

LD 21 (54-55); Matthew 16:13-18; I Cor. 1: 1-2; The Church of Jesus Christ I. The Gathering of this Church II. The Members of this Church

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, how many Christians are in the world today? It is estimated that there are over 2 billion people who identify as Christians in the world today. But I did not expect you all to know that answer- but how about this one? How many members are there within our church? Well, there are around 200 members within our church- and as we will see- each member has a specific role and responsibility. As you will remember, Jesus often compares the church to a body. Interestingly, there are 206 bones in the adult body- and it is easy to see how difficult life is for the body when those bones are not acting like they should. With hip, knee and back problems- I'm sure many of you can testify to the pain that accompanies a bone that is not functioning properly! As each bone of the body has an important roll- so also each member of the church is vital to the strength of that church. So today as we continue our series through the AC we continue to focus on the work of the Holy Spirit. As we saw last week, the Spirit is active both in the corporate body and in the individual believer within the church. So this morning we consider this theme: Jesus Christ unites the body of the church by way of the Holy Spirit.

I. The Gathering of this Church

In our first point we will be considering the gathering of this organization- the bringing together of this thing called the church. Now in QA 54 we read of the holy, catholic church. By way of reminder, the catholic church here is another way of saying the universal or world-wide church. QA 54 is not speaking of a specific, official organization but rather the one, true church that was, is and will be. What is the church? Well, the church is the group of people- or the community of believers- who are gathered into the Kingdom of God by Jesus. So the question we start with is this, how many churches are there? Although there are over 35 million so called churches in the world, the fact remains, there is and always will be only one, true church. So the holy catholic church is describing the church that Jesus Christ

gathers- the one group of people that are bought together and made one- or the body of Christ that has been secured and washed by His blood. This body of believers was gathered in the OT and in the New- and continues to be gathered today. It is a church gathered from all time and in all places. So the church was gathered from the beginning of the world and will continue to be gathered until the end of the world. This church is united in the way in which she is saved- as Acts 4 puts it- there is only one name under heaven given to men by which we can be saved. So there is only one way to the Father- one name by which we can be saved. In other words, the church of the OT and the NT are united in this fact- they are saved by believing in promised Messiah of God- Jesus Christ our lord. Although the OT saints were looking forward and we are looking back upon His life, there is and remains only one way in which we can be saved! This one church is gathered from all nations and lands. So Jesus is gathering a church from every tribe, tongue and people. Out of the entire human race, every color of skin will be represented in heaven. So the church is made up of believers from Adam to Abraham and down to Timothy and Titus and to Luther and Knox. Coming from Africa to Australia- from Canada to Croatia. From East to West, North to South. As we read from I Cor. 1:2- all who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ! All- everyone and anyone who calls on the name of the Lord. From every place that people dwell- the church is being gathered. These are all being made one in Christ. As Gal. 3:28 makes clear; male and female, rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile- all are one in Jesus Christ. There is a spiritual unity that Eph. 4 speaks of – one faith, one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of all- and I could add- One church! So the church is made one by Christ. Where does true, church unity come from? Well, it is Jesus who gathers them. They are made one as the One Good Shepherd brings them into the one sheep fold. They are made part of the one flock of God. This is again the work that Jesus does by His Spirit- as our QA 54 says, Christ gathers through His Spirit and Word. So the Spirit is the One who produces faith within us and unites us to Christ! But Christ not only gathers, He also protects. As we read in Mt. 16, Jesus will build His church and the gates of hell will not

overcome it! The devil and our enemies will never succeed in stamping out the church- just as Ahab and Jezebel failed in the same task. So Christ gathers and protects His people. So as we bring our first point to close, the DNA of the church is this: Those who are chosen by the Father, saved by the Son and sanctified by the Spirit! This is what the church looks like- and this is what makes the church One. Remember, belief that the holy, catholic church exists is an article of faith. We do not believe in the existence of the church based on what we see around us! The fact is, it does not look like there is only one, true universal church. But this truth remains- there is one head of the church- and one body the bride!

