

Why Church Matters

Membership Matters: The Keys of the Kingdom (Matthew 16:13-20)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on October 11, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ Last week we began a new series on *Why Church Matters*, and as I explained we're doing this in anticipation of a 5-10 year vision plan that your elders and pastors are working on and hoping to unveil early next year. Our goal in this series is to lay out the necessary theological foundations upon which our vision plan will be built.
 - ▶ And part of that vision includes becoming a church where membership is not just a formality but a meaningful and central aspect of our lives. We're going to try to paint a compelling picture of what church membership could look like if practiced in our church in a biblical and meaningful way.
 - **So my goal today is to get us on the same page in our understanding of what church membership means and why it matters.** I've divided this message up into three sections where we'll pose three questions that I wouldn't be surprised if you've asked yourself.

Where is membership in the Bible?

- ❖ The first and most common question I get when I talk about this is: *Where is membership in the Bible?* Perhaps you support a church having a practice and process of membership. You see its practical value. But you wouldn't go so far as to say that membership is biblical, that it's something taught in the Bible. So you're wondering how in the world are you going to preach on it from the Bible. *Where's membership in Scripture?*
 - ▶ **I really appreciate that question because I can see, at the heart of it, you want to root your Christian practice in Christian truth as revealed in Scripture.** You want to be a biblical Christian, a Berean Christian (Acts 17:11), who doesn't receive teaching uncritically but diligently examines the Scriptures to see if a concept like membership is there. That's good. That's the right approach. Don't take anything I say at face value. Make sure it accords with God's infallible, inerrant Word.
- ❖ So where is membership in the Bible? I'd answer that by saying membership is there in the same way a biblical concept like the Trinity is there. **It may not be explicitly named anywhere but it's implicitly assumed everywhere.**
 - ▶ Think about it. You're not going to find the word "Trinity" anywhere in the NT. That fundamental idea at the heart of our faith, that God is three in one – you won't find a definition laid out in any verse. But that doesn't mean it's not true or not biblical. The phrase "God is three in one" never shows up anywhere but it's assumed and implied everywhere!
 - And I think we can say the same about church membership. The phrase doesn't show up anywhere in the NT, but I'd argue that it's assumed and implied everywhere.
- ❖ **But the reason we may not see it is because we might be looking for the wrong thing.** When we think about membership, our first thought is joining a country club. If you become a member of a country club that entitles you to certain perks and privileges.

- ▶ I stayed at a country club this summer on vacation in California. It was nice. We were hotel guests, so we got access to all the members-only privileges, heated pools, spa treatments, tennis courts, free childcare, etc. Man, they really serve you well at a country club. They're there to please. They treat you like kings and queens.
- ❖ But if your conception of church membership is more like country club membership, then I'm not surprised if you don't see it in Scripture. If you see joining a church as just a way to get more out of it, to get members-only privileges, then you've lost sight of what a church is.
 - ▶ **A church is not a club that's here to serve you.** A church is not here to please. It won't treat you like a king. **No, a church is here to disciple you and equip you to serve and please the One True King.**
- ❖ So if you're combing the Scriptures, just know that you won't find any verse describing the church as some sort of club to join. **But you'll find plenty of verses describing the church as an assembly of kingdom citizens who have submitted themselves under the rule of a loving King, who regularly gather to worship their King, and then scatter to witness to Him before the watching world.**
 - ▶ If you have that understanding of "what the church is", then you'll find plenty of biblical support for joining and committing yourself to a community like that.
- ❖ I think what really helps is to nail down just the right metaphor for the church. And there are plenty to choose from in the Bible. The NT describes the church as a **building** (1 Cor. 3:10-11). And we're not just any ol' building. We're the new **temple** in which God dwells by his Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). Elsewhere the church is called the **bride** of Christ (Rev. 19:6-8) or the **body** of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:22-23).
 - ▶ Those are all very helpful metaphors, but today I want to draw from a less common but equally biblical metaphor – the church as an **embassy** of the kingdom of heaven. I see this in passages like 2 Corinthians 5:20 where Christians are called "*ambassadors for Christ*" entrusted with a "*message of reconciliation*" appealing to the world to get right with God through Christ in the gospel.
- ❖ Now just think: *Where do you find ambassadors? Where do they congregate?* In an embassy, of course. Seeing the church as an embassy of the kingdom is fitting. **Just think about the church as heaven's embassy situated on earth, in a foreign land.**
 - ▶ *Now what's the point of an embassy?* It's to represent its home nation well to its host nation and its citizenry. That's what an embassy does.
- ❖ **So the church, as an embassy, represents God and his kingdom to rest of the world.** Our life together as the church is supposed to give this fallen world a glimpse of what heaven is like. But that means we need a means, a mechanism, to distinguish – on any given Sunday or any mid-week small group – who the actual Christians are (true ambassadors) from those who are just seeking or those who are actually false believers.

