

Sermon outline and notes:

© Dr. Stephen Felker

Pastor, Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreek.church)

18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834

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2 Corinthians 8:5; Hebrews 10:23-25

“Our Commitments to the Local Church”

Intro. I am preaching a series of messages about the church on Sunday evenings, and I decided to preach this particular message on Sunday morning. The message is entitled, “Our Commitments to the Local Church.” There is no doubt that the Bible teaches that we should make a complete commitment to Jesus Christ. He Himself said, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Mt. 16:24). That is commitment! Now there are some who would acknowledge that they should make such a commitment to the Lord Jesus, but they do not see any need to make a commitment to a local church. In fact, seven out of ten Americans (72%) claim to have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, but less than one out of every five adults (17%) believes that being part of a local church is a critical element in their spiritual growth, according to the results of a study released in April, 2006 by the Barna Group. In fact, only 25 percent of adults who have a biblical worldview believe that the church is central in a person's spiritual growth.

But can you be committed to the Lord without being committed to His church? I hope to show you that the answer from God's Word is “No.” We should make a commitment both to the Lord, and to His Church. Jesus said in Mt. 16:18, "... you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church...." Jesus is all about building up His church in this world and how can you be committed to Jesus without being committed to His mission?

On the other hand, some do just the opposite. They seem to think that a commitment to a church in terms of attendance, giving, partaking of sacraments, and serving is the same as being committed to Christ. Even the Old Testament declares that religious ritual is no substitute for a relationship with the Lord. So even though this message is about making commitments to the local church, I want to say up front that such outward commitments are no substitute for personal faith and commitment to Christ, but should be an expression of our commitment to Christ.

My opening text tells us of the custom of new believers in the apostle Paul's ministry. Those who became Christians first gave themselves to the Lord, and then they gave themselves to the apostolic Church, according to God's will. But notice the order here. “They first gave themselves to the Lord.” It will not do you any good to give yourself to a church if you do not first give yourself to the Lord by trusting in Jesus as your Savior and Lord. You have no right to talk about joining a Christian Church until you have done that - “first to the Lord.” You have no right to partake from the Communion-table until you have done that. Give yourselves first to the Lord with repentance of sin and simple and faith in Jesus. I want you to know that God abhors your sacraments and your ceremonies if you substitute such rituals for a true saving relationship. So make sure you get the order right. First give yourself to the Lord. Repent of your sins and trust in Jesus as your savior. Do what Romans 12:1-2 says, and present your bodies to God as a living sacrifice, and be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Now once you have trusted Jesus as your Savior and committed your life to Him, what should you do next? How do you go about becoming the Christian that God would have you to be? How do you experience transformation of life? That will be the main topic of my message today. First of all:

I. BECOME A COMMITTED MEMBER OF A LOCAL CHURCH

After a true Christian has given himself or herself to the Lord, the very next step should be to make a commitment to a local Christian Church. It is not enough to become a part of the church universal (Mt. 16:18; 1 Tim. 3:15). You need to attend and then join a local church. You need to seek fellowship with others who love the Lord. Every born again believer should be a part of a local assembly. We are not to live our Christian lives in isolation from other believers.

A. The Reasons:

1. Example of the Early Church - On the day of Pentecost the three thousand who were converted were at once baptized and were added to the church. Acts 2:41-42 says, "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." Then v.47 says, "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." The New Testament pattern is clear: New believers are to join themselves to a church of believers.

2. It Is Essential for Spiritual Growth – When a baby is born, God designed things in such a way that the child is to grow up in a loving, nurturing family. The child is to be taught. Even so, when someone is saved, they need to be placed in a local church family. The apostle Paul understood this. When he traveled from city to city as a missionary, he won people to Christ. And what was the first thing he did? He formed churches for those new believers. Before he left for other communities, he first established pastoral leadership for that church (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). He knew that no young Christian and no older Christian can have real success in the Christian life without the fellowship of other believers.

Yet there are some who do not want to join a church.

