

# ***“Stop Dating the Church! – Part 5”***

**Text: 1 Corinthians 5:1-13**

**~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on October 14, 2018 by Pastor Barton Priebe**

## **INTRODUCTION**

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** This morning we are on the last part of our fall series entitled, ***“Stop Dating the Church! Fall in love with the family of God.”***
  - Over the past few weeks we have seen a trend that is happening in our generation. It is a trend of people who say they love Jesus but who have little or nothing to do with the church.
    - They want a dating type relationship with the church but not a marriage type relationship.
- But we have been seeking to recapture the New Testament vision of the church.
  - We have seen that Jesus loves his church as a groom loves his bride. Since Jesus loves his church and is totally committed to her well-being, we are to love the church and be totally committed to her well-being.
    - And, as we have seen, this does not just mean being part of the big “C” universal Church. To be a member of the invisible/universal Church is always expressed by being a member of a visible/local church – this local church that is the temple of God where the Spirit of God dwells.
- I’ve been praying that we would capture this vision. And perhaps you have caught it. But there is one last question I want to consider. Throughout the series I have continually referred to church membership.
  - The question I want to ask today is this: **(SHOW SLIDE 2) *“Is church membership a biblical idea or an unnecessary formality of organized religion?”***
- Most Christians today think of it as an unnecessary formality. Even some of the best Christians I know say, ***“I do love the church in all the ways we have been talking about these past few weeks. I’m committed! I give generously! But I don’t think I have to be an official member. That just seems really formal and not something the New Testament Christians did.”***
  - So is church membership a biblical idea or an unnecessary formality of organized religion?
    - Let’s start by raising some immediate objections and then look at some scriptures together.

## **WHAT’S SO IMPORTANT ABOUT HAVING YOUR NAME ON A LIST?**

- When the topic of church membership comes up some Christians will object saying, **(SHOW SLIDE 3) Objection #1: What is so important about having your name on an official list?**
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 4) Response: If all we mean by church membership is having one’s name on a list then it is not important at all.**
    - If that is all church membership is then who cares. That’s no more important than having your name on the membership list at Costco.
- But there is another response: **(SHOW SLIDE 5) Response: Having your name on an official list is important if being on that list puts you in a great relationship with someone else.**
  - As we will see, church membership is more like adding your name to a marriage certificate. That is a very formal document but it really isn’t about the document – it is what the document points to. Your name on that document points to the fact that you are now in a relationship that is meant to bring happiness and joy.
  - Or, as we will see, church membership is more like having your name put on a birth certificate. That is also a very formal document but it formalizes the fact that you belong to a family and have all the right and privileges that come from being part of that family.

- That's the way the Bible wants us to think about this issue of church membership. When a person becomes a Christian they are born again into the family of God. They are brought into a relationship with God and with their brothers and sisters in the church. More on that in a bit.

### WHY IS THERE NO VERSE ABOUT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP?

- **(SHOW SLIDE 6) Objection #2: If church membership is a biblical idea then why is there no verse that says Christians must become members of churches?**
  - That is correct. There is no verse that says that. In fact, nowhere does the Bible use the words "church membership." So doesn't that prove that it is just an unnecessary formality of organized religion?
    - **(SHOW SLIDE 7) Response: Just because the words "church membership" do not appear in the Bible does not mean the concept isn't there.**
- Think, for instance, of the word **"Trinity."** That word does not appear in the Bible and there is no verse that says, **"There is one God who exists eternally in three distinct but equal persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."**
  - Yet every Christian believes in the Trinity. Why? Because although the word is not there the concept is everywhere. People just made up the word as a short way of explaining a large concept.
    - The same principle applies to church membership. What I want to show you this morning is that the words "church membership" are not in the Bible but church membership is clearly assumed and practiced throughout the entire New Testament – that it is for your joy, that you would belong, grow, serve, and be part of what God is doing in the world.
- So let me give you three arguments that show that the New Testament church was not just some sort of hippie compound where people just celebrated peace and came and went as they pleased.
  - Rather, I want to show you three arguments that the early Christians had a very formal understanding and practice of church membership – a membership that was a living relational commitment to one another, like being part of a family.

