

## MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP – Part 4

“In the Bible Belt, many people think they’re Christians but have no concept of the severity of sin, necessity of repentance, message of grace, or the overall message of the gospel. They think they’re just fine with God and God is fine with them because they aren’t atheists and have been to church before as a kid. It’s almost like you have to help them get lost, so they can actually be saved.” pp 12

- Dean Inserra, *The Unsaved Christian*, pp. 12

“The people who practice cultural Christianity are not atheists or agnostics. In fact, Cultural Christians would be offended if described with such labels. These are not the urban academics living in loft apartments who could articulate their opposition to Christian beliefs. These are the suburban, cul-de-sac folks hosting a cookout to watch the game. They believe in God. They take seriously their “Christian” traditions, prayer in schools, nativity scenes, and Linus reciting the story of the birth of Christ during A Charlie Brown Christmas. What is wrong with being a monotheist who loves Charlie Brown and believes Jesus was born in a manger? Nothing, if it leads to gospel belief and practice. But the difficulty comes when we examine exactly who their God is and question why the coming of Jesus even matters. Cultural Christianity admires Jesus, but doesn’t really think He is needed, except to “take the wheel” in a moment of crisis. The Jesus of Cultural Christianity is a type of historical imaginary friend with some magic powers for good luck and sentimentality. “Amazing Grace” is a song known from memory, but why that grace is amazing cannot be explained. The God of Cultural Christianity is the “big man upstairs,” and whether or not He is holy and people have sinned against Him is irrelevant. Words such as “hope,” “faith,” and “believe” hang on the walls of living rooms as decorations, but the actual words of God only come around when Psalm 23 is read at a loved one’s funeral.”

- Inserra, pp. 13-14

“Is it possible for Bible-believing churches to unintentionally allow Cultural Christianity to flourish in their own congregations?”

A church membership inquiry several years ago led me to realize it is easier than I had ever considered. “What changes on Monday if I join the church and become a member on Sunday? I just don’t see the point.” That question stumped me, and it came during our first-ever membership class at the church I planted. Does anything actually change? I thought, as I tried to scrounge up an answer in front of about twenty people who now were probably wondering the same thing. I don’t remember what I said, but I know it wasn’t very good. I had no quality answer to give, because in our church, at that point, there really was no change. After being flustered for the rest of the Q&A, I started thinking about the question and realized it was not only a great question but also a crucial one.

What does it mean to be a member of a church? For us, as I look back to our early years, it only meant we were the church you said you were going to come to on Sunday morning, until you decided to go someplace else. As I considered the Cultural Christian climate of the city we had set out to reach, I came to the humbling realization that I had been unaware that our model of church membership was the very type of church practice that allows Cultural Christianity to flourish. We had it in place because we thought we were supposed to, I guess, but we couldn’t really describe why it mattered. Unsaved Christians thrive where church membership means nothing and is available to all, without anything changing the day after you “sign up.”

- Inserra, pp. 73-74

## Twelve Reasons Why Membership Matters

(The following is adapted and expanded from Jonathan Leeman's book ***Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*** from Crossway, 2012).

- 1) **It's biblical**. Jesus established the local church and all the apostles did their ministry through it. The Christian life in the New Testament is church life. Christians today should expect and desire the same.
- 2) **The church is its members**. To be "a church" in the New Testament is to be one of its members (read through Acts). And you want to be part of the church because that's who Jesus came to rescue and reconcile to himself.
- 3) **It's a pre-requisite for the Lord's Supper**. The Lord's Supper is a meal for the gathered church, that is, for members (see 1 Cor. 11:20, 33). And you want to take the Lord's Supper. It's the team "jersey" which makes the church team visible to the nations.
- 4) **It's how to officially represent Jesus**. Membership is the church's affirmation that you are a citizen of Christ's kingdom and therefore a card-carrying Jesus Representative before the nations. And you want to be an official Jesus Representative.
- 5) **It's how to declare one's highest allegiance**. Your membership on the team, which becomes visible when you wear the "jersey," is a public testimony that your highest allegiance belongs to Jesus. Trials and persecution may come, but your only words are, "I am with Jesus."
- 6) **It's how to embody and experience biblical images**. It's within the accountability structures of the local church that Christians live out or embody what it means to be the "body of Christ," the "temple of the Spirit," the "family of God," and so on for all the biblical metaphors (see 1 Cor. 12).
- 7) **It's how to serve other Christians**. Membership helps you to know which Christians on planet Earth you are specifically responsible to love, serve, warn, and encourage. It enables you to fulfill your biblical responsibilities to Christ's body (for example, see Eph. 4:11-16; 25-32).
- 8) **It's how to follow Christian leaders**. Membership helps you to know which Christian leaders on planet Earth you are called to obey and follow. Again, it allows you to fulfill your biblical responsibility to them (see Heb. 13:7; 17).
- 9) **It helps Christian leaders lead**. Membership lets Christian leaders know which Christians on Planet Earth they will "give an account" for (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2).

