

## What is the Purpose of Church Membership?

Ephesians 4:1-16

Have you ever looked past something because it did not seem important, but turned out to be significant after all?

That has happened to me a number of times and it happened to me again this past fall when I was trying to winterize our camping trailer.

One of the things that has to be done to winterize a camper is you have to put antifreeze in all the plumbing pipes.

I usually buy it in a big jug which is usually enough to winterize the lines twice.

I had a little bit left over in the jug from the last winter and had just bought a new jug so I was super confident that I had plenty of antifreeze to do the job.

I proceeded to plug in the trailer and change all the valves to the proper position so that the water pump would take the antifreeze out of the jug and pump it into the lines.

I made sure all the taps were closed and turned on the pump expecting it to run for a second or two and then shutoff because all the taps were closed.

After that I was planning to go around to every tap and open each one until I saw the reddish pink liquid run through the tap.

I turned on the pump and it started to run and it kept running and by the time I got it turned off again the new jug was half gone.

Not to worry, I still had plenty.

Even though I had double checked all the valves, I figured I must have made a mistake on the hot water tank and thought it had filled up with antifreeze.

I checked that and everything was fine and opened the drain just to be doubly sure and the tank was empty.

Having gone over everything again, I tried it again and the same thing happened and again I lost a bunch of antifreeze out of the jug but none had gone into the lines.

I was really scratching my head at that point and went over everything a third time and everything looked right.

That is when my trusty helper Kevin spoke up. He was looking around at the back of the trailer and said, "Hey dad I smell something back here, the ground is wet, and there is a hose back here too."

It turned out he had found the line that is used to drain the water out of the lines and the shutoff valve was open.

After I closed the valve, and bought another jug of antifreeze, everything worked the way it was supposed to.

Needless to say I was a bit humbled and Kevin was feeling pretty good about solving the problem.

*I had checked over everything several times but had passed over what seemed insignificant every time.*

It seemed insignificant, but turned out to be very important to the task I was trying to accomplish.

That is something that can easily happen to us in a variety of situations.

We can look at something and say, “What is the point of that?” or “I don’t need that?” or “That can’t be important” when all the while it may be something very important.

[I have found that realizing the purpose of something helps us to see the importance of it. I believe that is very much the case with the issue of church membership. If we fail to see its purpose there is a good chance we will fail to see its importance. Likewise, if we fail to see its purpose then we may also think it is important for the wrong reasons. In our text this morning **Ephesians 4:1-16** the apostle Paul shows us about the purpose of belonging to a local church and therefore has some important things to say about the purpose of formal church membership. These are lessons that all us whether a formal member or not should really take to heart. Number one is this...]

**Point #1 – Membership is a practical means to live out the call of the gospel. (Verses 1-6)**

God’s plan for our personal salvation has always been and will always be bigger than making us right with Him as individuals. It is about building us together into a holy people and He expects us to live that out now in preparation for eternity.

*The Apostle Paul opens chapter four with a plea to the Ephesian believers (Verse 1).*

The word ‘therefore’ connects what he is about to say to everything that he has already said in chapters 1-3 which focus upon the gospel call.

He tells them about what God has done for them as followers of Jesus.

He tells them about how the LORD according to His incomparable knowledge and power took them from being spiritually dead to spiritually alive.

He tells them about how God according to His grace made known to them what Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection has accomplished.

He tells them about how they have been transformed through faith from being objects of God’s wrath for all that they have done wrong, to being objects of God’s boundless and eternal love because they have come to believe that Jesus took the consequences of their evil upon Himself on the cross and payed the debt that they owed and because they believed in that they had been made right with God.

That happens 100% by faith. The believer contributes nothing to salvation.

That said, being called from death to life must have an effect on the one who believes.

That is what Paul is ‘urging’ believers towards. He wants us to “walk in a manner worthy of that calling”.

He tells us something of what that looks like in **verses 2-6**.

If the magnitude of what Jesus has done for us had truly sunk into our hearts then it will produce humility, gentleness, and patience.

How is that worked out in life? By, “bearing with one another in love.”

That means we must endure with other believers despite their shortcomings.

A gospel worthy life is impossible in isolation or with superficial commitments because the reality of being born again is worked out in our affections for other people who have been born again.

Knowing that means we ought to be ‘eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is not divided, He is not opposed to Himself; therefore, since He lives in those that belong to Jesus those that belong to Jesus must have a desire to belong to one another.

This eagerness for unity is a reflection of the objective reality of the Christian faith.

