

# You and Church Membership

Jack Hughes

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We are [continuing] this morning in our series on the Church. We've departed from Luke for a little while [so we can] focus our attention on you and the Church. This morning[ 's sermon] is going to be about you and church membership.

When I was working on my doctorate at Westminster Seminary in Escondido, [California], I had the privilege of taking a few classes on preaching from Dr. Jay Adams. Dr. Adams is a great guy. He has written many books, he's a pastor, he's a great preacher, teacher, [and] he's one of the foremost movers and shakers in the biblical counseling realm. In this class, we were sitting and talking, and the subject of church discipline came up. I forget how. We had a whole bunch of pastors [there], and one of the pastors asked, "How do you apply church discipline to those who aren't members of the church?"

And, Dr. Adams, you just have to know him. He likes to mess with you. He said, in a very relaxed, but definitive way, "Well, church discipline is for believers, and if somebody isn't a member of the church, they need [to be] evangelized, not disciplined." He said this to promote discussion, and it did.

Mark Dever, pastor of Capital Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., often makes a similar statement. He has written a lot on the Church—several books—and teaches at conferences on the church. What Pastor De-

ver likes to do is begin with this statement: “If you are not a member of the church you regularly attend, you may well be going to hell.” Now, when I make comments like that, does that shock you? I hope it does. That was the whole purpose—to get your attention and to shock you, because you know what? I think some of you need [to be] shocked. I think maybe some of you need [to be] offended a little bit, [to have] your lack of commitment offended some. I’m going to do my best this morning to offend you unto obedience.

Now, if you knew Dr. Adams or Dever, you would know [that] they don’t teach salvation by works. They are champions of salvation by grace alone through faith alone through the person and work of Christ alone. So why would they make these statements that if you aren’t a member of the church you regularly attend you’re not a believer? Well, we’re going to find out this morning.

There are many today who profess to be Christians, who attend church for years. Some of them never get baptized; they never become members of the church. To them, church is about getting their needs met. It’s kind of like a shopping mall [where] the churches of your area are different shops, and if you go to one and they don’t give you what you want, then you go find another one until you get what you’re looking for. You’re kind of a religious ping-pong ball. You’re just bouncing around from church to church, never committing, never serving, never giving, but you’re a Christian.

Joshua Harris, in his small, but helpful book *Stop Dating the Church* says you can always spot a church dater because they display these three qualities: [First,] they are me-centered. “Church is about me, about what I want, about what I can get, about the music style I like, and about the preaching style I like, and the doughnuts I like.” If you don’t get what you want, then you go somewhere else so you can get your needs met.

Second, Harris says [church daters] are independent. They don’t want to become a member [because] then they’d have to submit to the leadership authority. They’d have to have other people get involved in their lives and get to know them, know what they do during the week. They don’t want

that. They don't want people to find out what they're really like. They want to be independent. So they enter church in stealth mode, kind of slink in and sit in the balcony. (I just want you to know, I don't know who's up there. I can't see you—the lights are too bright—but I know you're there.) Then after the service, it's kind of like slip out the back, Jack, and make a new plan, Stan. They're just out. And you wonder, "Who was up there? I never met any of them. They're just gone." So, they're independent.

Third, [Harris] says, [church daters are] critical. [They say,] "You know, [at] that church, the pastor is just not quite where I am doctrinally. His sermons are a bit too long, [and] they're too doctrinal. They don't have the right programs. The people just aren't very friendly. The building is too old, the lights are too dim, and the heater isn't turned on high enough. The music, it's too archaic, or it's too modern, or there aren't enough choruses, or there aren't enough hymns." Their selfishness makes them critical. It's one of their defense mechanisms so they can justify bouncing around from church to church and never being committed. "I can't become a member of this church because they're hypocrites! There's too much doctrine, there's not enough grace. The people there, they aren't perfect. Besides," they say to themselves, "I will probably be moving on soon." They probably will, and they do, until they go to another church. They're kind of like Haley's Comet—every five or ten years, they come by. You see them for two or three Sundays and then they're off to the next church again.

Joshua Harris describes a friend who went to two churches on Sunday morning. He went to one because he liked the music and another because he liked the preaching. So [he went] to the music one first [to] get the music fix he liked, and then he'd stop by at his favorite place to eat, get a little snack, [and] time it just right so he [wouldn't] have to listen to any of the "icky" music, and then he could hear the preaching he wanted. That is just selfishness! A person like that has no idea what church is about at all. He is totally clueless. He's missing it. He is missing out, big time. He has no idea what it means to be a committed member of the Body of Christ. And, in reality, he is cheating himself, he's cheating the world, he's cheating

the church, and he's cheating God of His glory. That's what he's getting. He thinks that by shopping and manipulating things to get everything he wants that he's getting the most blessing. He's not—he's sinning. He's not being blessed, he's not being a good example, and he's cheating everybody, including himself. He's not getting what he is missing, and he doesn't even know what he's missing because he's not committed.

