Membership Matters Part 2

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Preacher: Kent Dixon

[0:00] Welcome here for this Sunday, February 19th. My name is Kent Dixon. It's my joy to be the lead pastor here. Snow is daunting to people.

Do you see that? Snow has daunted, but we shall overcome. So we're concluding our short series this morning called Membership Matters.
It's a two-parter. Sometimes I do much longer series, but this is just a twofer. So we began last week by considering some perspectives that people may have on the idea of membership, particularly in the local church.
And so this is a bit of a refresher, just quickly, and if you weren't here last week, you'll get this condensed version. So we recognized last week that in a broad sense, the idea of membership deeply resonates with our society.
Membership may reflect the idea of belonging. Being part of a tribe or a group with which you can identify. Being connected with or being identified as a member of a group can give us an idea of or a sense of identity, a sense of security, perhaps.
[1:15] And we also acknowledge that our understanding of the idea of church membership may be incomplete. It may have even been shaped by past experience.

And past experience, as we know, is not always good experience. And that our understanding that we may have developed over time may not be the kind of understanding that God has always intended for us to have.
Because, as our series title says, membership matters. It's important in a local church. As I said last week, God's plan for the church, the model that we see of local churches throughout the New Testament, was not a Sunday-only experience of individuals gathering together, seeking to have their personal needs met.
And as we talked about last week a little bit, that has largely become, bless you, Linda, that has largely become what the Western church is about.
It's about meeting needs that we come with, expectations that we come with. And you heard me say this last week again, and this is something that's really struck me over the past decade or more, is that this model has become to be considered normal, particularly in the Western church.
[2:38] We come to church expecting for our needs to be met. But God's plan for the local church has always been for it to be a body, a gathering of individual parts, individuals, members, that's where membership comes from, parts of a body, a place where equally broken and loved and redeemed people can gather to worship God and serve others.

That's it. A big part of committing to a local church community by becoming a member is intentionally recognizing that we have skills and gifts that God has given us that could benefit others.
We seek God, we love God first, and what immediately follows after that, our focus on others. And it's also to recognize that their gifts, the gifts of other people that we don't possibly have ourselves, could be of service and benefit to us as well.
That's what parts of the body coming together does. And then all of that can be a blessing to God and to the world around us. This is not about just me.
It's about me and you and all of us together. And all of us seeking God together to change the world according to his will. We have the opportunity to be so much more than the sum of our parts.
[4:13] And I think we get stuck in individual part thinking. But we're a family. We share a calling.

We have the opportunity to be used by God as a body in this place. And we have the opportunity to deeply commit and invest both in one another and in what God wants to do in and through our church.

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So I want to remind us this morning, this won't be a shock to anyone, that our God is a God of covenants. Right?
We see it throughout Scripture. Throughout the Bible, throughout human history, we recognize that God has made deep and abiding, even deeply sacrificial, as we reflected on in our singing this morning, sacrificial commitments to and with his people.
God has covenanted with us and made a commitment to us. He has promised to us, and that commitment is not only true and trustworthy, but it is forever.
[5:29] It is eternal through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So we make covenants and vows in marriage.

When we become parents, hopefully, we generally make a pretty serious commitment to protect and provide for our children, to be there for them.
Parenting is not a, oh, I'll make it to 18 and then, whoo, it's off my plate. Right? They are part of us forever.
So, recognizing those other commitments that we make in our life, why is it that we seem to hesitate to make covenants with one another in a church environment?
Perhaps we've been hurt by churches before, church leaders or church members. And I know that's been the case for me at times. I can see points in my life where someone that I thought was a Christian was unchrist-like.
[6:34] I've even had those kind of thoughts and actions myself and not reflected what I believe Christ is calling me to do and be. But negative experiences with people in our past should not make us unwilling to trust or commit to others in the future.

Do you see that? The future is not written except for God. The future is filled with hope. So, especially when a church commitment, this type of commitment, a commitment to our brothers and sisters in Christ, has eternal implications and rewards.
See the difference of that kind of commitment and what that can mean? And did you catch the two words that I used there? In Christ. I mentioned last week that while there's no specific passage or verse in the Bible that outlines or commands the idea of church membership, it's certainly the model that we see over and over in the early church.
And those words, in Christ, definitely support that. Those words or variations of them, often we hear in Him, are found more than 130 times in the writing of the Apostle Paul alone.
Shelley's jumping ahead. Don't look at the slide. Don't jump ahead. Remember last week? No cheating. So when you and I accepted Jesus Christ, surrendered our lives to Him, we were welcomed into God's family in Christ, in and through the saving work of Jesus Christ.
[8:28] And that relationship with Jesus then also means that we are intended to be in relationship with others who are also in relationship with Jesus.

