

Why Church Matters

Membership Matters: The Vision of Covenant Membership (John 13:34-35)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on October 18, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ Last week I preached a message on why membership matters. Why it's important for local churches to institute some form of membership (whether they want to call it that or not). **They need some mechanism to distinguish who are the believers – who are the ones who represent the Lord Jesus by their life and doctrine.**
 - ▶ We were leaning on the biblical metaphor of Christians as ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20) and **the local church as an embassy**. As an assembly of ambassadors living in a host nation doing their best to represent their home nation. By our life together – before the watching eyes of our neighbors – we're trying to give a faithful witness to both King and country. That's the embassy's goal.

- ❖ **And to accomplish that goal, the local church, as an embassy, has a unique authority to regulate the citizenship of the kingdom.** That means we make official declarations of who is a kingdom citizen, who is a Christian. We do that by listening to people's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. And as Jesus did for Peter in Matthew 16, our job is to affirm the genuineness of that confession – whether it came from the flesh or the Father.
 - ▶ **We've been authorized to speak on behalf of heaven.** And by *we*, I don't just mean the pastors or leaders. By *we*, I mean the congregation. I mean every member. This authority, this responsibility symbolized by the keys of the kingdom, was first given to the apostles and then quickly extended to local assemblies, local churches.
 - **Each local, visible manifestation of the global, invisible Church has full authority and full responsibility to speak on behalf of heaven and declare confessors to be Christians by using the ordinances (baptism and the Supper) along with the church's process of membership.**

- ❖ That's a quick summary of last week's message. And I love the fact that I get to come back into this pulpit week after week to clarify what I didn't make clear to begin with. I love it when you ask me questions after service. It sharpens my thinking. And there was one question I was asked last Sunday that I thought was pretty perceptive.
 - ▶ If the church is an embassy and joining membership is akin to receiving a passport from said embassy, then is it legitimate to carry two passports? There are lots of people who are dual citizens and carry more than one passport. ***So is it ever appropriate to have membership in more than one church?***

- ❖ That's a sharp question. Obviously at some point every analogy breaks down. There's no perfect analogy, which is why the Bible offers more than one when describing the church.
 - ▶ But if you think about it: **Seeking membership in two different churches would be the same as seeking for two different U.S. embassy offices to authenticate the same U.S. passport you're holding.** Why would you need to do that?
 - Just go to one embassy – as long as it's a genuine embassy, a true church – and have them use the keys of the kingdom. And once they welcome you in, then that's your new residence. That's your new embassy office, from which you'll carry out your vocation as an ambassador for Christ.

- ❖ **So just as every ambassador only works out of one embassy office, then in the same way we should only be members of one church at a time.** So I guess the analogy can be stretched a bit more and still work. But then again, maybe it'll help to switch things up and use another biblical metaphor.
 - ▶ **If we really want to communicate the committed nature of one's relationship to their local church, then perhaps we should emphasize the Bride metaphor for the church – a marriage analogy.** I just officiated two weddings in the past two weeks, so marriage and marriage vows are very fresh on my mind.
 - I think comparing your commitment to your local church (to your fellow members) to a covenant like you'd find in marriage is a great analogy. It helps to draw out the committed nature of it and other implications for your life together as members.

- ❖ So what I want to do today is to unpack a vision of what we're calling **covenant membership**. That's membership based – not merely on comfort or convenience – but based primarily on a covenant that binds us to our fellow members.

- ❖ I think the common experience is that if we ever do decide to join a church, it's because we feel comfortable with the people and ministries. We've grown attached. It's **comfort-based membership**. Now don't get me wrong. Praise God if you feel comfortable in your church, if you've grown attached to the people and ministries! But that just shouldn't be the primary basis for joining. Because feelings change. New people might show up. New ministries might spring up. And you might not always be comfortable with it all.
 - ▶ The same could be said for **convenience-based membership**. That's where I join because this church and its ministries fit my life and my schedule. It doesn't demand much of me and my family, so we can carry about our busy lives – but still have church as one aspect of it. That's membership based on convenience.

- ❖ We want to paint a vision of something better called covenant membership. To do that I've divided this message into two sections. First, we'll look at John 13:34-35 and consider the heart of our covenant. Then we'll spend the remainder of our time together considering the vision of a local church covenant.

The Newness of Christ's New Commandment

- ❖ Let's turn to John 13 and let me set the context before we get into vv34-35. In chapter 13 Jesus sits down for his Last Supper with his disciples. It's the evening before his arrest and trials begin. It says in v1 that he knew the hour had come for him to depart out of this world to the Father. The devil had already placed the thought of betrayal into the heart of Judas.
 - ▶ Jesus had every human reason to sulk, to mope around. **But instead Scripture says that out of love he rose from supper, changed into the garbs of a lowly servant, and began to wash the feet of his disciples.** It was a powerful demonstration of humility and selfless love. And it was symbolic of how his impending death would spiritually cleanse his followers of their moral filth, of their sins.

