

**Core Seminar**

**Living as a Church**

**Class 2: Membership**

*Unity Through Depth of Commitment*

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**I. Introduction**

I’d like to begin with a question. ***How is the commitment we make to other people at church different from other commitments we make in life?***

Last week we stared by considering the glory of the church. Our church is made of people who are limited in knowledge, limited in love, limited in patience.  We have different personalities, different hopes, different backgrounds, different ways of communicating, and different priorities.  You mix all that together, and it would seem you’re likely to get trouble. But because of the power of the gospel, in fact you get a corporate proclamation of God’s glory.

How doess that happen? It happens as we love each other with a commitment that is evidently *super*natural. What does that commitment look like? We’ll answer that over two weeks. This morning, we’ll be looking at the depth of that commitment. And then next week we’ll look at the breadth of that commitment—loving those with whom we share little in common but Jesus.

So let’s consider this *depth* of commitment. A note up front: Really when you boil it all down this is a class about church membership. So might be thinking; *“I’m already a member. You convinced me. Should I leave now?”* No! My hope is that by unfolding what membership is—and how it’s different from other commitments that we will be refreshed and reminded of the unique sweetness of deep commitment we have to each other in this church. And what we learn will help us be *better* church members. To do that, I want to take some time to draw a distinction between the natural commitment of this world—which we’ll term “COMFORT-BASED COMMITMENT” and the commitment of church membership, which we’ll term “CALLING-BASED COMMITMENT”.

**II. Comfort-Based Commitment**

Commitment is something our world understands. Redskins’ fans are committed to the Redskins. People are committed to their jobs, to their favorite vacation destinations, to their countries. And people are committed to churches. But exactly *why* people commit to their churches can vary quite a bit.

I’d say that it’s common for churches to get you to commit to them the same way you would to anything else in this world—through *comfort-*based commitment. Let me illustrate with a non-church example: how you might get committed to buying Apple products. At first, a Mac is just another computer and an iPad is just another screen. But maybe you end up borrowing your friends’ mac to check an e-mail and you realize that the screen doesn’t hang up quite as much as it does on your PC. You’d hardly call yourself a committed mac user at this point, but you’re intrigued. So when your PC finally gives up the ghost, you do some online shopping and decide to give a mac a try—even if it costs a bit more. Then your friends notice you’re using a mac, and the ones who seem most excited are pretty cool people. After you get used to it, you find you really like the way things work and how intuitive everything is. And how much better you fit in when you’re working in a coffee shop. Suddenly, you realize you’ve been talking a lot about your mac because your great-aunt gives you an iPad for Christmas, which becomes an inseparable part of your brain. Before long, you’re going to mac conventions, dressing your kids in Apple gear, and wondering how you ever lived without every device synced. You’ve gone hard-core.

And how did it happen? Well, it didn’t happen all at once, and in fact, you didn’t even intend on becoming an apple fanatic. But the further you got in, the more attractive it looked, until you were in pretty deep.

For a lot of Christians, that’s what church looks like. A church begins by emphasizing that they have no expectations, and they advertise church as a great place to prosper morally, educate your kids, find community, feel safe, comfortable, and catered too. Then you join a small group and meet a few people, who you like. Somewhere along the way you become a member, but membership isn’t the point. The point is that a few years in, you’ve become really committed to your church principally because you like it and it’s kinda easy.

That’s what we’re calling comfort-based commitment. It works for consumer products; it works for churches.

The model in view—whether Apple or a church—is commitment as a process. Over time, you see the church community meeting your needs and so you become more comfortable there. And as you become more comfortable, you commit more deeply. So we smooth the path into our churches and highlight the benefits of getting more involved. Hopefully we can attract people as consumers and over time see them turn into providers. This is comfort-based commitment and it is a process. It is marked by its broad, general, non-specific treatment of God’s word… and as you can imagine it can often lead to fostering Christian witness which is very thin.

