

The Biblical Basis for Church Membership

Church Membership

By Don Green

sermonaudio.com

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Truth Community Fellowship

Creation Museum

2800 Bullittsburg Church Road

Petersburg, KY 41080

Website: truthcommunitychurch.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tcomm

Welcome to Truth Community Fellowship. That's a phrase that I'm not going to be able to say much longer because we are going to begin the process of moving to become Truth Community Church and that may seem like a mere matter of nomenclature but it's far more than that. We want to be all that the Lord would have us to be and we want to claim the title that God would have us to claim of being a true church of Christ and we've introduced a study of Ephesians. Last week we started that and saw an overview of the church in a universal sense that the church is called by God and the church is to manifest the character of God. That brings us to a particular point of practice that we're going to introduce today and this week in that we want to explain the basis, the biblical basis this morning for church membership. When I say moving from a fellowship to a church, this is what I have in mind, that's what I have in mind, this whole concept of church membership. We want to move from simply being a loose affiliation of people who gather together to truly coming together and manifesting the kind of committed body life that the Bible describes as existing in a true church.

We've been at our current ministry for a couple of years now and there has been wonderful growth. I mean not just numerically, I mean spiritual growth in the lives of you and hopefully in me as we've seen different things come together. One of the things that makes it obvious that we are ready for this move to a more formal establishment that's represented by the name "church" as opposed to "fellowship" is the fact that there is a consistent group of people, you that are here week after week after week. It's obvious where your spiritual commitment lies. And what we are about to describe this week and next week is not something that's going to be a change in what we do, it's simply going to be a recognition, this is laying the foundation for a recognition of the life that already exists. This is a step of growth for us. This is a step of maturity for us that I'm very excited about and I would not be going here as a pastor unless I knew for certain that there were people who were willing, ready, able and desiring to say, "Yes, this is a place that I want to identify with, that I want to join in a public expression of commitment." And the actual commitment in all of that is still a few weeks away. We're just laying a biblical basis for church membership here today but we're starting something that is fresh. It's new, this is a new step, a new chapter in the life of our church and what I would encourage you to do, those of you that have been with us over many months and you consider this to be your church home, so to speak, you should receive this as something

just completely encouraging and affirming in your own spiritual life and about the long term future of our church. We intend to be here. We intend this body of believers to exist for the indefinite future. We're not going anywhere. I'm not going anywhere ever. I am going to be here until the day I die. That is my commitment to this body.

So our expression of commitment comes together as we identify ourselves not just as a fellowship of loosely gathered people but we identify ourselves as a church, as a group of Christians that are committed to Christ and committed to one another. So what do we mean when we say church membership? What is church membership? Let me give you a little definition there that will help clarify what we mean by this. Church membership is a formal commitment to identify with a local body of believers in their doctrine and practice so as to share in the privileges and responsibilities of the church. Let me say that again. That definition is important: church membership is a formal commitment to identify with a local body of believers in their doctrine and in their practice so as to share in the privileges and responsibilities of the church. To become a member is to participate in, to embrace the responsibilities of biblical life of the one and others of the Bible, especially of the New Testament. It says, "I want to take on that responsibility. I want to express a commitment to that." But it's more than that as well. It's also entering a realm of privilege, a realm of belonging, a realm of pastoral care that says, "I not only want to provide my part in the life of a church in a formal way and identify myself with that," there is also a sense of saying, "I want to be under the care of this church." There is a mutuality that is involved that says, "I want to be a part of the life of this and I realize that that means that there are responsibilities. I embrace that and I realize that there are privileges and I want to receive those as well."