### ARGUMENT #1 – CHURCH DISCIPLINE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 8) First, the practice of church discipline requires a *formal* understanding of who is *inside* and who is *outside* the church body.**
  - Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 5. As we saw last week, this church in Corinth had serious problems. Look at verse 1. **READ 1 - It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.**
    - What does this mean, 'his father's wife'? You might think it is his mother but Paul could have written that. By saying, 'his father's wife' Paul is saying this man is in a sexual relationship with his stepmother. To make things worse this man is totally unrepentant. So note, this is not a man who is struggling with sin but wants to stop. This is not a man who is sorry for what he has done. This is a man who is openly and blatantly flaunting his sin and who refuses to repent.
- In verse 2 Paul says that since the man refuses to stop doing this, he is not permitted to remain a part of the church. We don't behave like that in the holy temple of God. He says in verse 2 that they are not to let the man remain among them. **READ 2 - Let him who has done this be removed from among you.**
  - So they are to excommunicate, or remove, this man from the church.
    - Here is the point I want you to see: church discipline only makes sense in a context where there are formal boundaries of who is inside the church and who is outside the church. Let me give you two reasons why.

- First, you cannot “**remove**” someone who is not an officially recognized member of a group.
  - Removing the man only makes sense if the man officially belonged to the church in the first place. I cannot be removed from the Victoria Golf Club because I am not a member there.
    - In the same way, if there was no official membership that placed the man “**inside**” it would be meaningless to speak of putting him “**outside**.” This language clearly shows some sort of formal membership for the Christians at Corinth. Donald Whitney writes,
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 9) “You can’t fire someone who doesn’t work for you. You can’t vote to remove a government official elected by another country...In the same way, you can’t formally discipline someone who is in an informal relationship with you; you have no authority to do so. These people in Corinth had voluntarily committed themselves to a formal relationship, and they knew who were official members of the church and who were ‘outside’.”**<sup>1</sup>
- Secondly, only a recognized group of “insiders” are allowed to expel the man. Look at verse 4-5. **READ 4-5 - When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup> you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.**
  - Notice that it is not one person who disciplines the man - it is a group who assembles. But here is the question I ask you: who is that group? Who are these people who are permitted to be at the meeting where they will expel the man?
    - Is it anyone who feels like coming to the meeting? If a person attends 3 times a year are they allowed to discipline the man? Are unbelievers allowed to come in off the street and judge the man? Is the man allowed to bring his friends to defend him? Who is the group? They are the formally recognized insiders of the church.
  - Clearly, corrective discipline can only proceed fairly if it is administered by an officially recognized group of insiders – that is believers. It was clear in Corinth that only the insiders were invited to the meeting.
- You see church discipline assumes a formal understanding of who is inside the church. This is why Paul speaks of two types of people – those who are “**inside**” and those who are “**outside**.” Paul claims that the church has no right to judge those outside the church but as family members we are to make right judgments about those inside.
  - So in summary, church discipline is impossible without some sort of formal recognition of who makes up the church and who does not.
    - Clearly the NT believers did not have a flexible and loose view of membership like so many do today. No one enjoys church discipline but we believe it is a good thing to be held accountable. We want to honour God with our lives.
- You have to ask yourself this question: Have I joined a church family in such a way that it has the right to remove me if I live in unrepentant sin?
  - Church discipline assumes that you are not just part of a church, but an officially recognized part of the church.

## **ARGUMENT #2 - THE MEANING OF THE WORD “JOIN”**

- **(SHOW SLIDE 10) Second argument: To “join” a church was understood as entering into a formal relationship with the church.**
  - In Acts 5:13 we read the story about God striking Ananias and Sapphira dead for lying to the church leaders and to God. We then read these words in Acts 5:13. **READ 13 - None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.**
    - Now is not the time to deal with the difficulties of the Ananias and Sapphira story. Right now I want to focus on the reaction of these people. Evidently there were some who

<sup>1</sup> Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church* (Crossway, 1996), 45.

superficially said they followed Christ but after hearing that two people fell dead before Peter they decided not to **“join”** the church.

