

## THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 157 | Family Of God, Part 4: Membership

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Andy Barlow



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**Autumn:** Welcome to the Vision for Life podcast, an ongoing conversation between the pastors of Fellowship Denver and the Church at Large. Each week we talk about life, faith, the Bible, and how to follow Jesus as we go about our daily lives. I'm Autumn, the host of the podcast, and Andy, one of our pastors here at Fellowship, is joining me on the podcast today. Andy, thanks for being here.

**Andy:** Thanks for having me.

**Autumn:** We were just joking that we might be speaking very quickly, or this might be a short conversation, because the green room where we record is quite cold today.

**Andy:** Yeah, so forgive us if our voices are quivering.

**Autumn:** Well, today's conversation is one of a four-part series of podcast episodes that we are doing in conjunction with our ongoing sermon series of Fellowship. In the fall, we had a sermon series entitled *Heaven and Earth*, and we're in part two of that *Heaven and Earth* series, and this sermon series is focusing specifically on the family of God, that when we are joined to Christ, we also inherit a family. It's a new kind of family that is marked by a particular kind of power and fullness. And so, in these conversations, we're asking, well, how does that family live? What does the shared life of that new family look like? And today we're talking about one aspect of what it means to be a part of that new family, and that is the topic of church membership, which probably sounds thrilling to many people.

**Andy:** Yeah, brace yourselves.

**Autumn:** Andy, in your 12 years of being a pastor, you said you've encountered various attitudes and understandings of this idea of church membership. So, could you kind of give us the lay of the land? What do you see in the people you talk to or hear from in terms of this topic and their understanding of the topic of church membership?

**Andy:** Yeah, so I think it really varies from context to context as well. So, I pastored in Louisville, Kentucky for a little over a decade. And just even the way people in that cultural context, which, you know, has a lot more churches and a lot more kind of cultural Christian heritage, people have a different sort of attitude towards membership than even in a place like Denver. But I think the thing I've noticed over the years is that, you know, there are some people who have very strong convictions about membership. They believe it's important. And that's a few people. But the majority of people that I've talked to over the years have any number of, maybe not necessarily, some are resistant, some are more apathetic, some maybe don't- they're not against it, they don't necessarily understand the importance of it. So, I think maybe if I could get concrete and just name a few sort of things I've encountered that might sort of help.

You know, I think coming to Denver, one thing I've noticed is, I think some people resist the idea of church membership, whether they know it or not, maybe because, a lot of people move to Denver to come have an adventure, to come try something new, and not to tie themselves down with a commitment. And so, I think that joining a church just sounds like a commitment, and

**Autumn:** Uh, maybe because it is.

**Andy:** Yeah, that's right, that's right. And 'I didn't move out west for that; I moved out here to be free,' you know, 'and to explore the mountains.' And, you know, and so, you know, there might be that mentality that leads to some resistance. I

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think there's also this idea of accountability. Meaningful church membership brings with it a measure of accountability. I'm committing myself to a specific group of people, and we're committing to actually hold each other accountable as disciples. And some people have a resistance to that, not because they want to necessarily live some wildly sinful life or anything like that, but like, just an example, I've met people who they didn't want to join a church because they didn't want to be accountable to other Christians, because in their mind they alone with a Bible that was all they needed. And the mentality is 'I'm accountable to God alone.'

And so, it's sort of this almost a gnostic or a disembodied vision of the Christian life. Nobody's going to tell me what to do. Nobody's going to tell me how to live the Christian life. It's me and my Bible and the Spirit of God within me, you know. So, these are people that want, I think they want to serve God, but in their mind there's a disconnect with church membership. I think even that word "membership," kind of leading to a third thing, membership can often, you know, in our cultural context, it can sort of conjure up the idea of a consumeristic mentality. So, there's that famous American Express slogan in the 90s, maybe, "Membership has its privileges." I think you know. And so, I think that a lot of people, when they hear the word membership, they're thinking of it in those kinds of terms like, I can pay my dues to join a country club. And it's really just this one-for-one. It's a cost benefit analysis. Like, what do I get out of it? What are the benefits? And so, really it's kind of about me. And so, I think there're a lot of devoted Christians who they hear the word "membership" and they're maybe resistant to it for good reasons because for them it conjures up this idea of consumerism, and they know we don't want to be consumers. We're disciples. And so, for them they're thinking, well, maybe membership isn't a good thing. You know, I think we'll get into that more that maybe there's a disconnect in how we're maybe the word "membership" is not always the most helpful term.

