

## **Whatever Happened to Commitment to a Church?**

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 90-460

Usually we open to a passage of Scripture in the Word of God and do our best to unpack its truths and grasp its significance, its meaning, its implications and sometimes it's direct application to us. But tonight I want to talk to you a little bit of a different mode, if I may, not so much as the Bible teacher, the theologian, but more as your pastor. I want to share with you a broad sort of capstone to our recent series on how to recognize a real church, how to recognize a true church.

I think I've given you enough information over these nearly ten times that we've been talking about that, for you to have an understanding of what the church is. And if you've missed some of those, as I'm sure you have, you can pick them up and download them from Grace To You website, or get CDs or whatever means would be best for you. You can even get manuscripts of them downloading the script as well as the audio on your computer.

It would be good for all of us as a body of believers here at Grace Church to have all of that information in our minds and in our hearts because we not only want to live out the responsibility we have the church but we want to be those who herald the uniqueness of the church, to a kind of quasi-Christian culture that in many cases is indifferent to the church.

You know, I'm very grateful for my upbringing. I was born into a pastor's family, the first of four children. I lived my entire life as a child in the church. I was at the church every time the pastor was at the church because they dragged me from birth to the church. My entire life was there. My memories have to do with the inside of churches and the parking lots of churches. I look back over that and I was so privileged, the church was the center of my life from the very beginning of my life and it has continued to be and will be all the way to the end of my life.

It was there that I was led to the knowledge of salvation. It was there that I professed faith in Christ. It was there in the church that I heard the truth, that I believed as God awakened my heart. It was there that I was publicly baptized and gave my profession of faith in Christ. It was there that I learned sanctifying truth and what it meant to grow as a believer. It was there that I learned sound doctrine. It was there that I learned the behaviors that were to be characteristic of the life of a Christian. It was there that I learned how to live the Christian life, how to love believers, how to serve the Lord, how to set the standards for my life, how to find the means of grace to live at that standard. It was there I met my wife. It was there I the life of the church, this church, that I raised my children and am now seeing my grandchildren raised. It is here that I have found the intimate circle of my lifelong friends. It is to

the church that I have given my entire life. I began ministry in the church as a very young man, starting teaching a little group of boys about nine or ten-years-old in a little tiny room I had a half a dozen little boys and I began at that point to teach the Word of God. And then I began to teach junior-high young people, then I began to serve high-school students. And then I taught the college Bible study and on and on it has gone even to this very hour. The church has been my life. It will be my life not only here in this world but it will be my life in the world to come because we will forever be together as a church, the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So I'm committed with all my heart to the church. And it is a total commitment of my life. I was always in the church. I was as soon as I could be declared a believer and made my public profession and became a member of the church with all of the responsibilities that went along with that. I was faithful to the church. I didn't know any other life. I didn't know any other way to be than to be totally committed to the love and life of the church of Jesus Christ. These were my people. This is my family. These are the ones that God has brought into my life for my own spiritual benefit and blessing and the ones I am to serve.

That's the only way I ever understood the church. It was everything in my life. We have a very different kind of attitude in evangelicalism today...very, very different. For many, commitment to the church is at an all-time low. And across the board it is in many ways at an all-time low. That's partly the fault of so-called churches that don't require anything. They're vast number of churches that ask for nothing, except money in the offering. They're not expecting membership. Many of them don't even have such a thing as membership, that they don't expect you to conform to a certain doctrinal statement, many of them don't even have a doctrinal statement, don't even have some kind of creedal articulation of the truth. They don't expect you to be accountable to elders and leaders who watch for your souls. They don't expect people to have that kind of accountability, they fear that will drive people away.

They're not asking people to do anything they don't want to do as if service with some kind of random whim, rather than a duty-bound on every believer and affirmed by the Word of God and by our giftedness from the Holy Spirit.

There was a time in the world that I grew up in, there was a time when coming to Christ meant joining the church and belonging to a church and be faithful to the church and being a part of the life of the church and growing together with the people in that local assembly, that local congregation, the fellowship of believers was a permanent identification. And all of that has changed dramatically. People bounce around from event to event.

We talk a lot about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That...that kind of phrase is not so much a biblical phrase, in fact it's not a biblical phrase at all. The Bible never talks about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I would just remind you that every human being on the planet has a

personal relationship with Jesus Christ and most of them are not good. He is the judge of most but it is very personal.