And so it's a wonderful time of coming together. Sometimes people describe church and think about it as a family and I guess that gives it a little bit of a sense of it but for some of you who have come from dysfunctional families, maybe family doesn't bring the best of things to mind. Well, what we have in mind here is a commitment to Christ, a vertical commitment to Christ that says, "You have established your church. You gave your life for your church in a universal sense and I want to give my life, my commitments to a particular church as well." In our day and age of easy divorce and all kinds of lack of commitment, sometimes the thought of a commitment can be a little bit arresting maybe, a little bit concerning but here's what we need to think: we need to think not like our world thinks and not think about it from a sense of what we've been culturally conditioned to do. People come and go out of relationships all the time, I get that and the thought of commitment sometimes might seem, you know, a little bit, I don't know, threatening or what does that mean? But here's the thing, beloved, we have to think about commitment to the church biblically. We have to see that the Bible and Christ through his word has established a pattern by which we are to model if we're going to be faithful Christians. This is about our faithfulness to Christ preeminently and our commitment to one another and to a local body as an overflow of a prior commitment to Christ. It has often been said that the Bible knows nothing of a Christian who is not affiliated with a local body of believers and that's true. I realize that is very common to hear people say, "Look, we're going to worship at home," or, "I'm going to go out and get close to God on

a mountain or on a tree," or something like that but that's not a biblical view of Christianity at all.

One aspect of biblical Christianity is participation in the life of a local body of believers. You know, Christians who want to live apart from the body of Christ at the very best, have a profound misunderstanding of what it means to be a Christian because Christ has called us to himself and he has called us to be a part of the body for which he has died. We're not meant to be isolated satellites circling around someplace, we're meant to be together in a body and the joy of this message for me today as a pastor is that that's what's already happening here. This is already happening here and it's shown by the fact that I know that you are going to be here on Sunday, you're going to be as part of each other's lives during the week because that's what you've already established and I know where you're going to sit. If I want to find Jeff, I know I need to look stage right. If I need to see Paul, I'm looking down the center to the left. That's a good thing. All of this is an expression of the fact that your hearts are already in line with what we're talking about here this morning by the way that you're living your lives and that is a wonderful thing.

So what we're introducing here today is it doesn't change anything in one sense, it simply expresses, gives us a foundation for understanding how we can make this even better going forward. So it's with that spirit that I share these things with you today and it might be a fair question: where do we see the concept of church membership in the Bible? The Bible is where we want to draw everything. We don't want to make up things that aren't in Scripture and guide our lives according to that which is outside the counsel of God's word. Where would we get the idea of church membership in the Bible? Well, here's the thing: the concept of church membership comes from observing various aspects of life in the early church that called for organization and authority in the life of the local body. You look at the Scriptures and you see different aspects that speak to organization, that speak to authority and delegation and life and responsibilities and privileges and you say that can only be explained by a unifying theme of what today we would call church membership.

If I were going to give you a unifying thought, a unifying verse from Scripture to kind of help set a frame in which we'll put the rest of the picture together, it would probably come from 1 Corinthians 14:40. You don't have to turn there, you can just jot that reference down. But the idea of church membership flows from this idea that "all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner." When you walk into a biblical church, there should be an evident sense of structure, of order, of intelligent thought that goes into it. If you walk into a place that calls itself a church and there is just chaos going on, people running around and you can find internet videos of people running around in their services and there is even one and I'm going to the utter extreme here, but of people who call themselves a church who don't share our persuasion on these things, let's say, you can find videos of people that are running up and down the aisles of their church during the service, having not sense of order or decorum to it. One in particular I remember, there is a guy who runs down the aisle and jumps into the baptistry while people are on the stage doing their thing. Beloved, that is not decently and in order. You should be able to walk into a body, you should become acquainted with the life of a church and say, "There's an

order. There is a structure here that is healthy, that gives a sense of stability which reflects the stability of a universe and a world that is operated by a God who has decreed all things, the end from the beginning, who operates things to a point that there are 24 hour days and 7 day weeks and there are cycles and rhythms that you can rely on." Well, the church should be a reflection of that kind of order because our God is a God of order.

With that introduction in mind, what should Truth Community learn from the biblical church? I'm going to give you four things this morning and this is going to be an encouraging time for you. On what do we base the concept of church membership? First of all this: the early church had an established roster. An established roster. As you read the book of Acts, you can see that they knew who was a part of the church. There was an identification that took place and this is reflected in the fact that they knew numbers and the only way that you can know numbers is if you count 1, 2, 3, 4 and that means that some people are in the circle and some people are outside of it. That's the idea. Turn to the book of Acts 1 and you see this as the church grew there was an accounting. They were keeping track of people. That's the thing. The early church was obviously keeping track of the lives of people so that they knew where they were and there was an oversight taking place from leadership to the people and the people had made themselves known to leadership. That's the key. So in Acts 1:15 prior to Pentecost, you see that, "Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren," watch this, "a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together, and said," and he went on and described what the church needed to do in preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit. 120 people. They knew the numbers. There were people that were accounted for there.

