

Personal Commitment to the Church, Part 1

Selected Scriptures

80-246

This is a special Lord's day as we contemplate the matter of church membership. It was, I believe, about fifteen years ago that I felt that I should preach a sermon on church membership. I had never done that and so I decided that I would just do that and see if I couldn't motivate some people to join the church, to make a real commitment to the church and not just come and go and be sort of spectators. So, on a particular Sunday I did and at the end of the service, not knowing what to expect, I said, "All of you who would like to join the church come to the front." And in two services, 1600 people came.

Now there were other pastors who heard about...heard about that and that tape became sort of a cult tape because everybody wanted to know how can I guy preach one sermon and 1600 people join the church. And the truth of the matter was that there was nothing particularly revealing about the tape, there was nothing particularly magical about the tape, there was nothing particularly unique about the tape. It was just the fact that people were made aware of the fact that they should do something that they were willing to do. And so in the end it was really my fault for not telling them to do it. It was like, "Okay, if that's what you want us to do, that's what we're going to do." And it was a really exciting moment except we had 1600 people and we were trying to figure out what to do with them. We had to find out whether they were Christians, first of all, put them through some kind of process which we were able to do. And then many of them needed to be baptized. And so we had a sequence of baptismal services that went on for quite a while. In fact, I remember one evening I baptized 90 people in one baptismal service. And it was such an exciting service that in the middle of the service people were coming up here asking if they could also be baptized. So I think we started out with 80 and ended up with 90 before the evening was over.

Now it was several years after that, it was actually in 1994 that I felt the time was right again to preach a message on church membership and I think 600 people came to join the church. And so it seems as though periodically I just need to tell you folks what you need to do as new people come into the church and this is such a Sunday to do that.

I love the church. I think you know that. The church has been the center of my life since I was born. I was born in a pastor's family and have known nothing but the church my entire life. It is the place where I was led to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. It is the place where I was giving to sanctifying knowledge of the truth of the Word of God. It is where I learned how to live and how to love and how to serve the Lord. It was the place and has always been the place where I have been established as a Christian. It is also the place where all the goals of my life, all the standards of my life, all the principles of my life have been laid down. It was where I met my precious wife. It is where I raised my beloved children, and now my grandchildren. It is where I have made all my friends. And it's where I've given my life, every bit of my life and shall continue to do so until I die. And after I die, I will still be in the midst of the church forever and ever and ever, I just won't be preaching anymore.

And we'll all be together collectively worshiping our great God in His presence. The church has been my life and it will be my life forever...forever. I can't imagine life without the church. I can't imagine not being a part of the church.

And by that I don't mean "not going to church." I find "going to church" sometimes to be a somewhat less than fulfilling experience. If I'm not here, if I'm somewhere else, usually whenever I'm not here and somewhere else, I am preaching in a church service, which is fine. But there are occasions when I'm not here and I'm not preaching and I just go to church and I am put in the role of a spectator and it's not a happy experience. I don't know the people. Very often if the pastor sees me it makes him uncomfortable and nervous, which it shouldn't do. I don't know anybody. I can't connect with anybody. I don't know what he's preaching last week, next week. I don't have any continuity. I'm just dropped in to the church on a one-Sunday situation, taking whatever comes to me. I have nothing to offer. I don't know the people. I have no ministry. I have no accountability. I don't have anything to offer, I just land there and I'm gone. And I have begun to realize that for some people that's their entire relationship to the church. That is not what God intended.

I am committed with all my heart to the church, and not just THE church in a generic sense, but this one. The average pastor stays in a church three years in America, just long enough to accomplish nothing. It's true. Three years. But I'll tell you one thing you do accomplish, you send a message very loud and clear to your congregation that you didn't make a commitment to that church, then try to convince them that they should for a lifetime. It's a tough sell.

In the eighteenth century in America, for example, seventeen hundreds, eighteenth century, 71 percent of pastors in that century at one church their whole life...71 percent. There was one particular church that was pastored by a father, a son and a grandson for 123 years. They only knew one family...one family. There was another church I read about in the eighteenth century where the pastor died and a young pastor came and married the widow...and so they knew that family and that new man. That was pretty typical. Men spent their entire life in the same church. Four percent of pastors in the eighteenth century had three churches. One was the norm, 71 percent. You gave your life to the church and then you could tell your people to give their life to the church. Pastoring a church wasn't climbing a ladder, it wasn't sort of a road for self-promotion. It was...it was like a marriage. In fact, when a person went to candidate at a church, the minimum stay was three months. You didn't go in there and preach two sugar-stick sermons which were a lot better than you could produce every week, and wow them, you know, with your best shot. You went for three months, maybe six months, maybe even a year. And at the end of that time they determined whether you would come. And then they had what was tantamount to a wedding and you made a commitment, a vow to the church. In today's environment there are lots of divorces. It's very hard if pastors aren't committed to local congregations to expect people to be. In fact, in some cases I think pastors move faster than people do. But this is a day of non-commitment, isn't it? This is a day of "I need my needs met." "I want fulfillment...I want to be happy," etc., etc., so we bounce along thinking we can find a more favorable place. That goes all the way down through our whole culture. Everything we do is that way and the church tends to accommodate that with a very high mobility in the pastorate and a very high mobility in the people. And even more than that, the people are looking for the briefest kind of association with the church. If you can hit me with a Sunday-night service, I'll really be happy, "one hour, I'm in there and out of there and don't mess up a whole day" mentality. And this shows up in the unwillingness of people to join the church.

