

## CHRIST'S CHURCH

### What it means to be a member of the church

*Address given by Mr. Matthew J. Hyde at the Strength in Truth Conference  
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I have been asked to speak to you all on what it means to be a member of the church. Perhaps some of you are already church members; perhaps some of you are exercised about church membership; and perhaps some of you have never thought about it – it is not something that has concerned you. I hope whatever state we are in this morning, there will be something for us each as we come to consider what it really means to be a church member.

One of my burdens over the last little while has been the loss of an understanding of what the church is about. I think many of us gather for worship and we simply see that as being what the church is about. But when we come to the Word of God, the church is about being part of that one family of God, about bearing one another's burdens, living together in love and caring for one another.

I need to begin by defining the terminology. Is it *a* church or *the* church? *The* church and *a* church are two different things. The one is part of the other, but they are separate, and I just want to consider for a moment what is *the* church compared to *a* church.

When we come to consider *the* church, we are talking about all of the elect, all of the Lord's people in every generation from Adam's day down to now, in every place in the world. They are *the* church. Once a person is saved by grace, regenerated, they become part of the church. They were a member of the church in eternity past in election, but they now become in time, in reality, in their own experience, a member of the church, and once a member of the church, you never cease to be a member of the church. You may die here, but you immediately join the glorified church above, and the church on this earth and the glorified church above are one church: *the* church, the body of Christ.

But then we have *a* church. When we come to speak about *a* church, then we say there is *a* church in Brighton, there is *a* church at Chard, there is *a* church at Attleborough, and so on. They are separated groups of the Lord's people – that is evidenced by the fact they have been baptized, baptism being the entry to the church – that meet together for worship and that walk together in love and union. That is *a* church, and so there may be many churches in that sense, all of which are part of *the* church.

To take another line of thinking about this, *the* church is only regenerate, so if you are a member of *the* church then you must be a regenerate person. You must be a sinner saved by grace. But *a* church can be a mixture. There may be some who are church members who are not actually saved, and there may be some of you this morning that are saved, you know the work of the Holy Spirit, but you have not joined *a* church. You are not a member of *a* church, but you are a member of *the* church this morning. So while there is overlap, the two are distinct. A church sits within *the* church and there may be a small part of *a* church which solemnly is not part of *the* church.

We have already said that *the* church is in all time, all places, whereas *a* church is *now*, in one place, and members of *a* church may come and go, *a* church may come and go. The seven churches that John wrote to in Asia have become extinct. But *the* church does not begin or end with the state of *a* church.

Christ is the Head of *the* church. He is, of course, also the Head of *a* church, (if Christ is not the Head of any given church, then that church is not a church whatever man may say). But in *a* church, Christ has appointed office bearers, pastors and deacons, to have that rule within the church under Him. They are under Christ, and then they are over the people.

You may also find *the* church described as being the invisible church. We cannot see *the* church. We cannot truly tell today who here is a member of *the* church, but *a* church is a visible church. It is what we all think of when we speak of the church.

Now I have spent a bit of time on this because I want to answer my question this morning in both senses: What does it mean to be a member of *the* church, and then, What does it mean to be a member of *a* church? There is overlap, but if we get the foundation right, what it means to be a member of *the* church, then we will be a long way to being good members of *a* church.

So firstly, I want to come to answer the question, What does it mean to be a member of *the* church? In considering this, my mind went to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism. You may not have heard of the Heidelberg Catechism. It was a catechism which was written in 1563 in Germany, and it sets forth in question and answer format the doctrines that the church in Heidelberg believed. There is a Baptist version of this catechism called the Orthodox Catechism. In the 1600s one of the old Particular Baptists, Hercules Collins, took the Heidelberg Catechism and adapted it for use by Baptists.

The first question of the Heidelberg Catechism reads: “What is the Christian’s only comfort in life and in death?” This is the answer the catechism gives. “That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood hath fully satisfied for all my sins and delivered me from all the power of the devil, and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head. Yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life and makes me sincerely willing and ready henceforth to live unto Him.” In reality, this is a statement of what it means to be a member of *the* church. It speaks of the relationship, the blessings, and the duties and responsibilities of a member of *the* church. It is all bound up in these few words. So I want to take this answer for a moment to hang a few thoughts on it, and then hopefully you can always refer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism if you ever want an answer to what it means to be a member of *the* church.