We talk about in a positive sense having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as if that's the end all and be all of Christianity. But we never talk about a corporate relationship to Jesus Christ. But the Bible doesn't talk about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, it talks about a corporate relationship to Jesus Christ. It isn't as if we are all sort of individual people isolated in a relationship with Jesus Christ. When you came to salvation, you were placed by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ and it is far better to say, "I'm a part of those who belong to Christ," than to say, "I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ," as if that in itself is a some kind of a self-contained and fully satisfying relationship...when in fact it is not...it is not.

The reality of low commitment is manifest in the contemporary evangelical scene on a number of fronts. The contemporary evangelical has instead of church, Christian media. It might be...it might be what's on his Ipad, or his Iphone in terms of music. He may get his Christianity from certain Christian music groups, or Christian rappers. That may be the source of his input. It may come from Christian radio. It may come from Bible teaching Christian radio like Grace To You. It may come from Christian television programs. People become consumers. They are isolated, independent, personal viewers or listeners of Christianity without being participants in the reality of the life of the church. They feel little attachment to a church. They feel it might be intrusive, it might be demanding. It might expose them a little bit. They're attendance tends to be irregular and fragmented. They are, again, ecclesiastical consumers. As such, they neglect the ordinances of the church, the regular ordinances of the church. They're not exposed to the privilege of hearing the testimonies of baptism and seeing the Lord add to the church those that are being saved. They're not regularly engaged in the table of the Lord, breaking bread at His table and being confronted as to their own sin. They don't participate in those things in a regular routine way as they are commanded to do in the Word of God by the Savior Himself—even when baptism and communion are administered and in many churches they aren't, but even when they are, they are directed at a kind of personal experience rather than at that corporate unity of the church...less and less communion, less and less baptism is offered to the whole congregation. In many cases it's isolated, it's a sort of ancillary event that happens for those who want that.

People could attend churches for months and months and maybe never hear or experience a baptism or participate in the Lord's table. The development of Christian media, Christian personalities and the development of Christian music has become a substitute for the church. Stimulation, emotional stimulation coming through the very clever means of media outstrips in dramatic communication what happens in the church. The scintillating, emotional, seductive music, even that which is Christian, has more of an appeal and can be more readily chosen and controlled than the systematic carefully crafted, well thought out, profoundly theological worship of the church when it comes together to hear great music and to sing. Christian resources, books, sermons downloaded, radio, television, Para

church ministries, Christian personalities have become slick, wealthy, competent, capable of becoming the surrogate church to many, many professing Christians.

And then, of course, there is this proliferation of independent stylized approaches to church designed to do nothing but give people the style that they want with little regard for the content. National Christian quote/unquote personalities become the heroes and faithful pastors who are endeavoring to be faithful to make the church the church are unappreciated. There's a power shift in evangelicalism and it's gone from the local church and the shepherds in the local church to the media Para church. There doesn't seem to be a lot of interest in correcting this because although there are from time to time books written on this, they don't sell very well, certainly not like the latest Christian rap album.

But we've been trying to look at the church as the church and now we're at the point where I need to say to you—Are you a part of the church?—and I want to talk to you from my heart on this. Look, I don't need to prove the point to you about the church. The Lord said He would build His church, that's where we started, didn't we, in Matthew 16 and the gates of Hades wouldn't prevail against it? And we know what marks the church is a unity of life. That's why the church...that's why the church is called a vine and branches, that's why it's called a family, that's why it's called a body. It's called a building fitly framed together. It's a unification. Being in the church means you're up against the others who are a part of the church. Belonging to an assembly of redeemed believers is what it means to be a Christian. So I'd like us to stop talking about a personal relationship to Christ and start talking about a corporate relationship to Christ, belonging. The unity of the body, that is the issue in all definitions of the church. You have been placed into the body of Christ. And, of course, that particular metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 is the most dynamic and dramatic because the illustration of unity in diversity in life is the body. There is no parallel illustration that carries the weight and the power and the clarity that that one does. We are a body. We share common life and all the elements of common life. We believe the same thing. We possess the same eternal newness in Christ. We are one in worship, one in ministry, one in responsibility, one in fellowship.

The idea of an unbaptized Christian is unknown in the New Testament. And so is the idea of a Christian who is not a part of a local assembly. Christians were collected together in local assemblies in local communities, local towns. And when they went from one town to another, they took letters to identify them to the next community as true believers, letters sent by the leaders of the church from which they were coming.