There are even denominations or associations of churches that don't advocate membership. They

don't care if you join. They don't want you to join. They're happy to have you come. In fact, they design the whole church for seekers who aren't even members, they're just there on the fringes. The church is then redefined in a consumer mentality and the idea is that you're supposed to give something to the people rather than what the church's intention is biblically, and that is that the people come to give glory to God and to give ministry to each other.

It's a very difficult time for the church right now, very difficult time. We live in a day of ecclesiastical consumerism just like all the other kinds of consumerism. People feel little or no attachment to anything, no obligation to anything, no commitment loyalty to anything. Church attendance is irregular, sporadic, hit and miss. I talked to a guy the other day who was telling me how, you know, happy he was as a Christian and he was so thrilled to be a Christian and so committed to the Lord. I said, "What church do you go to?" He said, "Oh, I go to five churches." I said, "You go to five churches?" "Yeah, I go here and I go there and if I'm over here, I go there and if I'm over here I go there and I go here and I go there." And it was like...you know, "I'm so Chris...I'm so spiritual one church isn't enough for me, I've got to have five." I mean, this is like a badge of spirituality rather than an indication of ignorance or carnality. We have by virtue of this kind of consumerism the kind of thing where, you know, you...you look at churches like you might look at the movie page or something and try to decide what you want to go and see, or who you want to go and hear.

Following along with that is the neglect of the ordinances, the neglect of communion and baptism which is very serious. Many churches have de-prioritized these things anyway because they think they offend fringe people, seekers. But these, the Lord's table and baptism, are central elements in Christian testimony and witness. They are our witness. In baptism we declare what it is to be immersed into Christ. And in communion we proclaim the death of Christ until He comes. But baptism and communion get ignored in the mentality of today. And people who bounce around all the time may go months and months and months without ever experiencing either. Not coming to the Lord's table means not coming to the table of self-examination, exposing your sin to be dealt with. And even in places where baptism and communion are administered they're...they're directed at some personal kind of experience, rather than the corporate unity of the church and they become less and less frequent as a main part of church life.

You also have the development of ministries outside churches, what we call para-church ministries, or even in some cases, I guess, you'd be honest to say anti-church ministries. Highly promoted ministry suck up the majority of Christian dollars. Massive para-church ministries consuming millions and literally collectively billions of dollars. There's a new book out that talks about the fact that wherever the money goes, the power goes because the people who have the money can buy the influence in the media. And so how they promoted slick wealthy ministries led by unusually talented and gifted people supported by wealthy patrons using sophisticated marketing methods engulf millions of dollars and when they suck up the money, they buy the power and influence. It's almost as if the church doesn't exist. If you ask the question of the world, "Who are the influential Christians in the world?" It's unlikely that they would ever mention a pastor...very unlikely. They might say names like Charles Colson or Billy Graham or Jim Dobson or somebody like that, men who have great influence. And those people certainly are representation of Christianity, no question about that, I'm not saying they're not. It's just that the power of the organizations dictates their profile in the media. The church, the local church rarely has the capability to do that. People then define Christianity in these big broad para-church terms and feel no real commitment. People who run massive organizations that take in hundreds of millions of dollars every year become in many ways the architects of a kind of visible Christianity the world looks at. And so people are content to connect

with these kinds of things and it sucks up their interest, it sucks up their involvement, even their dollars and they have less commitment to the church.

Another thing that is a part of this is the fact that you have a proliferation of independent stylized churches started by people who have no accountability to anybody or anything. Anybody who wants to can start a church. If you did that in John Calvin's day and you weren't trained, educated, and ordained, you were put in jail. Now there's an opposite perspective. Because they were so concerned that somebody who didn't adequately understand the Word of God would misrepresent it and lead people astray, they had a process that you went through by which you were qualified. That's why we do ordination. Ours is an independent church but it's not independent from accountability. I was ordained by the IFCA, Independent Fundamental Churches of America, in a grueling ordination process in which I was questioned by a hundred plus pastors who unloaded every imaginable question on me to determine my suitability for ministry. And when that ordination was completed, there was an affirmation. We do that here at the church. In order to qualify for that there has to be training. You can't practice medicine without a license, you have to be very careful about who you allow to practice theology. One can be deadly to the body, the other can be deadly to...what?...soul. And so you have this whimsical approach to churches to day that appeals to this consumer mentality where people have the freedom to float anywhere they want because pastors have the freedom to float anywhere they want and unaccountability is rampant. The church has shifted from being led by trained and ordained people, very often to being led by untrained and unordained people who are not appropriately prepared for that ministry, nor are they accountable to any group for their ministry.

