

On Church Membership

Sermon preached by Rev. Brian E. Coombs on June 19, 2005 at Messiah's Church (RPCNA)

Let Mount Zion be glad, Let the daughters of Judah rejoice Because of Your judgments. Walk about Zion and go around her; Count her towers; Consider her ramparts; Go through her palaces, That you may tell *it* to the next generation. For such is God, Our God forever and ever; He will guide us until death. – *Psa.* 48:11-14

So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. – *Acts* 2:41-42

There are many Christians today who want Christianity, but without the Church. It's sort of like how people want the beer, but without the carbs; the food, but without the fat. And although you may have your beer without the carbs, and your food without the fat, you should not have your Christianity without your church.

The central, primary institution in which God is interested from everlasting to everlasting, is the Church. 'The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all other dwelling places of Jacob' (*Psa.* 87:2). That Jesus said 'If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple' (*Luke* 14:26) means that great emphasis and priority must be placed on the heavenly society above all human endeavors.

What do we read in Scripture? 'For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will always seek your good' (*Psa.* 122:9). 'If I do not remember you, if I do not exalt you, Jerusalem, above my chief joy, may my hand become lame, and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth' (*Psa.* 137:6).

But sadly, there are Christians who want Christianity, with all its teaching and spiritual experience, yet without the Church.

Is the Church a gas station, where a believer can pull up, fill up, and then just pick up and go? Is it a drive-thru, where the believer comes to get what he wants – to be fed – and then leaves hardly to be seen again, unless he happens to be in the area, and just happens to be hungry again?

There are some who go, as it were, from station to station, and drive-thru to drive-thru, with no accountability, no giving, no ministry, no real spiritual nurture, and no regularity in any of these.

Why is this?

In some measure, parachurch ministries (ministries alongside the church), and also the house church movement (gathering of believers, but without the formal structures), have drawn people away from a primary regard for the local, biblically structured church. And although these may offer useful resources and opportunities for Christians, they oftentimes end up competing with the local church, and in some cases become a surrogate church. I'm referring to the radio ministries, and televangelists, and conferences, that people hear and see and attend instead of publicly gathering with the saints for corporate worship on God's holy day. It's sad that some Christians are more committed to listening to John MacArthur, or R.C. Sproul, or whomever else more than they are to their God-appointed pastor or leaders.

Yet at a deeper level, a much deeper level, there is a 'Gnostic influence' at work in the hearts of many Christians today. Some call it 'individualism', but it is really a strain of Gnostic thinking.

The Gnostics separated the spiritual from the temporal. They believed that matter was evil. And therefore, they claimed that God would never become a man, that God has nothing to do with the body, the visible, or the tangible.

In terms of the church, many Christians are Gnostic in their thinking. They are not interested in the tangible, visible expression of Christ's body.

But can Christ be separated from His Body, as the Gnostics did? According to Scripture the Body of Christ is the Church (*Col. 1:18,24*). Can we separate Christ from His Church? The NT knows nothing of a disembodied Christ, nor a churchless Christianity.

Today we're looking at the theme of church membership. And as we consider this theme, at the outset, you must know that the Church is not for everyone. It is not a voluntary organization or society where all people, without qualification, are accepted.

Church membership is only for those who profess saving faith in Jesus Christ as the only means of salvation, and the children of such people. And whether you make a profession of saving faith in Jesus Christ or not, you must unite with the Church if you are to be saved.

Let me put it this way, and listen carefully: 'Outside of the Church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.'

How does that statement sit with you? Is it strong? Is it *too* strong? Does it sound like a statement from some kind of controlling, cultish pastor?

‘Outside of the Church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.’ It was the Church father Cyprian who formulated this statement in the 3rd century. He rightly compared Jesus’ Church to Noah’s ark, and proclaimed that there is about as much hope for someone outside of the Church as there was for the people outside of the ark. Later, notable church theologian Augustine said the same, ‘*Salus extra ecclesiam non est*’ (Salvation outside the Church is not; i.e., there is not salvation outside the Church).

The Roman Church, centuries later, still maintained this expression. Yet in the medieval period (c. 1,000 years ago), that expression was distorted and came to mean that apart from the Church’s dispensing salvation through the sacraments, there was no possibility of salvation. The Roman church (if we could call it that) to this day still holds the same position: people are saved through the sacraments.