Notice the number of times the word ‘one’ is used from verses 4-6.

No doubt this is talking about the universal church, but Paul is writing to a local church filled with real people.

His point, it would seem, is that the local church is supposed to be a picture of what the universal church is.

We are supposed to bear with real people that we actually know and worship with, we are supposed to desire unity with real people, it is through the relationship we have with actual believers that we have committed ourselves to that we can practically live these things out.

[I remember before I got married I was going to be the greatest husband in the world in my own mind. I was going to be a fantastic listener, a great leader, always put my wife’s needs before my own, never get angry and on and on the list went. Needless to say I really underappreciated how much of a sinner I am. If I had never actually gotten married I would have missed out on the enormous blessing of trying to live out in reality what the Bible calls husbands to be.]

There is something very similar to that with belonging to a local church.

If I never commit myself to belonging anywhere then I can go on thinking I’m a fantastic Christian.

I can go on thinking, “Oh I’m not like those people who are mean and hypocritical.”

I never have to put up with anything because I can just walk away at the drop of a hat.

[Listen, I'll be the first to tell you that a lot of stuff goes down in the church that shouldn't. I'll be the first to tell you that people can be difficult and self-centered. I also know there are times when it is necessary to leave a church because the church has gone off the rails. But it is also true that Jesus loved us while we were still sinners and that He bears with us even though we don't deserve it. The uncommon love shared among believers is supposed to reflect that and church membership is a practical way of committing ourselves to that glorious goal. Here is a second lesson about the purpose of church membership...]

**Point #2 – Membership declares the necessity of theological agreement. (Verses 7-13)**

In order to have genuine and lasting Christian unity and fellowship people must agree on essential truths and strive for a greater understanding of everything revealed to us in the Scriptures.

More than a few people over the years have used the verses we just finished reading to argue that unity is more important than theology.

Their solution to the divisions from church to church and denomination to denomination is to say what we believe doesn't matter so no matter what we believe we can hold hands and say we all belong to the same church.

To make such an argument is to take what Paul says here completely out of context.

That becomes clear in these next few verses and we are told here about what Jesus had done for the church. (Verses 7-8)

As you might imagine there is some disagreement over exactly what these verses mean on some of the particular details, but regardless of where we might land on the particulars the main point seems very clear.

The main point here is that because of the victorious work of Jesus He has been able to dispense spiritual gifts to people for the purpose of making His glory known throughout all creation.

**Verses 9-11** list some of the gifts the Lord has given.

It would seem he is particularly focused on the teaching ministry within the church.

The apostles and prophets laid the theological foundation of the church according to chapter 2:20 and God has preserved that for us in the Bible.

No one can lay another foundation without being in serious error. The only thing we are encouraged to do is to build upon that one unchangeable foundation.

That is the task of 'evangelists, shepherds [pastors], and teachers.'

All of these, in as much as they are genuine, are gifts given by the LORD to the church.

We are told the reason why these gifts are given in **verses 12-13.**

Don't let anyone lead you astray by telling you that theology and doctrine divide the church.

These verses are telling us the exact opposite, they are telling us that shared convictions about Who Jesus truly is binds believers together and grows us up in Jesus developing His character in us until we reach the goal of being like Him to our maximum ability as human beings.

*In thinking about what we believe we must distinguish between primary issues and secondary issues.*

Primary issues are those things that we must agree on in order to be Christians.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones commenting on this text said, "My contention is that the teaching of the New Testament is quite clear about this, that there is an absolute foundation, an irreducible minimum, without which the term 'Christian' is meaningless, and without subscribing to which a man is not a Christian."

Matters like salvation by faith alone, the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, the Trinity, and alike.

Secondary issues are things that genuine believers may disagree on and still be saved.

Issues like end times, preferred bible translations, what day of the week to worship on, mode of baptism, how often to celebrate communion, and alike.

While it is true that salvation does not depend on secondary issues, it is not true that all secondary issues are unimportant.

The whole point of verse 13 here is that we seek more and more agreement under the authority of the Bible.

*Any church that is worth belonging to will have a clear statement of faith that must be believed in order to belong to the church.*

I know some will object and say, "Doesn't that create unnecessary division? You are keeping people who disagree out of your church."

I do agree that there is a danger of making too much out of secondary issues, but the danger is far greater to the health and wellbeing of the church by being vague about things that really matter.

