

The Basis for Church Membership

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These are wonderful days for our church. It's a wonderful day to have all of you with us here today. I know that we have guests, some here for the first time. We welcome you. We have others that have joined us recently over the past few weeks, few months, and we're glad for you and we're glad for those of you that have been with us for many many years. It's all a rich diverse blessing that God has given to us at Truth Community Church so welcome, we're glad that you're with us.

One of the things that I do, I don't know what the practice of other pastors are in what I'm about to describe, but with a changing, growing, dynamic church, new people coming, it's very important to me that we teach on things repeatedly that allow everyone to kind of catch up and be on the same page. You know, you come into a new church and you don't have the benefit of the past history of a church; it's hard to know, you know, exactly what brought this body to the particular place that it's at, and I think it's important for a church to slow down and to take time for new people that come and lay a foundation for, and to renew and to relay the foundation of important fundamental matters so that as new people come, that they would be able to understand clearly what a church stands for and why it does what it does. Today, I'm going to take a brief one day pause from our exposition of the book of Philippians and do a message that I first preached almost seven years ago on the matter of church membership, and more specifically the biblical basis for church membership.

Membership is very important biblically but there's something that I want to say to kind of help set a context for it. While we emphasize the importance of church membership at Truth Community, we do not at all try to rush people into it. We think it's important for new people to get to know a church, to understand something about it. We're not trying to add to our membership rolls, we want people to come, to understand, and then make – I should emphasize the adverb there – and then, that's the word, then make a decision about whether this church is right for you or not. You know, and so we like for people to be informed and to be comfortable and to not rush or push anybody into a decision that they're not ready for. That's very very important to us and we live by that, and the only way to know that in your own experience is to watch over time into how we do things, but we do emphasize church membership and today what I wanted to do was I wanted to explain the biblical basis for church membership for the many new friends that we have that are coming, and to help you understand why we do what we do. Now in some circles, the concept of church membership is not embraced at all. It's completely avoided and,

you know, I was speaking with a pastor just less than three weeks ago, a fine man in the Cincinnati area who came out of a background where church membership was not practiced at all. People just came, people came and went, and there was no concept of membership, no practice of that at all, and this fine pastor recognized that he wanted to move away from that model and into a matter that practiced church membership, and so we had a very wonderful discussion about that that was very encouraging to me. And so I want to address that here so that you understand why we do what we do, and more importantly, where in the Bible we draw the concept, where we see the precedent, the pattern that would establish church membership.

Well, what is church membership? Let's answer that question first of all. What is church membership? Well, let me give you a definition. I may read it a couple of times here just to help those of you that take notes. Church membership is a formal commitment to identify with a local body of believers. Church membership is a formal commitment to identify with a local body of believers in their doctrine and practice so as to share in the privileges and responsibilities of the church. That's kind of a formal, I intend it as a rather technical definition. Church membership, it's a formal commitment to identify with a local body of believers in their doctrine and practice so as to share in the privileges and responsibilities of the church.

Now look, a church is not a social club. A church does not exist to do what society tells it that society thinks it ought to do and what culture thinks that it ought to do. The church was founded by the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ came, Christ gave his life for his people, and he intends for his people to identify with other Christians. This is something that is often forgotten and missed. I know it wasn't clear to me in the early years of my conversion. We tend to think once you're saved it's easy to fall into a pattern of thinking that the Bible is a personal book written only to you, and that you kind of grow and learn in isolation and from one another. That's not the pattern at all. Christ saved us to make us a part of his body. We become a member of a body, we become related to others who have also been saved by Christ, who also share in his Holy Spirit, and so there is a commonality and Christ intends us to live the Christian life together, not alone, not apart from one another. He gifts us, he gives us abilities that we are to use to serve others and others have abilities that are meant to serve us. So the whole idea of the church is that people come together and we come together in order to do two things: we come together to honor God, or you could say three things, I guess, we come to exalt God; secondly, we come to edify other believers through the doctrine that we teach, the doctrine that we hold; and thirdly, we exist to evangelize others and bring them into the fold of Christ as well as the Spirit would bless us. These are God-centered priorities. This is what the church is to do.

