

Belonging Means Commitment
Gen 3:18-22, Eph 5:22-33

Well friends, if a man and a woman love and respect each other and want to be together, to live together – than what would stop them from taking the next step of expressing that love and respect by making a marriage commitment to each other and becoming husband and wife?

Well, quite a few things apparently, because the latest stats show that 60% of couples are living together before getting married. The common line of reasoning is that getting married is a big commitment, a lifelong commitment, and so you want to make sure that this is something that will work before you commit to it.

So, in spite of the fact that living together does not actually prepare you to make a marriage work, couples move in together anyways and “try it out” to see if this is something they want to commit to.

And sometimes this living arrangement can drag on for quite a while because one partner is quite happy to live together and get all the benefits of marriage without having to make to make that public, legal commitment which binds you to a member of the opposite sex for life...

And so they keep stalling, putting it off, offering their excuses as to why they can't - or don't really need to make a marriage commitment.

Maybe you've heard some of those classic excuses... “We don't need a piece of paper to tell us that we love each other...” “Things are good right now – why ruin it by getting married???”

And friends I think that many people also have those same kinds of feelings, reservations or excuses when it comes to making a formal commitment in their relationship to the Body of Christ.

You see friends – if someone believes that Jesus is the Messiah; that He is the faithful covenant partner with God that we could never be; that His death and resurrection pay the price for our sin and give us a new relationship with God... and they are experiencing the work of the Holy Spirit transforming them...

Then what would stop them from taking the next step of confessing that reality and making a public membership commitment to be a part of Christ's Body?

Well friends, we can't really answer for other people – but we can answer for ourselves...

And so I put that out to you this morning... what's stopping us from taking that next step in our relationship with Valleyview where we make a formal membership commitment to Christ's Body?

Because friends – the reality at Valleyview is that while we are growing... our actual membership is shrinking.

We have an average of 50-70 people out every Sunday... there are about 120-130 people who are actively connected to our church community – and yet we have only 25 active members on our actual membership roll.

Friends, in many ways it's like we are living together with Christ, "shacking up" with His Body... we're involved and participating and supporting the Church but we're reluctant to make that formal commitment to it.

Now maybe it's because we've never been asked... or we hadn't really thought about it...

But friends I think that deep down its just part of that same reluctance to commit to things that we all have - because once we've committed – we're committed!

We'll have responsibilities and duties and obligations that we must make a priority in our lives – even when we don't feel like it... we'll have to say no to some things because we've said yes to others...

And if we go through a difficult time with our church, or minister, or our fellow members – we can't just quietly stop coming and slip away... we have to confront the situation and try to work things out with each other... that's commitment...

And so if the question of membership comes up – well we can offer up excuses similar to those objections to marriage.

“Hey I don't need a piece of paper to tell me that I love Jesus...” “Look I enjoy coming to worship here and listening to the sermons and the people are nice... why ruin all that by becoming a member...”

We may not even think that there's anything wrong with participating in the life of the Body of Christ without making a formal commitment of some sort to the Church...

And certainly if you are visiting us this morning, or you've just recently started to connect with Valleyview and you're checking us to see if we're a good fit for you – then its ok to

have that kind of “dating” relationship with us as you start out. 😊

But – for the rest of us who've been here for some years now, and have made Valleyview their church home, their church family, and are involved and are a regular part of our church life - I want to challenge us this morning to consider taking that next step and make a formal membership commitment to Valleyview.

Because friends – as I've been saying repeatedly this month: you can't grow closer to Christ without growing closer to His Body – and today we're looking at the fact that Belonging to Christ means that we are committed to His Body.

And so I've had us read Eph 5:22-33 this morning - a passage of scripture which refers to marriage and to the body of Christ and we want to see if this has anything to say to us about commitment.

Now at first glance this passage seems to be defining pretty traditional roles for Christians in their marriages based on the relationship between Christ and the Church.

And we have to acknowledge that what Paul seems to teach here **really** contradicts what most people believe about marriage today and how husbands and wives ought to relate to each other.

But friends I would like to suggest that this passage actually has more to say about our relationship to the Body of Christ and what it means to be committed to the Church than it does about our marriages?

If we approach this passage seeking to discover what we can learn from marriage about our commitment to Christ's Body - we'll find that Paul isn't really instructing us to adopt traditional authoritarian roles for our marriages instead he's teaching us what it means to be part of the Body of Christ.

Now friends – please understand I'm not suggesting this in order to “soften” a scripture which challenges the status quo.

We can't just go changing the meaning of scriptures passage that we don't like, or which make us feel uncomfortable or challenge to our cultural beliefs and practices, especially when there are areas where our culture believes and does things that are wrong.

But friends in this case the entire letter of Ephesians is about the Church and what it means to be a part of it – so it makes perfect sense to consider what Paul is saying in 5:22-33 in light of that.

Paul wrote this letter to help the new believers in Ephesus grasp the totality of what they have been made a part of through their faith in Christ.

He wanted to them to understand that they weren't just a group of people who happened to form a group around a common experience, or common set of beliefs, they weren't

merely a new religion or a movement – they were actually the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ – the new People of God in a way that hadn't ever existed before.

And in the big picture friends...the Body of Jesus Christ, His Church is going to outlast and supersede and actually transform... any and every other religious distinction, social groups, political organizations, and cultural institutions!

Friends I hope that we too, are beginning to grasp the cosmic implications of what the Church really is and what we have been made a part of when the Holy Spirit gave us the faith we need to believe in Jesus.

Because from the outside a church can look like any other organization or institution and it can be easy to miss that spiritual dimension which makes it go beyond the ordinary.

So Paul writes his letter to the Ephesians, specifically crafting it to help them understand what it means to be a part of the

Body of Christ – the Church, and by the time we get to chapter 5 Paul has covered a lot of teaching about the church.

