

Commitments We Make
Lessons for
First United Methodist Church, Tulsa
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The Commitments We Make

Purpose: The purpose of this course is to study and apply the vows we take during our lives as Christians. We will specifically study our baptismal, marriage and church membership vows in order to understand what we have promised to do; why these promises are important; how we can follow through on these promises; and the results of faithfulness in our lives and the lives of others.

Outline of lessons by Week

Week I--The Biblical Concept of Promise (ours and God's)

Week II--The vows of Baptism

Week III--The vows in Communion

Week IV--Marriage Vows

Week V--Membership Vows--Our Prayers

Week VI--Membership Vows--Our Presence

Week VII--Membership Vows--Our Gifts

Week VIII--Membership Vows--Our Service

The Biblical Concept of Promise

Read I Samuel 1:1-28. What prompts Hannah to pray to God? What promise does she make?

Hannah was a barren woman. Her husband Elkanah had another wife, and through her Elkanah had sons and daughters. Although Elkanah loved Hannah, there was a natural rivalry between the two women, and the infertility of Hannah was a sore point. In addition, without a child, especially a son of her own, Hannah's rights in the family would have been precarious had Elkanah died before she did. Children formed a sort of "Social Security" in families, and if her rival's children inherited Elkanah's estate, Hannah might have little or even nothing to live on.

So, Hannah prays to God and makes a promise:

(v11) O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head. [New Revised Standard Version]

When Samuel is born, Hannah does present him to the temple. In a sense she makes two vows: to present her son to the temple when born, and to make him a nazirite (Numbers 6). She does so, and in the end has five more children other than Samuel (see I Samuel 2:21).

The point of the vow shows our dependence on God. Because God ultimately holds the universe in his hand, Hannah feels that the God of creation can solve her infertility problem. Note the words of Hannah's song in I Samuel 2:

The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up;
The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. (v7)

Hannah feels the need on the other hand to promise her faithfulness to God, giving back to God the child that would free her from the taunts of the other wife and provide some security in the future. The implication of these chapters is that God is faithful, and our faithfulness allows God to be even more faithful yet.

Read Matthew 5:33-37. What is Jesus saying about oaths and vows? Why does he reverse the earlier tradition?

Jesus repudiates the tradition that had grown up around the laws of oaths and vows. Swearing directly on the name of God was considered forbidden by the commandments and blasphemy. Therefore, people developed a system of oaths that went around direct reference to God. Swearing by "heaven" or "Jerusalem" was considered an indirect reference to God and binding. Interpretations of what made for a binding and serious oath versus less binding and less serious oaths seemed to have abounded in the time of Jesus. Jesus rejects all such oaths as ideally unnecessary. Even swearing by your head would be wrong. For one thing, God made your head as well as all creation, and you cannot change that reality by your oath. The point Jesus makes is this: what you say should simply be true. Oaths should be unnecessary.

People in the Bible wrestle with the problem of establishing truth in relationships. You can see in scripture an elaborate concern for how relationships are made and kept and protected.

The key relationship, of course, is the relationship between God and people.

We can see this in one sense in the series of covenants God makes with us in scripture. The word "covenant" ("*berit*" or "*bayrit*") comes normally in the phrase "to cut a covenant."

Use an overhead showing Genesis 8:20-9:16. What commitments do you see God making with Noah? What does God expect from humanity?

Note the covenant made between Noah and God in Genesis 8:20:

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took of every clean animal and every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of human kind,

for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

In the Noahic covenant, Noah shows his submission and obedience to God through building the ark and through his sacrifices. In response God promises never again to destroy the world through flood:

(9:8ff) Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you. . . . I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God said, “This is the sign of the covenant for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”

An even clearer covenant service is found between God and Abraham in Genesis 15:7ff. There Abraham takes a number of animals and literally cuts them in two. Then as the sun goes down, “a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land.’”

A covenant is a promise made between two parties based on certain conditions. If the conditions are met, then certain performances follow. If the conditions are not met, or if the performances expected are not made, then certain curses are often added.

We can roughly describe the form of a covenant as follows:

Identification of the parties (‘I am Yahweh your God’ Ex 20:2)
Review of history (‘Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage’ Ex 20:2)
Stipulations (The Ten Commandments and the following “Book of the Covenant”)
Sacrifices and Ceremony
Blessings and Curses

The length of these sections can vary widely in the Old Testament. But the point of the covenant ceremony is simple: Because of God’s deeds for Israel and the patriarchs, a relationship is created with obligations and promises on both sides.

We see this in Exodus 24:4-8 (NRSV) with the covenant made between God and the people at Sinai:

⁴ And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the LORD. ⁶ Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. ⁷ Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All

that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.”⁸ Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, “See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

The people quickly fail to keep this first national covenant, and in Exodus 32-34 we see a remaking of the covenant. Here Moses warns the people, “Observe what I command you” (34:11) and lists again the main commandments.

Read II Samuel 7. What promises does God make to David? What is expected of David in return?

In II Samuel 7 we see the covenant being made between David and God. Through the prophet Nathan God promises David, “You and your house will be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.” But in previous verses God warned that disobedience will be corrected (“When he commits iniquity I will punish him.” v14).

In all the covenants God promises something to the people of the OT:

- For Noah, not to flood the earth;
- for Abraham, the promise of land and descendants;
- for Moses, the promise to be with Israel and bless them;
- for David, the promise that his line of kings will endure.

In each case God sets the conditions, and the people involved respond with faith and obedience. The whole book of Deuteronomy can be looked upon as a covenant renewal following the wilderness years, with God promising to bless Israel when they are obedient and curse them when they disobey.

Summarize what you have learned from these covenant passages? What is the point of making a covenant? What does the covenant seek to do for God and for Israel?

The point in these covenant relationships is this: God makes promises very seriously, and God expects us to keep our promises to him.

The concept of covenant states that God sets the conditions for relationship between himself and us. On the one hand God promises the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant and the covenant with Moses to those who are faithful and obedient. On the other hand, with disobedience and broken covenants come curses. In the New Testament the new covenant comes in our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are signs of that covenant.

The covenant ceremonies underline the importance of promises and commitments, especially those made between God and people.

If covenant ceremonies were intended to create and safeguard the relationship between God and people, what went wrong?

In the OT the writers assume that God’s word is true and dependable.

This God--his way is perfect
the promise of the Lord proves true;
He is a shield for all who take refuge in him. [Psalm 18:30]

In Isaiah 45:19, the LORD speaks:

I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob,
“Seek me in chaos.” I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right.

Paul quotes the OT in Romans 3:3-4 (NIV84) to underline that God is faithful above all else:

³ What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God’s faithfulness? ⁴ Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written:

“So that you may be proved right when you speak
and prevail when you judge.”

Significantly, there is no word for “promise” in Hebrew. The concept is expressed in other words, but for God’s promises go, it is enough that God says it. What God says, God does and will do.

The problem, of course, is that human beings are not so trustworthy. Therefore, an elaborate system of vows and oaths grew up in ancient societies to verify human truthfulness and assure that commitments would be kept.

The OT assumes the need for people to be faithful to their word, but **what do the following passages tell us about the actions of ordinary people in Israel?**

Exodus 20:16 -- You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

Hosea 4:1ff -- Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed.

Micah 6:11-12 -- Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights? Your wealthy are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, with tongues of deceit in their mouths.

The tendency for humanity is not to be faithful, not to tell the truth.

In summary ask these questions:

What is the purpose in the commitments we make to relationships?

What are the problems we face?

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Read I Samuel 1:1-28. What prompts Hannah to pray to God? What promise does she make?

Read Matthew 5:33-37. What does Jesus say about oaths and vows? Why does he reverse the earlier tradition?

Genesis 8:20-9:16

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of human kind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done....”

God Blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth . . . on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, the blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind. And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on earth and multiply in it.”

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you . . . I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. God said, “This is the sign of the covenant for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth”

Covenant Form

Identification of the parties (cf. “I am Yahweh your God,”
Exodus 20:2)

Review of history (“Who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of bondage,” Exodus 20:2)

Stipulations (The Ten Commandments and the following “Book
of the Covenant”)

Sacrifices and Ceremony (cf. Genesis 15)

Blessings and Curses (Exodus 34:6-7)

**Read II Samuel 7. What promises does God make to David?
What is expected of David in return?**

Summarize what you have learned from these covenant passages? What is the point of making a covenant? What does the covenant seek to do for God and for Israel?

If covenant ceremonies were intended to create and safeguard the relationship between God and people, what went wrong?

Psalm 18:30

*This God—his way is perfect;
the promise of the Lord proves true;
He is a shield for all who take refuge in him.*

Isaiah 45:19

I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, “Seek me in chaos.” I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right;

God’s word is True!

Romans 3:3-4—God is faithful above all else:

What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?

*May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, “**That Thou Mightest be justified in thy words, and mightest prevail when Thou art judged**”(Psa 51:4, LXX [Greek translation from the Hebrew]).*

Our Problem

The command:

Exodus 20:16 -- *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

The Reality:

Hosea 4:1ff -- *Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed.*

Micah 6:11-12-- *Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights? Your wealthy are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, with tongues of deceit in their mouths.*

Summary

What is the purpose in the commitments we make to relationships?

What are the problems we face?

Vows and Commitments
Lesson II
Our Baptismal Vows

The Baptismal service of the United Methodist Church includes the following vows:

On behalf of the whole church I ask you:

- (I) Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sins?
- (II) Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?
- (III) Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations and races?

Looking at these three vows, how would you summarize each?

The UM hymnal (p. 34) does not enumerate these vows specifically as we have done above, but the differences between the three vows seems fairly clear:

I-- The emphasis is on **repentance from sin**. The way the question is asked understands sin as more than just my own personal acts of disobedience; my sin is placed in the context of a general cosmic and social rejection of God. Not only have I sinned, but society is sinful and indeed there are spiritual forces of sin and evil. We are connected with all the above. I have participated not only in my own personal sin, but also in the sin of my society and even—by the fact of being a created being—in the sin of the spiritual realm. Repentance technically translates the Greek work *metanoia* which has been explained variously at “agreeing with God” (i.e. about my rebellion) or “to change your mind” or redirection of our lives (from rebellion to cooperation with God.)

II--The emphasis is on **commitment to God’s realm of power against the evil and sin we have just repented of**. This is still repentance, but in the positive sense. We do not merely turn away from sin; we turn to God for the power to live differently. Repentance is not just saying, “I’m sorry”; concrete changes in life should follow. The power and freedom, however, are not things we create in ourselves but things God gives us. We recognize in this vow the need to change but also the fact that we do not have the power to change ourselves. God gives us this power--only in God do we find freedom to live as we would like to live.

III--The emphasis is on **confession of Jesus Christ as Savior**. To be complete, repentance must include the reception of forgiveness. The reception of forgiveness of sin is salvation--the healing which brings wholeness to the person. It is only as we trust Christ alone as Savior and Lord that our repentance becomes powerful and saving. We receive this as a gift--we have not earned it. Even repentance does not earn salvation. Repentance humbly receives

salvation. Yet, with our confession of Christ, we also commit ourselves to obedience to Him. He is Lord! We follow Him, not ourselves, as the expression of our faith and trust in Him.

Now the question is this: Does this three-part vow (repentance, commitment to God's power, confession of Christ as Lord and Savior) really connect with biblical ideas of Baptism?

Read Acts 2:27-42. **What does Peter connect with baptism? How do believers react to Peter's sermon?**

2:37 says the audience was "cut to the heart"--meaning they were deeply moved and convicted by Peter's words, and they asked, "What shall we do?" Good question! This kind of hearing--hearing with faith--demands a response. And Peter outlines the basic response:

repentance
baptism
receiving forgiveness of sins
receiving the Holy Spirit (v38)

Note verse 42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers."