This morning, we are going to go after this whole idea of church membership. I just have an artificial outline here of three points [that] all relate to church membership. The first one is: biblical support for church membership. Now, if you were here last week, we started off by first defining the Church. I think I used fourteen bogus definitions of the church last week, and then even within the Bible there are a whole bunch. There are two big ones, though. There is what is called the "invisible church." There are about fifteen to seventeen verses in the New Testament [that] describe what is called the "invisible church," or the "universal, invisible church"—all believers of all time whether they are on earth or dead and in heaven. All true believers are part of the invisible church.

Now, related to that is the "visible church," and that's us and all the other congregations around the world, whether they're meeting in houses, or garages, or warehouses, or church buildings like this. That is the visible church. So we have the invisible church—all true believers—then we have the visible church. There are people within the visible church who are believers and [there are those who are] unbelievers. There is wheat among the tares [see Matthew 13:25–40], and [there are] goats among the sheep [see Matthew 25:32–33]—people who know they're not saved, people who are thinking about maybe giving their lives to Christ, [and] people who think they're saved but are not. There's this mixture within the visible church.

You need to keep those two key definitions in mind, because when you start talking about the Church, then it can be confusing. One person is thinking of true believers, and another one is thinking of [a] mixture. One's thinking of a building, one's thinking of an institution. One's thinking of a pastor, one's thinking of a profession. There are so many definitions that

you have to get that clear. So, we're mostly going to be talking about the local, visible church this morning.

Sometimes when you're talking to people, and you've probably had this happen to you, you start talking to people and you think, "I think I'm going to see if I can talk to this person about the Lord." So, you know, there's nobody [else around] and you've got this little moment with this person you don't know, and [you] say, "Yeah, I'm a Christian."

And they go, "Oh! Are you one of those 'born-again' Christians?" I like that question.

I like to say, "Well, is there any other kind?" Jesus said, "Unless you are born again, you cannot enter the kingdom of God" [see John 3:3], and then he said, right after that, "You must be born again" [3:7]. There is only one kind of Christian—the born-again kind. If you're not born again, I don't care what you call yourself, or how religious you are, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. You're a child of Satan [and] you're headed for hell [see John 8:44]. All Christians in the invisible church are born again. That is just what the Scriptures teach.

When you start talking [to] people about being a Christian, a true believer, then the subject of church comes up. Maybe you [ask], "What church do you belong to?"

"Well, I don't believe in church membership."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Why not?"

"Well, you know. . . I had a bad experience."

"Oh, so you aren't going to commit yourself to the church because somebody else sinned so you're going to sin, too? Is that what you're saying? 'Listen, somebody sinned against me, so I'm going to sin against God'?" Think about that. Is that reasonable? No.

Or, here's another excuse: "Well, I'm living in sin right now, and I don't want to become a member because I know that church, that Calvary Bible Church, they discipline people there." (We're going to have a whole [other]

sermon on that later, too, by the way.) “They discipline people there so, man, I’ve got to get my act together and quit sinning because I know I’m living in ongoing sin.” Well, that person needs [to be] evangelized because the Scriptures make it clear: “By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God” [1 John 3:10].

Some people say, “I would become a member, but I don’t want to be submitting to anybody. I’d have to submit to the leadership, and I’m not going to do that.” Even though the Bible says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them” [Hebrews 13:17]? You don’t want to obey God?

Or some people say, “I just don’t want to serve. I’m really busy.” Even though the Scriptures say, “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another” [1 Peter 4:10]? Even though you’re commanded to serve, you don’t want to obey God?

Then somebody says, “Well, listen, I don’t see church membership in the Scriptures.” Well, that’s why we’re in Hebrews 10. Look at Hebrews 10:24–25, a familiar text if you’ve been around the church for a while. You probably know this passage because this is one of those common texts that people like to quote about being involved in church. Hebrews 10:24–25 says: “And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” You may know this text. You’ve probably [at least] heard it before if you’ve been around the church very long. Maybe you even have it memorized—if I kind of got you started, you could probably finish it pretty well.