Now the way that membership should be approached is somebody finds a church, they visit a church and they say, "Is what is being taught at this church consistent with what I understand the Bible to teach?" Okay, that's a great start, and then you look and you see what's happening in the body, you look and you examine its leadership and you say, "Is this a people that I can identify with?" Well, if you find sympathy in your heart with the teaching of a church, and if you find sympathy in your heart for the people that you get to

know within that church, and this is a process that takes time, then it is proper and it is appropriate for you to consider the responsibility that you may have before God to contemplate church membership, that formal commitment to identify with a local body of believers. You know, and one of the things that I like about church membership, one of the things that I think is part of the wisdom of God in ordaining the church, is that it provides us with a way to step out from the world, to step out from our prior way of life, to step out from our social connections and say, "These are the people that I belong to. These are the people that I share a common life with. These are people that I share a common philosophy with, and I not only want to receive ministry from that church," the one who is thinking rightly says, "I want to give and to be a part of a church like that. My gifts may seem meager, they may not seem very important to me, but I want to whatever I bring to the table, I want to bring to the table of this people and be a part of it." And as we collectively do that, we develop a body with distinct convictions and with distinct practices that enable us to go forward. And just mentioning evangelism briefly, evangelism, therefore, becomes your personal evangelism therefore in the context of a local church has a whole church behind it. It's not simply you, there is a church that bears witness, that supports you in your individual evangelism and so there is just this great corporate aspect that is brought to bear on the body of the Lord.

Now so what I want to do today is just answer the question: where do we see the concept of church membership in the Bible? I've lost friends in the past, I lost friends over teaching this and that's okay, people have different convictions, but I want you today to be able to understand where Truth Community Church sees the concept of membership in the Bible, alright? So that's what we're going to do over the next 40 minutes or so.

The concept of church membership comes from this, it comes from reading the Bible, we always start with Scripture, we come and we read the Bible and we observe aspects of the early church, we see the way the early church was operating and the way that they organized things, and the way that they established authority in the life of a church. It wasn't a free-for-all. It wasn't a pure democracy going on, as Americans are prone to think about things. There was a pattern of organization that we build on in our life 2,000 years later. So that's where we're going this morning, and the unifying thought today comes from a text in 1 Corinthians 14. You don't need to turn there. It's very brief and it's pretty familiar, but in 1 Corinthians 14:40 it says this, "all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner." All things must be done properly according to God's word, and in an orderly manner. That is God's pattern for the church. It's not meant to be a free-for-all. It's not meant to be the church is not meant to be a place where people come and everybody just does whatever they want without any kind of leadership or direction being given to it, without common doctrine and without common practice going on. No, it's not like that at all in Scripture.

So where do we go in Scripture to learn about these principles of church membership from the early biblical church and what do we see? I think there's four points that I want to bring out this morning. First of all, we see this, number 1, we see an established roster. We see an established roster. The early church knew who their people were and they kept count. They kept records of the growth of the church and you can see this if you'll turn to

the book of Acts with me as we get into Scripture now. In the book of Acts 1, we find the beginnings of the fact that the church was keeping track of its people. Let me say that again: the church was keeping track of its people, and this is an important thing to understand.

Now after the ascension of Christ in Acts 1:12, the Bible says that, "they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James." The early apostles were all gathered there. Remember that they were appointed personally by the Lord Jesus himself and so they had authority in the early church and they were all gathered to there waiting for that coming of the Holy Spirit that we read about in Acts 2.

So these leaders were there and what were they doing? In verse 14, "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers." So there were others there besides the apostles. All I want you to see here in verse 15 is this, "At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said," and Peter went on and gave, you know, that initial message that he had for the early church. What I want you to see is that under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it is recorded for us that there was a precise number of people there. There were about 120 people there together and so they were counting noses. They were aware of who was there so much so that a number could be assigned to it. And so the early church knew their people. This is an early indication of the concept of membership. These people have come out from the world and somehow identify with us. Okay.

Acts 2:41. Peter had been preaching after the coming of the Holy Spirit, he said in verse 38, he "said to them, 'Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.' And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation!'" Here we are 2,000 years later and the urgent message hasn't changed. You all need to be saved from this perverse generation that we're living in today, if you haven't been already.