Look over at Acts 2:41 after Peter preached his magnificent sermon. I long to preach a sermon that has the results that this sermon had. In chapter 2, verse 40, Peter was "solemnly testifying and he kept on exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation!' Notice this about that comment: when he says "Be saved from this perverse generation," he's calling them out of the world, calling them out of their prior identification with the world. "Be saved. Put your faith in Christ. Be identified with something that is separate from what you have always known before." There's a calling out, "Be saved from," and to be saved from something is to be saved to something. So in verse 41 it says, " So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls." You can see why I want to preach a message like that some day, right? Wouldn't that be awesome? But we'll just take whatever fruit the Lord gives to us in his good wisdom. So 3,000 souls. They counted them. They knew the number. There was a group of people that were identified and known and the quantity could be stated with precision.

Now one more, Acts 4:4, "Many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand." And so they were able to quantify. There was some manner of a roster, a list, an accounting, that said, "We know these people have come to Christ. They have identified with us. There is a group that has become a part of this spiritual body." That's the idea. They knew their numbers. The early church knew their people. That points us in the direction of church membership, that there wasn't simply an amorphous, ill-defined gathering of people coming and going

and their names weren't know, they could number them. That means that they knew them. That meant that there was some sense of identification with the church.

Now watch this: go back to Acts 2:41. What is it that would qualify a person for membership in the church? Well, fundamentally and we'll talk about this more in days to come, the preeminent qualification for membership in the church is that you have to be born again. Not anyone can walk off the street and become a member of Truth Community Church. You have to be a born again Christian. You have to belong to the universal body of Christ before you can become a member of a local body of Christ. You have to be born again. Look at chapter 2, verse 41, as we look at these verse again. Notice what it says about them, "So then those who had received his word were baptized." They received Peter's message to be saved from that perverse generation. They received the word. They yielded to the gospel; they yielded themselves in faith and trust to Christ and they were baptized. In chapter 4, verse 4, you see the same idea. "Many of those who had heard the message believed," and so there is a believing dynamic to the true church that is a preliminary qualifying aspect of being eligible for membership in the church. Those are the people that we receive into membership, those who have believed in Christ. Those who have been baptized as believers in Christ are eligible for membership in the local church. It's pretty simple really. You have to belong to Christ before you can belong to his church. You have to obey Christ in the first act of baptism before you're ready to be received into the church.

But the early church under apostolic leadership, they knew their people. There was a boundary of inclusion that said, "These people are part of the church." That's one reason why we would move toward church membership, why we believe that church membership is a biblical concept. Secondly, not only was their an established roster of members, you might say, of people, secondly: there was also an established leadership. There was established leadership in place. We have spoken here often about the principle of elder leadership and there's much more that we need to say as time goes on and we're not going to rehears all of that here today. All we want you to see this morning is that the early church had lines of authority and delegated responsibility that speaks to a structure that gives us insight into the idea of membership and those who participate in the life of the church. Look at Acts 6:1, "Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number," you see there was growth and they knew that there was an increase that was going on. Now a problem came up, imagine that, a problem in the life of a church. I'm shocked. Aren't you? Having been in churches in the past, isn't it shocking that there would be an issue to come up? That's okay. That's life in ministry. Acts 6:1 says as they were increasing, "a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food." It was a legitimate need that was going unaddressed. Now, that's not our concern at the moment but here's what I want you to see, verse 2, "So the twelve apostles summoned the congregation of the disciples." They knew who to call together. There was an identified congregation that needed to come together to have this problem address. "They summed the congregation of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.'" The apostle said, "We have a particular responsibility that we must meet and fulfill and we must be devoted to the

word of God." Yes, this issue needs to be addressed but no, it does not need to be addressed by us personally. We have other responsibilities that we must meet.