- This word **“join”** is a powerful word. To **“join”** means to **“glue or cement together, to unite, to join firmly.”** In I Corinthians chapter 6 Paul uses this exact word to describe the joining of two people in sexual union.
  - Do you see? This is *not* an informal or casual word. When you glue two boards together they are not in a casual relationship with each other like when they are stacked on top of each other. To sexually unite yourself with another person means you have gone far beyond an informal friendship.
    - The people in Acts 5 did not join them, or glue themselves to the church because they knew it meant to be formally identified with the church.
- In summary, the word **“join”** clearly points to a formal understanding of membership where a Christian glues him or her self to the church.
  - Would you describe your relationship with the church that way or is it is an informal relationship like dating that you can leave anytime you want?

### ARGUMENT #3 - THE BIBLICAL METAPHORS FOR “CHURCH”

- My third argument to demonstrate that the NT assumes and teaches a formal and official understanding of church membership concerns the metaphors used to describe the church.
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 11) Argument #3: The New Testament metaphors for the “church” require a formal relationship of believers to the church.**
- The local church is described as being a **“flock”** of sheep.
  - When Paul leaves Ephesus he tells the elders to **“keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.”**<sup>2</sup>
    - As Donald Whitney says, **“A flock of sheep isn’t a random collection of ewes, rams, and lambs. Shepherds know their flocks. They know which sheep are theirs to care for and which are not. Sheep belong to specific flocks.”**<sup>3</sup>
  - So we have to have some way of identifying who is in the flock that is Central Baptist and who is not. That is what membership does.
- The local church is described as a **“body.”** 1 Corinthians 12:27 says, **“Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.”**
  - Again, this is not a casual thing. How many of you would say that your head is casually connected to your neck? I for one am very thankful that my feet are in a formal relationship with my legs.
    - Again, this language points to a formal joining together of believers where it is clear who operates as each part of the body.
- The local church is also described as a **“household”** or family. 1 Timothy 3:15 states, **“Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how to conduct yourselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God”.**
  - Here the local church is pictured as a family. What would you think of me if I said, **“Well, I am sort of a part of the Priebe family – sometimes I am a Priebe but others times not really.”**
    - You are either a part of a family or you are not.
- Finally, the local church is described as a **“temple.”** Ephesians 2:21 says, **“In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord”.**
  - What is the purpose of a brick? It has no purpose by itself. A brick exists to be cemented together with another brick in order to build a structure. Now in the NT, every Christian is a stone or brick and yet today many Christians say, **“I do not have to be joined to a church.”**

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 20:28.

<sup>3</sup> Whitney, 48.

- Really? Are you so sure about that? Let me ask you, **“What good is a brick that lays around on the ground by itself?”** Its only value is to be kicked around. In the words of Charles Spurgeon, **“it is a good for nothing brick.”**<sup>4</sup>
  - So a Christian that rejects the church or only has an informal association with it is not fulfilling his or her purpose. Bricks never have a loose affiliation with each other or else they fall over. Bricks are *cemented* together.
- You see then, all these metaphors teach us something. They teach us that a Christians’ life is to be lived out with other Christians in the local church. But this is not just a loose affiliation with the church. It is not just a dating type relationship. It is a relationship where we are joined to one another in an official way.
  - Sheep are either part of a flock or not, the head is part of the body or not, you are in a family or you are not, and you are either cemented together with others or you are not.
    - The metaphors for church show us that every Christian is to be a member of a local church.

## A WRITTEN LIST OF MEMBERS?

- But what about this question of a written list of members? Did the NT churches actually keep written lists of their members? We cannot say for sure but it seems like they did.
  - Consider for instance those parts of the Bible that we so often skip over in our reading – the genealogies. The Jewish people were very acquainted with accurately kept, exhaustive, written lists that demonstrated formal membership in Israel. There is a case in Ezra chapter 2 where a group of Israelites could not find their names written in the genealogical records and so they were excluded from the priesthood. Written lists mattered!
    - With this background it certainly does not seem unlikely to consider the possibility that a local church that contained literate Jews may well have kept an official list of membership.
- But what about the many Gentile churches that did not have this background of membership genealogies? Even there we see indications of official written membership rolls. In 1 Timothy 5:9 Paul writes about how to care for widows and instructs Timothy, **“Let a widow be enrolled.”** To **“enroll”** literally means to write a list.
  - Notice again that there was a clear understanding of which widows were a part of the church and which were not, to such a fine degree that a written list could be kept of who was to be cared for.
    - If there was a list for widows it does not seem very far fetched to imagine that there may have been a list of members.

