**Theology of the Church – Core Seminar**

**Class #2 – Church Membership**

**Introduction**

If you were with us last week, you’ll remember we talked about defining the church. That needs to be the starting point because we need to know what we’re building before we start construction. One of the things we noticed from the biblical narrative is that God’s intention has been to create a people for himself who would display his glory, and as we noted last week from Ephesians 3:10, the church is not an optional, but an central part of God’s plan to display his glory. But what happens when those who claim to represent His name fail to do so?

Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 5 if you will.

**1 Corinthians 5:1–7 “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. 2 And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. 3 For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. 4 When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. 6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.”**

What’s going on here?

*A man is sleeping with his father’s wife and the congregation is tolerating it.*

*Paul calls on the church to remove him, to hand him over to Satan – not for the goal of his ultimate destruction but restoration (v5).*

The question that comes up for our focus today is, remove him from *what*?

Well, that’s what we need to clarify this morning. The answer I think we’ll find is *church membership*, but again, we need to listen to what Scripture teaches on this rather than the ideas of man.

**The Church Represents Heaven**

Turn to Matthew 16. In the first part of the chapter, we find Jesus warning the apostles not to trust the teaching of Israel’s leaders (Matt. 16:1-12). They were self-righteous, and so missed Jesus – their proud self-reliance blinded them from seeing Jesus for who He really is. So, Jesus then turns to Peter and says in Matthew 16:15: “Who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus affirms Peter’s answer, and then says,

**“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. 19 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.” (Matt. 16:18-19)**

This is the first of two times that Jesus talks about the church in the Gospels. And notice how He connects the church (v18) to the keys of the kingdom of heaven (v19). Last week we noted that the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven is God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule. So what’s the connection between this kingdom of heaven that Jesus talks about in v19 and the church in v18? Well, the church is meant to display *on earth* who is, and who isn’t in the kingdom of heaven.

Specifically, when Jesus talks to Peter, He’s interested in a *what* and a *who*. What is a right confession, and who is a right confessor?

Jesus exercises that authority toward Peter, but then goes a step further. Jesus gives Peter and the apostles this same authority: the authority to stand in front of a confessor, to hear his or her confession, and to announce an *official* judgment on heaven’s behalf.

• That is or isn’t a right confession.

• And that is or isn’t a true confessor.

I want to make sure you get this: Whoever is holding these keys of the kingdom has heaven’s authority not to *make* a Christian, but to declare who is a Christian, which we do through baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

In Matthew 16, the apostles are said to hold the keys. Then in Matthew 18, Jesus puts the keys into the hands of the local church. Turn there.

**Matthew 18:15 - “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”**

A man’s been confronted a couple of times over his sin. He doesn’t listen. So in verse 17 Jesus says, “tell it to (WHO?...) the church.” Not to a pastor, not to a committee, not to a session or presbytery, but the church. The final court of appeal is the church.

The local church has heaven’s authority to guard the ‘what’ and the ‘who’ of the gospel…who and what on earth represents heaven. It hold the keys – and what do keys do? They unlock or lock doors – in other words they bind and loose (as in **v18**).

Jesus has authorized the local church to stand in front of a confessor, to consider the confessor’s confession, to consider his or her life, and to announce an official judgment on heaven’s behalf. Is that the right confession? Is this a true confessor? Just like Jesus did with Peter.

**The Keys are Exercised Through Baptism and the Lord’s Supper**

We bind and loose…we exercise the keys…through baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Notice Matthew 18:20. Jesus explains this key holding activity in verses 17 and 18 with an explanatory “for” in verse **20: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them**.”

What does that mean, gathered in his name? Jesus is talking about that place where you exercise baptism. Turn to **Matthew 28:18**: **“All authority in heaven and earth have been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit.”** The church, because it has the authority of the keys, has the authority to baptize.

Baptism is a symbol of a spiritual reality – a picture of our union with Christ in both His death and resurrection. But baptism not only symbolizes our union with Christ, it is the Christian’s way of associating him/herself with God’s people too.

Baptism is the door in so to speak – it’s done 1x. The Lord’s Supper is done regularly[[1]](#footnote-1). In these gospel displays, we’re drawing boundary lines of who is in and out. Remember Matthew 18 or 1 Corinthians 5? When someone claims the name of Christ but refuses to let go of their sin, their claim loses credibility and the church is called to remove their affirmation of being a Christian and to excommunicate – to bar them from the Lord’s Supper. Now this can be tough, but it’s important the church follow Scripture on this because the church is called to represent, to image God – the glory of God is supremely important; and it’s important for the individual, because we’re telling each other the truth about our state before God rather than deceiving/flattering.