You can see in this passage the same outline as we saw in the baptismal vows: repentance, acceptance of God's power to live a new life (the Holy Spirit); confession of Jesus Christ as Lord (the devotion to the apostles' teaching and prayer) and Savior (forgiveness of sins).

Peter's preaching to Cornelius in Acts 10:42-43 echoes similar themes:

And he [Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be the judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Then in verse 44 we are told that the Holy Spirit falls on those hearing the word. Peter sees this and immediately baptizes Cornelius and evidently some others.

Read Romans 6:1-11. **To what does Paul compare baptism? What does this suggest that baptism is or means?**

Remember the question Paul is asking in verse 1: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" Of course, Paul wants a "no" answer.

And why? To answer the "why" question, Paul looks at the meaning of baptism. Baptism "into Christ Jesus" means "baptism into his death" (v3). Baptism symbolizes a "burying" (v4) of the believer with Christ in the death of Christ, and a "resurrection" with Christ "in newness of life" (v4).

Baptism is further to be connected with a “crucifixion” of the “old self” (v6). As death frees the slave from the bonds of slavery, dying with Christ frees the Christian from slavery to sin (vv6-7). Baptism should mean the Christian considers him/herself “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

This is why we both repent of our sins and commit ourselves to freedom from the power of sin through God (vows I and II). There is both the recognition and repentance for our sinfulness--indeed that we are trapped in a web of personal, social and spiritual evil--and a commitment through the power of God to live free from that sin. Baptism, says Paul, symbolizes both **repentance from sin** and **commitment to God’s power** to live a life free from sin.

Read Colossians 2:11-15. **What was the role of circumcision in Judaism? What does Paul connect baptism with here? What is the result of God’s act in Christ and what does this have to do with baptism?**

2:11 Paul begins with a reference to circumcision, through which a Jewish boy baby was marked as belonging to the covenant community. Circumcision connected the person with the promises and covenant of God.

Paul sees a connection between the “cutting” away of the foreskin in circumcision and the death of Christ on the cross--his death is a “circumcision” for us which we receive through baptism.

In baptism we are symbolically buried with Christ and raised again in Christ. Baptism points to both the death and resurrection of Christ. In baptism we express faith in the fact that God raised Christ from the dead. (2:12)

2:13 spells out how this happens. We were “dead” in our sin and uncircumcision, but God in Christ forgives our sin.

2:14 uses the imagery of the cancellation of debt. A debt was sometimes nailed to the door of a house marking the lien (just as an eviction notice might be posted on a house today). But the document listing our debts is instead nailed to the cross--a sign that our debts are paid by Christ.

2:15 extends the idea. Not only has Christ paid our debts, but in his death and resurrection the powers and rulers of this world are “stripped.” Two ideas are expressed here. First, the “powers and rulers” are dismissed and humiliated, much like corrupt court officials were stripped of clothes and signs of rank when being dismissed. Then we have the imagery of a military triumph where the conquering general parades his captives before him as a sign of his victory. In short, not only are **personal sins** forgiven in Christ’s death, but **social and spiritual forces of evil** are vanquished also. Baptism, in Paul’s view, alludes to all of this total victory over evil--an idea expressed in our vows I and III.

Read the following:

1 Peter 3:18-22

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you--not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

How does Peter describe the purpose of Christ's death? How does Christ accomplish that purpose?

Christ died, says Peter, "to bring us to God." The implication is that we were separated from God and alone. Christ brings us into relationship and communion with God.

How does he do this?

1) Through his suffering for sins. This was a "once for all" act--a reference to the cross first, and perhaps overall to his life as a one-time, historical event. The implication is that sin demands suffering.

2) Through suffering as a "righteous [person] for the unrighteous." The unrighteous by implication cannot deliver by suffering for their own sins. It was Christ suffering for us as the righteous servant of God that frees us from our sin.

3) He was "put to death in the flesh" but was made "alive in the Spirit." The Greek here parallels Jesus' "dying in the flesh" and "being made alive in the Spirit." The sense seems to be that Jesus died in the physical realm, but in the realm or through the agency of the Spirit he was made alive.

What we see so far in I Peter is the same idea in slightly different language, namely, that the death of Christ was an atoning death bringing forgiveness for sins. The death and resurrection are seen together as a single act, signifying that with forgiveness comes new, real and everlasting life through the power of God in the Spirit.

What is the comparison between Christ and Noah? How does this relate to baptism? What is the meaning of baptism here?

v19 suggests that at his death, Jesus went and preached to the "spirits who were in prison." It is not exactly clear what Peter means here. Some feel that Jesus went to preach to "spirits" in the realm of the dead, imprisoned because of their rebellion against God. Some feel

that Jesus preached to the spirits of the people of Noah's day who rejected Noah and died in the flood (cf. 1 Pet. 1:11).

That question about where and when the preaching occurred is obviously not the key point to Peter (or he would be clearer). Instead, the key point is the contrast between those in prison who heard the proclamation, and those in the ark who were saved. Noah and those in the ark become in Peter's mind a type or prefiguring of all salvation: they listened to the proclamation of God and were saved "through water."

This connects in Peter's mind with the water of baptism. Baptism saves us, as the ark did them, by providing safe haven in the midst of judgment.

Notice what Peter says baptism is not. It is not a "a removal of dirt from the body," but it is "an appeal to God for a good conscience." The word "appeal" underlines the grace nature of baptism. We do not do anything in baptism--all power comes from God. Our baptism is a sign of our trust in God for the results. We trust God on the basis of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection for us.

As v22 suggests, we can expect a "good conscience" or moral renewal, because Christ has not just been resurrected; he has taken up a position of authority in heaven (at the right hand of God) where he has power over "angels and authorities and powers." Again, as in vow III, the spiritual dimension of evil is recognized, and triumph over these spiritual powers is claimed in baptism through Christ.

In short, Peter strongly emphasizes baptism as a symbol for our trust in the saving power of Christ's death and resurrection--saving us not just from the guilt of sin, but also from the spiritual and social dimensions of sin. Our response is a response of trust in God and reliance on his power for our own transformation and renewal.

Following these three vows or commitments in baptism, the UM Hymnal adds this vow for parents baptizing a child or infant:

Will you nurture this child in Christ's holy church, that by your teaching and example they may be guided to accept God's grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life?

Why do we believe that children can be baptized?

There is some evidence that in the early church whole households were baptized, including evidently children:

Acts 16:33

At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay.

Paul clearly believed that the children of believers already belonged to God by virtue of their parent's faith:

1 Cor. 7:14

For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

The reference in Colossians 2:11-15 connects baptism with the rite of circumcision--both marking the believer as a member of the family of God. Paul doesn't exactly develop the thought, but since circumcision was done to infant boys, the application of baptism to infants is a logical extension of his thought.

This will hardly convince an ardent proponent of adult baptism, but that's not the point here, so do not get stuck in that argument!

Instead, ask: **What does the vow mean?**

The key words in the verse are these:

Nurture
Teaching
Example
Guided

The last word may be the most significant: Christian parents guide their children in the meaning of their faith. They do this by teaching and example that nurture the child.

The parent's vow in infant baptism is to let their lives teach and grow their children so that faith becomes a believable proposition: something they understand emotionally and intellectually.

In the end, the child still must choose to "accept" and "profess" this faith for themselves and "to lead a Christian life." Christian faith is not simply a matter of believing certain ideas, but of living a faith-life.

Why is baptism a part of this? Because the example and teaching of parents are used by God in prevenient grace to convince the hearts and minds of children of the truth of the gospel. Before the child makes a personal profession he/she is living in the grace of God claimed in baptism. Their personal profession, whenever they make it, is the result of the grace working in their life. Baptism is a sign of this grace.

Note that the whole church on p. 35 joins in this covenant promise. The church as a whole also promises to nurture and teach by precept and example the gospel to its children. God works His prevenient grace in the lives of people through the whole community of faith as well as the parents to reach children.

The final thing to note in the Baptismal Covenant comes on p. 35 where the church answers a series of questions:

Do you believe in God the Father?

Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

In covenant III p. 46 another question is added:

Do you receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?

To what do these four questions ask the person to commit? Why are these commitments important?

In answer to the first three questions the candidate or church answers with the three parts of the Apostles Creed. The fourth question is merely answered, "I do."

Compare these to the first questions. The first questions in a sense ask us about our personal faith: do we repent, and receive Christ as Lord and Savior and trust our lives to him? These questions ask us, "Will we understand our faith in terms of the tradition and understanding of the church through the ages and the scriptures?"

The first set of questions ask, "Do you believe in Christ?"

The second set of questions ask, "Do you join the church as a whole in understanding who Christ is and what Christ has done?"

The difference is important. Yes, faith is a personal relationship with Christ. But we are not permitted to define the meaning and scope of that faith in terms of our own understanding and experience. Our faith has to be in line with the universal faith of Christians not only in our generation, but other generations.

Why is this important?

This keeps us from doing something that is very popular in our day: we cannot define Christ to suit ourselves. In baptism we do not commit ourselves to our own understanding of what Christianity is and means; we commit ourselves to the historic faith of the church. Of course, the church has often disagreed on just what that means. But we are still warned not to redesign Christianity to fit our prejudices.

Final Questions: **Define the key commitments you think are made by a person in baptism.**

On behalf of the whole church I ask you:

(I) Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sins?

(II) Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

(III) Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations and races?

Looking at these three vows, how would you summarize each?

Read Acts 2:27-42. What does Peter connect with baptism? How do the people react to Peter's sermon?

Read Romans 6:1-11. To what does Paul compare baptism? What does this suggest that baptism is or means?

How does Peter describe the purpose of Christ's death? How does he accomplish that purpose?

What is the comparison between Christ and Noah? How does this relate to baptism? What is the meaning of baptism here?

Will you nurture this child in Christ's holy church, that by your teaching and example they may be guided to accept God's grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life?

Why do we believe that children can be baptized? **What does the vow mean?**

Do you believe in God the Father?

Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

Do you receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?

To what do these four questions ask the person to commit? Why are these commitments important?

Final Question: Define the key commitments you think are made by a person in baptism.

Vows and Commitments
Week III
The Vows in Communion

Mark 14:22-25

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." ²³Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. ²⁴He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

Luke 22:14-21

When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the. ¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. ²¹But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table."

Matthew 26:20-27

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve apostles with him. ¹⁵He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God; ²¹and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." ²²And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?" ²³He answered, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born." ²⁵Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" He replied, "You have said so." ²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

1 Corinthians 11:21-34

For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²²What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

²³For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In 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." ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

²⁷Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. ³⁰For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. ³²But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

³³So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. ³⁴If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come.

What we know about the institution of the Lord's Supper comes from these three passages in the Synoptic Gospels and the comments of Paul in I Corinthians.

What was the context of the institution of the Lord's Supper? What is its relationship with the Passover? What is Jesus seeking to have the disciples do?

Luke plainly states that this meal takes place in the midst of the Passover. Some scholars argue about this, since the Gospel of John seems to place Jesus' death on the day of Preparation before the Passover. The other gospels say Jesus was crucified on the Day of Preparation, i.e., Friday. (See Luke 23:54; Mark 15:42 and even John 19:31. John 19:14 says "the Day of Preparation for the Passover.")

If the Supper was not a Passover meal itself, Jesus clearly meant to draw on the symbolism of the Passover meal. The Passover meal was a ritual meal to remember the miraculous deliverance of the people of Israel from slavery through the death of the Egyptian first-born.

