



Commitment to a Local Church

Today we will talk about our relationship with Christ, not primarily about our personal relationship with Him, but our relationship to Christ in its corporate expression - how relationship with Christ implies and makes necessary a relationship with everyone else that is related to Him.

Much is said about our personal relationship with Christ, but our corporate relationship with Him (with His “body,” “family,” “household,” “church”) is just as important. You can’t have one without the other. The Scriptures teach us that we should put just as much effort into developing our corporate relationship with Christ as we do our personal relationship.

Sadly, there are many who think their personal relationship with Christ is all that is important. Many people feel guilty about their lack of commitment when it comes to their personal relationship with Christ, but they think very little of their lack of commitment when it comes to their corporate relationship with Christ - their commitment to the local church.

What does it mean to be committed to the church? What does God require? What do the Scriptures teach?

We are going to examine FIVE aspects of a proper commitment to the local church.

These biblical principles, and their implications, should help all Christians see the importance of joining together in a mutual commitment to one another in a local church setting.

I. The Local Church is Central to God’s Plan

The first aspect of a proper commitment to the local church is recognizing that the local church is central to God’s plan for ministry. It is also to be central to the life of every Christian. The New Testament does not conceive of living the Christian life apart from the local church. Commitment to the local church is not optional. It is not dispensable.

In 1 Timothy 3:14-15, the Apostle Paul told Timothy and the rest of us how important the local church is to God. He points out four realities about the local church in order to highlight its importance in God’s economy. First, here is the text of that passage.

1 Timothy 3:14-15 — I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

The local church is the “the household of God” (the family of God).

If you consider yourself to be a Christian, you should consider yourself to be a part of the family of God. Who would want to be without a family? Who would want to be without a local church? Who would want to be loosely connected to a family? Who would want to be loosely connected to the local church? If the two share certain qualities (and God says that they do), then we should also see how both must have a similar importance in our mind and in our commitments.



The local church is “the church of the living God.”

God owns the local church. He started it, builds it, energizes it, grows it, and purifies it. We should desire to be committed to what God is doing. He is building His church, and that activity is happening in relational ways in the local church.

The local church is “the pillar of truth.” It holds God’s truth up for all to see.

The church is the “pillar of the truth.” Through baptism, the Lord’s Supper, authoritative preaching, humble listening, regular attendance, and personal accountability, the truth of God is held up for all to see, appreciate and receive. It is God’s means of holding up the truth for all to see. You should desire to be committed in a dynamic way to a local church so you can both “see the truth for yourself” regularly, and to be a part of holding up the truth for others to see as well.

The local church is “the support of the truth.” It is the foundation.

What does it mean to have good ground support—a proper foundation—on a building? It makes the building firm and stable. The local church provides stability for God’s truth. The local church, alone, is able and responsible to proclaim the truth, to defend the truth, to live out the truth in their daily lives, and to hold one another accountable to do the same. Commit yourself to a local church so you can be a part of God’s plan for proclaiming and preserving His truth!

This may be the first time you have considered how God’s program for saving people, growing Christians, glorifying Himself, and proclaiming truth is centered around the local church. Don’t lose sight of this! Trying to live the Christian life independent of others in the family of God is not only unbiblical, it will detract from allowing the church to fulfill all of the purposes for which God designed it.

Get on board and make your personal commitment to the local church known. That leads us to the second aspect of a proper commitment to the local church.

II. Commit Yourself to ONE Local Church

This is the second aspect of a proper commitment to the local church. You need to CHOOSE, and you need to choose ONE!

Many people attempt to live the Christian life without a stated commitment or regular participation in ONE local church. Some claim being a member of an organized church is completely unnecessary. Others are just very irregular in their attendance at the church they claim to be their home. Many others hop around from one church to another, never really committing or building lasting relationships.

If people thought or acted this way in regard to their literal family, most people would think it unusual. So why don’t all Christians see it as unusual when their brothers or sisters in Christ are so distant, disengaged, and independent toward their spiritual family?

The Scriptures teach that you are to commit yourself to one local church. How does Scripture teach this principle directly? We will look at five ways the Bible teaches that we need to be part of a local church. The first three consider the biblical metaphors used for the



church. The last two consider the Bible's direct teaching that we have certain obligations and responsibilities to both church leaders, and to other Christians.

1. You are a member of a family

We already pointed out above that the church is referred to as the "household of God." This means you are part of a family. If a member of a family only came home to sleep at night and ate their meals at a neighbor's house five nights a week, we would consider them to be a poor family member (at the very least, an inactive one). God has designed the church to be like family. We are to share meals, share a mutual concern for one another, enjoy life together, and have an active life of love toward one another.

2. You are to be a brick in a building.

God has a temple—and you are a brick in it.

1 Corinthians 3:16-17 — Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

When he said, "You are God's temple" he was speaking of the whole church. "You" is plural, meaning that "all of you together constitute a temple of God" (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:16). The followers of Christ are not to be scattered around the earth's landscape, but carefully placed together to form spiritual temples. You may think you are spiritually strong on your own. You may think you are sturdy as a brick, but God intends to make something of you. He intends for you to be a brick in His spiritual temple.

