

# Love and Church Membership

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As we come to the time for the preaching of God's word today, I invite you to turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 13. 1 Corinthians 13, this is a special message taking a little pause from our series on building a Christian mind for reasons that will become apparent as we go along. But I wanted to open by reading 1 Corinthians 13 for it sets forth the supremacy of love in the body of Jesus Christ, and love is the topic and the theme of Christ coming to save a people, and as Christ saves us it becomes the theme of our lives and of our desires toward the local body. 1 Corinthians 13 sets forth the supremacy of love like this from the Apostle Paul.

1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

When I opened the series on building a Christian mind, we started with the theme of creation, creation being a proof of the existence of God, and one of the things that I said as an implication of living in God's creation is that there's a sense in which we are a guest in his realm of creation. As a guest, we should honor the owner of the house, the owner of creation, the maker of creation, we are obligated to give Glory and honor to him, and in a like manner, in a parallel manner, I want to help you think through what it means to be in the realm of the church. Our title of today's message is "Love and Church

Membership." Love and church membership. The other elders asked me to address this before I got too much further along in my series on building a Christian mind. There's a practical reason for that. With my recent study leave, all of our church life, in a sense, has been on a little bit of hold. We have a number of people who have applied for membership and they're waiting for us patiently to do something with their applications, and we have many new people that we're just so delighted to have, new people coming in all of the time, and we felt like it was important to spend some time at periodic episodes in the coming weeks and months to talk about church membership in order to put everyone in a position to succeed in that and to succeed in body life in a local church, to succeed as someone coming into the life of Truth Community Church, perhaps there needs to be a common understanding and a common sense of the purpose of the church and why we would even become members in the first place.

Now in the back of your church bulletin, you'll see listed the five membership commitments. We're not doing any kind of membership admission here today. But for later I wanted you to have this in your hands after you had heard today's message, to be able to read through it. So I refer you to that for your subsequent reading and meditation, but we thought it was important as elders, we thought it was important to maybe help new friends better evaluate if membership was for them. We thought it would help as elders if those that have been with us for a long time might be refreshed in the spirit of what church membership is, what should motivate us toward church membership, why would someone want to become a member of a local church, and here we have to kind of get our fingers into the dough, so to speak, and manipulate the dough so that the bread comes out right, you might say. Sometimes I come up with metaphors in the moment, and I have no idea where they come from, and that was one of those times. What should motivate us toward church membership? Part of the reason that I want to talk about love and church membership today is that we have all been conditioned, I'm afraid, to think wrongly about the purpose of the church, and in a way that we don't even necessarily recognize. We live in a materialistic culture. We live in a consumer-driven culture so that choices are driven by what I want and what's good for me, what will satisfy me, what's in my interests, and I'm sure that in ways I don't recognize, there are aspects of my life that are driven by that that I'm blind to. I've got blind spots just like you do, but when it comes to the church, it's important for us to set that self-centered mindset aside, you know, and I understand completely and you can't get away from it altogether, but when people come to a church and are trying to choose a church body, you know, they say, "Well, what's going to please me? What's going to be good for me?" And you know, when somebody's wanting Bible teaching and, you know, biblical fellowship, that's a good thing, a good way to look at it, but any lesser motivation is bound to bring us to problems sooner or later because that self-centered approach, that self-centered approach of what's in it for me, what will please me, do I like this church, do I like what I see happening, that self-centered approach is the root of all sorts of evil when it's baked into the life of a local church. And I'm speaking in broad principles. I'm not addressing for now any issues at Truth Community Church, I just want you to see that that self-centered approach of what's in it for me, I'm going to show you today that that is utterly contrary to the spirit of biblical Christianity. It's utterly contrary to the spirit of Christ and what he has done for

his people, and it is utterly contrary to what the Bible says should be the mark of Christians living together and living life together in the context of a of a local church.

