

## Membership Sunday The Importance of the Church

It is amazing to consider the time frame that we have gone through in a little under two years. We have gone through this thing called Covid. I don't know if you have heard of it. But it has drastically changed the way that we think of the church of Jesus Christ. No one knew how serious the virus was when it first hit, including governments and businesses and churches. Churches quickly altered their services to offer online or virtual services and preaching. We all had a sense of oneness and togetherness as we watched from our homes the services as they were either taped or live-streamed, and we were thankful that we had access to the preaching of the Word of God. Whole ministries arose during that time - internet ministries.

But something else also happened during the pandemic. When cases started to go down, and even when vaccinations were made available many church members of various churches didn't come back. Now there are those who certainly have legitimate health concerns, and their goal is to come back. But there were others who truly like the idea and convenience of virtual services. They could role out of bed, turn on their tablet or smart TV, and watch. They really did not need to interact with others. And some stats that are out there are truly alarming that as much as one third of those who used to go to church never came back, and have no plans to do so.

And in one sense it is quite alarming and shocking but in another sense it really is not that surprising. Many who attend church on a weekly basis before the pandemic were not active in serving, and only a small percentage of those coming out supported the church financially so that the ministries of the church could continue on. They were coming to church but even if they had a membership in a certain church they were not active participants in the church. What the pandemic did was accelerate what was already going on in their hearts, and that is they saw really very little need and had very little allegiance to the church of Jesus Christ. Many notice some who did not come back, but others that came out sporadically were not even missed.

Also during this time, there was the rise of strong political and social ideologies. And the pandemic accelerated deep divisions in how people viewed the world and society. Should one get a vaccine or not? What about masks? And to sit and associate with someone who had a different political ideology was too much for many. They either left and went to another church, or just stopped going to church altogether. There is no tolerance in our society today. And tolerance is not accepting everyone's opinion, but saying that you have a right to an opinion and even expressing that opinion, but I have the right to say that you are wrong. But today you cannot even be friends unless you have the right ideology. You might believe the same about the virgin birth, the Trinity, salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone, but watch out if you have different political view or social views. I can recall that someone called our church and said this, "I am thinking about coming out to your church and might even want to join your church depending on how you answer this question: do you wear masks?" Really? Is that truly what is of utmost importance?

Many churches are divided, others again are leaving and either taking their problems to another church or just not bothering with the church at all. Many are dismissing their pastors and other leaders of the church, not because they have a

different gospel, but they do not agree with a certain ideology. And many more are at a cross roads, wondering whether they should leave the church, let alone be active and be a member of a church. So many have opted for the virtual model of church, and they have no plans to go back. If they do not like the preacher, there are many more options to choose from on the World Wide Web. And much of this “whatever is easier attitude” comes from a misunderstanding of what the church is and who we are to be in the church, and the need of a gospel preaching and gospel ministering church in their lives.

And I am so delighted that this morning we have had a number of baptisms and also a number who want to join the church. And what I want to do is challenge us with the need of the church in our lives by just giving a number of reflections from this text in Hebrews 10:24-25 this morning. I hope it will be helpful and encouraging and challenging as we think through our life in the visible church of Jesus Christ.

#### 1. We see the need to be together. V.25

It is incredible to look at the beginning of the pandemic, and the new and exciting doors that it did open. Our virtual services can touch so many people. But one thing that we lost is that sense of togetherness. We certainly said that we were all in this together but we seem to lose that sense of one another. We certainly called one another, and texted and messaged various different people. But there was something missing, especially in that long two to three month gap where we did not see one another, that was followed by another long two month gap. And it was amazing to see the number of people who tuned into the livestream far out numbered the people who usually sat in the pew. Many were excited that this would far advance the Great Commission, and bring untold into God’s kingdom.

