

## OUR LIFE TOGETHER

### LESSON TEN: LIFE TOGETHER - BECOMING A MEMBER OF CHRIST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Do you remember the American Express commercials with the saying, “Membership has its privileges”? As we close this study about our “life together,” let’s think about the privilege of membership.

#### WHAT IS MEMBERSHIP?

Here is one definition: *membership is when two parties make a commitment to each other.* In the case of church membership, the parties are you and the church. You commit to this body, while this body commits to you.

Why do this? We believe *membership is a visible expression of our invisible union with Jesus and each other.* If you are a genuine believer in Jesus, you are in union with him, and with others who believe in him. You possess a bond that is special and eternal.

Membership is how we visibly express this union. When we unite in membership, we are not saying this is the only good church, or that we are the only Christians. We are saying that we are convinced that God has called us to express our invisible union, in a visible way, in this place.

Is this easy? No. A little verse chimes,

To be with the saints in heaven, Ah, it will be great glory;

But to be with the saints on earth, Well, that’s another story.

I often say to people who are new to our church, “I hope we disappoint you sooner, rather than later. Then we can move past an idealistic view of the church, to a realistic view of the church. If you are waiting to join a church until you find a perfect church, you have a long wait ahead of you.”

But while we know it is not easy to unite, we believe it is good to unite.

## THE PROMISES WE MAKE AT CHRIST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

In the Presbyterian Church in America, we ask prospective members to answer “yes” to five questions. We call these our membership vows.

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

With our first answer, we confess who we are: sinners in need of God’s mercy. We are like the tax collector in Luke 18. All we can say to God is, “Have mercy on me, O God, a sinner.”

*2. Do you 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?*

With our second answer, we confess who Jesus is: the only hope for sinners. We are trusting in him, and him alone, to give us new life and eternal life, through his death on the cross for our sins.

*3. 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?*

The first two answers describe what we believe. The last three answers declare what we are promising before God and his people.

With our third answer, we are pledging to strive to live our lives in ways that honor Jesus. We will falter and fail in this. But are we striving, with the help of God’s Spirit?

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

With our fourth answer, we are pledging to contribute to the ministry of the church. Let’s “camp” here for a few minutes, as we discover the two forms of “support” we are promising:

We are promising to offer our *SPIRITUAL GIFTS*.

In Ephesians 4, Paul describes how the church is supposed to work. God has raised up people like the apostles, the prophets, and (in our day) evangelists, pastors and teachers. Why? To do all the work of the church? No...*to prepare God's people for works of service.*

What is the purpose of this? *...so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature...*

Spiritual gifts are “building abilities.” They are abilities God has given us, to serve the church and its people, with a heart for building the church and its people in ministry and maturity.

But who has them? Everyone! *Spiritual gifts are in every Christian.*

In Romans 12, after Paul urges us to be motivated by God's mercy in Jesus, he declares that we *have different gifts, according to the grace given us.*

Some speak well. Some serve well. Some teach well. Some encourage well. Some contribute to the needs of others well. Some lead well. Some govern well. Some show mercy well.

The point is that we all have these gifts, and *all of these gifts are important.*

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul is writing against the arrogance and indifference of those who say, “We don't need these people in our body!” He uses this image of the physical body to tell us that just as the body needs feet, hands, eyes, and all its other parts, the body of the church needs all of its parts.

Some gifts are used publicly. Other gifts are used privately. But all are important.

What spiritual gifts do you possess? Do you know? Do you want to find out? Part of your membership commitment is to commit to use those gifts, to the best of your ability.

We are also promising to offer our *FINANCIAL GIFTS*.

If you decide to unite in membership with the other believers at Christ Presbyterian Church, you will be expected and encouraged to contribute financially to the church.

This is a difficult subject, because we have all known or heard of churches which have abused

their call to encourage giving, and have misused the gifts they have been given.

But like everyone else, the church needs financial support to survive and thrive. We hope and pray our members will hear and heed our call to provide for this.

How do we think about this issue? I offer three short thoughts on a big subject:

*\* Who are we? We are grateful stewards.*

In Mark 12, Jesus is asked whether his followers should pay taxes to the government. His short answer is yes! But his full answer is, *Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.*

Everything we have is from God, so we must be grateful.

Everything we have is to be used for God, so we must be stewards.

We have all been entrusted with resources. We should long to use them wisely. Our wealth is not a toy for our amusement. It is a tool for our engagement in the work of God's kingdom.

*\* What do we give? A trusting sacrifice.*

Later in Mark 12, Jesus watches a widow give her offering at the temple. It is small, but it is all she has to live on. He commends her. In fact, he says, she has put in more than all of the wealthy people who threw in much larger amounts.

