BC 28; Eph. 4:1-3; Rom. 10:9-17; Joining the Church I. Why we Must Join II. How we Must Join III. The Privilege of Joining

Congregation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, why are you hear? I mean, what reason do you have for getting up early on a Sunday morning- getting dressed and driving to church on a day off. Why did you do that? Why not just stay home- why not watch a service online with a cup of Starbucks in your hand? Why go to the trouble of showing up on Sunday? As we continue our series through the BC and its focus on the church, today we are going to answer the question of why we all should join and attend church. We saw last week that there is one, true Church. The catholic or universal church is being gathered by Christ. This church has no bounds- it is without limitation and without borders. But the local congregation is known in a specific time and specific place. So what is the connection between the universal church and the local congregation? Asked another way, what is the link between the invisible church and the visible church? Now it might seem a little gratuitous- that a pastor of a local church would tell you that you need to join the local church. But today we are going to see that Jesus is pleased to save His people in the context of the local congregation.

**I. Why we Must Join**

As we start we remember the context in which the BC was written. During this time in the 1500, joining the reformed church could be a death sentence. Even Guide DeBres would eventually give up his life because he would not deny the truth of these words here written. To join the church was a dangerous thing- to find your name on the roles of a reformed church was often a death sentence. But today, joining the church is seen as a waste of time! Sunday is a family day- or a day for my hobbies. It is my day- not the Lord’s Day! But joining the local church is not just a good idea, it is a necessary part of the Christian’s life! There are many who will say- I am part of Christ but I have no interest in his church. The church has too many hypocrites- why would I want to be a part of that. Although it is true- God’s people can be hypocritical at times- the fact remains that God wants His people to be united- to come together to worship Him! There is something special that takes place in the context of corporate worship- something that cannot be found out there- something that you will be missing if you neglect or ignore the call to worship. So why then must all of God’s people join a church? Why are we obligated- even duty bound- to enlist in the roles of a local congregation? The church is not something we can take or leave at our leisure- rather it is a sacred responsibility! Do no forsake the gathering as Heb. 10 says. And the reason why we all must and will eagerly desire to join a local church is because the local church is the chosen location of the means of grace. Children, do you remember what are the 2 means of grace? It is the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments. So why do we need the local church? Why must we join a congregation? Because it is within the local congregation that we will find the preaching of the Word and the sacraments. Take, for example, the preaching of the Word. Why is the preaching so important to God’s people? Well, as we read in Rom. 10:17, faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. To follow Paul’s line of thought in Rom. 10- gospel preachers need to be sent by Christ to the church so that the good news would be proclaimed. God is pleased to use this preaching of the good news to produce faith in our hearts. And it is only those who have true faith who will be saved. So if a person wants to be saved, it stands to reason that they will put themselves in the place that God has promised to work. Stated another way, God uses means to save His people! He uses the preaching of the word to produce faith and strengthen faith in our hearts. So if we want to be saved and if we want to be sanctified- then we will be consistently found here at church, sitting under the preaching! Faith comes from hearing the word of Christ proclaimed. To be clear, the church does not save. No, it is Jesus who saves. But He chooses to speak through and in His church- the Spirit uses the means of preaching to awaken those who are asleep in their sins. Preaching is by its very definition a unique event found in a specific place. It is the unique, Spirit filled opening and application of God’s word to a specific people! You cannot and will not get this by watching sermons online or by listening to Podcasts. These are helpful- but no substitute for the pure, preaching of God’s Word. To illustrate this point, consider the coals of a fire. If you remove one coal and pull it out of the fire, that ember would soon die. But keep that coal in the flame, the fire within is kindled and the fire stays lit. In a similar way, a Christian by himself will soon die out- becoming lethargic in the walk of faith. But surrounded by others, that fire stays lit! It is within the context of the local church that faith is produced and God’s people are sanctified! It would be abnormal- contrary to our good- for us to forsake the gathering of God’s people as Heb. 10 states. Do not forsake the gathering of God’s people, but rather encourage one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near. A common saying is this, “no man is an island.” As it stands- no sheep will be content to be a lone sheep- they will each seek a flock to find shelter within.