I think one that I encounter a lot and we could probably just kind of, you know, I could keep talking about these. But one that I encounter a lot is really just like, well, show me in the Bible one verse that says, thou shalt be a covenant member of a local church. You know, thou shalt sign on the dotted line. And the reality is there isn't a verse that says that. The idea of membership is built more cumulatively. It's more of a theological vision that's an implication of a lot of other things in the Bible. So again, for good motivations for people who love the Bible and they don't want their conscience to be bound by anything that they cannot find clearly taught in the Bible. For that reason, they might say, well, I'm not so sure I should become a member of a church because I can't really find a verse that tells me that. So, those are just some of the things I've encountered over the years.

**Autumn:** All of those reasons that you listed, Andy, seem true in my interactions as well. And even true in the ways that I've kind of contemplated this question for myself over many years after leaving home, deciding to be a part of a church in college, and then making decisions about church participation and membership beyond that. I have asked many of these same things. And there's one other reason that I wonder if you could speak to for a moment. And that I think is a sense of maybe a lack of clearness about the nature of the Church and this idea of what we sometimes call the "big 'C'" Church or the universal Church versus the local church. When we talk about church membership, we're usually talking about it—well, in our context and in this conversation—we're always talking about it as attachment to a local body of believers. Even the example you gave a moment ago of the person who may not desire the sort of accountability that comes with being a part of a local church body, but they still have a desire to follow God and to have a relationship with God. And you phrased it like it's me and God, my Bible. And no one else needs to bind by conscience or hold me in that sense accountable for my spirituality, the way in which I'm living my spiritual life. But those someone who has that mentality probably still sees themselves as connected to the Church in the terms of universal Church but may not have a

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vision for particular participation or connection to the local church. So, what is the difference between the two? And why is it important that we have a sense of what the big “C” Church is, the universal Church, versus the local church?

**Andy:** Yeah, I think that's in my kind of diagnosis of American evangelicalism. And maybe some of the theological issues that might afflict the evangelical church in America is generally speaking, what I have observed is that there is a pretty big doctrine of the universal Church and a pretty small doctrine of the local church. And so, you'll hear Christians say things like, you know, maybe I'm at a coffee shop with some of my friends who, you know, go to different churches around town, but we're all friends and we're just meeting up for coffee and somebody might say, isn't this cool? this is the church. You might hear people say things like that. And there's something really true and beautiful about that in the sense that, you know, Jesus said, I will build my church, and the risen Christ right now is seated at the right hand of God, and He is the head over the Church, which is composed of men, women, and children from every tongue tribe and nation who've been united to Him by faith and forgiven of their sins and reconciled to God. Every Christian throughout time and space, united to Jesus, composes the universal Church. And so, there is this real sense in which me and a Christian in Nashville and a Christian in Orlando and a Christian in New York City, we're all part of the one Church, right? And so, in America, what I've noticed is evangelicals tend to have a decent understanding that they belong to the universal Church. And that seems to be the primary emphasis that maybe makes people a little hesitant when it comes to like joining a local church. But the interesting thing is of the dozens and dozens and dozens of times the New Testament uses the word “church” and talks about “the church,” in only five maybe does it refer to the universal Church. Every other time is referring to a local congregation, right? A local congregation of people in a specific place, a specific city, a specific time, it's a defined group of people. And so, I think that people, you know, I think this can happen with any of us. We can believe one good thing at the expense of another good thing, and our lives can be imbalanced as a result. And so, I think that there's a need to recover the doctrine of the local church. And I think when we make that recovery, that will do a lot to, I think, lessen people's resistance to the idea of church membership.

**Autumn:** I think that's the point of our conversation is that we're hoping that, in discussing this topic and the nature of the Church, the importance of church membership and the biblical vision for church membership, that we understand it a little bit better, that we invite our listeners into thinking about this deeply, understanding it a little bit better, and getting a vision for the fullness that is present within the Church. The nature of the Church is an important part of that. And what you just explained, the universal Church, the local church, the way that the New Testament in particular talks about the local church and when it addresses the church, especially throughout all of the letters to the churches, they're addressing a specific congregation who have specific members, as it were. There are specific people who are a part of that body, and they were dealing with contextualized issues. And all of the letters were written to churches either in a specific region, and they were sharing that letter within churches to other churches in that region or to a specific church in a specific city. And so, all of this, the way that the church grows, the way that the epistles were written, address local church congregations.

Let's talk a little bit more about the unique nature of the church, Andy, so that we can get a handle on the biblical vision for the church and what it means to be a part of a church, what it means to be a member of a church. And the first thing that you mentioned is that the church is unique because it is regenerate. What do you mean by that?