Verse 3, "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Here's the thing: you had leadership in the apostles and they called together a congregation; they knew who to have present. The congregation was called upon to identify men who could meet this need and fulfill this task that was required. Here's what I want you to see, think about this with me: there is so much that is taught to us in this circumstance. The apostles knew their congregation and they knew that the congregation knew each other well enough that they would recognize men who were qualified for the task, who fit the description that the apostles gave to them to be able to fulfill that responsibility. And so what you see is: there are known relationships; there is an identification of people. There is leadership giving direction to an identifiable group of people who know each other who could then say, "Here are the men that we would recommend that you appoint to this task." That speaks to incredible body life. It speaks to structure; it speaks to known leadership that is going on.

As you continue to read in Acts, that pattern is repeated in every location. Turn over to Acts 14:21. See the centrality of the gospel as part of this as well. Paul and Barnabas are the subjects here. "After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples," there it is, believers were coming out of the world and were receiving the gospel, they were receiving Christ, they were turning from sin and entrusting their souls to a Savior, they were true believers, Paul and Barnabas, "returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.'" Now watch this, verse 23, "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." The disciples believed, elders were appointed, there was an established leadership over established disciples, known disciples, in each city and that is how the church was formed and structured.

So there is established leadership in a local church. It's not simply a gathering together, a loose gathering together of people for a Bible study where everybody's opinion has equal weight. No, in the biblical church there is leadership in place. That's the biblical pattern. As you continue to read on in the New Testament, God calls Christians as part of their Christian life, as part of their obedience to Christ himself, God calls those who follow to respond to their leaders with a cooperative and submissive spirit. Look over at the book of Hebrews 13 realizing that this is a biblical command to believers, not a human command from one in authority trying to expand his base. The Bible says to all of us, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." Then in verse 17 it says, "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."

Now, think with me for a moment: in order for a Christian to obey this word from the Lord about "consider the example of your leaders, submit to your leaders, follow them," what do they have to have? They have to have leaders, right? They have to know who their leaders are in order to follow, in order to be responsive and obedient to Christ himself and what he says here, now here's the point of all of that: think of a shepherd, a literal shepherd, a shepherd has to know what sheep are his responsibility in order to care for them and bring them in and out of the fold and make sure that they are provided for. In the same way, biblical elders need to know who is under their care and who is not, who is it that have presented themselves and said, "We want to be under the ministry of this church. We want to participate in the life of this church. We publicly identify. We make ourselves know. We affirm what this church believes. We appreciate the life of this body. We want to be a part of it. We are making ourselves known to you in that capacity." There has to be some kind of formal mechanism for that to happen. Church membership is the way that that comes to pass.

We as elders need to know who's under our care, who is looking to us for leadership, who wants us to be a spiritual influence in their lives and so there's a mutual identification that takes place through church membership. Members say in effect, "You are our elders," and the elders say in response, "You are our flock." "We pledge our spiritual care to you," those of you who have identified yourselves as members. We're looking down the road in our own church situation here that those who identify themselves as members are entitled to the prerogatives and the privileges of elder care and oversight in their lives and that is a sweet, precious thing to have elders who have your spiritual interest in mind as a part of your life. That's the way life in the body is supposed to work. Let me say something that they don't know that I'm going to say but I want to say this: I've been around church leadership for a long time, many, many years in different places and I want to tell you that in Dan Jackson and in Dane Logan, you have among the finest men I have ever seen in church leadership. There are quality men in place in this elder leadership that we have here, I'm talking about Dan and Dane, and to be under the care of men like that who know Christ, who care for his sheep or they wouldn't be elders here, to have that kind of pastoral care in your life is a great privilege that true Christians should want to run to, to be a part of, to support, to receive and to give and all of that. There are not many men like those two men in my experience anywhere and so I'm grateful to Dan and I'm grateful to Dane to be able to share in the leadership of this church.

So what you have here, getting back to the point now of our church membership here, is that you recognize a church by established leadership, established qualified leadership. Elders don't just walk into their position, they have to meet the biblical standards of character an ability described in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, we've taught on that. So these men don't just come off the street and become elders. You've had the opportunity over many, many months if not a year or two to observe those men and say, "Is their character and teaching consistent with what I find in the Bible?" There you go. Established leadership is a mark of a true church and responding to established leadership is part of church membership, it's part of what the Lord has for his people.