Charles Spurgeon said:

I know there are some who say, "Well, I've given myself to the Lord, but I don't intend to give myself to the church." I say, "Now why not?" And they answer, "Because I can be just as good a Christian without it." I say, "Are you quite clear about that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord's commands as by being obedient? There's a brick. What is the brick made for? It's made to build a house. It is of no use for the brick to tell you that it's just as good a brick while it's kicking about on the ground by itself, as it would be as part of a house. Actually, it's a good-for-nothing brick. So, you rolling-stone Christians, I don't believe that you're answering the purpose for which Christ saved you. You're living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live, and you are much to blame for the injury you do." (Spurgeon, Mack, 71).

3. You are to be a member of a body.

1 Corinthians 12:18-25 — But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it,



that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

God uses this metaphor to describe the local church so that we may understand the importance of having unity and commitment among the members of the body. Though the church is made up of individuals, those individuals are definitely one body. You don't keep your toes in your pocket until you need them. They are joined to the body. They are members of the body. They are not loosely connected. You are a member of the body of Christ. Don't try to be loosely connected. Commit yourself to one local church.

When you watch the news, you will notice that even in times of great tragedy—like that of a terrorist attack—they don't often show pictures of people's bodies dismembered. It is unnatural. It is gruesome. It is disgusting. It is grotesque. Somehow, you'll find many Christians who think it is not that big of a deal to be loosely connected to the local body of believers. When God sees members of His body—the body of Christ—loosely connected or dismembered it is ugly and grotesque. We are the body of Christ.

4. You are to fulfill “one another” commands with those in your church.

Love; serve; admonish; encourage; live in peace; be patient; be of the same mind toward; build up; comfort; confess your faults to; pray for; show hospitality toward; and the list could go on. There are many passages of Scripture that speak of responsibilities that Christians have toward one another. All of them are present tense verbs, meaning they are ongoing and continual responsibilities.

Galatians 6:10 — So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

This means that you are to prioritize some people over others. You are to prioritize those in your church household/family over those who are not in your church. It would not be possible to fulfill these responsibilities toward everyone who calls himself a Christian. Because these commands are given in Scripture, we know that God's design is for individual Christians to be members of a local church.

5. You have responsibilities toward your church leaders.

There are many passages of Scripture that teach us that, as followers of Christ, we have certain privileges and responsibilities toward our church leaders. Those Christians that have not committed to a local church could not possibly know to whom they owe those privileges and responsibilities. Do you know who your leaders are?

Many Christians are content to skip over the commands given to them regarding pastors, elders, and overseers. Others fool themselves into thinking that they just need to have a humble, helpful attitude toward all church leaders (not specific ones). Sadly, the end result is that there is a whole list of biblical commands that they cannot obey—because they do not know to whom they are responsible.

What are those privileges and responsibilities? Here are some representative examples of biblical commands and principles that all Christians must live out in order to be faithful to God's calling on their life. Notice that as the writers of Scripture pen these words, it is assumed that Christians will know who their leaders are.



1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 — We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

Hebrews 13:17 — Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Hebrews 13:7 — Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

People who are not committed to a local church do not know who they are to know, appreciate, obey, submit to, bring joy to, follow, or imitate. Godly, biblically qualified elders are appointed in a church (this is God's pattern, as we will learn), and every Christian should be able to name those under whose care they are to be fulfilling these spiritual duties. Without a commitment to a particular local church, with identified members and leaders, a Christian will be unable to fulfill these responsibilities truly and fully. Don't be a useless brick, or a dismembered limb, or fail to be able to identify the particular Christians (members and leaders) toward whom you have these privileges and responsibilities.

III. Commitment must be Mutual and Recognized

This third aspect of a proper commitment to the local church is a very general principle and is taught by implication and by the example of the early New Testament church. It is because of these principles and implications that we see the need for a formal membership process.

Did the early church have people fill out forms to become a member? We don't know that. Did they conduct membership interviews and have membership classes. We don't know that. But you are to be committed to the church and the church needs to be committed to you. And, you need to know of the church's commitment to you and the church needs to know of your commitment to them.

This is what it means to be a part of the church. This principle is true for both the leaders of the church, as well as all of the other members. We will now look at the biblical reasons why.

1. You and the shepherds need a mutually recognized commitment.

We pointed out above that every Christian has responsibilities toward their leaders. It is also true that leaders have a serious and solemn responsibility toward those they are called to lead. First, the Bible says they are to shepherd you.

1 Peter 5:1-3 — So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Every elder, pastor or shepherd must ask, "Who is the flock?" He will ask that question if he wants to be faithful. He must ask that question if he desires to fulfill his responsibilities before God. Do your pastors know that you are committed to your local church, and do they know that you are committed to receiving their spiritual care and oversight?



Without your verbal expression of that desire and commitment, they will not know (at least for sure) that they will give an account for your soul one day.

Hebrews 13:17 — Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Who will the shepherds give an account for? Are you a part of this church? The shepherds need to know. If we want to be shepherded—and want the shepherds to give an account for our souls—a mutually recognized commitment is necessary.