We need another look at this matter of church membership. Just to look at the metaphors, just continuing to talk about it a little bit, to look at the metaphors of the church that are used in the New Testament, the analogies, the illustrations, all of them celebrate kind of organic unity. All of them celebrate inter-dependence. For example, the church is a family, we are called the household of God in Ephesians 2. And a household or a family is a metaphor that talks about commonality, common life, common source, common parentage, common concerns, common responsibilities, shared life in the most intimate possible setting. That's a church. There's nothing in that metaphor that leads to the conclusion that there's anything about spectators here, nobody is a spectator in a family. You're involved on a life basis. You could take the illustration in the New Testament of the church as a vine with branches, that's organic again. You have the vine in which the source of life, the sap of life, if you will, flows and it goes out into the branches and produces the fruit. We are inextricably connected to the source of life, all of us, and thus to each other. You could take the picture of the church that is the body, the body of Christ. And again, there's an organic connection of inter-dependence. The body is a perfect illustration. We are not a crowd of people watching the same event. We are a body united by a common flow of blood, a common heart, a common head who is Jesus Christ. And His life pulsing through all of us organically connects us on a spiritual level so that there's no such thing as independence or disconnection. You can even talk about the fact that we are a holy edifice, a holy temple built up fitly framed together and built together interconnected as to produce a temple in which God's Holy Spirit can dwell.

The word "belonging" is a good word when we talk about the church. Belonging is at the very heart of Christianity. There's a...there's an often-used phrase that I never use, you've never heard me use it here because I never use it and that is this idea of having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That's not a biblical phrase. I understand what you mean. I don't want to argue that your relationship to Christ has to be your own. But I choose not to use that because I think that it expresses potentially

the wrong idea. I don't ever say, "I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ." I would say, "I have a relationship with Jesus Christ," that's enough said. I have a relationship with Jesus Christ. By His grace God has saved me and given me an eternal relationship with His Son. That relationship is this, His righteousness has become mine because my sin became His. That's our relationship. And I enjoy the benefit of that but it is not personal in this sense. I would rather say it this way, I have a corporate relationship with Jesus Christ. When I was saved, not only did Jesus Christ become my Savior and I became one with Him, but I became one with every other person who is one with Him. "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit."

We're all joined to the Lord, we're all joined to each other. That's the body. That's the vine and branches. That's the family. That's the building. It all talks about interdependence, organic shared life. I don't have a personal relationship with Jesus by which I can somehow define this relationship as an isolated one-on-one deal which gives me the freedom to float anywhere I want, to do whatever I want and define my Christianity in personal terms. I have a corporate relationship with Jesus Christ. The moment I put my faith in Christ, the Bible tells me that Christ by the agency of the Spirit of God baptized me into the body, the church. That's what happened to me. I was in...I was literally placed into the church, into the corporate body of those who believe in Christ and are the redeemed. I don't have a personal relationship in the sense that somehow it's isolated from everybody else. I have a corporate relationship that is inextricably organically spiritually connected to everybody else who is Christ's.

So, going from my salvation to the church is the obvious step. Going from salvation to no church or to five churches or to this floating idea is completely contrary to the intention of Scripture. It's one of the problems you have with these massive, massive organizations that take in hundreds of millions of dollars to do evangelism on wide, large scales whether they are done through meetings or conferences or crusades or whatever they are, these massive parachurch organizations that suck up all of these people and give them the gospel, and certainly people are converted in that, but the end result of that is they have no relationship to a church. And so many of those people fall away because it's not a true birth and there's no further exposure to the truth. Many of those who are genuinely converted flounder and float because the only loyalty they fell is a loyalty to that organization if they even feel that. But belonging is the heart of Christianity. It is not productive, it is not right to float around like some consumer picking and choosing what you want from week to week, hopping from place to place.

And the idea of being an unbaptized Christian is absolutely foreign to the New Testament. Being unbaptized is just flatly disobedient. If you come to Christ and you haven't been baptized, you're in a state of disobedience. You shouldn't take the Lord's table until you do what's right, until you...or until you're prepared to do what's right. That's clear in Scripture. But believe me, there's lots of people who would profess Christ who have not been baptized. And failure to come to the Lord's table, failure to do that is a serious breach of the command. Do this...Jesus said...do this. Failure to worship regularly, consistently, failure to hear the Word of God routinely, consistently, all these things are breaches of the biblical command.

