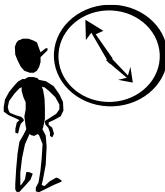


Inside this issue:

<i>What's So Important About the Church?</i>	1
<i>A.M. Sermon Outline:</i> What Do We Know About Immortality?	6
Duty Rosters	7
Announcements & For the Record	8



Time of Assembly



Sunday:

Bible Study	9:00 a.m.
Worship	10:00 a.m.
Worship	5:00 p.m.
(every other week)	

Wednesday:

Bible Study	6:30 p. m.
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What's So Important About the Church?

By Jefferson David Tant

The comment is often made, "I don't have to go to church in order to go to heaven," or, similarly, "I can be a Christian without going to church." The question is, "Is that really true, or is that a misunderstanding of what "church" is all about?"

What is the Church?

For one thing, the church is the spiritual "body of Christ." (God) *"put all things in subjection under His (Christ's) feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all"* (Ephesians 1:22-23).

The apostle Paul carries this idea of the church as the body of Christ a bit further in I Corinthians 12:12-17: *"For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; it is not therefore not of the body. And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; it is not therefore not of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?"*

The writer is teaching that all parts of the body are necessary and that no one member of the body has the right to discount or "put down" another part of the body. And so it is with the spiritual body, as we all work together to make the whole function well.

The point is that if I want to be a part of Christ, I must be a part of his body. How could I claim that my hand is a part of my body if it has been cut off? That wouldn't make sense, would it?

The Church and Growing

An important function of the church is our growth as Christians. As a part of my physical body must be attached to receive nourishment, so it is with the spiritual body, the church. God has told us to *"consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near"* (Hebrews 10:24-25).

There are two things to consider in the foregoing verses.

1. God commands us to encourage one another, even as various parts of our physical body work together to keep our bodies healthy.
2. We are to do this when we assemble together.

The phrase “*assembling together*” refers to our meeting together as a church. It is obvious that if I am not part of a church, I can neither give nor receive this encouragement, designed to be interactive participation. Part of this encouragement means that others can help me when I am burdened, as one family member helps another. “*Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ*” (Galatians 6:2).

Another analogy on growing is in I Peter 2:2: “*As newborn babes, long for the spiritual milk which is without guile, that ye may grow thereby unto salvation.*” Again, in II Peter 3:18, we are admonished to “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*” Where can we learn about Christ? Where can we go to learn about living as a Christian? Certainly, we should read and study God’s Word on our own at home, but God has also decreed that we do this in a collective sense—when we gather together as the church. The preaching of the Word is a part of our coming together (Acts 20:7), and we also “*teach and admonish one another*” (Colossians 3:16). We cannot practice the “*one another*” part without assembling together.

Returning to the Hebrews letter, we note the author admonished those Christians to “grow up.” He was writing some things he knew would be difficult for them to understand. And why would they have difficulty? Note his words: “*For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil*” (Hebrews 5:13-14).

Is it possible their ignorance and immaturity were because they were not availing themselves of the opportunities of assembling together? Remember that in Hebrews 10:24-25, he mentioned that some of them were already in the habit of “*forsaking our own assembling together.*”

The Church and Keeping Us from Sin

We live in a world full of enticements and temptations to sin. Satan is alive and well and very active. God has called us to live above sin and learn to resist the temptations around us. One way to accomplish this is through the strength we gain from one another.

Solomon understood the principle of strength in numbers when he wrote, “*And if a man prevails against him that is alone, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken*” (Ecclesiastes 4:12). We illustrate the idea with coals in a fire. If you take one coal and place it outside the fire by itself, it will soon grow cold. But when you place it back with the other coals in the fire, it will quickly receive warmth from the others and, in turn, can radiate heat itself.

By spending time with other Christians, we tend to become like them. Friends influence us. That is one reason God gave us the church that we might strengthen each other. “*Therefore encourage one another and build up one another...*” (I Thessalonians 5:11). But when we are not a part of the church and thus do not associate with other Christians, then we are more easily influenced by our friends in the world. “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals.’” (I Corinthians 15:33). It works both ways; thus, “good company encourages good morals.”

When I see someone about to step into traffic or some other hazard, my impulse is to warn and lead him to safety. God has given us the same responsibility towards others in our spiritual

family. *“Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted”* (Galatians 6:1). Thus we don’t have to face the trials and temptations of life alone.

God has arranged for local churches to be led by spiritually mature and godly men who are considered shepherds. He then urges the members of the church to imitate their example. *“Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith”* (Hebrews 13:7). The writer continues in Hebrews 13:17, *“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.”* How can you follow this teaching if you are not a part of a local church fellowship?

The Church and Worship

As beings created and blessed by God, we are to offer him our worship and thanksgiving. *“Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created”* (Revelation 4:11). Prayers of thanksgiving and praise should be a part of our daily lives. Still, God has also asked that this be a part of our public worship, as well. *“They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”* (Acts 2:42).