But there was something missing. The church felt disjointed. And I certainly realized that there was a health crisis going on. There were those who likened it to the Black Plague that swept across Europe and eliminated about one third of the population, and it certainly was not anything of that degree of danger. But as our hospitals filled up there were others who thought this was nothing more than the seasonal flu and should be ignored altogether. So our not meeting had a purpose whether we recognize it or not. It was an opportunity to love our community and indicate that we do care about them. But I can say, that it was very hard on the body of Christ. And may I say, it was hard on every member of the body of Christ. But why? We still had the Word of God going out? Certainly there were many lessons that each of us learned about ourselves and our God. God in his sovereignty meant it for our good and his glory. But this is not what it was suppose to be. This is not what the church was suppose to be. It was never meant to be a virtual affair.

And look at what the writer of Hebrews says here, because I think it is so important that we see this, **“not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”** This is a command isn’t it? And it is amazing how many took this to say whether there was a health crisis or not the church should be meeting. But we should at least look at it and understand that this is teaching the necessity and the need of us to meet together under normal and natural circumstances. It should be habitual in our lives that

when the church meets we meet. The meaning of “not neglecting” here is intentionality. Neglecting is overlooking, or just not seeing it as essential in our lives.

And what are we not to neglect? The meeting together or the assembling of the church of Jesus Christ. I do not think there is any thought or interpretation that would argue differently. So meeting together has a meaning doesn't it? Someone has once said that the church is not a building but a people - a people saved by the blood of Christ. Fair enough, but the church is not only a people, but a people who gather together. They meet in a geographical location together. The virtual preaching we are thankful for as shut ins and those because of one reason or another cannot come out. But the virtual option is not a church. It isn't an option really. The church by its very definition is the meeting together of God's people.

And some might respond, but they did not have the virtual option in the ancient world, and if you said that you would be absolutely correct. There was no internet or online option ever made available. And if it was, it was still not the church. Look at what he says we are to do when we meet together, “but encouraging one another.” Now think because I am not trying to be mean, but how can you encourage one another even if we are all gathered around our electronic devices in our homes? How can I encourage one another not to walk away from the faith of Christ or encourage another who is going through some trial in their lives. It is very easy or very tempting to stay home, and it might even be tempting for pastors just to have online services because they never have to bump into someone in the hallways and have one of those long talks about the problems and difficulties in one another's lives.

We come out with the goal of not only being encouraged and challenged by the Word of God but with an intention of encouraging “one another,” those who are believers in Jesus Christ. And how long do we do this? He says, “all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” We are involved in the ministry of edification in the lives of others as we meet together until that day that Jesus comes back.

So what is the call for us this very day based on this text? There are a couple. One is to recognize what the church is. The local church is the visible body of Christ that is seen and meets in a particular location for worship of Christ and mutual edification. It is quite simple when you look at God's will - don't neglect the meeting together. The other thing is as we welcome these believers into our fellowship today we are promising that we will not neglect the meeting together so that we might have this work of God going on in their lives. We might encourage them, strengthen them, and even rebuke and correct them when necessary. But that is what they are promising also. They are promising based on the work of Christ in their lives to be active and involved and present in the body to encourage us to keep on keeping on. This is what the church is and what the church does based on verse 25.

2. But not only do we need to be together, we need to seek the welfare of others. V.24

We have touched on the importance of seeking the welfare of others in the first point, but now I want us to investigate and flesh that out more. And this is so unlike the modern day church. Many choose a church or even choose to leave a church based on what they are getting. It is all about me. I have chosen to go to this other church because it has this certain program. I have left the church because I want to be involved in this ministry and I cannot. I am leaving the church because I don't like so

and so, or I don't like the politics of so and so. I am leaving the church because the pastor doesn't give enough illustrations, or doesn't preach enough on current events. And even think of why you came out to church this morning: was it to give or receive? Was it other-centred or self-centred? Was it to be used by God or just to be fed by others? All of us came out for a reason, what was that reason?

And it is amazing to look at the structure of this paragraph because it begins in Hebrews 10:19-21, "**Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God.**" The writer of Hebrews has been exhorting those who are tempted to go back to Judaism because of persecution of the vast superiority of what we have in Christ. The animal sacrifices have ended. We now have access into the very presence of God through Jesus Christ. Look at the word "since" used here twice. Since we have access to God, since we have Jesus as our High Priest there is a way that all Christians should respond.