- ❖ The Church is open for anyone at any stage of their spiritual journey to come and sit among us. So we all recognize that not everyone here is an ambassador for Christ. **So there has to be some way to draw distinctions so that we can say *these* particular people are kingdom citizens and their life together is representative of life in the kingdom when comes in all its fullness.**
- ❖ But the difficulty is that we're dealing with an invisible kingdom. A kingdom with no land or borders. **There are no geographic, ethnic, or cultural boundaries to mark off its citizens.**
 - ▶ If you were dealing with Israel in the OT, then it would be easier. The people of God under the Old Covenant were an actual nation state with literal borders. **You could tell who was an Israelite by observing visible markers.** What they ate or didn't eat. What they wore or didn't wear. And of course whether or not they were circumcised.
- ❖ But as we mentioned last week, with the establishment of the New Covenant through the blood of Christ, the very nature of God's people changed. The NT Church is no longer a spiritually-mixed bag of believers and nonbelievers (like OT Israel), but now it's comprised of only regenerate believers. **The common marker that marks us off as kingdom citizens is in fact our *common faith* in the Lord Jesus Christ**
 - ▶ But of course faith is invisible! Anyone can just claim to have faith. Anyone can just claim to be an ambassador for Christ. **But if anyone can just claim to represent King Jesus, then anyone can potentially misrepresent the King and trample upon His name, dragging it through the mud.** And isn't that one of the biggest reasons for the decline of the church in our day and age? The hypocrisy of self-professed ambassadors for Christ who turn out to be fakes.
- ❖ So do you see the challenge? We're dealing with embassies for a landless, borderless, invisible kingdom. We're trying to say to the world, "If you want to know what the kingdom of God is like – what God is like! – then observe *these* people. See how they live, how they love, how they serve, how they give, how they worship. And you'll see God!"
 - ▶ That's the witness we're trying to give. But how do we do that? Who do we point to? This is why every church needs some mechanism of membership, whether they want to call it that or not.

What is the point of membership?

- ❖ This leads to our second question: *What's the point of membership?* I hear this a lot. And not from people who don't care for the church, who have little connection to a church. I hear this from people who are very consistent and committed to their churches. But haven't joined.
 - ▶ The thought process goes something like this, "I'm regular in my attendance here. I'm involved here. I'm serving here. I tithe here. So why do I need to become a member? What's the difference? What's the point?" I hope by now the point is starting to come into view and make more sense. It all goes back to this understanding of Christians as ambassadors and the church as an embassy.

