

**“The ABC’s of the Christian Life:
(5) Following Jesus Christ Rightly -- #1: Joining the Local Church**

Introduction:

Today we begin to address the third division of our study, “The ABC’s of the Christian Life.” We **first** dealt with what it is to **come** to Jesus Christ for salvation in the first two Sundays of our study. Becoming aware of our personal guilt and condemnation of sin before God, knowing our inability to bring about our own remedy, we humbly come to Jesus Christ in faith, trusting Him as our Lord and Savior, even as we repent of our sin. And then for two weeks we emphasized **secondly** what it is to **follow** Jesus Christ unto our final and full salvation. Jesus is our Lord who leads us out of our sin, out of this fallen world, and forward in, and towards, the kingdom that the Father has promised to all who follow His Son. But today we begin to consider the **third** division of our study: how **we may follow Jesus Christ rightly**. And so, the division of our study may be shown in this outline:

1. **“Coming to Jesus for Salvation” (2 sermons)**
2. **“Following Jesus unto our Final Salvation” (2 sermons)**
3. **“Following Jesus Rightly” (? sermons)**

Now the content of our first four sermons of this series may be considered absolutely **essential** to salvation. If people do not **come** to Jesus in faith rightly, they will not be saved from their sin. They may become nominal Christians--Christians in name only--but they will not be true Christians, who enjoy a life-changing experience of knowing God through Jesus Christ. For true Christians not only come to Jesus for salvation, but they also **follow** Jesus Christ as the Lord of their lives. Only true disciples of Jesus Christ have salvation. If a “believer” does not follow Jesus Christ, having denied himself, while taking up his cross daily to follow Jesus, he is not a true believer; he will not inherit salvation.

But now we will address the manner in which true Christians are to follow Jesus. All Christians follow Jesus, but not all Christians follow Jesus Christ **rightly**. And so, the issues we begin to address today are not essential to salvation, but they are important issues, even very, very important matters. The sad fact is that there are Christians who never rise to their potential, never experience the kind of life that they could enjoy if they followed the Lord rightly. The Lord has given to all of His people “all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue” (2 Pet. 1:3). He has given to all true Christians, “exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (2 Pet. 1:4). But not all Christians have these promises realized in their lives. For God has not only commanded us to follow Jesus, but He has prescribed in his Word how we are to follow Him rightly, in a manner in which we will receive His blessing on our journey.

At the head of the list of important teachings we want to consider is **the new believer joining himself to a local church**. In order for a Christian to follow the Lord rightly, he should become baptized, joining a local church. We will not address baptism today, but rather, we will address the nature and importance of a Christian joining himself to a local church. [Now we considered this subject of the local church not long ago, a little over a year ago, but because of its importance to our overall series, we must affirm this matter today. Next Sunday, Lord willing, we will address the importance of baptism.]

Let us begin our consideration of this subject with a passage that speaks of new Christians both being baptized and joining the church. Please turn to **Acts 2:22-47**. Here we read of the great event of **Pentecost**, which was 50 days after the Passover, when our Lord had been crucified. On this day the Lord poured out upon His church the gift of the Holy Spirit, which gave great credence and spiritual power to the apostolic witness of the gospel, resulting in thousands of souls coming to Christ through faith for salvation. Here we

read of Peter's sermon to the gathered crowd in Jerusalem that resulted in many new converts being baptized and joining the church.

The day had begun with 120 disciples gathered together in an upper room. They were praying and waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit, whom the Lord Jesus said would come upon them (Cf. Acts 1:5). When the Day of Pentecost arrived, the Holy Spirit came upon them with audible and visible effects, which resulted in great commotion in the Jerusalem community, at least initially. We read of this in Acts 2:2ff:

²And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. ⁴And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. ⁵And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. ⁶And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. (Acts 2:2-6)

The crowds gathered, but they were confused and errant in their perception of what was happening. They initially assumed that the disciples of Jesus were drunk. This resulted in the Apostle Peter standing before them in order to preach the Word of God to them. After he initially explained what they were witnessing was the fulfillment of prophecy given long before by the prophet Joel, Peter proclaimed these words:

²²“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know— ²³Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; ²⁴whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it. ²⁵For David says concerning Him:

‘I foresaw the LORD always before my face,
For He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken.
²⁶Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad;
Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope.
²⁷For You will not leave my soul in Hades,
Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.
²⁸You have made known to me the ways of life;
You will make me full of joy in Your presence.’