*There are plenty of churches, traditional and otherwise, that will accept anyone for membership who can articulate a few things about Jesus. Many don't have classes for teaching about the church and what they believe. You just say you're a Christian or say you're transferring from another church or say you want to be baptized, and you're in. In such approaches, there is no real assessment of a prospective member's profession of faith or the fruit evidencing that faith in their lives. Further, while immediately assigning members to volunteer roles is admirable, the point of church membership should not be to get to the "next level" of church buy-in. Church membership should require you to covenant with other Christians, to promise to represent the church well, and to submit to the oversight and care of the church leaders.*

*The greatest deficiency in attractional church membership structures is that members are not adequately or appropriately pastored. Members come and go, just like "normal" attendees, and nobody knows when*

*or why members leave. Members may engage in grievous sin, which brings their profession into question or stains the witness of the church, and nobody helps them repent. Few faithful sheep are shepherded, and wayward sheep are rarely, if ever, disciplined.*

*This disorder is antithetical to the gospel. The gospel creates order among God's people and inspires the watchful care of others. If there is no meaningful shepherding for those who join the church, it becomes frustratingly difficult to find and experience the honest, transparent, deep community that shapes us by the gospel.*

*If our leaders don't care for us in personal, relational ways, why would we care for others that way?*

Jared C. Wilson, *The Gospel-Driven Church*, pp. 138-139

10) **It enables \_\_\_\_\_**. Meaningful membership gives us the biblically prescribed place to participate in the work of church discipline responsibly, wisely, and lovingly.

**1 Corinthians 5:1-13 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. <sup>3</sup> For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? <sup>7</sup> Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. <sup>8</sup> Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. <sup>9</sup> I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— <sup>10</sup> not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. <sup>11</sup> But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. <sup>12</sup> For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? <sup>13</sup> God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

"In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul calls on the Corinthian church members to protect the gospel by no longer identifying themselves with the man committing a sin that even non-Christians would question. They are the people in the city of Corinth who publicly "assemble in the name of our Lord Jesus" by the authority of Christ's charter. There, they are responsible on Jesus' behalf to ensure that this man is not allowed to publicly identify himself with Jesus. They should heed the charter by breaking his connection to their corporate name. They should withdraw their affirmation and oversight. They should exclude him. They should remove him from membership. His profession of faith no longer appears credible because his life decisions have the appearance of someone on the path to damnation. Paul cannot know for certain that this man is not a Christian, but the church still needs to speak for Jesus. Since the man is unrepentantly acting like a non-Christian, Paul, in love, exhorts them to treat him like one by removing him. Paul's goal, clearly, goes beyond holding God's people together. He's interested in marking off God's people for the sake of Christians in the church, the Corinthians public at large, the name of Christ, and this man – for the sake of preserving and protecting the gospel."

- Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, pp. 225.

#### 4 important concepts:

- 1) The church \_\_\_\_\_ the character of Christ and \_\_\_\_\_ the reputation of Christ.
- 2) The church carries the \_\_\_\_\_ of Christ.
- 3) The church gives witness to the \_\_\_\_\_ of the profession someone makes about Christ.
- 4) The church must set boundaries in order to protect and display the \_\_\_\_\_ of Christ.

