

The Sacred Calling of Church Membership



Before preparing for this sermon, I had never heard of Archbishop Philostheos Bryennios. In the 1860's he was a rising star in the Greek Orthodox church and was appointed a professor of ecclesiastical history. He was promoted in 1867 to head up what was called "Great School of the Nation" in Constantinople, modern day Istanbul, Turkey's largest city. In 1877 he was advanced again and became the archbishop for the city of Nicomedia, in northwest Turkey. He was both a pastor and a respected scholar – he enjoyed spending time with people and in dusty libraries and in old monasteries.

While in Constantinople, one day he was browsing in the old library of the Greek Convent of the Holy Sepulcher examining documents that were 1,000 years old, when he discovered (unexpectedly) a short Greek manuscript. It was not in the library catalog and had been missed by previous inventories for 100's of years because it was hidden between two larger manuscripts and itself was very small – a Greek text of only 2,190 words.

But nevertheless, here was a document that was thought to be as extinct as the dodo bird – it had not been seen by human eyes for at least 1,000 years. At here it was in his hands. That is had once existed was as well known, because it was referenced by 3rd century Church Father Origen and 4th century hero Athanasius – and our very first church historian, Eusebius, who wrote 10-volume history of the early church in the early 300s.

It was a document widely believed to be from first century, perhaps as early as A.D. 50. It had a strong connections with the books of Matthew and Jude. The writer likely knew both of these men. Though it is not in the New Testament Cannon today, it does not contradict the Bible as other

extra-biblical accounts do – for that reason, it was seriously considered for the canon, though it ultimately did not make the cut.

What was this discovery? A document called - *the Didache*. Which means “The Teaching”. Philostheos Bryennios published the *Didache* for the first time in 1,000 years, in 1883. Scholars and church leaders called its discovery “startlingly,” “a first class literary sensation,” and “the most important find of NT scholarship in the 19th Century.”

But what is it, you ask? To put it simply – it is a document related to first century church membership!” A summary of Christian teaching and thought – given to new converts prior to joining the church. The *Didache* began a process where by throughout the course of church history, where nearly every branch in Christendom has had some process for orienting and leading people toward a joyful inclusion in the local church.

This morning we are continuing in our series called “Divine Directions” were we are attempting to ask and answer the question – “Who are we as a church?” We have looked at the biblical purposes for the church, and have explored some of our own DNA as articulated in our mission statement. Now we turn to the topic of church membership.

Biblical Case for Church Membership:

Before we move on, let me pause for a moment and ask, “Why is church membership is important?” I do this because church membership is a debated topic in our day. For example, some churches have rejected the idea of church membership because they argue it follows a secular model - You may be a member of the country club or a member of Sam’s Club but you should not have to become a member of a church. This view argues that any requirement beyond salvation by faith in Christ is simply not necessary.

Why then bother with church membership at all? Let me give you three brief arguments in support of church membership.

1. **First is the argument from Church History** – that I have illustrated in the opening story.

While church history or tradition must be carefully weighted. The wisdom of the ages favors serious consideration of church membership.

2. **Second - God is a covenanting God.** As we examine Scripture we find a God who makes covenants - with Noah, with Moses, with David. A “New Covenant” was prophesied in the OT and fulfilled by Jesus in the NT. People also have covenants with one another. Isaac and Abimelech settled their disputes with one another with a covenant (Genesis 26:26-31). Dave and Jonathan’s friendship was sealed by oaths, and marriage is a covenant for life.

Covenants spell out the terms of a relationship – promises, responsibilities and privileges. Within a covenant there is accountability. Church membership is a covenant – consistent with the biblical practice of covenants.

3. **There is evidence in the NT that the early church knew who was part of their assembly, in a formal way.** Consider the following examples.

- The first is a negative example. You recall the man who was caught in a horrible sin at Corinth. Paul said, 1Cor. 5:12-13 **For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.** The expulsion of the wicked man assumes that he could be removed from something defined. That is, if there was a process for removal, there was also likely a process for being included in the church.

- Third, Widows were cared for [1Tim. 5:9](#) **Let a widow be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man** – there was a list and organized ministry responsibilities within the church. They, again, knew who the specific widows were that were part of that church body.
- Fourth, Elders were appointed and had responsibility over a flock. [1Pet. 5:2](#) **Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;** Their calling is to a defined association of people, not over a general group

I love this verse in proverbs: [Prov. 27:23](#) **Know well the condition of your flocks, And pay attention to your herds.** Church membership defines the flock. There are many flocks out there – which one are you committed to? To leaders it says – take care of these people – love these sheep – know these sheep. To one another it says – these are the people with whom we are going to journey through life together – shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand.

What it is and is not:

Ok – if you agree that church membership is important – what is it? What is its significance? Let me share some of what church membership is not, and then what it is. Church membership is not:

- A guarantee of spiritual maturity.
- Not a class system.
- Not a part of salvation
- Not tied to the Lord's Table.
- A statement that you agree with everything this church does!

To explain what church membership is – I am going to now distribute our Church Membership Covenant. Please take it out of the envelope and follow along with me.

- 1. I promise to watch over my fellow members in love; to remember one another in prayer; to aid one another in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian compassion in feeling and courtesy in speech; and to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation. I agree to our Relational Commitments² and will seek to abide by them with God's help and grace.*

That is you are committing to this body – to sharing grace with each other. The elders and I have taken some excellent work from peacemaker's ministry and have adapted it for use in our church – It is called Relational Commitments and discussed things such as peacemaking, confidentiality, what to do when you have a conflict, our committed to make marriages strong and church disciples. That document is available on our church web site under the icon of loving relationships.

- 2. I agree to the church's doctrinal beliefs, including holding to the authority of the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, that they are the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation is the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation.*

A more detailed explanation of our church beliefs are also on our web site. But what you will be affirming in this church are cardinal doctrines about God and Christ and the Spirit, not debated side issues. You will not need to agree with a particular view of end times events, or whether sign gifts exist. But you will need to agree to salvation in Christ, the death of Christ, the Trinity, etc.

- 3. I submit myself to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to pursue its purity and peace.*

To live life without accountability is a dangerous proposition. Church membership means that you recognize and submit to the elder leadership of this church and, if necessary the disciple of the church. That you will be a member who may not always agree, but you will pursue purity peace and unity.

Application

For those who are visiting – If you are a member of another church family – I trust this has been an affirming message for you – Love that community, serve in that church, pursue its unity! If, perhaps you are gotten away from church – Maybe God is challenging you to return home to the local church. It is not a perfect place – no church is – but it is God’s expression of love and reconciliation in our world. Be part of what God is doing through the church!

Second – for those who are a part of us here. Maybe you have been with LCCC since before it even had a name - those early, early days. Or, perhaps you have joined us more recently. I would ask you to pray this week over the church covenant you have received. Is the Lord leading you to formalize your commitment to this flock – this church? If you feel this is God’s leading, bring the covenant back next week in the envelope provided and simply put it in the offering place after the message. No public “Stand up for Christ and become a member” – but placing it in the offering will be your way to getting those forms back to us. We want to be sensitive because if you are not ready – take the time you need. If you have questions about the process, the relational covenant, whatever, take the time you need to be comfortable of God’s leading. I will be happy to answer questions – please contact me freely.

The church is the body of Christ – He is the head. We are to be joined both together with one another and with Him. May we do so to His glory. Amen.