

Impact

The Gospel and Church Membership
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The Gospel and Church Membership Ephesians 4:1-16

If you have a Bible, and I hope you do, let me invite you to open with me to Ephesians 4. Pull out those notes. They're in the Worship Guide you received when you came in. We're going to use Ephesians 4; it's going to be a home base for us. We're going to be looking at this picture of church membership all over the New Testament, so get ready to explore. Turn...maybe even put your finger on the Table of Contents, if necessary.

As we talk about church membership today, I know that there are a variety of different types of people in this room. I know that there are people today in this room who are committed members of a local church, maybe this local church or maybe another local church and you're visiting. I hope...I hope, if that is the case in your life, that you will be edified and encouraged, built up, as we study the Word today.

I'm guessing there are a good number of folks in here who may not be committed members of a local church. You may be a member, maybe just an attender, kind of nominally. You may be hopping from one church to the next, and you happened to land on this one this Sunday. Maybe you're wondering why church membership would be important, and I want to encourage you today, based on the Word, to see the importance of being a member in a local church. Then, I'm guessing there's a variety of folks here today who may not even have a relationship with Christ, and I hope that as we talk about church membership today, that you might see a picture in Scripture of the church for whom Christ died, and the people that are created by the salvation that Christ brings. So, Ephesians 4, and I want us to look at the importance of membership in a local church as it relates to the gospel.

There she was, the first girl I ever asked out on a date. I was a junior in high school, and I had not had much success on the relationship front to that point. Truth be told, I had had no success on the relationship front up to that point. This girl came to church camp, and word got around that she thought I was cute, and I thought, "Well, there's a girl that thinks I'm cute." I thought, "What do I do?" So, I started talking to her and ended up asking her to go out with me and some friends, and so she did, and we began this dating relationship mostly in context with her hanging out with friends. I think things were going pretty well until one particular phone conversation, and I remember this phone conversation vividly.

I was sitting there on the phone, and I start thinking, "You know, I don't know if I'm up for a talk on the phone every night and trying to find time to get together", which I wasn't doing a very good job at. So, I just decided to share my feelings, and basically, what I said was I told her that God and family...and this is really kind of where the straw broke the camel's back...I said, "God, family and my schoolwork are more important to me than you are."

So, needless to say, that was the end of that particular dating relationship until this girl started dating one of my close friends. Then, I started thinking, "What was I doing? Schoolwork? I've got schoolwork to do on Friday night now, and he's hanging out with her."

So, that began the process whereby I became good friends with this girl, and then best friends with this girl, and then eventually married this particular girl. My bride is extremely patient with me.

Why We Date the Church...

However, what about the Bride of Christ? There is a term that I've heard used and definitely have seen practiced called "dating the church". It's the consumer driven society we live in applied to church hopping or church shopping. It's looking for the best product for the best price on Sunday morning. Going from one church to the next, maybe staying a little while, but then moving on to another one or maybe just going to a different one every week, or maybe, substituting other activities for church altogether.

There are a lot of reasons I think we date the church. You've got some of them listed in your notes there. One, I think, is because we're independent. We're a self-reliant, self-sufficient people. The thought of mutual submission and accountability and interdependence seems foreign to us, if not frightening to us. I think we date the church because we're indifferent sometimes. "Is the local church really that big a deal? Isn't it just a formality, an unnecessary formality, maybe even a legalistic formality that, along the way in our church tradition, we've added on and it's corrupted the simplicity of the Christian life?" So, we've just grown indifferent to the church?

Maybe we date the church because we're immature. Sometimes we date the church just because we're immature in our faith. Now, it's interesting, oftentimes we will talk about how we're not committed to the church, and we will talk about that it's a mature thing to say. We'll say, "I love Christ, and I'm growing in my relationship with Christ, and I just can't get bogged down with the church. I can do more in my relationship with Christ and for the glory of Christ in the world apart from the church. So, I'm just going to leave the church alone and grow myself in my relationship with Christ." People will even say things like, "I love Christ; I just can't stand the church." Please do not say that. Do you realize the church is the Bride of Christ?

Then, how would you like it if I came up to you and said, "Bro, I love you, but I never told you: I just can't stand your wife." Would you take that as a compliment from me? Would that be a good thing for me to say? The church is the body of Christ. Men, how would you like it if your wife came up to you and said, "Honey, I love you, but I haven't told you that I just can't stand your body." Is that a nice thing for a wife to say to her husband? "Oh, thanks dear. That shows me how much you love me. Thank you for that." Absolutely not. Immaturity often results in dating the church.

Sometimes we date the church because we're indecisive. We can't decide on the one we like. It's the grocery store mentality applied to the local church, from one to the next to the next. "Where's the best product for the best price?" Oftentimes, we'll start to get camped out somewhere, then we'll say, "Oh, no. That's not going to work. That's got that one, so I need to move onto another one." Then, you move onto another one. Even when we begin to settle down in a local church, this mentality still pervades our thinking. We're always cognizant of the things that are just not up to par in this church that we've committed ourselves to, and we're always comparing the product here with the product somewhere else. We're indecisive, and it leads to a critical attitude in the church.