**Andy:** Yeah, so as you read the story line of the Bible, you know, maybe we could just do that really quickly in summary view. So, God creates the heavens and the earth. He creates a man and a woman and places them in a garden and gives them essentially a law. You know, you can eat of every tree in the garden, but there's one that you cannot eat of, and the

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day of you eat of it, you'll die. And we know the story—they ate of the tree, and they broke God's law. Which really was—it's not that it was an arbitrary rule, but the law that God gave them was essentially an act of faith. 'Do you trust me? Are you going to trust me to be your life and your wisdom, or are you going to trust yourself?' Well, they trusted themselves. They listened to the voice of a serpent. They ate from the tree, and they were expelled from the garden.

Before they were kicked out, God essentially articulated some judgments to them. But embedded in those judgments was a promise that one day one of the descendants of the woman Eve would be born, a descendant of Eve would be born, and He would crush the head of the serpent, but His heel would be bruised in the process. So, this is the first promise of the gospel in the Scriptures, a promise of a redeemer to come. And so, that really sets the stage for how to read the rest of the Bible.

The story hanging over the rest of the Bible is, when will this descendant of Eve come to roll back the curse that we've brought on humanity? You know, when will this descendant come? Well, fast forward, you know, centuries later, God comes to one of the descendants of Eve, a man named Abraham. He's an idol worshiper in the land of Ur, and God comes and makes a promise to Abraham that God is going to bless him and make him this great nation, and that through him, through his descendants, through his family line, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. So, what this is telling us is that the promised descendant of Eve that's going to crush the head of the serpent and bring us back into the garden is going to come through Abraham's family. Well, Abraham has a son, his son has a son, his son has a bunch of sons, and those sons eventually turn to the nation of Israel who find themselves enslaved in Egypt. And God delivers them out of Egypt and makes a covenant with them at Sinai to be His people and He gives them a law. And the nature of this covenant God makes with Israel is it's very conditional. If you obey me, you'll be blessed. If you disobey me, you will be cursed. But these were God's people, the nation of Israel. And yet, as you read through the Old Testament, what you'll find is that even though this nation of people, Israel was God's people in a covenant with God, not all of them knew God or loved God. Not all of them were regenerate, which means made alive by the Spirit of God. In other words, it was a mixed community. It was a community made of believers and non-believers. Now, this was a problem. As they awaited this day when, you know, this descendant of Eve was going to come and deliver them. One of the problems with this community was that it was mixed. Well, fast forward a few centuries, God makes this promise through the prophet Jeremiah, and he says this, Jeremiah 31:31. He says:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them. and notice the difference that the previous covenant, the law was written on tablets of stone, but here God is saying, I'm going to make a new covenant and I'm actually going to write my law on their very hearts so that the things that I want will spring out of them from the inside.

Right? So:

I'll put my law within them. I'll write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they shall be my people.

And listen to this:

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And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother saying, know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest."

So, in other words, there was evangelism happening within Israel to other Israelites, Israelites going to other Israelites saying, "Know the Lord, repent, Know the Lord." He's saying the new covenant won't be like that. "I'm going to write my law on their hearts ... I'm going to fill them with my Spirit ... No longer will each one say, 'Know the Lord.'" And He says, "They shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest." And then He ends like this, "For I will forgive their iniquity. I will remember their sins no more."

So—that was a long-winded way of getting to this—this promise in Jeremiah of a new covenant made up of an entirely regenerate community that loves God and wants to follow and worship and obey God, this is a promise of the Church that Jesus came to build, which means that the Church is not a mixed community of believers and unbelievers.

Okay, the Church is a regenerate community. And so, here's kind of where we get to this idea of membership. Membership is the visible manifestation of who the Church is. Okay, so just to make this very tangible. When we at Fellowship Denver do a membership interview with somebody, one of the things I ask everybody is tell me your testimony of faith in Christ. Tell me, what does the gospel mean to you? And what I'm trying to get at is, does this person understand the gospel? Has their life been changed by Christ? I'm trying to uncover, are they a regenerate Christian, as best as I can tell. Because membership is our way of saying as a church family, it's our way of publicly affirming together, this person is with Jesus. This is a New Covenant person. And that is one of the great- that's one of the important features of church membership. That's, you know, that's why it's not enough for somebody just to walk around saying, I'm a part of the church, I belong to God, which may very well be true. But that, as we're going to see later I think when we look into the gospel of Matthew, the job of actually declaring to the world who is with Jesus is a job that Jesus has given to the Church itself, not just to individuals.

**Autumn:** So, you just described the big story for us that traces some of, I think in covenantal terms, both the institutional but also the part of that that's like organism. When you're a New Covenant person and you have this law written on your heart, you are a part then of the people of God. The Church as an institution affirms that. And so, you're talking about the Church now in terms, Andy, that is saying is connoting that it has some kind of authority. And you're doing that because that's the way Jesus talked about his Church as well.

