

Membership Sunday 2023

Good Morning everyone well this morning is a **special Sunday** people are committing themselves to this church - becoming **members** that is – this is a glorious thing, a natural thing for a Christian to live out, to use their gifts, time and energy and express their faith in a local fellowship.

So I want to talk a little about church membership today and what that entails.

But to begin with, before we get into details, what is the church? The Christian church that is? – It's reasonable to ask, what exactly are you committing to?

The word “church” is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is defined as “an assembly of people” or “called-out ones.” So the root meaning of *church* is not that of a building or denomination but of a group of people - a group of people that are ‘set apart’.

But who are these people and what has happened to them?

Well we could define the Christian church as a group of people who have experienced something supernatural - something extraordinary and because of that, they have placed their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation.

So in essence the church is a **spiritual society** made up of **born again believers** this is really important - acts 2:47 says, regarding the first church “*and the Lord was adding to their number daily those who were being saved*” who was the Lord adding to the church daily? - **Those who were being saved.**

So that's the first requirement of Church membership - that you are saved, you are born again and that you have followed that commitment through into baptism. “*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved*” (Mark 16:16) so firstly this is the ‘minimum requirement’ to be part of the Christian church.

So we now know **what** the church is and **who** it is made up of, but what is it all about? What were these groups of born again, baptised believers committing themselves to? Acts 2.42 tells us;

“*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer*”

These are the 4 fundamentals of the Christian church and every Bible believing church and each member of it should centre on committing to these 4 activities.

If you were to look at our service this morning it encompasses and centres around these 4 activities.

So having clarified what those essential are let's look at some of the basics.

Firstly the importance of church/ attendance that is of coming to church regularly and faithfully

Some would say; 'we don't need to attend church, the most important thing is my relationship to God'. Why can't I just be a 'stay at home Christian'? The error of this comes from not understanding the **nature of the church** as we described earlier.

As I said it's a group of people, having the same thing in common, **it's a plural existence not a singular existence** whether that is a house church or meeting in a building there is no such thing as a lone Christian who acts independently.

I cannot stress the importance of church attendance, of meeting with other Christians. All the exhortations the NT epistles to Christians make no sense at all unless in a church context.

Meeting together as a group, a church. Is where we are encouraged - it's where we find our purpose, use our spiritual gifting and a whole host of other things. That's saying nothing about what your presence can bring in a very ordinary way - a warm smile, an encouraging word, can make someone's day - lift them out of a 'slough of despond'

It's a terrible trick of the devil to keep people away from church. I've said it before you will get picked off like a sheep that wanders from the flock and if your absent for too long you will end up in the wilderness. I've seen that happen all too many times.

Apart from that, you will never grow as a Christian; you will be ineffective spiritually, if you're not part of a church (and you fit and able to be here that is). It's interesting to note that most of the NT books, the epistles, are addressed to **churches not individuals** the churches at Rome, Galatia - Philippi etc

When the apostle John addressed his ‘warnings to the churches’ in the book of Revelation **it was again to the churches not individuals** for e.g. the church at Ephesus or Philadelphia. Not Mary up the road in her lounge or Michael from Cannock on his own in his kitchen! (If they can but choose not to go to church that is)

It is as if the early apostles are saying; your **identity is found corporately not as an individual – only in being part of a church fellowship.**

Having established the importance of church attendance for all Christians let’s now talk about a **commitment to a church or membership** at local level and how that differs from just attending.

The truth is; commitment to anything is not popular today, the spirit of our world says ‘let’s live loosely’ - you see it in marriage, people don’t want to make a commitment for life to any one person anymore.

The danger is that sort of ‘spirit’ can enter the church for e.g. people don’t want to commit to any particular church, they would rather keep their options open - move from one church to another, they become ‘spiritual travellers’ because it doesn’t suit them, they just want to operate as free agents.

That thinking is not scriptural though! - Romans 12:5 *“so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others”*

We are interconnected; you may be a hand I maybe a foot but we can’t operate independently.

So what the difference from just casual (but maybe regular attendance) and membership - what’s the difference between a member and a non member? 3 things:

Firstly it **clarifies the Difference between Believers and Unbelievers**

“They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us” (1 John 2:19)

It is not possible to know if a person “added to our number” is a true believer if we do not formalize church membership in some way. The church is to have only **believing regenerated people in membership** not just anyone who desires to join – or those who casually attend.

There would, of course, be great harm in having unbelievers try to serve the spiritual needs of the body of Christ.
So firstly the membership process identifies and sifts true followers of Christ.

Secondly as leaders we need to know who the flock are.

Membership separates and identifies those who come under pastoral care and have a desire to be led and shepherded.

There has to be some formal relations between leaders and the congregation. You can't pastor the whole world or even your own town. You need to know your sphere of work; you need to know those you can build relationship with.

Thirdly There has to be unity around the same doctrinal convictions. Are we in agreement about the importance of the fundamentals of our faith?

