

Saying “I Do”

2 Corinthians 13:11 ESV Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. **12** Greet one another with a holy kiss. **13** All the saints greet you. **14** The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

- I. There is a provision in the Texas Family Code known as a “Common Law marriage”, (also known as informal marriage).
 - A. A common law marriage is considered valid simply by the couple providing evidence that they: “agreed to be married”; and “after the agreement they lived together in (the) state as husband and wife”; and that they “represented to others that they were married”¹.
 1. In this arrangement, no ceremony is necessary wherein a public declaration of love and commitment is made before a congregation of witnesses. There is no sanctioning authority from either the church, or the state, given to the union. No rings need to be exchanged as a pledge of lasting devotion.
 2. Christians have never given their endorsement to such an arrangement. We have believed that without pledges, declarations, and sanctioning authority, you do not have a marriage. We have believed that the accountability that comes from making those pledges before a congregation of witnesses is very important to marital thriving. Without these, neither the man nor woman has any real obligation to the other. Either can leave anytime they want.
 - B. In the last few weeks, we’ve talked about the necessity of formally entering into a covenant of partnership with a local church. This is not unlike marriage in the sense that it is a public affirmation of commitment and mutual submission to one another for the benefit of our discipleship and the reputation of Christ.
 1. But many churches have neglected this important step. They have existed with “common law” membership; meaning that anyone who shows up, or gives, or serves, is considered a member in good standing.
 2. But this ignores the most important aspects of Christianity, like faith towards God and repentance from sin. It allows for very little examination of the depth or genuineness of one’s commitment to Christ and to the church.
 3. The tragic end-result is that the church may be inadvertently admitting people who are not true believers in Christ, thus easing the conscience and reinforcing a false assurance of salvation, and resulting in eternal damnation.
 - a) Church-sanctioned, traditional marriage is a kindness to a young couple, because it barricades them from joining their lives based on nothing more than a fit of passion, or an insecure need for love. It requires them to be sober, serious, and willing to affirm that they are in it for the long haul.
 - b) Similarly, covenant membership in a church is a kindness that says we care more about the reputation of Christ than we do about surface-level inclusivity and padding the numbers. We care about each other’s souls, and are willing to speak up, pointing each other to the scriptures so that none of us are deceived into thinking we’re saved when we’re not.

- C. “Common Law” membership also allows people to feel no sense of loyalty or calling to the church where they attend. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many more churches than ever before have this style of membership in place, making it very easy for people to come and go as they please, at the slightest dissatisfaction, with no sense of obligation to any church body.
1. Again, this is a problem for common law marriages. Statistically, if you're a female serial cohabiter—a woman who has lived with more than one partner before your first marriage—then you're 40 percent more likely to get divorced than women who have never done so².
 2. Many communities have a culture of “church shopping and church hopping”. We may “shack up” for a little while, but we have never been less likely to give our lives to one another in service, sacrifice, and accountability.
- D. But when we take a close look at the New Testament we see clearly that God intended something much deeper than “common law membership” for the members of his Body, the church.
- II. So what did God intend? Listen to Paul in our text today! He paints a very different picture from “common law” membership in the church.
- A. He winds up his 2nd letter to the Corinthians with these words: **“Finally, brothers, rejoice.”** There should exist deep, family relationships in local congregations, that should, in the words of Marie Kondo, “spark joy”.
1. Notice Paul doesn't consider the people in the church as co-workers, or members of the same club; and he doesn't address the church in familial terms such as parents and children, grandparents, cousins, aunts or uncles.
 2. Instead, we are “brothers and sisters”. We are children, in one family, who share the same Father, because of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.
 - a) This relationship shouldn't be lived antiseptically and lifelessly, but we should be known as people who are always found rejoicing together.
 - b) We rejoice in our common salvation, in answers to prayer, in our spiritual progress, and in the beauty of knowing God and being known by Him.
- B. Paul gives us four vital directives as local congregations in order to insure the success of our shared kingdom of heaven enterprise: **“Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace”**.
1. To “aim for restoration” means that we don't try to whip out our magnifying glasses like some spiritual Sherlock Holmes in order to find every bit of minutiae that can separate us, and then claiming the moral high ground.
 - a) On the contrary, it means to live in such a Spirit of gentleness that even in the most necessary (and severe) times of rebuke and discipline, our constant goal is to see people restored to right fellowship with Jesus and his Body. This is what Paul means when he says to the Galatians:
 - b) **Galatians 6:1 ESV** Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.
 2. To “comfort one another” means to **Galatians 6:2 ESV** Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. We consider the needs and heartaches of the other members in the Body above our own demands and concerns, knowing that others in the Body will do the same for us as well.

