



12 TRAITS OF A BIBLICAL CHURCH – Part 8

Biblical Membership

If you have the Word of God—and I hope you do—let me invite you to open to 1 Corinthians 12. Can I just say how thankful I am to be a part of this church? I was out of town last week for Secret Church, which I hope was profitable for you if you were able to participate—if you were able to stay awake until 1:30 a.m.! I'm looking forward to us hosting that here next year, Lord willing.

Last Sunday I preached in a church where the pastor is a brother I had the privilege of baptizing and discipling years ago. So it was a joy to preach there, and God moved powerfully in those services. But I really missed being here and couldn't wait to get back. I thank God for the privilege of belonging to this church with you. And that's what we're diving into today—membership in a local church.

I've given some of this background before but let me tell you more about the first girl I'd ever asked out on a date. I was a junior in high school and had not had much success on the relationship front. Truth be told, I had no success on the relationship front, until this one girl came to church camp. Word got around that she thought I was cute. I thought, "Ah, this girl thinks I'm cute." So what did I do? I started talking to her. I worked up the nerve to ask her to go out with me and some friends. She said yes and we started dating, mostly in settings where we were hanging around with our friends.

Everything was going well, until one phone conversation when I decided I was tired of having to talk on the phone every night. I had other things going on in my life, so I told her that God, my family and my school work were more important to me than her. Yes, I said my school work, which I would maintain now was the right priority in my life at that point. But needless to say, she was not too thrilled and our dating experience quickly came to an end.

I was fine with that, until she started dating a close friend of mine, at which point I began wondering what in the world was I thinking? I had totally blown it. Sure, I had plenty of school work to do, but that wasn't comforting me in that moment. Thus began the process of getting to know this girl all over again, slowly becoming good friends, eventually becoming best friends with this girl—and eventually marrying this girl. Needless to say, my bride is patient with me.

What about the bride of Christ? It's often said that Christians approach churches like dating. In our contemporary church culture, we've developed a practice where we hop from one church to the next.

We attend a particular church based on how we feel that particular Sunday morning. Then on many Sunday mornings, we just substitute other activities for church in our lives. We come and go, to this church or that church. After all, we're Christians. That's what matters most. We're part of the church around the world.

So why would we need to commit our lives to "a" church? And what's the point of becoming a member of a church? So we can vote in business meetings? That doesn't seem to be worth it. So we date the church—sometimes different churches. Sometimes we date the church for years, yet never really committing to one local body.

I think there are a lot of reasons why we date the church. On one hand, we're pretty independent people. We live in a very individualistic culture. We are self-made, self-reliant, self-sufficient people. The thought of mutual commitment, submission and accountability in a church seems foreign and, quite honestly, frightening to many of us. Truth be told, a lot of us are skeptical of the church. I'm guessing many of you have experienced hurt in the church sometime in the past. Maybe you've been burned in some way, so you're pretty guarded as a result.

Many, if not most of us, are skeptical of any institution these days. Look around the world and sadly, even in the church, we see scandal, corruption and abuse. So even the thought of commitment to an institution like a church feels scary. For those who aren't even followers of Christ, this might even sound cultic. In the end, we feel pretty safe in our independence, so we keep our distance. We date the church because we're independent.

We're also indecisive. Sometimes we date around with different churches because we can't decide on the one we really like. It's like the consumer mentality applied to church. We're shopping for the best possible package for the best possible price on Sunday morning. "I like the music here, but I like the preaching there." Or, "I don't like the preaching there, but I like the kids' programs." We're wired to always look for the better deal, which often leads to a critical attitude toward the church. We can find something wrong with any church we look at. Often as soon as we begin to settle down into one place, we become cognizant of all the things we don't like. We're indecisive.

Or we date the church because we're new in our faith. I often hear people use supposed maturity—being advanced in faith—to describe why they're not members of a church. People say, "I don't need to commit to a church. I can grow in Christ and accomplish more for Christ doing things on my own, without membership in one church." People will even say, "I love Christ. I just can't stand the church," almost as if that's a good thing. Please don't say that.