Maybe...and I want to say this as nice as I possibly can...another reason why we date the church is because we are ignorant. Now, again, I know that's not a very nice word to call someone, but I want to explain this. I'm not saying that everybody is not a committed member of a local church is just not smart. What I'm saying here is I think there are a lot of people who just have never thought about why the local church would be important; why it would be important to be a member of a local church. The church, I think, today, has contributed to that. What does church membership mean? You get to vote, and people call you up and ask you to do stuff? "Well, why do I want to sign up for that?" It hasn't always been this way.

In church history there have been times when the church has placed a huge importance on membership. However, then, today, any contemporary church growth expert would tell me the last thing I need to be talking about to you today is church membership, unless I'm looking to decrease ours. "On Super Bowl Sunday, you're going to talk about church membership? Oh, that's ingenious." In fact, you look over the last couple of decades in church growth circles, what you'll find is people have said, "Make joining the church as easy as possible and this is how you can grow the church." I want to submit to you the exact opposite is true. That when we raise the value of what it means to be a member of the local church, that it's then that we discover what it means to know Christ and proclaim the glory of Christ most effectively.

Why We Need To Stop Dating the Church...

Because God's Word says membership in the local church is important.

I want to submit to you one overarching reason why we must stop dating the church, and the reason is because God's Word says membership in the local church is important. God's Word, the Bible says membership in the local church is important. Now, I'll be really careful here. Stick with your notes there for a minute. Membership in a local church is not biblically commanded. I want to be very clear on this. I don't want to mislead anybody. Membership in a local church is not biblically commanded. You will not find one place in this book where it says "membership" or "church membership". You will not find anywhere in the New Testament a command for believers to become members of a local church, and that seals the deal for many. "Well, it's unbiblical, so I'm just going to leave it behind."

Before we take that step, though, let's think about it. The New Testament also doesn't show us one place where Jesus says the words, "I am God." However, does that mean that we're going to throw His divinity out the window? You won't find one verse or one passage in the Bible that mentions the word "Trinity". Does that mean we're going to throw that doctrine out the window as well? Maybe there are things that are not explicitly detailed here, spelled out in Scripture that are still a part of the design of God, and part of the truth of who God is and who He's made us to be. Membership in a local church is not biblically commanded, but membership in a local church is biblically implied. In fact, I would say it's explicitly implied, if that's possible.

Now, I want to be careful here. You be the judge. I want us to walk through a couple of things in the New Testament, reasons why I think church membership is understood in the New Testament; it's a given. You be the judge of whether or not this adds up or not biblically. First, when you think about this word "membership", even that word, you look at 1 Corinthians 12, there are ten different times...almost ten different times in that one chapter where Paul talks about how we are members or parts of the body of Christ. We're members of the body of Christ. So, I think this word "membership", better than just about

any other word, really sums up the picture that the Scripture teaches about the church. We're members of a body.

Now, to this point, people will say, "Well, yeah, I'm a member of the universal body of Christ. I'm a member of a group of believers from all time, everybody in the world today, who's trusting in Christ, and that's good enough for me." However, is that what Scripture teaches? I don't think it is at all. Membership is implied, first in Scripture, then membership is implied by church gatherings...by church gatherings. The New Testament word for "church" is "*ekklesia*". It literally means "gathering". The majority of instances when that word is used in the New Testament is in referring to a specific gathering of people.

Now, we've got to understand...and it's in your notes there...the church in Scripture is both universal and local...both in. There's a picture of universal church in Scripture, and there's a picture of local church in Scripture. In fact, you've got Ephesians open, look at Ephesians 1. Ephesians 1:22. Nine different times in the book of Ephesians, we see the church mentioned referring to the universal body of Christ, all followers of Christ. Listen to what it says in Ephesians 1:22. "*God placed all things under his feet...*" Talking about Christ. "*...and appointed [Christ] to be head over every thing for the church...*" Circle it there. That's the universal body of Christ.

You get to Ephesians 3:10. It's a great verse here. "*[God's] intent was that now, through the church...*" This is meaning the universal body of Christ. "*...through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms...*" You get to the end of this chapter, Ephesians 3:20, listen to this, these two verses. "*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us...*" Listen to this. "*...to him be glory in the church...*" There it is, circle it there. "*...and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations for ever and ever!*" That's not talking about just one local gathering of believers. That's talking about the church universal. Glory to God through the church universal throughout all generations.

So, we've got a picture of the universal church. At the same time, out of the 114 times this word "*ekklesia*" is used, almost 90 of them refer to local gatherings of believers. The overwhelming majority, 90 out of 114, referring to local gatherings of believers. Let me show this to you. Take a left and go back with me to the book of Acts, just a few books back to the left. Go to Acts 11. The church is both universal and local. Look at Acts 11:22. This is in book after book after book in the New Testament, and I want you to just get a brief survey of that, leading up to even this book that we're studying in Ephesians. Look at Acts, then we'll go to Romans and 1 Corinthians. Just want you to see the progression here and the picture that Scripture is giving us. Look at Acts 11:22. "*News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.*" So, this is not talking about universal church, everybody. This is talking about a church that gathered at Jerusalem.