But what many people don’t have memorized, or even know about at all, is the context. Everybody knows that when you study the Bible, context is king. And so, what is the context of this passage? Well, the book of Hebrews in its largest context is about the superiority of Christ, specifically the superiority of Christ over the things in Judaism [that] foreshadowed, or were a picture of, the ultimate things that would be fulfilled in Jesus. He

is, for instance, better than the angels [see Hebrews 1:4]. He is better than Moses [see John 1:17]. He is the better high priest [see Hebrews 4:14]. He is the better sacrifice, etc. All the way through the book of Hebrews, the author of Hebrews argues for the superiority of Christ. Sprinkled throughout the book are these five, what commentators like to call, “warning sections.” These warning sections are designed to get people who are regularly attending the local church and who have not yet committed themselves to Christ and the local church to get off the fence, [and] to push them off on the side of faith and commitment to the local church. Periodically, as you read through the book, [the author] stops and addresses these fence sitters. This text is one of them.

In [the] near, preceding context, the author of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is our great high priest. That’s from verses 19 all the way down through 21. Then he says [in] Hebrews 10:22[-23]:

Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.

The author of Hebrews uses a lot of Old Testament sacrificial system lingo here, but, notice that at the end, he has, “Let us,” which tells us [that] there is this exhortation, “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.” He is encouraging us to not doubt our salvation. Why? The answer: “He who promised is faithful.” You don’t need to doubt, [or worry] that you’re going to lose your salvation, that you’re going to forfeit your salvation, that you’re going to fall from saving grace. Why? [It is] not because of you and not because of what you do, but because the God who saves is a faithful God. That’s what [the author of Hebrews] says.

But that’s not the end of the sentence. Then we get into the next “let us” statement. We have these two “let us’s” in the preceding verses (we’re

not talking salad here), then we have this other “let us” in [Hebrews 10:]24: “Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds.” This is one of the many “one another’s” of the Bible (and for your information, in weeks to come we’re going to do a whole sermon on that, also). But, here, this particular “one another” is an exhortation for believers in the local church to stimulate other believers in the local church “to love and good deeds” in the local church.

This is the positive action all believers are to engage in. It is their responsibility to encourage others “to love and good deeds” in the context of the local, visible church. You may think to yourself, “How do I know this?” Look at verse 25, where we have the negative of the positive exhortation in verse 24. Verse 24 gives us the positive thing to do, verse 25 gives us the negative thing not to do: “Not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” The [word “assembling” refers to] the assembly of the local church, the context where we encourage one another “to love and good deeds.” He says, “Don’t get in the habit of forsaking the assembly of the local church. Instead, be encouraging,” which is a synonym for stimulating one another “to love and good deeds.”

You may be out there thinking to yourself, “Well, all right. I see that believers are to be in the local church. I see that we are to stimulate one another ‘to love and good deeds,’ and encourage one another, but I don’t have to be a member to do that. I could just show up periodically on Sunday, and the rest of the Sundays I can stay home and watch one of those whacked-out TV evangelists, and have church in front of my TV. Or, maybe I could just get a tape or CD of some sermon of some great preacher and I’ll just listen to it and have church at home. Or, if I’m really hi-tech, I’ll download three MP3 sermons off the Internet, and I’ll drive around and do errands and listen to three sermons on Sunday. Whoa! I’ll get triple church.” If that is you, I want you to look at Hebrews 10:26–27, and let these words strike you through.



We read: “For if we go on sinning willfully,” just stop there. He’s talking about some sin. “For” tells us he is continuing the thought. “For if we go on sinning willfully,” we have to ask ourselves: What is the nearest antecedent in mention? [Or,] if that word “antecedent” scares you, what is the nearest sin mentioned in the preceding context before verse 26? Look there: forsaking the assembly of the local church, which would include refusing to fulfill your God-given responsibilities and obligations to the local church. That is the nearest sin mentioned in the context. Don’t forsake, don’t depart, don’t abandon, don’t desert the local church because you have the Holy Spirit. You have spiritual gifts, [and] you are to use them in the context of the local church. You are to do all of the things that God says you are to do in the context of the local church.

If you forsake the assembly, what? Verse[s] 26[-27]: “For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,” that doesn’t sound good, “but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES.” Ow! Does that sound like “believer” to you—“adversaries of God”? People who have nothing to anticipate but the certain, terrifying expectation of judgment? No. That’s not a believer. Believers have passed from judgment to life. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” [Romans 8:1]. [The author of Hebrews is] talking about unbelievers. Now you can see why Dr. Adams, and Dever, and *moi* are saying this. Departure from the local church, a refusal to fulfill your God-given responsibilities to the local body of believers, is a clear, certain indicator that you don’t love God.

That’s why the Apostle John in 1 John 2:19 says, “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.” Parents don’t want to think about their kids going to hell. They want to think their kids are going to heaven, but just thinking it doesn’t make it true. Sometimes you have children who grow up in a Christian family, the parents are Christians, and they have their kids come

to church, and the parents are very encouraged. [But], as soon as the kids graduate from high school and get [away] from home, they quit going to church.