- ❖ At one point, Peter refuses to let his Master clean his feet, but Jesus tells him, “*If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.*” (13:8) If you want to be in Christ, to share life with him, then he needs to wash you. Ultimately with his blood. Cleansing you of all your sins.
 - ▶ **This act of foot-washing is the gospel personified.** The King of glory empties himself of all glory, that he might serve the good of those who don’t deserve it, who don’t fully understand it. Who simply receive his washing, his cleansing by faith.

- ❖ Now after this selfless act – which by the way was performed on Judas (though he still remained morally unclean; cf. 13:10-11) – Jesus institutes the Lord’s Supper. And though it’s not recorded in John’s Gospel, we know from the Synoptic Gospels that, in the Supper, Jesus mentions the New Covenant that God is making with his people that will be established by blood, his blood (cf. Lk 22:20).

- ❖ And then in v27, Jesus dismisses Judas from their presence to do what Satan had put in his heart. So by v31, another cleansing has taken place, figuratively. **Judas has been expelled from the new covenant community that Christ is establishing.** His church will be a pure community of regenerate believers. No longer a mixed bag.
 - ▶ Now in v33, Jesus reveals some troubling news that his disciples are not prepared to hear. He says he’s going away, and where he goes they cannot follow. And as he prepares to leave them for the time being, he lays out his expectations of them while he’s away. This a new commandment for his disciple. Let’s read vv34-35, “³⁴*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*”

- ❖ ***But what’s so new about this commandment?*** Love one another? It doesn’t seem like a new idea in Scripture. It sounds like a pretty old commandment. In fact, our same author, writing in 1 John 2:7, repeats his Master’s commandment to love, “*Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning.*”
 - ▶ So this is an old new commandment. It’s found in the Mosaic Law (Lev. 19:18). Jesus said the entire Law can be summed up with just two commands: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself (Mt. 22:36-40). So this command is nothing new. It’s ancient. But then again, it’s new in one sense. In two senses, actually.

- ❖ **The commandment in v34 is new in the sense that A) We’re given a new standard that gives shape to our love.** The command to “love one another” can no longer remain as some amorphous, abstract concept. Now it has concrete shape. Jesus says to love one another – “*just as I have loved you*”.
 - ▶ **That means the standard of comparison is Jesus’ love, which he demonstrated by foot-washing.** And as we said, his selfless act of foot-washing just pointed to his selfless act of cross-bearing. So very soon the disciples would have an even clearer sense and a more indelible impression of the love Jesus expects us to share with each another. His self-sacrificial love displayed on the cross is the *par excellence* of love.

- ❖ This is where we who call ourselves followers of Jesus need to be challenged. **We say we love one another. We say we love our church. *But is it demonstrated by self-sacrifice? It is proven by a love that costs us anything?***
 - ▶ It's so easy for us to keep each other at a comfortable distance where we're close enough to call what we do "fellowshipping" but distant enough that it doesn't cost us much. We can go to church, go to small group, but still keep our precious freedom from any real attachments, from any duty or obligation towards another.
 - But if you're going to love the brother or sister next to you just as Jesus has loved you, then expect to sacrifice something – your time, your comfort, your convenience. **So if you've yet to love people in your church to the point that it costs you something, then you've yet to love as Jesus loved you.**

- ❖ Here's something else about Jesus' love that ought to shape our own. **Notice how he loves those with whom he shares very little in common.** He doesn't go out looking for people who are just like him, who share similar interests, who *get* him, and then decide to love them.
 - ▶ No, he receives all the people whom his Father gave to him (Jn. 17:6) and loved us – even though we couldn't be more different. We were sinners, we were wicked, we were enemies. And he was holy, he was righteous, he was just. Yet despite our differences, he loved us and gave himself up for us. That's how Jesus loves.

- ❖ **We, on the other hand, tend to limit our love to those like us and those who like us.** We're selective. We're choosy. But if we're going to love one another as Jesus loved us, then we need to love whoever God gives us, whoever God brings into this church or into your small group. We can't pick and choose those we're more comfortable with. **That's why we're not casting a vision for *comfort* membership.**

- ❖ We're talking about *covenant* membership. And that leads to the second thing that's new about Jesus' new commandment. It's new in the sense that **B) It's based on a new covenant that particularizes our love.** Jesus loves the world and everyone in it. There's no doubt. He loves everyone, but he only made a covenant with his Bride. He only made new covenant promises to a particular people, to the Church. He didn't make them with the world-at-large.