Now the early church knew its members. In Acts chapter 2, for example, we know that people belong because they knew who they were. Acts 2 and verse 41, "Those who received Peter's word, believed the gospel, were baptized, there were added that day about three thousand souls." They knew exactly how many there were, there were about three thousand. I don't know whether it was twenty-nine hundred and eighty two or the three thousand and four, whatever it was, but they knew exactly

who they were because they heard the Word, they believed the Word, they were baptized. They therefore identified themselves in baptism, and baptism by the way pictures being placed into Christ, placed into His body, they made that public confession, they knew who they were, they had their names and that's the way it was in the early church. Verse 47 it says, at the end of the verse, "The Lord was adding to that number every day those who were being saved." So they were counting three thousand...three thousand five hundred...four thousand...and it kept going like that, thousands more all along. You come to chapter 4 verse 4, the number of the men alone came to be about four...about five thousand very soon. You come to chapter 5 verse 14 and believers more and more were being added, men and women constantly being added to the number. And it's easy to understand they're getting into the thousands, the tens of thousands, twenty thousand, thirty thousand being added. They know who they are. They're identified because they are baptized and the records are written down.

You can go over to the eighteenth chapter of the book of Acts and again you know that they were marking out who belonged to the church. In the eighteenth chapter and the twenty-seventh verse, here was an occasion when Paul wanted to go to Achaia when...Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, rather, and it says, "And when he wanted to go across to Achaia the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him." Now this is a typical thing that they did. Here was a believer going from one congregation to another, and they gave him a letter to take with him to introduce him to the other congregations so they would know his testimony, they would know the service that he rendered and they would have a profile on this believer. At the end of Romans chapter 16 verse 1 in Paul's letter to the church at Rome he says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea." I want you to receive Phoebe, I want to commend you to her, I know her, she has served the church in Cenchrea. That was typical letters of commendation, letters of affirmation were sent with believers when they went from one place to another. In Colossians 4:10, my cousin...Barnabas' cousin Mark about whom you received instructions, if he comes to you welcome him. Here Paul sticks in his Colossian letter an affirmation of Mark and tells them, "Receive him when he comes, he's a genuine believer." And this was typical. This was letters of approval that were sent from place to place as believers moved.

For many years growing up as a kid this was typically done. When somebody left the church it wasn't the same attitude today, people locked in on a church, went to that church in many cases all their life. When they did move to another place, they took a letter from their church affirming them to the new church so that new church would know that this entire church credited them and stood behind them.

Churches knew who belonged where. And there was no such thing as a believer who didn't belong to a local assembly. You were in the church at Ephesus, the church at Cenchrea, the church at Colossae, the church at Thessalonica, the church at Corinth, the church somewhere. All the epistles of the New Testament are directed to either churches or leaders of churches, all of them. There's no word from God to somebody who's not in a church. There are no free-floating epistles to all that are running loose. All the epistles are written either to the churches to be read to the church, or to the leaders of the churches.

Now this is a problem to me. And I...I will admit to you, I've been reading...in fact I was reading it yesterday...a book that recently...it's a reprint of a book written in 1888 by William Blakey, a Scottish preacher. And I'm always interested in my Scottish heritage, particularly the Scottish preachers. And the book gives the history of Scottish preachers from the sixth century to the eighteenth century. And the most notable era of Scottish preaching was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they had

great power. In fact, the strongest reformational preaching going on in Europe at that time was in Scotland, the great preaching of the Reformation in Scotland. For two centuries it lasted. And Blakey writing in 1888 points out that what made the difference in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in the preaching in Scotland was that the preachers viewed themselves...I like this, I never heard the phrase before...as warrior preachers...warrior preachers. And he says by that they meant that they believed that they were guardians and that any place where an assault came against the truth, they went to battle. They went to battle.

I always wondered where I got this. But I guess some of that warrior mentality got down through the MacArthurs to me because that's just how I think. If I see some area where I believe the truth is under assault, I feel like I need to run to that area and go to battle. That's just the way I'm wired. At the same time, Blakey writes about the fact that there were more moderate preachers who wanted more love and tenderness and compassion and kindness and tolerance to be preached. They finally took over in the eighteenth century and you know the history, down went the church. And today in Scotland you'd look a long time to find anybody who preached any gospel at all. They were warrior preachers and they...they were guardians of the truth. And wherever the truth was being breached, or wherever the truth was being assaulted, they went to that front and engaged in battle. And this is one of those fronts for me. I run from front to front, as you know. This is one of those fronts for me. The church is being assaulted in this area in regard to this whole matter of belonging, of being accountable, of coming under the shepherds, of giving your life to a congregation.

Now many of you are members of the church and you're very faithful to that and that's wonderful, and I'm glad for that. And some of you are not. And it may largely be my fault because I haven't addressed the issue since 1994. In fact, on any given Sunday half of you are members and half of you are not. Now we love you all and as I said, it's...it may well be my fault and not yours. We'll find that out because I will discharge my duty today and then we'll find out what you do. Does that get it to the bottom line?

