And by using the human body as an object lesson it was a stroke of spiritual genius because we all have one. And we can just look at the different functions of the different members of our body and recognize different members but they're all in union together all one body but each of them do something differently, and they do it all in harmony. Now when the Holy Spirit entered into us and brought us to life, at the same time he also baptized us or immersed us into this body of Jesus Christ. Even sealed us. 1 Cor 12:13 says for by one spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one spirit. This took place when we were saved. It was when we were saved that we became part of or a member of the body of Jesus Christ and of one another. The Holy Spirit baptized us into the body, connected us, and not just of Christ, but to each other. And as we read on in chapter 12 we see that the Holy Spirit also equipped us, gifted us to function within the body. We were all made to drink. And isn't that a beautiful way to put it? All made to drink of the one spirit, and we all have drunk, and this is an initial drink that never has to be repeated. It is once for all. We drink in the Spirit, and He stays and He abides and He never leaves. This is what Jesus meant when He said to the woman at the well in John 4:13,14 everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again. But whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him, referring to the Spirit, shall never thirst. But the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life. We drink of the spirit at salvation, and as Jesus said, we shall never thirst because that drink and it's result is a reality which can never be undone. Permanent. Eternal. We can go through cycles of being filled with the spirit or not

being filled. But after drinking him in, his presence and oneness with us is an eternal state of being. As Jesus said of the spirit in John 14:16 He will be with you forever.

I began with the reality of distinctions. We being distinct from the unbelieving, the body of Christ being distinct from any other human grouping, and within 1 Cor 12:13 we see an eradication of old distinctions and the creation of new distinctions. And we also see an eradication of old unities and the creation of a new unity. The verse says we were all made to drink and were baptized and then it goes on to say whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free. These groupings, Jews, Greeks, slaves, free, were separations or distinctions within the unsaved world of Paul's day. Religious Jews felt themselves so distinct, so superior to the Greek that they would not socialize with them. And within the Roman world, the cultural differences between a slave and a free man were probably the largest divide between classes of people that existed. So what Paul did in verse 13 there in Romans 12 is take the greatest distinctions between classes of people within the Roman world and say that within Jesus Christ, all of these distinctions are abolished, or at least they don't matter. Whether a person was a religious Jew even a Pharisee or a pagan Greek idolater, whether a person was a rich free man with all of the benefits of roman citizenship or the poorest lowest slave with no rights whatsoever, all of it or none of it either helped a person come to Christ or hindered a person from coming to Christ. It was all irrelevant because each one, if he or she was to be saved and become a member of Christ's body, each one had to come the same way. And each one had to drink of the same Spirit. And afterwards, they would all be brethren regardless of their social background, just as it is today. Regardless of whether a person is considered upper class, lower class, rich or poor, beautiful or ugly, gifted or not, famous or infamous, black or white or somewhere in between none of that matters. None of it helps or hinders. If a person is to be saved and become a member of the body through drinking of the Spirit, all must come the same way. All must believe, all must repent, recognize their sin, and drink of the Spirit of God. And in the drinking, there is a rather big and permanent shift in both distinctions and unions. All the worldly distinctions fade away. The cultural and racial union for instance, that existed with blacks among blacks, and whites among whites, and Jews among Jews diminished, and a new union and a new distinction came into being when we were saved. A spiritual union came into existence among all who had been baptized by the Spirit into the body of Jesus Christ. And this union of believers, this union among us is now distinct between all of the unsaved regardless of social background. And thus we find ourselves in union with one another based upon the indwelling Holy Spirit and a common spiritual birth rather than any cultural, racial, or financial similarities, and it is a union that transcends all racial and cultural and financial differences. We are eternally brethren in union regardless of where we come from. And this is a union, and I can't stress this enough, this is a union that is accomplished by God. Not us. Not man. Therefore, we should never allow anything man-made to hinder the exercise of our union. Or to put it another way, we should never add distinctions between ourselves which scripture itself does not add and which might hinder the loving and sweet fellowship based upon our spiritual union in the fullness of the Spirit. 1 Cor 12 gives us a few more facts about the body. Verse 18 says, "But now God has placed the members," that's you and I, "God has placed the members," each one of us, "in the body just as He desired." And earlier the passage describes how each one of us has been gifted by the Holy Spirit to function within the body. When the Holy Spirit brought us to spiritual life and baptized us into the body, He at the same time endowed each one of us individually with a spiritual grace, ability, giftedness,

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something that we are spiritually good at, and are to use in service to one another just as verse 7 says, for the common good. Our spiritual giftedness and placement within the body is not our own choosing, nor is it dictated by any human agency, but it is according to God's doing, His choice, His power, His will. As verse 11 says about the distributing of the gifts, and the same Spirit works all of these things distributing to each one individually just as He wills. And so there is a convergence between the individual distribution of the gifts as He wills, and verse 18, our placement within the body just as He desired. And verse 18 says, "But now God has placed the members...," God has placed the members. And as a result of God placing the members, verse 27 of 1 cor 12 says, "Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it, and because you are individually members of the body, we are also members of one another." As Romans 12:5 says "So we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members one of another." And Ephesians 5:25 says the same thing. "For we are members of one another."