Do you see that? How that's supposed to work? Does that make sense? So not only do the words in Christ imply becoming a member of the body of Christ in a place, but we also see the process, the natural progression, the steps that are involved and have been involved since the very beginning in this process.
Here's that slide. So we see it in the experience of the Apostle Paul himself. He was converted. That's the first part. He was baptized.
That's the second part. And then he joined the family of God in all the richness and depth of meaning that that has. Converted.
Baptized. Joining the family. Those are the steps. And that is the process. So you can scour the New Testament and you won't find anything, I promise you, that suggests that the early church had any idea or any concept of casual members.
[9:55] People who were there, but not really engaged. Or people who were there for a little while. We talked about drifters last week. People there for a little while and then moved on.

The New Testament talks a lot about church leadership positions. It talks about the responsibilities of church leaders. It talks about caring for one another in relationship and in church communities. It talks about commitment and engagement. But friends, it never suggests anything less than what amounts to a covenant relationship between individuals and the church body to which they have committed themselves.
There's no other alternative suggested in Scripture. If you look in Acts 2, we even get a sense there that the early church expanded on the three-step engagement process for new Christians.

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Because people were converted, we learn there, baptized, added to the family, and then they became involved. They became committed to the body and to one another.
[11:11] Turn with me to Acts 2, beginning at verse 42. And you'll know this passage to some extent. There's Bibles in front of you or in your Bible that you brought with you or on your phone or whatever you need to do.

And I will read it for us as well. Acts 2, beginning at verse 42 and continuing to 47. We read there, They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.
Everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.
All the believers were together and had everything in common.
Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.
And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. So do you see how that perspective more richly and correctly connects back to the idea of how God has gifted us so that we can engage those gifts to help and benefit others?
[12:39] There's nothing about that concept to me that supports the idea of casual attendance. You should listen to the pastor griping in the car on the way to church or on the way home.

I remember when I didn't go to church, I think to myself, and what was my reasoning? I was talking to a good friend of mine who's a fellow pastor just this past week.
And I said, isn't it sad, and I can see it in my own life, when we get busy, when we get stressed, the most important things drop off first.
Number one, we stop working out. Stop worrying about what we eat. We stress eat. We don't work out. We don't get exercise. We don't sleep well.
We stay up too late. Number one. Number two, usually it even comes first. We stop going to church. Somehow, the most important things in our lives, self-care and spiritual self-care, drop off first.
[13:48] when they're the most critical things in our lives, the most important things that we must cling to. Because at the end of the day, all the rest of it doesn't matter.

At the end of your life, is your spiritual life the most important thing that you needed to tend to? Yep.
The Bible uses many metaphors for the church.
And you've heard lots of them. A body, a building, a flock, a family, a household. And all of these things imply that the whole only functions when the parts are all working together.
When the parts are connected and engaged with one another. the local church was never meant to be just a group of individuals who all function on their own.
But a gathering of God's people in a specific time and place. Did God know we would be here? Yep.
Does he have a plan for us to be here ongoing?
[14:59] He sure does. Each church, every church, has different skills, different gifts within the members of that body. What we have here is unique to us.

Unique to the DNA of this group of people. And God can and will use this unique combination of gifts and experience and calling to make a difference in the way that only we can.
Do you recognize that? This combination of people doesn't exist down the street. Doesn't exist in a different city. this is a unique group of people called for a specific purpose according to God's will.
No matter how big or how small, it doesn't matter. God is here and he will use us if we let him. My goal last week and this week is not to make folks who are currently not members of our church feel guilty.
Somehow feel like they're less than. And I hope last week when we looked at the partial understanding, oh, I don't need to be a member. I don't want to vote. I don't want to go to a meeting.
I hope that I've shown you that it's more than that.
[16:17] It's so much more than that. The depth and breadth of what it means to truly engage with the local church as God has always intended. That's what I've been striving to get across.

So, formal membership. Why not? Friends, just as living together isn't the same as being married, attending is not the same as membership.
I think we can all likely agree that Christianity in the Western world, sadly, is losing steam, is declining dramatically. And there is proof of that.

