

Membership Matters Part 1

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[0 : 00] Well, welcome here for this Sunday, February the 12th. Whether you're joining us in person, you've heard me say this before, or you're connecting in some other way.

As you know, people listen to the sermons on the phone line or on the website and things like that. So lots of ways to connect. My name is Kent Dixon. It's my joy to be the lead pastor here. And it is good, believe it or not, this is not a lie, it is good to be back with you this morning. Preaching can be a burden, but it is a good burden. And it is an honest burden. So I'm glad to be back in this spot this morning. And thank you to my brother Paul for bringing his good perspective on God's word and God's truth over the past two weeks. So seven of the 11 days of our vacation involved an average of 17,000 daily steps.

[0 : 59] No, we did not walk the Camino Trail. We walked the Disneyland Trail. Someone said to me, I have a bit of a tan. As pale as I usually am, you know it well, I could stand in front of the fridge door open and get a tan.

So I do appreciate that. We had a good time as family. We came home exhausted, but we had more fun than I could possibly recount. So it was a good time.

So this morning we're starting a short series called Membership Matters. And as you can likely guess, I'm going to be focusing on the idea of church membership.

So why is Pastor Kent covering this super boring topic that isn't really that relevant to me? You might be asking that. If you're asking that, I can't read your mind, so don't panic.

But it is an excellent question. And the reason is, it's partly because leadership have asked me to talk about it. But more than that, I also personally feel that it is an important topic for us to explore together.

[2 : 08] So in a broad sense, the idea of membership deeply resonates with our society. I think we can all recognize that. And if you're my age or older, and we're all in that category, you might remember the phrase, membership has its privileges.

Do you remember that? That was a marketing slogan made famous in 1987, year after I graduated high school, if you want to pin me down chronologically, by American Express.

And American Express was a new credit card company that was seeking to identify themselves as a brand that reflected luxury and exclusivity. Membership has its privileges.

So we commit to membership in wholesale retail chains. Costco membership, anyone? To health clubs or golf clubs. Sometimes the former don't get used except for the first few months of the year. But health club and golf club memberships we have. It doesn't feel that long ago to me. I'm still dating myself again. Video rental memberships.

[3 : 15] That doesn't feel like that long ago. But a wide range of organizations and institutions we are willing to become members of. So why is this idea of membership so important to human beings?

Well, I believe in some ways being a member of something can suggest that we are part of a group from which others are excluded. Can you see that perspective on it?

An exclusive membership in something may be based on or reflect our class, our race, our social standing, those types of factors. So perhaps in a more positive way though, membership can reflect the idea of belonging.

Of being part of a tribe or a group with whom we can identify. And being connected with or being identified as a member of a group can give us also a sense of identity.

A sense of security even perhaps. And that's identity and security in a world that tends to want to put people in their place.

[4 : 28] According to all sorts of often arbitrary measurements. Arbitrary demographic considerations. Or at its worst, sometimes society tends to reflect the idea that really you're in it alone.

You are on your own. It's all up to you. Good luck with that. Does that feel like society to you in sometimes? So what about the idea of church membership?

Well, you might be thinking, I looked at the membership list and I compared it with people who are in the church on Sundays and I went, these people are members, these people are not. this group needs to hear this message.

Nonsense. We all need to hear this message. And you'll see that it's not specifically targeted and it will be relevant, hopefully, to all of us. So I'm going to share some statements with you that may reflect perspectives on church membership that you have heard from others or maybe you've even held them or currently hold them yourself.

Are you ready? Connor jumped the gun. It's okay. That's all right. So don't read ahead. I know it's like any teacher, any instructor, do not read down the bullets.

[5 : 45] I put them all up there. So is the idea of church membership even biblical? Perhaps you've heard that before. Point me to a verse, Pastor Kent. I need to know exactly where the Bible says, thou shalt, King James, thou shalt become a member of thy church.

Right? Is that there? It's not there. I can promise you it's not there. Isn't it enough that I attend and give and volunteer fairly regularly?