You see, church membership is rooted in the biblical principle of love. Not selfishness. Not what do I like. Not give me what I want or I'm going to leave. That is so foreign to the spirit of the church, and yet it is so common in the mindset of even the way that many modern churches appeal to people to come. You know, we'll give you what you want. We'll give you free coffee. We'll give you free Wi-Fi. We'll give you a concert experience. You know, we'll give you programs that are age specific. We'll take the kids off your hands so that you can be free to enjoy things on your own. And what I want you to see, beloved, is really important for you, to think deeply about what that is doing, that's saying that it's all about you and what's good for you and what makes you happy and what makes it easy for you and all of that. Now if I can draw a loose parallel to the institution of marriage, marriage is not meant to be like that, is it? A marriage based simply on two people who self-centeredly want what they want and will leave if they don't get what they want, is obviously contrary to the whole spirit of biblical marriage. Well, in a similar manner and I use the analogy loosely, we need to think about coming together as a body of Christ in a different way than what culture has conditioned us to think and the way that many churches condition us to think.

As I embark on this today, in one sense, humanly speaking, I'm dealing with an impossible task to try to dislodge that spirit from the minds of, you know, of the church because in our day, if you don't like a church, there's another one across the street that you can go to, right? If you don't like a church, there's all kinds of other alternatives for you to pursue and to leave behind the problems of church A and just enter into church B, and then you just kind of move around every few years to a different place until you come to the end of your life and you've never really contributed anything to a particular body and you've never really been built up in maturity. That's not the plan of God, beloved, and what we have to do is we have to see what Scripture says about the church, what motivates us, and let Scripture inflect us on a different trajectory with our consideration of life in the church.

Now one last thing here before we move into the content for today. You will never hear me recruiting people for church membership. You won't. In fact, many of you know when you first came and maybe you were excited about church membership, many, many people have heard me say, "Don't be in a hurry for membership. Take your time. Make sure that it's right for you. Wait a few months. Wait a year or two before you pursue membership." It doesn't do anybody any good to inflate a membership role with people who really are not clear on the concept and so we're not trying to rush people into membership, to the contrary, you know, we're trying to slow people down so that it's done for the right reasons and that everyone's in a position to succeed. I'm trying my best to approach this from a positive perspective here today to set forth things in a constructive way, not to be critical of anything that's happened in the past, there may be time to address that in the future, but for today we just need to see the principle of love and what that means for the church, and to talk about the principle of love and the church, you need to start, first of all, if you're taking notes this would be our first point for this

morning, you need to start with Christ's love for the church. Christ's love for the church. That's our first point for this morning. Christ's love for the church. How did the church come to be? What was it that if you were to trace back far beyond Truth Community Church, far beyond anything else, what was the seed, what was the starting point? What was the seminal affection that led to the existence of the church of Jesus Christ. Well, beloved, it goes all the way back deep into the character of God. It goes deep into the eternal purpose of God, and what we find is that Christ came in order to buy a people for himself and he did this out of a motivation of love.

Look to Matthew 20 with me, if you would. Matthew 20. Matthew 20. As you're turning there, let me remind you of John 3:16 where Scripture says that, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life." God sent Christ because he had a love for sinners. He sent Christ because he would have men to be saved and to come to Christ for new life, forgiveness of sin, and to enter into his kingdom. Well, in Matthew 20:25, Jesus called his disciples to himself and he said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them." He says look at the world and see how the world operates. The ones who have authority lord it over those that are under them. And then he goes on and he says in verse 26, "It shall not be so among you." He says, "Think about the world, there's a contrast to the way that it works in my kingdom and with my disciples," and he goes on to explain something to them about the direct antithesis of the way that it shall be among the disciples of Christ. Now that, beloved, is just exactly what I've just tried to do in a very faltering way in the introduction here. There is the way that the world thinks about the church, and then in contrast, in distinction, in opposition to that, there's the biblical way and the way that it's actually supposed to operate. And Jesus says to them, "It shall not be," verse 26 of Matthew 20, "It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave." There's a principle of loving service that operates in the kingdom of Christ, in the realm of Christ, and Christ, here's what you need to see, Christ makes an analogy to himself. Christ is the highest example. Christ manifested himself what it is that he wants in his disciples, as he says in verse 28, "even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." What Jesus Christ did for us is that he gave himself at a great personal sacrifice for our well-being. He did this out of a motivation of love. Nothing was added to Christ, nothing was added to his perfect divine essence by coming and serving sinners like us. We didn't improve his essence. We didn't add anything to him at all in what he did. He didn't gain anything to himself intrinsically by coming for us, rather, he sought what was good for us. He sought what would benefit us, and he gave himself up for that. And so in love, he sought what was good for his people, in love, he sacrificed himself for his people, and while we often talk about this in an individualistic way, and there's biblical reason to do that, the Lord loved me and gave himself up for me, we rightly say, but beloved, what you need to see is, what you must understand is that there is a corporate dimension to this, it's not all about you. It's not all about me and what I can get out of it. Christ had a broader purpose of bringing together a people, of gathering a people together, and his intention, as we will see as we go through Scripture here this morning, his intention is to have a people that manifest horizontally to each other what he has manifested vertically by coming from