You talk to these parents, and the mother or father says, “Yeah, my kids, they’re Christians. They just aren’t going to church right now.”

And then you have to say, “So, what does that mean?” They’re unbelievers is what it means.

We need to stop and ask ourselves this: Is church a big deal to God? God talks a lot about the things that are a big deal [to Him], and the Church is [mentioned] all the way through the New Testament. It’s everywhere. All of the epistles in the New Testament are written to the Church. Acts is all about the founding of the Church. The first three chapters [of Revelation are about] the Church. The end [of Revelation is also about] the church.

How much did God pay for the Church? Peter tells us in 1 Peter 1:18–19, “Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.” That makes the Church a huge deal. Paul, when speaking to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28, says, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” You elders, you’re going to be held accountable for how you shepherd your local congregation, which God Incarnate purchased with His own blood. That makes the Church the most valuable and precious thing both in heaven and on earth. It is a huge deal to God.

If you’re sitting out there, and you’re thinking, “Well, Jack, OK. It’s a big deal, but show me that verse that says, ‘Thou shalt become a member, go to membership class, fill out the application, and be interviewed.’” If that’s you, I just want you to know [that] that verse just isn’t in the Bible. I know what you’re thinking, “Ah! Told ya! Told ya! You know, Jack, you can’t be adding things to the Scriptures, because if you add things to the Scriptures, you know, that’s not good—[there are] those curses and everything [see

Revelation 22:18]. You'd really be a legalist if you did that." You know what? I love people who say things like that. I can respect the person who says, "Where is it in the Book? You know, where stands it written?" That's a great thing.

Well, if Hebrews 10:24–27 isn't enough, I'm coming at you. The book of Acts is where it's written. The book of Acts tells us about the early church. Do you know what it teaches us? It teaches that the early church kept records. [That's the first point in our response to "Where is it in the Bible?"] [Take], for instance, Acts 2, [which] is [about] Pentecost [and] the birth of the Church. Acts 2:41 says that after the gospel was preached at Pentecost this is what happened: "So then, those who had received his word," Peter's word, the preaching of the gospel, "were baptized," [they] made a public commitment and profession of faith, "and that day there were added about three thousand souls." What does that tell us? They kept records of those who believed and were baptized. They knew how many people were added to the church. Voila!

Acts 4:32 says, "And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul." Notice, there was a "congregation of those who believed." They knew who the believers were—they were the congregation. Acts 8:1 [and] 11:22 speak of the church of Jerusalem, that is, the believers at Jerusalem. [In] Acts 11:[26], we read this: "And when he," that is, Barnabas, "had found him," that is, Paul, "he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church," the believers at Antioch, "and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." Here we see that the believers at Antioch were the church at Antioch and they knew who they were, and they trained those whom they knew were believers at Antioch.

Herod, Acts 12:1 says, tried to lay "hands on some who belonged to the church." How did they know? They kept records. Acts 13:1, "Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers," and then he goes on to describe their names and who they [were]. Certain people were in the church at Antioch. In Acts 14:23, it says, "they had ap-

pointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” This is huge. This tells us that each local congregation was not only defined, but certain people were picked, who had names, that people knew, who met the qualification for elders, and those people were assigned to shepherd the flock in a certain location. You can’t shepherd the flock of God among you unless you are among the flock of God, unless you’re qualified. You don’t know if you’re qualified unless you’ve been around, you know the people, they know you, they know your character, they know you’re faithful, you have been tested, and then you are qualified to shepherd the flock. The only way that happens [is] if they know who is committed to the church and who isn’t, who’s in the church and who’s not.

That’s just a sampling—there are tons of verses in Acts [pertaining to the Church]. Read the whole book and you’ll see. Second: The New Testament epistles are all written to the local church. I already mentioned this, but when you look at the New Testament epistles, realize this: every time you read Acts, or Romans, or Corinthians—just go down the line—all of [them] are written to local churches. Or, in the case of Timothy and Titus, [they are written] to specific people in local churches. They’re all to local churches, about local churches, [about] what local churches are to do. There is not a mention, not a single shred of Scripture anywhere that talks about the person who is saved who is outside the local church. It doesn’t exist. There’s nothing there. Any instruction is for those *in* the church, committed to the church, who have made a public profession in the Church of God.

Third, Christ loves the Church. You say, “Well, what does that have to do with church membership?” We’re getting there. [Do] you remember Ephesians 5, in the section in verse 22 and following [where] it talks about husbands loving wives, and wives submitting to husbands? It says in there, [in verse 25]: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” Then after he goes through talking about all this, remember at the very end, he says, “This mystery is great;

but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.” So, as he’s addressing husbands and wives, he’s also letting them know that the husband and wife relationship—that loving, sacrificial, committed relationship—is the relationship on earth that pictures Christ and His love for His Bride, the Church.

