

The Nature of the Church - Part 3

This is my third message in a row about the church, the body of Christ, and with this one I'll be done with this issue and press on to something else after next Sunday. And I have looked to Scripture to define the church, its leadership, its membership, and I have approached this effort with two basic premises in mind. First, the Bible defines things, the nature of things, including the church, and any time we attempt to function contrary to the biblical definition and pattern, unnecessary tension is created which can sometimes lead to worse things than just tension, and you can see it with any person or with any church that has strayed from Scripture. And the second premise is, if I were to write up a church constitution, what would it include, what would it not include, and how would it be different from our current church constitution.

And over the past two weeks I spoke of two or three very basic changes that I would make. First, our current constitution does not make the distinction between elders and deacons, it only includes deacons. But the Bible makes a very clear distinction and defines the nature and the role of each. The biblical model is a plurality of elders ruling, overseeing, shepherding the church and I would include this in the constitution. And second, I would make a definition of a church member that reflects how God creates a member of a church through salvation as opposed to how man makes a member through human voting in the sense of formal membership. 1 Cor 12:13 teaches that when we believe, the Holy Spirit baptizes us into the body of Christ, and if we read through and study the rest of that chapter we find that it's at that point when we are saved that we become members of the church, members of the body of Christ, and it's at that point that we become members of one another through spiritual union, and it's at that point that we are gifted and equipped through the Holy Spirit to function within the body, and it's at that point that we are placed within the body positioned according to God's will and not our own. Therefore, it is my premise that God creates members of the church through salvation, through the salvation experience as opposed to people making members through voting. Now it was the issue of membership which initiated within myself this process, and what I mean by that, the process that has brought me to these three messages. Therefore, I will revisit this issue from the first message this morning, and add a few more thoughts.

Some of us have been looking at an article on this issue, formal church membership, an article written by John McArthur, and before I get into this, I must preface my statements by saying I disagree with that article, and I'm going to proclaim my disagreements, but you need to understand that this is a disagreement between brothers. Okay? There is no animosity here whatsoever. You can go on a search and try to find two pastors who agree on everything, but don't hold your breath. So that's this issue. He's a very godly man. I just disagree with him on this issue.

John takes a very different view from my own concerning formal church membership. He does admit within the article that formal church membership, and I'm talking about after a person is saved at some point people within a church voting other people into it, and then being labeled members as opposed to if you're not voted into it you're a non-member, he does admit within the article that formal church

membership is no where explicitly commanded in the Scriptures, and I quote his words, “Although Scripture does not contain an explicit command to formally join a local church,” but then he goes on to write, “the biblical foundation for church membership,” and again, he’s talking about formal church membership, “the biblical foundation for church membership permeates the New Testament.” And then he gives some Scriptures which he believes makes the case. Personally, with the Scriptures that he uses, I think he is reading things into those Scriptures which simply aren’t there. Recognizing at the same time, if he were sitting around with his elders and listened to these three messages that I’ve given on the church, I’m sure they’d tear it up very nicely because they differ from his own view. But John, in the article, attempts to give a biblical basis for formal church membership, and then he uses formal church membership as a basis, as a measuring device for at least three other critical issues within the body of Christ. First, he uses formal church membership as a measure of how committed a person is to the church. Second, he uses it as a measure to help judge who really is a part of the flock. Third, he uses it as a basis for administering church discipline. Now if I am seeing this issue biblically, once you lay a foundation based upon a false premise, and I consider formal church membership to be a false premise, once you lay a foundation based upon a false premise and then build upon that foundation other premises, and I consider all three of these issues, measuring a person’s spiritual commitment, identifying a true member of the flock, and the authority to administer church discipline all based upon formal church membership, I consider all of those premises to be false for the simple reason that the bible doesn’t use formal church membership for such things.

Take the first issue, using formal church membership as a measure of a believer’s commitment to the church. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, I have known voted-in members who were very treacherous in their commitment to the church and to the truth of God’s Word, while at the same time, I have known non-voted members who were very responsive to the will of God, and who fulfilled their role within the body of Christ, and fulfilled their love for the saints. I have known voted-in members who were very self-willed, hard, calloused in the handling of their relationships, and I have known non-voted members who were very sensitive in love and how they handled relationships. Therefore, there must be something deeper, more spiritual, more biblical in assessing a person’s commitment to the church than formal church membership. And John actually identifies some of these more spiritual measures in the last part of his article, and I quote, again, his words, “Living out a commitment to a local church involves many responsibilities,” and he ticks a few of them off, “exemplifying a godly lifestyle in the community, exercising one’s spiritual gifts in diligent service, contributing financially to the work of the ministry, giving and receiving admonition with meekness and in love, and faithfully participating in corporate or group worship.” He identifies these as living out a commitment to a local body, yet, all of which are done, and can be done, without the added step of voted membership. I would say then, that a person’s commitment must primarily be measured spiritually, rather than organizationally. Commitment is a matter of heart and spirit. It is seen in an ongoing inner transformation, and the growing influence of the grace of God upon the heart. A believers consistent presence among us is a given in measuring commitment. *It’s a given.* Heb 10:25 says, “not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some.” If we understand the nature of the body, the spiritual giftedness of each member of the body, and the call to exercise that giftedness within the body, then it’s obvious that

a believer cannot fulfill their role within the body of Jesus Christ without being consistently among the body. But commitment is far more than just attendance. It is far more a spiritual matter of the heart.

