

Fil-Am Community Church

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3 August 2014

Verses: Ephesians 2:19; Romans 12:5; Hebrews 10:25

## Membership of the Church

Let me start this message by saying “Membership has its privileges!”

I carry a couple of cards in my wallet that give me certain privileges not available to the “general public.” First is my “Costco Warehouse” card. It identifies me as a member at the warehouse superstore and enables me to purchase things for the church or at home for less than what I would pay elsewhere. It’s what I call my physical benefits card because it helps to fulfill my physical cravings. For some of you that would be food. For me, that would be electronic gadgets.

Second is my family membership card to the Loudoun County Public Library. It identifies us as residents of Loudoun county and with the card, we get the extra benefit of borrowing and checking out as many books, CD’s, DVD’s, magazines, as we want. Without the card, we can only browse within the library. We cannot bring out any books or other materials from the library. I call this card my mental benefits card.

Now, membership is optional; it is a choice. We made the conscious decision of becoming members because we felt the benefits far outweigh the costs. We may have paid a certain amount to become Costco members, but the savings are enormous in the long run. The library card is free but you have to drive to and fro in order to borrow and return books. As opposed to

just buying one-time online and keeping the book for yourself. Then with the library you have to remind yourself always of the deadline or you'll get fined. And the library can make mistakes too. In fact, just recently I returned all the books our children borrowed and a few days later, I got an email asking me to return a book that I already returned.

Despite this, we don't intend to give up our membership because, again, the benefits outweigh the costs. They provide benefits not available to the general public.

So, I have a physical benefits card, a mental benefits card, and this morning I'd like to talk about another card that I carry, invisibly, that is. This is my spiritual benefits card. It is a card I carry because I am a member of this church and I receive benefits and privileges as a member. Many of you are card-carrying members already. Some of you are still in the process of making a decision. Some of you are somewhere in the middle. But whether or not you have this card, this message is for everyone of us.

This morning, I'd like us to discover some of the benefits available to members only. First, let me read from Ephesians 2:19, *"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household."*(NIV)

Let us look now at what church membership really means. The passage we just read says that

### **1. Genuine membership is a SPIRITUAL REALITY.**

It means that when you become a Christian

#### **A. God accepts you as a member of His family.**

God is telling us that we don't have to be outcasts any longer; we're no

longer strangers. We can be “fellow citizens” and “members of God’s household.” Your inclusion as members of God’s household did not happen because you choose to join a local church. You see, you can be a member of this or any other local church, but still not be accepted by God.

When your life is over your entrance into heaven will not be based upon your membership standing at the local church; heaven won’t call the church office to verify if you were still a member in good standing.

All that matters is that you are IN CHRIST. The Bible says, *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace . . . through him we . . . have access to the Father by one Spirit.”* (Ephesians 2:13, 14, 18 NIV)

When you acknowledge by faith that Jesus’ death on the cross was for your sin, when you ask Him to forgive you of your sin and to be the Lord of your life, then—and only then—are you made a member of God’s household, a member of Christ’s body, His Church.

So, membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual reality at the moment of salvation. You are either in, or you’re out. You’ve either got it, or not.

You may be thinking, “So now that I’m a member of the body of Christ because he is my Lord and Savior, do I still need to be a member of a particular church?” The answer is “yes”. Why? Because

**B. The Bible recognizes both a “universal” and “local” membership.**

Now, I think we all know this by now, but it needs repeated. The Church is not a building; Church is also not a worship service or event for us to connect with God. The Church is made up of individuals who have put their

faith in Jesus for their salvation; You and I make up the Church.

This is what is sometimes called the “universal” or “invisible” Church; it is the Church of Jesus Christ. Only in heaven will the “universal” Church be able to all gather together at the same time and place. Until then, we who are all a part of the “universal” or “invisible” Church MEETS in local assemblies or churches. The Bible recognizes the believer’s membership in both the “universal” and a “local” church.

Let’s look at some examples in the Bible. The book of Revelation was written to “the seven churches in the province of Asia.” Each of these local churches is addressed individually.

Many of Paul’s letters were written to local churches or regions: Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Galatia, Colossi.

We can see the “universal” and “local” reference to the members of the Church in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians.