3. To “agree with one another” means that every part of the Body is under an obligation to find common ground, and not demanding that everyone see from our unique perspective. But this leads to a valid question: with whom’s viewpoint must we all agree? The denomination’s? The pastor’s?
 - a) Not at all. We must all agree with God, as he has declared truth in the written Word. It is the only source of objective truth that we have.
 - b) You may feel that this is impossible, given the vast number of conclusions that honest people have come to about various teachings in the Bible. But all of us must be committed to the scriptures, and not to any particular viewpoint. We dig in where truth is clear, and we discuss and debate in humility where it is not.
 - c) We must all demand that if anyone wants to contend for a different doctrine, they must make their case from the full scope of the Bible and be prepared to be cross-examined because we value the truth.
 4. To “live in peace” will be the net result of all of our aiming for restoration, comforting one another, and agreeing with one another. And what a testimony that will be in a world that rips itself apart over politics, race, money, and every other passing thing.
- C. All of this is accompanied by an incredible promise, one I pray we never take for granted: **“the God of love and peace will be with you”**. When we are reflecting the nature of God, by living in love and peace with one another, we have assurance that he will bring his love and peace to dwell with us.
1. How much mental anguish do we needlessly endure because we forget this simple, but often repeated promise of scripture; that He will be with us? Do you know this is true? Are you living Monday through Saturday like it’s true?
 2. But the cool thing is that he often makes his presence known, sharing his love and peace, not by coming with a bucket of warm fuzzy feelings, but through the ministry of the church! That’s where he shows up the most.
 3. Read the last chapters of most of Paul’s letters and prove me wrong. They are filled with the names of specific individuals who time and time again ministered the love and peace of God to Paul in his present circumstances.
- D. All of this gets sealed with a very uncomfortable command: **“Greet one another with a holy kiss.”** People in America have made jokes about this passage as long as I’ve been alive. Almost like it should have been edited out by now. But Paul tells us that all scripture is profitable for us in 2 Timothy 3:16, so what could the message of this passage be for a bunch of folks in 2019?
1. Even today in many parts of the eastern world, it is not uncommon for a kiss to be given on the cheek as a sign of warm greeting, and familiar love. It means, “I know you and I accept you. I extend to you sincere goodwill.”
 2. Paul is saying that that is the way we should regard each other; not as individuals who happen to go to church together, or who may have the same religious bent, but as people who are not afraid to identify with each others strengths and weaknesses, sufferings and successes.
 - a) We are people who know, accept, and sincerely love one another.
 - b) We accept each other, even though we know through confession our various faults, failures and weaknesses. Yet even knowing these things,

we love each other with a sincere love from a pure heart. And we are confident because of Christ that love will be reciprocated.

- E. Paul ends his letter with a trinitarian benediction. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”
 - 1. Paul starts where everything starts for us: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are saved from sin, death and hell only by grace. We are forgiven and reconciled to God because of grace. We have been united to his body the church by grace. We are nothing without grace. **John 15:5b ESV** “apart from me you can do nothing.”
 - 2. Next, he proceeds to the love of God (which has already been promised to us in verse 11). Never forget that you wouldn’t have ever experienced the grace of Jesus had God not loved you from before the foundation of the world! **John 3:16 ESV** “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”
 - 3. Last, we experience both the grace of Jesus and the love of God, only because of the constant fellowship we have with God through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. **Romans 5:5b ESV** God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.
 - F. The church is to be a place where the grace of Christ flows freely **through** his Body. The church is to be a place where the love of God is **constantly** on display, convicting and compelling lost sinners. The church is to be a place where the saved **experience** the fellowship of the Holy Spirit through the fellowship of his chosen, called-out people.
- III. I hope you want to be a part of the Body. I hope you recognize the the need to be more than just a “common law” member of a church. If you do, it may be time to “put a ring on it.” Consider this a proposal: will you marry us?
- A. What is Jesus looking for in a bride? The answer to that is found in **Mark 1:15b ESV** “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”
 - 1. The first thing that must be found in the bride is **repentance**. You can’t be in love with Jesus and in love with your sin at the same time, anymore than you can say you love your wife and keep a girlfriend on the side. It’s absurd!
 - a) This does not mean that you have to be perfect. None of us are. It means that you hate your sin and don’t coddle or excuse it. It means that you fight your sin and don’t welcome and make provision for it.
 - b) It means that you confess your sin to God and others, and don’t try to pass yourself off as something better than you are, but you limp along with the rest of us, correcting and receiving correction where necessary.
 - 2. But repentance without believing in the gospel is meaningless. We try to repent without the gospel when we just try to improve our morality without trusting in Christ’s work, and Christ’s righteousness; when we put more stock in what we should start doing (or stop doing) more than what Christ has done on the cross and when he walked out of the tomb.