Keep going to the right and you come to the book of Romans. Go to the very last chapter in the book of Romans, Romans 16. Romans 16, look in verse...we'll start in verse 3. Verse 5 is where we're going to see the word "church" mentioned. Look at Romans 16:3. Paul is kind of getting to the end. He's giving some greetings to different people, and he says, "*Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches...*" It's multiple churches. "*...of the Gentiles are grateful to them.*" Listen to verse 5, "*Greet also the church that meets at their house.*" The universal body of Christ cannot gather together in a house. There is a church, a local gathering of leaders, that meets at Priscilla and Aquila's house.

Turn one page over to the right; you come to 1 Corinthians 1:1. *"Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy..."* This is a great picture. *"...together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ - their Lord and ours."* So, it's a great picture. Here's a local church at Corinth, together will all the believers. However, this is a church here.

You get to the end of 1 Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 16. We see the same picture that we saw at the end of Romans. Church that's meeting in a house. 1 Corinthians 16:19 is exactly what we saw in Romans 16. Paul writes, *"The churches in the province of Asia..."* Many different churches represented in the province of Asia. *"...send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house."* This continues, 2 Corinthians 1:2 says the same thing, *"the church of God in Corinth."*

You keep going on, and you see it in Colossians 4:15, Galatians 1:2, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2, 2 Thessalonians 1:1-2, over and over and over again. We won't go through all 90 of them, but the picture is local churches, gatherings of believers. Now, don't miss it. Church, both universal and local, and the local church is the visible expression of the universal body of Christ. So, the local body is an expression of the universal body. Now, this is important. This is huge. You'll notice in those...for example, in Corinth there, the 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul didn't write to "the part of the church in Corinth". He didn't say, "To the component of the church that meets at Priscilla and Aquila's house", or, "the parts of the churches all over here." He says, "To the church of God in Corinth". That local body is an expression, a visible expression of the universal body of Christ. That's the picture the New Testament gives us.

Therefore, for anyone, any follower of Christ to say, "I'm a part of the universal body of Christ, and I don't need to commit myself to a local body of Christ", is to live your Christianity completely contrary to the design of God. It's to ignore the New Testament. So, if it's that important with church gatherings, then it begs the question: What gathering are you a part of? What gathering do you worship with, and not only worship with, but serve with and minister to and love? You think, "Well, I'm a part of a lot of different gatherings. I get to go to a different one every Sunday. I can even go to ones on the Internet at home. I don't even have to get out of my house." Well, let's go to the second implication for Scripture in church membership.

Church membership is implied, not just by church gatherings, but by church discipline. Now, we saw this in Galatians 6 a few weeks ago, and we said we're going to talk about this more in the days to come, and I'm going to say again this morning: We're going to talk about this more in the days to come, but I want you to turn to 1 Corinthians 5. I told you we'd be doing a good bit of turning. 1 Corinthians 5, turn back there. While you're finding there, I'm going to go to Matthew 18, and I'm going to read you something from Matthew 18. You hold your place in 1 Corinthians 5. We'll get to that in a minute. Listen to Matthew 18. In Matthew 18, Jesus starts talking to people about how, when a brother is caught in sin, and you want to help restore him in his relationship with Christ, then this is what you do. This passage is familiar to some of us; it's foreign to most of us.

Matthew 18:15, *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them..."* Listen to this. He says...Jesus says, *"Tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."* What He's saying, and this is Jesus saying, "If Bob sins against you, and you go to Bob, and he doesn't listen to you, doesn't listen to a few other

people...you're going in with love and gentleness, then you take Bob to the church, and you tell the church about it." Now, does that mean the whole universal body of Christ needs to know about Bob's sin? Absolutely not. He's talking about a local church here, a local church that has the authority of Christ in situations like this.

1 Corinthians 5 is talking about the same exact thing. Paul here is addressing rampant sexual immorality in the church in Corinth. There's this one particular guy who had given himself to some major sexual immorality. Not that there's minor and major, but we're going to study this passage in the days ahead. This is a tough passage. I want you to look with me at verse 9. Listen to what Paul writes, "*I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people...*" Now, listen to how he draws the distinction between the world and the church, those who are in the church and those who are not in the church. "*...not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.*" If you're not going to associate with sexually immoral, then you can't live in this world.

But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you.

In other words, remove him from the church.

The language here...don't miss this...the language here is there are people inside the church and outside the church, and if someone inside the church is giving themselves in rampant sexual immorality and will not turn from that, Paul says, "Remove them from the church." All of that implies that it's defined whether or not you're in or out of a church. You see, church membership, being in or out of the church, is implied by church discipline. In fact, what's really interesting, is it's not the individual who determines whether or not he's in or out. It's the church that determines who is in or out. Paul is saying he does not need to be in there; it's not up to him; it's up to the church to guard the purity of the church. There is so much in this passage.

I know to even think of this passage makes people all across this room uncomfortable. This is so foreign to us. We're going to dive into this in the days ahead. However, see the picture here. The only way this can happen is if church membership is a reality. Church discipline and church restoration necessitates church membership. I wonder if that's one of the primary reasons why we don't focus on church membership, because we don't want the kind of accountability that Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 are talking about, so we choose to live contrary to the New Testament.