2. You and the rest of the church need a mutually recognized commitment.

Both leaders and members of the church need to know that you desire a mutual commitment with them. Why do they need to know? As we have mentioned, every church member has responsibilities toward others in the church. Because of this, every member needs to know who is a part of their church.

We talked previously about all of the “one-anothers” in Scripture that outline many of our mutual responsibilities. There is also a responsibility to love one another by properly holding others accountable to live out the reality of one’s profession of faith.

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus outlines this process of lovingly reproofing other members of the body. Ultimately, when a so-called brother refuses to listen to the loving reproof coming from the whole church, there comes a point where the Scripture instructs us to put them out of the church. The Apostle Paul puts it this way.

1 Corinthians 5:11-13 — But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. 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. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

This sobering process is a necessary part of church life (even though we all hope that it is seldom necessary). The simple point to be made under this heading is that if the church body does not know who is an “insider” and who is an “outsider” then they will not know who they are responsible to love and hold accountable in this way.

Some people simply assume that everyone will “just know” that they are a part of the church, because they regularly attend. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know exactly what each regular attendee is actually thinking in this regard. Even though the process may be different from church to church, a formal church membership (a stated mutual commitment to one another), is a means for people to verbalize this commitment, and to clearly identify those people to whom each member owes the responsibilities of love and accountability.

So, let’s be really clear on this. Church membership is biblical. The process of becoming a member that we have developed is a means to help Christians (leaders and congregation) fulfill their biblical responsibilities. God does not command us specifically to fill out a church membership form or go to a church membership class. That is why the process is different from church to church. What these principles do teach us is that we need to have a recognized mutual commitment to each other. The process we have developed at Heritage Christian Fellowship is simply a means we have developed to help us fulfill this responsibility.



IV. Appreciate the Value of Church Membership

The fourth aspect of a proper commitment to the local church is to fully appreciate the values and benefits of being a recognized church member. While a formal church membership commitment is a helpful way to identify and fulfill one's mutual responsibilities to others in the local church, there are also many blessings that come with having this mutual commitment with the church body. It is worth taking some time to consider them and learn how to appreciate these benefits.

1. You will be blessed through loving accountability.

The Christian life is hard. God has not designed us to live this life of struggling against sin alone. We need encouragement, comfort, admonishment, and love from others. When you become a member, you are asking for this encouragement and accountability. Verbalizing it reminds everyone of the blessing of being called to live life together with others who are engaged in the same spiritual battle.

2. You bless your shepherds with joy, which will bless you too!

Remember Hebrews 13:17? It says it is unprofitable for you if your shepherds have to lead with grief. Pastors and church leaders often grieve when people are simply "Christians-at-large" rather than committed to the mutual love and accountability for other Christians. They know that a Christian will be more edified and will profit spiritually if they make this mutual commitment (and take it seriously). It is a joyful experience to teach and shepherd people who invite and appreciate this mutual commitment.

3. You encourage others by committing to your part in building up the body.

Ephesians 4:15-16 — Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

A hitchhiker is someone who wants a free ride. He doesn't assume any responsibility for the money needed to buy the car, put gas in it, or maintain it. He wants a free ride, a comfortable ride, and a safe ride. He wants the driver to take him where he wants to go. A spiritual hitchhiker takes the church for a ride. He may switch back and forth between churches. Or he may take advantage of the same ride over and over again. He wants to take advantage of certain blessings of the church without taking any responsibility. Don't be a spiritual hitchhiker. Encourage others by doing your part to cause the growth of the body.

4. You encourage other believers to commit themselves to the local church.

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

Making and fulfilling the mutual commitments of church membership makes the church look beautiful. As the church loves one another and does good deeds for one another, it encourages others to see the value of the mutual commitments of church membership, and to pursue fulfilling their biblical responsibilities with joy and energy as well.



V. Make the Most of Church Membership

This is the fifth aspect of a proper commitment to the local church. We should not just appreciate the value of it, we should wholeheartedly commit ourselves to being part of that blessing and value to all the other members as well.

Every organ is created by God to be a functioning part of the body. Individual organs, separated from the human body, cannot survive except by some artificial sustenance for some time. But that is not what it is designed for. God intends that members of the body be functioning in the body and through that connection to be stimulated for growth and development.

Every Christian is designed by God to be an active member in a local body. You were not made a Christian for independence but interdependence. Just as a hand or a foot cannot survive if amputated from the human body, Christians are encouraged to see themselves as dependent on others in the body.

1 Corinthians 12:18-21 — But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”

Don't just verbalize a commitment and forget about it. Every member of the body needs the other members. Be diligent to fulfill the commitments you make to the church body and be diligent to help others who have made that commitment. We all need one another. And the Bible talks about the fact that there are so many ways that we actually need one another.

1 Peter 4:8-9 — Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

Hebrews 3:13 — But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Romans 12:3-13 — For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

What a beautiful picture of love and mutual dependence. Imagine what a glorious portrait of the value and effectiveness of Christ's love it would be if every church member were committed to this kind of love, encouragement, and service. This is truly God's design.

Make the most of your church membership commitment by always striving to live your Christian life in a manner that reflects the value of being a member in the “household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).