- a) To “believe in the gospel” is to believe that Christ Jesus has accomplished everything necessary for us to be saved, leaving nothing for us to do but to trust his work and obey his commands.
 - b) It’s not just to believe the story of the gospel, but to believe the effectiveness of it, and to place all of our hope in nothing less ever.
- B. Added to that is the testifying sign of baptism. If marriage is our analogy of the covenant of church membership, then baptism is the exchanging of rings; the symbol of identifying with our beloved, of death to ourselves and our desires, and of our coming alive in Him and towards Him.
 - 1. **Acts 2:36 ESV** “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” **37** Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, **what shall we do?**” **38** And Peter said to them, “**Repent and be baptized** every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”
 - 2. A person who says they belong to Jesus, but refuses to get baptized is like a bride who says she will marry a man, but refuses to show up to the ceremony. Both the wedding and the baptism are designed to display your commitment, and show to whom it is you exclusively belong.
- IV. In addition to all of this, becoming a covenant partner allows us to know who it is that really wants to be disciplined in the gospel, their spiritual well-being shepherded. We can’t just assume that everyone here does. Joining allows you to say, “I know I can’t do this on my own. I need some help”. The partners will receive this priority care; not because they are special, but because they are asking for it by joining.
 - A. Becoming a covenant partner allows us to know who really considers this church a home and not just a lily-pad; who it is that takes real ownership in its ministries and sacrificial concern for the other members.
 - B. It lets us know who is prepared to be recognized for leadership (elders, deacon, department heads, etc.). Partners can be entrusted with such responsibilities, because joining demonstrates a concern for what God is doing here.
 - C. Joining lets us know who can be consulted about the private business of the church.
- V. Have you repented of your sin? Do you believe fully in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Have you been baptized to show your allegiance to him? Then let’s make it official. It’s time for you to formally join the church. If you don’t join this one, join another one, but align your life to the life of a unique local body of Christ.
 - A. If you would like to be considered for Covenant Partnership, take a white card, fill out your information, place it in the box at the back of the Worship Center, and we will be in contact with you very soon.
 - B. You must take this step if you would like to be considered a member of NRLC, whether you’ve been a part of this congregation for 2 weeks or 20 years. Everyone (including myself) is starting at square one.
 - C. If you need some time to pray, we’d rather you do that than make a hasty, not well-thought out commitment. And if you have questions, please feel free to contact me or any of the other elders.

- VI. What an exciting time this will be for North Ridge Life Church to unite again around the gospel! To pledge ourselves to one another under the banner of Jesus Christ. To grow more biblical in our approach to the Kingdom of God.
- A. Covenant Partnership is all about the unity of the Body around the crucified and resurrected Christ. We demonstrate that unity every Sunday around the Lord's Table.
 - 1. What we do here today, untold millions of our brothers and sisters are doing along with us around the world. We remember the cross and suffering, and brokenness and bleeding of our Savior together.
 - 2. We remember that all of it purchased for us forgiveness, grace, mercy, healing, deliverance, peace, joy, the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, and one day, eternity with the Father in unending Worship.
 - B. But along with all of that, the breaking and cursing of the Son of Man upon that tree brought us all into family that will never end. United with the Father, Advocated by the Son, full of the Spirit, And one with each other! How blessed are we?
 - C. **1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

¹ <https://guides.sll.texas.gov/common-law-marriage>

² <https://www.thedailybeast.com/divorce-stats-that-can-predict-your-marriages-success>