Why is that so important? Well, that mutual understanding clarifies life in the church. You know, you see week by week and it's wonderful when people come, when people visit, but the elders of a church are not spiritually responsible for everybody who walks in the door on any given Sunday. Sometimes people just visit because they're out of town and they wanted to worship with a body on Sunday. That's great. Glad to have them. Sometimes people come and go. They're checking it out and that's okay. We're glad to have them. But people who are simply sporadic attenders, people who are mere visitors, who have no commitment, no desire even for the life of a local body, those are people who are not under the care of the elders of any given church, not just ours. Elders are not responsible for everybody who walks in the door. They are responsible for a subset of those who say, "This is our church. We want to participate in the life of this church," and the elders say, "Okay, now we know who our responsibility of care belongs to." The elders are primarily responsible for their members, not for casual visitors or sporadic attenders who really don't want to be a part of the life of the church. We don't go and chase after goats or chase after sheep who are just wanting to go from fold to fold. We don't judge that. People can do what they want but they can't expect elder care when they're not a part of the life of a church. Does that make sense?

The way that you clarify those relationships is that you have a clear standard of membership, you have established leadership and you have Christians who have come and said, "I want to identify with this life and the life of this body," and the leadership and the prior existing members say, "Welcome, we're glad you're here." You become a part of something that's bigger than yourself. This is the biblical pattern. Flowing out of that comes a third point. We've talked about an established roster, established leadership and third point which may or may not be new to some of you is that there is established discipline in a local church and that speaks to church membership as well. Here's the thing: when you look at the life of the early church described in the Bible, there were times where sin broke open into the midst. It was open, it was obvious that there was disobedience in the house of God, so to speak, amongst the people of God. As you read about those incidents, you realize that the local church was expected and commanded to expel unrepentant members from their midst in order to maintain the purity of the church. The most extreme example of that would be Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 when they injected deception into the life of the church and well, you know, Peter rebuked them and God had them fall over dead as an indication, as a statement for all time that the purity and the holiness of the church must be respected and those who identify with the church should take the holiness of the church, the purity and the unity of the church seriously.

Now, the enforcement mechanism has lessened since that time for which we're all, I suppose, somewhat grateful. If you look to 1 Corinthians 5, it's not that the death penalty has been given to the church and I'm saying that light-heartedly, I don't want to frighten anyone here. But you do see that in 1 Corinthians 5. It brought the fear of God upon the people. Look at 1 Corinthians 5 and in verse 1, there was open immorality that was in the midst of the church of Corinth and Paul said, "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the

Gentiles," it doesn't get this bad in the world, Paul says, and here it is in the church, "that someone has his father's wife." There was an open scandal that was polluting the church. The church was not pure as it was supposed to be. As we saw described last week from Ephesians 4-6, the purity of the church was being violated by people who were brazenly sinning in their private lives. This was open and the church had done nothing about it so that it creates the impression, it created the impression that that kind of open rebellion against God was tolerable, it was acceptable and could be received without consequence in the life of the body of Christ. Paul says, "That can't be. That is not the way the church operates. There must be purity in the church because our Lord is pure, because he saved us in order to sanctify us, a people zealous for good works." We looked at that in Titus 2. Christ saved us so that we would be a people set apart for obedience to him and for a pure witness to the world and when there is open sin tolerated in the body, all of that is polluted. It's like pouring open sewage into a city reservoir, everything is affected by it.

Beloved, think with me for just a moment. You know by experience, perhaps you've been tempted toward sin yourself in such circumstances, you can see it in others if you just think and observe. Anywhere that open sin is tolerated, it makes everyone more willing to sin. It lowers everybody's standard and they say, "Okay, well, this isn't so bad. Leadership is allowing this to happen, well maybe I'll sin in my own way as well." And you create an environment where holiness is not taken seriously and the church gradually becomes indistinguishable from the world and the name of Christ is besmirched, it's smeared because people who claim his name as their own do not live in the holy way that he has commanded them to do.