I want to look at three aspects of what it means to be a member of *the* church. The first statement I would highlight is this: that members of *the* church *belong unto the faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ*. As Paul says, “Ye are not your own; for ye are bought with a price.” A member of the church is not a free agent. A member of the church is a son or daughter of God. They are a brother, a sister of Jesus Christ. They are His bride, His wife. They do not belong to themselves. They are in that sense the property of Jesus Christ. What a glorious thing that is, to be owned by Jesus Christ! And so we can say the first thing that it means to be a member of *the* church is *relationship*. We are brought into a relationship. We were once strangers, foreigners, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, far off, enemies of God. We did not see anything that we desired in Jesus Christ. He meant nothing to us. But now there is a change of relationship. Our heart is changed. Now we love God. We love the Lord Jesus Christ, and we lean upon Him as a Friend. We draw strength from Him.

So there is *relationship* in being a member of the church. The Word of God brings out the full meaning of this relationship in many different pictures. Every one picks up different aspects of this union between Christ and the church. It is such a vast subject that I cannot do it justice this morning. You need to take in all of these concepts.

The Word of God speaks of the relationship as being the relationship between the head and the body. The head controls the body by constant communication. The head is over the body.

It speaks of it as being like the vine and the branches. The branches draw all their nourishment from the root. If you cut a branch off, it is dead, it is lifeless, it cannot live on its own. It is only as it is united to the root and as it draws water up from the root that it lives. Church members draw all from Him. Of ourselves, we can do nothing, but Paul says, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

It is likened unto the king and his kingdom, or his subjects. The king reigns over his kingdom, reigns over his subjects, and Jesus Christ reigns in us and should reign in us, and we should be found willing and loyal subjects of that king.

It is spoken of as the relationship between husband and wife. It speaks of love, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her. We are assured by this relationship of Christ's love to us. We are also brought into duty, in that sense – wives obey their husbands. If we are a member of *the* church, we are to be obedient to our Husband, to our Lord, the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

It is spoken of as the shepherd and the sheep. The shepherd leads and cares for his sheep. We can expect Jesus Christ to guide us in all things, His Word, to provide all guidance and tender loving care. Members of the church are never left without guidance. He is the Shepherd and we are the sheep.

He is the elder Brother and we are the co-heir. We are heirs with God, joint heirs with Jesus. Friends, what does that mean? We will be partners with Him in His throne. Everything that belongs to Jesus will be ours. We will share His throne, His crown. That is what it is to be an brother of Jesus and a co-heir with Jesus.

It is spoken of as being the foundation and the building. Jesus is the foundation, and we are the building built upon Him. The building takes all its strength from the foundation. It takes its shape from the foundation. It takes its limits from the foundation.

It is spoken of as being food and drink. Jesus said, "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you." Food and drink nourish us, become part of us. "We are what we eat," as the saying goes. And so it is, the relationship between Christ and His church is so close. "We are what we eat." We become like Christ. We cannot say we become part of Christ in the same sense as we assimilate what we eat, but we become one with Christ by mystical union.

So the relationship between Christ and His church is so strong. It is a relationship of closeness, closeness between us and Jesus. It speaks of oneness. We are one with Jesus. It speaks of dependence upon Jesus. We must lean upon Him and draw all from Him. It speaks of communication. The head and the body communicate – the nervous system. There should be communication where there is relationship. Your marriage will fall apart if husband and

wife do not talk to one another. Communication between the body and Jesus Christ. He gives direction. He leads His church and He gives identity. We take our husband's name. The Lord says in Isaiah 43, "Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine." We are no longer called Forsaken and Desolate, but we are called Hephzibah and Beulah. And we have that change of name also for Him that you read of in the second chapter of Hosea, where we no longer call Him, my Lord, Baali, but we call Him my Husband, Ishi. That is what it means to be a member of the church, to be brought into relationship with Jesus Christ. We are not our own. We are part of His body. We are His bride.

The second aspect the Catechism speaks of regarding what it is to be a member of *the* church are the *blessings* that flow from this union, the blessings that flow from this relationship.

The first blessing is: Jesus has satisfied for us. That means He has paid the price that was due for our sins. He redeemed us. He has satisfied the demands that the holy justice of God had on us. He has delivered us from the power of the devil, delivered us from death, delivered us from the bondage of the law.

Secondly, He preserves us, keeps us. He says, "Neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand." He keeps His saints.

Thirdly, He makes all things subservient to them. "All things are yours," he says. "And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's." Because we are Christ's, all things are ours. Friends, everything in this world today is working for the good of the church. "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." So everything, even the bad things that seem to come to pass, are for our good. The Apostle Paul in prison could say, "The things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel." He would not have anything changed. David could say, "As for God, His way is perfect." That is what it means to be a church member, to be a member of the body of Christ. Everything, everything in the world – the forthcoming General Election, the wars and the rumours of wars – everything is working for the good of the church.

Fourthly, He assures us of eternal life. He has given us Himself. When He could swear by no greater, He swore by Himself, that by the oath and the promise we might have strong consolation.