There's another term, and I've heard you describe this in some other contexts, but there's another term that you have explained when you were talking about the Church and the nature of the Church, and that is *ecclesia*. And we understand part of the nature of the Church in Jesus invoking that term to describe His Church. So, how does that idea, that the Church exists to affirm who is a New Covenant person, both to protect them, to give them a home, to indicate that they are a part of this greater body, but then also, in doing that, they're exercising authority over those individuals who make up the Church. And we're saying the Church does that because Jesus instituted the Church to do that. But where do we see that in Scripture?

**Andy:** Yeah, so when we think about the word "church," a lot of times people think, well, in the Old Testament there was Israel, in the New Testament there's the Church. And I think for many people, they think the Church is this new idea. But if you even read the Greek translation of the Old Testament, you'll find the word church, *ecclesia*, it's everywhere. It was this rich concept embedded into Jewish thought, which really came to them from Greco-Roman culture. And so, in the Greco-Roman world, an *ecclesia* was most often referred to like a public assembly or a gathering that was very political in

nature. So, essentially, it was like all of the citizens of a city state would gather, I think it was like 50 times a year, they would gather and they would carry out the affairs of the city and they would they would hear cases, and they would make decisions about cases, and they would they would think about, hey, we're in a war with this country, should we pull out or should we send more generals, you know? And they would make decisions about that. Or maybe they would have citizens who have been unruly, and they have to decide, what are we going to do with these citizens? And sometimes they would even expel citizens, you know.

And so an *ecclesia* had this very clear for like anybody in the Greco-Roman world at the time of Jesus and the disciples, when they heard the word *ecclesia*, it meant something very specific most often, like the main thing that would have come to their mind was, oh, yeah, that's the political body of Roman citizens that gather together, you know, 50 times a year in every city state. That's what an *ecclesia* is.

And so, then Jesus comes on the scene, right? And He's proclaiming the kingdom of God, and He's calling people to repent and enter into this kingdom. And then we get to the Gospel of Matthew, which is the only place Jesus uses this language of *ecclesia*. In Matthew 16, Jesus starts to talk about the *ecclesia*. You'll remember Peter confesses to Him; He says, "Who do people say that I am?" And they say, oh, some say this, some say that. And then Jesus says, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And then in response to that, Jesus essentially said, you're right, Peter. And on this rock, which probably means this confession, this confession that I'm the Christ, on this rock, I will build my own *ecclesia*. And the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And so, we see Jesus, in this cultural context where people knew what an *ecclesia* was, he comes in and he says, I'm going to build my own *ecclesia*, my own body of citizens that that are very political in nature, like there's going to be, I'm going to be the king, there's going to be a kingdom, it's going to be filled with citizens. And these citizens are going to assemble. That's what the word *ecclesia* literally means. It means an assembly or a gathering. These citizens are going to assemble. And in Matthew 16, Jesus says, they're going to make binding judgments. When the *ecclesia* assembles, Jesus says, whatever they bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever they loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven. And so, two chapters later, Jesus is going to talk about the *ecclesia* again. He's going to talk about their binding and loosing authority. So, this is just really interesting because the only two times Jesus talks about the Church, the *ecclesia*, He talks about this binding and loosing authority that they have. And I think that what this binding and loosing authority is, if you read these texts, is the binding authority is to bind on earth means essentially to say, 'This person-' it's to make a judgment and say, 'This person is with Jesus.' This is really what we talk about when we talk about membership and to loose on earth.

What you see in Matthew 18 is to actually remove somebody from the *ecclesia*. The context of Matthew 18 is if your brother sins against you, you'll go to him, talk to talk to him, confront him. If he doesn't listen, go take one or two others and plead with him. And if he still doesn't listen, Jesus says, tell it to the church, right? And then the whole church is kind of going after this person. And if he still doesn't listen to the church, you'll let him be to you as a tax collector and a gentile. In other words, you remove them from the *ecclesia*, you don't have anything to do with them, right?

You discipline them out of the body. And then Jesus says the same thing, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven. In other words, he's saying, when you bring people into the church, into church membership and affirm that they're with me, all of the authority of heaven stands behind that affirmation. And when you loose somebody or you remove somebody from membership, because of



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unrepentant sin, you say they do not stand with Jesus anymore. All of the authority of heaven stands behind that. So, that's a little bit more of the sort of the context of church membership from the way Jesus spoke about it.

