



Profession of Faith and Church Membership

Romans 10:5-13

1 Corinthians 12:1-13

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What I thought that I would do in this sermon is review some of the biblical teaching on what it means to be a member of the church of Jesus Christ. This morning we have witnessed three of our baptized members publicly profess their faith in Jesus Christ as part of the process of becoming communicant members of the church. As well we have witnessed a reaffirmation of faith as part of the process of transferring membership into our congregation. To help us understand the significance of all of this, I have distributed a copy of part of the section from the Form of Government of our denomination which summarizes what we believe the Bible to teach about church membership. What our Form of Government actually claims for itself concerning its relationship to Scripture is expressed in chapter 1, paragraph 6, “The ministry, laws, worship, and sacraments of the New Testament Church were given either directly by Christ Himself, or by His Apostles, or have been formulated by inference from and in agreement with their teachings.”

What that means is that there is not a proof text for every guideline in the Form of Government, but it is claiming that everything in it is based either directly on the teaching of Christ and the Apostles in the New Testament or is “inference from and in agreement with their teachings.” The fact is that the Bible does not give us a detailed form of government for the church, but it does give us everything that we need to fashion a form of government that is based on the teaching of Scripture – either directly, by inference from or in agreement with.

So today we will look at church membership. And we will begin with the practice of requiring vows as a requirement for church membership. Where in the Bible do we learn that it is necessary to actually be a member of a church and to make vows as a means of entering into membership.

We begin with the biblical requirement to publicly confess our faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself is very insistent that his followers acknowledge him publicly. In Matthew 10:32, Jesus says, “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven....” Then we have Romans 10:9-10 which says, “[I]f you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” And finally on this subject 1 Timothy 6:12 where Paul writes to Timothy, “Take hold of eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”

These verses together teach the necessity of confessing our faith before men publicly and the one about Timothy indicates that it was the practice of the early church that such a confession was done formally in the presence of many witnesses. This does not mean that publicly making profession of faith in a formal ceremony is the extent of what it means to confess Christ publicly. We are to be public about our relationship to Jesus as we live in the midst of the world. But part of that is the formal profession of faith in the presence of witnesses.

Now there is another aspect to this that is very important. This has to do with the fact that believers are in a covenant relationship with God and his church and a covenant relationship by its very nature requires public commitments. This is most clearly seen from the covenant making ceremonies in the Old Testament. In the covenant-making ceremony recorded in Exodus 24 we read in verse 3, “Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.” This was a public and formal commitment that the people were required to make to God that they would abide by all the words that he had spoken to them. The Bible has a lot to say about the covenant relationship between himself and his people and one of

the things that is clear from all that teaching is that it is a formal relationship which includes oaths. God swears oaths to his people, and he requires that his people formally commit themselves to lives of faith and obedience.

The New Testament makes it clear that the relationship between God and his people in and through Christ is a fulfillment of the Old Testament covenant relationship called the new covenant and so while the new covenant is a far richer covenant than the Old Testament covenants had been, it is still a covenant and by their very nature covenants are formal committed relationships that involve formal oaths.

Now this is all very important for our understanding of church membership. Our culture is obsessed with the freedom of the individual to follow his or her own heart and to live as he or she pleases. One of the results of that is that people are very hesitant to make commitments. They want to keep their options open. They do not want to restrict their future options by making binding commitments. That is why, for instance, so many people live together without getting married. People don't want to place themselves under long term obligations. They don't want to be tied down. They don't want to restrict their choices.

Church membership is the opposite of that. The covenant relationship between God and his people is designed to fence us in, to restrict our choices, to place us under obligations.

It is significant that the Bible teaches the complete opposite of the world and our own sinful hearts in its teaching on slavery and freedom. It teaches that to insist on the freedom to live as we please is actually slavery to sin. And it insists that submitting to the restrictions and obligations that God imposes upon us is actually freedom to live the life of flourishing we were designed and saved to live.

And the whole idea of church membership and vows of church membership is based on this truth of the biblical teaching. Our Form of Government does not say too much about the blessings of church membership because it is not a comprehensive treatment of the

subject. It does say that the “children of communicant members are entitled to the pastoral care, government, and nurture of the church” and it does give a short list of some of the rights and privileges of church membership, but those are only the tip of the iceberg, when it comes to the benefits of church membership. Church membership is a part of salvation itself as the Bible describes salvation and that is hinted at in the questions for profession of faith.

But there are a lot of commitments that are required – oaths made to God in the presence of his people. You promise to “live all of life as a Christian,” “in the strength of the Holy Spirit.” You promise to “exercise stewardship of God’s resources entrusted to you for the furtherance of God’s kingdom and purposes.” You accept that our standards are based on the Bible as far as you understand them. You promise to submit “to the government and discipline of this church.” You promise to “seek the peace, purity, and prosperity of this congregation as long as you are a member of it.”