That is something that is huge for this reason: because we are Christians, right? The word “Christian” means “little Christ.” You have to ask yourself: Are believers to be like Christ? Well, yes. Are believers to love the things that Christ loves? Yes. Does Christ love the Church? Yes. Is Christ committed to the Church? Yes. I mean, if you’ve ever read those letters in Revelation 2–3, where Jesus commends, and rebukes, and confronts, and exhorts, He mentions specific people, specific issues. Why does He do that to literal, local churches? Why does He do that? [It is] because He loves the Church. He loves the local church. You are to be like Jesus and love the Church. If you aren’t willing to make a commitment to the Church, how can you say that’s love? I mean, all you have to do is talk to anybody here [who has] been married thirty-five, forty, fifty years, and say, “Man, how did you make it through all the hard times, and all the trials, and all these things? I mean, was it those warm fuzzies you had? Those romantic, ‘Oh, I just love you’ [feelings]? Is that what got you through? What was it?”

What are they going to tell you? They’re going to say, “You know what? It was our commitment to love and to cherish through richer and poorer, and through better and worse, as long as we both shall live. That’s what got us through.” They all say that. And if they don’t, they’re divorced. That’s what gets you through—a commitment, a commitment to fulfill your solemn oath before God. Love is based off of that kind of commitment. So you cannot say, “I love the Church. I love what Christ loves,” and not be committed. It just doesn’t work.

[You may be thinking, “OK, I understand that. I get that we’re supposed to love what Christ loves and that means loving the Church. But, what is the *purpose* of church membership?] [First,] consider this: God calls you to corporate worship with the local church. Think about this. You need to

assemble to worship corporately. We see this in the Scriptures. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 11—that text we read from every time, pretty much, we have communion Sunday—in verses 17–18 of that chapter, Paul says, “But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church,” it’s just assumed: “when you come together as a church.” You gather to worship as a church.

In Acts 20:7, it says, “On the first day of the week,” Sunday, “when we were gathered together to break bread,” a synonym for communion, “Paul began talking to them.” He preached until midnight, he preached until a guy dropped out of the window and killed himself. (And believe me, it’s never happened here—yet.) But the whole point is [that] they gathered on Sunday to be equipped, to hear preaching, to celebrate communion. Sound familiar? [It is] the gathering of the Church.

[In] 1 Corinthians 5:4, Paul confronts the Corinthian church because they were putting up with this guy who was wicked. He says, “In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit,” and then he goes on to address the situation. In other words, the Corinthians had a time when they gathered together corporately. It’s all the way through the Bible. There are tons of verses that you can find [that say] “they gathered together,” “they came together,” “when you are together.” It’s assumed that, yes, the local church will gather at times just like we’re gathering now, to praise God, worship God, pray, hear the Scriptures taught, encourage one another, serve one another, and do all the things that the Church is to do when it gets together.

[Second], God calls you to fellowship with the local church. We saw this from Hebrews 10:24–25: you are to be stimulating one another “to love and good deeds.” There are lots of texts on this. (We’re going to spend a whole sermon on this—actually, three sermons.) They all relate to this issue. That’s what church is about. Church isn’t just coming to get what you want, to plunder the Egyptians [see Exodus 3:22], church is about you coming to give what God gave you.

[Third], God calls you to serve others in the local church with your spiritual gifts. This is the natural outcome; this is part of fellowshiping with the local church. It is the natural outflow. We're going to talk about this. Romans 12 [and] 1 Corinthians 12 [say] that each of you have received spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit, and, as Peter says in 1 Peter 4:10, "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another." You can't do that if you're skipping around, if you're not committed. Do you think we're going to let you lead or teach if you won't even become a member, if you won't even say, "Yes, I submit myself to the leadership"? Not on your life.

[Fourth]: God calls you to be ministered [to] by others in the local church. You see, when you don't become committed, then you don't serve in the area of your spiritual giftedness like you should, so you're cheating other people. If you don't become a member and commit yourself, then other people [who] have spiritual gifts who want to invest in you don't get a chance to either, so you're robbing them of the blessing, because Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" [Acts 20:35]. You need to commit yourself because other people are waiting to serve you, to disciple you, to rope you into their ministry, to make you part [of the church], to get involved in your life.

