

1 Thessalonians 1-10:

1 Paul and Silvanus and Timothy,

**To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace.**

2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, 4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; 5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. 9 For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

This church at Thessalonica was a remarkable church. One of the most notable omissions at the outset in the salutation is that Paul does not identify himself as an apostle. He just says, "Paul." You have probably noted that in his other letters, he identifies himself as an apostle, a servant of God, a messenger of Jesus Christ, in order to enforce his authority, because it is usually intended within the letter that he will bring to bear upon that church some authoritative correction. Not here. He never even identifies himself as an apostle. He does not have to bring his great apostolic authority before them. There are no issues in this church to confront that would call for such authority. Largely this is a letter of gratitude. It is a letter of encouragement to a church of believers who were living holy lives, who were loving each other in a Christ-like way, and who were enduring suffering faithfully. This was a noble church. And this first chapter is the initial outburst of gratitude from the heart of the apostle, which he unpacks in more detail through the remaining chapters of the epistle. However, when you read this first chapter, you really notice the passion of this letter, the character of this church, and what it meant to the Apostle Paul.

For what was Paul thankful? If you look at just those 10 opening verses, you see this list: A faith that works, a love that labors, a hope that endures, preachers that are powerful, life that is new, joy that is transcendent, behavior that should be modeled, witness that is strong, loyalty that submits, and an eager expectation for Christ's return. That represents an exceptional resume for any church to emulate.

I chose to open with this because I love this church in the same way. It has been the center of our spiritual lives for well over a decade. My spiritual journey to that point had been an unusual one: where although I grew up in the church, and had the book of Romans memorized at the age of 14, my parents were both false converts and divorced at about that same time. I had every reason to turn away from God and consider all His Truth as foolishness, and for a time I did take my hand off the plow. However, praise be to God that He does not leave His own to their own folly – because although for a few years I did pursue doing what was “right in my own eyes”, He did not give up on me. God saved Paula a few years into our marriage – where I had myself backtracked into a “casual Christianity” (which is really no Christianity at all). The fire that God ignited in her salvation caused me to examine my own heart, and we began to search for a church where we could introduce our own children to the Lord. That was nearly 30 years ago, and we have been seeking to grow ever since. We had been visitors and members of non-denominational churches – large and small – since that time both in Indiana and once we moved here less than 18 months after Katrina. But, praise to God, it has been in this Church – Covenant of Peace -- where I have been led to such a greater knowledge of God, where I learned and experienced the Person and work of Christ, and where I gained the knowledge of saving and sanctifying truth by the profound and amazing Grace of God. It is where I learned how to pray fervently, how to lead my family, how to worship, how to love, and how to serve. And it was in the church that I experienced the leading of the Spirit of God directing me to a life of ministry. This where we’ve made many lifelong friends and partners in ministry to the saints. This church has touched every part of our lives.

Frankly, at this point in my own walk, I can’t understand people who claim to be saved by Christ who don’t have a similar love for the church—who aren’t eager for every opportunity to worship together with other like-minded believers. I can’t understand people who are always finding reasons to find other activities so they don’t “mess up” their Sundays. Why are they so eager to get away from the church? Where else would they rather be?

There was a time not that long ago when coming to Christ meant actually **coming to** His church. As far back as the New Testament, salvation brought you into union with the

visible, gathered Body of Christ. For the founding of the Church, becoming a Christian meant entering into fellowship with the people of God:

Acts 2:

46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

But today that has changed. The contemporary emphasis in evangelicalism is a believer's "personal" relationship to Christ. Individual faith is the pervasive theme, and rarely is there any discussion of how believers are supposed to fit into the church. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated and accelerated the situation.

When was the last time you read a tract or heard a gospel presentation that ends with a discussion of the believer's *corporate* relationship to the church? At best there is a very low key, secondary emphasis on "getting plugged in" to church involvement, church attendance, and being a part of the family of God in the visible, gathered household of saints.

And in the massive effort to make salvation *personal*, the New Testament Church involving regular, gathered worship and fellowship have been left behind and overlooked – to the detriment of many souls. Too many people today tend to be ecclesiastical "consumers". They have become only interested in what they can **get out of** their church, and they bounce from congregation to congregation as their whims and interests change. They don't have any particular commitment or loyalty to a specific assembly of saints. Sadly, you probably know people yourselves that take this approach.