heaven in order to redeem us, what he manifested vertically by giving his life on the cross to reconcile us to a holy God. Christ was laying himself down. He laid himself down for his people, and having done that, having stated that fact, now Scripture turns and says, "You go and do likewise." An imperative follows the indicative of what Christ had done.

Let's look at another passage, Ephesians 5, if you will turn there with me. Ephesians 5. In Ephesians 5, you read in the first two verses, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Paul writing to the church says within the body of Christ, here is how your ongoing conduct is to be manifested, you are to walk in love. Notice that it's not a simple moralistic demand that you behave in a certain way. Paul says, "You walk in love and let me show you what I mean by that. Let me tell you what I mean by love. You in the church, distinct from the world, you in the church distinct from some modern manifestations of what professes to be Christianity, you love as Christ loved us." Notice the plural. "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God." What did Christ do? He laid his life down. He selflessly gave of himself to the betterment of his people, stating that in the most simple of ways, and now, beloved, when Christ has gathered us together into his realm, gathered us into his church, the motivating principle by which we gather together, the motivating principle by which we commit ourselves to a local body is a principle of love, and in Scripture love is the exact opposite of being self-centered, of what's in it for me, do I like this, am I still happy here? Love lays itself down for the sake of others.

That's what Christ did and you see Paul applying this exact same principle later in the passage as he speaks to husbands. In verse 25 he says, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Do you see it? Do you see it, beloved? He's saying the exact same thing that he said in verse 2. In verse 2, he said Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, therefore, you walk in love. As he makes a more particular application of the principle of love and human relationships, he speaks to husbands, he tells them you love your wives and here's how you do it, it's as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, verse 26, "that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word." Christ loved the church and that becomes the principle by which, the motivation by which we gather together and as we form relationships within the body.

And so, you know, just thinking about, you know, the person of Christ, Christ relinquished his glory in heaven for a time, came to earth in the form of a baby, lived in poverty having no place whereby he could lay his head, and ultimately gave his own life up on the cross, bearing the punishment of our sins in his own body, bearing the stripes on his back that should have fallen upon us, crying out in anguish in the isolation of separation from God, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Understand that as you trace your way through the life and the sufferings of Christ, that the supreme motivation in that was a motivation of love. He did this for the sake of those who could not save themselves. He did this for you. He did this for me. And beloved, it was no mere sentiment by which he did this. It wasn't simply an emotional thing that felt good for a

while when he did this. No, from a deliberate act of self-sacrificial volition he gave himself up for us when we had nothing to offer to him in return.

That spirit is what gave birth to the church and, beloved, let me come back to what I said earlier. There's more to this than the physical thing that I'm going to describe here. When we enter into the church building, when we walk into the church building, we should be mindful of the fact that we're entering into a realm that belongs to someone else and the physical act of walking in is simply a metaphor for the spiritual aspect of entering into a commitment with the body of Christ. We enter into a realm that finds its root in the love of Christ for his people. We enter into a realm which Christ purchased for himself with his own blood, and that means that when we walk into this realm, when we enter into the realm of the local church, we enter into a place where we have to check our baggage of selfishness at the door. We have to leave that behind and realize that I'm entering into a realm where where I give of myself. I'm content not to have everything that I want. I'm content not to have for everything to be my way. I'm content not to have the music exactly like I want or the, you know, the programs to be exactly what I want. You know, that self-centeredness has to stay outside. If someone is going to come into the life of a local church, the biblical way to do that, the supreme and the controlling motivation is, "I'm coming into a realm that Christ purchased with his love and by that I want to come not just for what I can get out of it, I come recognizing that I have a responsibility to give, to contribute, to make it better for other people, to be mindful that others are involved and that they are more important than myself in my involvement here.