Exodus 12:21-28

Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go, select lambs for your families, and slaughter the Passover lamb. ²²Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning. ²³For the LORD will pass through to strike down the Egyptians; when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over that door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down. ²⁴You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. ²⁵When you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. ²⁶And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this observance?' ²⁷you shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.' " And the people bowed down and worshipped.

²⁸The Israelites went and did just as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron.

The annual sacrifice of the Passover lamb reminded Israel that God had passed over their houses because the blood of the lamb marked them out as the people of God. At the same time, death had destroyed the first born of the Egyptians in order to free Israel from slavery. The

people also ate unleavened bread as a reminder of that time. As the Passover ritual developed in the centuries after the Exodus, cups of wine were included and psalms were sung as thanksgiving to God for their deliverance.

Jesus takes the symbolism of the unleavened bread and the cup of thanksgiving to refer to his own body and blood. He declares that he is offering a “new covenant” in his blood—a reference to the new act of salvation he initiates through his death on the cross. There is no specific reference to the Passover lamb, perhaps because the New Testament writers knew that Christ had become the Passover lamb (I Corinthians 5:7).

In Luke’s version, Jesus specifically commands the disciples to repeat this meal as a remembrance of him. Paul sees this (I Corinthians 11:27) as a proclamation of Jesus’ death and resurrection to be repeated until his second coming. While the other gospels do not include this specific command, the presence of the story in all three synoptic gospels suggests that the meal had great significance to early Christians. Through the centuries since then, Christians have participated in the Lord’s Supper in remembrance of Christ’s death and resurrection.

What does the Lord’s Supper mean? On the one hand, the clear references to the Passover meal make the Lord’s Supper a parallel experience. The Passover celebrated and reminded the people of Israel how God redeemed and delivered his people. The Lord’s Supper does the same—reminding Christians that we have been redeemed and saved through the death and resurrection of Christ.

In the Old Testament the Passover meal served to renew the covenant relationship of the people. The Passover is the first feast listed in Leviticus 23:4ff (and again in Deut. 16) after the reference to the Sabbath. The Passover celebrates the redemptive action that created the nation after its sojourn in slavery.

Note the obvious differences between the Passover and the Lord’s Supper. Matthew 26:29 emphasizes that the blood of Jesus is the blood of a new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. While this is not emphasized in the other gospel accounts, the connection between the blood of the sacrifice and forgiveness of sins is natural. The Old covenant involved a sacrificial death of the lamb for redemption from slavery to Egypt. The new covenant offers the sacrificial death of Jesus for redemption from sin.

Paul makes no direct reference to forgiveness of sin, but note that in I Corinthians 11:29 Paul states that those who “eat and drink” the Lord’s Supper “unworthily” bring judgment on themselves—including sickness and death. The theme of judgment is the opposite of the idea of forgiveness. To misuse the Lord’s Supper would bring judgment instead of forgiveness.

The Lord’s Supper served to remind the church of the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Lord’s Supper helps us to remember the meaning of that death and resurrection, and to experience again the forgiveness and grace God gives us through Christ. It is not an exact recreation of the sacrifice of Christ, for as **Hebrews 10:11-14** says:

And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. ¹²But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God," ¹³and since then has been waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet." ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

As a sacrament, the church understands that participation in the Lord's Supper helps us to experience the grace of God in special ways. We experience the renewing forgiveness of Christ's death. We are touched by the Holy Spirit as we take the Lord's Supper, and we are brought into the life of God's kingdom in a new way. It is not that the bread and wine (in the Methodist church, grape juice) are themselves magical or the instruments of change in us. But God's Spirit works through the elements and the words and acts of taking the Lord's Supper to help us experience the grace of God in new ways.

As we look at the Lord's Supper in this lesson, we ask, "To what am I committing myself as I take the Lord's Supper?" and "What are the results of this Sacrament in a believer?"

Here we follow the ritual as given in "Word and Table IV" beginning on page 26 of the *United Methodist Hymnal*. We choose this service instead of others in the hymnal because this is the older, more traditional form of the Lord's Supper, and the language here is more expressive and theologically significant. The newer versions (I, II and III) differ mainly from what we use either in the use of musical accompaniment, or in the absence of elements like "the Prayer of Humble Access" or in shortened forms of the "Great Thanksgiving." The lack of these elements means that these services miss some of the language that more completely explains the commitments we make in taking communion.

II. The Invitation:

Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to live a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy way: draw near with faith and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort, and make your humble confession to almighty God.

Who exactly does this statement invite to the Lord's table? What qualities are expected?

1. True and earnest repentance. What does that mean? The opposite would be "false and insincere"—repentance that neither truly accepted responsibility nor felt much angst or guilt for the sins committed. Only those who deeply sense and accept their need for repentance need come to the table. This means we recognize that we have sinned and need forgiveness. This is not just a vague sense of guilt, but a particular sense of our rebellion against God. This may include the repentance of specific, individual sins, or it may simply be a sincere recognition of our real selfishness and lack of charity.

2. "Intend to live in love and charity with your neighbors." Sin is not private, but always social. Part of our repentance is the intention to change our relationships with others. Whereas

before we might have lived in judgment and condemnation with our neighbors, or in resentment and envy, or some other negative, competitive or hostile attitude, now we are choosing to love and give mercy. This means we have to let go of any hurt or judgment against anyone we know. Jesus put the matter even stronger in Matthew 5:23-24:

Matthew 5:23-24

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Jesus tells people not to come to the altar when someone has something against you until you go and try to reconcile with them. Our human relationships need to be in order as we try to keep our relationship with God holy and fresh.

3. “Intend to live a new life.” Communion is a renewal of our intention to live as new creations. Christians are “born again” at the moment of faith. But our new life in Christ needs to be “renewed” every so often. Christian faith is not a once-and-for-all commitment; it’s a daily commitment to obey Christ. Jesus said, “Take up your cross daily” (Luke 9:23).

4. This is followed then by a prayer of general confession. Confession completes the intention to repent, change our attitudes in our relationships, and renew our commitment to Christ.

III. The Great Thanksgiving:

It is very meet, right, and our bounded duty that we should at all times and in all places give thanks unto thee, O Lord, Holy Father, almighty, everlasting God.

What duty does the introduction to the Great Thanksgiving describe for us? Why is this duty important?

Our duty is to give thanks “at all times, and in all places” to God. In the more modern Table I version we read this:

“It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth” (p. 9). Giving thanks is right for us and for God.

Why is this right? Because God created us, and we owe God our life. After we sinned and turned away from God, God sent Jesus to suffer and die for us. Again, from Table IV:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there, by the one offering of himself, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world; and didst institute and in his holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of his precious death until his coming again.

The death of Christ is a “full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice” for the sins of the world. We must be thankful for this! Not only our sins, but our neighbor’s sin are covered, meaning that our lives and our futures have hope!

O Lord, our heavenly Father, we thy humble servants, desire thy fatherly goodness mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; most humbly beseeching thee to grant that, by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in his blood, we and thy whole church may obtain forgiveness of our sins, and all other benefits of his passion.

And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee that all we who are partakers of this Holy Communion may be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction.

And although we be unworthy, through our manifold sins, to offer unto thee any sacrifice, yet we beseech thee to accept this our bounded duty and service, not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offenses; through Jesus Christ our Lord.... [pp. 29-30]

What do we offer to Christ in this prayer of Thanksgiving?

Our souls

Our bodies

As a reasonable holy and lively sacrifice

Asking to be filled with grace

The prayer of Thanksgiving means a re-offering of ourselves—our whole lives to Christ. It is a reminder that we live our lives as a “sacrifice” in return for the sacrifice of Christ.

Why is this necessary? The words here remind us of Paul’s words in Romans 12:1-2:

Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

A piece of graffiti on a “Comments Wall” at the Urbana Missions Conference once read, “the problem with a living sacrifice is that it keeps crawling off the altar.” It is so easy for us to take back areas of our lives for ourselves and to try to control them ourselves. We manage our money or our families. We keep to ourselves our thoughts or our feelings. But, in return for the sacrifice of Christ for all the sins of all the world, we must offer all of ourselves to Christ.

III. Prayer of Humble access

We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table. But thou are the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to partake of this Sacrament of thy Son Jesus Christ, that we may walk in newness of life, may grow into his likeness, and may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.

To what do we commit ourselves in this prayer? Why is it important to trust God's mercy? What do we seek as a result of this sacrament?

The prayer begins with an assertion that we trust, not our own merits, but God's mercy. This calls us to lay aside pride or any sense that we earn our salvation or our relationship with God. We rely instead purely on the mercy of God.

The attitude we seek is the attitude of the Syro-Phoenician woman who asked Jesus for a miracle for her daughter in **Mark 7:24-30**--

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

The woman here trusted completely in Christ's mercy. She did not claim in any way to "deserve" what she was asking to receive. That same spirit should be ours. We are wholly dependent on God to receive the goodness of God.

Our goal in communion is three-fold:

- To walk in newness of life
- To grow into his likeness
- To dwell in him and he in us

Each of these ideas reflects a biblical concept.

Romans 6:4

Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

2 Cor. 3:18

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

John 14:20-23

On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." ²²Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?" ²³Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

“New life” is defined as being transformed into the likeness of Christ. This comes from the power of the indwelling Christ through the Holy Spirit. This is what we are seeking to renew in the Lord’s Supper—Christ living in us with his power to renew and transform our lives into his life.

Summarize the meaning and significance of the Lord’s Supper. What goal is sought? What commitments do we make?

Communion or the Lord’s Supper is a sacrament or “remembering”—putting us back into right relationship with God and Christ and each other as we recall the meaning of Christ’s death for us and reapply this to our lives.

The goal is to allow the Holy Spirit to reform our lives continually into something new. We are seeking to be made like Christ through his power.

To do this we must become repentant, thankful, humble people. We look for the mercy of God, and we place our trust again in Christ’s sacrifice for us. We are willing to admit our need again for forgiveness; we are willing to put right our relationships with others and to confess our sins. We seek to become obedient people, followers of Christ together.

Mark 14:22-25

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." ²³Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. ²⁴He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

Luke 22:17-21

¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. ²¹But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table."

Matthew 26:26-27

26 While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." 27 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

1 Corinthians 11:21-34

For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²²What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

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What was the context of the institution of the Lord's Supper? What is its relationship with the Passover? What is Jesus seeking to have the disciples do?

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Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go, select lambs for your families, and slaughter the Passover lamb. ²²Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning. ²³For the LORD will pass through to strike down the Egyptians; when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over that door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down. ²⁴You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. ²⁵When you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. ²⁶And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this observance?' ²⁷you shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.' " And the people bowed down and worshipped.

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Whom exactly does this statement invite to the Lord's table? What qualities are expected?

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What duty does the introduction to the Great Thanksgiving describe for us? Why is this duty important?

O Lord, our heavenly Father, we thy humble servants, desire thy fatherly goodness mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; most humbly beseeching thee to grant that, by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in his blood, we and thy whole church may obtain forgiveness of our sins, and all other benefits of his passion.

And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee that all we who are partakers of this Holy Communion may be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction.

And although we be unworthy, through our manifold sins, to offer unto thee any sacrifice, yet we beseech thee to accept this our bounded duty and service, not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offenses; through Jesus Christ our Lord....

What do we offer to Christ in this prayer of Thanksgiving?