B. The Excuses for Not Joining a Church – I've heard plenty of excuses over the years. Some say:

1. "I don't want to be bound to a church. I want to be free to do as I please." Yet many of those same people have bound themselves to a spouse. In fact, that is the very language that is used in 1 Cor. 7:27 & 39. When a man and a woman fall in love and decide that they want to establish a lasting relationship, what should they do? They *should* make a commitment through marriage. That bond is good for them both!

Even so, as a Christian you need a committed relationship with a local body of believers where you are committed to them and they are committed to you "for better or for worse, in sickness and in health." The problem with some people is they are *dating* the church rather than joining and being committed to a church. Now granted, your bond to a local church is not as strong as the bond to your spouse. In our day you can change churches, yet I believe that people change churches more than the Lord really wants.

2. "I am afraid that I will be just another church dropout." The fact is, if your faith and commitment to Christ is genuine, you are highly likely to remain with God's people. It is people who are not genuine in their faith that are likely to drop out.¹ Those who join a church and become active are the ones who are not as likely to drop out of church completely.

¹ 1 John 2:19, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us."

3. “The Church is so imperfect. I see too many problems.” Let me ask you something. Are you perfect? Do you not have faults and problems? Sure, churches have faults and problems because we are made up of people. Yet I will say this, some of the finest people on earth are to be found in local churches, though they are not perfect. Furthermore, if you feel the church has faults, it is your duty to come and help us correct those faults. Don’t just complain about the problem; do something about it!

4. “There are too many hypocrites in the church.” Then you must be very sound and sincere yourself, I suppose? I trust you are so, but then you ought to come and join the Church, to add to our soundness by your own. Surely you do not believe the theory of some, that because *some* professing Christians are hypocrites, therefore all are. So many of the same people who avoid the church because of the presence of hypocrites do not avoid the grocery store or bank. There are hypocrites in those places as well!

So there will always be some professing Christians who hold back on joining the church, for one reason or another. Well, suppose everybody else did the same? Suppose all Christians in the world said, “I shall not join the Church.” Why, there would be no visible Church. That would be a very bad thing. This world would be far worse off if there was no church.

[Bring a brick or put one on PowerPoint]. Here is a brick—a very good one. What is the brick made for? It’s purpose is to help build the exterior wall of a house. But by itself, it is of very little use, and it certainly does not fulfill what it was designed for. It is a good-for-nothing brick, until it is built and *bound* into the wall. It takes lots of brick bound together to make a wall.

C. Which Church Should You Join? - Do not waste your time looking for a perfect church. Some of the local churches in Paul’s day were very imperfect institutions. Read the epistles to the Corinthians and see how imperfect the church in Corinth was, and yet Paul never thought of advising any believer in Corinth to get out of this imperfect church. He did tell them to come out of heathenism, to come out from fellowship with infidels (2 Cor. 6:14-18), but not a word on coming out of the imperfect church in Corinth.

Now even though you cannot find a perfect church, you should look for the best church you can. Unite with a church where they believe the Bible, preach the Bible, and seek to live by the Bible, including the greatest command, which is love. Join a church where the worship is Christ-centered and genuine. Unite with a church where there is a spirit of prayer. Unite with a church that has a real active interest in the salvation of the lost through the proclamation of the gospel, where new believers are looked after and helped. Join a church that is mission-minded. Join a church where your gifts and abilities will be utilized. There are other considerations that may be important to you, but I believe these are the most important considerations.

Now the question is this. What should you do once you join a local church? I believe you should:

II. REGULARLY ATTEND A LOCAL CHURCH

This is foundational to other aspects of your relationship with a local church. Now let’s turn over to Heb. 10:23-25. V.23 says, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.” The Jewish readers were having a hard time breaking with the Old Covenant, with the Temple and the sacrifices. They were having trouble holding fast the confession of their hope without wavering, as v.23 exhorts.

