Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Apparently, being body conscious is a massive thing today. To be body conscious is to know that there is a certain way your body should look and feel and that if it does not, well, you’ve got work to do.

* There are even lots of businesses, all around the world, called ‘BodyConscious.’ And these businesses offer services like massage, essential oil treatments, body-building classes, supplements, herbal remedies, tanning treatments, de-tox programs, and on it goes… On one such businesses’ website it says, “By understanding each client’s current biology, psychology, environment, and lifestyle, BodyConscious creates tailored lifestyle programs that are perfectly suited to achieve better all-around health and happiness.”
* One newspaper article about body conscious reported that 20% of all men who are about to go on a beach holiday said that they get anxious about ‘putting the flab on display.’ And one in 10 men actually spend more on getting the body ready for the beach than on the holiday itself!

So that is what body conscious is about. And while there are extreme forms of body conscious, it’s probably safe to say that all of us are body conscious, to one degree or another, right? We wear clothes, we try and watch what we eat, we get some exercise, and we use sun lotion, etc.

But there is one form of body conscious that is always right and that does not receive anywhere near the attention from most people that it should. It is love for the body that is the church of Christ.

* Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 5, and Colossians 1 are NT passages that describe the church as the body of Christ. And the image is simple to understand and very important. Jesus is the head and the church is His body. And in the same way that you are head and body, and that the idea that someone would say, I only like your head but I don’t want anything to do with your body, is total foolishness, to love Jesus Christ is to love His body – the church. You simply cannot truly love Jesus without truly loving the church.
* Jesus Himself loves the church. Ephesians 5 says exactly this: “He loved the church and gave Himself up for her,” and He is sanctifying her and cleansing her “*by the washing of water with the word, so that He might present the church to Himself in splendour*.”
* So Jesus Christ loves the church. And we too must be body of Christ conscious; we too must love the church.

But that truth begs a question or two: What is this church that we must love? And what does love for the church look like?

* Well, last time we looked at Belgic Confession Article 27 and the church. We saw that the church is all true Christians throughout history and all around the world. And the terms we typically use to describe the church in this way are catholic (small c), which means universal, and invisible, because this whole assembly can really only be known and seen by God.
* But we also read earlier from Psalm 84. There the Psalmist says, “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts. My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord.” And I think we all know that the Psalmist was not speaking about some invisible entity but about the tabernacle or temple that he could see and touch and worship in.

And so, the church is not just the invisible church that is known to God but also the visible church that we can see.

* In the OT, the visible church was the congregation or the assembly of Israel. If you looked around the world for God’s people, you found them in the nation of Israel. Now, that doesn’t mean that all Israelites were true believers; Romans 9:6 says exactly that. But in those times, God worked in a saving way within Israel. So the visible church of the OT was the nation or assembly or congregation of Israel.
* And in NT times, the visible church is local Christian congregations like ours.
  + For example, Acts 2 begins with a Jerusalem congregation of 120 persons and by the end of the Day of Pentecost 3000 persons were added to that congregation. So there were now 3120 members of the Jerusalem congregation.
  + And in Acts 6, when there was a need to appoint deacons, the Apostles said to the congregation, “Pick out from among you seven men of good repute.” So do you think they just picked seven men who happened to be there that day or who were passing by? Of course not. They picked seven men who were members of the congregation, who they knew were of good repute.
  + The letter to the Philippians is addressed “to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, with the elders and deacons.” So just as you could identify the elders and deacons at Philippi, so too you could identify the saints who were members of the congregation there.
  + And those body of Christ passages in Romans 12 and 1 Cor. 12 were written to local congregations in Rome and Corinth. The Apostle wanted the members of those congregations to see that they had been given different gifts which they were to use for the common good of their congregation. That is the major point of those passages.
  + Now, just as we saw with OT Israel, this does not mean that everyone in a local congregation is a true Christian. In any local congregation there may be unbelievers or hypocrites. Nevertheless, because the Lord Jesus Christ has established the church as His means of gathering in all of God’s NT people, the visible church of today is local congregations like ours.
* So the church we are to love is the invisible church – all of God’s people throughout history and all around the world, and the visible church – local congregations like ours.

And with the rest of our time this afternoon, we want to consider a passage that tells us what loving your local congregation looks like – Hebrews 10:22-25. And our two points will be that loving your local congregation means Formal membership and full participation.