But the Reformers were quick to reject that thinking. They rightly preached that salvation, counter to the Catholic teaching, is not on account of the sacraments, but only through faith, and only in Christ. They parted with Rome.

However, they boldly maintained this expression, ‘Outside of the Church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.’

They corrected the errors concerning salvation and the sacraments, but they made no changes to an exclusivist view of the Church. They noted that the Roman Church was *not* the true Church, and that the Reformed churches were the true Church. And outside of them, there was no ordinary possibility of salvation. We know this was their view, because this same expression – word for word – is found in many a Reformed creed and confession - the Second Helvetic Confession (17:11), the Belgic Confession (*Art.* 28), and ours, the Westminster Confession (25:2).

But we need to pause for station identification. Are we saying that one is not a true Christian unless he is a member of a church? Not quite.

R.B. Kuiper, the author of the useful book on the Church ‘The Glorious Body of Christ’ helpfully says: ‘The Scriptural rule is that, while membership in the Church is not a prerequisite of salvation, it is a necessary consequence of salvation.’ Another (John Muether) has said, ‘Our faith is not *from* the Church...But it comes *through* the Church’ (*A Sixth Sola?* in ‘Modern Reformation’, July August 1998, p.25).

I.e., you are not saved because you are a member of the Church. But rather, church membership is the result of having been saved by God through the preaching and witness of the Church of Jesus Christ.

It is true - there are some people, in extremely unordinary situations, who although not members of a church, are notwithstanding true Christians. We would recognize the thief

on the cross in this category. We would also recognize Christians serving life sentences (converted in prison), as well as any Christian who is lost at sea, stranded on a tropical island, or trapped in a dormant volcano. (The ‘unordinary’ cases are marginal - very, *very* marginal). We cannot (and should not) use this as an excuse to remain outside the church’s membership.

All this leads us to note that *God has designed Christianity to exist in the Church, and Christians to be members of the Church.*

When we look at the Scripture we see just this. We see the OT providing pictures which contain the essence of Christ/Christianity. The house of the Lord, the temple, Zion, Jerusalem, and other themes, all find their ultimate meaning *in the Church* of Jesus Christ.

At Psalm 48:12-14 we are summoned by the Psalmist to consider the worth and the splendor of the Church. It’s as though he was a tour guide, or a real estate agent:

Walk about Zion and go around her; Count her towers; Consider her ramparts; Go through her palaces.

There is obviously something noteworthy and remarkable to see *here!* Just as Jerusalem was a marvel of the ancient world, so the Church, too, is ‘the joy of all earth’ (*Psa.* 48:2), the place into which ‘all the nations bring their glory’ *now* (*Rev.* 21:26).

When people were converted under Peter’s preaching in Acts 2, they were baptized and added to the people of God (v.41). They did not stay where they were. They were identified, and became a part of, a different society and people group.

God has designed Christianity to exist in the Church, and Christians to be members of the Church.

But in order to understand this design better, we will ask (and answer) three questions that relate to this truth. If *God has designed Christianity to exist in the Church, and Christians to be members of the Church*, then:

1. What is meant by ‘the Church’?

The simplest answer is that the Church is ‘the called.’ The Greek word for Church (*ekklesia*) means just this. They are ‘the called,’ and are addressed that way in many NT letters (*Rom.* 1:6; *1 Cor.* 1:24; *Jude* 1). The Church is called out of darkness into the marvelous light of God (*1 Pet.* 2:9), called to freedom (*Gal.* 5:13), called to inherit a blessing (*1 Pet.* 3:9), and even though called to suffer (*1 Pet.* 2:21), at the same time called to eternal glory (*1 Pet.* 5:10).

All this is to say that the Church is the people who have been called out of sin and death, and have been brought to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, their righteousness and life.

And all this is wonderfully described in Psalm 87, where heathen nations are ‘born’ in, recorded in, and find a place in, Jerusalem. Even the most persecuting – like Saul of Tarsus – are graciously subdued and accepted by God: Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Ethiopia.

But we can go further in describing the Church. And for our interest today, the Scripture leads us to consider the Church as having both an invisible and yet a visible aspect to it. The Church is:

a) The elect, gathered in Christ *invisibly*

This refers to all the people God has chosen to save in Christ from Adam to the last baby born. It is ‘invisible’ for a few reasons. *First*, we do not know the true, ultimate status of a person’s soul before God. Only He does. The true number and composition of the elect is unknown to us. In this sense the Church is ‘invisible’ (or, ‘unseen’).