He says in 1 Corinthians 1:2, *“To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours.”* (NIV)

What’s Paul doing? He is addressing a letter to a specific “local” church—the church of God in Corinth, but he also includes all believers as well. Paul addressed some issues that had a specific application to the Church in Corinth, but the principles have application to all Churches and believers.

So, we see that local churches have been established by the early Christians. But, is there anywhere in the Bible that says these local churches

have a membership roll? Did they formally accept people into membership in a local church? Let's look again at what the Bible says.

First, when we examine the biblical record, we discover the existence of church government. You see, the pattern throughout the New Testament is for pastors to oversee the local body of believers. Their duties presuppose a clearly defined group of members who are under their care.

*“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”* (Acts 20:28)

*“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.”* (1 Tim. 5:17)

*“Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account.”* (Heb. 13:17)

Notice in that last verse, the pastor will give an account of the sheep under his care. How can you keep an account of something you don't have a count of? Clearly, they were keeping count of people. And that is accomplished only through membership.

Also, the fact that the early churches have pastors and deacons explicitly tells us that there is an orderly, organized structure of church government.

But one passage in Scripture that can convince us that there was membership in the early church is in 2 Cor. 2:6. In this passage, Paul writes concerning a man the Corinthian church had excommunicated, *“For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.”* This man's exclusion from the church was a punishment by the majority. You

can't have a majority unless you have a definite set of people from which a majority is constituted.

And, and, please note, Paul is a trained lawyer, one of the best. That's quite apparent in the letters he wrote to the early Christians like his letter to the Romans where he presents his arguments in a sound and logical manner. As a lawyer, he surely would know the advantages of an organized and orderly organization. In 1 Cor. 14:40 (NASB) he says, "*All things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.*" Along with this was the responsible accounting of people who would be part of the organization. He organized and established many local churches. Is it any wonder then that God chose him to be his main instrument in organizing the early church?

Ultimately Christ has only one Church, of which all believers are members. However, the Bible recognizes both kinds of membership; universal or invisible and local. You and I are not more saved because we are members of a local church; you won't get an engraved golden plaque in heaven for your years of membership at the local church.

Membership at the local church does not guarantee us anything in heaven. So why should you join a local church? Why should you consider being a member of Fil-Am Church?

## **2. Membership has its privileges HERE AND NOW.**

To be clear, membership within a local church is an option; it's a choice each of us must choose to make. However, membership is highly recommended because of the benefits you and I can receive in the here and now.

I can't open the Bible and show you an "eleventh commandment" that

says, “You must be a member of a local church”. However, biblical principles do recommend membership. And God recommends it because it is for your own good and others as well.

So what are the privileges and benefits of membership that we can receive in the here and now?

A. Church membership provides a public testimony of your salvation.

Remember, from the moment we are saved membership is a SPIRITUAL REALITY; we are “members of God’s household” and “members of His body” (Eph. 2:19; Col. 3:15). Being joined together with Christ requires no initiation, ritual, or waiting period. You are included IN CHRIST by faith.

At the moment of your salvation God does an internal work within your life. You are no longer “dead in your sins,” but are made “alive in Christ;” you are a “*new creation, the old is gone, the new has come*” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Now, this internal work of God finds external expression as you get connected with other believers. When you become a member of a local church you are making a public confession of your faith in Christ. Much like baptism wherein we always say that it is a public declaration of your faith in Christ. But, of course, baptism is much more than that.

Anyway, Fil-Am Church will not accept anyone as a member; the church is not like the Rotary or Kiwanis Club that will accept anyone as a member once they pay their dues. The first requirement for membership within our church is a personal confession of faith in Christ as personal Savior. You may be a nice person, attend church regularly and even give in the offering, but that isn’t enough to become a member. You need to confess your faith in

Christ.

So, Church membership offers you the privilege of declaring that Jesus is your Lord and Savior.

## **2. Church membership also encourages participation in the mission of the church.**

The stated purpose for every Christian Church is the same; regardless of the label an individual church may have, its mission is the same as all the rest. Jesus established the agenda for His Church. He says in Matthew 28:19-20, *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”* (NIV)

The local church is the only organization whose stated purpose is for the benefit of its non-members. It is our responsibility to tell the world about the love of God made known to us through His Son Jesus.