²⁹“Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, ³¹he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. ³²This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. ³³Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear.

³⁴“For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself:

‘The LORD said to my Lord,
“Sit at My right hand,
³⁵Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”’

³⁶“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

Peter proclaimed to them that the long-anticipated Kingdom of God had been inaugurated. The promised Son of David had come and He had become the exalted King over the Kingdom of God. Israel's rejection, crucifixion, and burial of Jesus had not thwarted God's purpose to exalt David's Son; rather, Jesus Christ's rejection, death, and resurrection had been the very path that led to and resulted in the enthronement of Jesus as Lord and Christ over the Kingdom of God. The Jews had rejected and crucified the One the Father had exalted and enthroned. We then read of their response:

³⁷Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

³⁸Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

⁴⁰And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." **⁴¹Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.** ⁴²**And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.** ⁴³Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

⁴⁶So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. ***And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.***

I would like us to consider the nature of the church at Jerusalem to which these new Christians joined themselves, even while we extrapolate how all new Christians are to order their lives. We may conclude from this portion of God's Word, that...

I. New Christians are to join the church

In verse 41 we read that the ones who had gladly received Peter's word regarding the Lord Jesus, were first baptized. The result was that 3,000 souls were added to the church that day. And then in verse 47 we read a summary statement of what had transpired in those early days of the church at Jerusalem, "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." New Christians are to join themselves with other believers in a local church.

Some would argue that the Lord was adding these new Christians to the universal, invisible church. Some say this in order to diminish the importance and need to align with a local church. They claim that they need not join a local church for they are members of the universal church. Yes, the Holy Scriptures do speak of the universal church. Our confession of faith states this biblical doctrine:

The catholic or universal church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that fills all in all.¹

But to argue that the universal church is what is meant in Acts 2:47 is simply untenable. The Lord was adding daily to the local church at Jerusalem those who were being saved.

Let us consider the nature of the local church reflected in our passage.

¹ Article 26, paragraph 1, *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*. The verses cited to substantiate this statement include Hebrews 12:23, Col. 1:18, Ephesians 1:10, 22, 23, and Ephesians 5:23, 27, and 32.

A. The local church

When we consider the Greek word that we translate into English as “church”, it helps us to better define what a church is before God. The Greek word for “church” is the word **ἐκκλησία** (*eklesia*). This word is the combination of two words, the preposition, “ἐκ” (ek), meaning “out of,” and the noun, “καλεω” (*kaleo*), which means “call.” The word for church, therefore, denotes an assembly of “called out” people. This Greek word of the New Testament era was commonly used to describe a group that was called out to a public meeting. Similarly, Christians are ones whom God has “called out” of the fallen world in order that they would gather together as His people.

We use the word “church” in the English language to describe a number of ideas that are not in accordance to its use in the Scriptures. We call this **building** a “church.” The Bible does not use the term in this way. We use the word, church, to describe a **denomination**. We speak of the Methodist Church, or the Lutheran church. The Bible does not use the term in this way either. We speak of **national churches**--the American church, the church in China, the African church. This also is an unbiblical usage of the word “church.” We speak of “the church” as **all professing** Christians everywhere. I do not believe the Bible uses the term in this way either. Only when we use the term to describe either the universal church or **a local assembly of disciples** of Jesus Christ, do we use the word “church” in a biblical sense.