**III. Calling-Based Commitment**

But let’s not vilify comfort based commitment in general, it’s natural to drift towards that which is comfortable. We should draw a distinction, however, to what we aspire to in our churches. Calling-Based Commitment is distinctive because it has a depth and richness to it that comfort-based commitment does not replicate. Let’s consider some of the differences:

1. The New Testament describes all Christians as deeply committed to their local church in ways that are meaningful, sometimes painful, and quite deliberate. Take the words of 1 John as an example:

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. (1 John 4:19-20).

For John, love between believers is a sign of saving faith. Contrast that with comfort based commitment and you see that the bible calls us to love others, comfort demands that we love ourselves and priorities our own preferences.

1. An interesting diagnostic question to ask yourself: Why do you come, and keep coming to church? What motivates you to crush a huge part of your weekend in this building? Comfort-Based Commitment might point to social, personal, and professional reasons. Calling based commitment has obedience to God and a delight in his church as one of its primary motivators.

The motive of our community should say something about our faith in Christ. Our commitment to each other should look different from the world. Our interactions should look more like Christ and less like our co-workers/friends/neighbors.

Calling based commitment commits first and asks questions about mutual benefits later. Calling based commitment seeks unity in Christ and thrives with diversity in background.

1. Third distinctive: Relationship. I attended a church in Sydney. Large church which spent a lot of time thinking hard about reaching as many people as possible. The classic “get ‘em in by any means necessary”. Really good intention, the issue was that with no commitment there were very few deep relationships, there was certainly no culture of community or focus on one on one discipleship. Everything was kept on the surface, you know, because it’s more comfortable that way and in the end that’s how authentic relationship would flourish… unfortunately that was not the case.

Strangely enough, it is with the formality of membership that deep relationships are formed. Not to say real relationships cannot happen apart from church membership, but practically… with each new member voted into our membership it is clear as day who we are called to love, it is clear who we are to protect, it is clear who we are to initiate relationship with in our local church. They have committed, obviously, publicly to our number, and we have committed to them, obviously, publicly.

A church built around membership is obviously different. It requires commitment *upfront*. You decide to promise to love a group of Christians in deep and sacrificial ways even before you actually know them that well. So your commitment isn’t based on feelings of attachment or comfort or belonging—though I hope all those things come eventually. Instead, it’s commitment that you make simply because that’s part of following Jesus. Authentic relationships can be found at church that are serious about membership.

So this idea of *calling-*based commitment is a commitment to each other simply because it’s part of being *called* into God’s family. Committed to other believers through the local church is Christian. Look back to that passage I read from 1 John. It says that *every* person loved by God, saved by God, in turn loves other Christians.

That means we need to stop viewing church commitment as a process and start viewing it as an event. The event is our salvation and commitment is something that inevitably follows. That doesn’t mean that we make *all* of our commitment to the local church upfront—there’s lots of room for growth. But it means that we make a significant commitment up front. Because that’s what it means to be a Christian.

In that sense, you’ll find plenty of Comfort-Based Commitment in Calling-Based Commitment churches. There’s nothing wrong with Comfort-Based Commitment. The problem comes when it becomes our main approach to life in a church. If we expect to ease our way into a church and see Comfort-Based Commitment kick in over time, we’ll have consumerist, relationship-light, not-that-different-from-the-world community. Instead, we should recognize that God called us to commit in deep and meaningful ways to a local church when he called us to salvation. If that’s our attitude toward church, we’ll find a community that is honest about what it means to be a Christian and that serves as a rich catalyst for Christian relationships.

**IV. Commitment that is Significant**

So what are some basic components of this commitment we’ve been talking about? What does it look like, boots on the ground? Four basic pieces to consider:

1. Commitment that is Sacrificial. Romans 12:13-16 tells us to “Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality…Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another.” If my wife and I are unable to get pregnant, I should rejoice when my fellow church member gets pregnant. If I just got a new job, I should weep with my fellow church member who lost hers. I should give of my money, my time, and my home to care for others in my church—simply because they are God’s people. Loving this way isn’t for some elite group of Christians; this is what it means to be a Christian.
2. Commitment to Gather Together. Hebrews 10:25 tells us that the Christian life is one of “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” To be a Christian is to join with other Christians on a regular basis. The author of Hebrews just doesn’t envision another category of Christian.
3. Commitment to Encourage One Another. Working off that same passage, verse 24 tells us to “consider how to stir one another to love and good works”—something that plainly takes place through the gatherings of verse 25. And encouragement in the book of Hebrews is much more than momentary hand shaking as we head out the door. As we see in chapter 3, encouragement is the antidote to unbelief. To encourage means to strengthen each other’s faith. A Christian is committed not only to their own spiritual well-being, but to helping others to fight for faith.
4. Commitment to Guard One Another. Matthew 18. Jesus says that if a brother sins against me, I’m to talk with him about it. If he doesn’t repent, I’m to take one or two others with me. And if he still doesn’t repent, I’m to tell it to the church. “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector.” In other words, put out of the church. The final barrier to self-deception in this world is the local church. No one else can tell me so powerfully that the faith I profess with my mouth is contradicted by my life. And it’s interesting that this authority is not given to a pastor, or to the elders, but to the church. Of course, guarding each other against the self-deception of immorality or false doctrine is something we do under wise and loving leadership. But ultimately, the New Testament gives responsibility for guarding one another to the entire church.

Christian, God has called you to do these things. To love other Christians sacrificially. To gather with them regularly. To encourage them toward faith. And to guard them from sin and self-deception. Making these commitments isn’t something we leave to mature Christians; that’s what the Bible assumes every Christian does. That’s what depth of commitment looks like.

But if we stop here, we still haven’t fully understood the depth of commitment that we’re to find in the local church. Because not only is Biblical commitment in a church significant; it is also formalized.

**V. Commitment that is Formal**

Is Christian commitment in the local church relatively fluid and amorphous? Or does Scripture call us to formalize it? To answer that question, watch carefully as Paul describes the church in 1 Corinthians 5. He’s explaining that the church doesn’t have responsibility to judge unrepentant sinners out in the world—but it does have that responsibility inside the church. “For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside.” (5:12-13a).

The detail I want you to notice is the line separating the “inside” and “outside” of the church. On one side of that line are those who call themselves believers and submit that profession to the judgment of the church. One the other side are those who have made no such commitment. So some people today talk about having a center-defined community instead of a boundary-defined community. Instead of obsessing over who is “in” and who is “out,” just teach people and encourage people—no matter their spiritual state—to come in closer for the good spiritual food. Problem is, that seems to be at odds with how the New Testament describes the church.

We see the same thing when the Bible talks about church leaders. We are to submit to our leaders (Hebrews 13:17) because they will someday give account for us. But if affiliation with a church isn’t in any way formal, how do these leaders know who they’ll give an account for? And how do we decide who we submit to?

Whether dealing with church discipline or leadership, it’s clear in the Bible that church commitment has some level of formality to it. Believers know who they’re committing to; the church and its leaders understand who they’re responsible for. This is what we call church membership—using Paul’s imagery of the church as a body and we as its members. Now, what difference does this formality make? It matters in two ways:

1. Formal commitment serves as affirmation of informal commitment. I find the analogy to marriage revealing here. Here’s how Tim Keller describes the marital application of this truth:

When the Bible speaks of love, it measures it primarily not by how much you want to receive but by how much you are willing to give of yourself to someone. How much are you willing to lose for the sake of this person? How much of your freedom are you willing to forsake? How much of your precious time, emotion, and resources are you willing to invest for this person? And for that, the marriage vow is not just helpful but is even a test. In so many cases, when one person says to another, “I love you, but let’s not ruin it by getting married,” that person really means, “I don’t love you *enough* to close off all my options. I don’t love you enough to give myself to you that thoroughly.” To say, “I don’t need a piece of paper to love you” is basically to say, “My love for you has not reached the marriage level.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

OK. There are all sorts of discontinuities between marriage and church membership. But one way in which they *are* similar is in the interplay of formal and informal commitment. If someone says that they intend to fulfill all the Bible’s “one another” commands in the context of their church but refuse to formally commit to doing so through membership, what kind of commitment do they actually intend to make? To use Keller’s language, their love for their church has not reached the membership level. Formal commitment clarifies who is actually making the decision to love their church as Scripture describes.