Third implication: Scripture implies church membership with church leadership. Membership is implied by church leadership. Go with me to Hebrews 13. I think this is the last place we'll turn for a little while. Hebrews 13. Go to the back, Hebrews and James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, 3 John, kind of work your way back from those. You'll come to Hebrews 13. We're going to talk in just a second about leadership in the church in Ephesians 4, but at this point, I want you to see an interesting command that the New Testament does give to Christians. I want you to listen to it and then think about it in light of this whole church membership picture. Hebrews 13:17. The Bible says to Christians, listen to this, "*Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.*"

Now, again, this is one of those passages, a little uncomfortable to preach on as a pastor, as a leader, "Obey your leaders; submit to their authority." There's no question that a leader in the church could use a verse like this, abuse it, and lord a verse like this over a people.

However, when you realize what this verse is saying, especially the second half, it's just not possible. "*They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.*" This is one of the most humbling verses in the entire New Testament for me, because what Hebrews 13 is teaching is the same thing that Acts 20:28 teaches, is the same thing that 1 Peter 5 teaches, is that, as a pastor, there is coming a day when I will stand before God to give an account for your spiritual lives. That is an overwhelming thought. Not just myself, but elders, pastors, overseers in the church are entrusted, Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5 says, "with the flock that is under your care."

Now, think about it. Does that mean that I will stand and give an account before God for every Christian there is on the planet? Absolutely not. Does it mean that I will stand and give an account before God for every Christian in Birmingham, Alabama? No, but I will stand and give an account for every person in this body, and if that's the case, then this body must be identifiable in some way.

Membership is implied by church leadership, and it's the other way around, too, when it says, Hebrews 13:17, "*Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.*" Does that mean you're supposed to obey any Christian leader there is? Whatever any Christian leader says, you're held accountable according to Scripture to obey what they say and submit to their authority? Absolutely not. Instead, you are accountable before God for obeying the leadership in the local church of which you are a part in submitting to their authority. You see these words like this: "obedience", "submission to authority", "standing accountable to God for people".

This makes us uncomfortable, shows us why we shy away from church membership. Really, the ultimate implication here that really sums up what we've been talking about is membership is implied by church accountability. In all the pictures we've seen of local churches and those who are defined as parts or members of the local church, they all have accountability before God. This is all over the New Testament. Acts 6: Church members are accountable for appointing leaders over them. Acts 13: Church members are accountable for commissioning missionaries. Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5: Church members are accountable for purity in the church. That's the whole point in 1 Corinthians 5. God is not speaking, in 1 Corinthians 5, to the immoral man who's indulging in sexuality immorality. He's saying to the church, "You have not guarded the purity of Christ, and you are accountable for that." This is serious stuff, and it really flies right in the face of American individualism and contemporary church growth philosophy.

So, we've got a decision. We can either indulge our individualism and even to what people will say would grow the church best in our world today, or we can go with Scripture. As your pastor today, I want to say to you that we're going to go with Scripture, even when it makes us uncomfortable. I know these passages can be abused, and we've got to be careful not to abuse them, but we need to dive into these passages to see what we have ignored or missed out on when it comes to church that God designed for His people. It's not up for us to determine; it's for us to follow.

So, I want to ask the question of every single person, every single follower of Christ in this room. What local body of believers are you accountable to? I'm not asking if you have your name on a membership roll somewhere. In many places today, it means absolutely nothing.

One statistic I saw said there are 16 million Southern Baptists, and 6 million in average on worship every Sunday. So, not is your name somewhere, not even are you attending somewhere, but where is the local body that you have committed your life to, that you've committed to gather with week after week after week, that you've committed to, not just worship alongside, but to share life with the people in that body, where you are serving, loving and being served and being loved and vulnerable enough to do that? Where is the body to which you have said, "I'm going to submit to the leadership of this church; I'm going to submit to be shepherded by the leaders that God has entrusted me to their care?" Where is the body that you are using the gifts that God, by His Spirit and His grace, has given you to build up for the glory of Christ? I would say to every follower of Christ in this room, if you do not have a local body where that is the case, where you are a committed member, then you are living contrary to the design of God for your life. I want to urge you to bring your life in obedience to New Testament for a lot of different reasons that I want to show you.

There are really no exceptions to this picture. The New Testament doesn't say, "This is only important unless you're a college student." College students, if you go to college in Birmingham, Alabama, then be committed to a local church in Birmingham, Alabama. If you go to college in another city in Alabama or Georgia or anywhere else, then be committed to a local church there. I was on a radio deal this last week with Dr. Russell Moore, and the whole topic of conversation was about local church, and the title of it was, "Christ Didn't Die for a Campus Ministry." He didn't. He didn't die for a campus ministry. It's not that campus ministries are all bad, but they're not the local church. If a campus ministry is keeping any one of us...or a para-church ministry, for that matter, is keeping any one of us from committing our lives to a local church, then it's not fulfilling the purpose that it is there for. You need to move on.