Now if anyone wants to get up and walk out and say, "That's not what I came here for, pastor. I'm out of here." You know what? I'll give you, you know, I'll take a moment and let you just step up and walk out. That's okay if no one's ever explained it to you, if you've never understood it that way before. You know, fair enough. But this is the way it is in Christ's realm. It could be no other way. Did Christ give of himself, beloved, to create a church where people would be so motivated so selfishly and act in such self-centered ways that it leaves behind rubble when they go their own way? That's not biblical. That's not Christ-like. And as we contemplate Christ's love for the church, how does that impact us then? That leads us to our second point for this morning. Point number 2 if you're taking notes you write this out as the second point: it impacts us in our love for the church. In our love for the church. Our love for the church.

When we stop and meditate on the self-sacrificial love of Christ for the church, we realize that if we're going to be a part of a local church that Christ's love sets the pattern for us. Watch this. We love what Christ first loved. We follow in his wake. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for it. We enter into the realm of the church, not with our own agenda, not with our own demands, but coming and saying, "I have something, you know, I would like to contribute here. I'd like to support here." Church membership is not rooted in what pleases me. It's not about me defining the way the church should be so that it lines up to please me. That's wrong. That's selfish. That's sinful. That's very hard to recognize in your own heart. But we give ourselves for those for whom Christ died. If Christ gave himself for them, and I'm a lover of Christ, then I want to give myself to what he gave himself for. Christ taught that in his own words. The greatest commandment in

Mark 12, we read this, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second commandment is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these." Christ sets the priority on love, that sacrificial giving of self.

And let me remind you of some familiar passages in the gospel of John, if you'll turn to John 13 with me. John 13. Jesus had sent Judas out of the fellowship around the table, and if ever there was a deceiver in the midst, Judas certainly was that man. The other disciples at the moment, at the time, did not recognize that he was one who would betray the Lord. You'll recall that when Jesus said, "One of you will betray me," the disciples were at a loss to know who it was. They didn't recognize that Judas was in their midst, Judas as the betrayer. They did not realize he was at the midst, but Christ knew, he knew all along. So he'd sent Judas away and now in verse 31, he turns to a purified group of disciples, the satanic element represented in Judas has been removed and now there is a purity restored to their fellowship around the table just before the crucifixion of Christ. Verse 31, "When [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.'" So the topic is of the glory of God and how God is to be glorified, and flowing from that concern for the glory of God, Jesus instructs his disciples. He says, "Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you." Now remember, this is a climactic moment. Judas has been sent out. Christ is about to go to the cross. And at this pivot point where Jesus is about to part in an earthly sense from his disciples, here's what he emphasizes to them. He says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you." Do you see it again? Just as Christ loved the church, just as Christ gave himself for us, that's what we're to do. You love one another. "Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another."

Beloved, those of you that are new to our church, those of you that are considering maybe have applied for membership and are waiting for us to act upon your application, understand that to stand on the brink of a church, to look into church membership, to offer yourself for consideration for church membership, that at the core of your motivation in that act of self-presentation should be a recognition and a commitment in your heart that says, "I want to love this body. I want to give myself to this body. I'm not going to be someone who comes for a couple of weeks and then you don't see me for six months and then I show up and expect you to treat me like I was never away. I'm not going to be that way. I'm coming," you say to yourself, you have a recognition in church membership and pursuing church membership, "I'm coming to give myself in love to this body." Yes, there is a right expectation that the body will love you in return, and we will everyone that we receive into membership. We may not do it... well, let me just say we don't do it perfectly but we do endeavor to preach to you, to love you, to pray for you, you know, to give spiritual ministry to you, a spiritual life to you. We do do that. But understand if you're on the brink of coming into membership, there should be an

expectation, a recognition on your part that, "I come so recognizing something of my responsibility, and I come to give myself to this body. I love the truth for which this body stands. I love the people that I see in this body and that I've come to know. And now I present myself in membership, not demanding that you do things for me, although I gratefully receive your promise that you will care for me as you say that you will do. I believe you. I trust you'll do that. But as I come to membership, as I come asking for membership, I come with a pledge of my love for you as well. This is mutual. I want to identify myself with a body that stands for the truth that this body stands for and I want to support it with my love, with my presence, with my gifts. I want to stand out apart from the world and stand with a body that stands for Christ and his word, for Christ and Scripture. That's what membership, I understand that that's what it means. I want to give myself in that way."

