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Detasseling

Growing up in the farmland of Indiana, there was one summer job kids could count on—a job which paid an outrageous wage to a 13 year old—eight dollars per hour. Though the work was hard, the job was simple. You'd show up at 6:00am with a sack lunch and a gallon of water. Then you and a dozen

other bleary-eyed kids dreaming of new drum-sets, dirt bikes or stereos would climb up into the baskets of this spider-like tractor that would take you through miles of cornfields. Your job was to pull the top, the tassel, off of each stalk in your row.

It was called detasseling, and apparently it was important. Almost every kid I knew growing up held this summer job at least once. And almost every kid I knew had no idea why they were pulling those tassels off. To this day I'm still not altogether sure—something to do with there being boy corn and girl corn.

There are many things we do in life which we would be hard pressed to explain—like why we set out cranberry sauce on Thanksgiving or shake hands with our right hand and not the left. Likewise, there are also many things we **don't** do even though we should because we don't really understand why they are important. Over the course of my time in ministry, joining the membership roll of a local church appears to be one of these things. Why do churches like Oak Hills have a formal membership process and membership vows? It is a fair question.

Since today we are receiving new members into the church, I wanted to take time to address the question of church membership. My objective is to present a **Biblical rationale** for the importance of membership in the local church while contending for the **Biblical purpose** of living as publicly identified members of a local body of believers—considering this an **act of worship** before God.

The goal here is certainly not to shame anyone who is not on the membership roll of this or any other Bible-believing local congregation. Many churches these days don't have a formal membership process. My hope is that the Lord would use His Word to challenge us all, members or not, to better understand the life of intentional, committed fellowship God calls every believer to in His Word. To get at this discussion, we turn to what I suspect is a familiar verse to many, and one that not only encourages ongoing, committed fellowship, but sheds valuable light on the wisdom of knowing and being known by one another over the course of your life as a follower of Christ.

Hebrews 10:24-25

²⁴Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵not 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.

Let Us Consider

Meeting together and church membership are not necessarily the same thing. So I do not think this text gives us a chapter and verse command requiring membership in the local church. In fact, I'll even go so far as to say I have not found a chapter and verse in the Bible commanding Christians to include their names on the membership roll of a local church. So why are we looking to today's text to build a case for church membership? Because of what it does command—that we would **consider** how to stir one another up toward love and good works.

What does it mean to consider? It means to think something through, to study, to understand and to come up with ideas. Our text tells us to consider how to help each other remain intentionally faithful to Christ, spurring one another on in service to the Lord. A key principle for the church in this text is that Christians are not here on this earth simply to whittle away the years keeping our noses clean until Christ comes back. We have an ongoing call to love well and serve the Lord with all we have and are. Included in this is the call to consider how we might help our brothers & sisters in Christ do this too.

One of the ways I believe we can do this is by being as intentionally and publically committed to a local congregation of believers as possible. And one way congregations in the Presbyterian Church in America do this is through formal church membership. Now, I would not insist that the PCA's process for church membership is the only valid way to join a church. We do not believe that unless you are a member of a PCA church, your faith is suspect. Nor do we believe church membership vows are required for entry into God's Kingdom.

So why do we have them at Oak Hills? Because we, along with many other faithful leaders in the church who have gathered regularly over the years to consider how to stir one another toward love and good works, believe church membership is a wise application of Scripture's call to committed, accountable fellowship as members of the church of Jesus Christ. Church membership is the application of a series of Biblical principles—an application arrived at through prayerful, careful consideration of how we might live as faithful followers of Christ. Let's see it.

A Biblical Rationale

Our text presumes meeting together is important—so much so that not meeting together is a form of neglect. To neglect is to not give to something or someone the attention they need. I point this out to establish that the author of Hebrews bases his call to meet together on the presumption that meeting together is normal and not meeting together is abnormal—even neglect.

Still, that doesn't prove the case for church membership, does it? We can meet together as brothers and sisters in the Lord without having to fill out a membership card, right? And the answer is, of course that's right. The fellowship of the saints is a wonderful thing. When we hear of someone in, say, China, coming to Christ, it is right for our hearts to swell with joy as we consider them nothing less than our brother or sister in Christ, though we'll likely never meet them this side of heaven.