The word **ἐκκλησία** occurs 115 times in the Greek New Testament.² Three times it is used to describe a secular gathering of citizens to a town meeting.³ On one occasion the word is used to describe Israel in the wilderness (Acts 7:38)—God had “called out” Israel from Egypt, gathering His people to Him in the wilderness. **Εκκλησία** is used 111 times to describe a Christian assembly of believers. If we were to consider each of these 111 occasions the word is used for the New Testament “church”, it may be determined that the “church” refers (1) to a **local church**, (2) to the local church as an **institution**⁴, (3) or to the “**universal**” church that is being gathered and will be completed at the end of the age. The universal church is not discussed directly in very many places in the New Testament. Of these 111 occurrences in which the word, church, is used to describe the gathering of Christian believers, the vast number of these, 92 occurrences, refer to the local church. Of the Greek word, **ἐκκλησία**, it has been said that

Its ordinary use in the New Testament is to designate a specific, local assembly of Christians, organized for the maintenance of the worship, the doctrines, the ordinances, and the discipline of the gospel, and united, under special covenant, with Christ and one another; as “the church at Jerusalem,” “the churches of Galatia.” The word occurs in this local sense in ninety-two instances.⁵

The first century Christians would not have understood our use of the term, “church”, when we use it to describe our buildings, our denominations, or our national churches. A church that could not gather together, would have been no church in a biblical sense. And so, we see the Greek word for church, **ἐκκλησία**, assists us in better understanding the church, for it excludes many uses of the word church that are used by us today. Biblically speaking, there is no such thing as a denomination that is called a church, like the Presbyterian Church, or the Methodist Church, or the Roman Catholic Church. There is no biblical example of a national church, like the Church of England or the Church of Scotland. And there is no use of the word, church, to describe all the Christians of a geographic or national border, such as “the church in America” or “the church in Asia.” It is not biblical to speak of “the evangelical church”, or of “the church of New England.” We are not saying that it is wrong to use these expressions, but if and when we do so, we no longer use the word, church, as it is used in the Bible. We are not saying that we should stop calling this building a church, or refer to a denomination as a church, but we should be aware that when we do so, we should not import biblical ideas when we use the word in those ways. But people commonly do, and

² This includes the word, “church” in Acts 2:49.

³ These are all in Acts 19, verses 32, 39, 41.

⁴ When our Lord told His disciples to “tell it unto the church” (Matt. 28:17), He was speaking of the local church as an institution.

⁵ Hezekiah Harvey, *The Church; Its Polity and Ordinances* (Backus Book Pub., orig. 1879, reprint 1982), p. 27.

generally, this results in a depreciation of the nature and importance of the New Testament local church. And too often it gives unwarranted credibility to institutions that are not churches according to the Holy Scriptures.

We may put forth this definition of a New Testament local church:

A church is a congregation of Christ's baptized disciples, acknowledging Him as their Head, relying on His atoning sacrifice for justification before God, and depending on the Holy Spirit for sanctification, united in the belief of the gospel, agreeing to maintain its ordinances and obey its precepts, meeting together for worship, and cooperating for the extension of Christ's kingdom in the world.⁶

Here is another good definition:

A Christian church, according to the point of view traditionally held by Baptists, is a company of regenerate persons, baptized on profession of faith in Christ; united in covenant for worship, instruction, the observance of Christian ordinances, and for such service as the gospel requires; recognizing and accepting Christ as their supreme Lord and Lawgiver, and taking the New Testament as a divinely inspired record and therefore a trustworthy, authoritative, and all-sufficient rule of faith and practice.⁷

Let us consider the spiritual life of the church that Luke described in our passage of Acts 2.

B. The spiritual life of a local church

What, then, does the New Testament teach about the nature of the local church? Here in our passage of Acts 2 we may identify some qualities of the spiritual life of the local church. We read in verse 32 Peter's command to the people who were under conviction after hearing him preach Christ to them. He commanded them,

Repent, and let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, for the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call.