Look over at John 15. John 15. Jesus repeats the theme. As we continue reading in John's upper room discourse, report of the upper room discourse, John 15:12, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another." The epistles pick up on this theme. Do you know what? There's something sweet about recognizing kind of the unfolding of biblical revelation and the progress of revelation. The disciples were there with Christ in the upper room before the cross. Afterwards, Christ is crucified, Christ is buried, Christ is resurrected, he's ascended, he sends the Spirit upon the apostles to minister and to give revelation in his name. It's so sweet to recognize that as the years and in some cases a few decades pass, and as the disciples are working out the commission that the Lord gave to them, that they never forgot, they never forgot the basic instruction that the Lord gave to them because you see it picked up and repeated in their own writings so that, for example, the Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 1:22, he says this. 1 Peter 1, I'll start in verse 18. He said, "knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot." You see, he looks back at the sacrifice of Christ, that precious blood, precious because of the person whose blood it was, precious because of what that shed blood accomplished on behalf of his people. So precious. So valuable. So much a magnet for our affections. Verse 20, "He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God." Christ shed his blood for you, the Spirit has applied that to your heart, you're now a Christian, you're in the kingdom of God. Verse 22. Look at it here, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." He says because you have been saved, because you are now gathered together



with the people of God, understand what your duty and responsibility is. And this is not, let me not get ahead of myself here. Understand your duty and responsibility is to purify your soul for the love of the brethren, to give of yourself to them just as Christ gave himself for you.

Now beloved, what you have to understand is, what you need to understand is this: we're not talking and we're not speaking in a realm of an irksome duty that is contrary to what a true believer wants. "Oh, I have to love the brethren? I don't wanna do that." That's not the spirit of it at all. That's not the spirit of it at all for a true Christian, for one who is growing in sanctification, for one who has been born again and is a new creation in Christ, the Christ who loved us and put his own Spirit within us. The true Christian, the sanctified Christian delights in it. He delights in love. He delights in fellowship with like-minded people. Why wouldn't he? Christ saved you. You love Christ. We have everything in common. It's not a command that cuts against the desires of a true Christian. The true Christian embraces this and wants to grow in it.

The Apostle John in 1 John 3:16. I mean, these things are pointed out to you. They jump off the page and they arrest your heart and cause you to ask yourself questions and make commitments going forward. In 1 John 3:16, it's interesting John 3:16 is about the love of God, so is 1 John 3:16. "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." This is the way it ought to be in the church of God. He laid his life down for us in order to purchase a people for himself. He loved us and sought our eternal well-being. Well, if we're in his realm, then we adopt the mind of Christ toward the body of Christ. It could be no other way. There is no place in this for this selfish mindset that has been cultivated in us by the seeker-sensitive movement over the past 50 years in the health and wealth gospel. There's no place for it.

As you read on, John kind of illustrates it. What does that love look like? He says, "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk," don't just talk about this, do it, "but in deed and in truth." Out with the hypocrisy, John says, that says that you embrace these things but you live in a different way, in a different manner because the example of Christ and the teaching of Christ and the Spirit that he puts within us, all of that call us to give ourselves to the church, that the church does not exist for me to dabble in according to whether it's convenient to my schedule or not, to dabble in whether, you know, I like the activity or not, whether I'm interested in the particular theme coming from the pulpit or not, whether I like the programs or not. You know, there's just something nauseating about that mindset when it's compared to what the richness of the purity of the way that Christ intends the church to operate. You know, and look, I'm sympathetic with the fact that for some of you, if not for many of you, I realize what we're talking about here is convicting. You say, "Do you know what? He hasn't looked directly at me in what he's saying," and I'm saying this looking at an empty chair now just for the benefit of everybody. Give you, you know, I'm happy to give you a little room. "You know, I see how my life has fallen short of that." It's important for you to act upon that conviction if the Spirit would convict your heart in that way, and take a different look at the way that you operate in the church.