[Fifth]: God calls you to evangelize the lost and bring them into the local church. Now, if you're not part of the local church, what do you do if you lead somebody to the Lord? What do you do? You lead somebody to Christ, and then you say, "OK, be warm and filled. Trust God, He'll take care of you." Jesus said, "Go make disciples of all nations" [see Matthew 28:19] lead them to the Lord by preaching the gospel, then get them to make a public profession of their faith in Jesus Christ, "baptizing them," and then what? [Christ says], "Then I want you to be teaching them, discipling them to observe all that I commanded you." Where does that happen? [It happens] in the context of the local church. That's where it happens. We saw in Acts that evangelizing isn't merely about sharing the gospel, but [about]

sharing the gospel [and] bringing people to a place of public profession of faith in Christ, where they are committed to a local church.

[Sixth]: God calls you to commit to the leadership of the local church. Turn over to Hebrews 13, since we're kind of [into] Hebrews this morning. Hebrews 13:7, where the author of Hebrews says this: "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." Now, do you see that command there, that exhortation, to imitate the faith of your leaders? The question is this: Are you going to obey this or not? I have news for you. All of the leaders here are members. Are you going to imitate that or not? They're all committed. Are you going to imitate that or not?

Look down at Hebrews 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." The leadership of Calvary Bible Church wants you to know that you need to commit yourself to the local body of believers. If not [to] this one, [then] to another one. You need to become a member. Do you see what God's telling you here? Obey your leaders and submit to them. I'm telling you, from them, [that] they want you to do that. Are you going to obey that or not?

Richard Baxter, in his work *The Christian Directory*, speaking of those who do not commit themselves to membership, says, "He therefore that will intrude into their communion and privileges without expressing his consent before hand to be a member, and to submit to the pastoral oversight, is to be taken for an invader." Why say that? [It's] because it's true. I mean, if the Scriptures say do that, and the leadership is saying [you should] commit yourself, and [that you should] follow our examples, and we're all members, [and] we're telling you to be members, and you go, "Well, you know. . . ."

"What? What's your excuse?" There is none. There is no excuse. There's no way out of this one. That's the whole point of the sermon.



[Seventh:] God calls you to give to the local church. I've done a whole series on this.<sup>1</sup> [so] I'm not going to go into this in detail, but you need to give to the local church. If we could let all the giving records be known (and we never will), [who do] you think gives to the church? [Is it] the members or the non-members? You know the answer. The non-members, the uncommitted people, don't want to give to the church; they don't obey God in this area. They want the local church to feed them spiritually, to provide soft, squishy pews, and lighting, and sound systems, and parking lots, and children's ministries. They want to receive as much as they can. They want to plunder the Egyptians [see Exodus 3:22] and then leave with no commitment, without contribution to the Lord's work.

I had something really strange happen a while back. This has never happened to me [before], and this was just out there. This guy comes into my office, and says, "You know, I really feel like the Lord is moving me to give to your church."

And I'm thinking, "Well, fine, give."

He says, "Well, I go to a different church," he says, "I'm giving to that church. I don't want you to think I'm not giving to my church."

And I said, "Well, what do you mean?"

He says, "Neat things are happening here. I just really feel God is doing things at this church, and I want to give to this church. But," he says, "you know, I've got some criteria."

I'm thinking, "Oh, great, he wants a plaque with his name on it. And he wants a full-page ad in the Daily News, saying, 'I gave to church.'" And I just thought, "Oh, no."

He says, "Listen, I don't want anybody to know what I give. No one." He says, "How many people will know? If I give, how many people will know?"

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.calvarybiblechurch.org/Sermons.aspx/Series/Stewardship>

And I said, “Just one person: Don Churnock. He is a black vault. Everything goes in—he’s always willing to take an offering—and that’s it. He’s the only one who will know.”

He said, “OK, I want to know who [he] is and how I [can get to] talk to him.”

I said, “He’s not here right now,” and I gave him [the information he needed].

This guy loved giving. He talked to me, [and said], “Man, I have just been so blessed,” and he told me this story that I wish I could tell you, but it would implicate the godliness of somebody here who wouldn’t want you to know. But somebody’s example in giving just blessed him so much [that] it changed his life. And [there he was,] giving, but [he didn’t] want anybody to know. And he gave cheerfully, he gave sacrificially, and he gave so that only God knows. That’s part of being part of the local church. That’s what Christians do.

Now, I could give you more reasons, but we’re running out of time. The whole point here is that if you love God you will love the Body of Christ, and you will want to be part of the Body, you’ll want to serve in the Body, you’ll want to give in the Body, you’ll want to be blessed by the Body, you’ll want to hang around the Body. If you don’t want that, you’re an unbeliever. You are an unbeliever. I don’t know what other conclusion [to make].