The early church knew its members. They counted them—three thousand on the day of Pentecost—five thousand a few later, a few days later, weeks later. They knew who their people were. They had records of their people. Read Romans 16 and listen to Paul recite the names of all the people that he is privileged to work with and minister with and serve with, and he does this on many other occasions. But there's a whole list of them. He writes letters to the churches. And when he writes to the churches, he identifies people in those churches...sometimes troublesome people

and sometimes wonderful people.

And I have to say that we can talk all we want about the church, and we need to do that, and make sure that everybody has a definition of the church that is biblical, but eventually where we're going to end up is you need to be faithful to be a part of the corporate assembly of the unity of the saints in the body of Christ gathered in a local place. You need to identify fully with other believers.

Many of you are members of Grace Church. And when we talk about membership, all we mean is you have said I commit myself to this church, I submit to the Word of God here, to the authority of the elders here, and I offer myself to give my life in love to the fellow members of this church and to serve and be served in any way that the Spirit of God can use me. This is my place, these are my people, these are my elders who care for my soul, and this is where I will use the gifts that God has given me for His sake. That is not a spectator kind of attitude.

Others of you are not members. Some of you come a lot and some of you are engaged to some degree or another in ministry, maybe in your family, maybe at work, and maybe even here. But you've come short of a full commitment to the church. It's a bit of an anomaly that Christ would make the commit that He made to purchase His church but His church having been purchased would be reluctant to become everything He wants it to be.

That's not a good position to be in. That's a kind of disobedience that is unnecessary. If the church threatens you, if being a member of the church threatens you then something isn't right. Does it threaten you because you're holding on to sin that you don't want exposed? Does it threaten you because you might be given responsibility or somebody might have expectation? Does it threaten you because you're unwilling to offer your life in service and love? Does it threaten you because you don't want to use the gifts you've been given? Does it threaten you because you don't want to give and invest?

If all those things rather than being joys to you or threats to you, you might want to ask yourself if you're a Christian. There may be a degree of ignorance as to our relationship to the church, and I would say that's very possible because there is so much going on in the name of the church that misrepresents the church, I know there are a lot of people who don't even understand the importance of becoming a part of the church in a biblical way because they've never been taught that. And I understand too that the culture, the kind of culture in which we live is so individualized, and I also understand that we can become so self-sufficient in this culture. But from a social-economic viewpoint, we don't need anybody and it's a hard transition to put ourselves in the spiritual position of recognizing how desperately we need one another and are needed by each other as well.

So I just want to encourage you. Now that we understand what a church is, you have become responsible to really be a part of the church. Every time Michael comes up here, and many other

times when Tom comes up, they talk about the Members Center. There's a reason we keep talking about that and I now that familiarity sometimes breeds indifference, you hear it so much you don't think about it, that is to constantly remind you of the urgency of making a complete commitment to the church.

Now let me help you with that. We're not asking you to do something that hasn't already taken place, because spiritually speaking you've been made a part of the church. You're a part of the body of Christ, you were baptized by Christ by the means of the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. You share common life with all of us. We're only asking you to put into action what is a spiritual reality. And to fight against that is to resist the very thing the Spirit of God designed for you when He placed you into the body of Christ.

So let me just give you some things to think about, okay? We have maybe a few minutes left here and I want you to think about belonging to the church from several aspects. Number one, it's an obedience matter...it's an obedience matter. I mean, it starts there. You're either going to say I'm not going to do it because I don't want to do it. And disobedience has its own motives, doesn't it? Why would anybody say I don't want to be a part of the church? Well there would be no valid reason, there would be no good reason why I would say I don't want to join with these people, love these people, serve these people, come under the authority of these godly men. I don't want to commit myself to this ministry, to this group of people. There would be no reason to think like that unless you had decided that you rather would be disobedient. The only reason you would want to be disobedient would be to entertain your own selfishness and who knows what might prompt that? There were lists of believers in the book of Acts. There were letters going back and forth from churches about believers. There were local assemblies, a unity of saved souls gathering in local groups for identification, for protection, for love, for testimony, for witness. They assume membership, identification. They knew who they were. They knew them by name. They were dependent on one another. We are reminded in Acts 20:28, "Be on guard for yourselves and all the flock among which the Spirit has made you overseers to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Paul says to the Ephesian elders, "You have the responsibility to shepherd the church of God because they were purchased with the blood of Christ.

How can we shepherd the church of God if we don't know who the church of God is? We have those that we know are the church of God because they have said I want to be in the church, I want to be in reality what I am spiritually. I want to be a part of the church and I want to be shepherded. I want to be cared for. It's an obedience issue. We need to be obedient to be faithful shepherds, but you need to be obedient to be a loyal and faithful sheep.