Let me illustrate. This is painful, but I think it needs to be said in this context to help you understand how this works out when people act for reasons other than love for the body. Over the past several years, there's been a disturbing trend developing within the life of our church. It doesn't apply to anyone in this room because you're all here and I'm not picking on anyone in particular, but I have a responsibility, beloved, that goes beyond not trying to hurt anyone's feelings, to be faithful to the Lord of the church and to help his true people understand the way that life in the church is to be lived out and sometimes it helps to have a negative example given to say, "Oh, I see how that violates this." As elders, it's been our sorrow over the past few years to see a number of people who were members that we thought, you know, we certainly loved them and we thought they loved us. But they choose to leave and it's okay. I understand that people are going to come and go and that there's going to be a life in the church, a coming and a going, a turnover and all of that. That's not what I'm talking about. I understand that people be members for a while and in some cases they relocate. That's okay. We don't own people that just because they come into membership. That's not what I'm talking about. Here's what I'm talking about. We'll get an e-mail in the middle of the night saying, "I'm leaving the church." Had no idea. Elders had no idea that there was some kind of concern there. We reach out to them. This has happened multiple times, beloved, multiple multiple times. So it's a problem enough that I need to address it from the pulpit and it's a problem enough that I need to be specific enough for you to understand. And so this happens. I could show you the emails. I could show you the text messages if I didn't delete all the text messages from my phone, say, "Can we talk to you about this? We had no idea. Will you please come and meet with us so that we can talk about this and we can understand what's going on?" No, we will not meet with you. I will not meet with you. "Can you tell us something about, you know, what led to this?" No, I will not talk about it.

Now look, beloved, pivot away from that and just address things going forward, just enough to set a context for you. You tell me, you tell me how to reconcile that with a spirit of love. How is that a manifestation of the love of Christ for someone who's stood here and made a public commitment of love and participation in the life of the body. You tell me how that is consistent with the principle of love that animates church membership. I can't reconcile that. I can't reconcile that. I can grieve over it. I can defer to their refusal. But I can't say that's love. I can't say that's right. But I can lay it out to you for you to examine your heart if you're going to be a part of the life of Truth Community Church, to say, "If things change, I'm at least going to honor a request from my elders to meet with me. I'll at least sit down in respect and and love like that." It's really not asking much. Can we meet? No. Yeah, tell me how that's loving. Tell me how that's loving.

So love in the church looks different from that. Love in the church looks like the "one another's" we see described in the word of God, there's almost nearly two dozen of these. I'm not going to have you turn there, but just to rehearse in your mind, the reciprocity, the mutuality, the consideration one for another that animates life in the church, listen to these: love one another; live in harmony with one another; welcome one another; instruct one another; care for one another. :ove one another? J. C. Ryle says this, says, "Our Lord has many weak children in his family, many dull students in his school, many raw

soldiers in his army, many lame sheep in his flock, yet he bears with them all and casts none away. Happy is that Christian who has learned to do likewise with his brethren." Do you know what? You get involved in a local church, you get involved in the life of the body, there's going to be people whose weaknesses become manifest to you, people who offend you, people who don't handle a phone call or a visit the way that you wanted them to do, somebody who, you know, says something that they ought not to have said. Now when that happens, and it will happen, you have to come back to this principle of love that says, "Oh, but do you know what? Love bears all things. It believes all things. It endures all things." There's a spirit of forgiveness in love that doesn't take into account a wrong suffered.

And so I can continue on in life of the church and be loving, be gracious, not hold that against other people, and maybe there's something more to the story than what I know, and I can be content with that. Scripture goes on: serve one another; bear one another's burdens; bear with one another in love; be kind to one another; forgive one another; address one another in songs; count others as more significant; do not lie to one another; encourage one another; seek to do good to one another. One theologian said this, "The unity of life in Christ should express itself in genuine and tangible care for and commitment to one another."

But there's more. Scripture says stir up one another to love and good works; confess your sins to one another; pray for one another; keep loving one another; show hospitality to one another; clothe yourselves with humility toward one another. Do you know what the thing is about those 21 biblical admonitions given to the church that say "one another"? There's mutuality to it. You can't come into a church, be all about yourself, come in late, leave early, hold everybody off at a distance, get angry and leave when someone brings some measure of accountability to your sinful life. You can't do that and honor anything about these one another's. At some point, beloved, at some point, at some point Christians need to step back and rethink the whole approach that they've had to church. Charles Spurgeon says the church is not perfect but woe to the man who finds pleasure in pointing out her imperfections. Christ loved his church. Let us do the same.

Church membership is voluntary. It's voluntary. We've never made anyone become a member against their will and we never will. No one has come up here and made a public profession of commitment and love to the church as shown on those five commitments on the back of your bulletin, beloved, no one has been under the force of a gun or under pressure from elders to come and make that. They've all done that voluntarily. Those of you that are members, you've all done that voluntarily. Christ expects that public commitment to be honored.