Fifthly, He gives us willingness and readiness to do his will. The love of Christ constrains us. He gives us His Spirit to work in us "both to will and to do of His good pleasure." We become obedient – not now legal obedience – we are not dragged to do things; we do them because we want to. He gives us daily grace and wisdom, grace to know what to do and grace to do it, and He gives us strength and the leading of the Spirit, the prompting of the Spirit.

And so there are blessings. To be a member of a church means to be blessed. To be blessed "with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." Redemption, deliverance, perseverance, working all for our good, assurance, and working in us "to will and to do of His good pleasure." These are the blessings that are received by those that are members of *the* church.

But then finally, the third aspect is, where there is privilege, where we are given blessings, there are also *responsibilities*, or duties that come with it, and the Heidelberg catechism speaks of these *duties*. "He makes me sincerely willing and ready henceforth to live unto Him." This is the third aspect of what it means to be a member of *the* church: not to live

to ourselves, but to live to Christ. It is not my will but it is His will. We see this in the Apostle Paul on the Damascus road. What was almost the first thing he said when the Lord appeared to him? “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?” That is the evidence of being a member of the church. You are made willing and ready to do what the Lord wants you to do. It is no longer what *I* want. It is what will *the Lord* have me to do? What is Jesus’ will for me? That is what it is to be a member of the church: to have that duty, to follow the Lamb, to follow Jesus, to do what Jesus commands.

And so there is duty, and that is why I asked for Colossians 3 to be read, because the duties of a church member are found in the gospel precepts, the things that we read together there: to walk worthy of the relationship, to walk worthy of our Husband, the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The motivation is the blessing. “Freely ye have received, freely give.” It is the keeping of the gospel precept and especially the new commandment, “that ye love one another.” That is what it is to be a member of the church. It is to be under that commandment, and it is to desire, it is to love to keep that commandment, “that ye love one another.”

And so what does it mean to be a member of *the* church? It means we are brought into a relationship with Jesus. We are no longer afar off. We are now near, sons and daughters of God. It means we receive all blessings, everything, all spiritual blessings and all things that are required on this earth for us and for the good of our souls. Nothing is spared; all is given. It means duties; it means that we must, or should desire to walk worthy of that calling.

And of course the opposite of this is that to be outside of the church. If we are outside the church we must conclude we have got nothing. That is the solemn situation we are in. We are born into this world, we come into this world naked, we go out of this world naked. Except we are a member of the church, we have got nothing, absolutely nothing. If we are outside of the church everything is working against us this morning. Everything is not working for our good. We have no hope against the day of our death, no salvation. We are under the power of darkness. We are in the clutches of the devil this morning, whether you know it or not. That is why it is all-important: are we a member of *the* church? That is what William Gadsby asks when he says,

“Have I union  
To the church’s living Head?” (H. 698)

That is what it is to be a member of the church: to have union, to be brought into relationship. Have you got union this morning with the church’s living Head? Are you a member of *the* church? If so, “Ye are not your own; ye are bought with a price.” But the blessing is this: “All things are yours ... and ye are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.”

So friends, if you want a brief summary of what it means to be a member of *the* church, I encourage you to go to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism and you will find there the Scripture references back up, I believe, all that I have said to you this morning.

But then I want to move on just to consider: how do we become members of *the* church? Perhaps you sit there this morning and you say, “This is what I need; this is what I want.” You realise you have nothing if you are outside of the church. To be outside of Christ is blackness and darkness. How do I become a member of *the* church? Well, it is not by baptism. We become a member of *a* church by baptism, but we do not become a member of *the* church by baptism. We can think of those in Scripture who were never baptized. The dying thief was never baptized, but he was a member of *the* church, brought into relationship, promised all

things. “To day shalt thou be with Me in paradise.” That does not mean that we can dismiss baptism. Friends, baptism is one of those duties laid on members of *the church*. “If ye love Me, keep My commandments.” If you are a member of *the church*, you will not think lightly of baptism, but we do not become a member of *the church* by baptism. Baptism is one of the duties, one of the ordinances, the privileges of members of *the church*, but it is not how we become part of *the church*.

Neither do we become a church member by our works. It is not by turning over a new leaf; it is not by being more holy than other people. You may sit there and say, “Well, I can see that you can be a member of *the church*, but I am not worthy of being a member of *the church*. I am a sinner.” Friends, it is not by works. It is by grace we become a member of *the church*. John sums it up in his gospel like this when he says that “He came unto His own, and His own received Him not,” talking of Jesus. “But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God,” become members of *the church*, to be brought into a relationship with Him.

John continues to enlarge: our church membership is not of blood. “Which were born, not of blood.” We are not members of the church because we were born to godly parents, because we were born and brought up in a Strict Baptist church. “Nor of the will of the flesh.” That means it is not by your merits and by your works, not because you decide you are going to be a member of the church and you are going to live like a member of the church. Nor is it “by the will of man.” I cannot elect you to be a member of the church; I cannot choose you to be a member of the church; I cannot make you a member of the church. But it is “of God.” God and God alone makes members of *the church*, and He does so by grace, because there is not a member of *the church* that deserves to be a member of *the church*.