I. Prayer of Humble access

We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table. But thou are the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to partake of this Sacrament of thy Son Jesus Christ, that we may walk in newness of life, may grow into his likeness and may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen

To what do we commit ourselves in this prayer? Why is it important to trust God's mercy? What do we seek as a result of this sacrament?

Summarize the meaning and significance of the Lord's Supper. What goal is sought? What commitments do we make?

Vows and Commitments
Lesson IV
Marriage Vows

Marriage clearly involves the exchange of vows and the commitment of a man and woman to each other. However, as we shall see, the commitment is not just to each other, but also to the community of Christ. This is suggested in the fact that the couple make their vows before their family and the church gathered.

Notice the introduction to the ceremony (we will use both the new ceremony in the *United Methodist Hymnal* [UMH] and *Book of Worship* [BOW] in the latter pages 116-27; and the more traditional ceremony, pp. 128ff).

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the presence of these witnesses, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is an honorable estate, instituted of God, and signifying unto us the mystical union that exists between Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence in Cana of Galilee. It is therefore not to be entered into unadvisedly, but reverently, discreetly, and in the fear of God. Into this holy estate these two persons come now to be joined.

Note the underlined parts. Who is included in this ceremony besides the bride and groom? Why is this more than just a transaction between two people?

The “we” and the references to “witnesses” and the “Church” all suggest that the community of faith is included in the marriage of two people.

Why? For one thing marriage is not just about two people deciding to commit to each other; it a decision for two people to commit to a covenant relationship ordained by God. God created this concept of marriage as scripture suggests:

Genesis 2:22-24

*Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib and brought her to Adam.
[23] "At last!" Adam exclaimed. "She is part of my own flesh and bone! She will be called 'woman,' because she was taken out of a man." [24] This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.*

The natural physical connection between two people was planned in God’s creation. Their life-long commitment to each other was part of God’s will for people in general. Marriage, therefore, represents something God plans, not just two people.

In addition, the “we” phrases in this introduction underline that the marriage takes place in community and in the church. Marriage, indeed, mirrors the purpose of God in the church itself. According to Paul, the “one-flesh” relationship of husband and wife echoes the relationship of the church and Christ:

Ephes. 5:28-33

In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. [29] For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, [30] because we are members of his body. [31] "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." [32] This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. [33] Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

The church has a stake in marriage because the loving relationship of husband and wife recreates on a physical human scale the relationship between church and Christ.

How is this so? Paul himself seems to be at a loss to take his own thought further (v32). But the unity between husband and wife corresponds to the unity of the church and Christ. The love relationship between husband and wife corresponds to the love between Christ and the church. And the duty of the wife to respect the husband corresponds to the duty of the church to respect Christ.

The reality is that the world and the church have a great deal at stake in a marriage. Today we know that single mothers leading families correlate highly with many problems, including child poverty, delinquency and abuse. Tear apart the family and we can see that you tear apart the community. Normal nuclear families are not perfect—they are merely better than anything else we have for the raising of children, the maintenance of social peace, and the well-being of people.

The church likewise needs healthy families. Children learn first and best about God from parents. Lacking one parent, children struggle to understand God. Of course, “family” can exist in forms other than husband, wife and 2.3 children. The church has historically been one of the few institutions to care actively for widows and orphans as part of its core mission. But healthy families help the church carry out its mission to the poor and those hurt by life.

Note the first vow—a question asked by the minister to the couple with the father of the bride standing between them:

I require and charge you both, as you stand in the presence of God, before whom the secrets of all hearts are disclosed, that having duly considered the holy covenant you are about to make, you do now declare before this company your pledge of faith, each to the other.

Be well assured that if these solemn vows are kept inviolate, as God's word demands, and if steadfastly you endeavor to do the will of your heavenly Father, God will bless your marriage, will grant you fulfillment in it, and will establish your home in peace.

The newer version is much simpler, and includes a response of the family:

Minister: *I ask you now, in the presence of God and these people, to declare your intention to enter union with each other through the grace of Jesus Christ, who calls you into union with himself as acknowledged in your baptism.*

What is this introduction trying to stress? Why are the parents involved?

1. “The declaration of intention,” as it is called, reminds the bride and groom that they are making an important promise, not just to each other but to God. They are being called to follow God’s word, and, if they are obedient to God, God will bless their marriage. It is important to understand that it is not just the man and the woman, but their relationship individually to God is at stake here.

2. In medieval times, the child was literally the property of the father. This is true in many cultures. In some cultures the groom must pay a “bride price” to purchase the bride from the father. In other cultures the father has provided a “dowry”—often to ensure that the bride has independent means to survive on her own if necessary. The father stands between bride and groom at this time because until the bride and groom make a promise to God and the church to love and care for each other, they cannot make a promise to each other.

All this emphasizes that the commitment of marriage is first to God and to the community of faith. Marriage is a very “social” act before it is a private commitment.

This brings us to the first set of vows:

Will you have this woman/man to be your wedded wife/husband, to live together in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her/him, comfort her/him, honor and keep her/him, in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others keep only to her/him as long as you both shall live?

What does it mean to “have” a person to “live together in the holy estate of matrimony? In what ways do husbands/wives “comfort” each other? How should they “honor” each other? How should they “keep” each other in “sickness and in health”? What does it mean to “forsake all others and keep only” to our spouse?

1. The word “*have*” in this setting has the suggestion of “accept.” But “have” can also sound like ownership. You can take this too far—husbands and wives should not treat each other as property. But there is a true sense in which we do “have” one another. We own each other in the sense of responsibility to maintain and cultivate the other person. We live with each other and keep with each other. So to “have” a person as a husband/wife to “live together in the holy estate of matrimony” implies the willingness to take possession in the sense of accepting responsibility and a life-long relationship with the person in marriage.

We also promise to “love” each other. The following words define what is meant by “love.” First, that we “comfort” each other. The word “comfort” has synonyms in the concepts of “ease,” “console,” “calm,” and “satisfy.” To take up responsibility in marriage means taking up the responsibility of “comforting” each other in the sense of helping ease the stress and strain

that attacks the other person, console that person when he/she is down, and calm our spouse in the midst of worry. The word “satisfy” is especially intriguing. This is not “satisfy” in the sense of meeting demands, but “satisfy” in the sense of helping the person experience completion and peace.

Paul says something like this to husbands in Ephesians 5:25-27.

Ephesians 5:25-27

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, [26] in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, [27] so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

Paul urges husbands to seek to help their wives to reach their absolute best before God—spotless and without blemish. You do this through self-sacrificing, putting the needs of your spouse ahead of yourself for their good.

2. The word “*honor*” suggests many things: to respect, give praise, esteem highly. We commit ourselves to respect and praise and esteem our mates in marriage. You might ask here: What are some ways you like to be honored by another person? What does your spouse do for you? What do you do for them?

Again, the passage from Ephesians 5 stresses the need for the wife to respect and honor the husband:

Ephesians 5:33

Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

Husbands are urged to “love” their wives and wives to “respect” their husbands. It is not as if wives are not to love their husbands and husbands do not need to respect their wives. Rather, Paul probably knows where each sex struggles in their marriage vows. Men have trouble putting the needs of their wives ahead of their own needs. Women have most trouble respecting and esteeming their husbands if they fail to love their wives properly. In the days of Paul, especially, women had few legal rights or power—their words and their attitude toward their husbands were the only tools they had to influence their lives. Paul wants us not to use these tools for evil, but for good. Use especially your words to esteem and build each other up. You must use more than your words—your actions also communicate either “honor” or disrespect.

3. “*Keep him/her in sickness and in health.*” It is interesting in this case to look up the antonyms of “keep.” The opposite of “keep” is to “discard,” “dismiss,” or “disperse.”

A good question to ask: Why do you get married in the first place? Being rational and basically self-centered, most of us get married because we think the relationship will do us good. We get married because we enjoy being loved, having companionship, sex, and the other joys of marriage.

But when we get married, we also recognize that life is never all good. We take responsibility for each other to “have” each other in good times and bad. The temptation in the bad time is to leave when things are no longer fun and self-satisfying. But the marriage covenant is to “keep” one another—to care for and hold each other especially in the bad times rather than to leave or dismiss or discard each other simply because we get sick or old.

A rural family described a sad thing they sometimes see. City people drive out to the country, dump the formerly “adorable” puppy that has now grown up, and leave it. Then the rural family has to decide to keep it and take care of it now that it is no longer loved by its original owners, or to let it run wild and probably die of neglect or be killed by other animals.

We can decide to “dump” our love when our beloved becomes mainly a drag or a problem because of health—but our marriage vow is to **keep** them.

4. *Forsaking all others.* This does not mean that women can have no men friends, or men no women friends. It does not mean never seeing your parents again.

But it does mean that you recognize the exclusive and complete loyalty that you owe to your spouse. No other relationship can demand time or emotion or commitment that conflicts with the commitment you have with your spouse.

For men this means making sure to stay clear of temptation with other women—guarding and protecting your affections for your wife, so that your emotional and sexual attachment is solely with her. It means your job cannot be more important than your wife, and the same should be said about your hobby or anything else.

For women the temptation may be emotional and relational rather than sexual. You cannot let friendships tempt you to emotional ties that undermine your commitment to your husband. Even family or children cannot replace him in your affections.

How can we keep our vow to “forsake all others”? How can we be accountable to our spouses to make them the ultimate human relationship we have (after our spiritual relationship with Christ and God)?

The Exchange of Vows

The next vow is made between the man and the woman. Now that they have satisfied the community of faith that they are making the right commitment before God, they repeat their commitment to each other:

*I, [Name], take you [Name]
To be my wedded wife/husband
To have and to hold from this day forward
For better, for worse
For richer, for poorer
In sickness and in health
To love and to cherish*

*till death us do part
according to God's holy ordinance;
and thereto I pledge you my faith.*

What is repeated in this vow? What is new? What is the meaning of these pairs of opposites?

1. Much is repeated in the two sets of vows. The idea of “having” each other is repeated from the declaration of intent, now expanded slightly with the word “hold.” The idea of keeping each other “in sickness and in health” is repeated. The vow “to love” each other is repeated, along with the promise to keep the vow until the end of life.

2. The new part lies first in the use of obvious opposites: richer/poorer; better/worse. These opposites suggest that, as we enter marriage, we make a commitment to love whatever the consequences in life. We recognize that we do not know the future, but we can decide to stay together and love each other whatever the outside consequences may be.

This is one of the difficulties of marriage. No one ever consciously marries for “worse” or “sicker” or “poorer.” We always marry expecting “better”—the good things the relationship brings.

But in fact we cannot control the future. Relationships which exist only for the good times have nothing to do with the marriage covenant that God plans for us.

Love means a commitment to make it through the hard times. In the Song of Solomon we read this passage:

Song 5:2-8 (New Living Translation)

Young Woman: "One night as I was sleeping, my heart awakened in a dream. I heard the voice of my lover. He was knocking at my bedroom door. 'Open to me, my darling, my treasure, my lovely dove,' he said, 'for I have been out in the night. My head is soaked with dew, my hair with the wetness of the night.'

[3] "But I said, 'I have taken off my robe. Should I get dressed again? I have washed my feet. Should I get them soiled?'

[4] "My lover tried to unlatch the door, and my heart thrilled within me. [5] I jumped up to open it. My hands dripped with perfume, my fingers with lovely myrrh, as I pulled back the bolt.

[6] I opened to my lover, but he was gone. I yearned for even his voice! I searched for him, but I couldn't find him anywhere. I called to him, but there was no reply. [7] The watchmen found me as they were making their rounds; they struck and wounded me. The watchman on the wall tore off my veil.

[8] "Make this promise to me, O women of Jerusalem! If you find my beloved one, tell him that I am sick with love."