[A few years ago I was asked by a denomination leader what I thought was needed to encourage more cooperation between that group of churches. I said, "More clearly defined theology!" He said, "I totally disagree!" He believed that you could believe anything and work together, but

the reality is that is impossible. If one person is digging a hole and the other is filling it in are they working together? If one person in a canoe is paddling forward and the other backwards are they going to get anywhere?]

The prophet Amos asks, “Do two walk together unless they have agreed?”

No they don’t and the same thing is true in the church.

You cannot build unity without agreeing to believe together.

I would never claim that our statement of faith or constitution is perfect.

But what I can say is it is a sincere effort to make clear what we believe and we have tried to keep the scope of the statement to things with a high degree of importance.

Our purpose is to build unity amongst this body of believers.

If you want to belong to this church you need to read it and carefully consider it, if you are already a member you should be familiar with it.

If you are a member of this church and have no idea what we believe you are failing in your responsibility to ‘maintain the unity of the Spirit’ in this particular local church.

[If you read it and disagree, come with an open Bible and show us our error. We’ll listen, but whatever you do don’t be apathetic about what you believe that is not good for you, it’s not good for your family, and it is not good for the church. Agreement is essential to Christian unity and membership is a practical way to live that out. That brings us to one more lesson with regards to the purpose of church membership which is this...]

### **Point #3 – Membership in a doctrinally sound church keeps us from error. (Verses 14-16)**

A church that cares deeply about what its members believe is a hedge of protection for all those who formally join themselves to its fellowship.

Look with me at the two very important words that begin verse 14.

‘So that’. In other words this is the reason why ‘attaining the unity of the faith and [the unity] of the knowledge of the Son of God’ is so important.

This is what it does in the life of those that belong to the church (**Verse 14**).

[Since I have taken up sailing in the last few years I appreciate this verse in a whole new way. Because of my inexperience I have felt what it is like to be at the mercy of the wind and waves. I have felt what it is like to be without a rudder or a keel on a boat. Likewise as my experience and understanding has grown a little bit I have felt what it is like to have a good rudder and a solid keel. It is the difference between moving wherever the wind blows and going in the direction I want the boat to go.]

Thinking that good theology is unimportant is like trying to sail a boat without a rudder or keel.

Belonging to a formal gathering of other believers which is based on the truth of Who Jesus is and what God has done for us through His Son and the giving of the Spirit is the best way to keep us from such things and it is also the best way to help others do the same.

Church membership is NOT about blindly believing what the church believes or what the pastor says.

I always cringe a little bit when a sentence begins with “the pastor says...”

What church membership is supposed to mean is that you have personally thought through and continue to think and grow in good theology so that you are built up in the faith and therefore not easily tossed back and forth.

**Verses 15-16** make that clear.

*Instead of being tossed here and there, we are willing to “speak the truth in love” to each other.*

It is certainly true that we have an obligation to speak the truth in love to everyone who names Jesus as their savior.

That said, there is something particularly good about being formally accountable to people that we have made a formal commitment to.

As a formal member you agree to live under a clear set of convictions and when you go against those convictions it is the obligation of the other members to call on you to turn back.

This is the process known as ‘church discipline’.

The idea is that members are supposed to hold each other to the truth that we say we believe.

If a member refuses and persists in disregarding what they have committed to then they are to be removed from the membership of the church.

*Someone will say, “That doesn’t sound very loving and there is a lot said here about love!”*

Yes it is loving!

Not like the world loves but like Jesus calls us to love one another.

Biblical love is a desire for another person’s highest good and it is for a person’s highest good to call them out of error and into the truth.

We should all want that as Christians and membership in a biblically sound church is a practical way to live that out.

What does that do?

According to verse 15 it ‘grows us up in Christ’ which according to verse 16 binds us together, which in turn ‘makes the whole body grow so that it builds itself up.’

*Some folks, I suppose, want to become members of a church because they want to belong to a club.*

Some want to be members because they think it is a golden ticket to heaven.

Some because they want to have their say in what goes on and want to work their way into positions of power and control.

Maybe some because it's family tradition.

None of those things are good reasons to become a member in a church.

The purpose of becoming a member in a church is to practically live out the call of the gospel, to work towards unity among believers through shared convictions about the truth of God's Word and therefore be kept and strive to keep others from error so that Jesus might be glorified in such a fellowship.

I wonder what might happen if everyone in this room resolved to live that out!

I wonder what might happen if everyone in this room had a clear sense of what the purpose of church membership really is and as a result could better see its importance.

I have to think every ministry of the church would benefit, or fellowship would improve, and our gospel witness would be more effective.

May God in His mercy be gracious to bless us with such and uncommon union of believers.