I found a little quote during the week of Spurgeon where he was saying this, that somebody had said to him they were surprised, or they could not understand, how it could be written in Romans that God hated Esau, and his reply to them was this: “I am more surprised that God writes in Romans that He loved Jacob.” Friends, there is greater surprise over the fact that any have been called to be members of the church, because all were sinners, the very worst of sinners. It is all of grace.

That grace is *sovereign*. It is sovereign grace. We must not diminish that this morning, it is sovereign. It is alone in God’s disposal. But it is also *full* grace. Paul writing to Timothy says that he was injurious, a blasphemer, a persecutor, a vile, wretched sinner, “but I obtained mercy.” And he goes on to say, “The grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant.” “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.” His grace is sufficient to put the worst of sinners into *the church* and to make them members of *the church*. It is *full* grace. And that grace is *free*. It is not based on merit. The free, unmerited favour of God – that is what grace is. Always undeserved. The gospel says, “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” It is *free* grace. O do not stumble this morning at sovereign grace. It is sovereign grace – we must emphasise that this morning. It is not of the will of man nor of the will of the flesh. It is not by birth. It is by God’s sovereign grace. But ah, friends, it is *full* grace, the sufficiency of grace to the vilest, and it is *free* grace, without money and without price.

How do we become members of the church? Joh says: “even to them that believe on His name.” Entry into *the church* is by faith. It is by faith we receive him. It is by faith we

receive the fulness of Christ. So we are not saved by works, but by grace, through faith, and that not of yourself, it is the gift of God.

How do we know if we are members of *the* church? Perhaps that is the question with you this morning: How do I know if I am a member of *the* church? Well, friends, it is a vast subject and we can only really scratch the surface, but firstly, just to go through the three points I have already made.

Firstly, *relationship*. Has there been a change of relationship in your life? Once Jesus meant nothing to you, but now you see some beauty in Him. Once you were described in Isaiah 53: “No beauty that we should desire Him”; “no form nor comeliness.” Jehovah-Tsidkenu, as Robert Murray M’Cheyne says, meant nothing to you, but now you see some beauty in Jesus. Now you love Him; you love to hear Him spoken of; you desire to know more of Him; you want to be amongst His people; you want to be where He says, “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.” Love to all that is His: His day, His Word, His people.

I want to come down very low this morning, to the smallest evidence. Are there any here this morning that mourn over their lack of love? You would love Him, you would adore Him, but you feel such a lack. The world clings to you, but are you wrestling, are you praying, “Lord, save me from the world; give me more love to the Lord Jesus Christ”? Friends, if we love the Lord Jesus Christ and thought that our love was sufficient, if we were satisfied with our love, we are probably not a member of *the* church. The experience of the members of *the* church is with William Gadsby:

“O that my soul could love and praise Him more,  
His beauties trace, His majesty adore;  
Live near His heart, upon His bosom lean;  
Obey His voice, and all His will esteem.” (H. 667)

That is the desire of the members of *the* church. Is that your desire? A change of relationship.

Secondly, there are these *blessings*. In regeneration we are given a new heart. We have new affections. Now we find this love to the Lord Jesus Christ. Now we love His commandments. We love what He tells us to do. We have a new mind. We are brought into an understanding of things we could not understand before. Perhaps your mind has stumbled at sovereign grace, at election. You could not understand it. The carnal mind receiveth not the things of God, but now your mind is renewed by grace, and you begin to understand, and you love His truth and you want to know more of His truth. It is a change of willingness. You are now made willing to do what He requires. His commandments are no longer a burden, but now you know what Jesus says in Matthew: “My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” You are made willing in the day of His power.

To be a member of a church is to have calling, to be called, and that is to be separated from the world. Do you know something of separation from the world? Once the world was everything – ambitions, your job, marriage, children, whatever it may be – but now all of those things have fallen into their right place. Now you are separated from those things. They mean less to you. You have had to leave the world. That is of course, repentance and faith – leaving sin, leaving the things which are not from Jesus for our salvation, and turning to Him. Access at the throne of grace, a desire now to pray, a having to pray, a need of prayer.

Then we must emphasise: assurance in some measure. The hymnwriter puts it like this:

“Dream not of faith so clear  
As shuts all doubtings out.” (H. 312)

Some people think that if you have got assurance it means you will never have any doubts. But friends, we may include in assurance the humble hope. Can you rest this morning in your hope. Have you got a comfortable hope, have you got some comfort – some comfort against the thought of death, some comfort this morning against trouble and difficulty? I am not my own; I belong to Jesus Christ, and therefore all things are working together for good and He will bring me at last to Himself in glory.