**II. How we Must Join**

Now that we have seen that joining a local church is not just a good idea- but a necessary part of the Christian life. In our second point we find the way in which a person is to join. If I want to join the church, what must I do? What is the process that I must undergo? Is there some initiation? If I want to join the local Lion’s Club- all you have to do is pay your membership fees and show up. In fact, most clubs or groups that you join are happy to welcome anyone who pays the fee and shows up. When it comes to sports teams- most of the time you have to try out. If too many people try out, those who are not as gifted tend to be cut from the team. Well then, what do I need to do in order to join the church? Do I have to be super gifted- or else I might be cut from the team? Do I need to pay my dues and sign on the line in order to join this club? Well, joining the local congregation of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ is something that we all must do as we saw in our first point. And we are welcomed as a member of the local church when we believe in Jesus and confess His name. This link between belief and profession is found in our reading from Rom. 10:9- if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heat that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. As Jesus also said in Mt. 10:32- if you confess me before men, I will confess your name before my Father in heaven. Getting back to our question- how are you made a member of the local church? Well, you become a communicant member of this church by believing in Jesus and by publicly professing your faith! There is a verbal and visible aspect to church membership! In other words, there is no such thing as a secret or silent member. Although it is true that covenant children of this church are members of this church in the formal sense- there are unique rights and privileges reserved for those who publicly profess their faith here! Becoming a communicant member- a member who has access to communion or the Lord’s Table- is one such privilege. Every time the church gathers to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, they are reaffirming again in a very visible way that they too believe in Jesus and are a member of His people! The congregation is united in this way- the bond of sacred union strengthened as they eat and drink together in remembrance of Jesus Christ. So there are no membership dues to become a member here- no fee that you pay in order to get your name on the roles. No try outs! Rather, by faith in Jesus Christ and publicly professing your faith! That is how you become a member of this congregation! And going back to our illustration, the only way you can be cut from the team- if you will- is by refusing to repent and believe! Church discipline and final excommunication is applied to those who refuse to repent from their sins. By denying that you know Christ and refusing to believe in Him- that is how it is known that you are not a member of God’s people. So those who would join the church must do so in a visible and verbal way! The local, visible church then, is made up of professing believers and their children.

**III. The Privilege of Joining**

Now that we have seen the need to join and the way in which we join, in our final point we consider the benefits of joining the local church. Why would anyone want to join- to become one of the members this or any local congregation? In our final point we consider the privileges that we enjoy as a member of local church. In addiction to the privilege of access to the Lord’s Supper, there is the privilege being a part of a group of people who love you and seek to bless you! You are found in the context of a community of like-minded believers who use their gifts to bless you- and to whom you might be a blessing. As our BC art. puts it, we are obliged to join and keep the unity of the church by seeking to build up one another according to the gifts God has given them. Here we consider what is called the office of the believer. The local congregation is the context in which God calls you to use your gifts- and the place where the gifts of others will be enjoyed. As we read from Eph. 4- we are to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. As Eph. 4:16 continues, the church is a body in which every part has a purpose. When each part is working properly, the body grows so that it is built up in love! The imagery is clear from I Cor. 12, the local congregation is like a physical body. Each member is a different part- a foot, hand, eye or ear. We are connected to each other by muscle, bone and vein. There is one heart that beats in us all- one Spirit by whom we have life. Belonging to this body- being a part of a local congregation- means that there are both privileges and responsibilities. You enjoy the benefit of being ministered to- and you are called to use your gifts for the benefit of others. So it is for your good- others are looking out for you. Supporting the local church is a very concrete work. You are not called to support the universal church as such- but you are called to support the local congregation as it is a local manifestation of the universal church. We all have gifts to use- we all have a part to play. Like a good theater or Broadway show- the narrative only makes sense if everyone plays their part! So it is within the church. We are called to support each other- to carry one another’s burdens. So we show up on Sunday- ready to take our place! We sing and bring our offerings- we speak that needed word of encouragement. This is a work we are all called to partake of. And this work is very normal- very ordinary if you will. So we pray for others in our church. We extend the right hand of fellowship. We encourage each other with our smile and fitting word. We do our part as a teacher- or as a student. We clean or repair the building- we bring cookies to share- we call on those who are shut-ins or we use our musical talent. We all have our place- our God given talent that God wants us to use. But the fact is, we live in a very me-centered, non-committal society. People go to the church that they can get what they want with the least amount expected of them. So I watch a service online to avoid the messiness of real relationships. Or I attend a mega church where no one knows me or expects anything from me. I go where I can blend into the background and where there is no accountability. But the local church is not a place to hide from others. It is a place to lean into others- to pour ourselves into each other- under the caring eye of local leaders. The local church is where discipleship and discipline take place- where genuine community is found. As Gal. 6 puts it- do good to all and especially to those of the household of faith.

To conclude, the local church is where God wants His people to be. We are called out of this world- called together for worship. If Jesus is your shepherd, His flock will be your home! Jesus is pleased to save His people in the context of the local congregation. The local church is not perfect, but it is a family! A place where we love and serve- being knit together in the bond of peace- united to both Christ and His people!