The local church is unique apart from any other type of ministry, type of organization, type of club, anything else in the world. God has said, "My church is the avenue through which I'm going to display my glory to the nations." So, give yourself to this. You think, "Well, I'm new in my faith. I'm not ready to commit my life to a local church." All the more reason to commit your life to a local church, if you're new in your faith. You say, "Well, I'm advanced in my faith. I've got to move beyond the local church." Makes no sense. You don't move beyond the Bride of Christ; you love the Bride of Christ. The church needs you, and you need the church.

The Importance of the Local Church...

So, what is the local church? Why is it so important? We're going to fly through this, but I want to get an overall picture, and then we're going to unpack some more in the days ahead. A local church...Ephesians 4, look in verse 1: "*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.*" It's interesting. I'll show you what's about to happen here. Paul has just finished three chapters of gospel, gospel, gospel...the gospel is good. Then, he says, "In the light of that, here's how to live out the gospel: Live a life worthy of the calling of the gospel you've received." He starts giving some real practical instructions here, and then he starts telling about the body of Christ and the church. "*Be completely humble and gentle...*" It's practical stuff. "*...be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit...*" Here we come to the community of faith. "*...the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*"

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.'"

We're not going to be able to unpack this whole picture here. "(What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)" He's talking about the church here. He says, "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ..." Second time we've seen that word used "body".

...may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body [third time], joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

"A local body of baptized believers..."

What's a local church? There is basically a definition of a local church in your notes there. "A local body of baptized believers..." Key word there being "body" as what Scripture referred the church to in Ephesians 4: "A living organism of baptized believers." Now, this is another one of those issues that we just don't have time to cover in depth, but we are going to cover in depth in the days to come, because we cannot lose sight of the significance of what happened a few moments ago, when these two ladies were baptized.

We are recipients of a new covenant.

Significant here in verse 5 when Paul says, "One Lord, one faith, one..." What? "One baptism." What Paul is doing here in Ephesians, just to give you an overview, and you have this in your notes there. He's talking about how we are recipients of a new covenant. We've seen this in Galatians; Paul brings it here in Ephesians. You had God's covenant with His people, the people of Israel, back in the Old Testament. God's covenant with Abraham, God's covenant with Moses.

Go back to God's covenant with Abraham. God's covenant with Abraham...His promises to His relationship with His people was marked with a sign. Anybody remember what the sign was? Circumcision. We talked about this, the whole picture in Galatians here. That was the marker. Even in the Old Testament, you had an identifying marker, whether or not you and your family were in the kingdom or out of the kingdom, in the people of God or out of the people of God; that was the picture. So, what you have is this old covenant.

When Christ comes, it changes everything, and God enters into a new covenant with His people, and the sign is no longer circumcision. What's the sign now? What's the identifying marker of the new covenant of the people of God? Baptism. Baptism is the identifying marker of those who've been united to Christ. It's the picture of what we saw in baptism. Buried with Christ in our sins, raised to life with Him. Baptism is the declaration that we

belong to Jesus, that Scripture tells us to do, commands us to do. Be baptized. Acts 2:41, "Those who believed the message were baptized." It's what they did soon as they believed.

We are members of a new community.

So, we're recipients of a new covenant and that is shown by baptism, but it's not just about a new covenant. What Paul is saying here in Ephesians is that we're also members of a new community; recipients of a covenant and members of a community, and this new covenant creates a new relationship that we have with the people around us. What's interesting, Ephesus here, the people who Paul's talking to...Ephesus was made up...the church there was made up of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. We've got to realize the division between the two, Jews and Gentiles, in that day was strong, but now all of a sudden, they're being brought together, Jews and Gentiles together, in one community. This was huge. One of the problems at Ephesus was these Gentile Christians were feeling kind of second rate, almost like second class Christians because they weren't a part of the original people of God with the original covenant God made with His people. So, what Paul is doing is this beautiful picture in Ephesians 1 and Ephesians 2 of how they now come together as one.

Look at Ephesians 2. Turn back a couple chapters to Ephesians 2:11 and see how he's contrasting the old covenant and new covenant and talking about the new community that's created in Christ. Ephesians 2:11,

Therefore remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (that done in the body by the hands of men) - remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ."

What a great verse. Verse 14, "*For he himself is our peace...*" Listen to the unity here. "*...who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...*" Between Jews and Gentiles. "*...by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.*" What an incredible passage. What Paul is saying is, when you're in covenant with Christ, it creates a whole new community that you're a part of.

By nature of our covenant with God, we're in covenant with each other. By nature of our relationship with God, we're in a relationship with each other. So, this is the church here. We're members of a new community, and baptism is one of the things that unites us. "*One Lord, one faith, one baptism.*" So, baptism is not just a declaration, "We belong to Jesus"; it's also a declaration that we belong to each other. This is why, when we talk about church membership here at Brook Hills, we link baptism with that. Neither of them...let me be clear...neither of them are necessary for salvation. You don't have to be baptized in order to be saved. You don't have to be a member of a church in order to be saved. However, both of them are automatic reflections of salvation. There are obedience issues in all of our Christian lives, and when we're baptized, we saw what happened earlier today, it was not just two people saying, "I'm identified with Christ", it was also saying, "I'm identified with a community of faith." This is a huge step in the New Testament for people who risked their lives in their baptism, to say, "I'm now identified with this body of believers."