That brings me finally to *duties*. Is there now a willingness, a willingness now to keep the gospel precept, a desire to live to His honour and His glory? Again, I come down low. Is there any mourning over self and sin? Is there confession in your soul? Have you had to cry to the Lord at the throne of grace because of your failure to walk in His commandments, because you have found pride lurking in your heart, the lusts of the flesh, the pride of life? You would be free from sin. The good that you would you do not. The striving – there is now something of that constant warfare. You would do good.

Well friends, these are some of the ways by which we may know that we are members of *the* church. There has been a change. It may only be small. You may say this morning, “It is very small.” But the hymnwriter speaks very wisely when he says,

“Those feeble desires, those wishes so weak,  
'Tis Jesus inspires, and bids you still seek.”

Friends, go on. The Apostle Peter said, “But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” If you are a member of *the* church, the Holy Spirit will teach you more of yourself, more of your need of Christ. He will teach you more of Christ and more of the fulness and freeness and mercy there is in Him.

Well we must move on. Having considered what it means to be a member of *the* church, what does it mean to be a member of *a* church, that is a local church, a member of the church where you may attend? We want to begin with some foundations. Firstly we must be a member of *the* church to be a member of *a* church. But if you have got some of those evidences this morning that you are a member of *the* church, some of those changes that grace makes, then there is nothing between you and being a member of *a* church this morning. But that is the question where we must begin: Are we a member of *the* church? Some want to be a member of *a* church. They just see the church as being a club, some privilege. They want the privilege, but they do not know what it is to be a member of *the* church. O the first question must be, Am I member of *the* church?

Entry into *a* church is by baptism. That is the entry into the church. Circumcision in the Old Testament was given when a baby was born, natural birth. Baptism is administered after the new birth, and is the outward sign of the new birth. We must be born again. Having been born again, then the entry into the visible church is by baptism. As circumcision was the entry into Israel in the Old Testament, baptism is the entry into the New Testament church.

Baptism is administered on the basis of a profession of faith, and that is a right profession of faith. That does not just mean the words that you say at the church meeting. Perhaps there is one here this morning who is saying, “I don’t know what I will say to the



church and therefore I can't go forward." Friends, it is not so much what you say at the church meeting. I think that has not been emphasised enough. It is what your feet say, it is what your hands say, it is what your voice says. Is there a change in your life? I am certain of this: that if you went to the church meeting and were unable to say very much, but if there are those godly church members who have seen a difference, seen a difference in your life, that which cannot be hid, they will receive you without you saying very much. I have certainly in my time as pastor received a church member who said virtually nothing, but their whole life was a testimony. Their whole life was a testimony to the grace of God. They were members of *the* church. Perhaps that was a unique situation, but O friends, do not let the devil this morning put all the emphasis on what you may have to say at the church meeting. Remember the profession is how you live. Is there seen that love to the brethren?

That brings me to consider this: it begins with love. To be a member of *a* church should begin with love – love to the Lord Jesus Christ – therefore you desire to keep His commandments – and love to His people. “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.” Are you saying this morning, “Lord put me among the children”?

“With them numbered may I be,  
Now and to eternity.”

Can you say with the hymnwriter,

“Here my best friends, my kindred dwell,  
Here God my Saviour reigns”?

That is where true church membership begins – a love to the Lord, a love to His people. And love submits. It submits to Jesus. It submits to the church. It submits to the rules of the church. It is love that keeps us in our right place as church members.

Joining a church is a rational thing. I mean by that the action is to be informed. We do not just baptize anybody, and not anybody can be a church member. We baptize upon a profession of faith. Faith informs you of your right to be a church member. When you come to be a church member, you need to know what you are joining – the people that you are being expected to love, the doctrines that the church believe, the rules that they have, the covenant of the church. I expect if any of you approach a deacon or your pastor to ask to be baptized, they will speak to you about those things. But I would say, I have always appreciated it when I find those who come to ask for membership and they have already got the rules, they have already got the articles. They have a desire, and therefore there is some informing. They know what they are doing. They are not taking a step into the dark in that sense. Do you know – if you are not a member of the church, *or if you are a member of the church* – do you know what your church's articles of faith are? Ask the deacon, ask the pastor, for a copy of your church's articles. They may not be the Gospel Standard articles – they are certainly not at Galeed, Brighton – even if the church is on the Gospel Standard list.