The Bible calls the church the bride of Christ. Men, what would you think if I came up to you and said, "You know, I love you, bro, but have I ever told you that I just can't stand your wife?" Would you take that as a compliment? The Bible calls the church the body of Christ. Husband, what if your wife

came up to you and said, “Honey, I love you, but I need you to know that I can’t stand your body.” That’s not an advanced thing to say in a relationship.

Sometimes we date the church because our view of the church is incomplete. Many people today have reduced the church to a place you go to hear a sermon. You don’t really expect much more than that, so you wonder, “Why would I need to commit myself to that?” Others date the church because we’re inundated by all kinds of things. There’s pressure from work on Sunday, or pressure to have your kids in this or that sport or a travel team. Our lives are full and we try, but it feels like the church can so easily get choked out, because our lives are tied up in all sorts of things.

In the end, I think some—maybe many—people are just plain indifferent. Many of us have never really thought about why committing to a church would be that important. If that’s you, I don’t blame you. I think churches have contributed to this. We’ve not really held church membership with a very high view these days. It hasn’t always been that way. There have been times in church history when church membership was highly valued and extremely important—but not today.

After all, what does membership in a church really mean? Voting in a meeting—is that all? If it’s more than that, a lot of people aren’t really interested in more than that kind of commitment. The name of the game in the church today is to make it as easy as possible for people to follow Christ and be part of a church. Don’t ask for a major commitment to either. Any church growth expert would say the last thing we should be talking about is church membership today, unless we’re hoping to decrease ours.

My goal in the next few minutes is to show that this kind of thinking is actually out of step with God’s Word. Today I want to show you in the Bible that committing yourself to meaningful membership in a local church is actually critical to your life as a follower of Christ. I want to help you begin to think about why commitment to a church should be a high priority in your life and one that actually shapes your other priorities. I want to show you a picture of the church that I hope in the days to come will shape the way you think about work, sports, parenting and a million other things in your life.

Pastorally, I want to show you how—amidst inevitably busy lives and families—commitment to the church is designed by God to be a revolutionary reality in your life and in your family. Even as I say that, I know there are some of you here today who are new to the church. Maybe this is your first time in church—or maybe for the first time in a long time. Maybe you’re not even a follower of Christ right now. I want you to hang with me, as we talk about commitment to the church. My hope is that you will see a picture of community that you want in your life and in your family.

This is the sixth of 12 traits of a biblical church that we’re looking at during the first half of this year. We’ve seen how biblical preaching and teaching, evangelism, discipleship, prayer and giving are traits of a biblical church. Today I want us to see how biblical membership is an essential—in fact I would say is one of the most essential—traits of a biblical church. Today I want to show you biblically

that followers of Christ are not church avoiders or attenders, hoppers or shoppers. Biblically, followers of Christ are church members. Let's read in 1 Corinthians 12, starting with verse 12. As we read God's Word, I want you to count every time you see one of three words: member, part or body. This is God's Word.

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body— Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

I don't know if you were able to keep count, but I count 36 different times—in 16 short verses—where Christians are referred to by God as members or parts of a body. This is how God, in 1 Corinthians 12, describes Christians: as individual members of a greater body, where everybody has a different part to play in that body. It's a beautiful picture of the church and the part every follower of Christ plays in it.

Now, it's at this point that I will often hear followers of Christ say, "Yeah, I'm part of the body of Christ—meaning the global body of Christ. That's what the Church is. Everybody who believes in Christ is a part or a member of the Church, the global Church—and that's what's most important." But is that what the Bible teaches? I don't think it is. Let me show you biblically three reasons why followers of Christ are not just members of the global church. I want to show you three reasons why the Bible actually expects followers of Christ to be members or parts of a local church.

1. The Bible expects every follower of Christ to identify with and belong to a local church.

The primary word for “church” in the New Testament is *ekklesia*. That’s the Greek word that literally means gathering. It refers to a gathering of believers. Yes, there are times when the New Testament refers to the gathering of all Christians—not just in the world, but in the history of the world—as the global church.