**Autumn:** Jesus didn't use the term *ecclesia* very much. He used it a couple of times, but He talked about His kingdom a lot. And when He invokes this term, it's clearly connected to His conception of His kingdom, the *ecclesia*, the citizens of His kingdom, who would function in that way, the way He was invoking the term, or the ones who would carry out the political will and saying that carefully. I'm not using the term political in the sense of talking about our American political context, but they were the people who were New Covenant people who had the law of God written on their hearts. And they, both by the affirmation of their words and by the way in which they chose to live, showed that they were a part of His kingdom people. Those were the citizens who He was talking about. And those people would carry out His political will. They would do the bidding of their king, and their allegiance was to that kingdom. This is a depth of meaning that I think we don't often realize when we use the word "membership." Earlier in our conversation, you use the example of being a member of a country club, which is funny that you chose that because neither of us probably would ever or will ever be a member of country club.

**Andy:** Nope, that's right.

**Autumn:** But we think of membership often in those terms, yeah.

**Autumn:** Or a member of a Planet Fitness.

**Andy:** Yeah, exactly.

**Andy:** I might join a gym, right? You know, not a country club.

**Autumn:** Right, a member of a gym; you can be a member of a lot of different things. And that is usually you choose to join yourself to that. You pay some dues; you get the benefits. And that is how I think our perception of church membership is more conditioned. The way you're describing it here, Andy, sounds more like the term "citizen."

**Andy:** Exactly.

**Autumn:** We don't say we're members of America. We say that we're citizens of America.

**Autumn:** We're American citizens. We are, because of birth, or choice, or both, attached to a particular place and time. And so, as I'm listening to your description, I think that depiction of someone who's a citizen of Jesus's kingdom is a part of His church or His *ecclesia*.

**Andy:** That's right.

**Autumn:** There's another interesting facet to that term "membership." So, there are a couple of these nuances. I think the way we typically use the word "membership," this explanation of the term "membership," which is more like being a citizen. And then the idea of being a member of a family, which is another nuance of this word. And in our current sermon series, we're talking about being a part of a family. But our perception of being a member of a family is quite different from either being a member of a gym or a citizen of a country. So, how does that impact our understanding of the nature of the church?

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**Andy:** Yeah, I mean, I think this is a really helpful discussion because I think what it shows us is that, you know, the word membership can have some misleading connotations for us. But if you think about it in terms of like a family, it actually like I'm a member of my family. And when I think about what it means for me to be a member of my family, I think about a whole host of covenantal commitments that I have as a husband and as a father. And it's very relational in nature. It's very specific. There's a specific group of people that make up the members of my family. And so, yeah, I do think it's helpful to think about this not only through a political, kingdom lens, but through a family lens as well.

And I think this is, you know, even though these all kind of overlap, I think we have to acknowledge that, when you think of things through like, "I'm a citizen of a kingdom," you think of different things than I'm a member of a family. And so, so much the way the New Testament talks about life in the church is through this family imagery. You know, we just saw recently in our sermon series in Acts chapter two, the way that the earliest Christians related to one another was not.

It doesn't have the feel of citizens of a kingdom as much, at least in Acts 2, as much as members of a family. They gathered together daily in their homes, and they broke bread, and they ate meals together, and they shared life together. And if anybody lacked anything, people just gladly sold their stuff to help one another out. And I just think of my own family, you know. If my son needed an operation that we couldn't afford, I would sell everything, anything, you know? Any toy I possessed, anything. I would sell my musical instruments, and I would sell anything just to ensure he had what he needed, because that's what you do in your family, right? So, I think the idea of membership through the lens of family is a really important thing to keep in mind because without this concept of membership, you really lose the concrete concept of who is my family.

I try to challenge people with this a lot. There are, I don't know how many churches there are in Denver. I don't know how many Christians there are in Denver, but I know that there's only a certain group of specific Christians in Denver that are my church family, right, that become the context for me to live out all of the, you know, "one anothers" of the New Testament. So, I don't know if that goes along with your question or what you're thinking. Those are my thoughts.

**Autumn:** Yeah, no, I agree. I think that it's, again, we see you both demonstrated that the church as institution and the church as organism, both are depicted for us in various passages in the New Testament. And when the term "we are members of one another" is used, it is talking about a body and using that organic language and invokes this idea of familial interaction. You said, we know each other, we rely on each other, there's a unique way in which we're committed to each other. And that's because of this understanding of family. The Church then as an institution supports all of that. It makes us able to do that. When we commit to the church's institution, then we do know who our family is, who it is that we are committing to. So, I really love that example.

So, this is, I think, getting to- we're beginning to answer, why is this idea of church membership biblical? Well, Jesus taught this particular understanding of kingdom and church and used the word *ecclesia* and founded His church in a particular way, and then sent out his disciples to form more churches, which we see in the New Testament are these local bodies of believers. There's another aspect of this, another part of this answer, I think, Andy, and you have phrased this as, there's an explicit way we understand this, that the Bible talks about this doctrine, and an implicit way. What do you mean by that?