What do you want from me? Seriously. Like I give, I'm there, I make coffee, I'm there on Sundays, I hand shovel the parking lot which Fern did the other day. I, you know, all of these things, what do you want?

Why do I need to be, why this other thing you're talking about? Doesn't church membership mean that I just get to vote in meetings? Well, honestly, that doesn't matter to me.

I don't care about church meetings. I don't plan to go to one. I don't care if I vote or not. It's not important to me. Is that maybe your thought process? Church membership feels like an archaic concept.

[6 : 52] At least one that's no longer relevant. I will go to church. I will not go to church. You can't make me go to church. Membership will not make me go to church. Is that a perspective that you've heard or you hold?

What about this one? This one really gets to me. This is my church, ish. This is my church, for now. Friends, I want to suggest that all of these misconceptions, and they are misconceptions in my mind, or at the very least, incomplete perceptions about church membership.

That's what these are. And I want to see if this week and next week we can begin to reclaim a more accurate concept of what it means to be a member of a church. Because I believe membership matters.

I believe it's important in a local church context. Why do I believe that? Well, I believe it's here where we sit and learn, where we sing praise to God with other people, where we grow and serve together, all in the context of a very different group of people.

Look around the room. You don't have to do it right now. I mean, we're a relatively small group. You know most of the people in this room. Are they exactly like you? Are they carbon copies?

[8 : 15] I don't think so. So we're very different. But here we are. There really is, in my mind, no other place like it.

It's the only place, the local church is the only place where the common factor for each and every one of us is the unifying grace of God. Good job, Emmett.

Good timing. Right? Do you recognize that? That is what unifies us in this place. In the local church is the grace of God redeeming and saving all of us and bringing us into community as a family.

You can have an amen there. We're not Southern Baptists, but don't be afraid to amen at any time. So one quote I read said this, a church is not a homogeneous or homogenous, if you prefer, club of people like us with whom we would naturally want to go on vacation.

Amen. Preach it, brother. Rather, good timing, Vern. Rather, it's a supernatural fellowship.

[9 : 28] Do you hear that? A supernatural fellowship of people very unlike us with whom we are bound in Christ. A church is not a homogenous club of people with whom we'd naturally go on vacation.

I went on vacation with people who, three people, who are largely unlike me. We all came home, which is a good thing. We still get along, which is a good thing.

But we are in a group of people who are not carbon copies of us. We are brought together in, as this quote says, a supernatural fellowship under Christ of people who are different from us, but who we can call our brothers and sisters, because we are all part of the family of God.

There's an amen. And some of you may have heard me say this before, but over the past 30 plus years, I've come to recognize that the church, particularly in the Western world, has become a deeply consumerist environment.

So what does that mean? Let me explain. Most of us likely come to church with expectations. I have even said some of these things as a congregant in my past.

[10:46] Will the sermon, here's Christianese for you, speak to me? Have you said it? Have you heard it? Will the sermon speak to me? Will the worship singing suit my personal style, my personal tempo, my personal key, my preferred genre?

She's a little bit country. I'm a little bit rock and roll, so, you know, does that work for us or not? Will I feel greeted enough or too little?

Ultimately, will my Sunday morning expectations be met to a sufficient degree that I feel my time, my time, has been well spent and that my needs have been met?

Does it feel familiar? When Christians develop this me-first consumerist perspective on their faith, they may wind up becoming drifters.

And so, maybe you've known some, maybe you've been one. Drifters are the people who drift into a church and stay for a while until they become bored or displeased with something.

[12:06] Can't stand that pastor's preaching, can't stand the way they sing, the style they sing, how fast, how slow, can't stand that that wall is blue and that one is white. Pick it. Sing off a screen, sing out of hymn books.

Drifters find a reason to continue to drift. These folks are looking for the perfect church to meet their tailored needs, their very specific, and by the way, often unspoken, expectations.