In fact, they have little to no attachment to the church at all, and are under no obligation for regular attendance—if they make it, they make it; if not, it's no big deal.

For people like that, their faith is claimed to be completely anchored in their "personal" relationships with Christ—there is no corporate commitment or responsibility to the people of God. Their 'Christianity' exists completely outside and apart from the church.

But the idea of believers living independently of the church is totally foreign to the New Testament. As with our opening passage this morning in 1 Thessalonians, The Holy Spirit addressed almost every epistle to a local church, and other books like 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon were addressed to key leaders in the church. Even the book of James—the current series with Pasto Blair and which was written to believers scattered

by persecution—assumes the recipients are still meeting together and deals heavily with life in the context of the corporate, gathered church.

Throughout the New Testament, the assumption is always the same: that the people of God are faithfully gathering in a local assembly where the Word of God is being disseminated. That unified gathering—not just the invisible, worldwide church of all saved by Grace, but the **local, visible congregation**—is at the heart of Christianity. The church is the only institution the Lord established and promised to bless. Why would anyone who claims to love the Lord want to keep His people at arm's length?

The widespread lack of commitment to the church shows up in many other ways as well—the rampant neglect of baptism and communion, the explosion of parachurch ministries, and the forsaking of the biblical qualifications for church leadership are just a few examples. We'll deal with some of those issues later in this message.

This morning, we will take a very quick survey from Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonica, and of course supplemented by other Scripture along the way. We are going to focus on our responsibility to the church and the role each of us is called to play in our local congregations. It starts with the important step of submitting to your local church in membership, and that's what we'll examine next.

Membership

It's obvious that the early church knew its flock well. In Acts 20, Paul exhorted the elders of the Ephesian church to faithfully watch over and shepherd their people. But it's very difficult to shepherd if you don't know who your flock is. And, as Blair reminded us a few weeks ago in his series in James, sheep don't survive well just roaming around on their own.

While the New Testament never speaks of church membership in today's terms, the principles of life in the early church lay the foundation for faithfully submitting and belonging to a local congregation. While the original membership process might vary from today's patterns, there's no doubt that New Testament Christians were lovingly united and bound to their local body of believers. Let's take a quick look at something that is fairly obvious -- yet easy to miss if you are not looking for it.

While the church was being born during Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:41 says, **“So then, those who had received his words were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.”**

When reading this passage, have you ever asked yourself “Added to what?” Added to the others, right? But **what** others? Acts 1:15 says that about one hundred and twenty

people were already gathered together in the upper room—the three thousand people saved on the day of Pentecost would have been in addition to the core that already existed after Christ’s ascension.

While it is possible that their names were even physically added to a list by a secretary or someone keeping track, that’s not what is most important. The moment these men and women were saved, they were baptized as a physical testimony of their transformed lives and as a way to identify with the other believers. They were immediately welcomed into the church. Note that someone was keeping count.

Just a few verses later, as we saw earlier, Acts 2:47 says, **“And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”** The influx of new members did not stop at Pentecost. The church met daily, and every day the Lord was drawing new men and women to Himself and into fellowship with His people.

And that explosive growth wasn’t short-term. A few chapters later, in Acts 5:14, the church was still growing exponentially: **“And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number.”** The implication is that someone was keeping track of the ever-expanding size of the flock.

Of course in the earliest days of the church, everyone met together. But after Stephen was martyred, believers became scattered by persecution. A church started in Antioch, and then others began through the ministry of Paul. Eventually the church extended in all directions through the apostles’ missionary endeavors. What began with one massive congregation was now reproducing itself from city to city as the teaching of the gospel spread and new men and women were saved.

No matter where they were being saved, the implication is consistent: They were immediately welcomed into a local gathering of believers. In fact, any time someone moved or relocated, they brought with them, or were preceded by, letters of recommendation to their new congregation. Acts 18:27 describes how Apollos was commended to the church at Achaia by the disciples. It would have been typical to notify the church receiving him that he came with the blessing of his previous congregation.