Second, we do not see – in any given generation – the full manifestation of the Church. It is hidden from us. We know it is a ‘great cloud of witnesses’ (*Heb. 12:1*), ‘a great multitude which no one can count’ (*Rev. 7:9*), ‘like the stars of the heavens’ (*Gen. 15:5*). But as God has saved a people in each generation, of necessity, that full body of people is unseen by us since many have gone before us, and many will yet come after us.

In this light, the Scripture says: ‘The Lord knows those who are His’ (*2 Tim. 2:19*). And so the Church is the elect gathered in Christ invisible to our finite perception. But at the same time, the Church is also:

b) The professing (and their children), gathered to Christ *visibly*

Many NT letters are addressed to churches; those who have professed saving faith in Jesus Christ (cf. *1 Cor. 1:2*). And a part of this number is also included the children of those professing Christians. At *1 Cor. 7:14*, the Bible acknowledges such children as ‘holy’, i.e., they are ‘set apart’ to God by virtue of the covenant He has made with their parents (as God has always done).

We could liken these two aspects of the Church to two circles, but circles that overlap to some degree, sort of like the moon passing in front of the sun for an eclipse. There will be a portion of the invisible church circle that does not overlap with the visible church circle. That is purely made up of the elect.

In the section of the invisible church circle that overlaps with the visible church circle (that is the middle section that joins both circles) there are persons who are both in the invisible *and* the visible aspects of the church. These would be true Christians who are members of a local church.

In the far section of the visible church circle, which does not overlap with the invisible church circle, are persons who are members of a local church, but not members of the invisible Church. These would be those who profess the gospel, but are not truly saved.

The ‘long and short’ is this:

You can be in the visible church, *but not* in the invisible church. In this case, you are a hypocrite, an unbeliever, though you may be a member of a church.

You can be in the visible church *and* in the invisible church. In this case, you are a true believer who is a member of a true church.

You can be in the invisible church, *but not* in the visible church. In this case, you are either in heaven, elect but not yet saved, or saved but not in a local church.

What is ideal and right, for this earthly life, is to be both in the invisible church and visible church (i.e., born again and a member of local church).

Where are *you*?...

So in review, we learn that the Church has two aspects to it, just like a coin has ‘heads’ and ‘tails.’ The Church is *invisible*, comprising all who have been, are, or will be saved. It is the Church *as God sees it* in its totality. The Church is also *visible*, comprising all who profess Christ as Lord and Savior, together with their children. It is the church *as man sees it*. But note: These are *not* two churches. They are two aspects of the one Church (‘there is one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church’).

Understanding the biblical distinction between the visible and the invisible church, as we do now, leads us to consider a 2nd question, in particular, the appropriateness of church membership:

2. *Why should I be a member of a church?*

Notice how I have said ‘*a church*.’ We’re talking visible church here; local church. A church (among many!) that teaches and lives the truth as it is in Jesus.

And by ‘member’ is meant one who appropriately, as a believer in Christ, has a rightful part or place in the Church of Jesus Christ – not merely the invisible aspect, but the

visible aspect. Only God knows the invisible dimension to the Church. But we function (and must function) in terms of the visible. Indeed, we can function in no other way.

Church leaders cannot read the heart. And so they hear a person's profession. They judge a person's statements. They observe a person's lifestyle. It is true that there are hypocrites in the visible church. But since we cannot judge the heart, we must receive people on the basis of their free, public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as the only Way of salvation, their bearing the mark of a Christian (which is baptism), and their vocal commitment to love and obey the Lord. This leads us right into the heart of 'visible church.' We need some form of outward, visible form to help us recognize and receive the brethren.

I know that some churches are indifferent to membership rolls. Some are opposed to them on the grounds that they are Pharisaical or legalistic. Some do not emphasize them at all. At other churches you automatically become a member if you attend a certain period of time.

But there is biblical precedent for a church to have a membership roll. Acts 2 clearly emphasizes that there was a 'number' to the visible church in Jerusalem (cf. 5:14). Those who were being saved were added to this number (2:47). On Pentecost, 3,000 were added to the church (v.41). By chapter 5 the number reached 'about five thousand' (5:4).

This assumes there was a standard by which to recognize and have record of those who believed in Christ. It is true that this record was not written in Scripture for us. It would not practically have served us at all. But what is clear is that there were a known number of believers who comprised the visible church in Jerusalem.