We then read of the response of the people to Peter's words in verses 40ff,

And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day there were about three thousand souls added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. (2:40-42)

We may say several things about the nature of a New Testament church from these words.

1. A New Testament church is comprised of those who have *repented of their sins and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ.*

We see in the verses we just read that only those who were saved were added to the church (cf. v. 47). This is a distinctive of a New Testament church: ***a local church is to be comprised of those who have been saved.*** Historically, Baptists have termed this principle as a "***regenerate church membership.***" Only those who have given evidence of having been born again are to be admitted to church membership. The formal membership of a local church should be comprised only of those who have manifested their new life in

⁶ J. M. Pendleton, *Church Manual Designed for the Use of Baptist Churches* (The Judson Press, orig. 1867), p. 7.

⁷ Edward T. Hiscox, *The Hiscox Guide for Baptist Churches* (Judson Press, 1976), p. 13.

Christ through turning from sin to the Lord and showing a willingness and commitment to follow the Lord in all aspects of life.

2. We see that persons added to the church were ones who had believed and then were *baptized*. “And those who gladly received his word were baptized.”

First came faith and then baptism followed faith. As many as received his word--that is believed and embraced his message--they and they only were baptized. Only believers should be baptized. I would assert that one of the reasons that local churches are as weak as they are is because unconverted people are commonly baptized and brought into the church. A church is to be comprised of those who have new life in Christ. If the church becomes filled with those who are void of new life, then that church will not experience the life of Christ in its gatherings and that church will fail to manifest the life of Christ to the world; in fact, it ceases to be a true church of Jesus Christ. (We will say more about baptism later.)

3. A local church is to be comprised of persons who continue steadfastly in *the apostolic teaching*.

Again we read in verse 42, “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine.” A true church of Jesus Christ must be based upon the clear and full declaration of *apostolic teaching*; the church must be comprised only of those who are committed to and submitted to that teaching. In order for us to understand what is meant by the apostolic teaching, we might first ask the question, **Who were the Apostles?**

The apostles were the designated authoritative witnesses to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus had many disciples, but he only chose **twelve** to be his apostles. They were a distinct group of men of unique qualifications called to the special task of starting and grounding churches in the faith. Actually, the expression, “**The Twelve**”, became somewhat of a title to distinguish these men and the supreme role they served among the churches.

Let us turn to Matthew 10 and read of our Lord Jesus originally commissioning the Twelve. The first 10 verses read as follows:

And when He had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease. ²Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; ³Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Lebbeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus; ⁴Simon the Canaanite, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him.

⁵These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. ⁶But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ ⁸Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. ⁹Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, ¹⁰nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food.

Here we read that that these chosen men are called “the twelve disciples” in verse 1. They are called “the twelve apostles” in verse 2. They are called “these (the) twelve” in verse 5. These Twelve were clearly called apart by our Lord Jesus and commissioned by Him for a special task. They travelled with Him. They learned from Him. They preached in the regions through which He was travelling. They performed miracles through power that the Lord had given them.

Elsewhere in the gospels we learn more about the Twelve. In Luke 22:28-30 the Lord Jesus promised that they would rule over the “twelve tribes of Israel”; that is, they were to be the new leaders of Israel, replacing the current corrupt leaders of Israel whom the Lord deposed (Cf. Matt. 21:33-45). Revelation 21:12-14 describes the foundation levels of the New Jerusalem; they are named after the twelve apostles. Paul wrote to the Christians at Ephesus that the church had been built upon the foundation of the apostles (Eph. 2:20).

The Twelve were an important group of men. They were the leaders of the Israel of God. There were 12 tribes that comprised Israel. There were 12 apostles that the Lord Jesus placed over Israel that had entered into a new covenant relationship with Himself.

The Twelve were such an important group that when one of them died, Judas Iscariot through his betrayal and subsequent suicide, the eleven felt compelled to replace him. We read of the replacement of Judas in Acts 1:15-26. The point is this, there had to be 12 apostles.