However most of the time when this word “church” appears in the New Testament, it’s actually referring to a specific group of Christians in a particular location. In fact, out of 114 times that we see *ekklesia* in the New Testament at least 90 of them refer to specific local groups of believers. Let me show you a couple examples. Turn to 1 Corinthians 1 and look at how it begins. Let me show you who this book was written to:

¹ Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, ² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.

Did you hear that? Paul says, “*To the church of God that is in Corinth...*” That’s a reference to the specific group of believers in Corinth, this local church. Then note that they are “*called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...*” That’s a reference to the global church, right? But this letter wasn’t written generally to every Christian in the world in the first century. It was written specifically to the church at Corinth. If you look right before this in your Bible, at the end of the book of Romans, we read this in Romans 16:3-5:

³ Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, ⁴ who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. ⁵ Greet also the church in their house.

Did you follow that? That’s a reference at the end there to a church, not just in a city, but in a house—the church that gathered in Prisca and Aquila’s house. Then right before that, you see “*the churches of the Gentiles...*” You see the same thing over in 1 Corinthians 16:19, referring to different churches that are spread throughout Asia.

This is obviously just a small sampling, but the picture we have in the Bible, over and over again, is one of local groups of believers in particular places called churches. Notice that they’re not called parts of churches. Paul doesn’t say, “To the part of the church that’s in Corinth,” or “the part of the church that meets in this house,” or “the parts of the church scattered throughout Asia.” No, each of these groups locally is called a church. That’s the primary emphasis in the New Testament—local churches, local bodies of Christ—to which individual followers of Christ belong. We see this all over the New Testament.

Think about Revelation where Jesus writes seven letters to seven churches. Those letters are addressed specifically to Christians who are members or parts of local churches, local groups of believers in those places. So when we read the New Testament, we find ourselves asking, “In which group of believers in which particular place am I a member?” Let me put it this way. If Paul were to write a letter to you in the 21st century, which local body of believers would you be identified with?

The Bible expects followers of Christ to identify with and belong to a local church. So there’s a group of Christians in Metro Washington DC who identify themselves with and belong to McLean Bible Church. The question is: are you a part or a member of this body? Or are you a part or member of another body of believers? At which point someone might think, “Well, I belong to all sorts of churches. Sometimes I identify with different ones every week. What’s so wrong with that?” That question leads to the next picture we see in Scripture.

2. The Bible expects followers of Christ to be served by and submissive to local church leaders.

Hold your place in 1 Corinthians and turn over to Hebrews 13 where I want to show you a really interesting verse that helps us understand the importance of commitment to one church. In 1 Corinthians 12, where we started, we read about apostles and prophets and teachers in a church. Throughout the New Testament we see pastors and elders and overseers referred to as leaders in the church. This all leads to Hebrews 13:17. Listen to what the Bible says there. God gives a command to Christians:

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Well, as a pastor that’s a pretty challenging verse to preach. “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.” Sounds pretty self-serving, doesn’t it? It seems like a pastor or a church leader could use a verse like that to lord it over people. But then listen to the second part of this verse: “*They are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account...*” Did you catch that? I sure did. As a pastor, as a leader in the church, this verse just said that I will stand before God to give an account for the people I lead.

Which leads me to ask the question who will I give an account to God for? Will I give an account to God for every believer in the global church spread out around the world? No, I will give an account before God—along with the other pastors at McLean Bible Church in all of our different campuses—for everyone who is identified as a member or a part of this body. Acts 20:28 says elders and pastors are responsible for caring for the flock that’s been entrusted to them. That implies they know who the flock is

that's entrusted to them. First Peter 5 says that elders, or pastors, are shepherds of God's flock that's under their care. The Bible makes clear that elders and pastors—including myself—have a responsibility for a particular group of people before God. Which means it's really important for pastors to know who the members of a church are. This is not just important for pastors; this is important for you, for every follower of Christ. If you come back to the first part of Hebrews 13:17, God's Word commands you to obey and submit to leaders in the church. Think about that. Does that mean that you as a Christian are supposed to obey and submit to every leader that exists in the global body of Christ? Or are you supposed to follow this instruction in Hebrews 13:17 with the pastors and leaders of the local church to which you belong?