Verse 41, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized," they exercised faith in Christ, they were baptized, "and that day there were added about three thousand souls." Again you see the number. Somebody was watching what was happening and was keeping a count, keeping records, saying, "These people have come to Christ. These people have been baptized. These are people that we have responsibility for." These numbers by themselves don't prove church membership as we practice it. We're building a cumulative case here in terms of what we see going on.

One more passage in chapter 4 of Acts, Acts 4:4. We see again a hearing of the gospel, we see people responding in faith, believing in Christ, and thus distinguishing themselves from the world. Acts 4:4, "But many of those who had heard the message believed," faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ it says in Romans 10, they heard about Christ and they believed "and the number of the men came to be about five thousand."

And so the early church knew its people and that gives us a sense that there was some tracking going on, there were rosters being kept, they knew who was there. This was not a slipshod operation, this was not just a flea market that people were coming and going and no one was watching what was happening. You know what's beautiful about this and part of what we try to practice here and part of what it says about the nature of spiritual leadership is this, is that there were leaders that were watching what was happening and there were leaders that saw when people were responding to the gospel and believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, and they took responsibility for them. They knew that they had believed, they numbered them, they counted them and they, as it were, they stretched their arms and brought them under their spiritual care. Now look, this is what Christ told the church to do. This is what the church is to do.

Go back to the gospel of John 21 and in John 21:15 you recall how Jesus restored Peter after the Lord's resurrection. He restores Peter after Peter had denied him three times before his crucifixion and without going through the whole passage for the sake of time, notice what Jesus specifically instructed Peter to do. He said, "Peter, go change the political structures in Rome." Not quite. "Peter, go and eliminate slavery in first century Rome." No, not quite, in fact, no, not at all. That's not what he said. He said, "Peter," verse 15, he said, "Peter, tend My lambs." In verse 16 he said, "Peter, shepherd My sheep." At the end of verse 17 he says, "Peter, tend My sheep." He gave him a spiritual responsibility not for all of the world but for those that Christ would call out of the world who would be known as his sheep, his people. And so there was a responsibility placed on the apostolic circle to care for the people of God, the people of God who specifically defined are those who have repented of sin and put their faith in Christ. They have been born again. They have become a part of his body.

So what we see when we go from that passage in John into the book of Acts, we see that that's exactly what the church is doing, they are preaching the gospel and men are responding with repentance and faith. And as men respond in that way, the church, those in leadership took responsibility to track them, to know them, and so that they would be able to tend the sheep as the Lord had commanded them to do, so much so and so precise were they in their spiritual care that they numbered them and they kept count of who these people were. That is significant. There was an established roster in the church.

Now secondly, another way that we see the concept of church membership taught by Scripture is this, is that you see an established leadership. An established leadership. It wasn't just that there was a roster of a congregation, there was an established leadership that was in place, and what you see is this, you see that the early church had established authority and delegated tasks. There were men responsible for teaching and for prayer

and for leadership, which describes the biblical office of elder, and you see these men delegating work that needed to be done within the body.

Look at Acts 6 beginning in verse 1. Now remembering that there were 11 apostles and at that first gathering there were 120 people, well, by chapter 4 it had exploded to 5,000 people. You can imagine the challenges that that presented, just the logistical challenges for the church, and you see an evidence of this in Acts 6:1. "Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number," the church is growing just as ours is, only there it was of a much greater magnitude, but the church was growing and there was a need for spiritual care that this apostolic circle by themselves could not fulfill, and there were things that were going undone and needs that were not being met. In the middle of verse 1, "a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.'" He says, "We as leaders have a responsibility to the word of God and that is the supreme priority for us in leadership, and we can't stop doing that for the sake of taking care of things that other people can do. And so we can't neglect the word of God but we understand that these needs need to be met."

So he says in verse 3, "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task." We can't do it but we'll make sure that it gets done. You guys help us, you identify the men that you would like to be in charge of these tasks and we will authorize them, we will appoint them to the task so that these needs are met. The horizontal needs of food and care are met without the word of God being neglected. This is authority. This is leadership being exercised. Then in verse 4 it says, "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

So you see this established authority and these delegated tasks being taken place. There are men who are making decisions about what is going to take place, who's going to do what, what they're going to do and how needs are going to be met. This is leadership being exercised in the context of the local body of Christ, and as you read through the book of Acts, you see that pattern of elder leadership being repeated in every location.