II. The Members of this Church

Now that we have looked that DNA of the church- how and from where it is gathered- in our second point we are going to focus in the members of this church specifically. The end of QA 54 sets the stage for us- it is not enough to believe that there is a holy, catholic church. No, I must myself BE a member of this church! And of this community of believers I am and always will be a living member. So I need to not only be able to define the church- I need to be a member of it! How am I a member? Well, I am a member by faith in Jesus Christ. But not only must I be a member, I must be a living member! I am to be an active and invested member! Consider the body which is made up of many different parts. What happens if you have a part of your body that is cut off? Well, the member cannot survive once separated from the body? If you cut off a finger or loose a toe because of frostbite- those members are lost to you! They die and you suffer loss. No, I am to be a living member! But what makes a living member? Well, a living member is one that is joined to Christ by faith and is also joined to the body by service! It is this service to other members that we focus on this point! As QA 55 continues, what do you understand about the communion of the saints? Not only am I a member of Christ, there are others here who are joined to Christ as well! Not only do I believe- we believe and I belong to this church! So that those who are joined to Christ by faith enjoy communion with other members as well! Communion

is only possible if you have shared things in common- namely Christ and His Spirit! Let me ask you a question, do you know who are the members of this church? Have you ever read the church directory only to be surprised? I do not know who that is! Well, today you have an opportunity to find out! I believe that the church is a communion of saints- that I belong to Christ and to this body as well! And just a brief note on the word "saints." The word- saints- here is not being used in the RCC way. A saint is not someone who is super spiritual, free from sin- having earned spiritual riches that can be shared with others. That is not the kind of saints in view here. Rather, a saint is someone who is holy by way of their identity- belonging to God- dedicated for holy service- and filled with the Holy Spirit. We are saints because of the righteousness of Christ. That is why Paul addresses I Cor. to the saints in I Cor. 1:2. The church at Corinth, those now sanctified in Christ and called to be saints. So being a saint is not something we attain by our works- but rather an identity we receive that calls us to holy service. But what is this holy service that the saints of this church are called to? Well, as QA 55 says- each member should consider it a duty to use the gifts Christ has given them for the service of others. Ask not what your church can do for you- but rather what you are called to do for your church- right?! So I do not first of all look at the benefits I get from being a member of the church, but rather what is my responsibility- how am I to serve others now that I am a member. This is a radically different way to look at church membership- I am a member called to serve! Listen to these words from Rom. 12: 3-8. You each have a gift- and are called to use that gift according to the measure of faith God gave you. You are individually members of one another. Having gifts that differ, each one should use it according to grace given you. So we all have gifts from Christ- gifts from the Spirit- that we are called to use for the benefit of other members in the church. So what sort of gifts do you have? What talents or roll are you equipped by the Spirit to fill? Well, our talents are both abilities and possessions. Your possessions are on loan from God- your money is a gift that you are to steward. This starts with the simple tithe. 10% of your increase is to be returned to God for the direct use in Kingdom work. Do not show up before the Lord

empty handed Dt. 16 says. But that is only the start. Having returned your tithe does not mean that rest of your money is yours to use as you see fit? No, all of your money belongs to Jesus- and all of it is to be used in His service and for His glory! So even in the paying of your bills- and saving for retirement- the service of fellow man for the glory of Christ is to be in view! And concerning your abilities- there are so many ways that you serve to the benefit of others. Have you ever felt like you have no gift to give- no talent or ability to use to bless others in Jesus' name? Well, let me give you a few examples. Many of you have been diligent in praying for others, providing meals, extending phone calls- each a small gift of encouragement! Helping others with projects or the simply encouraging work or look of compassion! Even just showing up for church and singing- all of these are examples of talents that can be used to serve others. As a church, God have given many of you very generous hearts! I have seen sacrificial giving and sacrificial service in many ways! I hear of open homes, encouraging words, messages of concern and prayer. This is wonderful- but do not grow weary in doing good as Gal. 6 warns. Rather, as we read in Rom. 12, having gifts given to us, let us use them! Gifts that are not used grow stale- while gifts used gain interest and return with dividends as Jesus taught in the Parable of the Talents in Mt. 25. So we should all consider our own talents and treasures- thinking soberly about ourselves, interests and abilities. When I am called upon to serve, do I respond by blessing the members of this body? I am to use my gifts readily and joyfully because I am thankful to Jesus for the gifts He has given me! Ready to bless others because I have been so richly blessed!

As we close, we remember that the only true source of church unity and communion is found in and through Jesus Christ! Only one who is a Christian will be joined to Christ and joined to the church by the Spirit! Without Jesus and the Holy Spirit, there will be no true union with the universal church or the saints! As our theme stated: Jesus Christ unites the body of the church by way of the Holy Spirit. So may we each pursue unity and the bond of peace- loving our good Shepherd more and delighting to serve the fellow sheep in His fold!