By making those commitments you are giving up a lot of freedom as the world understands freedom. You are placing yourselves under tremendous life-shaping obligations. There are similarities to the commitments made in marriage. By becoming a communicant member of the church of Jesus Christ you are committing to obligations that will severely limit, what you do with your time, what you do with your money, and generally how you will live your life.

Look at the list of responsibilities of church members in our Form of Government. Each one of those is rooted in biblical teaching. “Church members are required to: A. Make diligent use of the means of grace. B. Share faithfully in the worship and service of the Church.” That means that you are required to be here when the church meets for worship or for prayer. It does not mean that you can never be absent, but the Bible explicitly says that we are not to neglect meeting together in Hebrews 10:26. Church members are required to be deeply involved in the life of the church. “C. Give of their substance as the Lord may prosper them.” Church members are required to give liberally to support the work and the mission of the church. “D. Render wholehearted service to Christ and His kingdom throughout the world.” This means being

wholeheartedly involved in helping the church fulfill the Great Commission. It means living lives of service and love to other people for Christ's sake particularly fellow members of the church.

"E. Continue in the peace and fellowship of the people of God." The Bible calls us to love one another, to live a peace with one another, to be involved in the life of the church. We read of the members of the early church that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42). "F. Submit to the authority of the elders." We considered that in detail last week and so I won't go into that now. "G. Live so as to bear faithful witness to the Gospel." God calls us to be witnesses to Christ and to the gospel by means of our lives and by means of our words and by means of our giving.

Church membership is not intended to be a peripheral part of our lives. It is not intended to take up a few hours of our lives each week. That is very clear from the biblical teaching and that is what is reflected in the vowed for profession of faith and the explanation of them in our Form of Government. One verse that sums this all up is all up is 2 Corinthians 5:15 which says that Jesus "died for all that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." The rest of the New Testament spells this out in considerable detail when it describes the life that is to flow from the saving grace of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Romans 12:10 tells us to "Love one another with brotherly affection." Verse 13, "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." 1 Corinthians 13:7 says "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Verse 24-26, "God has so composed the body ... that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored all rejoice together." Ephesians 4:16 says that "When each part is working properly... the body grows so that it builds itself up in love." Ephesians 5:2 tells us to [W]alk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" Philippians 2:4, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

I list these verses to make it absolutely clear that the vows required for church membership are solidly based on biblical teaching.

So by making those vows we commit ourselves to life-dominating participation in the life of the church. We place ourselves under formal obligation not to live for ourselves but for Christ and that is fulfilled to a large extent by participating in the life of the church.

And this is not a side matter of the salvation that is in Christ. What we must understand is that salvation in Christ is profoundly corporate. If we are saved, there is an intensely personal aspect to it. Our sins are confessed. Our hearts are renewed by the Holy Spirit. We place our trust in Jesus. We repent of our sins. We are reconciled to God so that we have a relationship with God in Christ. There is an undeniable and absolutely necessary and precious personal aspect to salvation. But there is also an undeniable and absolutely necessary and precious corporate and communal aspect to it.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 is a key verse here, though there are many verses that teach this truth. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” Baptism is a sign and seal of the washing away of our sins, but it is also a sign and a seal of being united to the body of Christ. When you are united to Christ you are automatically united to his body and you cannot have one without the other. It is in that sense that salvation itself has a corporate aspect to it that belongs to its essence.

And that translates into both unspeakable blessings but also life-dominating obligations. And as is always true of our obligations to God, the obligations are part of the blessings. It is similar to marriage and family. Husbands, wives, children, brothers, sisters, parents – they all come with obligations. You have profound responsibilities to the other members of your family, but those responsibilities and obligations are part of what makes family life to be so rich and precious. And so it is in our relationship with Jesus and his body.

Life without obligations is empty and pointless. Those who seek to live without obligations live empty lives, but not only are their lives empty, their very selves become empty and without substance. We are designed to develop into people of character and substance in and through our responsibilities and obligations to God and to other people. And this is one of the great blessings of salvation. Salvation is about being saved from the penalty of our sins and from the destructive power of sin in our lives. That is why Jesus died. But the working out of that salvation in our lives – the experience of the blessedness of salvation in our lives involves embracing and living out the obligations of love – love to God and love to other people.

And the church is at the heart of that. Salvation includes membership in Christ's church. This is why the Westminster Confession of Faith says of the church, "It is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, outside of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation." (WCF 25:2)

It is really important that we understand this. It is really important that we understand that this is the biblical teaching about salvation. We are living in a time of radical individualism. It is a time of extreme and blatant selfishness. Life is seen to be about the individual and the individual pursuing his or her own desires and pleasures. And that fits very well with the sinful inclinations of our own hearts. It is the most natural thing in the world for us to live for ourselves and live for fulfilling our own desires and inclinations.

But we must understand that this is the way of death. It is the opposite of what God requires of us. It is the opposite of how we were created to live. It is the opposite of how we are saved to live if we are believers. We were created and saved to live for the glory of God and the biblical description of what that kind of life looks like is summarized as loving God with all our hearts and loving our neighbor as ourselves. The biblical description of what that means also involves being profoundly involved in the life of the church.