Based upon my own understanding of Scripture, and my own experience of people in the church, I would use at least these things to assess a person's commitment to God and the church. First, a love of Truth, a love of God's Word, which is reflected in the investment of daily time and energy for the absorption of God's Word into the mind and heart. This will be done with a teachable heart, and at the basis of a teachable heart is the recognition that God's word is sovereign over us. This means that we have the attitude that God's Truth, as a reflection of the lordship of Christ, is Lord over us. We can't just pick and choose what we want in the Scripture, it is all Truth, it is all God's Truth. True commitment is measured in the submission to God's Truth in the context of all the cultural differences around us. It is a submission to God's Truth regardless of what my past convictions might have been, regardless of the battle with my own self will over against God's will, or the desire to justify myself or be right in any discussion or argument, or just to look good. True commitment involves the ability to approach the Word of God without defensiveness, but with the attitude of adjusting myself to whatever I discover God's Truth and God's will to be. This then will be reflected in the ongoing transformation of my life to more and more reflect the image of Christ, and it will be reflected in such a manner that over the years other people will be able to see my progress. Of course, you would add to this measure of commitment prayer; a healthy prayer life. Another way to measure commitment is sincerity of heart, that is, a lack of guile, inner integrity. There is no deviousness or manipulation in the context of relationships or in the pursuit of one's personal desires. Also there is a lack of denial concerning one's own shortcomings. There is a willingness to acknowledge where I am strong, where I am weak, when I have made a mistake, when I have sinned. I would also include a growing love of the saints, not just measured in a person's attendance, but measured by a person's enjoyment of and delight in other believers, measured in even to some extent the depth of relationship with at least a few other dear believers. A love of the saints based upon the attitude found in Phil 2:3 of regarding one another as more important than ourselves. Another measure of commitment I believe is giving just as John mentioned in his article, especially sacrificial giving. God is a giver, and we reflect the power of His likeness and His grace upon our heart as we give. And we reflect a sincere trust in, and a reliance upon Him to provide for us even as we give to others, whether it is the giving of time, ability, materials, or money. I would also include, and this is a good one, patience in the midst of trial, the heart that endures difficulty and continues to grow soft and thankful versus hard and bitter. And finally, I would include as a measure of a person's commitment, thankfulness. *Thankfulness*. Repeatedly in the New Testament we are called upon to be thankful. Thankfulness reflects a heart that credits God for all that is good, and refrains from complaining and blaming God for the hardships. Thankfulness is the opposite of pride. Thankfulness is the freedom to fully enjoy all that God has done and all that He has provided while gratefully acknowledging the true source of it all.

Next, John in his article wrote that true individuals of the flock must be distinguishable in order for the elders to know who they are responsible for, and then he uses formal church membership as a distinguishing factor, meaning to help identify for the elders those whom they are responsible for. But I would never use formal church membership to assess who is a genuine part of the flock, or who as a

pastor I am responsible to shepherd. The Bible gives, I believe, other criteria for assessing such a thing. Salvation is a dynamic interchange that produces noticeable outer changes, and the epistle of first John identifies many of these noticeable changes that causes a believer to be distinguishable from an unbeliever, such things as admission of sin, love of truth, love of the brethren, a lessening of outward sinfulness, acknowledgment that God is right, He is holy and just. These are true measures as to whether a person is part of a flock that a shepherd is responsible to shepherd. Formal church membership is nowhere used as the distinguishing factor for such an assessment. And finally, John uses formal church membership as a foundation from which to administer church discipline when it is needed. And again, his thinking is that such discipline presupposes that the elders know who their members are, and again, I would beg to differ. Church discipline usually revolves around one of three things; open or continued sin, false teaching, or causing discord among the brethren. Nowhere in the New Testament is formal church membership required for addressing such problems. Any person who is involved with this church, and claims to be a saved one, and who is openly sinning or teaching falsehood or causing division is open to discipline by the leadership of this church.

Now I want to give you some random thoughts and questions concerning problems that I see with formal church membership. First, I believe that formal church membership creates unnecessary tension and unnecessary frustration. Even though John likes to use formal church membership as a basis for discipline, he wrote in the article, and again I quote his words, "Sadly, the widespread lack of understanding of church membership has made it necessary for our elders to discipline not only formal members, but also those who regularly fellowship at Grace Community Church." And it's a fascinating dilemma. He finds himself disciplining nonmembers, while at the same time using membership to identify those he is responsible to discipline. He uses the word "sadly," and I think it is a totally unnecessary sadness, a self-inflicted sadness. In every Bible believing church that I have seen, heard of, or read about, that uses formal church membership, there is always this tension and frustration, because there has always been and there will always be involved believers who will not formally join, for whatever reason. The simple solution is to define and recognize members of the body based upon God's creation of them through salvation, based upon the biblical definition, and reflect this in the church constitution and all of that tension and frustration would not exist because there would not be the distinction between member and nonmember.