So God recognizing that we're all prone to sin and Christ being committed to the purity of his church, he died for us to make us pure individually and as a body, then he has bestowed on the church the responsibility to guard that purity amongst the life of its members, those who name the name of Christ, those who have been received as true Christians are not free to pursue sin in their life without consequence in the church. That's the idea. So look at what Paul did in verse 4, he said, "In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." Paul is intervening by apostolic prerogative because the church hadn't done it themselves; the church had not taken care of it themselves. Now look at 1 Corinthians 5:9. He's now clarifying what it's supposed to be like. He said, "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world." He says, "That's not my point. I'm not talking about immoral people in the world as being outside the realm of your interactions because that's impossible. Of course you're going to deal with sinners in the world." Verse 11, notice that he had a different purpose in mind, a purpose related to the church. He said, "But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler - not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders?" Watch this in the context of what we've said about membership this morning, "Do you not judge those who are within the church?"

But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves."

Look, I can't speak to all of your past church experiences. It's not a secret that many organizations that claim the name "church" upon themselves are unwilling to do this. We don't care about them in the sense that we're not going to worry about what they do or don't do. What our job here today this morning in the life of a church moving forward is to recognize that there is a principle of church discipline that the Bible calls a true church to exercise in order to protect the purity of the church. Paul says, and look at it again with me in verse 13, "But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves." Watch this: that means that there is a known circle of boundary of people who are inside the church and everybody else who's outside in the world. Inside that circle when there is open, flagrant, hard-hearted sin in the midst, a scandal has arisen in the body of Christ, God calls upon the church to remove that man, place him outside, remove his privilege of membership and participation so that the purity of the church would be protected, so that there would be no compromise of the church's testimony, so that that local church could honor its head, its Master, its Lord Jesus Christ by saying, "Lord, you are pure and holy and to the best of our ability, we are not going to tolerate open defiant sin in our midst." That's what church discipline is. That speaks to the concept of membership because there is accountability that is involved.

Briefly, turn over to Matthew 18 if the idea of church discipline, sometimes called church restoration. The goal really is to bring people to repentance but if they won't repent, then you have to deal with it. Go over to Matthew 18. Christ gave the pattern for that discipline in Matthew 18:15. It says, ""If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother." Now, stop right there. I want you to see something really important: throughout the whole process of what we call church discipline, the goal is not to kick somebody out. That's the last resort. The goal, the desire, is to restore that one, to bring them to repentance so that they would come back to what they're supposed to be as a Christian, that they would honor Christ by forsaking sin and that they would continue to be a part of a healthy life of a healthy body. That's the goal and the only time that you get to the point of expelling somebody from membership is when they have made it plain that they prefer their sin to life in the fellowship, life in the body, being obedient to Christ. So ultimately, you give multiple opportunities for people and you confront them and you say, "Look, you know, you can't be with a woman who's not your wife. Okay? That's not alright. You can't do that. Won't you repent? Won't you forsake that relationship and come back to Christ, come back to your spouse?" Well, the guy says, "You're right. I'm so sorry. Yes, of course, that's what I want." That's what Christ is saying here in verse 15, "If he listens to you, you've won your brother." We're not trying to kick people out but we're trying to protect the purity of the church and people are given multiple opportunities to repent.

Look at verse 16. There's a progression that takes place. "If he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed." So, I'm trying to think of a name that is not represented in here.

Xavier, I know there's no one named Xavier in here. "Xavier, you know, we talked to you several days ago about this and you're still hanging out with your mistress. You know, look, I brought John and Tom with me to just ask you again, won't you repent? Won't you turn away from that? Won't you forsake that relationship? You're dishonoring Christ. You're crushing your family. You're polluting the life of our church with this conduct. Won't you repent."

Verse 17, "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." So there is this progression of a private confrontation, one or two more, the church is informed of this open sin and in the face of all of those pleas, all of those entreaties, "Please come back. We want you with us. We don't want you to experience the discipline of God on your life. We don't want this sorrow to come to you. Won't you come back?" I've walked through this process in other places many times, you know, they fold their arms, "No. No. No. No. No." "Okay, then we're left with no other choice than to remove you from membership," and to make that known to the church that, "Xavier has been pursuing this relationship with a woman who is not his wife. We have talked to him on multiple occasions. We have followed Matthew 18 through the process and he still refuses to repent. Therefore we are informing you as a church body that we're removing him from membership. We are putting him outside our fellowship and we ask you to pray for his salvation. He has to be outside of the church like a Gentile or a tax gatherer. He can no longer continue claiming membership here because membership is for believers who are obedient." At that point, that guy Xavier should be, we say, "We have no reason to think he's even a Christian." That's the process of discipline that is involved.

