

MEDITATIONS ON CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND THE SACRAMENTS

JOHN 17 WHY BOTHER?

Why bother? Why bother with the church?

Last year, a Christian organization did a survey of young adults. They found that 7 in 10 stop bothering to go to church by the early '20s. Some come back by age 30. But many do not.

Why? Here are some of the most-stated reasons:

- * They “found church members judgmental or hypocritical.”
- * They were “too busy.”
- * They “disagreed with the church’s stance on political/social issues.”
- * They felt more connected with people outside the church than with people inside the church.

Another researcher says people in their 20s are “significantly less likely to believe a person’s faith in God is meant to be developed by involvement in a local church.”

But it’s not just young adults. How many people of all ages do you know who claim to be Christians, but have little or no church involvement?

Why bother? Why bother with the church? Why bother to attend? Why bother to unite in membership?

As Jesus prays for his people, he prays for their unity. One way we profess and express that unity is through church membership.

Why bother? Why bother with the church?

First, because we have ONE HOPE.

Some of you have heard me describe a game played by British pilots on the Falkland Islands. Sometimes when they are flying, the pilots will see a group of penguins on a beach. They will descend and fly down close to the penguins. Then they will come back and do it again and again.

As one, the penguins will look up then back and forth. Then when the pilots zoom away, the penguins look up still higher. Then all together, all the penguins fall onto their backs.

In Jesus, we are all looking at the same hope. We are looking at him.

In verse 1, Jesus prays, “Father, the time has come.” The time has come for Jesus to suffer and die on the cross for the sins of his people. This is our one hope of forgiveness from God and reunion with God.

In verse 2, Jesus prays, “For you granted him (Jesus) authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.” We are reunited to God in Jesus’ death, so we have one hope of eternal life.

Yet that is not just a future hope. In verse 3, Jesus prays, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” We can now hope to know God.

We express this hope in our first two membership questions:

* Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?

* Do believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the gospel?

Is your hope in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, union with God, and an eternal life of knowing God, starting today?

Jesus does not pray for his people to profess or express a purely private religion. He prays for them to profess and express one hope, together.

Why bother? We have one hope. We have ONE HELP.

Several years ago, after the Asian tsunamis, some surfers in Australia decided to do something to raise

money for the victims. They gathered a crowd to watch, and they broke the world record for most surfers on one surfboard. They got a huge board, and 47 people stayed on the board for four minutes.

You may be thinking, “Good for them. Not for me.” You may not want to bother with it.

But what if you have to? What if you have to surf? Would you rather do it alone, or with other people who might help when the waves come?

It’s like the Christian life. You may say you want to stay out of the waves, but then they smash into you anyway. Dare you go it alone?

Jesus prays in verse 15, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.” Satan is the “evil one.” He will do anything and everything to smash into your hope.

The wave of illness. The wave of temptation. The wave of financial ruin. The wave of rebellious children. The wave of divorce. Where is help?

Jesus prays in verse 17: “Sanctify them by your truth; your word is truth.” To be sanctified is to be made more holy, like Jesus.

Even as the waves smash, Jesus prays for his Father to make his people more holy, as they are filled with his truth.

We gather together to hear the truth that sanctifies us, even in the midst of the waves. With that truth, we are helped, and we help each other.

We know this. In the survey I mentioned before, the young adults still in the church were asked why they were still there. Some answers:

* “It’s vital to my relationship with God.”

* “It helps guide my decisions in everyday life.”

* “It helps me become a better person.”

* “It helps in getting through a difficult time.”

* “I fear living without spiritual guidance.”

We express our need of help in our third membership question:

* Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?

Our help is in the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit’s help is ours, as we gather together around God’s truth.

You need help. I need help. We need help.

Do you know that? Or are you too proud?

Young people, you need help. Older people, you need help. Middle-age people, at the height of career, activity and accomplishments, you need help.

Woman with cancer, you need help. Single man with sexual temptations, you need help. Exhausted mother, you need help.

We do not try to ride the waves alone.

Why bother? Why bother with the church? We have one hope, and one help, and ONE HEART.

