

"Committed to Church Membership"

Some years ago in a National Hockey League game a player named Bill Masterson fell backwards on the ice and hit his head. He died of head injuries (this was before players wore protective helmets). Prior to the start of his team's next game there was a somber time of remembrance, during which time he was briefly eulogized. Among the words said to celebrate his life was that he was a **churchman**. (If you know anything about hockey players, most of them aren't known for being Christians or going to church. But this man's commitment to the church was part of the honor and recognition given him that night).

But in many ways today, people who go to church aren't held in high esteem. ***In the U.S. today, the perception people have of the church is increasingly negative.*** For instance, how often in films or on TV programs do you see the church portrayed in a positive way, or as contributing to the wellbeing of individuals and society? When's the last time on a TV sitcom you saw a normal, healthy family going to church? Or praying? You have to go back to old reruns of Little House on the Prairie, or the Waltons to view this. Actually, most often the church is simply *ignored* by the media as if it didn't exist, like it isn't even on the radar screen of modern life. And those rare times when the church or church-goers are *mentioned*, church people are often presented as hypocrites, or religious oddballs.

This negative view of the church is taking its toll. Studies are indicating that for some years now each new generation of youth is less likely to attend church. When religious surveys are taken, the fastest growing category is that of those who indicate "no religious preference".

Now in some ways it is certainly understandable why people take a dim view of the church. In many instances, the church has no one to blame but itself. The cover up of sexual abuse on the part of priests within the Roman Catholic Church...money-grabbing television preachers and ministries... congregations that resist change and insist on doing things the way they did 50 years ago...denominations mired in outdated institutional forms and bureaucracies. As a result, a larger number of people today figure: "Why would I want to commit my time and energy to the Christian church? I've got better things to do."

In spite of the widespread skepticism and indifference towards the church in our culture, the church is part of God's divine plan for human life. The church is not just a human invention. It is more than a mere social institution. It is of *divine origin!* When the church came into being, God didn't say, "Oops. I didn't expect this! This isn't what I had in mind!" In Matthew's gospel there is the story of Simon Peter's great confession of Jesus as the Christ. Jesus asks His disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" Then he goes on, "Who do *you* say that I am?" Let's pick up the story in Matthew 16:16: "Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.'" Look at Jesus' response: "Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it'" (Matthew 16:17-18). Notice, "I will build my church". Jesus *intended* to start the church!

Now we're not just talking about the institutional church here. The buildings, the organization

that can develop. These are *human* forms. Sometimes these can actually *hinder* what God wants to do if they become rigid and outdated and irrelevant. When the Bible speaks of the church it means **people** – the Greek word for "church" is "ekklesia" – which means *a people called together and called out for a purpose*.

The Bible says that the Church is Christ's body in the world today. 1 Corinthians 12:27 (written to believers) says, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." Colossians 1:18 tell us: "He is the head of the body, the church." All who truly trust Christ as Savior and follow Him are the body and presence of Jesus in the world today - continuing the work Jesus started when He was on earth! *You can't have a more important task and responsibility than that!*

Biblical faith is always faith in community. There is this tired cliché that you hear from people: "Well I can be a good Christian without going to church." *Anybody who says that has absolutely no understanding of Biblical faith!* In the *Old Testament*, the faith community was *Israel*. If you believed in the true God - Yahweh – you were part of a covenant community called Israel. The worst thing for an Israelite was to be cut off from that community (there was a specific term for it – one would be "outside the camp"). In the *New Testament*, that faith community is the *church*. To follow Jesus meant you were part of that community of believers called the church.

Romans 12:4-5 relates to this point: "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another." Notice, we are one body in Christ, members one of another.

The message of 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 is similar, "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. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." The Scripture goes on: "As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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'" (verses 20-21). Can you imagine your eye glancing down at one of your hands and saying, "I don't need you." Or your head saying to your feet, "Hey feet, you don't serve any purpose. Get lost!" For a person to say, "I believe in Jesus, but I don't need to be part of the church" is like your hand saying, "I can do all right on my own. I'm going to disconnect from the body." Or my right ear saying, "I'm tired of being attached to Harry's head. I think I'll just go off on my own and do my own thing!" When is the last time you walked down the street and saw an ear floating along? Or you were at Walmart or the grocery store and saw a big toe flopping along unattached to a body? To say, "I can be a Christian without being part of a church" is as absurd as that!