"In joining the church, we put ourselves in a position where we ask our brothers and sisters to hold us accountable to live according to what we speak with our mouth. We ask them to encourage us sometimes by reminding us of ways that they have seen God work in our lives, and other times to challenge us when we may be moving away from obedience to Him. Your membership in a local church is that congregation's public testimony that your life gives evidence of regeneration. Membership in a local church is not saving, but it is a reflection of salvation. And if there is no reflection, how are we to know about the salvation claimed? In becoming a member of the church, we are grasping hands with each other to know and be known by each other, and to help and encourage one another when we may need to be reminded of God's work in our lives, or to be challenged about major discrepancies between our talk and our walk."

- Mark Dever, *A Display of God's Glory*

- 11) **It gives** \_\_\_\_\_. Meaningful membership It places an individual Christian's claim to "obey" and "follow" Jesus into a real-life setting where authority is actually exercised over us.

#### **John 14:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> "If you love me, you will keep my commandments".

There are \_\_\_\_\_ "one another" commandments in the New Testament. These are obeyed in community.

#### **1 John 2:19 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

#### **1 John 4:20-21 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup> And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

\_\_\_\_\_, if a member shows long-term negligence in gathering with God's people, how can he say he loves them? And if he doesn't love them, how can he love God?

"Another way to explain our membership in or covenant with a local church is to say that it makes the invisible visible – it defines the gospel love of God for the world. The new covenant of Christ embraces an individual silently and invisibly. You cannot see, hear, or smell a person being united to Christ and receiving his Spirit and going so by faith. It's the strongest, most real union in the world, but its visibility pales in comparison to other forms of union. We can see the jerseys that unite a football team. We can hear the vows spoken by bride and groom. We can smell the blood that would have united one Israelite and another. But we cannot see, hear, or smell the bonds that unite an individual and God, much less the bonds of union between members of the heavenly and eschatological body called "the church," even though these bonds are eternal and unbreakable."

- Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, pp. 267-68.

12) It builds \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

Meaningful membership puts the alternative rule of Christ on display for the watching universe. The very boundaries which are drawn around the membership of a church yields a society of people which invites the nations to something better.

**Matthew 5:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

**Matthew 5:13-16 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. <sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

"The call to the Christian life is a call to believe the gospel, repent of sin, and follow Christ with others. To put it plainly, this is church membership. An unregenerate person cannot and should not have to understand such a reality that exists for a Christian. Rather, he needs to be made aware of his sin and need for Christ.

This also matters greatly for the witness in the community of the church. Unbelievers know when their friends who claim to be Christian don't actually take their faith seriously. It is detrimental to the mission of God in a community when unbelievers see little distinction between themselves and friends who are associated with a church. Christians are called by Christ to let their lights shine before others (Matt. 5:16), and this is impossible to accomplish if they don't actually possess the light to shine."

Dean Inserra, *The Unsaved Christian*, pp. 79

**John 13:34-35 (ESV)**

<sup>34</sup> A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

**Ephesians 3:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> ... so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

**1 Peter 2:9-12 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

<sup>11</sup> Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. <sup>12</sup> Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

**Philippians 1:27 (ESV)**

<sup>27</sup> Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel ...

This passage is not about \_\_\_\_\_ . It is about rightly  
\_\_\_\_\_ in a dark context.

**Philippians 2:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> ... that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom **you shine as lights in the world** ...

This life looks like this:

**Philippians 1:27-30 (ESV)**

<sup>27</sup> Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, <sup>28</sup> and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. <sup>29</sup> For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, <sup>30</sup> engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

“Many Protestants have begun to think that because the church is not essential to the gospel, it is not important to the gospel. This is an unbiblical, false, and dangerous conclusion. Our churches are the proof of the gospel. In the gatherings of the church, the Christian Scriptures are read. In the ordinances of the church, the work of Christ is depicted. In the life of the church, the character of God himself should be evident. A church seriously compromised in character would seem to make the gospel itself irrelevant.

The doctrine of the church is important because it is tied to the good news itself. The church is to be the appearance of the gospel. It is what the gospel looks like when played out in people’s lives. Take away the church and you take away the visible manifestation of the gospel in the world. Christians in churches, then, are called to practice “display evangelism,” and the world will witness the reign of God begun in a community of people made in his image and reborn by his Spirit. Christians, not just as individuals but as God’s people bound together in churches, are the clearest picture the world sees of who God is and what his will is for them. Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). And Paul stated, “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph 3:10-11).”

- Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, pp. 165-166

**NOTES:**