“...joined together under biblical leadership...”

The church is entrusted with servants of the Word.

So, a local church is a local body of baptized believers, joined together under biblical leadership. In Ephesians 4:7, Paul starts talking about gifts that Christ gives by His grace. When you get down to verse 11, he starts talking about how He gives gifts to leaders in the church. *“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so the body of Christ may be built up...”* Here is the picture, two overriding truths here in Ephesians 4:11-12. First, the church is entrusted with servants of the Word. It gives this whole list of leaders: Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. What unites all of those together? They all have a responsibility for proclaiming, teaching, and declaring the Word of God. Putting the Word at the center of the church, and God has entrusted leaders to the church to be servants of the Word.

We see this all over Scripture. We see in Galatians 1, in 2 Timothy 4, that if a leader is not declaring the Word and teaching the Word, then that leader should be removed from his leadership role in the church. It’s dependent on the Word. This helps us realize what’s going on in Hebrews 13:17, when it says, *“Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.”* This makes sense. If they’re serving with the Word, then it makes sense to want to obey their leadership and submit to their authority because their authority is linked with the Word. However, if any leader, including myself, leaves the Word behind and begins to lead with man’s opinions and man’s desires and man’s designs, then we should be uncomfortable with obeying their leadership and submitting to their authority, and we shouldn’t do it.

This is where I cannot reiterate this enough. In some sense, I want to reiterate it over and over and over again, week after week after week after week. I have nothing to bring to this church as pastor apart from this Word. Nothing. Any authority that I have in this church is completely linked with this Word. It’s the way God has designed it. He’s designed it so that His Word is platformed, so that when anything good happens in The Church at Brook Hills, only He gets the glory for it. People won’t say, “What keen leadership. What an innovative pastor.” God forbid. If this church is dependent on my innovation and keenness in leadership, then we are sunk. However, if this church is dependent on the Word of God and the kingdom of God, it will advance with great power.

The church is equipped to be servants with the Word.

This is the picture. Servants...the church is entrusted with servants of the Word, and don’t miss verse 12. Now, here’s where it gets really interesting. It says, “Apostles, prophets, evangelist, pastors, teachers.” Why did Christ give those to the church? Here’s the purpose, *“To prepare God’s people for works of service.”* So, the church is entrusted with servants of the Word, and the church is equipped to be servants with the Word. The purpose of a pastor/teacher...the purpose of my role, God says, “In the church, I’ve put a pastor/teacher before you for this reason: To prepare the people of God for works of service.” The word there, literally, is to be servants, to be ministers.

This is where we see again, Scripture just kind of flying right in the face of much of our local church mindset that says, “Well, the pastor exists to meet everybody’s needs.” Or, “Well, if the pastor can’t do it, then the staff exists to meet everybody’s needs.” The reality is, here in Scripture and just common sense, obviously, if every single need in this room was dependent on being met by me, we’re in a lot of trouble, even if it was dependent on being met by me and eight elders, or staff. “Well,” you say, “that’s what the staff is for.” Absolutely not.

Thirty, forty, fifty...we could never hire enough staff members to meet all the needs represented across this room, and especially, if we want to reach people outside of this room with the gospel. There's no way. The picture that Scripture gives is not one person with the Word; it's an army of people equipped with the Word to make this gospel known in this church and in this community and all nations. All of God's people, each part, it says at the end of this passage, doing it's work. Every member of the church is a minister of the gospel. Every member of the church...every member...every single member in this church, a minister of the gospel.

However many members at Brook Hills, every one of them is intended by God to be a minister of the gospel, and you are doing it. There are members of this faith family today who are in a hospital bed, and they don't just have a staff member visiting them every once in a while, but they've got small groups surrounding them right now. There are families and marriages walking through struggles, but not just with paid professionals' help over here, but with brothers and sisters who are praying alongside them and weeping alongside them and going through this journey with them.

It's the email I got last night from somebody in this community who's not a member of this church, thanking the members of this church, because somebody over the last couple of weeks...won't go into the whole story...but has reached out to them in a way that brought great sacrifice to that person, but reached out to them, has ministered to their family. This person emails me this long email saying, "Thank you." Each part doing its work, so praise God for how this has been played out. I want to continually for us...this is the picture: That we will continue in...that if we're a people that are dependent on a small group of leadership and a false dependence on them, there are oftentimes we even create in the church, in order to accomplish the kingdom mission, then we'll never, we'll never invite this community, much less all nations for the glory of Christ. However, when an army of men and women across this faith family is equipped with this Word to go out and to meet each other's needs and to proclaim the glory of Christ and meet needs in this community and all nations, then the glory of Christ will be made known through this church. God, may it be so.

"...to grow in the likeness of Christ..."

The church entrusted with the service of the Word and equipped to be servants with the Word. So, local body of baptized believers joined together under biblical leadership to do what? What does the church do? To grow in the likeness of Christ. Ephesians 4:13, three goals: Until we all reach unity in the faith and the knowledge in the Son of God, and second, become mature, and third, attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. We're going to fly through these.