Now how are we going to hold fast our confession of hope without wavering? Well, the writer of Hebrews is telling us in vv.24-25 that one of the best ways to hold fast to the things of God is to be in the fellowship of His people, where they could love and be loved, serve and be served. So note with me:

A. The Command to Assemble – The author says in v.25, “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some...” “Assembling” is the translation of a word (*episunagoge*) that would have reminded his Jewish readers of the word “synagogue,” the weekly meeting place of the Jews. Just as the Jews were accustomed to attending the synagogue weekly on the Sabbath, even so, we should maintain a habit of attending worship at least weekly, typically on Sundays. The early church adopted Sunday as a day to come together for worship. Acts 20:7 says, “Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ...spoke to them...” 1 Cor. 16:2 and Rev. 1:10 also point to the practice of worship on the first day of the week, no doubt commemorating the resurrection of our Lord.

I believe that you should be faithful and regular in your attendance. He says, “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together...” In 1 Cor. 5:4 Paul said, “when you are gathered together...,” not if. In fact, Paul references the church coming together at least five other times in that book (see 1 Cor. 11:18, 20, 33; 14:23, 26). In the book of Acts I found at least nine references to the believers gathering together. That does not include the many references to the “church,” which in the Greek means a called-out assembly. How can you be a Christian in good standing with the Lord and His church without being a regular attendee of our weekly gatherings?

A pastor was once asked to define “Faithful Attendance at Worship” and this was his reply: All that I ask is that we apply the same standards of faithfulness to our church activities that we would in other areas of our life. That doesn’t seem too much to ask. Consider these examples: If your car started one out of three times, would you consider it faithful? If your mail carrier delivered mail only 2-3 times/week would you consider him or her faithful? If you didn’t show up at work but half the time, would your boss call you faithful? If your refrigerator quit a day now and then, would you excuse it and say, “Oh well, it works most of the time.” If your water heater greets you with cold water one or two mornings a week while you were in the shower, would that be okay with you? If you miss a couple of mortgage payments in a year’s time, would your mortgage holder say: “Oh, well, ten out of twelve isn’t bad”? If you attend worship only often enough to show you’re interested but not often enough to get involved, are you faithful?

The majority of church members are not faithful. They come to worship only when it’s convenient, or on special occasions. The Scripture says, “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some.”

Now why is it that you should gather with other believers on a regular basis? Next, let’s see from our text:

B. The Purpose of our Gatherings – The first thing I want to make clear is the fact that:

1. It’s Not Only For Your Benefit – Again, v.24 says, “And let us consider one another...” The exhortation is to take careful note of each other’s spiritual welfare, for we are all members of one family. In v.25 the author says we should gather for the purpose of “exhorting one another.” So we see here that gathering for worship and fellowship with other believers is not just for your own benefit. It is for the benefit of others as well. The emphasis here is on what

you can contribute to others in the assembly. Fellowship with God must never become selfish. Rom. 14:7 says, “For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself.” So we should do what v.24 says and consider one another. We ought to watch for each other’s interests.

What a blessing it when you go to a church that practices an others-centered focus. People minister to you upon arrival with a warm greeting. They give a word of encouragement. They pray for you, especially when you share a prayer request. The Sunday School teacher gives a good lesson from God’s Word. Singers are not seeking applause but are seeking to minister to you the Word of God in song. We do not gather just to receive, but to give worship, praise, and thanks to the Lord, and to minister to one another.

So what is one main purpose of our gathering in reference to others?

2. It Is To Stir Up Love & Good Works – Our author says in v.24, “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works.” The word “stir up” (*paroxusmos*) means “an inciting, a stimulation, a prodding”² by someone coming along side. We need each other. We need to be in fellowship with each other, as we mutually strengthen each other and encourage each other to love and to do good works. We need to hold each other accountable.

How do we do this? One way we should do this is by sharing the Word of God with one another, and encouraging one another to obey it. There are plenty of commands to love and do good works. Colossians 3:16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” Then, another important way to provoke one another to good works is by our example. Jesus said in Matt. 5:16, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” Then, when we are looking for workers in a ministry project, why not ask someone to join you in signing up? One of our great annual ministries is Vacation Bible School. Will you offer to help, and encourage others to do so as well? If so, see Cheryl, our VBS Director! Each individual believer should live in such a way as to stimulate other believers to love and do good works. Are you doing that?