The 12 apostles' role is extremely significant for churches. They were official representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ. They were eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry, first hand hearers of His public teaching and were privy to his personal training and instruction. The Greek word for apostle (ἀπόστολος – *apostolos*) means "one who is sent forth" (In Hebrews 3:1 the word is used to describe our Lord who had been sent forth by the Father --cf. John 17:3). In Matthew 10:5 the verb form of the word apostle is used. The Lord Jesus summoned twelve disciples and *sent them* out preaching; therefore, they were apostles of the Lord Jesus having been sent out by him.

The Lord gave to His 12 apostles authority over the churches; that is, He commissioned them to teach in such a manner that their teaching was to be regarded as true and as binding as His personal teaching. To hear them was to hear Him. To disregard their teaching was to incur great guilt and His rejection. We read in Mark 6:7ff of the apostle's authority and the responsibility of those who hear them to respond to their teaching:

⁷And He called the twelve to Himself, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them power over unclean spirits. ⁸He commanded them to take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bag, no bread, no copper in their money belts—⁹but to wear sandals, and not to put on two tunics.

¹⁰Also He said to them, "In whatever place you enter a house, stay there till you depart from that place. ¹¹And whoever will not receive you nor hear you, when you depart from there, shake off the dust under your feet as a testimony against them. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!" (Mark 6:7-11)

Apostles were witnesses of our Lord's words and deeds. Christ gave His apostles authority to be His apostles (The Twelve). Their teachings were authoritative and their writings were authoritative. Our New Testament is a record of the teaching of the apostles. If people refuse to hear an apostle, they are refusing to hear the Lord Jesus Christ who sent him.

What was the apostles' doctrine? Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, recorded in Acts 2:42 that the members of the local church at Jerusalem kept the apostles' doctrine. The doctrine or teaching of the apostles is contained in the New Testament through the writings of the apostles or the writings of those who were understudies of the apostles. Matthew wrote a Gospel; he himself, being an apostle. Mark was not an apostle, but it is commonly understood that the Gospel of Mark records Peter's testimony to Mark of events he had experienced. Luke who wrote his Gospel and the book of Acts, was a follower and recorder in of Paul and Luke had occasion to research many details about the events he recorded (Cf. Luke 1:1-4). Of course Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, called by the Lord Jesus to serve in the unique role.

Aside from the New Testament books themselves, it could be said that there was a body of apostolic teaching, that is, *the apostles' doctrine*, to which the New Testament gives evidence. The apostles' doctrine was commonly proclaimed and reinforced by the churches. If we desire to be a church truly patterned by the New Testament, we must seek to recover the apostles' doctrine, restore its prominence in our minds and the life of the church, and proclaim it faithfully among us.

The writer to the Hebrews rebuked his readers for being undiscerning Christians--they were mere babies when they should have been teachers (Hebrews 5:11-14). One cause for the deficiency of these Christians was that they were "not accustomed to *the word of righteousness*." We should probably not understand the phrase, the "word of righteousness" as a direct reference to Scripture, but rather to the body of teaching (doctrine), which was "Christian"--the content of "the" faith of Christianity. This "word" was the standard by which they were to make judgments, however, they were "unaccustomed", or unfamiliar with it, and as a result they were unable to distinguish "good from evil." Due to their ignorance of the substance of

their faith--Christian doctrine--and their failure to apply it--to distinguish "good from evil"--they were endangering themselves.

The New Testament writers frequently described in other terms what the writer to the Hebrews identified as "the word of righteousness." Repeatedly the New Testament gives reference to a collection of teachings (i.e. doctrines), which was entrusted to Christians to maintain and pass on to the next generation. This body of teaching is described in various ways. It is "*the word*" which was handed down by "eyewitnesses" (Luke 1:1, 2) and preached to the early church (1 Peter 1:25). This teaching was described as "*the truth*" (2 Tim. 2:18), the "*traditions*" that Paul had passed on to the church of the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:15). Paul referred to this body of truth as "*the faith*" or "*the things you have learned and become convinced of*" (2 Tim. 3:8, 14). Jude wrote of "*the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints*" which needed to be contended for lest the message be lost through corruption of its content (Jude 3, 4).

