**Church Membership**

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** John 13:1-17; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 122, 476, 133, ‘Facing a task unfinished’, 525

**Series:** Doctrine of the Church (#2) – Belgic Confession (Article 28)

**Occasion:** ‘Cadet Sunday’

**Theme:** All Christians are called to join a local church and to be under the instruction and discipline of church leaders, submitting to the rule of Christ and serving the members of Christ’s Body, the church.

**Proposition:** All Christians are called to be members of a local church.

**Introduction**

There is something that we all have. We brought it with us here today. In fact we take it with us everywhere we go in this life. It’s far more complicated than a cell phone. We all have slightly different version of this marvellous product. It’s incredibly well-designed and capable of performing many different kinds of tasks. It’s so important to each one of us that we couldn’t live here without it. Do you know what it is? It’s your body - an amazingly complex and beautiful living system. We are all ‘*fearfully and wonderfully made*’ (Ps 139:14) in God’s image (Gen 1:27).

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 (and also in Romans 12:4-5 and Ephesians 3:6; 5:30), the human body is revealed as an image of the church. Just as our bodies have many different parts e.g. feet, hands, ears, eyes, so likewise: the church is made of many different people with various gifts, talents and abilities. Just as our bodies cannot function well if all the parts are not working together properly, so likewise: the church suffers if all her members are not united together and actively caring for one another.

Today many young people are reluctant to join a local church, which is the body of Christ who gather together in a particular place. There can be many reasons for this, including: thinking that church membership is not such a big deal, not wanting to commit themselves to a particular congregation, being wary of being under the oversight of church leaders.

This morning we are going to look at what the Bible teaches about church membership. We’re going to do so with the outline and Biblical concepts expressed in Belgic Confession Article 28. The Belgic Confession originated in Belgium and was written in 1561, mainly by Guido de Brès, who was a preacher in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. He died as a martyr for his Christian faith in 1567. This confession is one of the seven historical documents which we believe, as a Reformed church, faithfully summarise many aspects of the teaching of the Bible.

Unlike the usual approach to preaching from this pulpit, where the truth of a particular passage in the Bible is expounded, this series takes a topical approach, where a subject is explored from a range of texts and concepts in the Bible. This is the second of six sermons in this preaching series, which focusses on what the Bible reveals about the church.

We’re going to look at the church membership by asking three questions:

1. Is it really our duty to join a local church?
2. Is it really necessary for us to submit to instruction and discipline?
3. Is it really our calling to serve other church members?

Let’s begin with the first question:

1. **Is it really our duty to join a church?**

Cadets and GEMS, many of you are already church members! For those who have a parent or parents who profess faith in Christ, they have likely been baptised either as an infant or as a young child. As the child of a parent who is a professing member of this church, you too are very much part of the church as a baptised member. We hope and pray that as you mature you will desire to follow Christ and that you will publicly profess your faith and become a ‘communicant member’.

We can see from the Bible that children of a believing parent or parents belong in the church. For example, in the letter to the Ephesians, young people are addressed directly ‘*children obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right*’ (Eph 6:1). Such children are ‘holy’ (1 Cor 7:14b), set apart by God to be raised in the ‘*discipline and instruction of the Lord*’ (Eph 6:4). Cadets and GEMS, you are blessed by knowing about Jesus Christ and learning what it looks like to live for Him by seeing your Christian counsellors and others in the church ‘living for Jesus a life that is true’.

Now the Belgic Confession makes a very strong statement about the church, which many Christians today might disagree with: “*We believe, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it…all are duty bound to join it*”. This sounds more like something the Roman Catholic church would have said at the time of the Protestant Reformation in order to scare people into staying in the church. The idea that outside of the church there is no salvation, was expressed by the early New Testament Christian leader Cyprian of Carthage who also said, “*he cannot have God as Father who doesn’t have the church as Mother*”. Was Cyprian right, is the Belgic Confession right, can a person be saved without the church? What do you think?

It’s helpful to remember that the gospel of salvation in Christ alone is intimately connected with the church (e.g. Gal 3:26-28; Eph 3:1-12; 5:31-32; 1 Cor 6:15). Christ Himself is united with His Body, the church (e.g. John 15:1-5) whom He loved and gave Himself up for (Eph 5:25). Those who confess the following confirm that they are truly saved:

* That the Bible is the Word of God
* That there is only one way to be right with God
* That this way is through Jesus Christ (John 14:1-6) who died

Those who are outside the confessing community of the church are not saved.