As always, Jesus is looking at the heart. He sees in her, what he should see in us.

We trust God, because he is our Father through Jesus.

We sacrifice for God, because God has sacrificed Jesus for us.

*\* How do we give? With joyful generosity.*

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he commends poor believers who give to other poor believers.

They are joyful about this. They urgently plead with Paul to take their money!

They are generous about this. They give beyond what they can afford to give.

Do you see the heart attitudes behind these descriptions?

Sometimes people ask, "How much do I have to give?" That is the wrong question! The right question is, "How much can I give?" The answer is, "Whatever God puts on your heart to give."

But, you may ask, what about the tithe? Yes - 10 percent is a good guide to how we should give. But the Bible also provides us with the concept of "offerings" - gifts beyond the tithe.

When all is said and done, the issue is not the precise amount. The issue is the passion of your heart. If you love the church as Jesus loves the church, you will give as a grateful steward, offering a trusting sacrifice, with joyful generosity.

You will do this to "the best of your ability." No one is perfect! But are you striving?

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

What is submission? It is when you *voluntarily place yourself under the authority of another person or persons*. When you submit to the government and discipline of the church, you place yourself under the spiritual authority of the elders.

They are responsible before God, for how they lead you. You are responsible before God, for how you follow them.

This is lived out in the *government and discipline* of the church - the daily governing of the church by the Session, and the teaching and judicial discipline of the church.

When you affirm this promise, you are saying, "I will submit to any judicial process that involves me - either involving my conduct, or the conduct of someone else in the church."

The vow ends with the rather curious phrase, "study its purity and peace." This seems to refer to a pursuit of the purity of the church (holiness), and the peace of the church (unity). You will strive to encourage the church to be a body of godly people, living as one before Jesus.

## AND THEN...

What if you decide God is leading you to affirm these vows? Next comes a three-step process...

### 1. *THE SESSION INTERVIEW.*

Note that this is not an examination! I shall never forget my initial examination for ordination as a pastor. I was receiving a call to a church in Minnesota, so my examination took place at a Presbytery meeting in South Dakota. In January. On a day when the temperature rose all the way to minus 20.

Happily, we were inside - at a camp. The wood burning stove was roaring. I sat in front of it, in my heaviest winter sweater. After three hours of questions, I could wring it out!

This is not what we do as a Session! We do not ask you to recite the subpoints of the outlines from the class lessons, nor do we require you to do philosophical and theological battle with us.

We want to hear two things:

*\* Do you have a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ?*

You can usually express this by simply telling your story. Were you raised in the church? Did you come to faith in Jesus as a child? Or have you wandered from the Lord, only to be called into genuine faith as an adult?

It is also good to describe how Jesus Christ has changed your life. How has he transformed you, and how is he transforming you?

Just about everyone's top fear is speaking in public. While a Session interview is not exactly a public event, it is speaking in front of a collection of people. We encourage people to relax, and if they do have a fear of speaking to others, to write out notes or even a complete testimony.

*\* Are you willing to agree to the membership vows of Christ Presbyterian Church?*

We will simply ask you the five membership questions, and you can affirm them.

## **2. HOUSEKEEPING DETAILS.**

As Presbyterians, we have to push a few papers!

We need to know if you are currently a member of another church. If so, and if it is possible, we would like to receive a *letter of transfer* from that church. This letter simply needs to state that you are a member in good standing of that church - you are not under any discipline.

If you are not currently a member of a church, we will receive you through what we call...

\* *Profession of faith* (if you have never professed faith in Jesus before); or by

\* *Re-affirmation of faith* (if you have professed faith before).

## **3. PUBLIC RECEPTION.**

Once you interview with the Session and any necessary paperwork is complete, you are a member of the church.

But since you are making a commitment to “life together” with other believers, it is good for you to express that commitment before those believers. During a worship service, you will stand before the congregation and answer the membership questions again.

## **THE END OF THE MATTER...**

I repeat: our life together is far from perfect, for we are far from perfect. Our leaders and our members reveal this quite often!

I realize: we all come with differing backgrounds, and you may have differences with our beliefs on issues like baptism.

But: is God doing a good thing here? We hope so!

When you unite in membership, you make a “solemn covenant” with God and his church, according to our Book of Church Order.

Do not take this lightly! Yet do not neglect to take this pledge, because your commitment to the

visible church reflects your commitment to the beautiful Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let's close with the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that began our study:

*Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate...*

*The physical presence of other believers is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.*

Will you participate in this reality created by God, so that you may receive and offer the incomparable joy and strength that God provides through his people?