

## **Why Become a Church Member?**

August 5th, 2012

Matthew 16:13-20, 18:15-18

*"<sup>17</sup>And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. <sup>18</sup>And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup>I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*

A little over a year ago, I began to ask some questions about the subject of church membership. Why do we do that? Why do we make people go through a class, sit before an elder for an interview, and make people sign a covenant? Why do we even have a covenant? The fruit of that thinking and studying has been a deepened, renewed wonder and appreciation for the Church, church membership, the reality of our church covenant.

And -- as was the case with baptism a few weeks ago -- it seemed wise to take a few weeks to instruct the Body in these areas, because again I've observed a significant level of ignorance in these areas. That is, at least in part, due to the fact that we have not made our membership covenant the prominent part of our life together as a church that it ought to be. And I'd like to see that change. I'd like to see all of us come to a greater grasp of what it means to be a church member, and to think through these covenant commitments which bind the membership of Joy together. So I am going to spend the next four Sundays highlighting those different commitments.

But first, I thought it would be helpful to spend a week examining the question, why should I become a church member? I know many people resist this idea of formal membership, but as I've thought through this subject, I think there are good reasons to believe that membership in a local church is a New Testament expectation for all Christians. Some of you may remain unconvinced, and I don't regard you as enemies.

But this isn't just a message to the non-members of Joy. I hope that those who are members will be edified as we learn or are reminded of why we make this commitment.

So why should you become a church member? I believe the place to start is by considering the keys of the kingdom, which is why we're here in Matthew 16. This is a difficult text, but when we dig it up I think we'll find some foundational truths that undergird the commitment of church membership.

### **The Keys of the Kingdom**

"<sup>18</sup>And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup>I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.'" Peter is given the keys of the Kingdom of heaven. What are keys used for? Keys lock and unlock doors, allowing someone to enter into a new space, or barring someone from entering.

And that seems to be what Jesus is giving Peter the authority to do: to regulate who was coming out and who was going in. Jesus is giving Peter (and the apostles) heaven's authority to examine the confession and life of those who claim to be Jesus' followers, and to render a declaration as to whether they are truly a citizen of God's Kingdom. He's authorizing Peter to affirm with joy those whose lives and professions of faith indicate that they belong to Jesus by opening the doors and uniting them to His Body on earth, and to exclude any imposters who would harm the members of His Body.

Anyone can claim to be a citizen of heaven, to be a follower of Jesus. And Jesus has already warned His followers in this gospel of the danger of hypocrisy and self-deception among His people (cf. Matthew 7:21ff). It's just as true today. In His words to Peter, Jesus is making

clear that He did not intend to leave us to govern ourselves and declare ourselves His citizens and representatives in the world.

Instead, He gave Peter the keys of the kingdom, authorizing him to do for others what Jesus had just done for him. Peter rightly confessed who Jesus was, and Jesus said that Peter's right answer came from heaven. Though Jesus was on earth, He spoke on behalf of heaven. Then immediately He tells Peter that he is to do the same: to represent what is bound (included) and loosed (excluded) in heaven by binding and loosing on earth. This is what it means to have the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

### **The Local Church is Given the Keys**

This still leaves a lot of questions though. How do you know binding and loosing means including or excluding someone from the church? Even if that is what it means, Jesus is talking to Peter, not a local church, so why does this matter for church membership? The implications for church membership show up two chapters later:

*"<sup>15</sup>If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. <sup>16</sup>But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup>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."*

Here Jesus has in view a local church, a group of believers who can come together to deal with a Christian brother living in sin. After several steps in the process aiming at restoration, the final step is for the church to render a judgment on the unrepentant sinner: "Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector".

Just at this point -- after exercising authority to remove someone from the church and declare that the individual is not to be regarded as a fellow believer -- Jesus again invokes the metaphor of using the keys of

the kingdom to bind and loose: "<sup>18</sup>Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." This is an act of loosing, but they also have the authority to bind, which is to affirm a profession and unite a brother to the church.

So what Jesus authorized Peter to do in chapter 16, He is evidently authorizing the local church to do in chapter 18. The local church has been given the keys of the Kingdom. It has been given heaven's authority for declaring who on earth is a citizen of the kingdom and a true, genuine representative of the King. The authority to remove someone from membership in the church ("Let him be to you...") presupposes an authority to assess a person's life and doctrine, and render an authoritative verdict on Jesus' behalf.

### **The Local Church: An Embassy of Heaven**

To illustrate what I'm trying to say, the local church is like an embassy of heaven. An embassy is an official representative of one nation inside another nation. If you travel to Spain on business for a month, and while you're there, you lose your passport, you as an individual citizen of America do not have the authority to declare yourself an American citizen. You won't get back in this country simply by yelling in the customs line, "I promise you, I'm an American citizen!" Unless you're Jason Bourne, you're going to have to submit yourself to the embassy. You need to be officially affirmed.

So you go to the American embassy in Spain and you say, "I'm an American citizen but I've lost my passport. Can you issue me a new one?" The embassy won't make you an American citizen, but they are officially authorized to declare you to be an American citizen in a way that you yourself aren't. The embassy does some investigation and issues you a new passport. Now you're authorized. You've been

affirmed and have the rights and privileges and the protection of an American living in a foreign land.