Look at Acts 14 just as one example. In Acts 14 beginning in verse 21 and echoing things that we studied in the book of Titus back in 2013 when Paul told Titus to go to Crete or to as he was in Crete to appoint elders. Verse 21 in Acts 14, "After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples," you see again the pattern? The gospel is preached, the word of God is preached, people believe, they are now disciples. "They returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.'" Now verse 23, "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." And so again you see established leadership, the apostolic circle appoints elders for these new churches and the elders are going to carry out the leadership responsibilities in the midst of those local congregations. Well, leadership

means that there's a distinction, there's a distinction, there's leaders and there's the body of Christ. There's leaders and there's the body, stated differently. And so there's leadership in a local church. Well, this speaks to membership in ways that will be evident as we go along.

Now after the church has transitioned in Acts and you're getting later letters written by the apostolic circle, look to the book of Hebrews 13 and in a clear biblical principle that our American society is trained to detest and hate and reject, but in a way that is clear in Scripture, God calls his people to respond well to their spiritual leadership. There is a principle of leadership and there is a principle of submission that the word of God calls the church to operate by. So the writer of Hebrews says in chapter 13, verse 7, he says, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." Do you see the leadership principle that's at stake there that's being expressed very clearly? There is leadership in the body of Christ. There are those who follow in the body of Christ. This is God's pattern. It's not something to resist. It's not something to be suspicious of when it's rightly practiced. This is what God has embedded in his word for his people. This is how Christ leads and blesses his church is through recognized leadership so much so that it says in verse 17, look at it there with me in Hebrews 13:17 it says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." We know that these are not government leaders of which he is speaking because he says these are the men who watch over your souls.

Now remember and going back and keeping in mind the things that we've already looked at this morning, this is what Christ was telling Peter to do, "Tend My sheep. Feed My sheep. Shepherd My lambs." And then you see leadership being practiced in Acts and then you see it being affirmed here just before the fall of Jerusalem in 68 AD is about when Hebrews was written, you see this principle being emphasized decades later after the start of the early church.

Now what does that have to do with membership? This is very important to understand. This is so very important to understand. Membership, church membership provides a means by which there can be a mutual identification in the church. A mutual identification. Stay with me because this part is really important to understand. In church membership, members are saying to the established leadership, "You are our elders. You are my elders. I come to you, I want to live out what Scripture tells me. I want to identify with you as my elders." And watch this, on the flipside when a church receives people into membership, elders are, in effect, saying, "We accept that responsibility. You are our flock. You are the ones for which we are accountable and we will tend your souls, we will shepherd you, we will feed you," spiritually speaking, so that there is this sense in which members say, "I want to step out and I want to identify with this body," and in response elders say, "And we accept that responsibility. We welcome you into our flock."

And here's the tremendously wonderful clarifying effect that this has on life in the church, and as a practical matter having been in matters of church leadership for a few

years now, I think this is absolutely undeniable in terms of affirming the concept of church membership what I'm about to say right here. The elders of the church are responsible for the members of the church. Elders do not oversee casual visitors. They do not oversee sporadic attenders. Think about it, a casual visitor isn't at all coming in and saying, "You're my elders," they're just saying, "Hey, I was at the counter this weekend and I wanted to stop in and see what you guys were doing." They're not submitting to the leadership of Truth Community Church just by walking through the door. Or stated differently, somebody in the neighborhood comes and says, "Hey, I saw your sign out front. I just wanted to check out and see what you guys were doing." They're not submitting to the authority of the church just because they walked through the door. They want to investigate. They want to see and some of them say, "I don't want that." No problem. No problem. They can do that, but what you need to understand is that elders are not responsible for every soul that walks through the door because not every soul has identified with the church. Elders are responsible for those that have identified with the church and there needs to be a formal mechanism by which that is made clear and church membership is it.