The action is to be informed, and it is to be a commitment. We become part of the body, and we do not just cut our hand off, we do not just cut a finger off. I firmly believe that membership of the church should really be viewed in a very similar way as marriage. When we join a church, there should be a lifelong commitment to that church, and the reasons for leaving that church should be the church has fallen into heresy, or there is some gross immorality in the church, or we are moved in providence. Today because the doctrine of the

church is at a low ebb, there is not much commitment to the church. You join the church and if you do not get on with the pastor's ministry, you move somewhere else. You join a church, but if you fall out with another church member, then you just move on. O friends, Jesus Christ commits to His people. "Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love." There should be that same commitment in our heart to the church we have joined, the love unto the brethren, as Jesus commits to us in his great love. It should be with commitment – that is what it means to be a member of a church.

Well, again I want to give you something to hang my thoughts on this morning and I would direct you to the church covenant or declaration printed with the Gospel Standard Articles of Faith. Sadly, this important piece gets overlooked. When you become a member you are asked: Do you believe the articles of faith? We may put emphasis upon the rules. What do the rules say? When it comes to calling a church meeting, what do the rules say? But I fear I have overlooked the declaration. I have not asked my members to publicly make the declaration and perhaps I have erred in that. Most churches have a covenant. Again, your church's covenant may not be the one in the Gospel Standard Articles. You will find that some of our churches have very old church covenants. What is a church covenant? It is a pledge of what you will do as a church member. It is a pledge of what it is to be a church member. I am going to go through the covenant section by section.

The first thing of what it means to be a member of *a* church, is to maintain unity in the truth. The covenant in the Gospel Standard Articles reads, "Now all and each of these doctrines and ordinances we can honestly say it is our desire to maintain and defend in one spirit and with one mind, *striving together for the faith of the gospel.*" To be a church member is to have the oracles of God delivered to you, to know and to hold the doctrine the church stands for. The church members are there to hold the doctrines of the church, to ensure the church does not move, to ensure the ministry in the pulpit does not change, to ensure the ministry is always according to the Word of God. To be a church member is to have the responsibility of ensuring the ministry in the church is maintained and it is to be done unitedly; together; in unity. "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." And that word *endeavouring* means literally straining everything. Everything about you is to be trying to keep unity.

Again, this is where the devil so quickly gets in. He will divide. Division in the church is weakening, and division in the church is dishonouring to the Head of the church, the Lord Jesus Christ. Friends, are we endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit? That means there may be times when we have to make compromise. Compromise in the decision in the church should not always be seen as a dirty word; it should not necessarily be seen as weakness. Friends, it is to keep the unity. As long as it does not touch vital truth, as long as it does not touch the doctrine of the church, then we may rightly (we indeed *must*) compromise in order to maintain unity in the church. "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." That needs to be written over every church meeting agenda.

The second thing that it means to be a member of the church is to give faithful witness in our lives, give faithful witness to what Jesus Christ means to us, what He has done for us, and our hope. We read in Hebrews that they declared plainly they sought "a city which hath foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God." The lives of the church, the lived church, should declare plainly whose they are and whom they serve. The covenant reads, "And we desire, by the grace of God, that our conversation" – that is the word conversation as used in the King James Version of the Bible, meaning not just the words we speak, but how we live. You know that saying, "Actions speak louder than words." That is the meaning of conversation

there – not just how we talk, but everything about our lives and our conversation, both in the world and in the church; not just how we are seen as we turn up to the church meeting, as we turn up to the services, but how you are in the workplace, how you are in the supermarket doing your shopping. May it be “such as becometh the gospel of Christ.” And, the covenant continues, that we may “live soberly, righteously, and godly, in the present world.” This is only the simple teaching of the New Testament: “that ye walk worthy of God who hath called you unto His kingdom and glory.” You look up those words, “Walk worthy,” in a concordance, and you will find Paul uses them frequently. “Walk worthy!” To be a church member is to have the responsibility of walking worthy.

Then it is to seek to edify the body. What does edify mean? It means to build up. It means to strengthen. Everything that we do is to be for the strengthening, for the encouragement, for the building up of the church. As soon as you begin to gossip about problems in the church, as soon as you begin to go behind one another’s backs, as soon as you begin to step out of the line of Matthew 18, that if you have a problem you go to your brother directly; perhaps you begin to undermine the ministry of the pastor, the ministry in the pulpit, you begin to question what the church stands for – all of those things begin to bring division, they begin to bring cracks in the church. We are to seek to edify, to seek that which not only is for unity, but that which is for strength in the church.

The covenant puts it like this: “And as it regards each other in church communion, we desire to walk with each other in all humility and brotherly love; to watch over each other’s conversation” – again not just their words, but how they walk – “to stir up one another to love and good works; not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, but, as we have opportunity, to worship God according to His revealed will; and, when the case requires, to warn and admonish one another according to God’s Word.” That is what it means to be a church member. It means you have other people watching over you. It means you are accountable. Friends, they are watching over you in love. Do not count it as something bad if a godly church member says to you, “I have noticed that you do so and so, but the Word of God says this.” Why are they doing it? Because they love you, because they want to edify the body of Christ. They want the best for you. We should not say – old nature says, “O I don’t want them telling me what to do.” Remember, you have the same responsibility towards them.