Here's the thing, beloved. I won't ask you to raise your hand to know how many of you have actually seen that process handled properly. It is sobering. By every means it's sobering because you realize that you're entering into areas of weight and it teaches a church to realize that sin is a weighty matter and the protection of the purity of the body of Christ and upholding the purity of the purposes of Christ for the church is something of great consequence and when a man stubbornly refuses the entreaties of those who love him, who have been a part of his church experience and he refuses their entreaties, then understand that the one who is responsible for that consequence is the sinner. It is not an overreach of authority by church leaders. In fact, church leaders have no choice in the matter. They must do this if they're going to be faithful to Christ. Church leadership is going to give an account and it's not an acceptable thought for an elder who is thinking straight to say, "Yeah, I'm just gonna let that go and, you know, I'll give an account to Christ on it later." Are you kidding me? No way. There is no way that elders in a biblical church are going to dishonor Christ and be held to an account to him at the end of their journey. There's no way that faithful elders would prefer that over simply doing the hard thing in time and putting a flagrant sinner out of the church. They have to in order to be faithful to Christ.

And if I could say this, kind of stepping back and looking at all of us together: isn't that why we're here together? Isn't it because we love Christ, we love his word and we want to be faithful to him? Well, that means that we're going to be faithful not only in the

joyous times but we're going to do the hard things too in order to be faithful to him and church discipline is one of those things. The broader point for today's message is: discipline predisposes membership and I would go so far as to say is that really the element of discipline is one of the primary things that distinguishes a church from a parachurch ministry. A parachurch ministry doesn't have the prerogative or the responsibility of discipline. You have whatever kind of parachurch ministry that you've got going, there is not that role of discipline. This element of discipline to protect the purity of the body of Christ, distinguishes a church from those who are doing some other kind of ministry.

So with all of that said here's the point: someone who is engaged in unrepentant, open, flagrant sin or someone who openly contradicts the established doctrine of the church must be removed for the sake of the spiritual health of the entire body. There will be clarity. There will be purity. There will be unity that is done in that. When you remember, beloved, I know I'm kind of belaboring this point, but when you remember that we have a very real adversary of our souls, Satan, the devil, who is out to disrupt the work of Christ and you realize that he works through divisive and sinful people, it would be such a dereliction of duty, of church leadership, to allow an instrument of the devil whether he's aware of it or not, to allow a divisive, sinful person to undermine the work of the church, it would be a dereliction of duty. Elders who allow that should be thrown out on their ear. No, no, if we're going to be faithful to Christ, we have to be committed to purity amongst his people and he's given us a pattern, a loving gracious pattern, that gives multiple opportunities for people to repent before that weighty decision is made. The purpose of today's message: the call to remove someone as Paul did in 1 Corinthians 5, the call to remove someone presupposes a boundary of inclusion and exclusion that can only be understood with some concept of belonging to a church by membership. Clear enough? That's it.

So you have an established roster in the early church; you have established leadership; you have this principle of discipline. All of it saying, "Inside and out, membership, non-members giving us reason to believe that membership is that which would please the Lord in the orderly oversight of the church that belongs to him." Now, let's close on a good note, on a joyful note here. Fourthly, you have established meetings in a church. You have an established roster; you have established leadership; established discipline; and established meetings where people come together. The early church met regularly for worship and for mutual edification and that ongoing coming together speaks to a group that knew their place and wanted to be a part of it. Go back to Acts 2 and we'll close with this soon. Acts 2:42. Their established meetings reflected a common, shared, understood purpose. Gathered together, a group of people bound together by a common purpose reflected in established meetings. Acts 2:42, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." They were continually doing this. Verse 46, "Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number," there it is again, "The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." An identifiable

group of people, so much so that you could go from house to house and knew whose house was supposed to be involved. They were identified. They were clear. There was an understanding of this life.