It's a fellowship issue secondly...it's a fellowship issue. I could make a much more extensive case about obedience. There is no such thing as a Christian who is not a part of a local assembly by commitment, by life commitment, enduring long-term life commitment. There's no such thing as

someone who doesn't do that on the pages of the New Testament. It was a given and even in the early years of the history of the church. We could talk about it merely as an obedience issue and that would be enough. But it is also a fellowship issue. Can I remind you of the fact that we said this the last time we talked about this that the New Testament is full of one anothers...pray for one another, love one another, edify one another, rebuke one another, comfort one another, it goes on and on and on there, many of them several dozens of the one anothers scattered all throughout the New Testament.

We are called then to this mutual ministry of pouring our lives into each other for spiritual benefit. We also talked last time about spiritual gifts, that we've been given enablement by the Holy Spirit to serve one another in ways that are unique to us. It's like a spiritual footprint, or a spiritual fingerprint, or spiritual snowflake...no two are alike. Each of us is designed by God uniquely to make a mark in the life of the local church of Christ. That's why we're gifted. So we have the responsibilities of the one anothers and the responsibility to discharge our gift in the shared common spiritual life of an assembly of believers gathered together in a local place. That's the fellowship.

Now in Hebrews, I want you to turn to Hebrews for just a minute, chapter 10. As we've covered a lot of things in terms of Scripture, so I'm really just kind of giving you the practical application of it at the end, but I do want to remind you of Hebrews 10. We have this statement in verse 24, "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds."

All right, you're a believer. Stop and think about this, how can I stimulate other believers to love and good deeds? How can I do that? How can I be the means of spiritual benefit to someone else? How can I pour my life into someone else? Answer: by not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some but encouraging and all the more as you see the day drawing near, as you get closer to the day of judgment, closer to the day when the Lord returns and it all comes to an end—how do I stimulate one another to love and good deeds by not forsaking the assembling together as is the bad habit of some? But encouraging one another and doing it all the more as we get closer to the end.

Wow, we're a couple of millennia from that. That means the end is much closer now and it seems to me that there is greater amount of indifference by far today among professing Christians about assembling for the purpose of being a spiritual encouragement to each other, by using the one anothers and ministering our gifts.

What are we talking about? We're talking about spiritual friendships at all levels in which we bear burdens, in which we carry other's cares, in which we share mutually in the sufferings of others and the joys of others. This is the life of the church in which we give and take, share. It's a purifying communion crucial to the life of the church. And you don't need to be isolated from that. Sin isolates people. Sin wants people isolated. Sin wants to pull the coal out of the fire and it goes out. It wants to isolate you because temptation is so much more powerful when you're isolated. Our Lord wants you

in the communion, in the purifying common shared life of the fellowship.

And so, being a part of the church is an obedience issue and it is a fellowship issue. Thirdly, it is an authority issue...it is an authority issue. Now there's a bad word in our culture, authority. Naturally fallen human beings don't like people ruling over them, they can tolerate some people more than other people. There was a time even in our own country when people were a little more amiable toward authority because they had some respect for authority but we don't live in those days any more. People resist authority generally because they're fallen. They might succumb to some authority because they see the benefit of it. They might succumb to some authority or come under some authority because they see the nobility of it. But when you have the corruption that we have at the highest levels of authority in our society, it's pretty hard to convince people that they need to be under the authority of anyone, especially in a culture that has celebrated independence. You have generations of children that have reached a level of delinquency that's beyond anything we've known in the history of our country. Parents no longer disciplining children, no longer training children, no longer using the rod on children, have raised generation now after generation of wild children who do exactly what they want to do, succumb to no authority and that is escalating all the time. As it escalates, so does fear in a world that has gone completely mad. We're not surprised anymore when people take guns and shoot up everybody they can reach. This is a wild world that wants no one to tell it what to do. And the people who try to do that, we don't have respect for because many of them have been proven to be liars and cheats.

Into this kind of thinking, this kind of culture steps the church. And what does the message of the church say? Well let me read you what it says in very simple language. First Thessalonians 5. "We request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you—and listen to this—and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction."

You need to appreciate those who have charge over you and give you instruction. You should esteem them very highly in love because of their work and live in peace with one another. In Hebrews chapter 13 and verse 7, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the Word of God to you and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." And then verse 17, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief for this would be unprofitable for you." Submit to your leaders.