So it is with the local church, and local church membership. The church is the Jesus-authorized embassy of the Kingdom of heaven. Church membership is you walking through the embassy's doors and saying, "I'm a citizen of the kingdom heaven, a representative of King Jesus. Could you please affirm that by issuing me a passport that will publicly identify me as a citizen of His Kingdom, and protect me as one under the care and oversight of my home nation (heaven) while I continue my pilgrimage in this foreign land (earth, Hebrews 11:13)."

And it's the church asking questions (as Jesus did with Peter), gathering data, weighing the evidence, and issuing you a passport. It's the affirmation of Christ's Kingdom embassy on earth that you are an official, licensed, card-carrying, genuine representative of King Jesus, and immediately becoming a part of the embassy itself, one of the officials who affirms and oversees others. A church member is someone who is formally recognized as a Christian.

### **Church Membership is Visible and Identifiable**

Based on these two passages -- and the illustration of it taking place in 1 Corinthians 5 -- I conclude that Jesus expects His followers to be bound, united, affirmed, protected, overseen, and cared for by a local church which corporately has the authority of heaven in a way that you as an individual Christian do not. It seems that being in the church, or being put out of it, is a public, visible, definable reality. The church knows about, and is involved in, the removal of its affirmation of the man's membership. It is then, presumably, aware of and involved in the initial affirmation of membership as well.

Let me press that, because even if you're not sure about my interpretation of the keys, this is a significant pointer to the importance of church membership. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul says, "<sup>12</sup>For what have

I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? <sup>13</sup>God judges those outside." There is a clearly drawn line between those who are "in the church" and those who are "outside the church". Being in the church is a visible, definable reality.

Here in Matthew 18 Jesus says if you're getting ready to discipline, "tell it to the church". Without an identifiable, clearly defined church membership, how would we know who makes up the group of people who will take up this very sensitive and weighty matter of rendering the judgment that an unrepentant "brother" is to be regarded as an unbeliever? It's hard to believe that just anyone who happened to show up on a Sunday morning and claimed to be a Christian could be a part of such a serious decision.

"The church" is a definable group of people. When we take a matter "to the church", there is no uncertainty as to who we mean. And this line between those who are in the church and those who are outside -- something that is visible, clear and definable -- is blurred when there is no formal, identifiable way of recognizing who has become a part of the church and who hasn't. That's why we value church membership.

If not through a formal commitment to become a church member, how are we supposed to know who is "in the church" and who is "outside"? How am I as a pastor to know who the flock in my charge is that I'm to shepherd, and will give an account for (1 Peter 5:2, Hebrews 13:17)? Is it anyone who enters the doors of the church, even once? Christmas and Easter? Regular attenders? How regular? Three times a month? For how long? Six months? Do they need to be involved in any ways outside of Sunday morning? Do they need to contribute something financially to show they're committed? How much? When and how do you magically cross that line from "just visiting" to "member"?

Do you see how gray and blurry and confusing and potentially chaotic this gets when we try to take away a formal commitment of church

membership? Determining the membership of the church becomes all about works, and that is antithetical to the gospel of God's grace. It make a lot of arbitrary stuff the criteria for what makes a person a church member, rather than what Jesus called for: faith in Christ, and a credible profession submitted to Christ's Kingdom embassy on earth, as well as a commitment to have your life be accountable to the church, and to hold others accountable.

### **Church Membership: A Blood-Bought Gift**

So I would urge visitors, new Christians, and regular attenders to consider, out of love for Jesus, and for the pastors of the church and for the Body as a whole, making the formal commitment to be a member of Joy Community Fellowship. To say, "I'm here. I'm one of you. I want to be visible. I want to be held accountable. I want to be clear. I'm a part of this church, and I'm putting my name on the line to show it, so there's no confusion."

Maybe that's not necessary in China, but in a society where there's a church on every corner, where churches are hundreds of people, who float in and out of one church, then another, for years, where many churches have abandoned the biblical gospel, where people join churches that are several miles from where they live, having the structure of a formal commitment is a wise and prudent way of knowing who is truly one of us.

Don't just say, "Well, I'm here, aren't I? It's been a long time I've been here, can't you see I'm committed?" You may well be right about that, but don't perpetuate this vague and nebulous guessing-game as to how long you need to be here, how busy you need to be, etc. before we know someone has become a member. At some point you were a visitor; now, you say, you're not. How did that happen? When did that happen? Let it be clear!

Brothers and sisters, Jesus loves His Church. "18On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." That's a visible, definable, knowable group. And He gave His life to build the church, and its membership: "28Pay careful attention to yourselves and to *all the flock*, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." Membership in Christ's universal church is expressed visibly through membership in a local church.

That means church membership is a blood-bought gift of God's grace. More than most of us realize, it is a life-sustaining, faith-strengthening, joy-preserving means of God's mercy to us. Don't cut yourself off from this blessing. Let's cherish it, and soberly, joyfully and dependently consider the covenant commitments which unite us as a church purchased with the very blood of God. And let's celebrate our membership in Christ's Body by sharing together in the remembrance of His broken body and shed blood.