Now because of all of this, I have some problems with formal church membership. I am a pastor standing up here telling you this. And what I mean by formal church membership is again, when members of a church vote as to whether some other person might become a member. And I especially have some problems when formal church membership becomes a measure or a criteria as to whether someone is qualified to serve in the body of Christ in the church. Or when formal church membership is used as a criteria for measuring someone's spiritual commitment. Some years ago a few of us were in the kitchen discussing whether a certain person would make a good Sunday school teacher. And one of the ladies said about the person, "But she isn't a member." I must admit to you that such a statement irks me. It irks me to no end. Because to me it's a slap in the face to that dear Christian saint whom God has brought to birth and gifted and equipped to function within the body of Christ, and no place in Scripture is formal church membership a criteria for their placement within the body. So here are some of the reasons why such a statement irks me.

First, our being a member of the church, of the body of Christ, of one another, has absolutely nothing to do with human voting or the will of man. It has everything to do with what God has accomplished within that person through the new birth. God is the one who makes a person a member, not us. And for us to say that someone is not a member and use that terminology, I believe is a denial of spiritual reality based upon a man-made criteria.

Second, God has gifted and placed an individual within the body just as He wills. *He wills*. To deny a believer the freedom and the encouragement to employ their giftedness for the common good within the body based upon man-made membership is again, I think a denial of spiritual reality. But I think it's even worse. I think it's actually a resistance to God. God is the one who saves, gifts, places a person within the body and makes them a member. And to refuse someone their place within the body, to refuse them the work that God not only endowed them for but called them to because of a human institution or criteria that I can't even find in Scripture, to me is a fearful thing. It's almost a denial of the work of God in that person's life. To me, even to have that kind of mindset is a fearful thing.

Third, it's not just that man-made membership, voting, is not established in Scripture. That's not the issue. There are plenty of human methodologies that have been used within the church that can't be

found in Scripture. And such methodologies are fine as long as they do not redefine something that Scripture defines. God, Himself in Scripture defines the church, the body of Christ, and what a member is. Human voted membership, I think, scrambles it, and then redefines it, and then some believers make false judgments against other believers based upon that human redefinition and so the lady could say, "But they're not a member," meaning, they're not qualified to serve within the church. That's what they were really saying. And I could come back and say, "Show me that in Scripture. Justify that. How does God define a member?"

And fourth, I am convinced that voted membership is not a valid measure of a person's spiritual commitment either to the church or to Jesus Christ. It is certainly not a biblical one. I have known voted members who were quite treacherous in their commitment to the body of Jesus. And I have know non-voted members who have been exceptionally responsive to the will of God. True measures of spiritual commitment are biblically defined. Not humanly defined. And they are such things are love, and servant hood, and giving, and faithfulness, and prayer, and time in the word, and there are a number of things, but not voted membership. It's not an accurate measure of spiritual commitment.

Fifth, our union with one another, our sense of fellowship with and belonging to one another is not based upon something as superficial as voted membership. It is based upon the reality of what God has done spiritually within each one of us. And I believe that voted membership in the minds of some, not all, but in the minds of some, can actually cause separation, disunity, based upon a human distinction, and then judgments made based upon that human distinction.

And sixth, I believe that a saved one should have the freedom to entertain genuine biblical convictions if they so have them against formal church membership apart from being judged less committed. In fact I would consider them very committed, committed to the biblical definition of things.

There are a number of side issues involved which I have not had the time to address in one message, so I'll pick this up again next week. Needless to say, if I were to write up a church constitution I'd write it up differently. I cherish the freedom to recognize Christians, not according to whether they have been voted in by humans, but according to what God has done in their lives. The new birth. We are brethren. We are in union with one another. And even as I share this, according to the constitution, this puts me in a bind. Because according to the policy within the church bylaws and the constitution, a person within this church cannot become a deacon unless they are a member. And right now we are just down to Norm and I. And I am convinced that there are at least 2 or 3 men very qualified to be either a deacon or an elder within this church, but at least some of them have biblical convictions contrary to the present structure within the church constitution just as I do. And so basically the bind I put myself in is we have a non-biblical criteria then preventing some of them from serving in leadership within the church. And so here I have just discouraged anybody from becoming a member. So that puts me in a bind. But I am convinced that if you teach the truth of Scripture to the best of your ability as you see it and trust God for the outcome, He will take care of it in ways that we can't even foresee, and he will provide. Amen.