In order to carry out this biblical command, you need to identify with a church made up of pastors and leaders you respect and trust to teach you God's Word. We'll talk about this more when we get to biblical leadership, but the picture the Bible is giving here is clearly not members of a church just obeying whatever a pastor says according to his opinion. It's not that you're held responsible before God to do whatever a pastor says. No, the pastor's authority to lead in the church is 100% based on teaching God's Word. When pastors are teaching God's Word, then the members of the church will want to obey and submit to God's Word accordingly.

All of this is to say why so many people, including pastors, are uncomfortable with the thought of membership in a church. Leaders are told they will stand before God to give an account for members. What does that mean? And Christians are supposed to obey and submit to leaders—what does that mean? Again, we'll talk more about what that means when we dive into biblical leadership, but suffice it to say, this is humbling stuff for pastors and church members alike. But it's God's Word. In order for Hebrews 13:17 to be a reality in your life, then it's necessary to identify yourself as part of a church, a member of a church. This gets all the more humbling when you see in His Word one more way that God expects followers of Christ to be members of a local church.

3. The Bible expects followers of Christ to yearn for and yield to local church accountability.

You might think the Bible is taking things way over the top here. Now come back to 1 Corinthians—but not chapter 12. Come with me to 1 Corinthians 5. We're going to look at this topic more in depth when we look at biblical accountability as a specific trait of a biblical church, but let me just give you a teaser. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-2, Paul, in his letter to the church in Corinth—this identifiable group of believers in Corinth—says this:

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. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

To explain what just happened here, Paul just told the church at Corinth, “You have a member in your midst who’s having an affair with his dad’s wife. This is sin. This man refuses to repent.” So what does Paul say at the end of verse two? “Remove him from among you.” Jump to the last two verses in this chapter:

¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

Do you see what’s happening here? Do you realize that 1 Corinthians 5 is only possible if you have an understanding of membership in a local church? Here in the church in Corinth people were identified as being “inside” the church or “outside” the church. You have members of the church or non-members of the church. There comes a point if a member in the church continues in willful, blatant, unrepentant sin, they need to be removed from church membership, which is exactly what Jesus Himself taught the church to do. Listen to Matthew 18:15-17:

¹⁵ If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

In other words, if a brother is unrepentant and won’t turn from sin after private correction efforts by one, two or even three people, Jesus says, “Tell it to the church.” So what does that mean? Does that mean tell it to the entire global body of Christ? No. That means tell it to the members, the other parts, of that man’s church. Then if he refuses to listen even to the church as a whole, then remove him from the church as a whole.

Now, I’m going to talk more about this church trait a few weeks from now—in what is sure to be a politically incorrect Sunday—but it’s pretty clear that these passages are showing us a biblical expectation that Christ followers identified as church members that they could be removed if they continued in unrepentant sin. I use the language, “followers of Christ yearn for and yield to accountability” like this in a church. You might think, “They do?” The answer biblically, practically and personally is, “Absolutely, we do.”

I think about my life. If I am wandering off into unrepentant sin in a way that will destroy my life or my marriage or my family or the reputation of Christ, then I want brothers and sisters in my life who will warn me not to go that way. I long for, yearn for, a church—people who will love me enough to call

me back when I wander away from Christ, which I'm prone to do in my sinfulness. And so are you. This is part of how the Bible defines being a member of a church. Membership means saying, "I yearn for this from others and yield to this accountability. I will carry this out with others. I will pursue others in love." This is one of the clearest ways we care for one another in the body of Christ. We'll talk about that more in the days to come.

This is accountability—and it's not just between one another. There are other places in the Bible where we see that members of the church are accountable before God together. According to Scripture, church members are accountable for choosing and appointing leaders who will honor God and who are good for the church (Acts 6:2-6). Church members are accountable for making sure the gospel is being preached in the church (Galatians 1:6-9; 2 Timothy 4). Church members are accountable for commissioning missionaries from the church (Acts 13:1-3).

When you put all that together, you realize the Bible is flying straight in the face of American individualism and all of our skepticism—and to be honest, straight in the face of much of our contemporary church culture. It's begging every follower of Christ to ask the question, "Where are you committed as a member or part of a local church?" It's not asking, "Where's your name on a roll somewhere, or where do you attend worship and listen to a sermon?"