Paul followed the same pattern. In Romans 16:1-2 he wrote,

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.

Phoebe's journey to Rome was no accident—it's likely she was the one who delivered Paul's letter to the church there. So at the end of his passionate epistle, Paul paused to make sure she was looked after and cared for by the believers in Rome. He was eager to keep track of his sheep, letting the other congregation know her faith was genuine. You will find it was a pattern he repeated with other epistles as well.

And with good reason—the early church was very concerned to maintain its purity and to keep the tares out. There were many factious, heretical, sinful people – who posed an immediate threat to the church. Jude wrote an entire New Testament Book about this problem. As genuine believers moved from place to place, authenticating their faith and their character helped protect the church from error, division, and corruption.

That protective attitude is appropriate. The Lord loves His church—He shed His blood and died for His church. We are His body in this world as He works through us to accomplish His will. We are also His bride in eternity, the object of His affection and love. He demands a chaste and pure bride. He wants the church to be all it should be.

One of the key ways the church can guard itself from error and maintain its purity is to confirm the faith of its people and keep them accountable. The early church didn't have a name for that—they didn't need one. Today we call it church membership.

Fellowship

The genuine spiritual unity of saved souls is evident throughout the New Testament. And back then, just as today, that unity was manifest in the local gathering of believers.

Christians inherently bond together in common, shared spiritual life with those of like precious faith. Through the new birth of salvation, we have entered into a fellowship with other believers—a fellowship that's so wonderful, unique, and precious that Paul sternly warned the Corinthians to make sure there were no divisions among them that could threaten it:

1 Corinthians 1:9-10:

9 God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

10 Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.

The word we translate as fellowship—*koinonia*—essentially means partnership. Paul describes that partnership in Galatians 2:9: **“And recognizing the grace that had been**

given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship.” He and Barnabas were affirmed and welcomed into common participation in eternal life, as it is manifest through partnering together to serve the visible life of the church.

That’s exactly what happens in church membership—the individual believer is publically identified with the local body of believers and enters into an ongoing spiritual partnership with that congregation. It’s a public affirmation of our unity in Christ, our care for each other, and our shared desire to grow together in the love, knowledge, and application of God’s Word.

That’s why the modern trend of believers floating freely between congregations and never firmly planting in one place is a foreign concept to Scripture. What we have today is a model built on a modern, secular consumer mentality—people go to church wherever their “felt needs” are addressed, and unplug and move on when those needs change or are better met somewhere else. That pattern is completely contrary to the one we find in God’s Word.

In fact, it’s expressly forbidden by Scripture. Hebrews 10:23-25 is unequivocal when it comes to the necessity of fellowship.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

How can the people of God “stimulate one another to love and good deeds” if they aren’t regularly meeting together? It can’t happen. Forsaking the fellowship of other believers cuts you off from a key, God-ordained source of biblical instruction, refining accountability, and spiritual growth, as reflected in Proverbs 27:17, **“Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another.”**

And the need for fellowship is even greater as we draw nearer to the return of Christ. A shepherdless flock will not thrive; rather it will always scatter. And a rogue sheep becomes easy prey for ravenous wolves – the very prey those wolves seek to devour. Faithful fellowship helps insulate you from the influences of a world that is quickly sprinting to hell. Why would not a Christian take advantage of that?

Instead, too many believers today approach church like a duty or a task—one that’s often skipped, or swiftly pushed aside and forgotten as soon as it’s been accomplished.

I simply cannot understand that attitude. Don't you want to be with the people of God every opportunity you get? To share together in our common love for the Lord and His truth? Don't you want to build and deepen friendships, bear each other's burdens, and extend comfort and encouragement to those who need it? I want to come together with a collective choir of believers to sing praises to the Lord (even when we are off-key). I want to pray and worship with people who love God's Word, and I want to see firsthand what His Word is accomplishing in their lives. One of the lessons that our family has learned here in our time on the Mississippi Gulf Coast is it is important to find a sound church that is close enough to share our lives regularly with other members. This is something that has been a challenge for us at COPC in Gulfport while living almost in Louisiana.

