

Membership in the Lord's Local Church (1 Tim 3.15-16)

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Pastor Ostella

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**If I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.<sup>16</sup> Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory (1 Timothy 3:15-16).**

Introduction

The title of today's message is "Membership in the Lord's Local Church." This sermon is preliminary to the discussion of communion that will begin next week in the Bible study. We have been thinking about the relationship between membership and communion in the men's meetings for some time now and my recent work on this relationship reaches back to last October. I will give more historical background when the study begins next Lord's Day. Today, my purpose is to deal with local church membership *to set the stage* for consideration of the connection of membership to communion. So, let's begin with some introductory comments.

1) First, like many doctrines (i.e. the trinity), local church membership is not stated explicitly in Scripture. A membership roll (a specific number of people identified on a church list) is not explicit though Luke comes close by referring to additions to the number of saints at Jerusalem when he speaks about the Lord adding to the original 120, Acts 2.37). Nevertheless, there are many passages that clearly and forcefully imply not only the reality but also the imperative of local church membership. One is 1 Timothy 3.15-16.

2) Second, my emphasis is on the means of entry into the church, and from that, the meaning of membership. The means of becoming a member in Christ's visible local church is a public commitment to be His disciple within the care and under the authority of a local church. The meaning of membership is therefore the living of that public commitment; it is to be a disciple of the Lord in fellowship with a church family under pastoral care and authority.

3) Third, the case for membership as a Christian imperative can be concisely summarized. Notably, there is a general call to maintain good order in the church for edification (1 Cor 14:40, **all things should be done decently and in order**; 14:26, **Let all things be done for building up**). When this call is combined with specific church duties such as the evaluation and ordination of office holders, submission to spiritual leaders, the use of church funds, and so forth, the net result is the duty of membership.

Accordingly, the obligation to become a member is inescapably implied in the duties given us by the Lord Jesus Christ for the organization and proper function of His church, as a body of sinners saved by grace and living in various localities. It is that simple. Otherwise, the church cannot function in a fitting, orderly, and edifying way. Observing the sacraments, appointing office holders, forming budgets, and so forth, are like dots on an artist's canvas. The principle of *order for edification* puts lines between these dots, and the sketch that results is a sketch of local church membership as a Christian responsibility. In summary, I should join a local church because it is Christ's church and membership in it is a matter of obedience to Him and submission to His authority as Head of the church.

So let's consider the support for local church membership in more detail beyond this summary. It is based on at least three things from our text: the call to good behavior, the pillar obligation, and the goal of qualifying office holders. Another line of support comes from the nature of baptism and I plan to cover it in more detail next week.

I. Membership arises from the call to good behavior

Paul gave Timothy directions on how believers ought to conduct themselves in the church (1 Tim. 3:14-15; **I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that,<sup>15</sup> if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth**). The down to earth nature of this passage comes forward in the following three ways that lead directly to our subject.

1) First, Christians have specific duties in God's household.

The instructions Paul gives to Timothy here blend with the guidance he gives to men and women about church worship in chapter 2, and to prospective elders and deacons in chapter 3. We have obligations that emerge from what Paul writes to pastor Timothy (3.14) because the duties of pastors and flocks naturally carry implications for each other. Responsibilities exist in the church, waiting there for us to take them up (they are outlined in Timothy and the NT letters). Thus, powerfully, the apostle gives great importance to the Christian family by calling it **the household of God** and, **the church of the living God** (v. 15). So, when we gather for church, we do so as the family of the living God. Our specific duties are those of brothers and sisters with one Father, and this highlights their importance.

2) Second, our specific responsibilities are practical.

Nothing is ethereal or invisible regarding these obligations. To begin with, they relate to conduct in the local church of the living God **at Ephesus** (1 Tim 1.3). A local church is an expression of the church of Christ (the true body of His elect) in a particular geographical location. Therefore, by extension these instructions apply to all churches throughout the world in the time between the comings of Christ. We may claim to be part of the heavenly Jerusalem, but this text is not talking about duties we have in heaven; it is not talking about invisible duties of invisible saints to other invisible saints. These are practical local church obligations. Therefore, it is inconsistent to claim membership in Christ's invisible church and neglect membership in a local visible expression of His church. For balance, as we shall see in the Bible study, we must exercise great charity toward persons in transition from membership in one local church to membership in another. They are not neglecting this duty when they work toward joining a church through a prayerful and focused process. Thus, the duties are specific and practical.

3) These oughts of conduct guide the qualifying of officers in local churches.

In the preceding context of 1 Timothy 3, a list of qualifications is *put into the hands* of God's church to guide conduct regarding the evaluation of prospective overseers and deacons: **if anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.<sup>2</sup> Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,<sup>3</sup> not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.<sup>4</sup> He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,<sup>5</sup> for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?<sup>6</sup> He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.<sup>8</sup> Deacons likewise must be dignified** (3.1-8). The evaluative process includes testing and proving them (**let them also be tested first; then let them serve**, v. 10). This testing surely applies to both deacons *and* overseers (it applies *mutatis mutandis*, with the necessary adjustments). These qualifications are preserved in writing to enable the folk of the church to evaluate and appoint office holders without the apostle present: **I am writing these things to you** [about qualifying overseers and deacons] **so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God...the church** (14b-15).

The idea of membership is beginning to appear in our sketch of dots. You can already see the picture. How can *this specific and practical ought* regarding the appointment of elders and deacons be fulfilled rightly (as a godly obligation, as an ought) in the household of God in a local setting without a covenant bond between particular people seeking obedience to the word of Christ, the head of the church? That is just to say, how can Christians fulfill this ought, that rests on their shoulders, in an orderly way without being members of a local church?