There are people who come and they just come, and they go and they come now and then or they come and some of them are saying, "Why did I have to come today? If this was going to be my one time this month, couldn't it have been next week?" Well, I might get you next week too, you never know. And sometimes it may be out of ignorance. As I said, sometimes you may come and you may think this is the way to do it, and you may even see yourself noble because you come here, you could go a lot of other places where there would be a lot less pressure placed upon you. And so you perhaps are just ignorant. Some of you don't want to get any closer than this, you know you ought to be here, you...you come, you appreciate whatever happens here, you don't want to get any closer than that because you don't want to be exposed to leadership, you don't want to be given any responsibility and you don't want anybody getting any closer to your life. I don't know what those issues are. But I'm going to try to move you away from those things to what you should do this morning.

And let me just unfold some essential issues in church membership, okay? We already know it was established in the New Testament. This is the pattern. It's not arguable, it's crystal-clear this is what they did. There was no such thing as a Christian who didn't belong to a congregation. He went. He worshiped God. He heard the Scriptures explained and expounded while he was there. He ministered his gifts with the people. He served the people. He came under the leadership of the authority of the church. That was where his life was centered. That's how it is, for example, in Russia. Church on Tuesday, church on Thursday, church on Saturday, church on Sunday morning,

church on Sunday night and two hours and usually three messages and it may not be enough for them. It's their life. Some people think they've done God a favor when they pop in casually on a Saturday night for an hour. It's not quite it.

Let me tell you what the issues are. First of all you have an obedience issue here. The New Testament teaches that we need to be committed to a church. There's no such thing as a Christian who's not associated with a local assembly of believers. We already talked about that. They had lists. They had letters. They had local assemblies. There was a real union of saved souls manifesting itself in a local congregation of believers who gathered together for worship, sanctification and corporate testimony. And all the epistles, as I said, was written to them and none of them were written to people who didn't belong to a local congregation because that was an impossibility. You were baptized spiritually into the body of Christ, you were baptized visibly to a local church.

Secondly, it's a fellowship issue. It's not only an obedience issue, it's a fellowship issue. You were introduced into the church for the sake of common shared spiritual life. This is now your family. I mean, what would you think if somebody said, "Well I don't have a family, I just bounce around from family to family?" Of course you have a family. You were called in your family in 1 Corinthians 1:9, you were called into the family or the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord. When you were called to salvation, you were called into a fellowship, *koinonia* means partnership, you were called into a partnership, a communion, a common life. First John talks about it three times in the first chapter, fellowship, fellowship, fellowship. Galatians talks about it. First Thessalonians talks about it. Hebrews 10, very important portion of Scripture along this regard and it's a familiar one, Hebrews 10, let me just read a couple of verses. Verse 23 to start, "Let us hold fast the confession of our faith without wavering for He who promised is faithful." Then verse 24, "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds." How are you going to do that if you're not really a part? If you're not in the fellowship? "Not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some." Some people have the habit of not being faithful to the assembly, don't you do that, "You get together encouraging one another all the more as you get closer to the return of Christ day." Fellowship is critical.

And what is the essence of fellowship? Two things. The one another, praying for one another, loving one another, forgiving one another, rebuking one another, reproving one another, building up one another, restoring one another. Whatever it is that we do with one another in the fellowship, you're responsible to do. If you're spiritual, you lift up those that have fallen. Whatever it is, mutual care, burden bearing, sharing. And then on top of that it's your spiritual gifts, whatever your spiritual giftedness is it functions in the assembly...it functions in the body, in the fellowship. It ministers. You are a purifying agent. You are a supported, caring, burden-bearing agent. You are a point of accountability for others. It's a matter of giving your life away for somebody else. That's why I don't like the idea of this personal thing where Christianity seems to be all about what I personally get when the truth of the matter is I have a relationship to God that's not personal, it's corporate. And when I came into faith with Christ, I immediately was thrust into a tremendous responsibility to give my life away in the church. I am a part of the Lord's work in His church of using my gift of being an agent for purification and intercession and compassion and care and support and giving and whatever. This mentality today is that the...my Christianity is for me and I can kind of chart my course. Whatever feels good to me, whatever I kind of like, whatever is comfortable for me, that's the kind of Christianity I'm going to have. It's a fellowship issue here. You are to give your life away for the church in ministry, shared, spiritual life. And if you don't have any love for your brother, then how dwells the love of God in you? Isn't that 1 John 3? How can we know you're even a Christian? Tell

me you're a Christian and you don't give your life away for the church? Everybody is going to know you're a Christian, John 13, by your love, so where do we see it if you don't give your life away in the church?

Thirdly, it's an authority issue. It's an authority issue. I mean, it's this simple. When you were saved you were brought into the church and you are now under the rule of your pastors. You're under the rule of your pastors. Do you know who your rulers are? First Thessalonians 5 says, verse 11, "Encourage one another, build up one another," that's the fellowship part. The next verse then, verse 12, 1 Thessalonians 5:12, "We request of you, brethren, you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction." There are elders and pastors who have this responsibility. They labor among you. They work with you patiently, tenderly, graciously, they shepherd you. At the same time they have charge over you, they are your rulers, they have oversight. And at the same time, they give you instruction. And that just sums up what the role of the pastors/elders is. It is our responsibility before God to teach you the Word of God and we teach it to you authoritatively, Titus 2:15, "Speak these things with all authority and don't let anybody circumvent that authority."