We should consider the importance of the Apostles' doctrine to the life of the church. The point we want to make is this, there is a body of teaching to which the early churches gave themselves. They listened to it being taught. They embraced it. They ordered their church life by it. They proclaimed it to the world. They were pressed with a responsibility to pass it on to subsequent generations.

4. A local church is to be comprised of persons who continue in *fellowship*. Again, verse 42 reads, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and *fellowship*."

It is very important to understand the nature of true biblical fellowship. What is fellowship?

Biblical fellowship exists when there is a mutual shared appreciation and application of the truth among a gathering of Christians, those who enjoy a mutual relationship with one another through Jesus Christ.

Fellowship is present when there is a sharing and enjoying with one another the common spiritual life we have with one other. It may seem elementary to say, but true fellowship may only be practiced and enjoyed by people who have a common *belief* and *experience* of life from God through Jesus Christ. This is another argument for *a regenerate church membership*. Those who are born again are quite different from the unregenerate, those who are not born again. The two groups have little in common with one another, spiritually speaking. Paul wrote of this in **2 Corinthians 6:14-18**.

¹⁴Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? ¹⁵And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? ¹⁶And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

"I will dwell in them
And walk among them.
I will be their God,
And they shall be My people."

¹⁷Therefore

"Come out from among them
And be separate, says the Lord.
Do not touch what is unclean,
And I will receive you."

¹⁸"I will be a Father to you,
And you shall be My sons and daughters,
Says the LORD Almighty."

How can true fellowship be enjoyed between ones who do not have a common spiritual life and bond? This is why churches should only admit to membership those who have embraced the faith, have manifested that they have new life in Christ, and that they are committed to ordering their lives according to the Scriptures. Unless this mutual commitment exists among us, true fellowship is not possible between us.

When we speak of “fellowship” we must be careful to define our term biblically. Biblical fellowship is not based upon what we have in common as families, Americans, or hobbyists. Fellowship must be based on what we corporately believe and enjoy with respect to our common life before God. ***Fellowship is present when there is a mutual sharing or mutual exchange or joint participation of common knowledge about God and how we relate to Him through Jesus Christ.*** I believe, therefore, that the order of words is important in Acts 2:42, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ ***doctrine*** and ***fellowship***...” The two go together, but the second is grounded on the first. If we do not have a common belief—doctrine--how can we pretend that we are experiencing “fellowship”?

The local church of the New Testament is to be made of people who continue steadfastly in both the apostles’ ***doctrine*** and also in ***fellowship***. And so, we see again that a New Testament local church must not only be a right ***understanding*** of truth--continuing in the Apostles’ ***doctrine***-- there must be a right ***response*** to the truth--they continued in ***fellowship***. This is important, for some believe that a true church may exist apart from fellowship. Some of our Protestant friends have defined the local church differently. They teach that a local church is to be regarded as legitimate wherever the truth is ***proclaimed*** faithfully, irrespective of a response to that truth. No, the truth must be ***practiced*** faithfully also, not just ***preached*** faithfully, else there is no church present.

This wrong understanding of the church, in my opinion, is why some sound, godly, faithful Reformed teachers and preachers remain in a church or denomination that denies or even repudiates the very doctrines that they hold dear. It is because these men have a different definition of the church than what we are asserting here. They claim that “*the visible church*” exists wherever and whenever the Word is faithfully preached and the sacraments are faithfully administered. And so, these Reformed men have justified staying in apostate settings because they believe that as long as they themselves are free to proclaim the truth unhindered, then they are serving within a “legitimate” church. We would argue that such a place might be an evangelistic gathering, but it is no church of Jesus Christ. A true local church according to the New Testament is characterized by ***fellowship*** (as defined by the Scriptures).