1. Formal commitment makes informal commitment visible. Membership in a local church advertises that a person has made some very important, informal commitments, which helps build relationships faster. Someone could have every intent of loving you the way we see in Romans 12, Hebrews 10, and 1 Corinthians 5. But if they’re not a member of your church, you have no way of knowing that. When membership is meaningful, it makes informal commitment visible so that relationships can grow at a faster pace.

**VI. Practical Suggestions**

Let’s spend the remainder of our class thinking through ways this Biblical vision of commitment can be more practical.

1. Join a church. Some of us—or some of our friends—are still weighing whether membership is actually that important. In those conversations, I think it’s helpful to come back to what it means to be a Christian. To follow Jesus is to love others who follow Jesus. That’s what inevitably happens when we’re forgiven of our sin. And not just a general disposition of love, but a specific commitment to love a specific group of Christians—a local church.
2. Invest in relationships. Then there are those of us who join—but aside from showing up every Sunday for services, joining the church doesn’t really change our lives. As we’ve seen already in this class, relating to a church in a Biblical way means confessing sin so that others can help us fight for faith. It means confessing struggles so others can help us in practical ways. It means asking hard and sometimes awkward questions in our care for our brothers and sisters. And it means prayer as an integral part of every relationship.

What does it look like when this doesn’t happen? I’ll give you four categories:

* The **casual** member who attends regularly but doesn’t do much beyond that. His friends who know him best are not in the church. (**Committed**)
* The **fortress** member seems involved—at least in terms of serving others. But out of a conceit that they are never in need themselves, they never let people in to help them. (**Vulnerable**)
* The **static** member starts out with good friendships in the church. But as months turn into years and years into decades, those relationships never expand. And in a church as dynamic as ours, that frozen community as often as not turns into no community. (**Active**)
* The **consumer** member has relationships—but it is clear from a worldly perspective why each relationship would be important to them. They haven’t aspired, as I talked about earlier, to love others in ways that is strange to the world, simply because they’ve been loved by Christ. (**Invested**)

1. Commit to love the entire body. I think there’s a real danger for us in an age that is defined by the consumer and yet obsessed with community. We might find ourselves with real and satisfying community in a subculture of the church—but never step out to engage the broader church. That doesn’t mean that we need to have deep relationships with everyone at CHBC. We should find that our relationships aren’t confined to one particular small group or personality type or ethnic background or profession.

If we all take initiative to include in our friendships some who are very different from us, what we’ll find is that instead of a church composed of subcultures and impenetrable clicks, we’ll have a church where networks of relationships overlap and stretch to cover the entire church.

One really practical difference between calling-based community and comfort-based community is that calling-based community stretches us to form relationships that aren’t comfortable. And that’s necessary for that relational network to be as inclusive as it needs to be.

**VII. Conclusion**

If you look at how the New Testament describes the local church, this is one pillar that holds up Biblical community: depth of commitment. Our culture is telling us to commit only so long as we feel comfortable. Just like its taken marriage—where commitment used to precede intimacy—and has pulled all of the perceived benefits ahead of commitment. Well, just like that skewed version of marriage, comfort-based commitment in the church doesn’t work very well. It may draw a crowd quickly, but it doesn’t produce much depth. And without depth, it fails to be the supernaturally attractive, beacon of light in a dark world. Even though that “commitment-light” model seems best for reaching this world for Christ, in the long-haul it pales in comparison to a truly supernatural community. So we need to aspire to calling-based commitment—where we choose to commit to love all the unfamiliar people in a new church simply because we’ve been called by God to salvation, and called by God to love. And with that grounding of commitment, relationships will flourish.

That’s all one of two pillars: depth of commitment. The second is breadth of commitment, which is our topic for next week.

1. Keller, Tim. *The Meaning of Marriage*, New York: Dutton. Print. Page 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)