- ❖ **So it's true that Jesus loves a particular people with a particular love.** And so that means if you're to love like him, then it's not enough to have a general love for every Christian in the world. **To love just as he loved us is to offer a particular love to a particular body of people with whom we've covenanted.**
 - ▶ I think of it this way: I aim to love every sister in Christ in my life, but I've only made a covenant with one of them. And so I love my wife with a unique, particular kind of love. It's covenant love. **Likewise you should aim to love every believer in your life, but you only make a covenant with one local body of believers, and that's where your obedience to the new commandment get particularized (cf. Gal. 6:10).** Love everyone in general, but like Christ, make a covenant with one people, make promises to one congregation, and love them particularly.

The Vision of a Local Church Covenant of Love

- ❖ This is the basis for our vision of covenant membership. Again this is where your commitment to fellow church members is not based primarily on feelings of comfort or attachment. Nor is it based on convenience where you fit the church into your busy life.
 - ▶ **The vision of covenant membership is where you make a covenant of love with the members of your local church.** Where your attitude towards church is not, “*How do I fit these people and these ministries into my busy life?*” But rather, “*Where is my place in this church, among these people? What is my role, my duty, in light of these various ministries?*”
 - In the remainder of our time, I want to show you five ways in which a local church covenant of love can make membership a far more meaningful aspect of your life and discipleship to Christ.

- ❖ A covenant is meaningful because **1) A covenant identifies us with Christ.** By making a covenant-based commitment to a church, you demonstrate that you belong to Christ and his new covenant.
 - ▶ This brings us back to the embassy metaphor. **The embassy (the local church) is where you go to identify yourself with Christ (with the King).** The church is where you make formal and public vows, and then you’re marked off as a citizen.
 - Some of you can probably think back to when you became a U.S. citizen. Remember the public vow you took? You made formal promises – a covenant, if you will – expressing your new allegiance, your new identity as a citizen.

- ❖ It’s no different when you join a church. I’m sure when you were publicly baptized, you took a vow. You made a promise. **You made a formal and public covenant of love with God, and from that day on, you were identified with Christ as one of his own.**

- ❖ So it identifies us with Christ, and relatedly **2) A covenant identifies us with Christ’s people.** To be identified with Jesus by covenant is to be identified with all those who also identify with him. Through covenant Christ is my King and a Christian is my fellow citizen. Or using another metaphor, through covenant God is my Father and a Christian is my brother.
 - ▶ **What ought to identify us as a church shouldn’t be our nationality, our ethnicity, our social class, our culture, etc. The identity, the commonality, between us should transcend such things.**
 - That’s why historically churches have developed two types of formal statements that express our identity as Christ’s and belonging to Christ’s people – a **church confession** and a **church covenant**.

- ❖ A church’s confession (statement of faith) is a written summary of what we believe. It’s the common faith that binds us together. And a church’s covenant is a written summary of how we agree to live out our faith together. The covenant describes the common life we share.

- ❖ Now I'm sure you're familiar with churches that have written confessions, statements of faith. But you might not be as familiar with written covenants. It's not that different. Like in a confession, all you're doing is taking biblical truth and summarizing it concisely.
 - ▶ In case you've noticed, we've already been doing something like a covenant but informally. Lately, every time we welcome baptized believers into membership, we ask them and all church members to stand together and make promises to each other that essentially boil down to Jesus' new commandment: Love one another.

- ❖ **What we'd like to do sometime next year is to introduce a formal statement, a written covenant that all members agree upon and bind ourselves to.** In my previous church, I was part of the process to introduce something similar, and it was really well received. It put meat on the bones. **It made our love for one another more concrete and tangible.** And it wasn't something we just signed once and shelved away. Every month when we took communion we recited our covenant and renewed our vows, in a sense.

- ❖ I felt like it made a difference. Not just to the quality of our fellowship but the quality of our witness. **3) A covenant is a testimony for our Christian witness to others.** If we make with each other a covenant of love, then as we keep that promise the world will see us for who we are. We're Christians. Little Christs. Ambassadors for Christ.
 - ▶ Recall Jesus words in v35, "*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" **So it's our brotherly love for one another (for fellow believers) that will reveal to all people (including ourselves) that we're the real thing.** We're genuine disciples of Jesus.
 - Brotherly love is our defining mark. It kindles a flame in our darkened world. It gets people's attention. And they're drawn to the flame.

- ❖ I love reading about how the early church made such an impression on ancient Greco-Roman society. All because of their love for one another. The Greek historian **Lucian** was a man who despised Christians, but he had to admit there was something about their community.
 - ▶ He writes, "*It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator Jesus has put it into their head that they are brethren*"¹

- ❖ When a devastating plague swept across the ancient world in the third century, Christians who cared for their sick at the risk of contracting the plague themselves. Meanwhile, the pagan neighbors were kicking infected members of their own family out onto the streets all out of self-protection. There was such a contrast that people couldn't help but notice.
 - ▶ **Tertullian**, one of the early church fathers, describes how others spoke of Christians. He writes, "*It is our care for the helpless, our practice of lovingkindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. "Look", they say, "How these Christians love one another! Look how they are prepared to die for one another"*

¹ All quotations taken from <http://www.earlychurch.com/> and Michael P. Green, "1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching", pg 225.