And so let us ask the question: **What is biblically defined fellowship?** Often times, Christians base their “fellowship” on less than biblical standards. When we speak of “fellowship” we must be careful to define our term biblically. Fellowship must be based on what we corporately believe and enjoy with respect to our common life before God. We may say this about biblical fellowship:

Biblical fellowship exists when there is a mutual sharing or mutual exchange or joint participation of common knowledge about God and our relationship with Him through Jesus Christ.

However, for many Christians, fellowship as is set forth in God’s Word is not understood or even sought after. Because they do not value or stress biblical doctrine, their concept and practice of “fellowship” is not biblically shaped or sanctioned. Knowledge of doctrine precedes enjoyment of fellowship. Sound doctrine is essential and foundational to true fellowship.

Fellowship must be grounded on biblical doctrine, specifically, what the Bible says about the common life we have with God through the salvation that is in Jesus Christ. But sadly, I feel compelled to say, that many Christians do not understand this. Many Christians do not see doctrine as having a connection to the matter of fellowship, in fact, there are those who view doctrine as damaging, even detrimental to church fellowship. They base their perception of fellowship on matters other than what the Bible teaches. Let me make several assertions about this condition:

1. Many church attendees of “Bible-believing churches” do not understand the nature of biblical fellowship and therefore do not experience it or recognize it when it is present.

2. Church attendees of “Bible-believing churches” commonly make assertions and draw conclusions about “fellowship” that are based on unbiblical criteria. They believe that fellowship exists where it does not; they believe it does not exist when it might very well be present.

3. I suspect that many Christians, when faced with a decision to align with a church, do so based on their perceptions about fellowship more than any other factor. But because so many do not necessarily understand what biblical fellowship is, and therefore do not discern when it is present or absent, they make determinations about their chosen church home based on other than biblical criteria.

Some mistakenly believe that they are experiencing biblical fellowship when they enjoy the company of other Christians with whom they have common interests, likes or dislikes, which, however, are not central to biblical fellowship. Biblical fellowship is not based upon what we have in common as families, Americans, or the shared interests and hobbies that we mutually enjoy. Biblical fellowship is not based on what we have experienced together over the years as fellow church members; in other words, simply because some folks have grown up together in the same church and have served the Lord with one another shoulder-to-shoulder for many years and have many fond, shared memories with one another within a church setting; this should not be confused with biblical fellowship. Nor is biblical fellowship based on common interests of those of the same age group, social standing, or education level. But often times Christians make assertions about “fellowship” and choose to associate or disassociate with others based on these kinds of things.

Some view “fellowship” as participation and involvement in denominational sponsored organization and activities. Often “fellowship” is believed to be among only those who are involved with “my group”, “my church”, “my denomination”, “my school”, or “my college.” Others believe that they have true fellowship when they are with those who have the same philosophy of home schooling, or Christian schooling. Some believe that they may only have true fellowship with those who have the same view of eschatology or some other secondary biblical doctrines. Those who do not belong to “my group” or embrace “my understanding” of this particular teaching are viewed and treated as outside the arena of fellowship. I suspect that others believe that they are experiencing true fellowship when they are among others who have the same love for a particular form of liturgy, a common preference for a particular style of worship music. Some believe that biblical fellowship is present whenever there is a light, happy carefree spirit is present among professing believers as they gather for a Christian function of some kind. Others base their perception of the presence of fellowship when they are gathered with others who have the same love for a particular Christian speaker or Christian performer. Some see the basis of fellowship to be a common view of politics or a serious concern about some social problem such as abortion. All of these things, I would assert, are not what constitutes grounds for true biblical fellowship. But because of these things, true, biblical fellowship is obscured and forfeited.