The Biblical teaching about the importance of the church is reflected in the Apostles’ Creed which ends with key Scriptural teaching about forgiveness, resurrection and eternal life: “*I believe in a holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting*”.

Sometimes Christians today say things like “*I do believe in the church, which is composed of all those who truly trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour (what is sometimes called the ‘invisible church*’*), but I don’t see the need to commit myself to a local church”.* When Paul writes about the church being like a human body with many parts, he is writing to ‘*the church of God that is in Corinth*’ (1 Cor 1:2); that is a local congregation in a particular place.

Whilst Christians do share in a bond with their brothers and sisters all over the world and throughout all the ages, we are called to mainly function together as local church congregations. This is very clear from the New Testament letters and also from the letters to the seven local churches in the book of Revelation (2:1-3:22). So it is the duty of all Christians to join the assembly of the church and to ‘*separate from those who do not belong to the church*’ just as the Old Testament Israelites were called not to be part of the rebellion of Korah (Num 16). This doesn’t mean not having anything to do with those who do not as yet profess faith in Christ, not at all! It does mean identifying ourselves with the holy assembly of a local church.

Whilst the Bible does not say in one verse ‘*Christian, you must be a church member*’, church membership is clearly taught in Scripture in these ways:

1. In order to put someone who is persistently unrepentant out of the church (e.g. 1 Cor 5:13) for the sake of Christ’s honour, the purity of the church and for their own good – that they might come to repentance, there must be a way of defining who is ‘in’ the local church.
2. Willing obedience to local church leadership is a command in the Bible (e.g. Heb 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2). It makes sense to distinguish those who willingly come under the oversight of the elders from those who are visiting the church for a time, are working towards membership but who have not, as yet, declared the willing submission to local church government.
3. Just as we know which parts of our bodies belong to us and are a part of us, so it follows that the local church needs to be clear about who is part of the local church. Sometimes Christians try do to some ‘church mathematics’ like this: if I can get most of the benefits of being in the church without formally becoming a member, why should I join? Now it’s true that in this church we do try to treat all Christians who come regularly as part of our church family, including them in church life, placing them on elders lists and praying for them regularly. This is so that people have time to get to know us as a church in the hope that they will join with us in time.

Cadets and GEMS, church family and friends, I hope that you can see from Scripture that the high emphasis which the Belgic Confession places for Christians that we are ‘*duty bound to join a local church and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the church*’ is thoroughly Biblical. Let’s now look at the second question.

1. **Is submission to instruction and discipline really necessary?**

There is a warm and welcoming invitation which Jesus Christ sends out to everyone who will listen and respond: “*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matthew 11:28-30). A yoke is a wooden beam normally used between a pair of oxen or other animals to enable them to pull a load together when working in pairs. It was used by Jesus as a metaphor to describe the heavy burden of the human made rules and regulations which the Jewish rabbis taught must be obeyed. This is legalism.

In contrast, the Word of Christ is a rule which is ‘light’ in comparison to man-made religious rules. Jesus is not a harsh taskmaster. He does not call people to obey His Word out of fear or because they must yield to Him in order to be saved. The Bible is not a book of “dos and don’ts” which must be strictly followed in order to earn the love and acceptance of God. When Jesus says ‘*my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*’, He is saying that accepting His invitation to come involves the responsibility to learn and grow in living a life for Him by willing obeying His Word (e.g. John 14:15) and trusting in Him.

His ‘yoke’ is easy because He is a gentle and humble Saviour who treats His followers with loving kindness, compassion, forgiveness and care. The church is not a place where people can come only once they have been sufficiently obedient to Christ the Lord. The church is a place for people who know themselves to be broken and needy. It is a community for those who seek rest and peace in a very troubled world. It is like a field-hospital in the midst of a battle zone where weary soldiers come to gain strength, healing and are equipped to go back out into the great spiritual struggle which will continue to rage until Christ returns.

When Guido de Brès wrote in the Belgic Confession that all Christians must ‘*bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ*’ he used words which we probably wouldn’t use today ‘bend their necks under’. However, the meaning is as true today as it was in 1561. Everyone in the church is called to willingly submit to the instruction and discipline of Christ. Jesus calls all His followers, all who trust in Him alone for their salvation, to willingly yield to Him (e.g. John 14:15).