**Andy:** Yeah, so like I said, there's no verse that is just going to come out and say, thou shalt become a member of a local church. This is not the way the Bible is helping us come to these conclusions. Now, there are the things that Jesus said in Matthew 16 and 18 explicitly about the Church and what the Church does. The church has binding and loosing authority



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on earth, which I believe refers to membership and discipline in maybe the simplest terms. But there are a number of ways that the Bible implicitly leads us to these conclusions. In other words, because the Bible says this, this, this and this, when we add them together, this seems to be the clear conclusion.

I like to reference the Westminster Confession of Faith a lot of times when I talk about this. In section 1.6, it says this—this is a pretty famous part of the confession—it says, “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” And so, if I'm going to make the claim that church membership is biblical, I really need to show you how this is a good and necessary consequence of other parts of the Bible. And so, I just kind of want to tell you, this is not exhaustive, but here are a few ways. Here's kind of the point I'm making, that without something like whatever you want to call it, church membership, you know—church citizenship doesn't have quite the same ring to it—but whatever you want to call it, without some concept of church membership, it makes it virtually impossible to do some of the things the Bible calls us to do.

So, for example, in Matthew 18, when Jesus says, if your brother sins against you, go to him. If he doesn't listen, grab one or two others and go to him. And if he still doesn't listen, tell it to the church. Okay, now, if I'm going to actually obey this, and let's say somebody sins against me and I go to them and then they don't listen and then I grab, you know, Autumn and one other person, and we go to them and they don't listen, the next thing Jesus tells us to do is tell it to the church. Well, I have to know who the church is to know who I'm talking to here. Is the church every Christian in the world or the group at the coffee shop? You know, who am I telling? And it seems clear here that Jesus has in mind the local assembly of which you all are members. Tell it to the assembly that has binding, loosing authority, right? And so, in order for me to tell it to the church, I have to know who the church is, which means some concept of explicit membership and knowing who is a part of this *ecclesia*. This church has to be in place.

Another example would be in 1 Peter chapter 5. Peter exhorts the elders to shepherd the flock of God that is among you. And then he talks about specific attitudes elders are to have toward the flock. And again, as an elder, as a pastor, if I am called or if our elder team here at Fellowship, if we are called to shepherd the flock of God that is among us, well, we need to be able to identify who that flock is. Who am I actually called to shepherd? Is it everybody who walks through the doors of Fellowship Denver Church over the course of a given year? Is it everybody who's ever darkened the door of the church? Is it just people who come twice a month? I mean, who am I actually being called to shepherd? And again, I think that without some concept of membership, it's impossible for me or the elders to really obey this in a meaningful way.

Another example would be Hebrews chapter 13. And this would be maybe the flip side in some ways. This is an exhortation to members towards their leaders where the author of Hebrews says to obey your leaders and submit to them, knowing that they're going to have to give an account. And so, for members of a local church, if I'm going to use that term, they have to be able to know, who are the leaders I have actually covenanted myself to obey? Am I supposed to obey every leader, every pastor on the internet, everybody who claims to have spiritual authority? No, it's obvious that within a local church, there are leaders, pastors, elders, and there are members who have covenanted with one another. And just as the elders need to know who the flock is, the flock needs to know who are my leaders. And notice Hebrews there says that the elders are going to give an account, which means one day I'm going to stand before Jesus—and the elders of this church will say, I'm going to stand before Jesus—and we are going to have to give an account for the flock that was entrusted to us. And I don't think Jesus is going to be asking me about Michael Smith who

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lives in Orlando, Florida, right? I'm not accountable to Michael Smith, to shepherd Michael Smith, right? I'm going to give an account for the members of this church. So, those are just three examples of how the Bible calls us to do certain things. And without a concept of membership, we can't do those things.

**Autumn:** So, the instructions like in Matthew 18 would be an example of an explicit description of a way that the Church functions. It's something that Jesus said very clearly. This is a function of the *ecclesia*. And these other passages that you just laid out for us give us an implicit understanding. We can, as you were explaining, deduce from these repeated instances in Scripture that the church has a particular people, a particular place and a structure, and that's invoked over and over through these uses of the "the church," "the flock," "the leaders." And then when we draw that together, we see this picture emerge of the way a church relates to each other, the type of authority the church has that it has a structure and specific leaders for a specific people.

**Andy:** Yeah, I think that one maybe image we could use for membership is that membership is like a container that allows all the fruit of the Christian life to really grow and emerge. You know, if I just threw a bunch of seeds on my lawn, a bunch of flower seeds, some things might grow. But if I had a pot full of rich soil and I planted specific seeds in that soil, that becomes the container in the environment in which the thing that I want to grow can actually grow. And I think that that's really one of the most helpful ways we can think about church membership. I think some people think about church membership as like, well, I think churches just came up with this as a way to sort of keep track of who's who and whatever. But that's not really- while there may be practical pragmatic benefits that come with membership, really this is about, I would say, God's sort of designed container within which all of the fruit of the family of God can actually take root and grow up.