Reaching the world is an impossibility for any individual. However through membership we join hands with one another to do what Jesus commanded us to do. Jesus has given us His Spirit in order to give us the necessary power to fulfil His purpose, but He has also given us each other. We are not intended to try to do it on our own.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled the believers gathered in the upper room and they all began to speak in other tongues. The Holy Spirit did not just empower an individual, but a group.

When Peter stood in the power of the Spirit to tell those gathered in Jerusalem about what had happened, he did not stand alone. Peter stood together with the eleven. When it was all said and done over 3,000 accepted

Jesus as Savior; the Great Commission was being fulfilled. How was it done? Through the power of the Holy Spirit and believers who stood together. (See Acts 2.)

When you and I make a commitment to membership in a local church we stand together to fulfill the mission of the church.

Jesus never sent out His disciples to minister alone; the disciples ministered in groups of two or more. The ministry of the local church is strengthened and encouraged when we join our hands together.

I like what one author said, “Christians, like snowflakes, are frail, but when they stick together they can stop traffic.”

And lastly,

C. Church membership helps me to grow spiritually.

A Christian cannot go it alone. A Christian who is not committed to a local church, goes church-hopping, for example, can be unsteady and unfruitful. The Bible says that we are meant to belong to one another. Romans 12:5 says, “*So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*” (NIV)

We belong to one another like my arms and my legs belong to the other parts of my body. Every part of my body is connected to all the other parts.

You see, none of us is here by accident; God has brought us together. In the same way that our bodies are joined together in a certain way, or like the pieces of a puzzle belong together, GOD JOINS US TOGETHER.

Membership within the local church recognizes what God is doing to make us one.

And the reason for this is because God wants us to grow together. When

your body grows, each member of the body grows along with it.

When your arms grow longer, the legs grow longer too. That is how church should grow as well. This will happen only when each of us realize that we belong to one another.

You need other believers to help you grow spiritually. Colossians 2:6-7 says, “Just as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him...”

Now, the Bible often refers to your spiritual life as your “walk.” We are told to walk in the light, to walk in love, to walk in obedience, to walk in the Holy Spirit, to walk as Jesus walked, to walk in wisdom. Why? Why does the Bible talk about our spiritual life as a “walk”? Because life is not just a sit-down thing. It’s a journey. You’re always growing. You’re always moving. Your life is a journey. There is a destination to get to.

But here’s the thing we must grab hold of this morning: God never intended for you to walk through life alone. Never! The problem with hibernating and just being by yourself all the time is that you never learn to cooperate. You never learn what it means to be in relationship. You never truly learn to love or be loved. You never learn to be more like Christ because you are never challenged or provided with opportunities to live out your faith.

Practically speaking, why is it better to walk with others in life?

There are three reasons:

1. It’s safer.

It’s safer when you walk with others through life. There’s safety in numbers.

Whether it’s walking in a dark alley in the inner-city or out in the

countryside, it's still safer to have someone walking with you. It's a whole lot less risky.

## 2. It's supportive.

It keeps you from giving up. When other people are walking with you, they keep you going. Listen to this old Zambian proverb:

“When you run alone, you run fast. But when you run together, you run far.”

The life that we are called to live is not a 50-yard dash! It's a marathon! And we had better be prepared to run far. And to do that we need each other.

Before each winter, the geese fly south in V-formation. It's because they can fly farther in that formation. That formation creates an updraft and they don't get as tired when they fly together like that. When we fly, when we walk, when we run through life together, we're a whole lot less tired when we walk with others.

It's safer. It's supportive. It's also just plain...

## 3. It's smarter

You'll learn a whole lot more when you go through life with other people close to you. You will learn from them. You will learn from their mistakes. It's just plain smarter to walk together through this life with others.

Hebrews 10:25 says, “*Let us not give up the habit...*” That means you do it all the time. It's a habit for you. What is the habit? “*The habit of meeting together...*” We are told, (commanded, actually) to not give up on the habit of meeting together. And we are to do what instead? “*...instead let us encourage one another.*”

How can we encourage one another if we are not involved in each other's

lives? How can we encourage one another if we don't develop a habit of meeting together with others?

You see, we cannot fulfill this command of Scripture if we are not involved with others on a regular basis. You can't fulfill this command by yourself. It's impossible! We need each other!

To close, let me stress once again that membership has its privileges, but it's also optional—a choice. But I want you to be part of us, a growing, thriving, body of believers with one mind, spirit, and purpose serving one Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.