“Well, I don’t really like the people of God, and I don’t want to actually obey God in all these areas. I’d prefer to just do my own thing and rule my own life.” I mean, what is that?

Now, I want you to know, there are reasons, legitimate reasons for not becoming a member of the local church. And some of you are going, “Whew!” [If] you’re here for three months because you live somewhere else and your job brought you here and you’re on a special assignment, and you’re going to be heading back, fine. Maybe you’re just here from out of town, this is your first Sunday, and you’re thinking, “Whoa! This church is serious!” and you’re kind of shocked. You’re thinking, “Well, maybe I

shouldn't go anywhere. Maybe I should." That's fine. The whole point is: find a church, get committed, serve there, whether it's here or somewhere else. [Or], maybe you're a brand-new believer, you know you're going to be leaving the state in three weeks, and that's fine. You know you're not going to become a member. You don't even have the time.

But listen, [if] you have a bunch of those little, flimsy excuses, you just need to say, "Lord, OK. You're right. Time's up. I've just been looking out for number one, here. I really haven't realized the implications of not being committed to the local church, and now I'm going to pursue membership." This is what the elders want you to do. This is the example they have set for you. This is the example in the Scriptures, so do it.

Now, if you're out there thinking, "Well, what does it involve? I mean, what do I have to do?" Well, there are beds of nails, fire, [going] barefoot on coals. We've got a lot of things you have to do. It hurts, but it's worth it. No. It's pretty simple. The Scriptures talk about having roles, knowing who is in and not in the church—all of these things are clear from the Scriptures. But, the specific process [for church membership] is not laid out. This gives each local church the freedom to develop whatever process they want to [so they can] be organized and keep track of those who are in and those who are out.

Jonathan Edwards, for instance, one of the greatest theological intellects America has ever produced, was kicked out of his church in North Hampton because of this issue of church membership. His father-in-law, who pastored the church before him, Solomon Stoddard, said that, "You don't need to do anything to become a church member." He just had this open, unrestricted view. All you had to do was show up and say, "I want to become a member," and [they'd] put [you] on the [files] and you were part [of the church]. That's good if you want to say, "Hey, we've got 12,000 members. Now, there are only 400 here, but we have 12,000. They're out there somewhere." Some people like the numbers thing, so they want to have unrestricted, open access—whichever wants to put their name down becomes a member.

Well, Edwards, after studying the Scriptures, thought, “No, this isn’t good.” Because what happens then, [is that] people [who] aren’t even Christians become part of the church, become disciplers, become “leaders” in music, and Bible study teachers, and worshippers. The point is [that] people who don’t know the Lord can’t do any of those things. They’re all pretending. They’re the children of Satan. They’re headed for hell. And so, to try and give them an opportunity to “lead,” and “serve,” and “minister” when they don’t even have the Holy Spirit within them, and they aren’t even saved, is a huge nightmare. We talked about that last week.<sup>2</sup> And so, [Edwards] wrote, in defense of his position, *A Humble Inquiry Concerning Qualifications for Communion*. He published [it] in 1749, and it led to his being fired. All he basically said was, “When somebody wants to be part of this local congregation, we need to find out that they know the gospel, they understand how a person is saved, and they have evidence of a transformed life.” That was it, and they fired him because a whole bunch of people were already in the church who didn’t know the Lord, so they hated that standard. And so, they fired him.

William Barclay, who has a lot of bad doctrine, advocated this [open approach to church membership]. He says, “Let’s just do this two-tier form of church membership.” He said the first tier would be for those who are deeply attracted to Jesus Christ and the Christian way, and [they] wouldn’t discipline [those people] if they fell into sin. Then there would be this second kind of tier that [was for] “the many fewer. . . [who were] prepared to make a total commitment to Jesus Christ,” and if those people sinned, [they would] discipline them. Now, from our studies of Luke, how many people are actually Christians who aren’t totally committed? Zero. Unless you deny yourself, and take up your cross, and follow Jesus, you cannot be His disciple [see Matthew 16:24]. There is no half-committed Christian. You either repent, die to self, receive the Lord Jesus Christ, or you don’t. There is no in between.

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.calvarybiblechurch.org/Sermons.aspx/audio/sermon/2007/20070107>

And so, you're convicted about this sermon, and you're thinking, "Oh, man, I should have become a member last month. What's going to happen to me if I do that?" This is it—[our third and final point: What is the process for becoming a church member?]. Every couple [of] months we have a newcomers class, and you [go] there, and for about three hours we tell you about the history of the church, what the church believes, and we say, "This is where we came from, this is what we believe, and this is your responsibility as a believer." That's pretty painless. Then we give you an application, and if you want to, you can fill out that application.