And this is not something merely of the NT. The OT reveals this same idea. We read in Psalm 87:6 that 'The Lord will count when He registers the peoples: "This one was born there."' In Isaiah 4:3, 'everyone who is recorded for life in Jerusalem' is 'holy'. This is God's perfect record of His people (invisible church).

But the OT also presents a record of the exiles who returned from their Babylonian captivity in the mid-6th century BC. This is a record of the visible church. You can find it in the second and eighth chapters of Ezra. And it's interesting that those who could not give evidence of their ancestry were regarded as 'unclean' (*Ezra* 2:59-63).

'Outside of the Church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.' Outside of the Church, persons forfeit the means by which to be considered the people of God.

A church's membership roll, although obviously imperfect and incomplete when compared to the membership roll of the elect as known by God, notwithstanding represents the Lamb's book of life (*Rev.* 20:15). The visible church *is* the true church insofar as it bears the marks of a true Church with a people who confess Christ rightly.

But all this is not ‘just because it is.’ No, the Bible teaches a rationale for church membership. Here are 5 principles, briefly:

a) God’s design of covenant

Covenants in scripture are a formal, and usually public, thing. There are promises and signs associated with them. At its heart, a covenant speaks of a relationship with specific terms.

We could illustrate with the covenant of marriage. Those of us who have married have taken vows. We acknowledged terms to the marriage relationship, to the effect that we would ‘leave all others and love our spouse in sickness and in health until death.’ These were the terms. They were legal. They are binding. And they provide safeguards to the relationship. There are consequences when the obligations are not fulfilled, and blessings when they are.

But it is immoral, and destructive, to enjoy the privileges of marriage without a formal, legal marriage. The safeguards to the relationship are absent. How common it is that a man and woman live together, as if they were married, enjoy the blessings of the marriage covenant, *but without the covenant*. And if desired, they split with little or no consequence. This is not right. It’s a form of adultery, a breach of the 7th commandment.

A believer, being brought into covenant with Jesus Christ, is also brought into covenant with the Church, again, the Body of Christ. (And we cannot have Christ without the Church). And yet it is common for Christians to relate to the Church in sort of a cohabiting way. The blessings and privileges of the Church are enjoyed by many sincere believers, but without the formal taking of vows in recognition of the bonded relationship.

And like the earthly counterpart, the spiritual relationship between the professing-but-uncommitted believer and the church lacks legality. Tragically, it mirrors what is perverted and unacceptable in God’s eyes in the world. It also lacks the spiritual safeguards for the believer’s good (which I’ll explain momentarily).

In Acts 2 we see people publicly entering into covenant with the Church because they have been brought into covenant with Jesus Christ. They ‘received Peter’s word’, which means they entered a new relationship (i.e., covenant) with Jesus Christ through repentance and faith (v.41 with 38). And with this they testified to this new relationship by receiving the sign of this covenant, which is baptism (v.41). All this they did publicly, and in the presence of fellow covenanters and Christ-appointed leadership. They became members of the true, visible church in Jerusalem because God’s design by covenant.

A 2nd reason for becoming a member of a church is:

b) God's design of authority

Jesus, as King and Head of the Church, has delegated, appointed and vested authority in those men elected by the congregation to serve as its leaders (note that – 'serve as its leaders.')

Not all servants are leaders, but all leaders are servants. That is the nature of their authority.

Their authority is also spiritual, not civil or physical. Neither does it originate with themselves. It comes ultimately from Christ and is inextricably connected to the Scripture.

But the leaders of a congregation have real authority. Christ clothes the elders of a local church with the authority to rule under (and for) Him. This is made clear throughout the Scripture:

Jesus gave the apostles (and by implication *all* elders in His Church) 'keys' of the kingdom. The fact that whatever elders 'bind or loose on earth' is also 'bound or loosed in heaven' speaks to the exercise of their authority in close association with the authority of heaven itself (*Matt.* 16:19; 18:18). Christ Himself gave them this – 'I will give you the keys.' Church authority is Christ's authority.

Further, the congregation gathers under the rule of the elders. We read that God's people extol Him 'in the congregation of the people, and praise Him *at the seat of the elders*' (*Psa.* 107:32). I.e., they gather publicly under the judicial oversight ('seat') of elders. People worship; elders rule. We see this also at Psalm 122, where the pilgrim worshipers come together at Jerusalem where 'thrones are set for judgment' (v.4). Where there is grace as the basis for worship and fellowship, there is also law to guide that worship and fellowship.