- ❖ Think with me. *What's one of the most common tasks of an embassy – or more accurately the consulate office associated with the embassy?* I'm talking about a task that the consulate is uniquely authorized to do. It's to regulate the citizenship of the kingdom. The consulate has the unique authority to issue a passport. To officially affirm your citizenship. To give you that stamp of authenticity. The consulate uniquely carries this authority, does it not?
- ❖ Let me give you an example I shared the last time I preached on membership. Back when I was living in Canada, at one point my American passport was set to expire. Now if I ignored it and let it expire, I wouldn't have lost my citizenship. But if I tried to cross the border into the States, I would've been stopped. My own country wouldn't have let me in.
 - ▶ I could've argued with the border patrol until I was blue in the face, insisting that I was a U.S. citizen. And in all actuality I was. But it wouldn't have mattered. **I don't have the authority to officially declare myself a citizen. That authority uniquely belongs to the consulate (the embassy) – not to the individual.**
 - And let me stress, on that day I renewed my passport, the consulate didn't make me a citizen. I already was one. But what they did was equally important. They officially recognized and affirmed my citizenship.
- ❖ So let's relate this to the church. **We should equally stress that joining a church doesn't make you a citizen of God's kingdom.** It doesn't make you a Christian. You become a Christian by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Membership doesn't save you.
 - ▶ But just as I didn't have the authority to declare myself a U.S. citizen, just as I needed a consulate to exercise their unique authority and give me that stamp of authenticity – in the same way, **I don't have the authority to declare myself a Christian.** That authority uniquely belongs to a church as an embassy of the kingdom. **I need the church to declare me a Christian.** I didn't say *make* me one. That's God's job. But the church's job is to declare me one, to recognize, to affirm my citizenship in heaven.
- ❖ If I just attended my church and never joined, I'd be doing myself a disservice. **I'd be missing out on God's very means, the mechanism by which my membership in the kingdom is affirmed.**
 - ▶ I can disassociate from my Church yet still call myself a Christian, but I have no authoritative voice to back that up. But a congregation, an embassy of ambassadors, does. It has an authoritative voice. So when a church says, "We receive you as a member. We affirm you as a fellow ambassador.", that's for your assurance of salvation! You'd be depriving yourself of that encouragement if you never join.
- ❖ You should let your church do its job. Let the congregation exercise its authority to speak on behalf of heaven, to give you that stamp of authenticity, to officially declare you Christian, a citizen, an ambassador, a representative of our King.

Where do local congregations get their authority?

- ❖ Now I know what you're probably thinking. Where do you get that in Scripture? Where do you get this idea that a congregation has that kind of authority to declare people a Christian? That leads to our third and final question: *Where do local congregations get their authority?*
 - ▶ We'll spend the remainder of our time answering that question. The short answer is keys. **Local congregations are the ones holding the keys of the kingdom, and that's where they get their authority.**
 - But let's look at Matthew 16:13-20 and a couple other texts, and let me show you three things: a) The keys granted to the apostles, b) The keys extended to the church, and c) The keys expanded to the ends of the earth.

The keys granted to the apostles

- ❖ Let's begin by seeing how the keys of the kingdom were first **granted to the apostles**. Now prior to v13, Jesus was warning the Twelve not to trust the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders. They claim authority to speak on behalf of heaven, but Jesus refutes that claim. He says they don't speak for God anymore. He wants new ambassadors.
 - ▶ Then Jesus goes on and asks what people are saying about him. And after rattling off a few mistaken identities, Jesus asks in v15, "*But who do you say that I am?*"
 - Simon Peter is the first to reply, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" And Jesus answered him, "*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*"
- ❖ **Peter was blessed to have the eyes of his heart opened by the Father to see Jesus for who he really is – the Christ, the Son of God.** And for that reason, he's a good ambassador for the kingdom. Obviously you can't represent Jesus if you can't even perceive his true identity. But here we see the blinders starting to come off the eyes of the apostles.
 - ▶ So far Jesus has twelve ambassadors. That's pretty good but he won't settle with that. **Jesus wants embassies scattered to the ends of the earth all filled with ambassadors.** So look at what he says in vv18-19, "*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*"
- ❖ This passage raises a host of questions. **First off, who or what is the rock Jesus speaks of?** I think most natural reading of the text would point to Peter. There's a play on words here. His name is Simon Bar-Jonah (Son of Jonah), but here Jesus gives him the name he's best known by – Peter, which in Greek means *rock*. **So it's hard to see how the rock can be anything other than Peter himself.**
 - ▶ But this doesn't mean you have to draw a Catholic conclusion, which claims Peter as the first pope. That he had unique authority over the other apostles. **No, it's just a fact of history that God used Peter, as a first among equals, to build his church.** Remember how in Acts, Peter was the first to preach the truth of his confession that Jesus is the Christ. Three thousand were baptized and added to the church that day.