The song pictures a time when the bride cannot find the bridegroom, and in looking she is beaten by the watchmen for being out in the night. Love sometimes runs into trouble.

The marriage commitment is a commitment to work through trouble. As Song of Solomon puts it in 2:15:

Song 2:15

Young Women of Jerusalem: "Quick! Catch all the little foxes before they ruin the vineyard of your love, for the grapevines are all in blossom."

Husband and wife have to recognize the reality of evil, and to protect their love and their commitment from evil.

Question to ask: What do you find helpful in your marriage in dealing with times of stress and trouble?

The Final Vow

The marriage ceremony effectively closes with the ring vow:

In token and pledge of our constant faith and abiding love, with this ring I thee wed, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

What is the meaning of the ring? What do you promise in giving rings?

1. The vow calls the ring a “token and pledge.” A “token” is a symbol, a sign or an emblem of something. A “pledge” is a guarantee or security for a promise or commitment. The ring symbolizes for all to see that you have made a promise and a commitment to another person. You wear the ring to guarantee that promise by making an ongoing public statement of your intention. In putting on the ring you are accepting public accountability for your actions.

2. The public vow you make is to have constant faith and abiding love. The “constant” faith means reliable faithfulness. You will regularly express and show your love to the person from whom you have received your ring. “Abiding” love is love that lasts.

Note that this is not a promise about feelings. Abiding love cannot be provided on the basis of feelings alone, because feelings by nature do not abide. In the end married love is about “*agape*” not “*eros*” love.

“*Eros*” and “*agape*” are two words in Greek that we translate as “love.”

“*Eros*” is romantic, passionate love. *Eros* reflects love based on sexual desires and attraction. *Eros* is all about feeling and because of this is ultimately self-centered. *Eros* love is based simply on the animal attraction between a man and a woman. It is exciting, and yes, God-given, but it’s not the stuff that really makes the marriage covenant.

“*Agape*” on the other hand is best defined in **I Corinthians 13** (NLT):

If I could speak in any language in heaven or on earth but didn't love others, I would only be making meaningless noise like a loud gong or a clanging cymbal. [2] If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I knew all the mysteries of the future and knew everything about everything, but didn't love others, what good would I be? And if I had the gift of faith so that I could speak to a mountain and make it move, without love I would be no good to anybody. [3] If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would be of no value whatsoever.

[4] Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud [5] or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. [6] It is never glad about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. [7] Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

[8] Love will last forever, but prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will all disappear. [9] Now we know only a little, and even the gift of prophecy reveals little! [10] But when the end comes, these special gifts will all disappear.

[11] It's like this: When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child does. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. [12] Now we see things imperfectly as in a poor mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God knows me now.

[13] There are three things that will endure—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.

The essence of *agape* love is caring for the needs of the other person. That is what keeps marriages healthy and strong and that is what the ring vow commits us to giving.

The Final Blessing

The final blessing in the ceremony reads as follows:

O eternal God, creator and preserver of us all, giver of all spiritual grace, the author of everlasting life: send thy blessing on [Name] and [Name] whom we bless in thy name; that they may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant between them made, and may ever remain in perfect love and peace together and live according to thy laws. Look graciously upon them that they may love, honor, and cherish each other, and so live together in faithfulness and patience, in wisdom and true godliness, that their home may be a haven of blessing and a place of peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

What qualities does this blessing see as needed in a marriage? What will be the results?

1. The qualities are love and peace, honor and cherishing, faithfulness and patience, wisdom and godliness. People who embrace these qualities tend to make good mates.
2. The result is a “home” that is a haven from the world. The Christian marriage provides a place of blessing and peace—not just for the couple but for others.

3. Note what is never said in the whole ceremony: the importance of marrying the right person. The ceremony assumes that if you are faithful to God, God will bless the marriage. Obviously, both partners must embrace love, peace, honor, cherishing, faithfulness, patience, wisdom, and godliness. If either partner refuses to do their part, the covenant is attacked.

The marriage ceremony suggests that marriage is not about finding the “right” person; rather it’s about making the **right commitment**. Obviously, there can be situations where dishonesty in one partner hides major personal problems, which means there is no serious intention to make the right commitment (a person with serious personality disorders or chemical dependency for example). But, in a sense, if we understand that we are marrying fallible, imperfect people and joining them together, then we realize that no one is the “right” person in every sense. Every person has defects and weaknesses that must be overcome in the covenant relationship through love and faithfulness.

Since marriage is based on God’s plan for relationships and the family, the ultimate commitment in marriage is from God and to God. We trust that God will use our faithfulness and overcome our failures to make the marriage commitment a blessing. If we do not understand marriage in the context of our commitment to God, we will tend to see marriage as mainly a tool for personal happiness. If we do that, we will probably neither enjoy marriage or find happiness. The words of Jesus apply to the marriage vows as well as to life in general:

John 12:25

Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the presence of these witnesses, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is an honorable estate, instituted of God, and signifying unto us the mystical union that exists between Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence in Cana of Galilee. It is therefore not to be entered into unadvisedly, but reverently, discreetly, and in the fear of God. Into this holy estate these two persons come now to be joined.

Note the underlined parts. Who is included in this ceremony besides the bride and groom? Why is this more than just a transaction between two people?

I require and charge you both, as you stand in the presence of God, before whom the secrets of all hearts are disclosed, that having duly considered the holy covenant you are about to make, you do now declare before this company your pledge of faith, each to the other.

Be well assured that if these solemn vows are kept inviolate, as God's word demands, and if steadfastly you endeavor to do the will of your heavenly Father, God will bless your marriage, will grant you fulfillment in it, and will establish your home in peace.

What is this introduction trying to stress? Why are the parents involved?

Will you have this woman/man to be your wedded wife/husband, to live together in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her/him, comfort her/him, honor and keep her/him, in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others keep only to her/him as long as you both shall live?

What does it mean to “have” a person to “live together in the holy estate of matrimony? In what ways do husbands/wives “comfort” each other? How should they “honor” each other? How should they “keep” each other in “sickness and in health”? What does it mean to “forsake all others and keep only” to our spouse?

*I, [Name], take you [Name]
To be my wedded wife/husband
To have and to hold from this day forward
For better, for worse
For richer, for poorer
In sickness and in health
To love and to cherish
till death us do part
according to God's holy ordinance;
and thereto I pledge you my faith.*

**What is repeated in this vow from the earlier
“declaration of intent”? What is new? What is the
meaning of these pairs of opposites?**

In token and pledge of our constant faith and abiding love, with this ring I thee wed, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

What is the meaning of the ring? What do you promise in giving rings?

O eternal God, creator and preserver of us all, giver of all spiritual grace, the author of everlasting life: send thy blessing on [Name] and [Name] whom we bless in thy name; that they may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant between them made, and may ever remain in perfect love and peace together and live according to thy laws. Look graciously upon them that they may love, honor, and cherish each other, and so live together in faithfulness and patience, in wisdom and true godliness, that their home may be a haven of blessing and a place of peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

What qualities does this blessing see as needed in a marriage? What will be the results?

Vows and Commitments
Lesson V
Your Commitment to Pray

The question asked people when they join the church is given as follows in paragraph 15 of the Baptismal Covenant I:

As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service?

The older “traditional” question is given in Baptismal Covenant III:

Will you be loyal to the United Methodist Church and uphold it by your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service?

The difference between the two versions is not great, and is not critical for this lesson [namely, the newer commitments is to the particular congregation rather than the “United Methodist Church” and specifies “participation” rather than “upholding.”]

For the purpose of this lesson, the key point is that becoming a member of this church involves **a commitment to pray.**

Why is prayer a fundamental commitment of the Christian? What is prayer to the Christian life? How is prayer a part of our commitment to our church?

Prayer is a relationship with God.

The Bible understands that people need a relationship with God and must seek it. That relationship is spiritual. Of the many biblical references that suggest this, note these two:

Psalm 63:1

A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah.

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

John 4:23-24

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. [24] God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

Numerous verses in the New Testament urge the Christian to pray:

Matthew 6:9

Pray then in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

Acts 8:22

Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.

Ephesians 6:18-19

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. [19] Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel,

Colossians 4:3

At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison,

1 Thessalonians 5:17

Pray without ceasing.

1 Thessalonians 5:25

Beloved, pray for us.

2 Thessalonians 3:1

Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you,

Hebrews 13:18

Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.

James 5:13-16

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. [14] Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. [15] The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. [16] Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

Jude 20

But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit;

1 Timothy 2:8

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument;

What do these various verses tell us we pray for?

1. We pray to praise the majesty and character of God (Matthew 6:9).
2. We pray to build up our faith (Jude 20).
3. We pray for the spread of the word and the faithful witness of the church and church leaders (Heb 13:18; Col. 4:3; Eph 6:19).
4. We pray for repentance and cleansing (Acts 8:22; Matthew 6:12).
5. We pray for protection during suffering and persecution (Matthew 6:13; James 5:13).

In a sense these verses and others suggest that we should pray constantly and about everything.

Let's look at what Jesus taught in particular about prayer:

Read Matthew 6:5-8; Luke 11:1-13. What does Jesus say we should not do in prayer?

V5 We should not be “hypocrites” who pray mainly to be seen by others and acknowledged for our piety. Prayer is supposed to be first between a person and God. Therefore, prayer should be first private and quiet.

Does this exclude corporate prayers? Not at all. Note that the prayers Jesus criticizes are *individual* prayers done publicly. Corporate public prayers were part of the temple and synagogue forms of worship, and Jesus does not criticize these—indeed, the disciples continue these in Acts 3:1. It is the individual praying publicly to be noticed for his/her own piety that Jesus criticizes.

What do we learn from the Lord's Prayer for our own prayer?

In Luke 11:1 Jesus teaches this prayer in response to a request from the disciples, “Teach us to pray.” This then, is intended as a prayer that gives us an example of how to pray.

Luke 11:2-4

He said to them, "When you pray, say:
Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
[3] Give us each day our daily bread.
[4] And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial."

Father--The prayer starts with a name of relationship, “Father.” Jesus does not use “Abba” here--the familiar term--but the more formal, “Father.” Still, emphasis is on the positive

relationship between God and the believer. Note that in the following parables in Luke, God is compared to a friend who would respond at midnight to an urgent need, and a father who would give good gifts to a child. God is approachable according to Jesus and ready to respond.

Hallowed be thy name--in the Greek literally, “May you name be sanctified.” Although God is “Father,” God is nevertheless to be approached as an entirely Holy God--separate and wonderful. The sanctification of the name of God was a typical part of Jewish prayers (the traditional Jewish Qaddish prayer said, “Exalted and hallowed be his great name in the world which he formed according to his will,” and this was repeated daily in the synagogues). Howard Marshall explains this phrase as follows: “God is petitioned to bring about a situation in which men will reverence and worship him instead of blaspheming him or sinning against him” (Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 457). As we pray we should reverence God, recognize God’s holiness and wonder and pray that all people everyone come into a fuller knowledge of the truth and greatness of God.

Thy Kingdom come [Matthew adds, “thy will be done”]--To pray for the coming of God’s kingdom is to pray that God’s will would be accomplished “on earth as it is in heaven.” The coming of God’s Kingdom is the coming of his perfect will. The goal of prayer is to bring our lives and being more in line with the will of God. In prayer we seek the accomplishment of the Kingdom both in our lives and in history in general.