I don't have any personal authority, no elder does. I don't have the authority to say, "Buy that building, buy that lot, start this ministry, paint that room green," I don't have that authority. And all the elders would eagerly tell you I don't. I don't have any authority. My authority starts in Genesis 1:1 and ends at the last verse of Revelation. The only authority I have is the authority that I bring to you from the Word of God. I can only articulate that which God has spoken. Beyond that I have no authority. But when I speak for God, there is authority. And that's true of all the elders. So you have an authority issue here. We have been given the oversight to speak to you the Word of God, to labor among you to see the Word of God have its impact and to see you grow spiritually and we are over you, we have charge of you in the Lord. It says, "You should esteem them very highly in love because of their work." Boy, some...somebody ought to get around to a lot of church and tell them how to love their pastor because they can be pretty brutal. I think one of the reason move so fast is because the people are so unkind. But you have authority over you. People who don't belong to a church don't have any, they just...they're just free-floating Christians. They've redefined Christianity in their own terms. And they are the losers because they don't have their sheep without a shepherd and a sheep all on its own wandering in the wilderness isn't going to survive. Training, discipling, supporting, instructing, protecting, praying for, teaching, admonishing, warning, reproofing, rebuking, disciplining, this is what your leaders do, all for your edification, your spiritual development, your blessing and God's glory. We are here not only to proclaim the Word of God but to force the Word of God, as it were, into your life even to the degree of church discipline, if necessary.

Fourthly, it's an identity issue...fourthly, it's an identity issue. You're a Christian that means "little Christ." You are one with Christ. Your body, your soul, your mind are not your own, you're bought with a price. You bear the name of Jesus Christ and He died for one purpose, to build His church, "I will build My church," the only institution He has ever said He'd build, the only one He ever built, the only one He ever blessed. You are His bride. You are His church. You are that reality. You are the bride of Christ. You are the church of Christ. Are you ashamed to belong? That's unthinkable. If the Lord is not ashamed to call you His own bride, His own beloved church for which He shed His blood, He purchased you with His blood, Acts 20 says, or for some reason are you ashamed to make a commitment to the one who committed everything to you? Do you believe in the church? If you believe in it, you should be a part of it. Well, I know whatever level of commitment you make is what you believe in. If you believe church is a one-hour deal every so often when you can work it into your

schedule, then that's exactly what you believe because you behave the way you believe. So this is a very important matter. You have an identity issue. Is there some reason you don't want to identify with the church? And if you do want to identify with the church, then identify with the church that honors God, identify with a church that exalts Christ, identify with a church that's faithful to the Word of God so that Christ is honored in that identification.

But I wonder sometimes whether people just don't want to be identified with the church for fear of the fact that people know they belong to a church like this, somebody might have higher expectations for them than they would like to live up to. It's sort of a way to protect yourself again from being exposed. It's a matter of who you want to identify with. I don't know about you but I want to identify with Jesus Christ. And how can I do that? I can do that only by identifying with His church. I can't do it any other way. I don't say to somebody, "Well, I'm a Christian but it's a personal thing with me." I'm a Christian and it's a corporate thing with me. I'm...I'm going to live and die and then spend forever with the church that He loved and died to purchase.

Number five, it's a loyalty issue. Not only obedience, fellowship, authority and identity, it's a loyalty issue. What does that mean? It simply means that I am called to you, to be loyal to you as a loving family. I want to be loyal to my family. I want to be loyal to those that are in my family. I want to be loyal to my wife. I want to be loyal to my kids. I want to be loyal to my grandkids, to my kids in-law, I want to be loyal to all the people that God has surrounded me with, I want to be loving and loyal to them, faithful to them and that's my family. I love loyal people. There are...there are folks who don't even know people well enough to be loyal to them. People who church hop are loyal to themselves and their own interests. It's a selfish kind of thing. We are the household of God, Ephesians 2:19. We are the family. And loyalty to each other is a critical part of this. I want people to know that when they have a need I'm going to be loyal to them to try to meet that need. I want them to know that if there's...if there's something they need to be protected from, I'm going to be there to protect them. If there's a struggle they're going through and there's a crisis in their life that I'm going to be there to help them with that crisis, that I'm going to be loyal to the times they've fallen down, and help to pick them up. And I'm going to be there as well to rejoice when they rejoice and weep when they weep. I...that's what loyalty means to me, it's all about family. And you can talk about loyalty, I can be loyal to a lot of things but I'm not going to be as loyal to my family as I am...I'm not going to be loyal to anything as I am my family and on the spiritual level, that's definitely true. I will be a loyal American but I don't get tears in my eyes when I think about that. I get tears in my eyes when I think about the church. That's where my real loyalties are, my eternal loyalties.