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the oath signs by which we take oaths with one another. We profess Christ, and we affirm one another as Christians and members of one another in the church[[2]](#footnote-2).

It’s through the Baptism and the Lord’s Supper that we as individual Christians work together constitute a local church and its members. And Jesus authorizes Christians to do this by giving us the keys.

Do you remember the definition of the local church we talked about last week?

“*A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ’s name* [church is fundamentally a gathering, not a building] *to officially affirm and oversee one another’s membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances*.”

Now a few things are coming into greater focus. It’s *official* because only the church has been granted the authority of the keys – not an individual or a subcommittee. It’s a gathering, but that gathering is further defined with the purpose affirming and overseeing each other’s membership in Christ and His kingdom. It’s thru the gospel because that’s how God makes Christians and the ordinances because that’s the church’s instrument to exercise the keys.

**Who is Church Membership For?**

Now all this talk about the keys and binding and loosing raises an important question: what’s the biblical criteria for getting in? And that’s an important question because what we’re talking about is more than just fitting in – it’s a matter of eternity? So is it like a country club where you need to know the right people or drive a certain type of car? Is it like the military where you need to be able to do a certain number of pushups and pull-ups? To answer that, let’s turn our attention back to the Gospel of Matthew.

Who in Matthew does Jesus make a heavenly citizen, which is to say, a member of the church?

**5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**7:21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”**

**10:32 “Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven”**

**18:4 ”Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”**

These are the people whom the church is to receive: the poor in Spirit, those who follow God’s will, those who acknowledge Christ, those who humble themselves like a little child.

Do you see the pattern? Christianity, and therefore church membership, is not for the strong. It’s not for those who have their acts together. And who are determined to follow their own wills…do it their way. It’s for those who have tried…and failed.

* It’s for the teenagers who had certain moral ideals, but then went off to college and fell into sin.
* It’s for the mothers who have tried really hard to be the perfect mothers, and disappointed themselves.
* It’s for the retirees who has reached the end of their careers and looked back and realized, “It was all about me, and my selfish ambitions. And now what do I have.”

Christianity, and therefore church membership, is for the people who have reached the end of themselves. That’s why in **Matthew 9:12** Jesus said, **“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. …For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”**

The heavenly Father has chosen, unbelievably, to represent himself on earth not with the morally perfect, but with the morally broken. That is, the person who knows he or she is a sinner, hates that fact, and then turns from that sin and puts his or her trust in the righteousness of Christ.

Friends, here is the heart of Christianity. We were created for good. We did bad. Christ lived the humble, meek, and perfect life that we should have lived, and then died on the cross as a sacrifice to pay the penalty we deserved for doing bad. And now, he calls us to everyone who is poor in spirit, who hungers and thirsts for his righteousness, to turn away from that sin, and follow him as savior and King.

**Membership Triangle**

Alright, so what if after all this talk about the keys of the kingdom and binding and loosing you still have questions about church membership? I mean, where is church membership *really* in the Bible? One helpful way to answer that question is to read through the NT with this question in mind: *How does the Bible call Christians to relate within the local church?*

Love One Another

* **Romans 15:1 “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.”**
* **Romans 12:13, 15-16 “Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality . . . Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another.”**

Encourage One Another

* **Hebrews 10:24-25 “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”**

Guard One Another

* **1 Corinthians 5, Matthew 18…**

Obey Your Leaders

* **Hebrews 13:17 “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.”**

**Elders**

Oversight

Equip / Shepherd

Recognize

Obedience

Accountability

**Congregation**

**You**

So do you see how the NT calls us to relate to each other within the church?

But that raises a secondary question: which church? In other words, Hebrews 13 calls us to submit to our elders – but *which elders*? Every elder of every church? Elders are accountable to God for the souls they keep watch over, but *which Christians*? The congregation has a responsibility to affirm a profession of faith and to remove or discipline when there’s unrepentant sin – but *which individuals?* What all of this assumes is a local church – a membership where there is an ‘in’ and an ‘out’. Membership is simply a self-conscious commitment to other Christians (to love, guard, encourage), a submission to their authority as a congregation and to the elders who give oversight.

**Any Questions?**

**Discussion questions**

1. **Isn’t all this talk about ‘in’ and ‘out’ unloving? How should we think about love in the context of church membership?**
2. **What are things a church can do to keep the line between the church and the world clear?**
3. **How can we encourage a culture of discipleship?**

1. 1 Cor. 11:26 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also 1 Cor. 10:16-17 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)