Give us this day our daily bread--Prayer includes requests to God for our physical needs. God is not unaware or unconcerned about our real needs, and God expects us and asks us to bring our needs to him. To pray for our needs is to admit our real dependence on God. If you look at the Psalms you see that the Psalmist was ready to admit every need and vulnerability to God—including his anger and resentment over the way life was going! That vulnerability to God is important—we recognize our own need for God.

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. Admitting our physical needs is one thing. We must also admit our spiritual needs, especially the need for forgiveness. Repentance is an important part of prayer. We cannot have a relationship with God without dealing with those things in our lives that break relationship with God—our sins.

At the same time *receiving* forgiveness is the other side of the coin from *giving* forgiveness. People are sinners, but we’re also sinned against. Being a victim of sin, and holding those who have hurt us in judgment, blocks our relationship with God as much as our own sin (see Matthew 6:14-15; 18:21-35). This petition on giving and receiving forgiveness underlines the fact that prayer has a community component. Prayer is not just the believer and God, but inevitably includes the believer and the community of faith. Our relationships with people are part of our relationship with God.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.--This petition probably does not imply a life free of trials or temptations. Note what Paul says:

1 Corinthians 10:13

But remember that the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you

can't stand up against it. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it. [New Living Translation]

I. Howard Marshall (*The Gospel of Luke*, p. 461f.) suggests that the Greek translation reflects an underlying Hebrew verb tense (Hi'fil) that implies causation. So, the petition means in effect, "Do not cause us to be tempted so that we fall." The petition makes us realize that not only do we need forgiveness for our past failures and sins, but we need God's protection and power to avoid future failures and sins. We need, in effect, a continuous relationship with God and total reliance on Him.

Prayer therefore should establish the following:

Our relationship with God

The greatness and majesty of God that we and all people need to recognize

Our needs and dependence on God in our physical life

Our need and dependence on God for forgiveness, and our relationships with other people

Our need and dependence on God for our future

Prayer for the Church

Along with this general prayer, we have a duty to pray for other people in the church. As an example, let's look to Paul's prayers for the church.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly [3] remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Colossians 1:3-8

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, [4] for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, [5] because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel [6] that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. [7] This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, [8] and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

How does Paul pray for the churches? What does he ask for them? What does this suggest about our prayers for the church?

1. First note that Paul gives thanks for the church. Paul is grateful for the faith and the example of the various churches.

2. Paul prays for the further fruitfulness and faithfulness of the church. In Ephesians 1:18-19 he prays:

so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, [19] and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

He is praying for the further growth in faith and understanding of the church.

We are called, therefore, not just to pray for *ourselves* but to pray for the *church*, for her leaders and for all members. This can include our prayers for the church in every nation, especially where there is persecution and danger. But we should not overlook our opportunity and responsibility to pray for the church we attend, and whose ministry we benefit from.

We can give thanks for the strengths of our church, and we pray that these strengths will be perfected and any weaknesses cured. We can pray for the specific needs and struggles of our church and any dangers our church faces.

What dangers or needs are you praying for in relationship with our church? For what do you give thanks? How are you praying for the leaders?

Prayer in the Church

Read Acts 2:42; Ephesians 5:17-20. What part does prayer play in Christian worship?

Nothing could be clearer in the picture of the early church than the importance of prayer in their worship:

Acts 2:42

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Note how it is phrased, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching . . . and *the* prayers." The definite article "the" suggests a very specific format. Quite likely the early church began by adopting and then modifying the prayers said daily in the synagogue. The point is that Christians gathered together for community prayer. Prayer was not something one did only by oneself, but something Christians gathered together to do. The importance of this gathering together for prayer is also emphasized in Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

Ephesians 5:17-20

So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. [18] Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, [19] as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, [20] giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To “understand what the will of the Lord is” we must not get drunk with wine, but instead “be filled with the Spirit.” Paul expects us to experience being filled with the Spirit in the context of the worship of the community. The phrase the NRSV translates “sing psalms” is actually “speak Psalms” in the Greek. The Psalms were the spoken prayers of the church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer encouraged praying the Psalms as a part of worship together saying:

*Here we learn, first, what prayer means. It means praying according to the Word of God, on the basis of promises. Christian prayer takes its stand on the solid ground of the revealed Word and has nothing to do with vague, self-seeking, vagaries. We pray on the basis of the prayer of the true Man Jesus Christ. This is what the Scripture means when it says that the Holy Spirit prays in us and for us, that Christ prays for us, that we might pray aright to God only in the name of Jesus Christ. [Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 47]*

What Bonhoeffer sees in praying the Psalms might be said for all corporate prayer in the church. We pray together not for our own needs, but for the general needs of the world. This type of prayer helps balance our natural tendency toward selfishness in our prayers. We pray in worship together in written form so that we can learn the Scripture and learn what prayer is. Corporate prayer is a special means of the infilling of the Spirit, where we offer ourselves to God in obedience, and learn to receive as He gives rather than as we demand.

The idea of daily, corporate prayer was inherited from Judaism. Psalm 119:164 says, “Seven times a day I praise thee for the justice of thy decrees.” Verse 62 in the same Psalm says, “At midnight I rise to give thee thanks.” Early church leaders Tertullian and Cyprian called for prayer three times a day on the basis of the prophet Daniel’s example. Later in church history this sort of daily prayer at prescribed hours was the mark of monastic duty and discipline. The daily monastic “offices,” as they were called, were as follows:

- Vespers (at the end of the working day)
- Compline (before bedtime)
- Nocturns or Vigils or Matins (during the middle of the night)
- Lauds (at daybreak)
- Prime (shortly thereafter)
- Terce (during the middle of the morning)
- Sext (at noon)
- None (during the middle of the afternoon)

The Reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Bucer) tended to reduce these to two services, morning and evening, with an emphasis on praying the Psalms.

We as Christians are called to pray for others, especially those in office:

1 Timothy 2:1-2

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, [2] for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

Corporate public prayer exists in order to:

- 1) Teach us the principles of prayer
- 2) Join us in the worship and thought of the whole church
- 3) Lift up intercessions for all people

Psalm 63:1

A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah.

*O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

John 4:23-24

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. [24] God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

What do these various verses tell us we pray for?

1. We pray to praise God and exalt Him (Matthew 6:9).
2. We pray to build up our faith (Jude 20).
3. We pray for the spread of the Word and the faithful witness of the church and church leaders (Heb 13:18; Col. 4:3; Eph 6:19).
4. We pray for repentance and cleansing (Acts 8:22; Matthew 6: 12).
5. We pray for protection during suffering and persecution (Matthew 6:13; James 5:13).

Read Matthew 6:5-8; Luke 11:1-13. What does Jesus say we should not do in prayer?

What do we learn from the Lord's Prayer for our own prayer?

Father

Hallowed Be Thy Name

Thy Kingdom Come

Give us our daily bread

Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive . . .

Bring us not to the time of trial

What do we learn from the Lord's Prayer for our own prayer?

Prayer should establish the following:

Our relationship with God

The greatness and majesty of God that we and all people need to recognize

Our needs and dependence on God for physical life

Our need and dependence on God for forgiveness, and our relationships with other people

Our need and dependence on God for our future

How does Paul pray for the churches? What does he ask for them? What does this suggest about our prayers for the church?

Read Acts 2:42; Ephesians 5:17-20. What part does prayer play in Christian worship?

Corporate public prayer exists in order to:

- 1) Teach us the principles of prayer
- 2) Join us in the worship and thought of the whole Church
- 3) Lift up intercessions for all people

Lesson VI
Vows and Commitments
The Commitment to Presence

When people join our church, they are asked the following questions in paragraph 15 of the Baptismal Covenant I:

As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service?

The older “traditional” question is given in Baptismal Covenant III:

Will you be loyal to the United Methodist Church and uphold it by your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service?

What does it mean to support the church with your “presence”?

We support the church first and foremost with our “**presence**” in worship. The New Testament stresses the need for Christians to gather regularly in worship.

Remember the woman at the well and the question she asked Jesus about worship:

John 4:19-24

The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. [20] Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." [21] Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. [22] You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. [23] But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. [24] God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Why does the woman at the well ask this question? What does Jesus’ answer tell us about worship?

Interpreters argue about the woman’s question—Is it sincere or is she trying to avoid the implications of Jesus’ knowledge of her adultery (see 4:18-19)? I think the woman, faced with her sin, asks the question honestly. If you were a Samaritan and wanted to offer a sacrifice to show your repentance, you would go to the Samaritan temple. But if God had confronted her with her sin through a Jewish prophet, did that imply she needed to go to Jerusalem? I think the woman is truly repentant but confused as to the next step.

Jesus takes her question and deals with the larger question—not just where she should go to offer sacrifice, but what is the true nature of worship. Worship is not about

“Jerusalem” or the “mountain” temple of Samaria. Rather, worship must be “in Spirit and in truth.”

The “Spirit” in the Gospel of John is what (or who) Jesus sends to the disciples to be with them in his physical absence; the Spirit lives in the disciples (14:17). This Spirit reminds the disciples of the words of Jesus (14:26), testifies on Jesus’ behalf (15:26, complementing or re-enforcing the testimony of the disciples themselves, see v27); and the Spirit guides them into all truth.

The Spirit is the “Spirit of truth” because the Spirit takes what belongs to Jesus and declares it to the church (16:13). The Spirit is also called “The Paraclete”—one “called alongside.” The exact meaning of “Paraclete” has been debated. You can find it translated in various Bibles as “Comforter,” “Counselor,” and “Advocate.” The Spirit provides the presence of Jesus in the worshipping community. Note that the “you” in these verses is always plural in the Greek. This could mean “to all of you” individually, or “among you” collectively. John 14-16 comes in the context of the Last Supper and the Footwashing, which suggests a context of community worship. Therefore, I would suggest the Spirit in John is given to act in the worshipping body of believers as well as in individuals (the two are not mutually exclusive alternatives).

Worship “in the Spirit” therefore encompasses the gathering of the community of Christ:

- a) to experience the presence of Christ
- b) to remember the teachings of Christ
- c) to witness to the experience of Christ among believers
- c) to receive the guidance of Christ for the times

What does Jesus mean by worship “in truth”? Remember that he is the “Truth” (John 14:6). In John 8:31-32 Jesus tells some so-called “disciples”:

John 8:31-32

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; [32] and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

These “disciples” reject Jesus’ call to believe in him and follow him, and so they remain enslaved to sin.

From this we see that “truth” in the Gospel of John means *to believe in Jesus*. To worship “in Spirit and in truth” means worship led by the Spirit into discipleship and obedience to Jesus. The worship God seeks will lead people to believe in Jesus, to keep his word, and to experience his indwelling presence through the Spirit.

What does this have to do with our commitment to “presence” in *this* church?

1) Christian commitment means commitment to faith in Christ and an ongoing trust in him. You can only achieve this through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comes not just

to the individual, but to the gathered community of Christ. Real (and verified) experience of the Spirit requires our presence in the worshipping community of Christ.

2) Christian worship provides an ongoing experience of the presence of Christ, constantly reminding us of his teaching, and leading us in that teaching in our daily lives. **Christian** worship lifts up the witness of the **people** of faith.

What does Paul and the rest of the NT tell us about worship?

1 Corinthians 14:26-32

What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. [27] If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. [28] But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. [29] Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. [30] If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. [31] For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. [32] And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets.

Colossians 3:14-17

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. [15] And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. [16] Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. [17] And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Hebrews 10:21-25

. . . and since we have a great priest over the house of God, [22] let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. [23] Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. [24] And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, [25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The passage from I Corinthians 14 finishes Paul's extended discussion about spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12-14. Obviously, the key problem Paul is seeking to address is how to use the gifts, especially prophecy and tongues, to good advantage. Reading between the lines, Corinth has been experiencing a great deal of disorder in their worship—even competition from people who want to exercise, or perhaps “show off,” what they believe to be spiritual gifts.