Together, we want to know the truth of Christ.

First, together, we want to know the truth of Christ. "*Unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.*" Together, we want to know Christ. Here's the reality Scripture is teaching. Don't miss it. You cannot know Christ if you are trying to get to know Him disconnected from His church. In our individualistic pursuit that says, "I'm going to run after Christ, and I don't want the church to keep me from doing that.", what we fail to realize is we will not know the beauty and the glory and the love and the mercy and the grandeur of Christ if we're not a part of the church. We'll miss Him. We need to grow in unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.

Specifically, we want to guard one another from deception. So that we, verse 14, "*will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, blown here and there by every wind of teaching, by the cunning and craftiness of men and their deceitful scheming.*" There will always be threats to the gospel. There will always be threats to the truth of Christ in the church, and the church has been entrusted with this gospel as a deposit to guard. This is why...this is why we commit ourselves to a local church because we love the gospel. We love the gospel. We love church. We want to guard the gospel in the church.

This has been necessary in every day in church history, and it's necessary today in the century. There are threats in and outside the church against the purity of the gospel, and it is our responsibility...a member of the church's responsibility to guard that gospel. If that gospel is compromised in the church, it's the church, the members of the church that are held accountable for God for that. This is serious stuff. We want to know the truth of Christ. We want to guard one another from deception.

Together, we want to imitate the character of Christ.

Second, we want to imitate the character of Christ. "We want to become mature," Paul says, "growing into our Head who is Christ." This is the motivation here behind church discipline in Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5. Why did Scripture talk about removing somebody from the church? Why does Scripture talk about confronting people in their sins? Because the purity of Christ must be guarded in the church. This is not perfection...not perfection. I'm not perfect. Nobody's perfect. "Oh, no, He did something wrong. Oust him." That's not the picture, but the picture is, when the world looks at the church and sees people who claim to be members of the church living just like the world does, indulging in all kinds of things, and the world sees that person, then that reflects on the character of Christ, and Christ says, "Make sure to guard my purity." Not just for the sake of the world, for the sake of that brother.

Here's the deal. If I am wandering...just personally, if I am wandering one inch from intimacy with Christ, I want somebody pulling me back. I want somebody saying, "Come back, Dave." I don't want somebody to wait a year or five years or ten years before I fall way down here. No, I want somebody right here saying, "Come back. Come back." We need others to do this. We want each other to do this. It's loving to do this.

It's the same way that parents would love children. A parent doesn't look at his child doing something wrong that's going to destroy them or hurt them and say, "Well, it's his deal. It's not my business, not my position to judge. So, son, you go touch the hot, burning stove. No big deal." No, absolutely not. No, don't do that; don't do that. It's love; it's love. We're going to talk about this later. I'm starting to preach on the whole deal.

So, okay. We want to imitate the character of Christ, and we guard one another in that process from division; from division. Now, I say that because in verse 13, when it says, "We become mature", the word there is singular. It doesn't mean we become mature men and women. It means we become a mature man in Christ, a mature person, just like Ephesians 2 had talked about. So, we guard one another from living and acting and speaking in any way that doesn't build up each other for the glory of Christ.

Together, we want to display the fullness of Christ.

Third, together we want to display the fullness of Christ. This is so great, what he said, "Attaining the whole measure the fullness of Christ." That's what he's talking about in Ephesians 1:22-23 and in Ephesians 3:10. Through the church; God's intent is through the church, "The wisdom of God is made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms." God has chosen to display His glory to the world through the church. God has said

to the world, "Do you want to see the glory of my Son? Do you want to see the beauty of Christ? Look at His Bride." What a picture.

I mean, I will never forget standing at the front of that aisle, seeing those doors in the back swing open and out steps this girl who put up with my schoolwork, into the room. She steps in. Everybody turns. Nobody looking at me; it's like I'm not even there. I wasn't either. I mean, look at this woman. Look at how beautiful she is. I realized at that moment, "You know, I've got a lot of things wrong with me, but there must be something going right for her to be with me." She's a reflection of me. God has said to the world, "You do not have a visible picture of Jesus Christ in front of you. Instead, you have the Bride of my Son." Therefore, why would we want to leave that behind?

Why do we want to date that? How will we ever show the glory of the One who sacrificed His life for the church, if all we do is date the church? The church is not perfect. The Church at Brook Hills is not perfect, primarily because I am part of it. However, it is the Bride for which Christ died. It displays fullness, and we guard one another from distraction. Here's what I mean by that. What we've got here in Ephesians 4 and other places in Scripture...in fact, we'll talk a little bit about it next week...is the purpose of the church is to grow into Christ, the fullness of Christ and display the glory of Christ. That is the purpose of the church in Scripture. It is defined and not up for us to negotiate.

Here's why this is so important. Whenever we start talking about church membership, people, well-meaning Christians, oftentimes approach church membership and think, "I've got an agenda I'd like to promote in the church." So, people come to the church with all kinds of different agendas based on our experiences, based on our past, this and that, and the danger is in our contemporary efforts, to draw as many people in, we say, "Yes, we'll cater to this and this and this and this agenda."