In Titus, Titus is told by the Apostle Paul to preach the Word with all authority and let no one circumvent that authority. Let no one get around that authority. Training, discipling, teaching is the responsibility of the leaders of the church and to do that faithfully using the Word of God and setting a godly example is their calling. And the congregation is to come under their instruction, under their admonishing, under their warning, under their reproof, under their rebuke, under their discipling and even under their discipline. In other words, this is an authority issue. You need to ask yourself who is my spiritual authority? Whose life to I follow? Who sets the pattern for my life? Who is my teacher?



Who are my teachers? Who are those who give an account for my soul? Who are my spiritual caretakers? To whom do I submit? Who do I follow? Who do I esteem? Who do I love? Who is the model for my life and my spiritual development, my spiritual growth. It's an authority issue.

And in a world where everybody wants to be his own authority, people float around resisting that reality. Now I need to say it is an authority not based upon whim, it is an authority not based on office. My office gives me no authority. My education gives me no authority. My experience gives me no authority. All the authority and the only authority I have comes from the Word of God. But I am the one, along with others in this congregation, who have been called by God, prepared by God, trained by God, gifted by God and who have taken the opportunity to refine their privileges so they can be your spiritual authority. I don't get up here on a Sunday and make a lot of suggestions and let you pick one. I don't say, you know, there are a lot of things you could do and maybe you ought to try this and try that. I just—that's not how we approach things.

We say this is the Word of God, this is what it says. You must respond...you must obey...you must follow, you must be faithful. Who enforces the Word of God in your life? Who holds you accountable to that? Who cares for your soul? Submitting to that authority is essential in being a sheep. Jesus said, the problem in Israel, they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Number four, let me just say this, that this is also an identity issue...an identity issue...an identity issue. We are Christians. We bear the name of Jesus Christ. We are all joined as one with Christ. We who are joined to the Lord are one with the Lord and we are one with everyone else who is one with the Lord. We're not we're own. We're bought with a price. We bear His name. We are little Christs. We are the bride of Christ. We are the body of Christ. This is our identity. So the question then is would I be ashamed to belong to Him? I love the way the Apostle Paul sort of hits on this in the fourth chapter of Ephesians where he sort of lays out the unity of all of us in Christ, one body, one spirit, one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all who is over all and through all and in all. Which then begs the question, do you have something to be ashamed of to be identified with our unity in Christ? Are we ashamed to belong? Why would we resist that? Why would we fight against that? I would think that I would not only want to say, not only am I a Christian, one who belongs to Jesus Christ, but I am a part of the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the church of Christ. These are my people.

If the Lord Jesus is not ashamed to call us His, why would we be ashamed to belong to those who are His? There are many scriptures that we could look at on this but listen to 2 Timothy 1:7, "God has not given us a spirit of timidity but of power, love and discipline, therefore, do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me, His prisoner. But joy with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God."

Just an interesting illustration of the fact that there were some people who didn't want to be identified with Paul because Paul was so despised and so hated by the culture. Does that keep you from joining the church? Do you think somebody might sort of associate you with the people of God, with the people who name the name of Christ?

On the other hand, we ought to run as fast as we can to be fully identified with those who belong to Jesus Christ whatever the culture thinks of them. To say, "Well I personally believe in Christ and I'm a Christian, but I really don't want to be identified with the typical church," well a lot of people will take you in, a lot of atypical quote/unquote churches that also don't want to be identified with the typical church, for reasons that are all illegitimate.

No, the Lord is not ashamed to call you His, and He could make a case that He ought to be, and you can't make a case that you should be ashamed of Him, can you? Or of His people? We're not perfect, but we are His. And if you're His, you belong with those that are His.

So what about this whole thing of being a part of a church that really is a church? It's an issue of obedience and fellowship and authority and identity. But I want to talk about something beyond that and there could be a number of other things, but this is very important to me. It's an issue of truth, it's a truth issue. At the end of the day, everything that we believe and therefore, everything that controls our behavior has to flow out of the word of God. The church is the pillar and ground of the truth. Remember talking about that at the very beginning? It's a truth issue.