We read in Scripture that elders 'have charge *over*' the congregation (*1 Thess.* 5:12). In this light, the congregation is to 'obey and submit' to them (*Heb.* 13:17) for as Acts 20:28 says, they have been made overseers by the Holy Spirit.'

In all of these passages, the authority of Christ is brought to bear on the congregation through the ministry of the eldership.

Now the logic (and real 'punch') is this. If elders are made overseers chiefly by the Holy Spirit, then His work is also to bring believers under their oversight. And so if as a believer you do not give yourself to the oversight of duly appointed elders, you are, *in fact*, resisting the Holy Spirit.

When all is ‘said and done,’ then, to unite formally with a church is to acknowledge the authority of Christ in His Church. *Not* to unite formally with a church is not only not to submit to the authority of Christ as manifested in His Church, it is at the same time to set oneself up as the standard of authority in His place.

If this sounds like a strong statement, it’s because it is. Such is the teaching of Scripture. Such is a needed word in a generation of disorderly and sloppy Christianity. Such is a needed word in an age that more and more despises authority.

This leads us to a 3rd reason why you should be a member of a church:

c) God’s desire for order

‘God is not a God of confusion’ (*1 Cor.* 14:33). He is a God of impeccable order...And because He is orderly, His Church must be orderly, as the Scripture says, ‘all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner’ (*1 Cor.* 14:40).

Clearly, the elders of a church have the responsibility of oversight (as we’ve seen). And equally clear, they cannot oversee every Christian. Clearer, they must oversee those believers that are among the flock over which they as rulers have been appointed and given charge. Most clear, there must be a true relationship between sheep and shepherd for these responsibilities to be carried out. Formal, public membership in the local church secures that relationship.

We can illustrate by how the Church is illustrated in the Bible: by a body and a household. Each of these have orderliness to them. How would your body function without your head? Would it function orderly and productively? Would it even function? How would your household function if you did not have a clear idea as to who rightly belonged in your home, and for whom you were responsible? Does a father feed, clothe, nurture, and provide for the children *of the entire neighbor?*

A church that is to function well must have orderliness and clearly defined parameters for that orderliness. And membership - the formal, public receiving of believers and their children into the local church and its life - secures that orderliness.

A 4th reason why you should be a member of a church is on account of:

d) Believers’ need of nurture

Notice what Acts 2 teaches about the believers, and their being added to the Church. They were nurtured. Having been baptized (v.41), they were nurtured in the apostles’ teaching, the sacrament (‘the breaking of bread’), and through prayer (v.42). They were also nurtured by means of healthy, loving relationships with other believers (vv.46-47).

They were together, and they were growing in spiritual health. Would they be nurtured like that somewhere else? The NT is silent in mentioning another place where this could occur; and its silence is deafening!

You should be a member of a local church because you need nurturing. And nurturing has a regularity, a familiarity to it. Imagine an infant being passed from mother to mother at irregular intervals for its breastfeeding. Would it develop a proper bond of intimacy? It would likely be deficient in nurture. Yet many a Christian does just this, going from one source of nurture to another.

Listen carefully. We make much (as we should) of the doctrine of adoption; that through faith, God receives us into the number and gives us a right to all the privileges of His children.

But think further. If God is your heavenly Father, then who is your spiritual mother? Surely it is not Jesus. Surely it is not the Holy Spirit. It is the Church.

Our ancient friend Cyprian, once again, has provided another excellent statement: ‘You cannot have God as your Father unless you have the Church as your mother.’

What was he thinking? Exactly what the apostle Paul taught at *Gal. 4:26*, interesting, *just after* the teaching of adoption: ‘Jerusalem above (i.e., the Church) is free; *she is our mother.*’

John Calvin helps us understand the implications of this:

Let us learn even from the simple title ‘mother’ how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know [the Church]. For there is no other way to enter life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we angels. Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.

He says again, ‘The Church is the mother, and she has the milk and food that the Father has provided to nourish His adopted children.’

To be a Christian, and yet not be a member of a church, is to live as if saying that your Father has begotten you illegitimately.

In the very frank, but accurate, words of one contemporary Reformed pastor, ‘We must stop commending to people the one-parent family of God as father, without the church as mother, and its consequent bastardization of believers.’ (Michael J. Glodo, ‘*Sola Ecclesia: The Lost Reformation Doctrine*’ in *New Horizons*, January 2005).

