

Sunday School Notes

Life Together: *Meaningful Membership in an Individualistic Age*

Induction and Outline

This series will serve as both a membership class for those interested in membership at Hill City, as well as a teaching series for our current members about God's vision for our life together.

- i. Cultural Context
- ii. Biblical Case for Local Church Membership
- iii. Hill City Baptist Church Core Documents: *Confession of Faith, Church Constitution, Church Covenant*

1. Cultural Context

Church membership is something that was once *assumed* by most, if not all Christians. The idea of following Jesus and not being a member of a local, identifiable church was not only undesirable, it was unheard of. It is only in recent times that we have to be making a case *for* church membership.

There are probably a myriad of reasons for this, some of which might include:

- i) Individualistic view of society and ourselves: In this view, the individual reigns supreme. This is a distortion of the biblical truth which upholds the dignity, worth, and importance of individuals. Indeed, the body of Christ is *made up of* individuals: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (1 Corinthians 12:27). The individual is the supreme authority and arbiter of right and wrong. Self-expression and 'authenticity' are the highest virtues. There is a built-in suspicion of external authority.
- ii) Contractual relationships vs covenantal relationships: Our fundamental understanding of how humans ought to relate to one another has shifted. Covenant/familial relationships are replaced by contractual relationships. We see this in the breakdown of the family, divorce law etc. A contractual relationship is one that is entered into for mutual benefit and self-interest. A covenant relationship is entered into for the good and service of the other. A covenant relationship is characterized by faithful, loyal love (ie. 'steadfast love and faithfulness').

In this context, local church membership is not only unnecessary, but potentially dangerous. There is not so much a general indifference to local church membership, but an increasing suspicion towards it.

So we must first make a case that church membership is *biblical*.

2. Biblical Case for Local Church Membership (cf. 1 Corinthians 5, Matthew 18)

Though the word “membership” cannot be found in the New Testament, we believe the concept of membership is assumed, and necessary for at least five reasons:

- a) Churches have an “inside” and an “outside,” and can be “numbered” (cf. 1 Cor 5:12; Acts 2:41, 47).
- b) Church members are expected to know who does and who does not belong to the church (cf. 1 Cor 5:9–12).
- c) Christians are under the authority of the church as a whole, which means giving up our autonomy and putting ourselves under the church’s authority, such that if they persist in unrepentant sin, they are to be excluded from it (cf. 1 Cor 5:4–5, 13; Matt 18).
- d) Christians are also under the authority of the leaders, and are instructed to submit to them (cf. Heb 13:17).
- e) Leaders will give an account for those entrusted to their care, and must therefore know who they are responsible for (cf. Heb 13:17).

3. Church Documents

From our Membership Booklet:

The first document is our church constitution. Not only is this document a legal necessity for all charities wishing to operate in Canada, but it also outlines the nuts and bolts of how our church runs on a week-to-week basis. Here you will find information on the voting process for new members, recommending new elders and/or deacons, and our basic financial structure.

The second document is our church covenant. Though you won’t find a specific verse regarding covenants, we believe it follows naturally in the course of the membership process. Just as it would be frustrating to start a new position at a company without any defined responsibilities, so would committing to a vague idea of membership without knowing what that actually means for you. This brief document, taken almost entirely from Scripture, helps put flesh on the bones of what it means to be a member.

The third and final document is our church statement of faith. There are many people today who claim to “believe in Jesus,” but the question inevitably follows—“*What is it that you believe about Jesus?*” This document outlines the specifics of what our church affirms about subjects such as the trinity, human nature, and the reliability of the Scriptures. We affirm as our general principle the sentiment expressed by the late German theologian Rupertus Meldenius: “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” In short, this document enunciates what we believe to be the essentials of the Christian faith.

Conclusion

Meaningful membership in the local church is the assumed context of discipleship. In the coming weeks, we will examine various biblical characteristics of life together in meaningful membership, and look specifically at how we apply that to our life together at Hill City.