

The Importance of the Church in Your Life

“No one can have God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his mother.” - Cyprian of Carthage

- Early church father who lived in the 3rd century, just a few hundred years after the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.
- **What do you think Cyprian meant?**
 - The church guides and protects us, and the church gives our life meaning because through the church we receive the blessings of the gospel.
 - Put slightly differently, the vast of the blessings of Christ flow to us through His church, not because we need a priest or a mediator standing between us and God but because we are sheep in need of shepherds. We were not meant to walk this life alone, and so Christ gave us the church to guide and protect and bless us.
- **Why do you need the church? How does the church bless you? What tools has God given the church?**
 - Word, Sacraments, and Prayer
 - Ordinary means of grace: From the Westminster Standards the concept that God typically blesses His people through the reading and especially the preaching of the Word, the special blessings of the Sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism, and corporate or congregational Prayer.
 - Fellowship
 - Shepherding

- **The Word**

- **What do we mean by “The Word”?**
 - The reading, but especially the preaching of God’s word.
- **How does the reading and preaching of the Word help us? Why do we need it?**
- *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17 ESV)*
- *I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:1-5 ESV)*
- We need teachers! Teaching and preaching to us the whole counsel of God or else we will focus on what we like, what we want, and ignore whole swaths of the Bible.
 - *This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. (2 Peter 3:1-3 ESV)*

- **Sacraments**

- **What are the sacraments of the church?**
 - Baptism and the Lord’s Supper
- **What is a sacrament?**
 - Q. 92. What is a sacrament? A. A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.
 - They are visible signs of a Spiritual reality. In other words they are not just outward ceremonies but Spiritual realities.

- Baptism

- **How does our Baptism bless us?**

- Visible public sign of our inclusion in the covenant community. It marks us out as different from the rest of the world because we belong to Christ.
 - *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4 ESV)*
 - Baptism is not just a ceremony we do, it has real Spiritual meaning and significance, not just in the moment of baptism but throughout our whole lives as we witness others be baptized. Baptism is the visible sign that we have been united with Christ! We should cling to it, cherish it, think on it, and use it to our advantage.
 - Martin Luther famously resisted fierce temptation by declaring to the Devil “I have been baptized!”
 - *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20 ESV)*

- The Lord's Supper

- **How does the Lord's supper bless us?**

- *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1Co 10:16-17 ESV)*
 - Just like Baptism, it's a physical sign of a Spiritual reality. It shows forth the death of Christ and our union with Him.
 - But also the whole process of coming to the Table forces us to our knees in repentance and reliance upon him. The Catechism speaks of examining ourselves for worthy partaking of the elements. And a sister reformed denomination has in their liturgy for the Lord's supper this explanation “Through the elements of bread and wine, our Lord graciously gives himself and all his benefits to everyone who eats and drinks in a worthy manner, discerning the body of the Lord. It is one thing to eat and drink in a worthy

manner. It is very different, however, to imagine that we are worthy to eat and drink. We dare not come to the Lord's Table as if we were worthy and righteous in ourselves. We come in a worthy manner if we recognize that we are unworthy sinners who need our Savior, if we consciously discern his body given for our sins, if we hunger and thirst after Christ, giving thanks for his grace, trusting in his merits, feeding on him by faith, renewing our covenant with him and his people."

- The Lord's supper regularly reminds us of our Union with Christ and brings us, Spiritually, into the very throne room of heaven.
- Prayer
 - **What is prayer?**
 - Q. 98. What is prayer? A. Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.
 - **Why would we call prayer an ordinary means of grace? How does prayer bless you?**
 - When we pray we have access to the very throne room of heaven. The God of the Universe welcomes us into His presence and longs to hear our requests AND answer them.
 - *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? (Mat 7:7-10 ESV)*
 - **Why do you particularly need the church for prayer, can't you pray on your own?**
 - You learn to pray
 - You pray for things that you wouldn't otherwise pray for
 - *The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. (Jas 5:16-18 ESV)*

- *Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And he said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation." And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luk 11:1-13 ESV)*
- Blessings associated with corporate worship
 - *Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." (Mat 18:19-20 ESV)*
- Fellowship
 - Not a traditional means of grace listed in the Westminster Confession, but has been recognized as a common avenue of grace.
 - **Why does it matter who you spend time with?**
 - *Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm. (Pro 13:20 ESV)*
 - *Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (Psalm 73:25-26 ESV)*

- *Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. (Psa 1:1-2 ESV)*
- If we love God we should want close friendships with others who love God.
- **What is fellowship?**
 - Spending time with other believers, but a specific type of friendship. It relationships that drive you more and more to Christ.
 - *Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another. (Pro 27:17 ESV)*
 - *Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Heb 10:23-25 ESV)*
- **Who should we fellowship with in the church?**
 - Across generations. Obviously in proper and safe contexts
 - *Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. (Tit 2:3-5 ESV)*
- Fellowship isn't just hanging out with your friends, it's growing together as the family of God together. You can and should have godly friends and they don't have to go to your church, but you should invest your time and energy in developing relationships with folks at your church.
 - This is particularly fruitful over meals. Seek to show hospitality. When you're young you should be a joyful receiver of hospitality and as you grow you should become a joyful giver of hospitality.
- **Shepherding**
 - **Who in the church shepherds you?**
 - Elders: Ruling Elders and Pastors
 - They are not just distant theologians but men who have been entrusted with the care of your souls. Christ entrusted the church to the Apostles who established the foundation and the apostles, following the command of the Lord set up elders and deacons in local churches.

- *When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. (Jhn 21:15-17 ESV)*
- **What does it mean to shepherd? How do the elders shepherd you?**
 - The Elders guide and counsel you.
 - *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13:17 ESV)*
 - They keep watch over your souls! Which means, they want to hear from you! When things are going well and when things are going poorly. When you're content and when you're seeking wisdom. The elders of your church are there to help and guide you.
- **The elders protect you from the world and yourself**
 - **What if you didn't have anyone in your life to tell you not to do something bad?**
 - We're often blind to our own dangers. Elders lovingly warn us when we're heading toward sin or destruction.
 - Like shepherds with a staff, they sometimes have to *poke* or *pull*, but always to bring you back to Christ.
- The elders give you an example to imitate.
 - *Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. (Hebrews 13:7 ESV)*

What I would exhort you all to is to commit to this: always be a member of a church. Don't date the church, marry the church. Commit to being formally under the care and discipline of a local session for the rest of your life. Because that is the most surefire way to be shepherded, fellowship with God's people, and partake in the blessings of Word, Sacrament, and Prayer.