**Autumn:** So, to the extent that we're going to discuss it today, this is what we're saying: we do see ways in which we could say church membership is biblical.

**Andy:** Yeah.

**Autumn:** Via this understanding, these images that we've just discussed. If we bring it down to kind of the practical level, us, our listeners, how would you pastorally encourage someone to consider church membership? So, if someone's sorting it through, are there specific reasons you would give them or encouragements you would extend to someone to seriously, thoughtfully consider church membership?

**Andy:** Yeah, for sure. You know, I think that this might be a little bit counterintuitive because this is not the way most of us- you know, we're very individualistic in kind of our modern world in America. I mean, I don't think it's unique to us, but yeah, we're very individualistic. And so, oftentimes when people think about their relationship with God, they think about kind of "me and what I believe" and what I think about myself. And so, if I believe in Jesus and I believe I'm a Christian, that that's sort of how people think about this. But I would say one of the first reasons I would encourage people to join a church is so that you can enjoy, deeply enjoy, the assurance of your faith in Christ. And here's what I mean by that. If you look at the Bible and you think about what assurance is, assurance is a subjective reality. Okay, so security in Christ, our security is an objective reality; if you belong to Jesus, your sins have been forgiven. You've been united to Christ. You've been united into the family of God. Nothing can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ. That's an objective reality, no matter how good or bad day you're having, no matter if you sinned really terribly today or if you just think you knocked it out of the park. Security is an objective reality. But as many Christians can testify in their own life, even if there's an objective reality of security, your experience on a day to day level can go up and down of

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assurance. I remember periods of my life where I'm like, am I, am I really a Christian? I don't know. If I was really a Christian, would I have done that or would I keep struggling like this? This is one of the places where church membership can be such a vital help for experiencing assurance, because I think of assurance like a three-legged stool. You know, there are things that you just have to believe to be a Christian, right? So, do you believe the gospel? Are you trusting in Christ? Are you believing these things as far as you know? There's also the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit. Romans 8, the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we're children of God. So, your assurance might be wavering, but you might say, oh, you know, I believe the gospel. And the inward testimony of the Spirit that, 'I'm a child of God.' One day I might really like feel that and experience that, the other day I might not. But I would say a third leg to that stool is, what is my church family saying? Am I under church discipline for something right now? Have I been put out of the church? If not, I have strong reason to believe that my brothers and sisters are looking at me, and my pastors are looking at me, and they're saying, he or she is with Jesus. And I would say, when all three of those things are working together, what I believe, my experience of the Spirit's testimony in my own heart, and the word of my church family about me in the context of membership, this person is with Jesus. Those three can provide incredible assurance for us through all the different seasons of life.

So, yeah, assurance. I would say another one would be witness. You know, the Great Commission, again, this is sort of pushing against this individualistic impulse. The Great Commission was not given to individual Christians. Like, alright, everybody, just scatter and go tell the nations. It was given to the Church. This is a mission given to the Church, which means it can only be fulfilled congregationally, not individually. And so, I even just think of one of the clearest ways that Jesus says the world will come to be persuaded of the gospel, John 17, His high priestly prayer the night before He's crucified. He prays this, "I do not ask for these only, but for those who will believe in me through their words." So, basically, Jesus is saying, I'm not just praying for my disciples, but for all the Christians that will come to believe through them going out. I pray that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. And so, there's this oneness that's not abstract. Like when the world thinks about the Church, they can't think about this abstract body of all believers through time and history. They're thinking about this particular congregation in my neighborhood, and I happen to know Autumn and her family that go there and I've met their small group, and man, I have seen the way they love each other and they are just so sacrificial for each other, and they care about each other through the hard times of life. And Jesus is saying, when the world sees this concrete, in-flesh, embodied love and unity that can only happen at the congregational level, that's actually going to persuade them of the truth of the gospel. So, I would say, witness. If you are serious about the Great Commission, join a church.

And then I would just say like, this is just kind of common sense, you know, to live out the "one anothers" of the New Testament or the body language of the New Testament. You need a specific congregation to do that. And if you're going to use your spiritual gifts, the question is, well, where and for the benefit of whom, you know? Or the love one another, encourage one another, build one another up, reprove, correct one another, all these "one anothers", these are the- it's not like you just got into the world and do this to anybody and everybody. These were written to local congregations like the church in Thessalonica, you know—love one another, be patient with one another, build one another up. The expectation is you're going to live these out in the context of your local congregation. So, I would say those would just be three reasons to join a church.