No, the question is this: "Where are you committed to gathering together every week you can with a group of believers where you are mutually submitting to the Word of God and to one another, where you are giving together, caring for one another, taking responsibility for helping other members of that body grow in faith?" Basically, carrying out the functions we see in Scripture of a church together—that's what church membership is.

Biblical membership is a meaningful commitment to following Christ together in a local church. By the design of God, a church is made up of members who are committed to one another like this. The more I was praying about and preparing for today, I just couldn't help but think about all the people—even sincere followers of Christ—who view church today as merely a service you attend, where you sit next to people you may not even know very well, and then you walk away and try to follow Christ on your own. This is not what God has designed the church to be!

This is also not what God has designed for you to experience. God has not designed the church to be an event where we passively sit and watch a stage together, then move on to everyday life. The church is designed to be a community that does all the things we're talking about in this series together. Yes, we worship together and sit under the preaching of the Word together. But our community is about so much more. We share the gospel together—the greatest news in the world! We're making it known in this city and around the world together. We make disciples together. We pray together. We give together. We pool our resources for the spread of God's glory in the world.

We hurt together—just like we saw in 1 Corinthians 12. We rejoice together. We mourn together. We share life together. These are all things we're going to be talking about in the coming weeks. But this is what it means to be a member of a church. It's not just about voting or attending a meeting. It's about being committed to a community of brothers and sisters in Christ, a faith family. I just want you to hear and see today that God desires for every follower of Christ to experience that kind of meaningful community as part of a church.

If that's on the banner of McLean Bible Church on all of our campuses, that is great. "We would love for you to be a part, a member, of this faith family." Or if God is leading you to be part of another Bible-believing, gospel-proclaiming church, that's great. If that's the case, you're obviously welcome to worship here periodically, but we would encourage you to be committed to that local church where you are a member. The point is to commit somewhere; don't just "date" the church. Commit to a church.

When you leave church dating behind, the following things will happen:

You will experience God's love in your life in greater ways than you ever could alone. I say this in part because it's right after 1 Corinthians 12 that we see one of the greatest chapters in the Bible, in all of written literature, on the beauty of love—1 Corinthians 13. This follows chapter 12 for a reason, because that kind of love is experienced in the context of life with other members of the body of Christ. Your life and your experience of God's love is incomplete without the body of Christ around you like this.

That's the whole point of the imagery in 1 Corinthians 12. On your own, without the other members of the body of Christ around you, you're like a hand without a foot, like an eye without an ear. God has designed the local church to be a place where you experience the fullness of His love in your life. Even as I say that, I know that some of you in the past have experienced hurt in the church. When you think "church," you don't think of experiencing God's love. You think of wounds.

If that's the case, I just want you to hear from God's Word that that is not His design for the church. At the same time, I want you to know very clearly that McLean Bible Church is not a perfect church. You may be able to find the perfect church, but if you join it just know that it won't be perfect anymore. The church is made up of a bunch of messed up people. I'm looking at all of you. But that's the point, right? It's not where a bunch of perfect people come together and everything is just perfect. No. Jesus didn't love us because we were perfect. He loved us despite our many imperfections. So it makes sense for imperfect people saved by incredible love from God to show that kind of love to each other.

But how is this done? How will we display the glory of the One Who sacrificed His life for the church if we sacrifice nothing for the church? How will we display the beauty of the bride of Christ if all we do is date the church and constantly be looking for something better to come along that appeals to our

preferences? God saying He wants you to experience a depth of love in community with other brothers and sisters in Christ in a church.

And not just you. When you commit to a church, other Christians experience God's love through your life. So being part of a church is a good reminder every week that your Christianity is not just about you. You were designed by God to love others in a community, in the body of Christ. You—right where you're sitting now—are critical to that kind of community in a church. Every single one of you. Don't miss the picture in 1 Corinthians 12: a church without you is handless or footless or eyeless or earless.

