

“Requirements for Church Membership”  
(sermon given 5/2/10 by Scott Jansen)  
Acts 11:1-18 and John 13:31-35

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[Prayer for Illumination] Loving God, grant us enough humility to set aside what we know to be right, and to be conformed to your Truth—through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray... Amen.

The question I want to explore this morning is, Who should be welcomed among us as Church members? And today we have two scripture lessons on that topic. Our first reading comes from the Acts of the Apostles. Listen now, for God's word for you....

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.'

But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'.... This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

At that very moment, three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them, and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.

He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.'

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God????

When they heard this..., they were silenced.... And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance... that leads to life."

Amen.

So the Gentiles received two gifts from God: the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the gift of the "repentance that leads to life...." Clearly God wanted Gentiles to be included in the New Covenant. But how would one know which Gentiles to include? How do we know who has, indeed, received the gift of the Holy Spirit, or the repentance that leads to life????

Well, Jesus also gave us some very important instructions on this question. So, let us turn to his words, as recorded by John. Listen again now for God's word for you.

Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once."

Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'

I give you a new commandment....., that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Amen. So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.

Roberta: {bored} Yeah, Yeah. Don't even bother preaching. We already know what you're going to say....

Scott: Oh, we have a new heckler today—the elder who chairs our Membership Committee.

Roberta: {Yawning} And to be a member of Christ's Church, you have to love one another.

Scott: You don't sound too enthusiastic about that.

Roberta: Well, I don't know what practical application that has. I mean, what group doesn't want its members to love one another?

Scott: Hmmm. You're right. I can't think of any group I've joined that did not want its members to love one another—at least, to some degree.

Roberta: Exactly. It's too broad. How would you ever apply this test to an actual person?

Scott: Well, maybe it's more useful as a negative law than a positive law.

Roberta: How so?

Scott: The members of Christ's church should include people of every race, and skin color, gender, age, economic class, nationality, etc. In other words, we should never discriminate based on any physical attribute a person may have.

Roberta: I suppose that the negative law does have some practical use.

Scott: Sure it does.

Roberta: But, I still think you haven't really answered how the positive law has any usefulness. If we should not discriminate against someone for any physical attribute, that's fine. But how should we discriminate based on their... spiritual attributes?

Scott: Well, I'll try to answer the positive point in a minute, but I don't want to go too quickly past the importance of the negative point.

Roberta: OK.

Scott: The covenant that God made with the Hebrews through Moses was largely understood as a kind of "tribal" covenant. God said, "I will be your God and you will be my people."

Roberta: How is that "tribal?"

Scott: Well, the people understood themselves as largely defined by genetics. If your mother was a Jew, then you were a Jew. The rules for being a Jew were mostly rules about how Jewish cultural practices should keep Jews separate from non-Jews. That's why the "circumcised believers" in our story from Acts were so upset with Peter for breaking those rules by going to eat with uncircumcised men.

R: So the New Covenant is different from the Old Covenant. We don't care what tribe you're from—just what's in your heart.

S: Right. And that reminds me of a joke I heard at an interfaith conference yesterday, told by a Jewish Rabbi. He said the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem and the Pope decided to do some interfaith exchanges. So the Rabbi graciously went to Rome first and they had a question, so the Rabbi said to the Pope, “You’re the host—why don’t you go call God on the phone, get the answer, and I’ll go along with whatever you say.” So, the Pope went to his private quarters and consulted with God and came back with the answer. Then the Rabbi said, “How much for the consultation fee?” But the Pope said, “Oh, no—it’s no charge.” But the Rabbi insisted, saying, “you and I are in the business of consulting with God—if we don’t get paid for our work, we’ll never eat.” So, the Pope shrugged his shoulders and said, “OK. How about \$25.” And the Rabbi paid him. Then a few months later, the Pope was visiting the Rabbi in Jerusalem, and again they had a question, so the Pope said to the Rabbi, “Why don’t you get on the phone this time and consult God?” So the Rabbi went off and came back with the answer, and then the Pope got out his wallet and started counting out \$25. But the Rabbi said, “Oh, I couldn’t charge that much. It’s only 25 cents.” But the Pope said, “Wait a minute—how can you charge so little?” And the Rabbi said, “from here, it’s a local call.”...

