

Three Rivers Presbyterian Church  
Foundations  
The Doctrine of the Church

**Membership Vows – Question 4**

4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?

**Preliminary Thoughts**

- In the Bible, no Christian lives in isolation. God’s plan for us is to form a community. The Church is central to God’s purpose and design for this world and the next.
  - The only institution Jesus promised to build is his Church (Matt 16:18).
- We live in a hyper-individualistic age which prioritizes the individual over the community.
- Yet, God relates to his people by way of a covenant community, which is called his Church.

**What is the Church?**

- The New Testament word for church is derived from *ekklesia*, which means “called out.” It refers to the assembly or congregation of God’s people called **out of** the world and **into** a new covenant community of believers.
  - Sometimes the word “church” is used in its largest possible sense: the elect of God in all times and places (every true believer who has ever lived and will live).
    - This is called the **invisible church**.
      - “The catholic or universal church, which is **invisible**, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all” (WCF 25.1) .
  - Sometimes the word “church” is used to describe the church in the present world.
    - This is called the **visible church**.
      - “The **visible** church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (WCF 25.2).
  - Sometimes the word “church” is used to describe a **particular church** in a particular city or region.
    - In Acts, we hear of “the church in Judea” or “the church in Samaria” or “the church in Ephesus.”
  - Sometimes the word “church” refers to a **mixed body** of believer and unbelievers.
    - E.g., Wheats/tares; Judas; false brothers (1 John 2).

## Organization & Organism

- In the N.T., the Church is looked at from two different dimensions, both equally important.
- Most mistakes in thinking about the Church come from placing greater stress on one of these dimensions over another.
  - We want to avoid the church being a body without a soul, but equally we want to avoid the church being a soul without a body. We want both body and soul.
  - Both aspects of the church are repeatedly emphasized in the Bible.
- As an organization, the Church is an institution with structure, order, and polity.
  - It has **officers**: elders (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1) and deacons (Acts 6; 1 Tim 3), who have been given spiritual authority to make decisions, and whom people should obey.
  - It has **rites and ceremonies**: baptism, the Lord's Supper, worship, ordination, church discipline.
  - It has **Government**: Where does authority reside? Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational.
  - It has **doctrinal standards & ethical boundaries**.
    - God's people are told what they are supposed to believe and how they should live. You can't belong to the church and live like a pagan.
    - Warnings are given in the Bible about beliefs and behaviors that would put you outside the church (1 Cor. 5:9-13)
  - Historically, some denominations have tended to side more with the organizational aspect of the church (e.g., Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Episcopalians)
- As an organism, the church is a living thing, a communion, a fellowship of saints.
  - Paul compares the church to a human body. Each of us has different gifts. But none of us can perform our function if we are not connected to one another.
    - "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.<sup>13</sup> For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. <sup>14</sup> For the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts,<sup>[a]</sup> yet one body" (1 Cor. 12:12-20).
  - Paul's point is that we all have spiritual gifts, and we need to each to be healthy and for the church to carry out its calling in the world.

- The Church is also called the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 19:7-9).
  - Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph 5:25-27).
- The family of God (Rom. 8:14-17). The people of God (Heb. 4:9).
  - Christians are called brothers and sisters. In a family, there is a community of love, a community of support, a community of care and loyalty.
  - The Bible speaks about our organic obligations to those in the church.
    - We are to love one another (1 John 3:11)
    - Care for one another (Titus 2:3-8)
    - Confess our sins to each other (James 5:16)
    - Bear each other's burdens (Gal. 6:1)
- Historically, some denominations have sided more with the organism side of the Church (e.g., Plymouth Brethren, Quakers, many independent churches in our day).
- The goal: put the organism inside the organization, and you will have a living communion of brothers and sisters whose structure enables them to live in subjection to God's will – doing the things God wants his people to do in the world.
- The Church as the primary means of discipleship.
  - In the Church, the word is preached. The sacraments administered. Discipline and accountability is maintained.
  - No one can live the Christian life the way it is supposed to be lived without the Church. God has placed the gifts you need for flourishing in the Church. If you live outside the Church, your Christian life will be a deformed and inadequate Christian life. The life he gave you to live, the life He created in you, is a life that requires this organism.
    - Do you not know that **you** are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in **you**? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and **you** are that temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17).
    - “And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the **fellowship**, to the **breaking of bread** and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

### **Marks of a true church**

- Preaching of the Word of God
- Administration of the Sacraments
- Exercise of Church Discipline

## Attributes of the Church

- *We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church (Nicene Creed)*
  - “One” means “unity.” There is only one Church in the world, one body of the Lord Jesus Christ. There are not two bodies of Christ. Although we have divided it up into many parts (denominations), there is only one single church (John 17:21, 23).
  - “Holy” means objectively (because of the righteousness of Christ) and subjectively (because of our manner of life).
  - “Catholic” means “universal.” True believers can be found in every tongue, tribe, and nation. In other words, there are no racial characteristics, no national characteristics, no ethnic characteristics that confine the Church to one group or exclude any group.
  - “Apostolic” means our doctrine and practice derives from the teaching of the Apostles.

## How do I support the church in its worship and work?

- Prayer
- Being present
- Involved in the community
- Giving
  - Money: Tithing an important biblical concept (Gen. 14, 2 Cor. 8-9; Phil. 4)
    - Giving is the response to what God has done for us (not membership dues)
    - We owe everything to God; all we have is his
    - 10% is a good starting point; but we are to give sacrificially (2 Cor. 9:7)
  - Time: Serving each other takes time and energy but is crucial (Gal. 5:13)
  - Talents/ Spiritual Gifts: The reason God has gifted us is to serve the body (Eph. 4)
    - Examine your skills, life, experiences, passions to see how God might use you.
- Important: these are all ways you can support the church, not requirements for acceptance.