And so the author of Hebrews follows this with three "let us" commands. You see it in verse 22, "**Let us draw near with a true heart,**" and then in verse 23, "**Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering,**" and then the one this morning that I would like us to meditate upon as we welcome these new members into our fellowship, "**And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.**" I do not know how many times I have heard: "careful Pastor, you don't have to come out to church to be a Christian." Fair enough, but that is what Christians do. "Let us," is a call for believers. But it is not only a call to be with believers but our objective when we are with believers. Please understand. It is not enough just to be present, but it is how we are present, or what we seek or our intention of being present.

And this is so important, because we look at the word "consider" we are called to think. That is what the word means. It means to think. It means in the context to think with the mind of ministering to one another. And notice the word "how." It is talking about how do I do this? So I have to think of certain people that I meet. People who have difficulties and particular troubles in their lives. People who might be discouraged or even wandering into sin. I am going to see sister so and so today, or I am going to see brother so and so today, and if I do not give this thought I will not be able to carry out this objective. If I come out three minutes late to the beginning of service and have one foot out the door with the final amen, I cannot carry out objective.

And so God calls us based on the wonderful salvation we have in Jesus Christ and the access I have forever to God to give careful thought how this morning I am going to "**stir one another up to love and good works.**" The meaning of stir is something is dormant and inactive in the heart of an individual maybe because of the trials of life and someone feeling overwhelmed. We stir one another up to the love of Christ and to keep following and loving Him - in other words, good works. We love other people by entering into their lives and the mess and the hardships that they have. And I know that it is difficult and it is hard. But some of the greatest friendships and the most loving relationships I have have been forged by entering into their suffering or others entering into my suffering. The church when it is all about me and all about what I want feeds that selfishness and that isolation that so much part of the church today.

So often we are not directing people to Christ but through our speech and bitterness directing others away from Christ, and yet somehow it is all done in the name of Christ. Some individuals drift away from Christ with no one saying a word to them, but they will have so much to say about a piece of cloth over their face.

But just imagine a church and members of a church that were so amazed at the love that God has for them in Jesus Christ, that they were committed on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening or any other time that the church met together that I am going to be intentional. I know so and so is struggling with this particular trial in their life. I am going to talk to them on Sunday, not only that but what Scripture can I share with them. Maybe James 1:2-3, **“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”** I know this is tough, but God is producing something in you that could not be produced unless you went through this trial. And I am so encouraged to see you here this morning. I am so encouraged to see your faith in Christ. God really is producing steadfastness in you. Or, you know of someone who is going through a trial like you went through, and you come and put your arm around them, and share what was helpful when you went through those deep waters. This is one of the reasons why God sends us through afflictions and trials. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”** Notice the purpose statement - to comfort others with the same comfort that we have received from the Lord. Maybe, you consider someone you never talked to before, or someone who seems to need a friend, and you intentionally talk and befriend them this Sunday.

But here is my point: what would the church of Christ look like if this was all of the members ministering to all of the members? What kind of witness and growth would take place if my life every time the church met was about giving rather than receiving? What would the church look like if I really loved others the way Christ loved me rather than loving self? What would the church look like if I stirred up love and good works in others rather than agitating anger, bitterness and divisiveness?

Here is the thing: the Day of the Lord is approaching. The time that we have during this age is drawing to a close. We realize that it is shorter than it ever has been before. We want as a church and as members of the church to have the most meaningful lives that we could have for God's glory. We have these new members joining with us today. The question is: what impact are we going to have on their lives? What impact are we going to have on the other members? God has given us a ministry. Are you really seeking the spiritual welfare of others? It is not enough to say, “Well if I find out something that needs to be done or if I hear of a need I will seek to meet it.” This is not a passive command but an active command for all of us. Consider, think, plan, then act in loving and tangible ways for the glory of Christ.