R: Funny.... I’ve heard similar jokes.

S: Yes, the notion that God is particularly attached to a specific place, or to a specific ethnic clan, is a powerful notion among many Jews and Muslims. But Christians are not supposed to be bound by such ideas. The tribal notion of God is replaced by a new covenant.

R: That’s why Jesus said, “a New Commandment I give you.” Because the New Covenant needed a new basis in law and behavior.???

S: Right. Especially the laws that were meant to keep Jews separated, to protect them from being assimilated—those laws were swept away by Christians, and replaced with Christ’s new commandment.

R: I can see how the negative point is quite important. But you still haven’t said anything about the positive point. What does a Membership Committee chairwoman do with the rule that “I will know who are Christ’s disciples by their love for one another?” Wouldn’t even the Nazis say that they loved one another????

S: Yes, so Jesus doesn't merely say, "love one another." He says, "just as I have loved you, so also you must love one another." In other words, our love should look like his love.

R: How so?

S: Well, in at least two ways: social status and willingness to sacrifice.

R: Go on....

S: Well, let me tell you a story about social status. I was talking last week with an old Scoutmaster who led a Boy Scout troop like fifty years ago—not from this church.... And he said that they always wanted to win the competitions with other troops, like the Klondike Derby and whatnot. But his pastor kept pressuring him to let kids into the troop who would slow them down—who would reduce their chances of winning. Until finally one day, he told his pastor that "Christianity is a religion for losers!" .....

R: That's a harsh statement.

S: Yes, but there is a lot of truth in it. Who did Jesus invite to tag along with him?

R: Mostly the "losers" of his time.

S: So, in order to love one another the way that Jesus loved, we have to forget about winning the game, forget our prestige, our social status. We have to be willing to love those who don't make us more popular, or contribute to our career-network.

R: So, should Membership Committee put a big sign out front—"Losers Welcome Here?" .....

S: Well..., I don't want to leave ourselves open to misinterpretation. It's not that anyone should strive to become a loser. It's just that we should be willing to help anyone who needs it—even if they are nothing like us, nothing like our group. And even if they will never do anything for us in return.

R: So that's where your second point comes in—something about "willingness to sacrifice?"

S: Exactly. The two are pretty closely related. But Jesus didn't just love those who were easy to love. He loved even when it cost him something.

R: So our love for one another should demonstrate a willingness to suffer????

S: Yes, but only for the sake of love, never suffering for the sake of suffering. If suffering really does help someone, then that is what Christ calls us to do. But it does not mean becoming co-

dependent, or letting someone else walk all over you who doesn't really appreciate the love that is behind your sacrifice. Sacrificial love is meant to call forth more love from the other—it's not meant to just build up our calluses. Jesus didn't wear himself out trying to heal everyone in the world—he healed those who were in a position to respond to his love by loving him in return.

R: So “loving one another” in Christ's way means loving those who are of different social groupings, and it means being willing to sacrifice in order to encourage even more love.

S: Exactly.

R: But that's not something you can put on an exam like testing someone's reading level. That's more like a way of life.

S: Right. That's why the Acts reading says that Peter's Gentile friend, Cornelius, received (quote) “the repentance that leads to life.”

R: He was told by an angel that he would receive salvation for himself and for his whole family.

S: Yes, even the children were saved, according to the text. Because the household was now going to operate with some different principles.

R: They were supposed to “repent” in order to be saved?

S: They had to abandon the kind of “loving one another” that the Nazis did, and practice the kind of loving one another that Jesus demonstrated. That was their “repentance that leads to life.”

R: It still seems kinda' fuzzy. How do I know who is living that kind of life?

S: Well, there's one more point to notice in the text.

R: Go on.

S: Peter didn't go visit the Gentiles alone and make decisions alone, even though his vision from God was a private vision. He was humble enough, even after receiving the vision, to take six brothers along with him to make sure he was doing the right thing.

R: So that's why membership decisions are ultimately made by the whole Session, and not by the Membership chair alone.... I'm grateful for that—a lot less pressure on me.

S: Yep. That's the way the Spirit operates in the Presbyterian Church. The really big decisions are always made by a committee.

R: It's good to be Presbyterian.

S: Amen.