Church leaders must know the sheep that are in their fold. Elders must know who is under their care and who is not, and there's a certain sense in which it is incumbent after a while for those that have gotten the opportunity to be familiar with a church, that have come and been there for a period of time and, you know, they've made it obvious by their continued presence that, "I'm going to be here." Well, then there comes a point somewhere along the line, somewhere after you've gotten acquainted, I'm not putting a time frame on it or marking down markers by which this is determined, I'm just saying that at some point in time those who are receiving the benefit of the ministry of a church need to say, "I'm going to identify with this church and I'm going to make a stand, and I'm not going to stand on that periphery of am I in or am I out? I'm in." Membership allows that to take place.

Now there's another reason why that's important. Not only do the members need to say, "You're my elders," and the elders say, "Okay, by that act we accept that responsibility. We accept the responsibility for your spiritual care." There's a third reason that makes this all the more compelling the further along you get in it, into the pattern of the early church and it's this, it is, third point here is established discipline. Established discipline. You have an established roster of people. You have an established leadership that is in place. And that leads as life in a church goes on to established discipline.

Now this is another aspect that a lot of churches, frankly, do not practice. It is something that the world would look at with suspicion, but you and I must understand something here today, beloved, is that we're not governed by what the world thinks about these things, and we're not governed by what the broad general church does, we're not at all governed by those who conduct their ministry simply to get as many people as possible into the room. That's not what we do. We don't care about that. A church that doesn't practice discipline can bring a whole lot of people in but at what price? If you're willing to sacrifice purity for numbers, I think you've paid a price that Scripture would not commend you for. There is an established discipline in the true church.

Now I'm not going to go through Matthew 18 here today, that is an important passage in here but just in terms of membership and how discipline works with membership, that's all I'm caring to explain here today. My purpose is more limited. When sin broke out into the open in the midst of the church, the leadership, the body of Christ was expected to put out those who were unrepentant in order to maintain the purity of the church. Now follow me here. Let me just say this again and then we'll look at a text from 1 Corinthians 5. When sin came out in the open in the church, the church had a responsibility to deal with that and not allow it by letting that to go on in the body unaddressed. Scripture could not be more clear on this.

1 Corinthians 5 beginning in verse 9. 1 Corinthians 5:9. It says this, 1 Corinthians 5:9, Paul writing to the church at Corinth, a church that had many many problems and many many questions. Paul as he addresses things, addresses this matter and in chapter 5, verse 1, we should actually start there. There was a problem of gross sin in the body and he addresses it openly to them in chapter 5, verse 1. He says, "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife." Not his biological mother, his father had married someone else and the son had this woman, he was carrying on an adulterous affair with his step-mother and this was known in the church as it was taking place. And Paul rebukes them for allowing that. He says, "You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst." He says, "You have not responded to this. You are allowing this to take place as though it were acceptable. Well, the unsaved world doesn't find that acceptable and yet it's okay in the church?" he says. "What's the matter with you people? What's wrong with you?"

And it goes on in verse 9, skipping over some of the other important context for the sake of time. He says in chapter 5, verse 9, "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people." He says, "I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world." He says, "If you don't want to be around sinners, you're going to have to check out of planet earth because that's what we've got to live with broadly speaking in the world."

He goes on and clarifies what he means in verse 11. He says, "actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler--not even to eat with such a one." And what Paul is saying is, "You must distinguish between outside and the world and inside within the church, and when someone comes and is practicing this kind of gross immorality," not simply the incestuous things that started the chapter, he expands out, "a covetous, immoral person, an idolater, even a drunkard. Don't tolerate that in the church by a professing Christian."

Verse 12 he says, "what have I to do with judging outsiders?" The world has the world. That's not my responsibility. Do you see what we were talking about, this mutual

identification? Paul says, "I'm not responsible for what happens out in the world. Someone is outside the church and not participating in the life of the church, that's not my responsibility as a spiritual leader to deal with that." He says, "What I'm responsible for is inside the church." In verse 12 he says, "Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Therefore remove the wicked man from among yourselves."

Now stay with me here and understand the point that we are making. We're talking about church membership here today, okay, and we've said that there is an identifiable people within the body of Christ that leadership is responsible for, okay? Now this passage and the way the concept of discipline applies is this: an unrepentant person must be removed to protect the body, to protect the purity of the body, because bad company corrupts good morals and an open sinner in the context of a local body will have a devastating corrupting impact because it communicates – we need to slow down here – to accept that and to not deal with it communicates to everyone else in the body that sin's not that big of a deal, that we can all live in our chosen sins in unrepentant rebellion against God and still gather together in the name of Christ and pretend that everything is well. That's what one sinner in the context of a local body can do. One dead fly in the perfumer's ointment spoils it all. So the church has a responsibility to take that person, dealing according to principles in Matthew 18, Galatians 6, and to deal with that, to seek first their repentance but if they don't repent, to put them out of the church and say, "You cannot be here anymore." If you've been at Truth Community Church for 3, 4, 5 months, you know we had to deal with this recently ourselves.