3. It Is to Exhort One Another – V.25 indicates that we are to assemble together for the purpose of “exhorting one another...” Exhortation takes place during preaching,³ but based on v.24, I believe others are to exhort fellow believers when we gather for worship. It can be done either before or after the worship service.

What are we to exhort others to do? In addition to showing love and doing good works, look at the exhortation in v.23, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering...” We are to encourage other believers to hold fast, and be faithful to the Lord.

Do you know someone who is wavering in their faith and commitment to the Lord? If you, you need to obey v.25 and exhort them to hold fast, and remain faithful to the Lord and His church.

We not only exhort Christians to hold fast and be faithful to the Lord by our words, but also by our example. Your presence encourages the presence of others.

In light of these Scriptures, it should be clear that watching a church service on TV or the Internet is no substitute for personally gathering with other believers in a local church.

C. The Motive to Obey – Paul says in the last of v.25 that we should be “exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.” I believe the primary reference

² The verb form of the word is found in Acts 17:16, “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.”

³ See Luke 3:18, “And with many other exhortations he preached to the people.”

is to the coming of the Lord. 1 Peter 4:7 says, “But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers.” Each successive Christian generation is called upon to live as the generation of the end-time. The impending return of the Lord should motivate us because of what John wrote in 1 Jn. 2:28, “And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming.” After all, it is shortly after His coming that we will face Him at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Our lives will be examined and we will either be rewarded, or not rewarded at all. Jesus said in Rev. 22:12, “behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work.” Evidently the author of Hebrews is saying that our obedience to his commands in vv.23-25 will be considered when Jesus examines our lives and gives eternal rewards. Will you hold fast to Christ until His return? Will you still be worshipping Him regularly when He returns?

So we have seen that you should join a local church, you should regularly attend a local church, and finally, you should:

III. HELP STRENGTHEN THE LOCAL CHURCH

As I have noted, that is the essence of what our author is saying in vv.24-25. Now I want to expand on what is said here. So as you attend your priority should not be, “What do you offer me and my family.” The Christ-like question is this, “How can I help this church.” Well, I suggest that you help us:

A. By Praying for Your Church – Paul said in 2 Cor. 1:11, “you also helping together in prayer for us.” He said in Rom. 15:30, “Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ...that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me.” As your pastor, my prayer request is similar to what Paul said in 2 Thess. 3:1, “Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified....” What can be more important than praying for the leaders of your church and for the ministries of your church?

B. By Serving in the Ministries of Your Church - Every church member is to try to give himself to the church in the sense of doing his share in all church work. Usually 20% of the members do 80% of the work. I would like to see every active member of the church take on at least one service responsibility in the ministries of our church. If our Nominating Committee or ministry leader calls on you to help, I hope you will say, “Yes,” not only to them, but also to the Lord.

C. By Giving Your Offerings in Support - The church has many expenses, and what a church can do and accomplish is often in proportion to the giving of the members of that church. Are you doing your part in faithful and sacrificial support of the church? While all gifts are important, I want to especially thank those of you who give a tithe or more. We could hardly function without our tithers.

D. By Being Faithful in Doing All – When Jesus rewards Christians for their service, He will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant...” (Mt 25:21, 23). Faithfulness is the character quality that the Lord is looking for the most.

As Paul neared the end of his life, he said in 2 Tim. 4:6-7, "...the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Paul set an example of being faithful to the very end.

Will you be able to say that you have been faithful? We are to be faithful because God is faithful. Look at the last of v.23, "He who promised is faithful." You can count on God. The question is, Can He count on you?

Conclusion: Are you a Christian? Are you a member of a local church? Are you doing your part to build up that church, and help other believers in Christ? If not, why not do what God wants you to do during this time of invitation?

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letter to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957); F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary, The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964); Oliver B. Greene, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1965); John MacArthur, Jr., *The Anatomy of a Church* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1984); John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 105-112; R.A. Torrey, *How to Succeed in the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, originally published in 1906); Warren W. Wiersbe, "*Be*" Series: *New Testament Volumes 1 & 2, Hebrews* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 2, Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1947). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Ironside read but not used.