- ❖ And then throughout Acts, we see the other apostles take on the same role as they go about preaching the truth of Peter's confession, and wherever they went more embassies were planted. Which is why Paul says in **Ephesians 3:20** the church is "*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets [not just Peter], Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.*"
- ❖ So the rock is Peter, but the foundation of the church is all the apostles with Jesus being the cornerstone. But here's another question: ***What are these keys of the kingdom of heaven and what do they have to do with the church?***
 - ▶ In Scripture, keys are often used to symbolize authority (Isa. 22:22; Lk. 11:52; Rev. 3:7). If you hold keys, you hold authority. The authority to open and shut gates. Which means the authority to welcome or to dismiss, to receive or to reject.
- ❖ **So in receiving these keys, Peter was essentially given the authority to do what Jesus just did for him.** Remember in v16, Peter rightly confessed Jesus as the Christ, and in response, Jesus affirms his confession to be true and granted from heaven. He was functioning here in v18 as God's Ambassador, as someone on earth speaking for heaven.
 - ▶ And now here in v19, Jesus authorizes Peter and the apostles to do the same – to be his representatives on earth and speak for heaven. **He gives them the authority to declare what is bound and loosed in heaven by binding and loosing on earth.**
- ❖ The next obvious question is: ***What are they binding and loosing on earth?*** Answer: People. **The apostles are listening to people and their confession of Christ, and they're affirming whether or not it's a true confession coming from the Father in heaven.**
 - ▶ If they bind you, that means they're using the keys to open the front gate and receive you into the embassy. They're declaring you a kingdom citizen. And if they loose you, that means they're using those keys to open the back gate to dismiss you from the embassy. They can no longer, in good conscience, affirm your citizenship.
 - And we see the apostles using these keys in the book of Acts. Peter uses them to open the front gate and declares Cornelius to be a kingdom citizen (10:34-43). As well, Peter opens up the back gate and shows Simon the magician the door when he tries to buy the Holy Spirit with money (8:20-21).
- ❖ So here in this passage a regime change is happening. The King has rejected the representatives of the old regime, the Pharisees and Sadducees, and now he has authorized new ambassadors to speak on behalf of heaven. **These ambassadors have the authority to make declarations and to draw lines of distinction around kingdom citizens and say that *these* particular people are Christians.**

The keys extended to the church

- ❖ Now turn over to Matthew 18, and notice how these keys were quickly **extended to the church**. In chapter 18:15-20, we have the well-known passage on church discipline. Jesus is giving us a practical application of the keys. They're being put to use in the life of a church.