There is no such thing in the New Testament as being a Christian and having a relationship with Christ, and being disconnected from the church, Christ's body! Best-selling author and health guru Dr. Andrew Weil, has said, "Accepting Jesus should include life in a community of faith. Such connections have psychological as well as spiritual benefits, for connectedness is vital to well-being."

Ephesians 5:25 says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." This is in bold contrast to those today who think: "Jesus is ok; but I can't stand the church." Christ *loved* the church, and gave himself up for her! Could you plug in your name, "Your name loves the church, and is giving to give himself/herself up for her"?

Many critics of the church simply disregard the contributions the church has made to life and society through the years. In spite of black marks against the church throughout its 2,000 year history, the church has made immeasurable contributions to the betterment of human life. For instance, some of the prestigious ***colleges and universities*** in the U.S. were begun by the church, to train clergy. *Harvard, Princeton* (Puritan), *Yale* (Presbyterian). Princeton's crest reads: *Dei sub numine viget* "Under God she flourishes". Yet these schools are for the most part now thoroughly secular, often anti-Christian.

Many ***hospitals*** were begun as a mercy based outreach of the church. It was clergy like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and churches, that fueled and sustained the ***Civil Rights Movement*** of the 1960's. Churches have been in the forefront of ***social reform movements*** and ***humane works of compassion*** like homeless shelters and soup kitchens and adoption centers. All of this is easily forgotten by those today who criticize the church as being irrelevant!

If you eliminate the church from modern life, what alternative would you offer for the spiritual growth and wellbeing of people? I know of someone who stopped going to church. This person didn't want to be involved anymore with organized religion. Now honestly, there are times when I get dismayed with the church and organized religion. But what would you offer in its place? *Disorganized* religion? *No* religion? Do-it-yourself faith? My own personal beliefs shaped just how I want?

If you write off the church, who else provides you with resources for you to grow in the spiritual dimension of life? Dr. Phil? Steve Harvey? NBC or CNN or Fox News anchors? Do we get our soul needs met from our civic club or card club or fitness center? Are our children and grandchildren going to get enough spiritual nurture from their soccer team or dance lessons or school activities? Or from scouting activities? (as worthy as those organizations can be). Who's doing a better job than the Church to proclaim and teach the Word of God? What other institution is devoted to helping people find the *meaning of their lives*, and the *eternal realities of life*? I've invested a huge chunk of my life in the church. There have been countless frustrations, disappointments, problems - because the church is imperfect, and it is made up of sinful human beings. *But I do not regret all the time and effort I've put into serving Christ and church!*

The title of my message today is "Committed to Church Membership". For those of you who are members of Community UMC, or another congregation, I hope and pray that you are glad for whatever commitment you've made to the church, and that you will continue to dedicate yourself to serving your church with "your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service". Being part of the universal Church, the Body of Christ, always means being connected to and committed to a *local expression* of Christ's Body. (So, for instance, the New Testament refers to the church *in Corinth*, or the church *in Ephesus*, or the church *meeting in someone's house*)!

But what about church membership? Joining a church? I once had a person, active in the congregation, come to me and say, "I don't see anything in the Bible about actually having to join a church." I've had others say, "I'm involved in the church; why do I have to join?" True, you don't have to join a church to be involved. But I would turn the question around and ask, "Why *wouldn't* you want to join? What's keeping you from taking that step of membership?"

Someone has suggested 4 reasons for committing to church membership.

1. A Biblical Reason: Christ is committed to the church. We have already highlighted Ephesians 5:25: "Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her."

2. A Cultural Reason: It is an antidote to our society's lack of commitment. We live in a time where very few want to be committed long term to anything...a job...a marriage...a volunteer organization in the community. In a sense, to say, "I'll be involved in the church but don't ask me to join" is like couples who decide to live together rather than get married. They want the benefits of marriage without the long-term commitment. This attitude has produced a generation of "church shoppers" and "church hoppers" - where few are willing to commit to a congregation over the long haul. Membership swims against the current of this "consumer religion". It's an unselfish decision. Commitment builds character.

3. A Practical Reason (for joining): It defines who can be counted on. Every team must have a roster. Every school must have an enrollment. Every business has a payroll. Every army has an enlistment. Even our country takes a census and requires voter registration. Membership expresses our place in a family.

4. A Personal Reason: It produces spiritual growth. The New Testament places major emphasis on the need for Christians to be accountable to each other for spiritual growth. Sealing that commitment by joining a church is a tangible way of acknowledging our need to be accountable to one another for the life we live in Christ.

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