As young people in the church it is not easy. The Word of God tells us, “Great men are not always wise.” Old age, length of church membership, does not necessarily mean elderly church members get it right. Sometimes a younger church member, tremblingly you may have to go with the Word of God prayerfully to say to them, “I do not understand why you are doing that or how you are doing it.” Listen to them first. See what they have got to say. You may have misunderstood the Word of God. You may have looked over something in the Word of God that they can show you. Friends, it needs patience; it needs grace. We are not to fall out over these things. But it is walking together. We are to care for one another. That is what edifying the body is. If cracks begin to appear in your walls at home, you want to strengthen them. You want to make sure the cracks are repaired before the building falls down. That is what it is to edify the body. That is what it is to be a church member. It is to have people watching over you, and you to have the duty and the responsibility of watching over others.

Paul says, and many texts we could quote on this point, but just this one: “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient; all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.” Paul in the context is speaking of things which are not essential things to salvation. It was the eating of meats that had been offered to idols. It was the eating of meat that had been sold in the shambles. Some in the church had a weak conscience. Paul said there was

nothing in the Word of God that forbade him from eating that meat; he had liberty. He could see clearly, but he knew that if he ate meat it was going to divide the church. It was going to bring a division. Therefore he let his liberty go in that sense. To edify the body, is to keep the body as one. Now that does not mean that the church should always come down to the weakest common denominator. The weak have a *duty to learn*; the strong have a *duty to teach* the weak patiently, prayerfully, that together the whole body might be growing up into Christ.

“Walk in love.” To be a church member is a calling to walk in love. “Moreover, we desire to sympathise with each other in all conditions, both inward and outward, into which God, in His providence, may bring us; as also to bear with one another’s weaknesses, failings and infirmities, and particularly to pray for one another, for all the saints, and that the gospel and the ordinances thereof may be blessed to the edification and comfort of each other’s souls, and for the gathering in of vessels of mercy unto Christ.”

O what a beautiful picture of *the* church: to walk together in love, to bear one another’s burdens, to help one another. When one may have a particular personality type which is difficult, seek for grace to walk with them, to bear with them. O to remember that we have our own failings. “Walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given Himself.” Friends, that means we will have to spend time together. It means we will have to know one another. You cannot do these things if you just simply listen to services online. You cannot do these things if you turn up as the service is about to start and leave as soon as the “amen” is said, and you never see one another, and you never pick up the phone, and you never spend time together. It is “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.” It is to be together, to walk together.

Then it is to seek a growth in the church, particularly to pray “for the gathering in of vessels of mercy unto Christ.” The prayer of the church in all ages is, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” To be a church member is to seek the growth of the church, to seek that we might see the Lord’s people brought in and gathered into the church.

It is prayer, praise and worship. “And for every blessing and favour, both temporal and spiritual, we, who are as deserving of hell as the vilest of the vile, desire to ascribe all the praise to the glory of the grace of a triune God.” These words based on the practise seen in Acts 2: “And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people.”

In Acts 4 where attempts were made to stop the apostles preaching, we read of the church, “And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, Thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is,” etc. But there is a beautiful phrase there: “one accord.” We find if you go through the epistles so often the apostle speaks this: one heart, one voice, one mind. That is how the church is to be seen: oneness, unity. It is particularly unity in praise and worship. It is a wonderful thing sometimes to sit in the pulpit and see the congregation before me, perhaps with their heads all bowed in prayer, perhaps all joining together in the singing of the hymns – *all one*. What I hear in the pulpit is *all one*. That is the church. That is the body of Christ.

So what does it mean to be a member of *a* church? It means you have a responsibility to maintain unity in the truth, commitment to it. It means that we should be found giving faithful witness in our lives. It means we should be seeking to edify the body, to walk in love, to see growth in the church, and to be found joining together for praise and worship.

I venture to say this morning, that the covenant is as important, if not perhaps more important, than the Articles of Faith and the rules. As I have read that covenant several times over the past few months, I have come to feel that is the best part of the booklet of Articles and Rules printed by the Gospel Standard Society for our churches. Those few words, the description of the church in that booklet and what it is to be a church member, it is the best bit. And that was the heritage of our churches, the heritage of the Particular Baptist denomination, the heritage of Gospel Standard churches in the past, and I fear, friends, we have let that go. We have been more interested in the Articles and more interested in the rules. And the meat, if I can put it that way, in the sandwich, the bit between, has been missed out, and as a consequence we are impoverished, we are poor, we are weak. Friends, we need to come back to that covenant. We need to come back to that longing for unity and walking together.