Let me tell you how important this is. The benefit of being a church that is faithful to the truth is that you become faithful to the truth. You can't get that from selected CDs. You can't get that from selected preachers. You can't get that from the Christian music world. You can't download that. You can't find that kind of continuity on the internet. A church should have continuity in teaching the truth year after year after year after year after year. That is why it is equally unpopular today for churches to have doctrinal statements. They don't want to be bound to the truth. They haven't refined the truth to that degree. They want to give inspirational talks to people and maybe throw in the gospel, but let's not get carried away on affirming doctrine. We take the very opposite approach. We have the most extensive doctrinal statement of any church that I know of, very, very extensive, it goes on page after page, after page, after page, after page and we're always crafting addendums to it to clarify elements of doctrine. Because our responsibility is to know the truth, to affirm the truth, and to pass it on generation to generation to generation. Those little children lined up here, if they're here ten years from now from this day, they will be taught from this pulpit I promise you the very things that you've been taught. How valuable is that? The truth. You can go a lot of places and be inspired, be entertained, find some, you know, some spiritual uppers, some highs, but it's a truth issue...it's a truth issue.

Scotland in the sixteenth/seventeenth century had what were called warrior preachers who battled for the truth—and it is always a battle. You know, I think about this even when I think about, for example, the Master's College. The Master's College is a four-year fully accredited, liberal arts Christian college. And I've been privileged to serve there now for over 25 years and it's a joy for me. But we are so different than every other Christian college. Yes, we are fully accredited, the most extensive accreditation that the accrediting people can give, we have the ten year accreditation we got last time, only 12 percent of schools in the Western Association of Schools and Colleges have that. We're there academically. We again have been listed as one of the top five liberal arts colleges in America. Just recently we were selected by Forbes and CBS as one of the top ten schools out of 650 colleges and universities in America with the best professors in America...the best professors. We're in there with the Naval Academy, we're in there with West Point and the Air Force Academy, and other heady schools.

Yes, we're there academically, and we're grateful for that. But we have something far more important than that, and it is this. We have the same exact doctrinal statement that Grace Church has. We don't have professors looking for the truth, they know the truth. We have people teaching the truth. And that's why now those who graduated from the Master's College are sending their children back because they know the things that they were taught are still being taught.

Does truth change? Truth doesn't change. It stays the same. You hear Christian colleges say things like engaging the culture, searching for the truth. We're not searching for the truth and we're not trying to engage the culture. We're trying to take young people and hold them captive for four years so they don't do something stupid before they're mature, and during those four years make them skilled in all the academic disciplines and at the same time teach them the truth of the Word of God. It's a truth issue.

You can bounce from church to church, to church, to church and place, to place, and place to place and you can skim across and pick off things here and there in the evangelical smorgasbord but you're never going to have any depth of understanding until you're in a place where the truth is taught continuously, continuously, expansively with depth. That's why you want to be in the same place cause your sanctification is tied to that.

And then finally I would say, although there were other points that I had written down, I won't bother them, I think we've sort of covered them. Belonging to the church is an evangelism issue...it's an evangelism issue. How do people know that we're the disciples of Christ? They will know you by your...what?...by your what?...no. John 13:34 and 35, "They will know you by your love. By this shall all men know that you're My disciples, that you have love for one another." Collective testimony is critical. Collective testimony is absolutely critical.

I remember a lady who came into the church and she came to meet me after a Sunday morning service and she said, "I'm a member at the synagogue down the street." I said, "Well that's wonderful, why are you here?" She said, "Because I see all these people pouring into this church and I just came over a few times and I've never seen such love...never seen such love." Never heard the message. She was drawn by the love that she saw.

And at that level it would just be a kind of friendly love. She would never have understood the depth of love that goes on in this church that we see all the time who are a part of it. So in a sense, your participation in the loving ministry of the church lays a foundation to make the gospel message believable.

So all of that to say, I'm glad the Members Center is open tonight.

You say, "Well why Grace Community Church?" Well, yeah, I'm not here defending Grace Community Church as the only church. But I am here to tell you you need to be a part of a church and I will tell you this, if I wasn't the pastor of this church, I'd be a member of this church. If I had never been the pastor of this church, I would have raised my family in this church because all the things that I think the New Testament says should be a church are the pursuit of the people who are here. And I'm grateful for that.

I just...I say this not for the sake of quote/unquote this church, but I say all of this for your sake, right? For your sake...for your sake.

Father, we thank You tonight that we've been able to just think these things through maybe in a fresh way. And it's not as if it's new to us. We understand that You require everything of us. Jesus even said it, "Take up your cross and follow Me, deny yourself." And even though we have done that at the point of salvation, somehow self comes back to life and begins to take a high place in our lives and we get all caught up in things that don't matter. The church is a low priority, fellowship of the believers, a distant thought as we pursue the little dreams of our own small world. Help us, Lord, to see the church the way You see it, to love the church and to want to be a part of the church in every way. And work in the hearts of all of us who are here to make us more faithful to that, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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