Don't underestimate the role that every follower of Christ has in the church. God has given you gifts for the building up of the church. Through your membership and participation in the church, God has designed for you to reflect His love for other people. There are hurting people in the church who need you to be committed to them—not dating them off and on, sitting next to them and then moving on with life on your own. And it's not just other Christians.

When you commit to a church, non-Christians see God's love for them. You say, "What do you mean?" Think about Jesus' words in John 13:35: "*By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" The same picture is in John 17. Our community as a church is designed to be a witness to the world. God has designed our community together in the church to be a display of His love in the world. According to His design, when the world sees a sacrificial, 1 Corinthians 13 type love that people in the church have for one another, the world will be drawn to Christ. We've said already that often that's not what the world sees in the church. This is why we want to work to make that change. We want to love one another so well that non-Christians will look at McLean Bible Church and see the power of God's love at work.

This leads to the last benefit, the ultimate benefit of committing to a church. You experience God's love, others experience God's love through you, non-Christians see God's love for them, and ultimately when you commit to a church, God receives the glory He deserves.

This goes totally against the grain of the way we are wired to think. In our individualistic culture, and even in the church, God's glory is displayed most clearly not through your individual commitment to Christ. According to the Bible, it's displayed most clearly through a community's commitment to Christ. Throughout the Old Testament, God is drawing individuals to Himself. But ultimately, He is drawing a people to Himself. In the New Testament, this people group is called the church. Jesus did not die just for you or just for me. He died for the church.

So get the picture. Followers of Christ, your purpose in the world is so much larger than your individual life. You were made for a community that is united together in Christ to show His love to the world. It's a community made up of people different from you, from different backgrounds, with different

gifts, skills and passions; different people who uniquely come together in Christ to display His greatness to a watching world.

Do you know why I'm so thankful to be part of this church? Because of the members across this church. God has formed a unique community here that's unlike anything else in the world. Let me introduce you to some people.

I think about Lydia out at Prince William. As a teenager, she is actively involved in The Rock student ministry. She invited two friends at different times to Rock Camp—both became followers of Christ. She asked another friend to help do translation during Turkey Outreach. Through the process of translating the gospel over and over again, that friend came to Christ. Lydia has another friend whose dad recently committed suicide. So Lydia and her friend just got approval to start a mental health awareness club at their school. She and her family are reading through the entire Bible together. Lydia and her siblings were baptized last Sunday.

Then we have Cheryl out at Prince William. Cheryl has a really hard background, having experienced horrible abuse. Over a year ago she was robbed and assaulted in her driveway one night. She's been through surgeries and still suffers from double vision and migraines. Every Sunday she's a greeter at Prince William. She's involved in ministry to those who have suffered abuse and grief like she has. She and her husband are constantly sharing the gospel with anybody who will listen to them.

I think about Jennifer and Ed out at Loudoun. They've been members at McLean for close to a decade. They serve in Access Ministries. They've been on mission trips and are on mission regularly in the poorer parts of Loudoun County.

I think about Eric and Linda also at Loudoun, who have been members at McLean Bible Church for years. They're actively involved together in discipling teenagers there, and Eric is actively discipling men in the church.

Allen out at Montgomery County has worked for U-Haul for years. He started locally and is now serving corporately, while continuing his education. He helped get Christianity 101 on line a few years ago. He faithfully teaches the Word there. [And by the way, ladies, he is single.]

I think about Annapolla at Arlington, from Brazil, a student who became a member at McLean Bible Church because she wants to hear the gospel preached regularly. She wants to worship God freely and wants to be part of authentic community—praying together and investing in each other's lives.

Robert and Annie from Ghana have faithfully served as ushers here for years, out in the lobby, week after week after week.

Jeslain from Cameroon comes in every week to serve with our host teams. She's responsible for all kinds of things that go on behind the scenes, volunteering her time.

I think about Ron and Carol Bowen. Ron is 72. They downsized, moved into a senior living area specifically to reach people for Christ in that area. They lead multiple evangelistic Bible studies every week. Ron and Carol head up a bowling league on Tuesday morning with over a hundred of their neighbors—all intent on reaching them with the gospel. You can go and join Ron and Carol’s bowling league.