All through Jesus’ prayer, we read the word “glory.”

What is glory? What does it mean to glorify God? We can describe it in so many ways, but here is one way: God gets what he deserves.

He deserves all praise. He deserves all honor. He deserves all obedience. As Paul writes to the Romans, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.”

The Christian desires God’s glory. That is our heart’s passion. But how will the Christian display God’s glory?

Jesus prays in verse 23, “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me.”

Jesus has already said it another way in chapter 13: “By this all men will know you are my disciples, if

you love another.”

How will we glorify God? As we love one another, in unity.

We express our heart for unity in the last two membership questions:

* Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?

* Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

The last two questions are about people worshiping together, working together, and living a life of repentance for sin and forgiveness of sin.

It's difficult. It's messy. It's heartbreaking.

It's what Jesus did. He entered into our community, and he bought us with his blood, and he promised to be with, build and bless his church.

He did this, for the glory of his Father. We do this, for such glory.

Christian writer Mark Galli writes,

“My being a Christian means I am a member of a brotherhood of sinners, some of the most embarrassing sort...

“When we invite people to follow Jesus, we're inviting them into the desperately sinful church that Jesus, for some odd reason, loves.

“To be a Christian...is to identify not just with Jesus or with the healthy church of our imagination, but also with the tragically dysfunctional church, which is...embraced...by the One who was a scandal in his own day.”

Jesus' heart was for God's glory, so he entered this world to secure for himself a community for God's glory. As his followers, we enter this same community, and we live and prosper by the forgiving grace of God.

His heart is our heart. By professing and expressing our unity with each other, despite all our sins and shortcomings, we glorify God.

Why bother? Why bother with the church?

We have one hope. We have one help. We have one heart.

The church does not save. The people in the church are sinners.

But when we join the church, we profess and express the unity for which our Savior prayed.

MATTHEW 28:18-20

BAPTISM

Several years ago, I was given a book called “The Water That Divides.” It was an attempt by two pastors to bridge the divide between people with different views about baptism.

Of course, it is not the water that divides. It is people who divide. We each come to this sacrament with our own histories and our own attitudes. Even in this Presbyterian congregation, we have some who struggle greatly with how we offer this sacrament.

As we prepare to spend a few minutes pondering this sacrament, I want you to know that my heart's desire today is to unite, not divide.

We believe we have good biblical and historical reasons for how we practice baptism here. In the Presbyterian church, we believe:

* That baptism is rightly offered to believers and their children.

* That baptism is rightly offered through sprinkling the water, pouring the water, or immersing the person in the water.

Yet we also believe others with the same sturdy commitment to the Scriptures may reach different conclusions.

What unites us? What is clear from Scripture, about the clear waters of baptism? Let's ask and answer two questions.

First, WHEN DO WE BAPTIZE?

In Matthew 28, Jesus is giving his “marching orders” to his disciples. We call this “the Great Commission,” and in that commission, he commands his disciples to baptize.

But when? Notice the order of Jesus’ words: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...” When people become disciples, they are to be baptized.

So baptism is what we call the “initiatory” sacrament. To “initiate” is to start something. A church may initiate a new program. A club may initiate a new member. A crabby kid may initiate a fight.

Baptism is a sacrament for the start of our walk with Jesus. The water is a symbol. It represents the blood of Jesus. Just as water cleanses our bodies, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from our sin.

This is why we encourage people to be baptized before they receive the Lord’s Supper. There is no clear command in the New Testament on this, but if you think about the general pattern in the New Testament, it seems people were baptized first, then received the Lord’s Supper.

Now a second question: WHY DO WE BAPTIZE? What do Jesus’ words show us about what we are doing, when we are baptized?

For one thing, we baptize to show our entering.

Jesus says, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

When we are baptized, we are showing that we are entering into a union with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. When you do something “in the name of” someone, you are saying you are in a relationship with them.

Apart from the love of the Father, the death of the Son, and the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we are out of fellowship with God. But when we are baptized, we show that we are entering this relationship.

We baptize, to show our entering. We baptize, to start our following.

