



Lesson 1: Membership

8/9/15

INTRODUCTION

Donald Miller, a very successful contemporary author (*Blue Like Jazz*) is recognized for his feelings that Christian faith should be a relationship, rather than a formula (Wikipedia). While that sounds good at first hearing, it has lead Miller into an “emergent church”-type Christianity. The “Emergent Church” is a group of “post-modern” Christians who are generally characterized by their “disillusionment with the organized and institutional church and their support for the deconstruction of modern Christian worship, modern evangelism, and the nature of modern Christian community” (Wikipedia). Here’s what he wrote in a blog.

I’ve a confession. I don’t connect with God by singing to Him. Not at all.

I know I’m nearly alone in this but it’s true. I was finally able to admit this recently when I attended a church service that had, perhaps, the most talented worship team I’ve ever heard. I loved the music. But I loved it more for the music than the worship. As far as connecting with God goes, I wasn’t feeling much of anything. ...

How do I find intimacy with God if not through a traditional church model?

The answer came to me recently and it was a freeing revelation. I connect with God by working. I literally feel an intimacy with God when I build my company. I know it sounds crazy, but I believe God gave me my mission and my team and I feel closest to him when I’ve got my hand on the plow. It’s thrilling and I couldn’t be more grateful he’s given me an outlet through which I can both serve and connect with him.

My friend Bob Goff says when we study somebody without getting to know them, it’s called stalking. Bob says Jesus is getting creeped out that we keep stalking him. He’d like us to bond with him in the doing.

So, do I attend church? Not often, to be honest. (<http://bit.ly/1DEhSal>)

Many Christian are confused about the church. Some, like David Miller, for one reason or another, have really disregarded it entirely. Some simply “do church,” at least inasmuch as it has become traditionally practiced (i.e., attendance). Others are faithful in their attendance and commitment in their involvement, but their theology of the church doesn’t go much beyond calendars, buildings, and budgets.

Church matters! Not just the universal concept of the church, but the local church, too! Currently, this truth is being fleshed out for our group in several ways:

- “Connecting to our Covenant” Sunday evening sermon series with Pastor Phelps
- Band of Brothers 2.3, “I Love the Church” and *Why Church Matters* (Joshua Harris) follow-up book in Focus Groups
- “Church Matters” SMBS series in August
 - **MISSION** — preserve the truth, proclaim the truth, and practice (display) the truth (<http://9marks.org/?p=1414>)
 - **PRACTICE** — exaltation, evangelism, and edification
 - *Exaltation*: corporate worship on Sundays in singing, giving, praying, ordinances, and preaching
 - *Evangelism*: bringing them in and going out to them
 - *Edification*: public preaching and personal discipleship
 - **MEMBERSHIP** — August 9
 - **DISCIPLINE** — August 16
 - **OFFICERS** — August 23
 - **ORDINANCES** — August 30

In this lesson, we’re going to consider the idea of local church membership through the lens of our New Testament. As we do, I think we’ll discover that **membership matters!**

MEMBERSHIP DEFINED

Theologically —

1. **What is a Christian? → An ambassador**

“A Christian...is someone who wears the name of God on earth, who declares his gospel, and who is united to his people. In essence, the Christian is an ambassador—someone whose identity and work meld together. Everything that an ambassador is, says, and does represents his or her king. So it is with Christians and Christ” (CD, p. 39). **Cf. John 17:18; 20:21; 2 Corinthians 5:20; Revelation 1:12-20**

2. **What is a local church? → An embassy**

The local church is not a club. It is not a voluntary organization where membership is optional for you. It is not a friendly group of people who share an interest in religious things and so gather weekly to talk about the divine. Nor is a church a service provider, where the customer has all the authority” (CM, p. 22; cf. pp. 23-24—“The basic disease behind all of these symptoms [incubated, perhaps, by the emphasis on formalism and structure in religion and by the independent individualism of Western society, p. 23]...is the assumption that we have the authority to conduct our Christian lives on our own.”). **Cf. Matthew 16:18-19; all the Epistles**

“Instead of starting with the idea of a church as a voluntary association, we need to start with the idea of it as the people of a kingdom or nation. ... Clubs and political parties and labor unions have memberships. But you don’t often use the word *membership* in relation to governments and the citizens of nations. You don’t say, “So how’s the membership of the British nation doing? Aren’t you guys running, like, sixty million members these days?” ... The church begins with this fact: Jesus is Savior and Lord ... [and the church] *gather[s] together under his supreme rule*” (CM, pp. 25-26).

“What is an embassy? It’s an institution that represents one nation inside another nation. It declares its *home nation’s* interests to the *host nation*, and it protects the citizens of the home nation living in the host nation” (CM, p. 27). “A church

does not *make* someone a citizen of the kingdom. But it does have the responsibility for declaring who does and who does not belong to Christ’s kingdom. A church, then, is like the embassy of a nation. If your passport expires while traveling in a foreign country, you apply to the embassy of your country to have your passport renewed. The embassy has an authority that you as an individual citizen do not have” (CD, pp. 40-41). **Cf. Philippians 3:20; Colossians 1:13; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:4-8**

The biblical ideas of the church as a “family,” “body,” “temple,” “flock,” etc. have to be set within this understanding.

3. **What is church membership? → A passport**

“It’s a declaration of citizenship in Christ’s kingdom. It’s a passport. It’s an announcement made in the pressroom of Christ’s kingdom. It’s the declaration that a professing individual is an official, licensed, card-carrying, *bona fide* Jesus representative” (CD, p. 42).