Just [to give you] some background information, [there are] two questions [that] are [particularly] significant [on that application]. One is: Have you been baptized? We ask that because the Scriptures command it, and if somebody says he's a Christian and he's never obeyed the Lord in that area, we want to know why. And so, we want to know, have you been baptized as a believer? And if not, why not?

And if [someone] says, "Well, I don't know."

[We] say, "OK, [go to the] baptism class. It's coming up. Two little, short classes on Sunday [and then] we'll see you in the tank."

If [someone] says, "Yeah, I've been baptized as a believer," then we look at his testimony. We want to know whether his testimony and how he came to the Lord is actually a testimony where he is actually trusting in Christ and His work on the cross to save him, or whether he is trusting in his good works. Sometimes it's pretty scary. You know, he writes down there, "I've been a good person. I've never murdered anybody. I've tried to do good. I've tried to read my Bible. I've given to the United Way." Whatever. He lists these things, and we realize this person doesn't know the Lord and we share the gospel with him.

Anyways, you [answer those questions on the application for membership], then you go [and] you have an interview. It's not an inquisition. There are elders there—they're scary, some of them, but most of them are nice. They just ask you basic questions: So, how did you come to know the Lord? What are you trusting in to save you? What would you say the gospel is?

Do you have any questions? Do you understand your responsibility to the church? Are you ready to submit to that and commit yourself to this local body as we commit ourselves to you? Then, finally, the elders at the next elder's meeting say, "These are the people who want to become members."

And we say, "OK," and then we have [those people] come up here and they're all smiling, and you know, we do a little ceremony—the right hand of fellowship—pray for them, and voila, a bunch of people shake their hands and they're in. We [follow this process] because we want to make sure that we're relatively certain that [people who become members here are] believers. They may not be. It's not a foolproof process, but it does let us know that even if they aren't believers, they know what the gospel is, and they know what they need to know in order to become believers. And so, there's no excuse.

Some of you out there are thinking, "Man, I am so glad I'm a member because that person next to me looks pummeled, and beat up, and dragged over the coals." And you know what? Next Sunday is coming, and the Sunday after that.

But if you're out there and you're thinking, "You're right. I'm not a member," you need to obey God. You either need to become a member at this church or another church, but you need to get committed, become a member, and fulfill your responsibility to the Body of Christ, to love that which Christ loves, to stop cheating yourself, and cheating the world, and cheating the church, and cheating God of the glory He deserves because He has given you spiritual gifts and He wants you to use them in the context of [the] local church.

So, having said that, what did we learn this morning? Here it is. You know the Bible teaches [that] it is normal and right for every believer to commit him or herself to the local church. Secondly, you know the purpose of becoming a member of the local church—all those things we described are things you are to do, and those all relate to commitment, and those things are all the benefits you receive when you commit yourself. And now you understand the little process we have for members.

I just want to tell you one more story about Charles Spurgeon. He came to the Lord [when he was] sixteen years old, and he wanted to become a member of the church. But his pastor was a little bit slow and slothful, and so [Spurgeon] went to him, and he said, “I want to become a member.” Then the pastor didn’t get back to him, so [Spurgeon] went again, and he kept knocking on the guy’s door. “I want to become a member. I want to become a member. I want to...” Finally, he wrote [the pastor] a letter, [saying], “If you don’t receive me as a member, I’m going to call a congregational meeting and I’m going to ask the congregation myself if they’ll have me.”

That is the attitude that all Christians need to have. “I’m a believer, man. I want to be identified with the people of God. I want them to serve me, and I want to serve them, and I want to give, and I want to put myself under the authority of the elders and the leadership of the church. I want to have all the benefits that all those who are committed to the local church have because I love what Christ loves, and I want to obey the governing authorities.” That is the Christian attitude.

The person who says, “Ah, that’s not important to me.” That person just needs Jesus. He needs Jesus. So, those of you who are not members, get with it. Those of you who are, wear Kevlar next week. Let’s pray.

Father, we thank You for what we were able to see this morning in the Scriptures as we looked at many issues related to being a committed member of the local church. And, Father, I pray for those here who, for whatever reason, have been postponing or procrastinating [about] becoming a member. I pray that they would get those issues resolved and, Father, take action so that they can be blessed, so that they can receive all the blessings that come with being committed to the local church. And, Father, for the rest of us, as we have looked at all of these purposes of the Church, may all of those things remind us of our responsibilities. And, Father, if we are not doing those things, may we be rebuked, may we be confronted, may we confess our sins, and may we start fulfilling the responsibilities and obligations that all believers have to Your local body of believers. And,

Father, we pray all these things in Your name because we've seen it in Your Word, and because we want to give You glory, Amen.

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