Yet all of that is meant and commanded to happen in the church, not to be ignored and forsaken. Beloved, fellowship matters.

Accountability

As an elder here for over seven years, I know I will be required to give an account for the people under my leadership during that time. Every pastor and elder faces the same burden for the men and women under his care. But what good is a shepherd if the sheep won't submit to his authority? In an age of unprecedented modern church "consumerism", how can a pastor lead, serve, or even know an inconsistent, fluctuating flock?

Remember Hebrews 13:17:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

Active involvement in and submission to a local church body is crucial if we are going to live up to God's plan and pattern for the church. As has already been shown, the idea of Christians floating free between multiple congregations and never committing to one church body is completely foreign to the New Testament. That kind of untethered independence cuts you off from the authority the Lord established through His church.

But just what that authority looks like is the cause of much controversy in the church today. Some pastors have exercised illegitimate authority over their churches, with a level of involvement in their members' lives that has exhibited or bordered on abusive or dictatorial. It is not the pastor's role to tell his people where they should live, where

they should work, what individual they should marry, or exert anything that kind of control in other areas of their lives.

However, the biblical authority a pastor *does have* comes from the Word of God and the Holy Spirit working through his teaching in the lives of his flock. In effect, he is not a source of authority himself, but a vessel of it from the Lord to His people. *That* is the authority God's people need to submit to—the work of the Spirit through the faithful, consistent teaching of God's Word. Meanwhile, the flock is responsible to always test that teaching against the Scriptures.

And how should believers respond to that kind of authority? That is the question addressed by the writer of Hebrews above. It is a tremendous grief to try to shepherd a rebellious flock. Watching over the people of God is no easy task to begin with. We are called to train, disciple, support, and serve you. We are called to guard your purity, and to lend insight and exercise oversight with you. We are also called to exhort, warn, admonish, reprove, rebuke, and discipline in the application of God's Word in your lives—all for the sake of your spiritual growth.

That's hard enough with believers who are eager and engaged in the process. It becomes virtually impossible with people who won't be faithful to the flock and who want nothing to do with your leadership or be accountable to others.

If you have a faithful pastor or church leader who exemplifies the qualities of a shepherd (and I submit to you today that you do), let him know how much you appreciate his labor on your behalf. It will be a great encouragement to him to know he's making a spiritual difference in your life.

Paul instructed in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13:

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.

Now if you are a believer who rejects the biblical authority of the local church and won't submit to your pastor or church leaders, you need to do a careful, thorough examination of your heart. What is behind your rebellious spirit? What sin are you harboring that's keeping you from submitting to godly authority? I must ask: Are you sure you're truly saved at all? Because ultimately, your rebellion is not against the church under-shepherds, it is against the clear authority of God Himself.

Now to be sure, the proper authority exercised by a biblical church isn't harsh, personal, or oppressive. It's parental, building you up and working for your benefit. Beloved, please do not be foolish enough to reject that kind of biblical influence and authority in your life. Seek it out and submit to it through church membership.

This mutual accountability between the shepherds and the flock can be no better described within our primary Book this morning; from 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12:

But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.

For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

Identity -- in Membership

Our society is suffering from an identity crisis. Collectively and individually, people today often do not have a strong sense of who they are, what they want, or how to achieve it. They drift anchorless through life, following the whims and fads of the world instead of accepting responsibility and pursuing maturity.

Christians do not need to struggle with that kind of identity crisis. We have been redeemed and claimed by Christ, brought into His family, and are being transformed into His likeness. To some degree, it should be difficult to tell where He stops and where you start, so to speak. As Paul says in Galatians 2:20, **"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."**

That glorious truth describes the spiritual state of every believer. We are no longer isolated and alone—the Lord bought us with a price (1 Corinthians 6:20) and grafted us into His family (Romans 11:17). We bear His name, and our transformed lives are a testimony to His love and power. Christ's sacrifice on our behalf establishes our new identity for eternity—as was stated before, we are His church, His body, and His bride.

But if individually we are identified with Christ, why then do so many Christians refuse to identify with the *church*—a collection of others likewise identified with the Savior?