In light of Ephesians 4, what I would like to say to every single perspective member of The Church at Brook Hills is your agenda is not welcome here. We don't need another one because we have one. We're running after Christ and His Word with passion, and we want to display the glory of Christ in all the world, and we, in the urgency of our day, do not have time to waste on other agendas. So, if your agenda would be otherwise than that, then with all the kindness and compassion in me, I would say maybe this local church is not for you. This is the agenda of the church. It's not my agenda. It's not the elders' agenda or this power group or this leadership group. It's the agenda of Scripture that guards and drives the church, and we've got to avoid getting distracted from glorifying Christ in all nations.

That's why, over the next three weeks, we're going to unpack that one sentence that sums up who we are at Brook Hills. We glorify Christ by making disciples of all nations. So, see Scripture driving the local church. We guard one and other from distractions.

"...and express the love of Christ to each other and to the world around them."

Love is the distinguishing mark of the church.

All of that to say, a local body of baptized believers joined together in biblical leadership to grow in the likeness of Christ and to express the love of Christ to each other and the world around them. Ephesians 4:2, 15 and 16. There is love all over this passage. Love is the distinguishing mark of the church. It's the core issue. In John 13:34-35, Jesus says, "By this

all men will know that you are my disciples when you..." Do what? "...when you love one another."

Love is the essence of church membership.

Love is the distinguishing mark of the church, and love is the essence of church membership. Why should you join the church? The answer above everything else that I would give, based on Scripture is because of love. For whom? Well, we join a church, commit ourselves to local church, not just put our name on the roll; we commit ourselves to a local church for the good of ourselves, because if we don't, we will starve spiritually. The New Testament knows nothing of Christianity disconnected from the local church. God has chosen the local church to be the greenhouse, so to speak, by which your spiritual life will flourish. You think, "I've had some experience in the local church where flourish has been anything but the word I would use to describe." It's the picture. Again, it's not perfect, but it is God's design. We'll starve spiritually; join a church for the good of ourselves. Not perfect, but it's a priority.

Second, we join a church for the good of other Christians. You need other believers and other believers need you. One of the things that excites me so much, and I mentioned this at the new members workshops we've done in the past, and I would say to you this morning, especially thinking about a couple few hundred people today who were beginning to walk through that membership process, that just makes my heart leap to think about the gifts and the skills and the passions that are represented all around this room with people that God is entrusting to this body. That this body needs...we need each other. You need other believers; other believers need you.

God has designed your life, Christian, to be spent for the church; to be spent for the church. You say, "Well, what about people outside the church? What about non-Christians who aren't in the church, how will they know? Do I not do anything with them?" No, you join the church for the good of other Christians, and we join a church for the good of non-Christians. God's design is to take the church and create a loving community where people are serving one and other, sacrificing their lives for each other, laying down their lives to see each other's needs met and, in the process, saying to the world, "This is no Rotary Club. This is no organization. This is no other normal religion. This is something Spirit-led and distinct that is set apart from anything else in the world." The whole design is the world would look at a church and say, "I want that."

You look in the book of Acts. The primary evangelistic strategy in the book of Acts is the church. In Acts 5, they were talking about the church, and it says, "They were highly regarded by the people and more and more and more women believed and were added to their number." Isn't that a great picture? They saw the church and said, "Oh, yes. I want Christ. I want what's in the church."

This is why...this is why these are some of the things we're going to dive into and talk about what it means not to talk about each, to love each other, serve each other and not to back bite, not to say anything negative, to sacrifice our lives for one and other, because a lost and dying world is waiting to see a manifestation of Christ in His church. I want to respond when they do.

Join the church for the good of non-Christians, and, ultimately, we join a church for the glory of God. What the New Testament is teaching is that God has designed for His glory to be displayed through your lives, not individually, but as a part of a community of faith. He's designed for the fullness of Christ to be displayed through His church.

Defining the Relationship...

Now, in any dating relationship, there comes that point where you have the dreaded "DTR". "Oh, we have to define the relationship. We just did this last week. Do we have to define the relationship again? Yes, we're going to define the relationship." So, what I want to encourage every follower of Christ to do in this room at a local church is to define their relationship. I want to challenge you to come to a point where you commit your life to a local church. If that is this local church, then praise God. If that is another local church, then praise God.

If you have been considering joining another church, then do so. Go. Go to a place and people where you can most effectively accomplish the purpose of God in your life. Don't hesitate. If you've been considering joining this local church, then do it for the glory of God, the good of other Christians, non-Christians and yourself. Define the relationship and become a member of a local church. What does that involve? Membership in a local church, to bring this whole picture together, involves committing your life in covenant with other believers...united in Christ and covenant with other believers...to show the gospel to each other and to spread the gospel to the world. This is good. Your purpose in life is so much bigger than your individual life. You were created for a community, united by the gospel to take this world on with the gospel. That's good. Why would any follower of Christ not want to be a part of that?

So, I want us to celebrate a gospel that has transformed lives across this room. I want you to hear some stories of how the gospel has transformed lives in this faith family, and I want you to think about how this faith family is created by the gospel and as a result, unites us in spreading the gospel to the world.

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