Here's a few verses which summarize how the teaching progresses...

Eph 1:22-23 "And God placed all things under his (Christ's) feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

This is that cosmic, mind blowing dimension of the church....

Eph 2:19-22 "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

Jesus, God, Spirit – As part of the Church we don't just believe the Trinity, we experience being a part of it.

Eph 3:6 *"This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."*

The Church overcomes the distinctions of the Mosaic Covenant.

Eph 3:20 *"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."*

Notice how the Church and Christ are on an equal footing in this passage... So having laid out what the Church is and concluded this with an "Amen!" Paul spends the remaining three chapters describing that "glory in the church."

In other words how the members of the Body will relate to each other because of what the Body actually is...

So Eph 4:15 *"Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."*

And Eph 5:1-2 *"Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."*

So we see this progression going on in the letter of Ephesians – and it parallels the progression that we can experience as we grow in our understanding and connection to Christ's Body in our day to day life.

What I mean is that our belonging to Christ and His Body changes from an abstract notion to something that is concrete

and very real – and then it starts to bump up into the other parts of our life – like our marriage and work and school and so on - and then what happens?

There's conflict. People don't know how to combine what it means to be part of two institutions which define them – like the Church and their empire... or the Church and their family... Can you see how this might be problematic for new believers in Ephesus?

We still have that tug of war today don't we? We find ourselves torn between our commitment to Christ's body and our commitment to family and all that goes along with that.

So Paul in teaching new believers in Ephesus about the Church, Paul also explains how the believers can be members of God's family - the Body of Christ – with all its cosmic, eternal significance and also still function as members of the Roman society and their family – as husband, wife, children and servants.

And he does this by using truths about the church like;

Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. (vs 23) The church submits to Christ. (vs.24)

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. (vs. 26-27)

Christ feeds and cares for his body (vs. 29)

And connecting these truths to how a traditional Roman family would function where the husband was the head of the family.

And through marriage the wife gained property rights, citizenship, and legitimate children who would also have citizenship.

In return she was expected to submit to the husband as the head of the household and manage the affairs of the household.

So Paul is using the reality of Roman marriage in his day to help husbands and wives who had become Christian grow in their understanding of what it meant to be a part of the Body of Christ...

And at the same time He is undercutting and replacing Roman mythology and religion as the basis for Roman marriage.

Instead of submitting to their husbands because of whatever the myth of Romulus and the Sabine women said about submission... they were to submit because the Church submits to Christ!

And husbands ought to love their wives not just because a happy wife meant a happy life, and it was part of the ideals of being a good Roman citizen... but because Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for it...

Do you see what Paul is doing here?

This is less about defining the roles of men and women in “Christian marriage” and more about teaching husbands and wives how their Roman marriage roles can teach them about Christ and the Church – and in doing that Paul also brings their Roman marriage into the Church and redefines what their marriage is based on – making it Christian.

Of course this is possible because marriage is God’s idea – He created it!

That’s why Paul refers to the Genesis 2 passage we read in 5:31 *“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”*

So – you can see that if we consider this controversial passage in light of what it says about our relationship to the Church – it makes more sense... and it still challenges us in two significant ways.

First, this passage challenges us to base whatever we think and believe about marriage and gender roles on biblical truth that reflects our relationship with Christ and the new life of the Holy Spirit in us.

And that starts with accepting and believing that the essence of what God created marriage to be is for a male and female to help each other fulfill God's creational mandate - to be fruitful and multiply and rule over the earth - together.

However, aside from the fact that it has to be male and female, and there must be some sort of "leave" that occurs from the parents – we must recognize there is a lot of freedom within these boundaries for cultures and societies to develop marriage in different ways; traditional Roman marriage, Asian marriages, East Indian marriages, or modern Canadian inter-cultural marriages...

But for any of those marriages to become "Christian," the husbands and wives must base their roles, responsibilities, and why they are committed to each other on Christian truth

– not just social convention – and so this passage still challenges us to have Christian marriages – but that's a topic to explore in a whole other sermon series.

Secondly, and more related to the issue we're focused on in this series - this passage challenges us to look at what marriage might have to teach us about our relationship with the Body of Christ.

Just, as Paul draws on the "authority" aspect of Roman marriage to illustrate the Church's relationship with Christ – we can draw on our culture's conviction that marriage is about making a commitment to help us understand how we can grow in our relationship with Christ's Body.

Friends it takes a formal commitment, and a continued commitment to make a marriage work and last through the ups and downs of life.

And the same is true for the Church – for Valleyview. Friends Christ partners with us... His Body - but the Body won't work

and last through the ups and downs of life and ministry without our commitment!

Friends – why not make that formal commitment?

Because the spiritual reality that has taken place for us friends is that Christ's ultimate commitment to us has made us a part of His body through his death and resurrection and His sending of the Holy Spirit.

So with that being the reality for us - what is preventing us from responding by making a formal commitment to the Body of Christ?

What is preventing us from living that commitment out if we've already made it?

And friends – when people get married in our culture, to show their commitment - they take vows. So if you are wondering how to make that formal commitment or you want to renew

you membership commitment - you can come to me and tell me that you would like to take membership vows.

And we'll arrange for you come up here as we do when people become members and you can make a vow that you will commit yourself to knowing what Christ is doing at Valleyview, and you commit to being a part of it with your time, your treasure and your talents... because you belong to Christ and you know He is committed to You.

Friends – we can learn a lot from marriage about what it means to be committed to Christ and to His Church.

And I'm praying that as we've gone through this scripture passage this morning and reflected on marriage that you will come away having learned what you need to know about how to become more committed to Christ AND His Body

Amen.