Is this not incredible—the members that make up McLean Bible Church? Obviously, this is just a tiny sampling, but I think, “Where else in the world do Lydia King, Cheryl Stokes, Jennifer and Ed Green, Eric and Linda Florence, Allen Lane, Annapolla Sylva, Robert and Annie Oakine, Jeslain Madomay, Ron and Carol Bowen come together in community?” Do you see the beauty here? We’re the church—a visible expression in this area of the global body of Christ. We join together on a mission to show God’s love to each other and spread God’s love in the world. Why would any follower of Christ not want to be committed to that kind of community?

Brothers and sisters, let’s leave church dating behind. Let’s commit ourselves to a local body of Christ, locking arms together for His glory in the world around us. Here’s the deal. We’re diving into this Word today and I know the statistical realities that a relatively small number of you have actually identified as members of McLean Bible Church. Usually when I show you something in the Word, pastorally I want to call us to obey that word immediately, but today is kind of an exception.

Once we get through this “12 Traits” series, we want to more fully incorporate all 12 of these traits in our membership process. Which means we’re going to be strengthening that membership process in the days ahead. In addition, we’re not ready administratively for thousands to jump into that process today. So, you might want to wait and walk through that membership process once we’ve made some of these adjustments. I will let you know when that happens. We’re going to have a big push for membership at that point. If you want to go ahead and walk through that process now, by all means, feel free to do so. You will not be sinning. That will be a good thing. Just know we’ll be strengthening that process in the days to come.

Secondly, I want to encourage you—if you are a follower of Christ—to decide as soon as possible what local church, what body of Christ, you are going to be committed to in your life, in your family. If that is somewhere besides McLean Bible Church, then let me encourage you to commit your all to whatever body of Christ is preaching and living according to God’s Word. Or if that’s here, then even if you wait to go through the strengthened membership process in the days ahead, go ahead and commit your life to following Christ together as part of this church. If you’re not already involved in praying, giving, making disciples, living on mission in this church, get involved. We want to help you do that in any way we can. At the end of our service I or one of the other pastors will help you in the next steps of going along these lines.

Last, as I mentioned in the beginning, I realize some—or maybe many of you—are not yet followers of Christ. I appreciate you hanging with us and thinking together about church membership based on God’s Word. But plainly and simply, I want to invite you to become a follower of Christ today. The whole reason we’re united together in this church is because of God’s love. Apart from God’s love, we are one messed up group of people. But the good news is God loves messed up people. We’re not looking for people who have it all figured out. None of us claim to have it all figured out.

We do know this, though. We know that God loves us so much that He sent His Son to live the life of perfect obedience to God that we could never live. And then, even though He had not sinned against God, Jesus paid the price for our sin by dying on a cross in our place. He died for all of our imperfections, all of our sin, all of our rebellion against God. The way that’s played out in our lives is that Jesus paid the price for all on the cross, then He rose from the dead in victory over sin and death.

That means anyone who puts their faith in Him as Savior and Lord is forgiven of all their sins and reconciled to Him forever, to be His sons and daughters, brothers and sisters together in Christ. This is what it means to be part of the church. Don’t think, “What do I have to do to clean up my life in order to be part of the church.” It’s not based on what you do—it’s based on what God, in His love, has already done for you. If you’ve never put your faith in Jesus like that, we invite you to put your faith in Him today. As you do, we invite you to become part of this family of faith.

Let’s pray.

God, may it be so. Even right now, I pray for people who may not have a relationship with You. I pray that today would be the day when they put their faith and trust in You. May they bring all their sin and struggles and hurts, laying them down before You so that You might cleanse them from sin and give them new life based on Your love. God, I praise You for that reality in my own life and in the lives of brothers and sisters in Christ in this church.

We pray—based on the privilege You’ve given us of being a part, a member, of the church—help us to honor Your church, help us to love church. Help us to be the church You’ve called us to be. As McLean Bible Church, we want to be the church You’ve designed us to be. Help us commit ourselves to one another as we see in Your Word and, in the process, to experience all the benefits in our own lives and see the benefits in the world and ultimately for Your glory to be made known through us. God, please, may it be so, we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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