Second, I believe that formal church membership creates a distinction between believers, a distinction which the Bible does not make. John carries this distinction within his thinking, whereas the Bible emphasizes our union, a union not based upon voted in membership, but a union or unity of spirit based upon a common birth in the Holy Spirit and a shared spiritual life in Christ. The distinction the Bible makes is between us and nonbelievers, not us and us.

Third, based upon this manmade distinction, some believers then judge other believers to be unqualified for service within the church. There have been times, and I've mentioned this before, there have been times over the years in discussing a specific believers potential for service that I've heard someone say, "But they are not a member." And my simple question is, a couple of them, show me in Scripture where they are not a member, and where in Scripture is formal membership a requirement for service. God is the one who creates a member and gifts him for service. It is the work of God. And I

would consider it a fearful thing then to deny such a person his God-given role and place within the body based upon an additional manmade requirement. For instance, a person must be a voted-in member to serve as a deacon. But I do not see that requirement in Scripture. It's not listed in the requirements in 1 Tim 3. Therefore, a person can be prevented from fulfilling his God-given role based upon a human requirement.

Fourth, regardless of how careful we try to be, there is the tendency to focus on the manmade rule rather than the biblical, spiritual reality. And we see the tendency in the New Testament with the Pharisees and throughout the whole history of the church. Formal church membership has at least with some that tendency to draw attention to itself and away from the reality of the true biblical definition of a member. And to the degree that this happens, then our genuine God-created membership in the body with one another, and our sense of union based upon our spiritual union, is devalued, and the reality of what God has done in a person's heart is not as clearly recognized.

Fifth, within the minds of some, formal church membership can give a false sense of security. April was a member of a believing church long before she was saved, and it affects how a person thinks about their qualifications for heaven. For some it can end up being a huge, huge stumbling block. The idea that I am a member of a church, therefore I am a member of heaven.

Sixth, there is the possibility that formal church membership can have just the opposite affect of that intended, commitment. If to any degree a person is expected to fulfill their role in the church based upon formal membership, then it can create in some the mindset that if I don't join, then I am not responsible to be wholly involved. I am not a part of this because I am not a member. It can become an excuse for irresponsibility. Whereas the biblical reality is, whether a person formally joins or not, if the person is saved, that person is completely responsible for fulfilling his or her role within the body of Christ. Regardless of what any church constituting says, if you are saved, you are a member of the church, you are a member of the body of Christ, you are a member of all other such members, and you have a spiritual union with them, you are gifted for service within the church, you have a God-ordained place and position within the church and God expects each one of us to fulfill it. And from the perspective of any one of us who is here right now and involved, if we converse with a believer who is not vitally involved with a fellowship, we do not need any kind of formal hoop to recognize before strongly encouraging them to plug into a fellowship and fulfill their God-given purpose. We can simply say, "if you're saved, get to it," or however you want to say it. Why waste all the giftedness and the opportunities that God has given you and have little to offer to Jesus Christ when you face him?

And finally, a question. John used the word "sadly" in reflecting upon those he considered nonmembers, but if a person is vitally involved in the fellowship, if they are fellowshipping with the saints, if they are employing their graces and their resources to the saints, if they are loving the saints and fulfilling their role within the body of Christ, but they are not a formal member, what Scripture can you point to that they are disobeying? And if disobedience to Scripture cannot be found in them, why the sadness, why the false distinction, why the mindset that they are somehow deficient, and why place this burden of potential false guilt upon them as if they were somehow less a member than someone else?

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According to our current church constitution this church has a voted-in membership who have the privilege of voting on issues. Any changes in the constitution must be approved by a majority of the voting members. I would love to change the constitution to better reflect the biblical model and definition both of church leadership and church membership. At least the main themes I would address I have covered in the last three messages. And I would write up the specifics only if I sensed a willingness of the majority to change some things. And if we got that far, then a thorough discussion and airing of all the issues involved would need to take place using the Scriptures as our guide, and then there would be the possibility of a vote. If God is not creating within the hearts of a majority a like-mindedness with me on this, then I won't push it. If I'm outvoted, I'm outvoted. But I see here an opportunity to create something very special. I see here an opportunity to create something closer to the biblical model, and I am convinced if we do so it will make for less future tension, a greater sense of union, and a greater spiritual benefit for all involved, not just right now, but for whoever gets involved in the future. And for me personally this goal is worth the effort however God ordains the outcome. So I simply covet your prayers for all of us in this process and we'll see where it leads.