## II. Membership derives from the "pillar" obligation

Membership unfolds from the duty of holding up the truth with a good confession. The church, Paul says, is **the pillar and foundation of the truth** (1 Tim. 3:15). This is a gospel duty of utmost importance. So we need to fill this out by comparing it with Ephesians 2:20. In Ephesians, the members of God's household are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets: **you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup>built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone** (2:19-20). The apostolic word of *revelation from God is the foundation* on which the church is built. However, in Timothy, *the church is the foundation* of apostolic truth. The pictures stand in marked contrast (revelation is the foundation of the church; the church is the foundation of revelation). Each passage emphasizes different things through the same building imagery. Our concern is to determine how the church can be the pillar and ground of the truth and then to relate that fact to church membership. So let's look a little closer. The truth that the church holds up is the key to the contrast. It holds up **the mystery of godliness** (1 Tim. 3:16), which at its core refers to the coming of Christ in the flesh and the saving work He accomplished leading to His resurrection and ascension in glory. The mystery is the gospel of Christ once hidden in OT promise but now revealed in NT realization. Therefore, the point is that the church is to hold the gospel in place like a pillar supports a superstructure and a foundation supports a building. Furthermore, the hymn or poem of praise that Paul cites in verse 16 is an ancient confession of faith that sketches the work of Christ from His birth to His ascension.

Therefore, the church (as pillar and foundation of the truth), like Timothy, is to follow the example of the Lord Jesus who confessed a good confession before Pontius Pilate (1 Tim. 6:13). To do this in the best way possible, the church in a given location must labor constantly to clarify and improve her confession. It is impossible to do this in an orderly fashion if there is no definition regarding who makes up the church. In this context, why is even a membership roll of some kind necessary? It is necessary because the church is obliged to confess a good confession *as a body, group and family*, not just as individual believers. We must emphasize this point of community in our age of individualism. To do this, a local church must discuss biblical teaching, even difficult doctrines, and engage in dialogue to work out details. Whose confession shall we confess and how shall we use it (say, as a teaching guide)? It is not the confession of any one person. The church confession is a collective confession about which we agree, not perfectly but substantively. It has its roots in church history because the Holy Spirit has been working in the churches since the beginning. Then, given the reality of differences of growth and perspective, we must strive after like-mindedness regarding the faith (being disciples life long).

Moreover, striving after like-mindedness is part of our covenant relationship to one another (as Paul teaches in Phil 1:27). We have to find mutually acceptable terms on the very process by which we work toward better agreement. This has to be done in an orderly way, which requires a defined membership and some good and reasonable policies of procedure. Order requires a vote, but who has the right to vote? Anyone who drops in at the time of a business meeting? For good order, to collectively make wise decisions regarding what we confess and how we confess it, there must be a body of members defined by an initial confession (baptism) for the task of making confession. Confessing our faith as a Christian family involves learning together in such a way that we graciously and wisely negotiate to a good confession of better understanding forged through mutual exhortation. Doing this in an orderly way together requires local church membership. This leads to one more support for membership in this text.

To what end does Paul place the qualification list into the hands of believers? Overseers are to be qualified for *management*, and therefore must be able to manage their own households well to do so in the household of God: **Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,<sup>3</sup> not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.<sup>4</sup> He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,<sup>5</sup> for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?** (1 Tim 3.2-5). Of course, this clearly implies that Christians not only qualify the pastor for the role of instructor and caregiver, but also that they submit themselves to pastoral care and instruction. Thus, the ordination of a pastor involves a covenant with the pastor to be disciples under his care. His job is to teach disciples for holiness to the glory of God (as we noted in our recent look at the church's mission, Eph 4.11-12). So, believers not only submit to mutual exhortation (Heb 3.13), but also to pastoral authority.

Therefore, it is the responsibility of every Christian to enter a covenant relationship with a church and pastor. That is definitely implied in 1 Timothy, and it is explicitly stated in Hebrews 13: verse 7, **Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith** and verse 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.** Christians are to submit to leaders and obey them in keeping with their authority as leaders. So we ask, are all believers obliged to be under the authority of all pastors in all localities. Of course, the answer is no, except in a general sense. The obligation is to "your" leaders, to leaders and workers in the word that you own as yours. You own the relationship in which you have the place of submission to pastoral authority. How is this pastoral authority established? It is not automatic. It must be entered in an open way by the willing consent of each party in the context of the church. It must be public. Therefore, it is entered by a commitment, by the *membership* commitment. Additionally, because of the responsibility of the saints to manifest one another's love, we have to affirm the involvement of the church in this commitment. Accordingly, the membership commitment that every Christian is to make by the command of Christ (as shown in these commands in Hebrews and Timothy) is rightly called a covenant. Being a person in a membership covenant between flock and pastor, pastor and flock, and flock to flock is a fundamental Christian duty with far reaching implications.

#### Concluding summary

Therefore, for good behavior in God's household and to fulfill the practical obligations of confessing a good confession, qualifying overseers, and submitting to owned ministers of the word, those who profess faith in Christ are to join a local church by making a public covenant of membership. This is what Jesus, the head of the church, has ordained for Christian growth in grace and the spread of the gospel. Even the action of voting to forge a consensus is elevated in its significance by the connection Paul makes between office holders and the mystery of the faith. In the end, it is the high value of the gospel of the risen Lord Jesus that gives immeasurable importance to church membership.

**May we fall down before the majesty of the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ, in whom we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, in keeping with the Father's great power that He worked in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, put all things under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church; may the Holy Spirit enlighten our eyes to the high importance of church membership in relationship to the glorious gospel of Christ to the honor and glory of the triune God, amen.**