Listen to the rest of Jesus’ words: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

What comes after the baptizing? The teaching. Jesus wants his disciples to teach these newly baptized followers to obey his commands.

Jesus is Savior. He saves us from our sins, and we represent that in the sacrament of baptism.

But Jesus is also Lord. He saves us to a life of holiness, and when we are baptized, we are pledging to follow the teachings of our Lord.

Showing our entering. Starting our following.

On the one hand, it’s simple. While there is mystery in baptism, we need to remember that Jesus gave the sacrament to us for our benefit. We are no more holy, for making it too complicated.

On the other hand, it’s something to take seriously. When a believer is baptized, or when parents baptize their children, they are making a pledge before God and people, to follow Jesus.

Today, let’s rejoice, as one, in this glorious blessing of baptism.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26

THE LORD’S SUPPER

So if we have “the water that divides,” do we have “the bread and cup that divides”? In some ways, yes.

Once again, it’s the people. Here the divide is not between Presbyterians and Baptists, but between Catholics and Protestants.

Once again, my desire today is not to divide, but unite.

As Protestants, we believe:

* The bread and the cup in the Lord’s Supper represent the physical body of Jesus, but do not actually

turn into the physical body of Jesus.

* Taking the Lord's Supper is an act of obedience to Jesus, but failing to take the sacrament will not jeopardize your salvation.

There are other differences, but those are the main ones. Yet when we read Paul's words to the Corinthians, we discover some basic truths about the Lord's Supper. Let's again ask and answer two questions.

First, WHEN DO WE EAT AND DRINK?

After Paul repeats Jesus' words about the bread and the cup, he writes, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

The word "whenever" shows us that unlike baptism, which is a one-time, initiatory sacrament, the Lord's Supper is an ongoing sacrament. Through all of our lives as Christians, we participate in this sacrament.

But how often? Paul does not say. Some receive the sacrament once a year. Some receive it once a month. Some receive it every week.

For about four years, we have been receiving it every week. We do this partly because we believe that is probably what they did in Paul's day. He writes to the Corinthians about their gatherings, which seem to be worship gatherings, and which seem to include the Lord's Supper. So a reasonable guess is that each week, the churches gathered for worship on the first day, and their worship included the Lord's Supper.

But no matter how often we eat and drink, WHY DO WE EAT AND DRINK? What do Paul's words show us about this sacrament?

First, we eat and drink, as a reminder to our hearts.

I recently read an article that described two people.

One is a woman, in her early '40s, who can remember everything. She recalls every detail of every day of her life. It can be helpful, and it can be maddening and even depressing.

One is a man, in his '80s, who can remember nothing. He does not have Alzheimer's. In the present, he thinks clearly. But each moment is new. If he sees you, then sees you a minute later, it is as if he never saw you before.

We remember what we want to forget, and we forget what we want to remember!

Paul writes that Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." He knows we need to remember the good news that Jesus has died for our sins.

Sometimes we forget, because we think we are too good. The bread and the cup humble us, and drive us to our need of Jesus.

Sometimes we forget, because we think we are so evil. The bread and the cup comfort us, and return us to the grace of Jesus.

We eat and drink, as a reminder to our hearts. We eat and drink, as a proclamation to our world.

Paul writes, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The Lord's Supper proclaims the death of Jesus for the sins of sinners.

Some have said that the Lord's Supper is the "Presbyterian Altar Call." That's not a bad way to say it!

Each week, I hold the bread and the cup before you. I tell you what it represents. I ask you to ask yourself, if you are trusting in Jesus as Savior, and if you are living for him as Lord. I am proclaiming the gospel. If you are listening, you are forced to confront the claims of Jesus. You will turn from him, or you will turn to him.

Once again, I want you to see the simplicity. We remind ourselves, and we proclaim to all who will hear, that Jesus saves, because he gave his body and blood, represented here.

Yet once again, I want you to see the seriousness. The Lord's Supper is for sinners - but only for sinners who have confessed their need of Jesus.

Let's rejoice again, as one, in this glorious blessing of the Lord's Supper.