An illegitimate child is not who you are. As a believer in Christ, you are not an illegitimate child. You have a heavenly Father (God) and a spiritual mother (the Church). You are a true child of God, and you are called to recognize, and act in light of, your identity.

Have we been so influenced by our culture's brokenness in the family unit that we now spiritually think only in terms of one parent? We should not.

Philip Ryken, in his book *The Communion of Saints*, has accurately noted the relation of membership in the church to spiritual health. He says, 'Failure to become a church member, or to take one's church membership seriously, hinders the communion of saints.'

In our recent preaching series in 1 Peter, we have considered a lot about our identification with *Christ*. But with this comes an equally important need to know of our identification with *Christians*. By virtue of your new birth by the Spirit through the ministry of the Church, you were brought into a world where you have brothers and sisters. Being united to Christ, we are therein united to one another. And with them, you, too, are nurtured by a common mother, the Church.

'You cannot have God as your Father unless you have the Church as your mother.'
'Jerusalem above (the Church)... *she is our mother*' nurturing and feeding us with the pure spiritual milk of the Word, and the bread and wine of the Supper.

A final reason why you should be a member of a true church:

e) Believers' need of discipline

Being a part of any family, as a child, entails nurture and discipline. A father and mother, if they love their children, will not only nurture them to do what is right, but also will discipline them when they go astray and act contrary to what is expected of them. The same is true for a believer under the authority of his heavenly Father and spiritual Mother.

The writer to Hebrews said, 'If you are without discipline, then you are illegitimate children and not sons' (*Heb.* 12:8). But again, you are not so. You are sons, and thus you receive discipline that you may grow in Christ.

This is why Christ established a manner in which sin can be dealt with within the Church. An offended brother first goes to his offending brother to make peace (*Matt.* 18:15). If the offending brother does not hear, he is visited by more witnesses (v.16). If he still will not turn from his sin, the matter comes before the church. And if he will not listen to the church, he is regarded as outside the church, for such he is (v.17). The decision, 'bound

and loosed' by the elders, is the outworking of what has already been 'bound and loosed' in heaven (v.18). Christ is there with them in the exercise of their authority (v.20). The same language is used when the incestuous man was removed from the church at Corinth (*1 Cor. 5:4* with vv.2,13).

All this assumes a formal relation of a believer to a congregation *and* its appointed leadership. To put someone *out* of the church by a formal, public action assumes that he was brought *into* the church in a similar way.

For all these reasons – God's design of the covenant and authority, His desire for order, and believers' need of nurture and discipline – all believers should unite themselves to a true congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ that conforms most closely with the Scripture in both faith and practice.

You will do well to examine these things. See that they are so. And then walk by faith, with a heart that seeks to honor God, in these things. And God will bless you as you do.

We all need encouragement to do the right thing before God where we're at. For some of us it is to unite with the church. For some of us it is to know why we do what we do, and how we are where we are in the Church. For others of us it is to live not for (and by) ourselves, but in communion with (and service to) others.

God has designed Christianity to exist in the Church, and Christians to be members of the Church. We've answered the questions 'What is meant by the Church?', and 'Why should I be a member of a church?'. But a final question:

3. *What should I do as a member of this church?*

Notice how we've gone from '*the Church*' to '*a church*' to '*this church*.'

a) Words to the baptized, but not yet professing, members

Children - true or false: You are a member of this church. If you said 'yes,' then you are right. You are a member of the Church by your baptism. This sets you apart from many other children. God has made a promise to you that He will be your Savior through faith in Christ and repentance from sin. And you can be sure this promise is true by your baptism. That is God's sign that He means what He says.

But you are called to profess faith in Christ as Lord and Savior and be fed at the Lord's table. This is what is meant by a 'communicant member' of the church. Right now many of you are 'baptized members' but not yet 'communicant members.' What this means is that God should not merely be 'your *father's* God,' but '*your* God' (*Exo. 15:2*). Christ should not merely be your *father's* Savior, but *your* Savior.

And if you trust Christ as *your* Savior, then you should tell your parents you do, and also tell your pastor/elders. But so that you might, I have five things for you to do as you seek to know Jesus as your Savior:

Listen. Listen to the preaching/teaching each Sunday morning. It sometimes may seem long, and many things you may not understand fully, but listen to it, as it is the way God will give you faith (*Rom. 10:17*), and the wisdom that leads to salvation which is through faith in Christ (*2 Tim. 3:15*). Listen also to your parents' instruction and what they tell you about Jesus and the way you can be saved from you sins.