Now I do a lot of things in my life. I am president of a college and a seminary and I have a radio ministry and write books and all, but I don't have the same loyalty to any of those things that I do to the church. Those things could go away, but the church could never go away. This is my life. This is my family. It needs to be your family and not just in general but right here.

Sixthly, it's a ministry issue. And I've hinted at this already, I'll just emphasize it again. It's a ministry issue. What are you...what do you think the church is? It's just a fuel stop for you? You just want to...or maybe a, you know, the spiritual restaurant so we go where the food is the best? I hear people say, "I go here because I get fed...I go here because I get fed." Okay, I hope that's true. Why do you think we're feeding you? What do you think the purpose of feeding you is? So you can become a spiritual couch potato? We're not trying to turn you into a fat spectator, we're going to feed you in order that you might do...what?...work effectively, have energy, serve, minister. That's Ephesians 4:11, that really...that is really the mandate for what we do in the church. The Lord has given to the

church, according to Ephesians 4:11, teaching pastors for the equipping of the saints for the work of service." We're here to equip you to serve and if we equip you and you don't serve, that's sin. If you serve, if you serve you build up the body and Ephesians 4 says, "For the work of service to the building up of the body of Christ till we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to a mature man to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." We're...we're teaching you so that you could minister, minister to one another, minister your spiritual gift in order that the whole body may grow into Christ's likeness.

It isn't just the idea that the Lord wants you as an individual to look like Christ, the Lord wants the church to look like Christ collectively so that if somebody sees Grace Church they see Christ...they see Christ. It's...it's a ministry issue. You're not a spectator. You're not a consumer, you're a servant to the church to give your life for the church. That's what you do.

I always think about Epaphroditus, he must have been an amazing guy. Philippians 2, Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier, also your messenger and minister to my need. What a man. And because he was so faithful, he almost killed himself with disregard for his own health in the way he rendered service. Brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier, messenger, minister, what a commendation. This is a layman...this is a layman.

So, it is a...an issue of...of identity and of ministry. It's a family issue. It's a fellowship issue. It's an authority issue. It's an obedience issue. Number seven, it's a truth issue...it's a truth issue. I could say a lot about this, it's a truth issue. What do I mean by that? Look, folks, I was listening to the radio coming to church one day and there was a Christian talk show and somebody called up and said, "How do I pick a church? What do I look for in a church?" I wrote down the question. And the person that answered the question said, "Fellowship, caring and sharing, that's most important." Fellowship, caring and sharing...and I thought, "You could find that at a bar, AA, a cult, the Masonic Lodge, the Mormon Youth Movement or Weight Watchers." What is that? Fellowship, caring and sharing?

Now the question you want to ask about a church is not how good is the music, not how comfortable is the environment, not how easy is it to park, not even how clever the preacher is. There's only one question...how do they handle the truth? That's the only question...how do they handle the truth? If they don't do that right, everything else is out the door. The truth issue. And if you just go bouncing around intermittently showing up, you don't get the continuity of the truth. You don't get the flow of the truth. The Bible is not the Koran, it's not 122 suras that have no context, that are arranged only in the order from the longest to the shortest with no regard for continuity. It's not just a bunch of stuff strung together in single statements. The Bible is a series of 66 books and a book has a beginning, a middle and an ending and it goes from point A to point Z and the only way to understand the truth of God is to follow the path of those 66 books. And that's what we endeavor to do verse by verse to understand the unfolding Word of God. If you come in and out, in and out, in and out, you're going to get a sporadic Swiss cheese comprehension of truth. Worse yet, you bounce over here, you bounce over there, you go here a little while, you go there a little while, you will never come up with a cohesive systematic understanding of the truth of God, and therefore you're limited in your sanctification because you're sanctified by truth. You're also limited in your understanding and therefore you're limited in your ability to worship God fully for who He is and what He has revealed. It's a truth issue. You need the truth. You need it systematically, you need it continually. You need to hear the truth spoken in love. You need to be protected by the truth. You need to be taught by the truth. You need to be trained by the truth. You need to be disciplined by the truth. And it needs to be systematic and cohesive. And that's the remarkable thing, of course. So many people bouncing

around picking bits and pieces of stuff all over the place can't make a cohesive sense of it. If you're here in this church year after year after year, you'll find that all the elders and all the teachers and all the leaders teach the truth with continuity and consistency and integrity and they build the foundation on the house of truth. That to the eternal glory of God who is the God who wants His truth known and understood. It's a truth issue.

And I know why people come here really. I mean, that's...that's...for those who are faithful, that's why they come. They come because they hear the truth. And I know why people come here regularly and faithfully, because they love the truth. And I know why they leave. People might give me 15 reasons why they leave, but people who leave, if they don't go out of the area, people who leave our church leave because they don't have that much concern for the truth. They may be offended by it. It's about the truth. You need to be a place, if not this place some other place, where the truth is consistently, faithfully, systematically taught verse by verse from the pages of the holy revelation of God.