Well, understand this: the concept of discipline can only be understood with some concept of church membership. The concept of discipline can only be practiced with some concept of church membership. To remove someone from your midst presupposes that there is a boundary of inclusion and exclusion. We're in the circle, so to speak, within membership and outside is everyone else. Discipline means that if you refuse to repent of your open sin that you've been confronted about many many times and you still refuse to respond, then you have to be placed outside of the boundary under as we serve the Lord and protect the purity of his church. So discipline only makes sense if there is a boundary of inclusion and exclusion, and we understand that boundary as being the concept of church membership.

Now think with me just a bit here. Say somebody is living in open fornication. That's not that hard to say these days, is it? Suppose somebody comes in and they're living in an openly sinful relationship and they're visiting, and they've been here a time or two. Look, it's not appropriate for us. We might talk with them spiritually but it would be completely improper for a church to exercise discipline on someone like that. They'd say, "Hey," because they could rightly say, "Hey, I didn't sign up for this. I just came in to get warm. I just came in to check out what your sign meant, teaching God's people God's word. I just wanted to know what that means. I did not accept any concept that you were going to publicly call me out for my lifestyle. I'm just a visitor here." And that's fair. That's, you know, just talking about this in extremes to make the point. But my friends, when somebody inside the church, a member of the church starts to live that way, starts to live

in drunkenness, starts to live in sexual sin, and this comes to the attention of the church. You know, I realize people can live double lives for a while and you don't know about it. It's when you know about it that all of this kicks in. Then that person if they stubbornly refuse to repent, they have to be removed, and we have to communicate in the name of Christ that, "Your unbroken pattern of sin indicates that you are likely not a Christian at all and we can't receive you as one who claims to be a Christian under these circumstances. And so we have to put you out." Remove the wicked man from among yourselves, and that discipline, the point I'm trying to keep clear what we're talking about, we're talking about church membership today, that concept indicates that there is a boundary from which somebody can be put out. So established discipline speaks to the matter of church membership.

Now look, the whole concept of church discipline is something that's meant to be handled patiently, lovingly, gently over a period of time. This is not done harshly, quickly, rapidly, and for genuine church elders, genuinely qualified church elders, and I, you know, I've been in other churches not just here dealing with these things, this is never something that elders enjoy. "Oh good, we've got a church discipline thing! Let's get at it!" And you roll up your sleeves and go after it. No. No. What elders want is for people to walk with Christ and to manifest by their obedient lives the truth of the conversion that they profess to possess. That's what we delight in, and church discipline is always a grievous matter. It's always. Beloved, it is always grievous to see somebody get more and more hard, to send communication, to call them, to talk with them, to text them, to email them, and inevitably what happens is that they just shut you down and they don't even interact anymore. Elders get no joy or privilege out of that but we accept the responsibility to do what the Lord commands and we find satisfaction in obedience even if it's not found in reciprocated love by the one that we're addressing. But all of this presupposes some kind of concept of membership.

Now fourthly and finally as time starts to get away from me, another aspect that we believe indicates a concept of church membership is the idea of established meetings. Established meetings. So you have an established roster, established leadership, established discipline, and finally, point 4, established meetings. The early church met regularly for worship and mutual edification.

Go back to Acts 2 again, I ask you. Acts 2. And as you're turning there, people say, "Well, what about love? Why do you discipline if we love each other?" Well, love is not this sentimental concept that just embraces everyone as a Christian no matter what they do. That's not love and you must understand that there is a higher obligation than hurting people's feelings, the highest obligation for a church and for church leadership is that we must obey Christ. The church belongs to Christ and Christ says, "This is what I want you to do with people who live in open sin in My body." And so whether it hurts someone's feelings or embarrasses them is utterly secondary if not completely irrelevant because the primary duty is to Christ because it is his church, and he has said, "This is what I want My church to be like." And so we are responsible to do what he says even if it's uncomfortable personally, even if it embarrasses someone. Those things are secondary to

the fact that this church belongs to Christ, he has revealed what is to be done, and we are to obey. That was a little addendum to point 3.