**Autumn:** Yeah, the assurance, the fulfillment of the Great Commission, claiming those promises, and then living in love for one another. And in those ways, we experience this kind of fullness within the family of God that we've been talking

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about in our sermon series. Those last few things there, Andy, the “what does church membership entail,” do you want to talk about any of those things in particular?

**Andy:** I don't necessarily. I mean, we could even just land the plane with, what if somebody wanted to become a member at Fellowship Denver, what do they do? or something. Maybe we could do that. I don't know.

**Autumn:** Yeah, yeah. Okay. Alright. I'll just ask that. In terms of our church body, so our family here at Fellowship Denver, if someone wanted to become a member at Fellowship, how would they go about that?

**Andy:** Yeah, so I probably- five or six times a year, we host a six-week group that we just call a DNA Group. And essentially, we just go through who we are as a church, what we believe, how we live together as a church family. You know, we just try to cover the key points of our vision and our beliefs and give people a really clear picture of who we are so that there's kind of- people are making, not only just getting to know us, but if they choose to take that step of membership, we want them to know exactly what they're getting into and what they're committing to, you know?

So, we have a six-week group experience. And then after that, people are invited to take a next step, which would be what we call an elder interview. And that would just be—you're not even at that point, you're not committing to join the church—but it's kind of the next step where you would meet with one of the elders. And we would just get to know you. We might just hear a little bit about your story, how you came to faith in Christ. We would give you an opportunity to ask any questions you might have had about the DNA material. You know, some people are not comfortable talking in group situations. And so, maybe more of a private time like that they'd feel comfortable asking their questions.

And so, those are just great times to kind of go a little deeper. And if at the end of that time, you know, assuming the person has a credible profession of faith and they have understood kind of who we are as a church- and the way I like to think of it and the way we talk about this is, you don't have to even believe everything, every distinctive belief we have. There are some basic, core beliefs—essential beliefs—that you have to believe to be a Christian. This is just what it means to be a Christian. But there are some things that would distinguish us from other churches in town, just in terms of our doctrine and practice; you don't have to believe all those distinctives. But the thing that we tell people is, but can you see yourself being here and happily being a part of this body knowing that we hold to these distinctives? Or is this something that would constantly grate on you and just frustrate you? And so I really try to tell people, if that's where you're at, this might not be the right church for you to join. And I would encourage you to find one where kind of their doctrine and distinctives align with yours more fully so that you- so that every Sunday is not this grating experience, you know.

So, assuming there's alignment or a willingness to just join this body and the distinctives aren't bothersome to somebody and they have a credible profession of faith, then we would just simply ask if they've been baptized. And so, at Fellowship, where we've landed on this is that, convictionally, we would say that the Bible teaches what's called believers baptism, which means that baptism really is reserved for those who have come to believe in Christ and make a credible profession of faith. So, that would exclude like infant baptism. So, that's what we practice here. However, when it comes to accepting people into membership, there are some who come from traditions where they were baptized in as infants, and convictionally that's where they would still hold that belief. We would not exclude them from membership. So, anyway, just to kind of summarize these things to become a member here, you would go through DNA, you'd go through an elder interview, and assuming everything was good there, credible profession of faith, you know, you understood our

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distinctives, are happy to join with us, and you've been baptized in some way, shape, or form, then we would recommend you for membership, and you'd become a member at Fellowship Denver.

**Autumn:** To go back to a picture that you gave us before, it's sort of like saying, I recognize that the church is this container in which these covenant affirmations, tuned from Jesus and His people and the leaders of this particular church, are made. And this is the container within which I want to be planted and realize that this kind of cultivation and growth and new life and the fullness of this family can be experienced. And so, I'm going to be rooted and planted here. And in that it's reciprocal. There is a commitment to service, to generosity, to growing as a part of this family, to behaving like a member of a family.

**Andy:** Yeah, participating, showing up.

**Autumn:** And then there are commitments then that the church and its leadership are making to you to provide that kind of context in which you can grow, in which you're known and can be rooted and grow.

**Autumn:** Yeah. Well, Andy, thanks for having this conversation with me today. I imagine that, as I think about just sort of our podcast conversations as a whole, I think we probably brought up a couple of things today that are maybe new thoughts for people or are pretty counterintuitive, especially like the way in which the Church has authority, the idea of binding and loosing. So, if any of you who are listening just have more questions or thoughts for us, then we'd love to hear from you. So, you can send your questions about today's episode or suggestions about what you'd like to hear us discuss on the podcast in the future to [podcast@fellowshipdenver.org](mailto:podcast@fellowshipdenver.org). Thanks for joining us on the Vision for Life podcast. Special thanks to Adam Anglin for our theme music, to Jesse Cowan, our producer, and to Judd Connell, who provides transcription for these episodes.