In Revelation 5:11-14, we get a glimpse of the worship that takes place in heaven, as John describes the scene for us: *“Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.’ And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, ‘To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.’ And the four living creatures kept saying, “Amen.” And the elders fell down and worshiped.”* Also note the statement in Ephesians 3:21: *“Unto him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations forever and ever. Amen.”*

The writer of Hebrews quotes from the 22nd Psalm with these words: *“I will proclaim your name to my brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise”* (Hebrews 2:12). This describes one aspect of our congregational worship.

Few things stir the soul and lift our spirits more than good congregational singing as we speak *“one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord”* (Ephesians 5:19).

Another part of our public worship is partaking of the Lord’s Supper, a memorial to Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. The evidence is that the early church met weekly to partake of this memorial (Acts 20:7). The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth and instructed them about observing the Lord’s Supper. *“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’ In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes”* (I Corinthians 11:23-26).

If Christ has told us to do this in remembrance of him, why should we choose to ignore and disobey him? If it was important to him for us to do this, it should be important to us.

The Church and Salvation

We understand that salvation is based upon our faith in Christ. The well-known John 3:16 is very clear: *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."* But is it enough to give mental consent to the fact that he is the Son of God and our Savior?

II Timothy 2:10 says, *"Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sake, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory."* Please note that Paul states that salvation is *"in Christ Jesus."* Just what does that mean? It means that our salvation is in a relationship with Christ, which is to be in his body, his spiritual body, which is the church, as noted earlier.

From Ephesians 5:23, we learn that *"Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body."* Again, what is the "body?" The Scriptures teach us that the church is the body — the spiritual body of Christ. Now, if salvation is *"in Christ,"* then it is also in *"his body — the church."* The parallel is clear and cannot be denied. In a physical sense, if something is in me, it is obviously in my body.

Therefore, when one claims that he can be a Christian and be saved apart from the church, he is saying he can be saved outside of and apart from Christ, which we know would be impossible.

The Church and the Death of Christ

What relationship does the church have to the death of Christ? As we have seen earlier, Christ is the Savior of the body, the church (Ephesians 5:23). In Acts 20, the apostle Paul is addressing the elders of the church from Ephesus and gives them a solemn charge: *"Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood"* (Acts 20:28). Please give careful notice to the phrase concerning the *"church of God which He purchased with His own blood."*

It was not an organization that Christ bought with his blood, but the people composed the spiritual church or body of Christ. Now consider: if the church is so important that Christ had to be crucified and shed his blood for it, then surely we cannot afford to say the church is unimportant or that we can be saved without it. To do so would be to question God's plan and flatly deny God's purpose for the church.

Please note that the church was a part of God's eternal plan. *"So that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Ephesians 3:10-11). Evidently, the church was so important that God laid out its plan in eternity — before the world and time began. The apostle Paul thought the church was important, for when he came to Jerusalem, he wanted to be a part of the local church (Acts 9:26).

This being true, we must be careful not to alter or change it to suit ourselves, as many denominations do. I may buy a new car and then change it to suit my taste. I may soup up the engine, change the suspension, and do other things, but when I do that, I void the manufacturer's warranty. The manufacturer had a purpose and end in mind when the car was designed, and so did the One who designed and "manufactured" the church. We dare not mess with God's design.

Christ promised the apostles he would build his church. In response to Peter's confession that he was *"the Christ, the Son of the Living God,"* Christ said, *"I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it"* (Matthew 16:18). Christ rose from the dead and did just what he promised. Now, when you build something, you must have a foundation, and even that is men-

tioned in the Scriptures. *“For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God, which was given to me, like a wise master builder, I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”* What is being built? The church Christ promised!

Conclusion

Then the question is, “How does one get into Christ, into his body, the church?” We are not left to wonder about this, as God has revealed the steps one must take to be a part of the body of Christ. As noted earlier, our salvation begins with our faith in Christ as the Son of God, the Savior of the world.

The church or kingdom of God on earth began on the Day of Pentecost about the year 33 A.D., as recorded in Acts 2. As Peter and the other apostles were preaching to the great crowd of Jews gathered on that day, he proved that the one they had crucified seven weeks earlier was indeed the One that had been promised for hundreds of years. The message penetrated the hearts of many that day, and we have recorded what happened.

“Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ--this Jesus whom you crucified. Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’ Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:37-38)

Notice the order of things revealed.

1. They believed, which is evident from their conviction that Jesus really was the One promised — the Son of God.
2. In response to their question, Peter told them to repent — to turn from doing wrong.
3. Then, they were told to be baptized — to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of their sins.

Galatians 3:26-27 teaches that it is the act of baptism that places us within our relationship with Christ: *“For ye are all sons of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ.”* If we are “baptized into Christ,” are we not also baptized into his body, the church? The Bible so affirms. *“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”* (I Corinthians 12:13).

The letter to the church in Rome describes the significance of baptism -- a picture of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. *“Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection”* (Romans 6:3-5). Christ died, was buried, and was raised on the third day. In baptism, we die to sin, the old man is buried in the watery grave, and then is raised a new creature, with all past sins forgiven.

The apostle Paul, who wrote the foregoing words by inspiration from God, certainly understood what was required of him, and he responded to Ananias's command: *“Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name”* (Acts 22:16).

As an aside, those who claim baptism is not a part of our salvation ignore the clear teaching of Scripture and the purpose that God has given for baptism.