Why do they refuse church membership and eschew fellowship with a local congregation? If the Lord has made us all one family in eternity, why do so many believers spend so much time here on earth avoiding one another?

Paul sternly warned Timothy to not be ashamed of the testimony of the Lord (2 Timothy 1:8):

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity,

In his case, Timothy had very real reasons to be afraid of publicly proclaiming his faith and identifying with the church—he faced the constant threat of physical persecution, imprisonment, and even death.

The majority of believers in our country today will not face that kind of pressure (yet). Instead, the resistance to identify with the church is born out of the fear of the opinions of man. In our perpetually shallow and increasingly atheistic and pagan culture, there's nothing 'cool' about the church. So rather than being saddled with the stigma of buttoned-down religion, some believers try to discreetly live out their faith through loose affiliation with one—and sometimes more than one—congregation. Others recently are just avoiding the church altogether; ashamed that anyone might think they belong to one.

The idea of giving in to that kind of meager pressure would be laughable if so many Christians were not doing it every day. But rather than boldly and publicly uniting with other believers, they chase fickle popularity. Perhaps you've been tempted at times to do the same. What you do in the face of that temptation says a lot about the true state of your heart. The best indication of your priorities, as Blair has often taught, is how and where you spend your time and energy, whether it's a political movement, a school board, a neighborhood committee, or a fan club.

As such, of all the organizations you could belong to, the church is by far the most important. Your commitment to and identification with your local congregation speaks volumes about who you are and what matters most to you. In fact, your participation in your church is meant to be so much more than a once- or twice-a-week activity—it is a gathering of people who are no longer citizens of this world; a fellowship of men and women who have been transformed into new creatures and united in faith. Most importantly, the church is a foretaste of the glories that await us in eternity.

Therefore, if you claim to love the Lord but refuse to identify with His people, it raises understandable questions about the genuineness and veracity of your love. At the same time, and to repeat a point made earlier, if your reputation with the unsaved world means enough to keep you away from the church, you have cause for serious concerns about whether you have truly repented and believed in the first place.

One other thing to consider when it comes to reputations: it is true yours will likely suffer in some worldly circles if you publicly identify with your local church—it might even be humiliating for you.

But that’s nothing compared to the humiliations Christ willingly and sacrificially suffered on our behalf. Moreover, if the Lord is willing to associate Himself with weak, sinful people like us, we simply cannot keep Him or His church at arm’s length. If He is not ashamed to call us His, we absolutely cannot be ashamed to call Him ours.

Loyalty – through Membership

Church membership is not optional. Admittedly, there is no verse in the Bible that specifically commands us to sign on the dotted line and join a church. There is no Hebrew, Greek or Aramaic term that translates to “membership” in English (even in the Alabama dialect). However, the clear teaching of Scripture is that we are to be in faithful bond within the local fellowship of believers – in every sense of the word that we have coined as *membership*. In fact, there is a phrase in Scripture that comes very close to defining this term for us.

The apostle Paul had that unified fellowship in mind when he wrote Ephesians 2:19: **“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household.”** In essence, we’re now part of a family—God’s family. I would suggest that this is a very biblical definition for *membership* if you are asked: **“fellow citizens with the saints ... of God’s household”**. As such, please remember this verse, Ephesians 2:19.

So unity within God’s heavenly household requires loyalty, both to Him and to His people. The consumerist attitude that has taken hold in the church today is not interested in loyalty. It leads people to seek fellowship as a means to selfish ends—they will meet with other believers, but only when it suits their needs and pleases their interests.

When you come to church, you should completely turn around the typical question asked today, “What can I get out of my church?”, but rather, “How can God use me to

serve others here?”, and “Will there be other believers in the congregation who need me, whether it’s for help, support, or encouragement?”

The unequivocal answer will be yes. As Pastor Blair and the elders and deacons will attest, there is absolutely no shortage of spiritual, physical, and emotional needs in this church. You won’t have to look hard to find a multitude of ways you can be useful to your congregation. It should be the same attitude you would hope to cultivate within your own family—what are the needs around you and how can you be useful in meeting those needs? Bring that loyal, Christ-like attitude with you to church—you are not there to be served, but to serve.