Notice what Paul emphasizes about worship:

1) Worship involves preparation. Paul tells people, “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.” People come to worship expecting and ready to participate.

2) The goal in worship is to “Let all things be done for building up.” You are ready to let God use you to build up someone else. This is not “me-centered” worship; it’s worship seeking to serve.

3) Worship is for learning (v31) and encouragement. Therefore, there has to be order in worship—different people taking turns to do their part. What one person has to say or needs should not take precedence over the need of the whole. Even if one received a “gift” from God, that does not mean we have the right to use that gift at the expense of others. People who speak in tongues must do so in order, and not at all if there is no interpretation. Even prophets should take turns and listen to each other.

Look at Colossians 3. **What does Paul urge the Colossians to do together?** The exercise of worship (3:16) is a means of letting “the word of God dwell richly in your hearts.” We do this through:

- 1) psalms (or prayers—see the previous lesson), hymns, and spiritual songs
- 2) mutual admonition
- 3) teaching

We can look at the admonitions of verses 14-15 as a good way to prepare for worship. Paul tells us to “clothe ourselves in love” and “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” Worship presupposes Christian unity. It is hard to go to church angry with people at church. Before going to worship we must want to love those we will see and be willing to be at peace with ourselves and others. You cannot really teach people who are filled with anger and resentment or judgment. We are “one body” in Christ, but too often we do not act like it! Before worshipping, we must prepare our hearts through a desire to love and accept those we will worship with.

The goal of it all is given in verse 17: “Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Again, Paul stresses that worship is not where we go to get “our needs met.” We worship Christ, and in worshipping Christ all lives are put in order.

What does Hebrews 10:24-25 say about meeting together? Why is this important?

We meet together to “provoke one another to love and good works” and “to encourage one another.”

Sometimes you hear people say, “I can worship God in nature just as well as in church.” Certainly you can worship God in nature. But spending time on the golf course

is more likely to improve your golf game than your character. Fishing may stock your freezer, but will it fill your soul?

Worship and time with Christians in the church encourages us to put our faith into action more faithfully.

Connected with this, there's some good news and some bad news about our giving. In an article in *Christianity Today* Tim Stafford tells us this:

“US is higher in both absolute and percentage of income in giving than virtually any other advanced industrial society.” (Only possible exception: Israel.)

And among Americans, Christians are the best givers of all! Did you know that 2/3 of all charitable giving comes from committed Christian believers? In almost all charities it is active Christian believers who do most of the work and give most of the money.

But before we congratulate ourselves too much we should also know this. The typical church member still gives 1.5-2.0 percent of their income. The best givers in terms of percentage of income tend to be the poorer members—those making less than \$20,000 a year—and the richest, those making more than \$100,000 a year. The weakest givers tend to be in the \$40,000-\$100,000 range (not poor or really rich). [From “Anatomy of a Giver” by Tim Stafford, *Christianity Today* (May 19, 1997) Vol. 41, no. 6, pages 20-24.]

Christians are not the only volunteers or the only givers to charity in the world or in our town. However, regular church attendance typically leads to more giving of our time and money to people in need. And it should!

Looking at these passages together, what should be part of our worship together?

1. Prayers together.

A) **Prayers of thanksgiving**, expressing gratitude (see Col. 3:15; Phil. 4:6; I Timothy 4:4). Thanksgiving makes us aware that we are receivers and God the great giver. Thanksgiving helps us understand our dependence on God. Paul can say:

1 Thessalonians 5:18

. . . give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Thanksgiving can express our faith that even in the worst circumstances of life, God's will is working for our ultimate benefit.

2) **Praise**. Don McMinn says, “Praise is acknowledging and celebrating the person and work of God” (*The Practice of Praise. A Handbook on Worship Renewal*. Word Music, p. 41). Praise is commanded in worship (Psalm 150:6; 145). The Father and Son and Holy Spirit are worthy of praise as creator and savior. In the book of Revelation, the creatures of Heaven praise the Father and the Lamb for their deeds of creation and

salvation (Rev. 4:11; 5:12; 7:10). God's character is holy and righteous and worthy of praise. Praise recognizes and celebrates who God is and what God has done.

3) **Intercession.** Worship includes prayers of the people for those in need (see previous lesson).

2. Singing together.

Corporate worship means worship together. And nothing can be more easily done as a group than singing. Music also expresses emotion, combining the mind (especially in the words of hymns and songs) and the heart. St. Augustine said, "He who sings, prays twice." Music involves us at a deeper level in worship. The Psalmist certainly understood the power of music and singing in worship:

Psalm 149:1
Praise the Lord!
Sing to the Lord a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the faithful.

3. Corporate Witness

Worship is a place for the witness of the community to be expressed. This witness may be the personal witness of an individual, the witness of a ministry of the church, the pastor's personal witness in the sermon, or some other expression. In worship we say, "here is what God in Christ is doing among us!" and we celebrate the reality of God's grace in our lives. This reminds those of us struggling that there is hope. Christian witness also gives us examples to follow and reasons for faith.

[Just by being present we "say": "This is true; this is important; this is valuable."
Thus, our presence encourages others, and their presence encourages us.]

4. Teaching and Exhortation

While the Spirit reminds us of the word of Christ (John 14:26), the early church felt that they needed to hear the teaching of the apostles in order to understand and apply the scriptures to their own lives:

Acts 2:42
They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Acts 2:46-47
Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, [47] praising God and

having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

The sermon in particular combines witness to the Christian life and teaching the scriptures. This is supplemented by the reading of the Bible both responsively in the litany and in lessons. In worship we look not only to hear what Scripture says, and to understand what it means, but finally to apply it to our individual lives.

5. Response

Worship should also provide a means of response to God. The offering provides one means of response and personal commitment. You can also respond through spiritual recommitment or through a commitment to ministry. Worship provides a means for a renewal of our active involvement and discipleship—a “stirring up to love and good works.”

Are there other ways we can express our commitment to “presence” in the church?

1) Remember in Acts 2, people met together daily. Coming to church once a week for worship is good but probably not adequate to keep our discipleship fresh and vital.

2) However, this does not mean we have to be physically in the church building for worship every day.

3) Small groups that meet for prayer, study, and accountability can express the “presence” we need. Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20).

4) Ministry groups also provide an expression of “presence.” When we meet to work on a project, to meet a need or to help someone in the name of Christ, we are being the church together.

5) We can also meet for teaching as well as pure worship. Coming together to study the word in corporate Bible study complements (but does not replace) times of corporate worship. This includes our time together in Sunday School classes as well as particular Bible studies. These should not be considered a replacement for corporate worship. We need not just to meet with friends; we need to identify with the whole body of Christ. Sunday School classes tend to be separated generationally, which makes sense for the purpose of Sunday School. But we need to be part of the larger body of Christ; we need to pray together as a whole and hear the word of God as a whole. People who substitute Sunday School for corporate worship tend to be marginally connected to the church. Full-blooded discipleship requires both.

Summarize: What do you see as the main reason for a commitment to our “presence” in the church? What hinders us from expressing this commitment?

What does it mean to support the church with your “presence”?

John 4:19-24

The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. [20] Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." [21] Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. [22] You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. [23] But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. [24] God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Why does the woman at the well ask this question? What does Jesus' answer tell us about worship?

What does Paul and the rest of the NT tell us about worship?

1 Cor. 14:26-32

Col. 3:14-17

Hebrews 10:21-25

Looking at these verses together, what should be part of our worship together?

Summarize: What do you see as the main reason for a commitment to our “presence” in the church? What hinders or keeps us from expressing this commitment?

Are there other ways we can express our commitment to “presence” in the church?

The Commitments We Make
Lesson VII
Our Giving

As *members* of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries
by . . . **your gifts** . . . ?

What comes to mind when you hear the question, “Will you faithfully participate in [your church’s] ministries by your gifts?”

Read Deuteronomy 14:22-23. Why does God command the tithe in the Old Testament?

Deuteronomy 14:22-23

Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. [23] In the presence of the LORD your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always.

One key purpose of the tithe was to teach a proper “fear of the LORD your God.” The idea is not so much that God is going to “get you” if you do not tithe. Rather, giving makes us reverence God and shows that we appreciate that all we have in life we owe to God. We cannot claim our wealth as “ours”; we depend upon many people and especially on God’s creation for what we have. Giving helps us treat God with proper respect and keeps our pride in check.

Read Malachi 3:8-11. How does the prophet criticize Israel? What does God promise if Israel is faithful in giving?

Malachi 3:8-11

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings! [9] You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me--the whole nation of you! [10] Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. [11] I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the Lord of hosts.

Malachi is written after the rebuilding of the temple after the exile, but in a time of great difficulty (perhaps around the time of Nehemiah). Times are hard and many people are holding back on their offerings to God.

Malachi uses strong words to denounce this. This is tantamount to robbing God! And the worst is that in not giving, the people are not trusting God. And therefore they miss the blessings God has to pour out on them!

The Old Testament takes the need to give very seriously, because the way we give says a great deal about our true relationship with God.

Does Jesus affirm tithing? What does Jesus say about giving?

Jesus puts tithing in a larger context:

Matthew 23:23

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others”.

Jesus affirms tithing without saying that tithing is everything. You cannot tithe and neglect other parts of Christian discipleship (like service and forgiveness). But Jesus affirms the tithe as a *minimum* of Christian discipleship.

As you would expect, Jesus is concerned not just with the amount you give, but your motives for giving:

Luke 21:1-4

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; [2] he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. [3] He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; [4] for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

Luke 6:37-38

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; [38] give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

The widow who gives all that she has is praised above the rich who give to show off and give out of their excess. God knows and appreciates our sacrifice in giving—or our lack thereof! It is not the amount, but the love behind the giving that makes the giving effective.

In Luke 6, these verses follow the exhortation to “Love your enemies” (6:27). Jesus tells the disciples in this Lucan version of the “Sermon on the Mount” that just doing the minimum of the law is not enough. Rather, we have to go beyond the expected.

6:37-38 describes the actions of discipleship; our actions and attitudes in effect put us in the position to reap or not reap God’s blessing:

Do not judge—We are not judged.
Do not condemn—We are not condemned.
Forgive—We are forgiven.
Give—We receive.

Note that the first three all flow from the theme of loving your enemies (so you do not condemn or judge, but rather forgive). The exhortation to “give” seems a bit out of place. But this goes along with the exhortation to “give to everyone who begs from you” (6:30) and to “Do good to those who hate you” (6:27). More particularly, therefore, these verses tell us to give liberally to those persons we have every reason to avoid! Probably this meant giving to those in need as was the Jewish tradition (see Matthew 6:1-4 and Jesus’ words on giving alms). Our giving to those in need, even when we have reason not to, shows how far we reflect the attitude of Jesus in our lives.

Can we read these verses to suggest that when we give (to the church) God gives liberally back to us? I think so. If we give generously to those to whom we owe nothing, and God blesses us, why would God not similarly bless us when we give to His church which we do love?

Read Luke 12:33-34. What is true about giving that is not true about getting? According to Jesus, what does our giving say about us?

Luke 12:33-34

Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. [34] For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Jesus reminds us that everything we acquire physically, sooner or later falls apart and fades away. What we give, however, has eternal significance.

Our giving defines the state of our hearts. When we give we are “laying up treasure in heaven”—making an eternal difference and putting our trust in God.

When we turn to Paul we see him making a similar point:

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-12. What reasons does Paul give for giving? What does he promise to those who give?