Biblical Fellowship speaks of a mutual shared appreciation and application of the truth among a gathering Christians, those who enjoy a mutual relationship with one another to God the Father through Jesus Christ. Fellowship is present when there is a sharing and enjoying with one another of the common spiritual life that we have with one other. And so, it may seem elementary to say, but true fellowship may only be practiced and enjoyed by people who have a common *belief* and *experience* of life from God through Jesus Christ. This is another argument for ***a regenerate church membership***. Those who are born again are quite different from the unregenerate. They have little in common. Only those who have new life in Christ are able to have true fellowship with God and one another.

More specifically, what is fellowship? Let us turn to 1 John 1 to see more clearly what biblical fellowship is. The Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia* (koinonia). It can be translated as “fellowship” or “communion.” The word conveys the thought of “sharing”, “mutual exchange”, or “joint participation.” The word is used four times here in 1 John 1. It is used in twice in verse 3, and once each in verses 6 and 7. Let us read this chapter.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life-- ²the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us-- ³that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. ⁴And these things we write to you that your joy may be full. ⁵This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. (1 John 1:1-10)

In 1 John 1:3 we read about fellowship: “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that you also may have *fellowship with us*: and truly our *fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.*” Then in verses 6 and 7 we read, “If we say that we have *fellowship with Him*, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have *fellowship with one another* (that is, with God and ourselves)...”

Note what John was writing. He declared that the purpose of writing to these Christians was so that they might know more of Jesus Christ whom John had known personally, and in so knowing Jesus, they might have communion with, or fellowship with the Father through His Son. Here we can make an assertion about what biblical fellowship is:

Fellowship is present among Christians when there is a sense of shared knowledge about Jesus Christ which has lead them to have assurance of a relationship with the Father and when they are delighting in, and receiving comfort from that relationship.

What then, must be present when fellowship is present?

1. There must be *a declaration of truth* about the person and work of Jesus Christ; specifically, the truth must be declared about how sinners are reconciled to God the Father through Jesus Christ.
2. There must be *a work of the Holy Spirit* performed so that the hearers of the truth are (have been) brought to know experientially the joy and comfort that they personally have a part in the salvation that Jesus Christ secured.
3. There must be *a mutual commitment on the part of the believers to live in obedience to the truth of God* that they are hearing and affirming.

This is why, brethren, that a stranger who knows the Lord can come into our midst off the streets and because he is meeting with us and hears and understands and affirms the truth about the gospel in Jesus Christ that has reconciled him and us to the Father, he can enjoy true fellowship with us today, though he may never have been among us before.

Since biblical fellowship is as set forth in 1 John (and elsewhere), do you see how shallow and empty all other substitutes or grounds of fellowship other than the truth of God in Jesus Christ? If we do see “fellowship” based on matters other than an awareness of our relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ, we should recognize them for what they are, secondary matters that have the ability, if we allow them, to mar and destroy fellowship rather than enhance or produce it. We should jettison these false and unbiblical criteria that we use to define fellowship, these unbiblical issues that we use to alienate some wrongly and embrace others wrongly.

When is fellowship experienced? Biblical fellowship is experienced when the gathered people of God are put in remembrance of the common relationship that they enjoy with God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. Fellowship is enhanced, therefore, through reading the Word, teaching and preaching the Word, singing the Word, speaking to one another about our common life with God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me conclude with this verse, Galatians 3:26-28, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This is the basis of all true fellowship, the shared life that we enjoy as believers through a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The first question and answer of the Westminster Catechism reads, “What is the chief end of man?” “The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” Fellowship, or communion with God, is the chief means of fulfilling this chief end. It was for this purpose that God created man in His image, that He and we might know one another and that He might be glorified through our enjoyment of Him as we respond to Him in our love for Him, or trust in Him, our joy of Him, and our honoring Him.

The *goal of salvation* is our fellowship with God. Salvation brings about a restoration of fellowship between God and man, a fellowship that was broken through man’s sin in the Garden of Eden.

“...that which we have seen and heard we declare to you,
that you also may have fellowship with us;
and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.” (1 John 1:3)