Now I've pointed out the difficult side of these things, let me close in pointing out the positive sides and there are a lot of positives here within the body of Truth Community Church. Like I say, the point is not about someone leaving the church because I get that people will come and go and I hold no resentment or bitterness or anything about that. I get that. It comes with the territory. Some of my friends that are in ministry, fellow pastors in other places would probably say that I'm too lenient about it all. The point is

not about leaving, the point is about loving. It's about giving yourself to the people of Christ whom you publicly promised to love. You publicly promised in the presence of God and of many witnesses, "I will do this." That means something, beloved. If that doesn't mean something and alter the way that people behave, then we ought to stop doing it. We're not going to stop doing it. But having said that, having said that, there are so many people in this room that manifests the kind of love that Christ calls us to and I want to acknowledge that, and I want to be as just as I've given examples on the negative side, I want to give specific examples on the positive side that show us that those of you that are on the outside considering church membership, there are people like this, what I'm about to describe, in our church. And you could come and see them in living their lives, see how they do things. You could learn and say, "Oh, that's what a Christian is supposed to do." And you can grow from seeing their example and emulating it, and there are so many who are worthy of that kind of observation and emulation.

We have those in our church who travel a long way every Sunday to be with us. They don't mind the inconvenience because they want to be in a Bible teaching church. They bear the inconvenience and the expense so that they can be here. Some of you know who you are. I love you for it.

We have women in our church who consistently bring meals for the sick and insist that no one recognize them for what they do. "Don't tell anybody I've done this." They want it done in anonymity.

We have others who, I can't tell you how many times I've had people come and say, "I want you to give this envelope to that struggling family but don't tell them where it came from." I've had that happen so many times.

Do you know what? The rest of us can learn, "Ah, that's what love looks like. Not about me. About someone else."

You know, I think about we've got so many young families. I see them on Tuesday nights. They bring their children at inconvenient times because they want to be a part of the church and they want their children to learn that this is what you do. Those young families, those young men that are leading their families like that, I love them. I appreciate them. They're giving us an example because it's hard to do that. There's a lot of reasons not to do that on an earthly sense, but we have young men leading their families like that and I love them because they are manifesting that love for the church.

We have musicians that minister faithfully. I never even have to think about whether the music's going to be done right or not, because I know that these musicians will take care of it. It means a lot.

We have men that go out of their way to initiate conversations with new people to make sure they're welcomed, that their names are known, that their concerns can be addressed.

We have women in our church who have unbelieving husbands who don't support them in their desire to be at our church. But they work things out. They talk with their husband and the husband defers and so they come, they bring their little ones with them showing love for the church. That's what it looks like.

We have parents who come to worship with us. God hasn't answered their prayers for their children's salvation. Their hearts are broken. There's alienation in the family, wrestling with God, "O God, why? Why? O God, my heart's broken over this." And yet they come and they're here faithfully because the church matters to them. God hasn't given them what they wanted, but they're here anyway.

We have others in the church who gladly give of themselves in hospitality every time we ask with the most cheerful spirit, as if the elders are doing them the privilege, the favor of letting them serve the way they do. I don't know where that kind of love comes from except by the Spirit of Christ.

We have others who have relocated across the country because they wanted to be part of what they perceived to be a biblical church.

You see, beloved, I could go on but I've said enough here. You see, beloved, that's the spirit of love in the church. In different ways, different people in different stations of life making different kinds of sacrifices, giving of themselves in order to see the body of Christ flourish, in order to benefit and grow under the word of God and to do their part to make the church better. That's love. That's illustrating what Christ speaks about. That's the heart that in seed form should be represented by someone who wants to pursue membership. I don't have the courage to look up from the pulpit table right now to look into the eyes of those of you who know I was talking about you in this positive way. I don't want to embarrass you but I want you to know you're appreciated. You give of yourself and I love you for it. The elders love you for it.

So as we think about church membership going forward, the approach to church membership asks do you give of yourself to this body? Will you give of yourself to this body? May the Lord examine our hearts and help us all to respond righteously, where some of us may need to repent, that we would do so willingly and humbly, for those of you that have felt the affirmation of the Spirit of God in your heart to rejoice in and give all the glory to God for what he's done in your heart. May God bless the teaching of his word to our hearts.

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