By God’s grace and His perfect design, He has equipped each of us with a variety of spiritual gifts for use in the church. The Lord has fitted each of us with specific talents and abilities that tie into His purposes for our lives, Ephesians 4:11-13:

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

Every believer has a role within the Body of Christ, and that body cannot function unless everyone is working together (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). Hands can’t suddenly become ears; eyes can’t replace feet. And you’ll never find a stray finger or tongue that functions better on its own than it does with the rest of the body. The Lord did not save us to be solo acts—we are meant to work in concert and harmony together as one great choir.

Just how can that be possible apart from involvement in the local church? You will have other believers scattered throughout your life, whether at home, at work, or elsewhere. Nevertheless, God’s design is for you to be an active, useful member of your *local* church body, working side by side with other useful, self-sacrificing believers to accomplish His will in your lives and in your community. That starts with being a loyal member of your local church.

OK, Membership it is -- Now What

So we have seen that faithful participation in a local body of believers is a vital part of the Christian life. It brings us into fellowship with other believers, submits us to the authority of the Lord through His church, makes us useful to God and His people, and shapes our identity in Christ and our testimony to the outside world.

Hopefully, you have seen this morning that church membership is not just a personal matter. Clearly, the issues are vitally corporate as well. Importantly, the ordinances given to the local church—baptism, communion—lose their significance outside the group setting. As believers pull away from participating in local, corporate worship, they miss profound blessings that can be experienced only in that setting.

There are many people today who would call themselves Christians who have never been baptized; and many others have little to no interest in celebrating the Lord's Table. And for the countless professing believers who have adopted the modern consumer mindset regarding 'church', it is more and more likely that neither baptism nor communion will ever be a priority for them.

It has become such a problem that many churches have been downplaying the biblical ordinances, relegating them to less-attended midweek services or ignoring them altogether. They would rather reject the clear commands of Scripture than risk offending an unbeliever or making anyone uncomfortable with such 'antiquated' church practices.

Beloved, that is disastrous. Baptism is perhaps the clearest expression and testimony we have to the life-changing power of Christ. And communion unites the church in celebration of the sacrifice He made on our behalf. They're not optional rituals—they're vivid examples to the power and work of the Lord, ordained and instituted by God for the growth, unity, and testimony of His church.

Yet even in churches where baptism and communion are administered, they can often be directed as expressions of personal faith rather than corporate identity. They do not celebrate the commonality of the church, as we are baptized into one body and gathered at the foot of the cross to share in Christ's sacrifice. We need to be careful that they are not just observed merely as individual acts, with individual significance and individual results; but to emphasize the unity in the body that they entail.

One more point. Just as believers need to fight against the temptation to withdraw from the church, we also need to fight the tendency to isolate ourselves within the congregation. We cannot reject our corporate identity in Christ—we are called to be united in love, faith, and purpose. Baptism and communion are public expressions of that unity with every member of the body, and our service to one another should be no different: Serving one another in the church, and serving the world by proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Membership really just prepares us all for the service that our Lord has called each one of us until He calls us Home.

Farewell

As you all know by now, this will be my family's last Sunday as members of the Covenant of Peace Church. My employer had informed me a few months ago that my services were very much still desired, but that they need to be performed in that strange land called Huntsville, Alabama. We will be spending this coming week in preparing for and finally heading out of town on Friday, God willing. As I stated in today's opening, the teaching, fellowship, ministry, and most of all the love of the people of this church have comprised the richest blessings we have received in our walk with the Lord so far. We plan to keep in close touch, and have room to practice hospitality if you ever come our way at the southern tip of the Appalachian Mountains.

As has been my custom here, I can think of no better way to close than with "one of my favorite Scriptures" (which, of course if you have not figured out by now, includes all 66 books of the Bible ☺). I encourage all of you gathered here today the same way Paul closed this marvelous letter to the church at Thessalonica:

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28:

12 But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, 13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. 14 We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15 See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people. 16 Rejoice always; 17 pray without ceasing; 18 in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 19 Do not quench the Spirit; 20 do not despise prophetic utterances. 21 But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.

23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

25 Brethren, pray for us. 26 Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. 27 I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.

28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

And all God's people said ... Amen!