One final passage just for this in terms of the organization, the establishment. 1 Corinthians 16, just after the book of Romans. Verses 1 and 2, "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come." Meeting weekly, each one of you addressed, here's your responsibility as part of life in this church. So the Scriptures speak to established meetings and that gives us a sense that people knew where they belonged, what they were to be a part of and there was a group of people who could receive this instruction all identified and for our purposes today, church membership is the way by which that membership is established. Where clarity is brought.

Now, let me say this and I'm almost to the end of my message here: one of the things that we've tried to do over the past couple of years in the life of this fellowship, soon to be church is that we've been very slow to get to this point of church membership and there has been a reason for that, it's been for your sake, beloved, that we've done this. It would have been easy, it would have been more popular in some ways to have rushed into it in the first 2-3 months of what we did. "Let's get a church and members and get all of this started," and you just kind of whip up a fever and get things going and then you have problems later on. One of the reasons that we have taken so much time to get to this point, to get to this message today is for your benefit. We wanted you to have an extended period of time to be able to observe what this soon-to-be church stands for. You can't make judgments about whether a church is going to be faithful in its doctrine in a 3-4 week period of time. You can't know anything about the character of the leadership that constitutes the leadership of a church and you can't make judgments in 3, 4, 5 weeks or so. We have deliberately been slow on this so that you could see for yourself, does the teaching of this church comport with what I understand the Bible to teach? Do these men in leadership somewhat at least resemble the qualifications for leadership that I see described in the Bible in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1? We have tried, we have done everything that we could do to make this all plain and open so that there would be no question in your mind what this church is about, so that you could contemplate church membership with a sense that, "I know what to expect." There is an element of informed consent that is involved with it. You know, we don't believe that that happens quickly. We believe that happens over time.

Now, what we have here is, as we've come to this point, that time has past and people are in a position to make their own judgments and I believe that for almost all of you here in your faithfulness, your love, your mutual interaction, is an expression that your heart is already here and I'm grateful for that. So I say once again that as we talk about church membership, we're not really introducing something new, we're simply recognizing a preexisting life amongst those of us who gather together. There is a preexisting life and church membership simply for us is simply going to recognize a preexisting reality amongst what motivates, what captivates, the commitments of our

collective heart is as we walk with Christ. Church membership is simply a way to recognize that which is already true for us.

Now, next week what we're going to do, we'll see the privileges and responsibilities laid out more completely next week. The privileges and responsibilities of church membership but that's for next week. For now, the idea was just for you to see from the Scriptures, "Okay, I see where this is coming from. I see why membership would be a healthy thing." Now we just commit it to the Lord and see what happens. This will take place over weeks. We're not going to call for membership. Next week we want to give you some other things to consider down the road but soon, sometime this summer probably, we will open the opportunity for our first round of formal church membership. For those of you that are excited about that, that want to be a part, want to be publicly identified and when you're out witnessing, it's not just you but you say, "I have a whole church that believes like I do," and giving weight and support to your testimony. Soon we'll open that up. Soon we will stop calling ourselves Truth Community Fellowship and it will take fewer keystrokes to type it out on the computer. We'll call ourselves Truth Community Church and that will be a statement to ourselves and to those outside that we are claiming that the elements of a true church of Christ are represented here and that we intend that testimony to continue, to be established as we go forward.

It's a great wonderful thing. I hope that you're encouraged. All of this should be encouraging to those who truly love Christ and are obedient to him and it gives you a sense of direction about what's ahead in the life of our church. It's my desire, it's my expectation, it's my prayer that most of you are going to say, "Yeah, I want to be a part of that. Where can I sign up?" That will become known soon in the weeks to come. Alright? God bless you.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we just thank you for the fact that you've given us each other to share in things like this together. We thank you, our Father, that your Spirit is in our midst and that we can trust you for what lies ahead. We pray that you would bless our effort to reflect fully what you would have a local body of your people to be. So Lord, we commit these things to you in that as we continue to move in this direction, Father, that it would be a time of blessing and encouragement for those who truly love Christ. So with a sense of expectation, we ask your blessing, Father, once more for those who are just outside the church universal, those who don't know Christ at all personally, Lord, we pray that you would lead them to repentance and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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