That is, according to Scripture the way of life. That is the life that is pleasing to God and the life that is pleasing to God is the very best way for us to live. True freedom in biblical terms is fulfilling our obligations

to God and to his people and to his church and to the world. And all of this is summarized in the vows of church membership.

Now this is a demanding way to live. This goes against the grain of our natural inclinations and so it is not something that comes naturally to us. The Bible does not hide the fact that God requires that we live for him rather than living for ourselves and that living for God involves sacrifice, service, self-denial and faithfulness to the commitments that he requires of us. But it is also clear that we cannot live that way in our own strength. The only way that we can even begin to be faithful to our vows of church membership is by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit.

We see this in the way in which the Bible presents its requirements for living the Christian life. The commands to live for God and to live lives of sacrifice, service, self-denial and submission, always are rooted in the transforming power of God in the gospel – which means they are rooted in Jesus Christ and what he has done for us and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit who dwells in those who believe in Jesus. So for instance, in 1 Corinthians 12 which speaks of the body of Christ and how Christians are members of the body of Christ and are gifted to serve the body, Paul makes it very clear that the ability to live this way comes from God.

In 1 Corinthians 12:3, Paul writes, “[N]o one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.” The confession, “Jesus is Lord” was part of the confession of faith that the early Christians made when they became members of the church. And Paul makes it clear that the only way that anyone can every genuinely make that confession is by the power of the Holy Spirit. That is no less the case for those who have publicly professed their faith this morning or have professed their faith formally sometime in the past. The willingness to submit to Jesus Christ as Lord is a gift of God through the Holy Spirit. This is not something that we have within ourselves in our natural condition. Paul makes the same point in Philippians 2:13, when he writes, “[I]t is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” The willingness to submit to Jesus as Lord is a gift of God.

And so is the power to begin to live in accordance with that willingness. In 1 Corinthians 12:6, Paul writes, “[T]here are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.” He goes on to mention the various gifts of the Spirit and then in verse 11 he says, “All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.”

It is important that we understand this. The Bible makes it clear that the life to which we commit when we confess our faith and assume the obligations of church membership is a life that demands a great deal of us in terms of effort, and time and money and service. It makes it clear that following Jesus is very, very demanding in ways that are the exact opposite of our natural inclinations. And we can think of those demands and requirements and be discouraged because we can’t see how we can possibly live that way. The biblical answer is that we can’t in our own strength, but that one of the key aspects of salvation is the enablement that Jesus has procured for us by his saving work for us to begin to live this way and to grow in conforming to the way of life that is the fruit of salvation.

The high calling of the Christian life is rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ which is the good news that those who believe in Jesus are forgiven for all their sins and are enabled to begin to live the life that God requires of us and that is truly the best way to live. This is greatly encouraging. It is this that gives us the hope to embrace God’s calling upon our lives to live the life of obligation that he calls us to live.

Is it hard? Yes it is! Is it demanding? Yes it is! Is it good? Yes it is! Is it worth it? Yes it is! It is realistic to require us to live a God and church-focused life. Yes it is! As we have already seen from 2 Corinthians 5:15 that Jesus “died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” A couple of verse further on he writes, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come.”

But how does this work? It comes to a large extent through the church. The church is both the focus of our service, and the means by God conveys to us his strength for service. Notice how the first responsibility of church members listed by our form of government is “Make diligent

means of grace.” The means of grace are those instruments that God uses to save and build up his people in the faith. They are the word of God, the sacraments and prayer. There is a great emphasis in the Bible on the word of God and the preaching of that word for the salvation and growth of God’s people. Paul writes to Timothy, in 1 Timothy 4:16, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” Ephesians 4:16 says that “we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” by “speaking the truth in love” to one another. God uses his word in a powerful way for our salvation and spiritual growth and that word is at the center of the life of the church.

God uses the sacraments as well. Jesus Christ gave us baptism and the Lord’s Supper as a means to encourage us, to strengthen our faith, to remind us of our obligations and commitments as his people. And prayer. Jesus said in Luke 11, “[A]sk, and it will be given you; seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you.” And “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

We have considered the high calling of church membership. We have considered the serious nature of the commitments that we make and the life-dominating nature of the obligations that belong to being a member of the body of Christ. God calls us to be heavily involved in the life of the church. He calls us to sacrifice, service, self-denial which are all ways of saying that he calls us a life of love – for him and for his people and for the world. Make no mistake. Church membership as the Bible describes it is very demanding. But it is at the same time the way of obedience and the way of pleasing God which is the way of life. It is completely beyond our ability in our own strength, but the good news of the gospel is that Jesus died not only that we might be forgiven, but also that we might truly live a life that is good and that is worthwhile and that is pleasing to God. What is impossible with man is possible with God – also here. May the Lord enable all of us to embrace this calling and by the power that comes through Christ by the Holy Spirit live the life that is pleasing to God.