Established meetings, point 4. The church met regularly for worship and mutual edification. Look at chapter 2, verse 42, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." This was the regular pattern. When the church met, the church people were there. For some people that's a concept.

Verse 46, "Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." You see the regular gatherings, whatever the frequency is, a church having regular gatherings and the Christians associated with that church being there when it happens, this is part of membership. This is part of what is to be done. In 1 Corinthians 16, we won't take the time to turn there, they had regular collections for the support of ministry.

But beloved, in these brief things, you see established meetings, you could say established responsibilities, that membership is an indication that when the church gathers, to the best of my ability, I'm going to be there to be a part of that, to receive, to give, to be under it, to participate in the life of the body. It makes no sense to be a member if you're not going to attend when the church gathers together. What's the point of that?

So we can say this: church membership is for true Christians. It's for those who have genuinely been born again. You know, you have to be a part of the universal body of Christ in order to be a part of a local body of Christ when it's practiced biblically. Church membership is only for true Christians who can make a credible testimony that, "I once was lost but now I'm found. I was blind but now I see. And at the center of that distinction was the fact that Christ saved me, that there is new life in my soul that I did not have before but I have now. And as I have read my Bible and as I have started to understand things, I see in this church what I believe the Bible to teach. I see in this church a practice that I think is biblical." And going further, beloved, "I see in this church," I'm just talking general, we're talking about a principle of membership, not about what you think about Truth Community Church right now. That's not the point in this moment, but in church membership someone says, "I've been born again. I see in this church doctrine that I believe and I need and want to learn more. I see in this church a practice that I think is biblical even though it's not perfect." And going further, one step further, "I see in this church a group of people that I've come to care about and I want to be there for those people. I want to pray for these people. I want to love these people and I want and I need them to love and want me as well." So that we identify together not simply out of an abstract agreement on theological principles but out of a principle of love and new life in Christ and new life in the Spirit. That's what church membership is about.

Let me say a few things in closing. I actually kept myself on time today pretty much. I am grateful for the many and growing number of people who are members in our church and for months and for many of you for many many years have shown yourself to be faithful to the people, the meetings, the support of our church. Truth Community is a place greatly blessed. I would venture to say that 90% of the pastors in the country would love to trade places with me to have a part in a body like this. With that said, I pray for those of you perhaps some of you that are half asleep at home on the internet, who perhaps have gotten careless and have kind of drifted away from this. I call you back if you've gotten careless and indifferent to life in the church. For those of you that are newer to our church, I would just say this, I would encourage you to take stock of your life, your thoughts and what you see here. The preeminent question for you is whether you know Christ, whether like those early disciples you have heard the gospel, that Christ died and rose again to save sinners from their rebellion and judgment against God, and you've trusted Christ alone for your salvation, to start there because Christ made a blood atonement for people just like you to bring them to himself. Start there. The first question is: have you repented and believed? And then when that's clear in your mind, the next question is for you to consider whether you belong to his church. It doesn't have to be here at Truth Community but somewhere in the life of a true believer there needs to be an identification with a church that you agree with in doctrine and you agree with in practice and you want to give yourself to people like that. This is part of the Christian life. This is part of Christian discipleship and there is no virtue in staying on the sidelines indefinitely year after year after year. There's no virtue in that. Scripture calls us to commitment and a commitment that is open and unashamed. That's why we practice church membership here. I invite you to consider this as it applies to your own life.

Let's pray together.

Dear Lord, we thank You that Christ came, died for His people, died for His church, gave Himself for the church as it says in Ephesians 5, and Lord, we just thank You for what You're doing here, we're grateful for it. We give You all of the glory, none of our own. We acknowledge that whatever is good is happening is from You and whatever the defects are all belong to us. I pray, Father, for each one that's been under the sound of my words this morning, that Your Spirit would help them and minister to them as they process the concept of the church and church membership, and that You would bless them all greatly in the days to come. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.