Practically —

1. **The Local Church** — “The local church...is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ’s name to officially affirm and oversee one another’s membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances ... In all of this, it should be clear that one of the church’s primary jobs is to protect the name of Jesus (CD, p. 41).”
2. **Church Membership** — “Church membership is a formal relationship between a local church and a Christian characterized by the church’s affirmation and oversight of a Christian’s discipleship and the Christian’s submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church” (CD, p. 42).

Notice the common elements:

- A church’s affirmation
- A church’s oversight
- A Christian’s submission

“The church body says to the individual, ‘We recognize your profession of faith, baptism, and discipleship to Christ as valid. Therefore, we publicly *affirm* and acknowledge you before the nations as belonging to Christ, and we extend the *oversight* of our fellowship.’ Principally, the individual says to the church body, ‘Insofar as I recognize you as a faithful, gospel-declaring church, I *submit* my presence and my discipleship to your love and oversight’” (CD, p. 42).

“Christians don’t join churches; they submit to them” (CM, p. 30). “It’s true that a Christian must choose to join a church, but that does not make it a voluntary organization. Having chosen Christ, a Christian has no choice but to choose to join a church” (CD, p. 43).

MEMBERSHIP DEFENDED

1. *The Logical Fallacy*

“To imply you can be part of the greater community without first being part of the smaller is not logical. You cannot be part of Rotary International without also being part of a local chapter. You cannot be part of the universal human family without first being part of a small immediate family” (<http://bit.ly/1HwbWvo>).

2. *The NT Epistles*

“Every letter in the New Testament assumes Christians are members of local churches. The letters themselves are addressed to local churches [or local church leaders]” (<http://bit.ly/1HwbWvo>). Their instructions and injunctions are meaningless unless their recipients are members of local assemblies.

3. *The Doctrine of Union*

“‘Lone-Ranger Christians’ are a contradiction because becoming a Christian means being united to Christ, and union with Christ expresses itself in union with a local body of believers. It seems to us that in the New Testament, to be excluded from the local church was to be excluded from Christ. This is why the issue of membership is so important.” Cf. **1 Corinthians 12, v. 13 (universal church truth), v. 12 (local church application)**

4. *The Practice of Community*

“Living without church membership is not healthy. Independence—the desire to choose for yourself what’s right and wrong—is at the heart of sin. You need the humility lesson of submitting to flawed elders. You need the encouragement of sharing victories with your church. You need the fellowship of sharing sufferings with your church. You need to know we’re all in this life together, and we won’t walk away from you just because you let us down or we disagree” (<http://bit.ly/1HwbWvo>). Cf. **1 Corinthians 12:12-31** (“an organic whole”)

5. *The Command to Discipline and Separate*

Matthew 18:15-17 — “It’s hard to believe that just anyone who showed up claiming to be a Christian could be a part of that gathering. Surely, “the church” must be a definable group to handle such a weighty matter” (<http://bit.ly/1JRGEFn>).

1 Corinthians 5:12-13 — “There are two implications here: One is that there is an ‘in the church’ group and an ‘outside the church’ group. Being in the church is definable. The other implication is that a person can be removed from being ‘in the church.’ Such a formal removal would not be possible if there were no such thing as a clear membership” (<http://bit.ly/1JRGEFn>).

6. *The Command to Submit to Church Leaders*

Hebrews 13:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 5:17 — “The point here is that without membership, who is it that the New Testament is referring to who must submit to a specific group of leaders? Some kind of expressed willingness or covenant or agreement or commitment (that is, membership) has to precede a person’s submission to a group of leaders” (<http://bit.ly/1JRGEFn>).

7. *The Requirement of Shepherds for their Flock*

Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2-3 — “‘Those in your charge’ [your portion, your lot] implies that the elders knew whom they were responsible for” (<http://bit.ly/1JRGEFn>).

8. The Model of Acts

- the Jerusalem church (Acts 1:15; 2:41; 2:44-45, 47; 4:4)
- persecution and local churches (Acts 8:1-4ffff)
- church as an identifiable people (Acts 11:26; 12:1; 14:27; 15)
- churches overseeing officers, missions, doctrine, finances, discipline, etc. (Acts 6:1-7; 13:1-3; 14:27; 15:1-4, 22, 30-31; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 [Acts 11:29-30]; 1 Corinthians 5)

MEMBERSHIP DIRECTED

Local church members have three primary responsibilities that should guide their weekly participation:

1. **Congregational government** (Acts 6:1-7; 13:1-3; 14:27; 15:1-4, 22, 30-31; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 [Acts 11:29-30]; 1 Corinthians 5)
2. **Community evangelism** (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8)
3. **Corporate ministry** — not just ministry areas, but “one another” ministry (people! [community & commitment]):
 - Unity (~1/3 of the “one another” passages)
 - Love (~1/3 of the “one another” passages)
 - Serving (~1/3 of the “one another” passages)

CONCLUSION

In our local church, let it be said of us as it was of Philemon: “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you” (Philemon 7). See this article for 20 practical ways to be refreshing (<http://wp.me/p5FX8d-3a0>).

RESOURCES

Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), esp. pp. 35-45.

Wayne Mack, *To Be or Not To Be A Church Member?, That Is The Question* (Lincroft, NJ: Calvary Press Publishing, 2004).

Joshua Harris, *Why Church Matters: Discovering Your Place in the Family of God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2004).

Foundations: Bible Truths for Christian Growth, Chapter 7 “The Local Church” (Mentor, OH: Grace Church, 2011).