- ❖ **Notice what they witnessed was not some general, conceptional idea of brotherly love.** They weren't looking abstractly at the love between Christians among the universal Church. No, they witnessed tangible love between members of a local church. **They were looking at real people and real relationships bound together by a covenant – a promise to love one another.** That's exactly what we want our neighbors to see when they look at us. We want our covenant-based life together to serve as a testimony of our Christian witness.
- ❖ There's another benefit of a covenant-based membership, especially if you develop a written version. **4) A covenant is a testimony for our accountability to each other.** It's not just a testimony for the outside world to see. A covenant serves as a testimony for the church itself. It's an ethical statement shaping our community, describing how we should treat each other.
 - ▶ Think about how marriage vows set a couple apart. They're a testimony to the rest of world. But the vows also describe how the couple promises to treat each other. And in a healthy marriage they'll hold each other accountable to those vows.
- ❖ **Likewise, in a healthy church, there will be a shared vow, a shared covenant, that puts into words the way we're going to treat each other and relate to one another.** Just take all the "*one another*" commands that you find in the New Testament and boil them down.
 - ▶ I looked at them this week. There are 37 distinct "*one another*" commands. 37 ethical commands for how we ought to relate to each other. Commands like: **Love one another** (Jn. 13:34), **honor one another** (Rom. 12:10), **live in harmony with one another** (Rom. 12:16), **serve one another** (Gal. 5:13), **care for one another** (1 Cor. 12:25), **bear one another's burdens** (Ga. 6:2), **admonish one another** (Col. 3:16), **confess to one another** (Jas. 5:16), **forgive one another** (Eph. 4:32). I could go on.
- ❖ I don't think any Christian, in their right mind, would resist and not want to be part of a covenant community – a church that practiced these *one anothers*. It's what we all want to experience. **We won't resist that kind of life together. But we might resist the way to get there.** Because the way to get there requires accountability.
 - ▶ **But if all we expect is comfort-based membership, then there can't be any accountability.** If you're calling people and drawing people to the church based on comfort, then of course you won't (you can't) call for accountability because no one feels comfortable when they're being held accountable.
 - But just as there's no healthy marriage if vows are taken lightly, there's no healthy church if we're not keeping our vows to live out the *one anothers* and holding each other to it.
- ❖ Now I know what the common objection is going to be: ***Why does my love for one another need to be formal?*** Why do I need to go through an official process and sign a piece of paper to prove my love for people in this church? Doesn't the fact that I'm here every week, that I'm active and involved, mean anything? Don't my actions speak for themselves?

- ❖ But I hope you're starting to see how that's like a man telling his longterm girlfriend, "*Why do I need to go through the formality of a ceremony and take public vows and sign a piece of paper just to prove my love for you? Don't my actions speak for themselves?*"
 - ▶ What he's really saying is, "*I love you and I'm committed to you, but not enough to the point where I want to be held accountable to that love and commitment. I still want to keep options open because you never know.*"

- ❖ **Covenant marriage intimidates because it binds you. It closes off all other options.** Now I realize the analogy breaks down in that covenant membership is not till death do you part. It doesn't mean you join one church for the rest of your life. But it does bind you to your church so long as God has you there. It keeps you accountable to love other Christians – not in vague generalities – but in particular to a particular body of believers.

- ❖ That leads to our last point. **5) A covenant makes us responsible for a specific people.** I'm sure all of have Christian family and friends who aren't members of your church. And I'm sure you'll love and serve them, and you'll be concerned for their spiritual health and growth. That just comes natural.
 - ▶ **But what won't come natural is loving and serving members in your church you barely know.** Those who are so much older or younger than you. Those who are in a different life stage or come from a different background or different culture. **I guarantee what won't come natural is a burden to see them spiritually healthy and growing.** If they're not in your small group or your fellowship, it's natural to treat these members as perfect strangers. You don't feel responsible for their spiritual lives. *And why should you?* You have nothing in common.

- ❖ **Except, that is, for the fact you share a common faith and common covenant that enjoins you to love one another just as Christ loved you.** He loved you even to the cross – not because you were family, not because you were friends, not because you had so much in common. No, Jesus loved you because he chose to and then he entered a covenant with you. That's gospel love. That's covenantal love.
 - ▶ So without a covenant between you and fellow church members you might very well default to what comes natural. But the Christian life together is meant to be supernatural where we love one another with Christ-like love. That's why we need a covenant, and that's why we're casting a vision for covenant membership.