Good luck with that. Other Christians, and COVID helped with this, and that's sarcasm, by the way, have become digital disciples.

And as that phrase came into my mind, I thought, man, if that has not been trademarked, maybe I should, and I should write a book. Digital disciples. This is a phenomenon that we are seeing.

You might say, oh, it's a certain demographic. It's in France. It's in every demographic. Not just younger Christians. This growing trend in this group, as I said, was likely, quite likely, accelerated by COVID, and pastor friends agree with that.

[13:21] These folks believe that they can engage with online content, artificial communities, and that will be good enough. That will check the church box.

But friends, church is not a download. It is not a digital consumerist, again, product that we can order, consume on our own.

So is belonging to a church ultimately just about me? Or just about you as an individual? Or is it something that you or I can engage with in isolation, as I suggested there, and still be experiencing it in the way that God always intended it to be?

Do any of these perspectives feel to you like they fit God's intention for the church? Do they feel like what our perception of belonging to a church should actually be?

Turn with me in your Bibles to Romans 12, if you would. So there's Bibles in the pew in front of you, or if you have your app, it will not be on the screen, because I like to challenge.

[14:36] So we'll read it together if you're feeling brave. And we're going to start at verse 1 and read to verse 10. It's a big chunk, but I think we're all up to it.

So read out loud with me if you're able, beginning at verse 1. Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing, and perfect will.

For by the grace given me, I say to every one of you, do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ, we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. [16:03] We have different gifts according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.

If it is serving, let him serve. If it is teaching, let him teach. If it is encouraging, let him encourage, for it is contributing to the needs of others.

let him give generously. If it is leadership, let him govern diligently. If it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.

Honor one another in brotherly love. Romans 12, one to ten. So given what we've just read there, and I, as I prepared this sermon, I thought, boy, I want to go on an exegetical tangent with this entire passage, and we'll do that another time.

[17:14] Given what we've just read there, are you surprised that the root word of membership comes from the Latin word membrum? The Latin word membrum is literally translated to mean limb or body part.

Not too surprising. So this perspective, then, is what true membership, especially membership in a church, means. It's not about belonging to a club.

It's not about voting or not voting. It's not about being forced to do something that you don't want to do. It's about being part, being an active, necessary, engaged part of a body that works better together, because we're all gifted in different ways.

God's plan for the church, the model that we see of local churches in the New Testament, was not a Sunday-only experience that involved individuals gathering together, seeking to have their personal needs met.

And yet, that is what church has become to a large extent. Not a Sunday-only experience of individuals looking to have their own needs met. That's where that consumerist spin has come to the Western church, and it's not a good thing.

[18:40] God's plan for the local church has always been for it to be a body, for it to be a gathering of individual parts, individual people, members of the body in that reclaimed way of looking at it, and a place where equally broken and loved and redeemed people can gather together to worship God together and serve each other in this community, but serve the world with our gifts together.

together. We're called by God, and we'll look at this more next week, to be committed members of a local church, so that we can use the gifts that he has given us in an intentional way to bless one another and bless other people.

And as I say, we'll look at that more next week. In the same way, though, can you recognize that the unique gifts that other people have can bless you?

So I've said to friends, I've challenged friends over the years, pre-pastoral years even, if you are not involved in a local church, not only are you missing out on the gifting that God has given people in that place, you are denying people, I'm even going to go so far as to say robbing people of the gifts that God has given you that you could be using to bless others in an intentional way.

So our gifts bless each other and all of that then, our blessing one another, can be a blessing then to God by association, draw attention and give glory back to him, and also be used to bless the world around us.

[20:35] Because it's not just about what we do inside these walls. goals. It's about going from this point and doing. So do you see how different that model, that intention, is from the preconceptions that we've considered about church membership this morning?

So next week we're going to look at what's involved in church membership. What does it look like? What's the process? What are the pieces? We're going to look at some New Testament examples of how we can see church membership in action.

And then how God calls us to engage with that. Does that sound good? Amen.