Look. Look during the sacraments. When someone is baptized – especially a baby or young person – that is what it was like when you were baptized. Watch the water when it is poured on someone's head. This is a picture of your sins being washed away by Christ's blood. Also look when we have the Lord's Supper. The bread broken is Jesus' body given for us at the cross. The cup being poured out is Jesus' blood being shed so that sins could be forgiven. Also look at the way we live as church. Watch how your parents do what is right. Watch how your pastor/elders live lives of service to Christ. For this is how you are called to live.

Learn. Learn to read the Bible. Learn how to pray, asking for the Holy Spirit (*Luke 11:13*). Learn how to treat others with love and kindness. Learn the catechism, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's prayer. Above all, learn about Jesus – who He is, and what He has done for you in His death and resurrection.

So children, listen, look, and learn as you seek to know and follow Jesus as members of this church.

But I also have:

b) Words to the professing, communing members

All these above exhortations to the children apply to you, too. But more can be gleaned from Acts 2, and I put these before you that you may live more fully as communing members of this church, not 'communing' merely in the sense of eligible to come to the Lord's table, but 'communing' in sense of being fully involved in the lives and ministry of this congregation.

On the basis of v.42, *commit to public worship and the means of grace*. The early church was 'continually devoted' to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship/breaking of bread (i.e., the sacrament), and to prayer. Be consistent with attendance at public worship. Do not merely attend, but prepare. Finish your six days of work as surely as the six days finish themselves. Prepare your heart and mind with prayer before you worship; not there

in your seat before the minister enters, but as soon as you awake, and as you go about your morning at home. Pray not only for the preacher, but also for the hearer, even yourself. Pray for more baptisms. Truly recognize your Savior in the breaking of the bread and pouring of the cup. If you are available, attend Bible study or prayer meeting throughout the week. Be regular on private exercises of worship and devotion. Be consistent in family worship. *Commit to public worship and the means of grace.*

On the basis of v.43, *stand in awe of what God is doing among us.* ‘Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe.’ With apostles doing miracles, this would be understandable. But how about now that apostles and the age of miracles has ceased? Does God still do remarkable things? *He does.* People are coming to Christ. The gospel is going forth. And what is your response to that? Do you stand in awe? Do you take note of, and speak about, the great things God is doing in your life? Do you ask others what God is doing in theirs? How has He rescued you of late? What battles have you recently fought, and won, by grace? How has He answered prayer? Truly, God has answered prayers we have asked. And we, as a privileged people in Christ – the most privileged people on earth – should always be characterized by a sense of awe at our God. ‘Our God is an awesome God.’ He does awesome things. *Stand in awe of what God is doing among us.*

On the basis of vv.44-45, *serve, even when it entails sacrifice.* Imagine living like the early church lived – selling your property to help a brother in need. Sharing your possessions – as any might have need. They served each other – even when it entailed sacrifice, sometimes great sacrifice.

Do you serve through sacrifice? Or is that the point at which you stop your serving? Do you give even when you lack? To be a member of the church is to recognize the union you have with your brother and to live in communion with your brother; to share as he might have need. Only when we abandon ourselves, regard others as more important than ourselves, and affirm the truth of loving our neighbor as ourself, and treating him the same way we would want him to treat us, do we live as communing members.

We are to be a people who take the communion we have at the sacrament into the community we are as the saints.

On the basis of vv.46-47, *continue in joyful fellowship with each other.* Be glad that you have been brought together in Christ. Apart from Him we may never have come to meet each other; our lives may never have crossed. But in Him we are gathered as one. Rejoice in that. Live with each other as though you all just came to Christ, and are together, humbled, and celebrating, beneath the cross. What room will there then be for bitterness, for impatience, for envy, and other sins? *Continue in joyful fellowship with each other.*

Note what God does in the context of these things – ‘The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved’ (v.47b). That’s not to say that God

depends on our doing 'abc' so that He will do 'xyz.' It's to say that the work of the Spirit is to lead us – and in time, others - into these things with knowledge, commitment, and passion. This is basic Christianity; this is real Christianity.

*God has designed Christianity to exist in the Church, and Christians to be members of the Church. In *this* context then, listen, look, learn, live, and love to the glory of God and the good of each other.*