We have statements of faith and things we hold to and CBC specifics, we go through these in our membership course, and through discussion, if you couldn't agree with or hold to the same values then we would probably say 'its best not join us in membership at this time'.

There are certain red lines we must hold to.

Edwin and I have discussed these, so there are no surprises further down the line in what we believe for anybody who joins us.

Lastly how should we be as members? What would we expect of you (and you of us) as part of CBC?

Firstly Submit to the leadership - again this is unpopular thing today, sadly in the church as much as in the world – people simply do not like to come under any sort of authority. What do the scriptures say?

Heb 13:17 *“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you”*

I take this very seriously if you are under our leadership we have a duty of care for you and when we stand before God we will not only have to give an account for our own lives but for those under our spiritual care as well.

Please can I say when we say things we honestly believe regarding biblical truths and how they affect you, it's for your good, not to hurt in a negative way, but I have to say it would be nice to find more joy than grief in this role?

Secondly being a member means your Accountable

Scripture tells us, that love is the most important thing (1 Corinthians 13) **but true love is active - it takes an interest in a person's welfare.**

Love isn't nebulous and vague - don't become a member if you don't want us to take an interest in you and your spiritual life.

I'm not talking about 'nit picking' but if we think there is something in your life detrimental to your faith or affecting your walk with God we are bound to say. Hopefully not in a judgemental way, but for your good. I would hope you would do the same for us also. It's what the scriptures tell us to do.

Gal 6:1-2 "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfil the law of Christ".

Read the book of Corinthians it is all about speaking the truth in love in practical ways - some people see Christianity, church membership as some sort of 'non contact sport'! We never come near one another, 'leave me alone' 'let me do my thing' 'I won't bother you if you won't bother me' philosophy - even if we both see our lives going down the pan! Again it's not scriptural.

Matthew 18:15-17 "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every act may be confirmed.

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".

It's an obvious analogy but if you saw your child heading for a busy road, of course you would warn them.

Again it not about pointing out peoples faults but taking a genuine interest in them.

Finally be careful of the Language we use - it can bring a church down!

There is great Power in the tongue!, the spoken word, the words that come out of our mouths. The Bible has a lot to say about the 'power of the tongue' our words can have a positive effect or a negative effect on ourselves and others.

Psalm 64:3 says: *“they sharpen their tongues like swords and aim cruel words like deadly arrows.”* And that's what negative words can be like, **deadly arrows** that penetrate our spirit.

Conversely positive words can build you up, bring encouragement and even *“health to our bones”* (Proverbs 4:20-22) Proverbs 12:18 *“There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing”*.

Grumbling is another sort of negative language that God tells us not to do, we are not to grumble but to give thanks, grumbling is a sign of unbelief – a sign that we don't see God's hand in the difficulties of life.

Also Gossip is another form of negativity - Gossip it's juicy we all love to hear it don't we? Proverbs say: *“The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts”*.

This is a definition of gossip: *“a conversation or report about other people's lives that might be unkind, disapproving, or not true”*: and that's the thing about gossip, **it might be or it might not be true!** Its hearsay, you simply don't know, so don't go there. It always takes two to gossip.

The truth is, if you hear a rumour or gossip about someone else **just let it die with you!** *“Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no gossip, strife ceases.”* (Proverbs 26:20).

The bible tells us to *“guard our tongues”* Proverbs again: *“He who guards his mouth and his tongue, Guards his soul from troubles “And this word ‘guard’ is a military term, the Greek word suggests to “watch in advance” to “post a guard or spy at gate or garrison as a protection”*.

I have this picture for those that are submitted to the Spirit of God, we are working together to guard our lips and our speech. We play our part, we must

guard what we say, but God through the Holy Spirit is guarding our lips also protecting us from what we might say.

Have you ever felt that 'restraint' when you could have said something but you didn't? That's the Holy Spirit at work restraining your lips from saying something you shouldn't. We need to be 'on watch', 'on guard' at all times so that we can be the one who builds unity with our words, instead of being the one who tears it down.

But how do we change our words? How do we make them more loving? We do it by replacing them.

That why proclamation of God's word is so important because its speaking Gods truth about ourselves and others it's about replacing the 'negative script' within us the negative thoughts and words that is in us all, because of sin but it takes time to replace these things.

Eph 4.29 *"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen"*.

If only we could meet that challenge let our words be; 'only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs'.

I know people who spiral down with the least critical word but shoot right up again with kind and encouraging words.

I make a point often if I'm going to speak to someone, and I know there struggling a bit, to say; 'you're looking well' even if they are not! what is the point of saying otherwise? They know already how they feel, why we have got to say something to make them more conscious of the fact?

Our language is so important.

Leave it there this week; it's a high calling being a member of Gods church but what a privilege and honour to be so. I just hope I haven't put you off!

Just a brief word to those who are visiting or finding their way - find a church and commit to it. That's Gods plan for all our lives.

Amen

Tony Troy (29.01.2023)