1. So first of all, loving your local congregation means full membership, which we see in vv22-23.
   1. If we were to look for a theme verse for the Book of Hebrews, it would probably be 3:12, “*Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God*.” And if we were to rank Bible verses that Christians quote in cards or emails to each other, I am pretty sure that this verse would not be on the list or it would be right at the very bottom. But the fact is that the Book of Hebrews is full of warnings like this, addressed to those inside the church!, about the need to look to Christ, to study the word, to be obedient, and to flee from sin and unbelief, because of the danger of falling into apostasy, which is to reject Christ.
      1. The congregation that the letter was written to was made up of mainly Jewish believers, hence the name of the letter. And they were thinking of ditching Christianity and going back to Judaism.
      2. So the letter begins by showing how Jesus Christ is superior to everything that the Jews valued in their religion – angels, the High Priest, Moses, and the sacrifices and ceremonies of the Old Covenant. That’s the first 10 ½ chapters of Hebrews, and they are interspersed with regular exhortations or warnings to persevere and to not fall away.
      3. And **10:19** begins another section of these exhortations. The verse begins with one of those NT ‘therefores,’ which indicate that what is about to be said is because of what has been said. So it is because Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all that the OT pointed forward to, and because of His work done on the cross, that we may enter into direct relationship with God.
         1. For OT believers, you see, God was always hidden away in the Holy of holies, where only the High Priest could go, on their behalf, once a year. But you and me, because of Jesus and by the Holy Spirit, can enter into the throne room of heaven; the very presence of God, in prayer, any time, any day. We have direct access to God and we do not need a human mediator to worship God on our behalf. This is the joy and blessing of being New Covenant believers.
   2. But as we come to vv22-23, we see implications in these words for local church membership. You see, salvation is not just about sins forgiven and eternal life after death; salvation is into the church.
      1. In the OT, any Gentile who came to believe in the God of Israel had to attach himself to Israel by way of circumcision and all of the other laws and ceremonies of the Law of God. You could not be a floating, independent, OT believer – you had to join God’s congregation.
      2. And it is the same in the NT. We saw this earlier, with those references from Acts 2 and Acts 6 and Philippians that speak about local congregations and membership. Ephesians 2 talks about believers becoming a part of the household of God. And as we have seen, the household of God is found in local congregations. So we cannot be floating, independent, NT believers – we are saved into a local congregation.
      3. And this is implied here in our text in the references to having our hearts sprinkled clean and our bodies washed with pure water and holding fast the confession of our hope.
         1. Does ‘sprinkling’ and ‘washing with water’ remind you of anything? Baptism.
            1. Earlier I referred to Acts 2 and the Jerusalem congregation growing from 120-3120 in one day. How did that happen? How did those 3000 become members of that congregation? v41 says, “*So those who received [Peter’s] word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls*.” So baptism is the sacrament of membership, of joining, of entrance, of belonging. We become members of a local congregation through baptism.
         2. But does that mean then that we should just take a bottle of water and try and baptize people? Ha ha! Got ya! You’re now a member of ARC! Of course not.
            1. The verse I just read says “*those who received [Peter’s] word were baptized*.” Peter had preached the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ; He had called on the crowd to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus as their Saviour. The ones who were baptized were the ones who heard the word and repented and believed.
            2. In **Romans 10** we read that “*faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the word of Christ*.” So a person hears the gospel and then believes. But we also read this in Romans 10, “*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*.” So what you believe in your heart you must **profess** with your mouth.
         3. And this is why, with adults who come to faith in Christ, they first make a public profession of faith and are then baptized; that is how they become members of a local congregation. Now, we could also speak here about the children of believers and their baptism and membership but we will have to leave that for another day. The key point here is that we must formally join ourselves to the body of Christ in a local congregation.
2. But look now at **v23**: It says there, “*Let* *us* *hold fast the confession of our hope*.” So yes, there should be one occasion when we publicly profess or confess faith in Christ and formally join a local congregation. But that is not it. Getting our name on a membership roll is not job done. And this where we transition from thinking about **formal** **membership** to thinking about **Full** **participation**, our second and final point, from vv23-25.
   1. We are to “*hold fast the confession of our hope*.” Another translation has it as “**hold unswervingly**.” During the week there was a pretty decent car crash outside the manse. Thankfully no one was injured. But the crash happened because one of the cars swerved across the center line and hit a parked car. And sadly, many people have done that with their confession of faith. They once professed faith and joined a congregation but some time later they swerved away from Christ and the church and crashed on the rocks of unbelief. And the commands of our passage and the letter to the Hebrews only make sense if we see that we have to work at remaining in faith. While it is ultimately the Lord who *preserves* our faith, we are to *persevere* in faith. And that is what these verses are all about. *We* must draw near to Him, *we* must hold fast the confession of our hope, *we* must consider how to stir one another up to love and good work, and *we* must not neglect to meet together, and *we* must encourage one another. These are love-for-the-body-of-Christ *commands*. These are things we must do. And the *location* or the *venue* or the *environment* for all of this activity is the local congregation. God’s gift to us for preserving us in faith is our local congregation.
      1. And brothers and sisters, if that doesn’t stagger you, I can assure you that it staggers me! Avondale Reformed Church, and I don’t mean the building but all of you, are God’s primary gift to me for preserving my faith. And it is the same for each member here. I love sermon podcasts and Christian books and conferences and other congregations but Avondale Reformed Church is God’s primary gift to me for preserving my faith. And it is the same for each member here.
      2. Listen to these words from **1 Corinthians 12:18** says, “*But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as He chose*.” Just dwell on that for a moment. You and me are not members of this congregation by accident; God has placed us here, together. He has joined us with people who we might never have known, by design, that we would grow together and serve together and become a congregation that others are eager to join because of the love for God and for one another that they see within. And our growth will not always be about sweetness and harmony; sometimes it will be about friction and even hurt. But a good case can be made to say that we grow most during those difficult times.
      3. The point is that these are the elders and deacons He has given us; these are the sermon series we most need to hear; these are the Bible studies we most need to be a part of; these are the people we must be serving with, first and foremost; these offering bags are where we bring our tithes before we consider giving elsewhere; and these are the people who ought to be at the top of our prayer lists. And if you get this; if you see that ARC is God’s gift to you and where God expects you to be keeping these commands, it will expand your *love* *for* and *commitment to* and *participation in the life of* ARC.

You see congregation, church membership is not first and foremost a horizontal thing but a vertical thing. It is not first and foremost about loving each other; it is first and foremost about loving Christ. Every time you obediently choose to attend a worship service, you are loving Christ. You come because you realize that Jesus, the head of the church, is present when ARC gathers for worship and He expects you to be there and He will meet you there and commune with you by His word and Spirit. And it is the same with every aspect of church life. And understanding and believing this is the only thing that will help you endure the difficult and even hurtful realities of life in a local congregation.

So the Lord calls us to formal membership and full participation. Because of our salvation in Christ and because of His love for His church, may it be that when it comes to the body – the church of Christ in Avondale – that we are all very body conscious. Amen.