But I do just want to say something about rules. The body of Christ is to be orderly. God is a God of order. When the church is chaos, when the garden looks unkempt when you pass by somebody's house, and the weeds are all grown up, and there is no order in the garden, you think there is no garden. Friends, the church is to be orderly, and therefore rules have their right place. The witness of the church in its orderliness – God is a God of order. The witness of the church in its unity. John 17 is all about unity in the church. It is the witness to God and to Jesus Christ. And therefore both order and unity are important, and they are assisted on a natural level by having rules, that we might know what the order is, what we may expect.

The Word of God is the first and ultimate rule. We must never put the rules of our church above the Word of God. They are always to be subservient to it. But under the Word, there is a place for rules, that when you join a church, you may know how a church meeting is to be called; you may know how somebody needs to be disciplined, if *you* need to be disciplined, how it will be worked out; how you might go about calling a pastor. Churches are self governing and any church has the right under the Word of God based upon the Word of God to make its own rules, and at times you as a church may need to make your own rules in order to deal with varying situations. Rules are important, but I have had to prove in my own experience that often trouble is caused in a church by not knowing the rules and not rightly keeping to them.

Well, ultimately this morning I come to this. I believe the church should be an attractive church. If the church is right, I believe people will want to join it. If your home church is right according to the Word of God, if Jesus Christ is truly the Head, if there is love and union in the body, then I believe any gracious soul looking at that church will want to join it. They will want to be a member of it. They will be able to say with Isaac Watts,

“There my best friends, my kindred dwell;  
There God my Saviour reigns.” (H. 361)

It is only when the church is attractive that it is mirroring the image of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the great Head of the church. Therefore those of you that are church members, is your church an attractive church? Is it drawing? Would people look at it – gracious people I am talking of – and say, “I want to be a member of that church”? When there is division, when there is falling out, when the report goes round: the church meetings are very hard, very difficult, and they go on for hours, and when you see the church members at variance with one another and two parties in the church, there is nothing attractive there. The gracious soul says, “I don't want to be part of that.” That only detracts from the gospel. It only detracts from Jesus. It only detracts from the blessing I receive under the Word. The church should be an attractive church. Are our churches attractive churches?

Well, to conclude, What does it meant to be a member of the church? It is the highest privilege, the highest privilege you can have on this earth. The king’s honours have been billed again in the newspapers this morning for his birthday, but to be a member of the church is much greater honour than having M.B.E. after your name, or Sir or Dame in front of it. It is the highest privilege you can have. Friends, to be a member of *the* church makes you an inheritor of a throne, a kingdom, which shall not pass away. It is a privilege to be sought after. It is the *greatest grace* we can ever know. We spoke about the grace and love in saving Jacob. The greatest grace this morning is if you can say,

“Jesus sought me when a stranger,  
Wandering from the fold of God;  
He, to save my soul from danger,  
Interposed His precious blood.” (H. 199)

Ah, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is exceedingly abundant, “that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich.”

But church membership is a *weighty responsibility*. Friends, with privilege, with great grace, comes a weighty responsibility. Who is sufficient for these things? I hope I haven’t put any of you off – if you have felt under the first part of the talk, “I have got some hope, a little hope that I am a member of *the* church,” I hope I have not put you off being a member of *a* church. Friends, He gives more grace. He says to His people, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” If it was not a weighty responsibility, it would not be a very big privilege, and it would not be very much grace. We cannot separate these three things – I must be faithful – the highest privilege, weighty responsibility, greatest grace. But Jesus says, “Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you” – be a member of My church – “take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.”

I just want to conclude by recommending a few books to you. One, just published by Etrick Press, is by Joseph Ivimey the Particular Baptist historian who lived in the late 1700 and early 1800s. It is entitled: *Edifying the Body of Christ*. In the middle of the book there is a reprint of his pastoral counsels, which is only twenty pages long and was what he wrote to his church members as to how they should live and how they should walk together. I believe that those twenty pages are worth all the rest of the book. If you only read those twenty pages, you will have a good foundation for understanding what it means to be a member of a church.

Secondly I cannot recommend too highly John Owen. You may say to me this morning, “I am not up to reading John Owen.” Well do not worry! There are two modernised editions of this book, one published by The Banner of Truth called *Duties of Christian Fellowship* (this does not use the KJV) and one by Reformation Heritage Books, called *Rules for Walking in Fellowship* (this uses the KJV). They are both modernisation of a small book that John Owen wrote on what it is to be a church member. It is very practical book. It tells you how you should care for your pastor. It tells you how you should walk together. In the original it bore the beautiful title: *Grapes from Eschol*. That was how John Owen viewed the church: Grapes from Eshcol, the greatest of blessings.

Well, may the Lord bless these remarks to you.