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There are statistics that show that. And churches in North America, across North America, are closing their doors in rather alarming numbers.
And so, researchers have also recognized that the growth that we see, that people are declaring boldly, oh, this such and such a church is growing. Well, it's actually referred to as transfer growth.
[17:27] So, what does transfer growth mean? Sorry. That means that people who were already Christians, who were already attending one church, decided to attend a different church.

So, the attrition from one church is counted as growth in another, but it's not new believer growth. So, in the process of leaving one church to go to another, the church that they have left begins to struggle. There's no question that people are still turning to God in faith.
You probably know some. People who, for the first time in their lives, are recognizing the need for God in their life. But sadly, that kind of growth, at least in this part of the world, is not as common as it once was.
I remember attending the Billy Graham Crusade that was in Edmonton, and it was in the 70-something. Can't remember.
[18:37] Should have looked it up. But I was there. And I remember being deeply moved and blown away by the throngs of people that came forward to accept Christ. And you could say, well, it was a big arena event at Commonwealth Stadium.

It's a big thing. But people were coming forward and recognizing the need for Christ in their life in big, big ways, in big numbers.
And we just aren't seeing that anymore. more. And I'm convinced that the decline that we're witnessing in the Western world, in the Western church, is at least partly due to the declining commitment of individual Christians to engage their gifting, to engage with God's calling on their life in community with others who are also in Christ, to seek to change the world as we have been called to do.
So I have some questions for you this morning. They can be rhetorical. You don't have to put your hand up. Are you confident in the way God's word is proclaimed and taught here?
Do you believe this is a community of people who are seeking intentionally to follow Jesus Christ with their words, with their actions, and with their motives?
[20:09] Do you believe this is a place where we seek to love God and love others? Under the logo you'll see in my email it says reaching up to God and reaching out to people.

That's one of the mottos of our church and it's really what it all boils down to. Reaching up to God, loving God and reaching out to people and loving them.
Do you believe God has called you to be here? Yes, that actually happens. And are you able to trust and commit to that?
Because if you can honestly answer yes to those questions that I just asked you, then I encourage you to formalize that commitment.
As I said to Maria when we talked about membership three years ago, four years ago, I framed it as planting your flag.
[21:15] Can you plant your flag here, in this place, in this time with these people? Because planting your flag means you can paint that wall, I'm not going anywhere.

We can have a disagreement, I'm not going anywhere. Pastor can say something that makes me feel awkward, uncomfortable, or bad, I'm not going anywhere. Plant your flag.
Make these people your people. Ask God to show you how you can make a difference here.
For those of you who are already members here, I want you to remember that the commitment that you made is not a one and done type of commitment, but one that daily declares largely to me and the other leaders of our church, guide me, use me, and perhaps even bury me here.
Because this matters. This is my family, and I belong here.
[22:40] Christian author Christopher Ash says this, the ordinary local church is a mixed and motley gathering of strange men and women.

Amen. The ordinary local church with all of its imperfections and weaknesses and oddities and problems has within it the seeds of the spiritual and relational genetic blueprint of a broken world remade.
are here. Can you see that?
Friends, the local church is not simply a social club, although we like to have fun and eat together, don't we? Nor is it a weekly box that we need to check.

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Time with Jesus, check. The local church is in fact part of God's grand plan to remake all things.
[23:55] Re-make all things. Are you interested in being a part of that? Because I know I am.
Converted, baptized, joining the family.

have you accepted Christ and surrendered your life to his lordship, received his saving grace? Then you are converted.
Have you been baptized? If not, why not? I will get in this tank with you gladly.
I would love to baptize you here if you haven't been. Consider what is holding you back if you haven't been baptized.
And I am here and others are here to process that with you. Are you a member of this church formally?
[25:01] If not, why not? what is holding you back? Friends, I hope this brief series, this two-parter, has challenged you, has clarified some things for you, and has ultimately prompted you to consider taking some steps forward in your discipleship journey with Jesus.

Jesus. If you're feeling God nudging you at this point in your life, I would love to talk to you more about that.
Vernon, Kathy, if you want to come up. Friends, I invite you to engage. Become part of God's intentional plan in this place at this time.
And commit to formalizing your membership here as part of this body. Plant your flag.
Amen? Amen. Amen.

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