- ❖ He says imagine a brother in church is sinning against you. **He's misrepresenting the King you both claim to represent, so what do you do?** Jesus gives us four steps.
- ❖ In brief, the four steps are: **1) Confront the him privately.** If he repents and your relationship is restored then that's the goal. He's rightly representing Jesus once again. But if he refuses to listen, then Jesus instructs you to **2) Invite one or two others into the process.**
 - ▶ But if the brother still refuses to listen, then in v17 Jesus says to **3) Tell it to the church.** That doesn't mean just church leaders. The church (*ekklesia*) means the assembly. You bring this issue to the assembly of members, the congregation.
- ❖ And if he still refuses, if he continues to misrepresent Jesus, then the congregation is to **4) loose him.** Notice how in v18 Jesus alludes to the keys of the kingdom by speaking again of binding and loosing. But notice whose doing it. It's not the apostles. **The job of binding and loosing now belongs to local congregations.** The keys are extended to individual churches.
 - ▶ This is where we get congregational authority. This is why we say a church has the authority to affirm your confession of Christ to be genuine and from the Father.
- ❖ So in this scenario, if the brother persists in misrepresenting Jesus, then the church is to use the keys to open the back gate and dismiss him. To treat him as they would a non-believer. Look at the end of v17, *“let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”*
 - ▶ Of course that means loving him as you would any non-believer and holding out the message of reconciliation. **But it also means drawing a clear line so that he knows he's living like a non-believer and is now being declared one by his church.**
- ❖ So Matthew 18 is an illustration of the keys of the kingdom in action. And my main point is that they're not in the hands of bishops or elders or pastors. No, the keys are held by the congregation, by church members. And I don't mean that I – as an individual Christian – hold the keys. That I myself have this authority. **No, the congregation, of which I am a member, holds the keys. It's a collective authority that we share.**
 - ▶ Remember what Jesus says in vv19-20, *“¹⁹If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”* So even if it's just a church of two to three believers, **a congregation of two or three gathered in Jesus' name holds a unique authority that the individual believer simply does not have.** This is what we mean by congregational authority.
- ❖ You can call yourself a Christian. And by God's grace, you might be one. **But individually you don't speak for heaven. The congregation as a whole does.** So join the church. Let the church use the keys, speak for heaven, and declare you a Christian if that's what you are.

The keys expanded to the ends of the earth

- ❖ Now turn to one last passage, Matthew 28, and I want to show you how the keys of the kingdom are **expanded to the ends of the earth**. I see this in the Great Commission (28:18-20) that Jesus gives to his followers. I know it doesn't mention the keys of the kingdom, but Jesus does mention his authority in v18.
 - ▶ Jesus says, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*" And then he authorizes his disciples to go to all nations, to the ends of the earth, with the responsibility of making declarations on behalf of heaven.

- ❖ As we go about making disciples of all nations, we're to baptize them in the name of our Triune God. **That act of baptism is a declaration by a congregation on behalf of heaven.** Like I said last week, baptism is not some private act, a show of devotion to God that you do once and then it has no impact for the rest of your Christian life.
 - ▶ **No, baptism is the means by which a church uses the keys to open up the front gate and receive you into its membership.** Baptism is not just a chance for you to say something about yourself. It's a chance for the congregation to say something about you. To do for you what Jesus did for Peter back in Matthew 16. To affirm your confession of Christ to be true and truly granted by our heavenly Father.
 - So if you claim to be a Christian, but have yet to be baptized, you should listen to your King and let one of his embassies carry out its duty to open the front gate and let you in.

- ❖ Let me just conclude by addressing two groups of people here. **To those of you who regularly attend this church or a church but have never joined**, I hope you're starting to see the biblical rationale for membership. I've been appealing to the mind. Next week I want to appeal to the heart and show you a beautiful vision of what's called covenant membership.
 - ▶ I'm going to pray that the Lord leads you to join the church, to receive that official declaration, and enter through the front gate. Our next membership class is Sunday, November 15th. Please note that in your calendar.

- ❖ Finally, I want to address **the members of HCC**. I hope you come out of here with a more sober view of your membership. No longer treating it lightly, as something with little practical value. I hope you see, as a 19th-century pastor once put it, that "***A church member is something more than a Christian, just as a citizen is something more than a man.***"¹
 - ▶ That something more is duty. You're not just a Christian with a general connection with each every other believer in the world. You're a church member with a specific duty to a specific body of believers. We're going to consider that duty more in detail next week. I just want to conclude with a plea to take your membership seriously. You have a duty to your fellow church members. *So what will that require of you this week? What can you do to express your commitment and care for fellow members?*

¹ John Angell James, cited in Jonathan Leeman's *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, pg. 206.