Together we're part of the Church Universal—all God's children from every tongue, tribe and people across the span of every generation. If you are a Christian, your name is recorded in the Lamb's Book of Life ^(Phil 4:3)—the membership roll of Heaven. And we're wrong to regard the "Book of Life" as a euphemism for some generic mass of believers because the Gospel impact of the "Book of Life" is the reminder that God has no generic followers. He knows each of our names, ^(Isa 43:1) the number of our days, ^(Ps 139:16) even the hairs on our heads. ^(Mt 10:30) Heaven has no social security numbers, only names.

Still, the Christian life is not one of simply waiting idly for heaven when we will join that great cloud of witnesses. Under the umbrella of the Church Universal, we also have the Church Local—particular congregations of believers meeting together for worship. In our text, that author of Hebrews challenges his readers to recognize that we have misunderstood the Church Universal if we have rejected the Church Local. We are called to be meeting together even now, encouraging one another.

I know there are many Christians who, for a variety of reasons, have struggled to commit to a particular local church. I understand this can be a lengthy process. But it still should be a process that sooner rather than later leads you to connect and commit to a local congregation. Some, like us kids up in the detasseling machine, would benefit from a better understanding of why we do what we do. So let's look at church membership through the testimony of Scripture. Consider the following five arguments for church membership today from God's Word.

1. Believers in the Old Testament were divided and counted according to their clans. From the establishment of Israel, God's people were children of Abraham, but also members of one of the twelve tribes. No believer in the Old Testament was without specific local accountability, leadership and opportunity to serve. Local churches function like clans.

2. Believers are called by Scripture to meet together, ^(Heb 10:24-25- Today's text) **and they are told they belong to each other.**

"As each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we who are many form one body, and **each member belongs to all the others.** ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor each other above yourselves." ^(Rom 12:4-10) If we're commanded to meet together and serve one another in devoted love, membership is an articulation of service and devotion to a particular body.

3. Jesus designed the church to serve as a "spiritual court" of accountability in the lives of believers. Talking about believers confronting each other's sins, Jesus says, "If he refuses to listen to them, **tell it to the church**; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector." ^(Mt 18:15-17) Jesus intends for the church to function as a court of authority, so by definition the members of the church are under that authority. Jesus doesn't suggest the church should hold authority over her members, He presumes it does. Membership is a believers' way of publicly yielding to the Church as a Spiritual court over them, as Jesus describes.

4. Christians have a responsibility to be under the authority of overseers, willfully submitted to spiritual oversight, care and, when necessary, discipline. To leaders, Scripture says, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers." ^(1 Pet 5:2, 1 Tim 3:1-6) To congregations, Scripture says, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you." ^(Heb 13:17) God formally calls particular men to serve as overseers of particular churches. If God calls particular men to oversee particular churches, and if He also calls believers to submit to such leaders, then God calls believers to formally associate with particular churches.

5. Accountability and oversight are for our good, and we shouldn't wait until we're in need of correction or rebuke to publicly invite it. As sinful people, we are all prone to wander. The problem is that often when we are in the most need of rescue, that is the time we are least likely to want it. With church membership, people call the church to be a spiritual court over them while they are thinking rationally, not while they are blinded by sin. The church member says with promise #5, "I need my church to hold me accountable. Please don't let me get away with profaning the name of my God or hurting His church to which I belong. Come after me." Oak Hills will even pursue church discipline when needed, but only with those who have, by their vows, asked us to.

Any time someone takes a vow, they relinquish a part of their autonomy, saying "My life is not my own. Others can depend on me to keep my vow or challenge me if I fail." With church membership, we pledge our lives to fidelity to God's Word while at the same time asking those around us to help, correct, encourage and stir us up—which is what our text today calls us to. Consider then that church membership is a way to spur one another on toward love and good works. And if it is, then consider also that church membership is very much an act of worship.

Oak Hills Membership Vows

Promise 1: Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope except in His sovereign mercy?

Promise 2: Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the gospel?

Promise 3: Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as a faithful follower of Christ?

Promise 4: Do you promise to support the church in its worship and its work to the best of your ability?

Promise 5a: Do you submit yourself to the government and discipline of the church, and do you place yourself under the pastoral care, biblical teaching, and leadership of your elders?

Promise 5b: Do you promise to strive for the purity of the church, with a solemn pledge to lovingly, directly, and privately correct those who, to your knowledge, become caught in a pattern of sin that could be harmful to them and/or to others in the church?

Promise 5c: Do you promise to strive for the peace of the church, with a solemn pledge to discuss your frustrations with other members of this body only with those who are either part of the problem or part of the solution, and that you will hold others accountable do the same?