And finally, it's an evangelism issue...it's an evangelism issue. Do you understand that you're belonging to a church that has a viable testimony in the community, has a tremendous impact on your personal witness? The church that you identify with is the foundation off of which you witness. If you say to people, "I go to Grace Community Church," most people in the city know what that means. Occasionally...it's an interesting thing...Sam Ericsson years ago was involved in some legal matters in the city of Los Angeles and Sam was an elder here before he went to Washington D.C. and now he's with Advocates International, but Sam said he invited an attorney in Los Angeles to come to church here. And the attorney said, "What church do you go to?" He said, "Well, I'd like you to come to my church, I go to Grace Community Church." He said, "You go to Grace Community Church?" He said, "Ha, I'd never go to that church." He said, "The crookedest lawyer in the city goes there."

Wow. Sam was horrified. It turns out that the guy wouldn't tell him who it was. Sam called me and told me the story. So on Sunday I said, "I want to tell you a story," and I told that story. And I said, "I don't know which of you lawyers he's talking about, but I...I wish you'd get your life right." And I think 26 lawyers repented that day, I'm not sure. It could be a slight exaggeration. You know, anonymity in vagueness can help sometimes, you know. But, you know, that's the...I would venture to say that's the exception rather than the rule, to be honest. That could be...that could be an occasional thing that happens.

The rule generally is if you say you're from Grace Community Church that means something to people because the people know something of the character of the church. Collective...the collective power of the testimony of all of us gives credence to the individual testimony of any one of us. And as we enjoy the...the fellowship together as Peter calls us, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation of people of God's own possession," when the world begins to see us this way, then we can proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into light.

I remember one Sunday...the synagogue down here was holding some Sunday event and some Jewish lady came to the synagogue to the Jewish event. But she got caught up in the crowd because on Sunday morning everybody was coming this way...and she watched these people, and she told me, out of curiosity she just came with the people. And she came in here and she sat down. She told me later that she didn't really hear anything I said that Sunday but subsequently a few weeks later she was converted and baptized. And I said, "What was it?"

She said, "I was absolutely floored by the love that I saw among the people." It was the people's commitment to each other that impacted her life. That corporate collective testimony makes the individual witness believable.

Not becoming a member makes no sense. You need to church...to be a church member, if not here, somewhere faithful to the truth. It's a matter of obedience to the scriptural command. It's a matter of fellowship. It's a matter of regularly, permanently submitting to the authority of the Word of God taught systematically and sympathetically by pastors and teachers. It's a matter of becoming strong in doctrine, being willing to identify publicly with the people of Jesus Christ. It's a matter of accepting the rich responsibilities and privileges of family. It's a matter of loving loyalty. And not joining the church is saying, "I don't care about that." And why this church? Well, you judge if we're faithful to these things. You judge. You need to belong. I'm grateful for my 33 years here. I love this church more now than I ever have, it's filled with loving, supportive, faithful, prayerful, kind, generous, dedicated eager people with vision, faith, trust and grace. We've never had a revival here, you know that? Because we've never been dead. We've never been dead. All over the world there are people who would love to experience what we experience here. That's no tribute to us, that's a tribute to God. Millions of people would trade places with you, they languish in dead places praying for revival that never seems to come. They have small glimpses of what we see all the time. God has done it all. The caretakers of the church, the shepherds and pastors of this flock are faithful, careful, wise and godly men but at the end of the day they're human, they're weak...we're all that way...we have no spiritual power on our own so everything that happens is the work of God to which we give Him all the glory.

So, it comes down to you. What's your commitment to the church because you are the church? I'm not the church. The building's not the church. You're the church. What's your commitment? Are you the weakest link? Now I know I'm supposed to say "good-bye," but I'm going to say the opposite, "Come on, join us and be strengthened."

This is a footnote. I wish you were all first-generation Christians. First-generation Christians fight to discover and establish the truth. Second-generation Christians seek to refine and extend the truth. Third-generation Christians settle into apathy. I hope that's not you. And maybe you are a first-generation Christian that just bought into this consumer mentality that's endemic to our warped culture. Rethink all that in light of the Scripture. Give your life for the church, the Lord of the church gave His life for you. It seems like a small way to say thanks. Let's pray.

Father, as we close our service we do so again acknowledging that Your Word is light to us and it comes not only as light but it comes as a power. It just...it just crushes our ignorance, it crushes our independence, it crushes our obstinate selfishness. It just breaks us and humbles us and pulls us down to the place of obedience. And that's as it should be. Lord, I pray right now that You'll lay it upon the hearts of the people here to do what is right and take the card, you fill it out and hand it to somebody. Take that little folder home and fill it out and begin the process to become a member of the church and if need be to be baptized, to be obedient to You, to Your eternal glory may the testimony of what happens today redound through the halls of heaven to the praise of Your ownself and the angels as well. We commit all of this to You in the Savior's name. Amen.

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