Jesus rules in His church through the elders, as His Word reveals: e.g. To the local church congregation: “*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account*” (Heb 13:17). To the local church eldership “*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly*” (1 Pet 5:2).

Cadets and GEMS, do you find it easy to obey your counsellors in your club? I think, to be honest, most, if not all, of you would say something like ‘not all the time’. All of us find it much easier to obey those in authority over us when they are asking us to do something which we agree with, don’t mind doing, or which doesn’t bother us much. All of us find it much more difficult to obey those who lead us when we disagree with their instruction, we don’t want to do what they say, and/or when it irritates us to have to obey.

One of the reasons why some Christians avoid becoming church members is because they do not want to submit themselves to the elders in a local church. That was the attitude which Korah had to God’s appointed leaders of His people when He led them out of slavery. You can read about his rebellion in Numbers 16.

Brothers and sisters, yielding ourselves to the instruction and discipline of Christ, being under His ‘yoke’ really is necessary if we are to be faithful to the One who laid down His life for us. Jesus Christ, the Lord of His church, rules local congregations like this one through the office-bearers. God has ordained that instruction and discipline of His people takes place in local assemblies of those who believe on Christ. That is why those who profess their faith make this vow: “*I do promise to honour the office-bearers of the church and, if I become unfaithful in doctrine or life, to submit to their admonition and discipline*”. Now let’s look at the third question.

1. **Do we really have to serve other church members?**

Cadets and GEMS – is there a foot-washing badge? To earn it you would have to learn how to clean other people’s smelly dusty feet and then dry them off with a towel! That’s what Jesus, the Son of God, did when he served his disciples as a household slave would have done back in the 1st century AD. He said: “*If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you*” (John 13:14-15).

One of the aims of Cadets and GEMS, a scouting-type movement for children aged from 8 to 15, is to teach young people how to serve others. This focus is reflected in the Cadet Pledge: “*Thankful to God for his gifts to me, I pledge myself to be ready to* ***serve*** *God, my parents, my country, my church, my neighbour and my corps*”. Likewise, church members who have publicly professed their faith commit themselves to serve other church members with this vow: “*I do desire to use the gifts the Holy Spirit has given me to build up the body of Christ*”. This is similar to what we find in the Belgic Confession that those who follow Christ are to ‘*serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body*’.

The Bible says that pastors and teachers are Christ’s gift to the church ‘*to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*’ (Eph 4:12). Here are some characteristics of committed church members who love one another (John 13:34-35): as summarised in Thabiti Anyabwile’s book ‘*what is a healthy church member?*’:

* Attends regularly (e.g. Heb 10.24-25)
* Seeks peace (e.g. Rom 14.19)
* Builds others up (e.g. 1 Cor 12, 14; Eph 4:11-16)
* Warns others (e.g. Matt 18.15-17)
* Pursues reconciliation (e.g. Matt 5.23-24)
* Is patient and longsuffering with others (e.g. Rom 15.1)
* Supports the work of ministry with resources, time, and talent (e.g. Rom 12:6-8; 2 Cor 8-9).

We earlier sang the ‘Cadet hymn’ – “Living for Jesus a life that is true” which reflect the Cadet Motto: Living for Jesus. Here are the words of the first stanza: “*Living for Jesus a life that is true, striving to please him in all that I do; yielding allegiance, glad hearted and free, this is the pathway of blessing for me*”.

One aspect of ‘the pathway of blessing’ for all who follow Christ is being a committed member of a local church. The language of the Belgic Confession is strong: “*All…who draw away from the church or fail to join it act contrary to the ordinance of God*”. However these words do reflect the truth of God’s Word.

Cadets and GEMS, as you get older you will be faced with some important personal questions:

1. Do I trust in Jesus Christ as my own Saviour and Lord?
2. Do I willingly follow Him as one of His disciples?
3. Will I become a professing member of a local church as He calls me to do?

Perhaps you are an older person listening to these words today, but you have not as yet committed yourself to Christ and to His church. These same questions come to you also:

1. Do I trust in Jesus Christ as my own Saviour and Lord?
2. Do I willingly follow Him as one of His disciples?
3. Will I become a professing member of a local church as He calls me to do?

The church is the living Body of Christ, like a human body she is made of many different members. “*Just as the human body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ*” (1 Cor 12:12). “*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it*” (1 Cor 12:27).

Christ served the church by dying for her so that she would live forever. He is working in 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 splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish*’ (Eph 5:26-27).

AMEN