## CONCLUSION TO ARGUMENTS

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<sup>4</sup> “Now, I know there are some who say, “Well, I hope I have given myself to the Lord, but I do not intend to give myself to any church, because——” Now, why not? “*Because I can be a Christian without it.*” Now, are you quite clear about that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord’s commands as by being obedient? Well, suppose everybody else did the same, suppose all Christians in the world said, “I shall not join the Church.” Why there would be no visible Church, there would be no ordinances. That would be a very bad thing, and yet, one doing it—what is right for one is right for all—why should not all of us do it? Then you believe that if you were to do an act which has a tendency to destroy the visible Church of God, you would be as good a Christian as if you did your best to build up that Church? I do not believe it, sir! nor do you either. You have not any such a belief; it is only a trumpery excuse for something else. There is a brick—a very good one. What is the brick made for? To help to build a house with. It is of no use for that brick to tell you that it is just as good a brick while it is kicking about on the ground as it would be in the house. It is a good-for-nothing brick; until it is built into the wall, it is no good. So you rolling-stone Christians, I do not believe that you are answering your purpose; you are living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live, and you are much to blame for the injury you do.” C. H. Spurgeon, “Joining the Church,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 60 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1914), 295–296.

- So, is church membership, as we practice it today, a biblical practice? My answer is this: Although we certainly do not want to make dogmatic statements about written lists, it should be clear by now the NT does not allow us to have a flexible and informal view of membership.
  - The early church was not a loose affiliation of believers. The NT believers had a formal understanding of who was inside and who was outside the church. The early churches had some official method, akin to our practices today, of determining who was in and who was out. They viewed the local church like a family that they joined and were devoted to.
    - Membership is simply a way of becoming a part of the family and determining who is and who is not a part of the family.

## APPLICATIONS

- So I think our application is plain this morning. If you are a Christian and have demonstrated your faith in Christ through baptism, what holds you back from becoming part of the family?
  - Some of you have sat in these pews for months and even years. You may love this place and it is evident by your general commitment. But there comes a day when dating is no longer enough. It is time to show your love with true commitment by marrying the church.
    - Why not become a member?

## SOME PRACTICAL AND MISCELLANEOUS QUESTIONS

- What are the qualifications of church membership?
  - There are two qualifications according to the NT. The first is faith in Jesus Christ. You must believe the gospel – that you are sinner, under the wrath of God, but that God in his grace has provided Jesus Christ as the one who will save all those who ask him to. If you have repented of your sin and cried out to Jesus to save you, that is the first qualification.
  - The second is baptism. Baptism is the visible and public sign of what Jesus has done for you and a profession of your faith in Him.
    - So if you are not a Christian, Jesus holds out his arms this morning and says, “**Come to me.**” If you are a Christian but you have not been baptized, Jesus’ first command is that you get baptized. And if you are a baptized Christian, the NT calls you to unite with a church through membership. Which step do you need to take?
- Do you have to be a mature Christian to become a member?
  - Absolutely not! Quite the opposite in fact. You become a member in order to grow into maturity. Remember the NT pattern – faith in Christ, baptism, membership.
- So how do you become a member of Central?
  - Date the church for a little while. Get to know her. Attend Starting Point and discover what Central is like. If you decide you want to be a member at Central then attend a membership class. Our next class is on Oct 21<sup>st</sup> following the service. Sign up at the office.
    - Take the card in the pew or chair in front of you and write on it, “**Will you marry me?**”...or just write, “**Please contact me about membership**” or “**I would like to get baptized**” or “**I would like to find out how to become a Christian**”
- I pray that this series has given you a new vision for the place of the church in your life. As we have seen, the New Testament vision is that when a person receives the good news of Jesus Christ they devote themselves first to the Lord through faith, repentance, and baptism, and then to Jesus’ bride, the church.
  - This was never a burden to those early Christians. It was a tremendous privilege. We are part of Christ’s bride. We are part of Christ’s body. We are part of God’s temple.
    - The church is family of God that is meant to help grow us in the faith, to care for us, nurture us, and enable us to live out our lives for the glory of God. It’s time to stop dating the church. It’s time to fall in love with the family of God.