2 Corinthians 9:6-12

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. [7] Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. [8] And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. [9] As it is written,

*"He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever."*

[10] He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. [11] You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; [12] for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.

1) We give because we want to be those who give bountifully and “reap bountifully.” We give because we believe that those who “sow sparingly” will “reap sparingly.” The more we commit ourselves to God, the more God does in our relationship. Therefore, giving more has increasing benefits in terms of God’s blessing in our lives.

2) Paul does not make giving a law, but a matter of spirit. God wants us to want to give, and to enjoy our giving. Enthusiastic giving means we act out of love for God, and God responds to our love with more love.

3) We give because we realize that all we have materially comes from God. We give back to God what God created through us. We show our trust in God for the future as well as our thankfulness for the past and the present.

4) Giving supports the work of the saints (God’s people who are depending on his supply), but it also expresses thanksgiving to God.

Read James 2:14-17 and I John 3:16-18. How does John define love? Does James agree?

James 2:14-17

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? [15] If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, [16] and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? [17] So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

1 John 3:16-18

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. [17] How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

[18] Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

Those of us who have resources are called to give to those in need. That is a sign that our hearts are motivated by love.

How does our church giving fit into this category?

1. Our giving to the Annual Conference covers the following:

Relief to the poor through UMCOR (United Methodist Commission on Relief)—one of the best agencies in the world for spending the maximum on relief and the minimum on administration.

Help to hurting families and children through the Circle of Care (children’s homes like Frances Willard here in Tulsa).

Scholarship Aid to students in needs through OCU and United Methodist Student Fund.

Aid to poor minority churches.

Support of ministries to the poor in cities, such as Restore Hope Ministry in Tulsa, Skyline Urban ministry in Oklahoma City and others. Also support of missions nationally such as Cookson Hills in Tahlequah.

Local church help for needy persons.

In many ways the church is involved in giving various types of aid to people in poverty, from direct aid such as food, clothing, and housing to scholarships, counseling, and medical help.

What about support for church programs?

3 John 5-8

*Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; [6] they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; [7] for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. [8] **Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.***

1 Corinthians 9:1-14

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? [2] If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

[3] This is my defense to those who would examine me. [4] Do we not have the right to our food and drink? [5] Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? [6] Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? [7] Who at any time pays the expenses for doing military service? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk?

*[8] Do I say this on human authority? Does not the law also say the same? [9] For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? [10] Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? **It was indeed written for our sake, for whoever plows should plow in hope, and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop. [11] If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? [12] If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we still more?***

*Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. [13] **Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed on the altar? [14] In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.***

Luke 10:1-12

*After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. [2] He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. [3] Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. [4] Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. [5] Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' [6] And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. [7] **Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid.** Do not move about from house to house. [8] Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; [9] cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' [10] But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, [11] 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' [12] I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town."*

Giving to the church also enables the ministry of the church. Jesus, Paul, and John all agree that people who minister fulltime in serving the church deserve the support of the church. Their needs should be met. In Acts 4:37 we meet Barnabas as he sells a piece of property and gives the proceeds to the apostles, presumably helping to meet the needs of the Jerusalem church.

Paul personally preferred to support himself through his own work, but even he received gifts from time to time, as he indicates in his letter to the church at Philippi (4:10-20). Paul equated the support of the ministry of the church and those who work fulltime with the support of the temple and those who work there.

Gifts to the church support the staff and the other expenses needed to carry on the ministry of the church. The Bible recognizes that the ministry of the church takes money. You need staff and materials for ministry, and God uses the whole of the body to provide the needs of ministry. The goal of the church should not be to impoverish its workers (either the staff or those who support the staff) but to share generously.

What comes to mind when you hear the words, “You will faithfully participate in your church’s] ministries by your gifts”?

Read Deuteronomy 14:22-23. Why does God command the tithe in the Old Testament?

Read Malachi 3:8-11. How does the prophet criticize Israel? What does God promise if Israel is faithful in giving?

Malachi 3:8-11

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings! [9] You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me--the whole nation of you! [10] Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. [11] I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the LORD of hosts.

Does Jesus affirm tithing? What does Jesus say about giving?

What is true about giving that is not true about getting? According to Jesus, what does our giving say about us?

Luke 12:33-34

Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. [34] For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Read James 2:14-17 and I John 3:16-18. How does John define love? Does James agree?

Our giving to the poor through the church:

Relief to the poor through UMCOR (United Methodist Commission on Relief)—one of the best agencies in the world for spending the maximum on relief and the minimum on administration

Help to hurting families and children through the Circle of Care (e.g., children's homes like Frances Willard here in Tulsa)

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What about support for church programs?

The Commitments We Make
Lesson VIII
Our Service

As *members* of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by
... **your service?**

When you hear the word, “You will faithfully participate in its [your church’s] ministries ...by your gifts”--what comes to mind?

There is no Christian faith without service. In fact, greatness in the Kingdom of God is directed related to service, not to rank:

Luke 22:24-30 (New Living Translation)

And they began to argue among themselves as to who would be the greatest in the coming Kingdom. [25] Jesus told them, "In this world the kings and great men order their people around, and yet they are called 'friends of the people.' [26] But among you, those who are the greatest should take the lowest rank, and the leader should be like a servant. [27] Normally the master sits at the table and is served by his servants. But not here! For I am your servant. [28] You have remained true to me in my time of trial. [29] And just as my Father has granted me a Kingdom, I now grant you the right [30] to eat and drink at my table in that Kingdom. And you will sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And in John 13 Jesus gives a personal example of service:

John 13:1-16

Before the Passover celebration, Jesus knew that his hour had come to leave this world and return to his Father. He now showed the disciples the full extent of his love. [2] It was time for supper, and the Devil had already enticed Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to carry out his plan to betray Jesus. [3] Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God. [4] So he got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, [5] and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he had around him.

[6] When he came to Simon Peter, Peter said to him, "Lord, why are you going to wash my feet?"

[7] Jesus replied, "You don't understand now why I am doing it; someday you will."

[8] "No," Peter protested, "you will never wash my feet!"

Jesus replied, "But if I don't wash you, you won't belong to me."

[9] Simon Peter exclaimed, "Then wash my hands and head as well, Lord, not just my feet!"

[10] Jesus replied, "A person who has bathed all over does not need to wash, except for the feet, to be entirely clean. And you are clean, but that isn't true of everyone here." [11] For Jesus knew who would betray him. That is what he meant when he said, "Not all of you are clean."

*[12] After washing their feet, he put on his robe again and sat down and asked, "Do you understand what I was doing? [13] You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because it is true. [14] **And since I, the Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. [15] I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.***

[16] How true it is that a servant is not greater than the master. Nor are messengers more important than the one who sends them.

After reading these two passages, ask: **What guidelines does Jesus give for disciples? Why is service so integral to following Jesus?**

1. The essence of the Kingdom of God runs counter to normal human thinking. In the world we think, “The greatest are served.” In the Kingdom of God we see that the greatest are servants.

2. We are servants first because we have received the “serving love” of Jesus. Peter’s refusal to accept Jesus’ desire to wash his feet reflects a deadly pride. There is a sense that Peter wants Jesus to be “too good for service” because he himself wants to be above serving. And he already knows what Jesus will make explicit later, “The servant is not above the Master.” All Christian service begins with the humble reflection that we have already been served by the greatest of all. Service that does not begin here can easily fall into pride, or into contempt for the people we are serving.

3. We serve others because we follow the example of Christ. The role of washing the feet of guests normally fell to a slave, or, if the family had no slaves or servants, to the youngest of the household or the person with the least rank. To take up the towel and basin meant to proclaim yourself as the humblest of the group. Yet, that is what Jesus did. The foot-washing mirrors the meaning of the incarnation. Jesus, though divine, not only took on human flesh but did so with the aim of serving. He was willing to die a horrible, shameful death on the cross in obedience to God and to serve humanity (Phil. 2:6-8). Our service follows his example.

Why is service so important?

1. Read 1 John 3:16-20.

We know what real love is because Christ gave up his life for us. And so we also ought to give up our lives for our Christian friends. [17] But if one of you has enough money to live well, and sees a brother or sister in need and refuses to help—how can God’s love be in that person?

[18] Dear children, let us stop just saying we love each other; let us really show it by our actions. [19] It is by our actions that we know we are living in the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before the Lord, [20] even if our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

Service reveals the heart. The person who refuses to serve shows that his/her heart has not really been captured by Christ.

2. Read Matthew 5:14-15 and John 13:34-35.

Matthew 5:14-15

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. [15] No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

John 13:34-35

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. [35] By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Service witnesses to others. In acts of love and care by the church, the world sees the reality of the Father's love in Christ. The philosopher Nietzsche said, "You Christians must show me that you are redeemed before I will believe in your Redeemer." Unless the church backs up its faith with loving service, people will rightly question the depth of our faith.

3. Read Galatians 6:7-10; 1 John 4:16-21

Galatians 6:7-10

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. [8] If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. [9] So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. [10] So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

1 John 4:16-21

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. [17] Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. [18] There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. [19] We love because he first loved us. [20] Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. [21] The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Service helps recreate our heart in the image of Christ's heart. When we love, we become more loving. When we serve, God's Spirit begins to reform who we are into the image of Christ. Service is a way of "abiding in God." Our love, says John, flows from the fact that God loves us. But we cannot love God and hold hate in our hearts for others or refuse their needs. Responding to the needs of others in loving service is a means of grace: a tool through which God reforms who we are.

Scott Peck (I think in *The Road Less Traveled*) tells of a female client suffering from depression who came for regular appointments. Normally she came in listless, down, and very depressed. But one morning she came in happy, positive, and energetic. Peck asked what was happening in her life. She explained her pastor had asked her to accompany him on some hospital visits. At first she resisted, thinking that seeing a lot of sick people could only make her more depressed. But she could find no way to say "no" and finally went. To her surprise she enjoyed the visits, felt of use to those who were sick, and came away "up" rather than "down."

Peck suggested, “Maybe you could do this more often.” But the woman strongly rejected this saying, “Oh, that would take too much of my time!” Peck noted that she missed the connection between giving of herself to others and the improvement of her emotional state. Most of us do the same—we do not understand that it is in giving our time and talents away in service that God’s Spirit can really work on us and change us.

What do we mean by “service”?

The variety of Christian service is immense. Read some or all of the following passages and see what types of “service” can be found:

James 1:27; 4:13-15

Hebrews 13:1-7

I Thessalonians 4:2

Ephesians 4:11

Acts 6:1-4

These ministries can be divided into two parts: those “inside” the church (with other believers) and those “outside” the church to all people.

The “inside” ministries include:

- action as “elders”—the church needs people in leadership to direct its work;
- teachers;
- evangelists;
- caregivers, etc.

The main duties inside the church are instruction and care of the believers. This includes helping those who are poor, especially widows and orphans, with physical needs. In the Judaism of NT times, the synagogues had developed a fairly extensive system of caring for the poor, and this was carried over into the early church, as we see in Acts 5-6.

Ministry to those “outside” was probably primarily ministry to the poor. Paul cites this as the most specific instruction he received from the elders in Jerusalem—something he considered to be a matter of course:

Galatians 2:10

They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.

Primarily Paul was thinking of the poor inside the church (see 2 Cor. 8-9). The church of Paul’s time generally came from the poorest sections of the community (see 1 Cor. 1:26), so taking care of their own poor was no small feat. But there is reason to think the church opened its doors to all the poor and orphaned.

How does one decide to get involved in a ministry?

There is in general no “right” or “wrong” way to choose a ministry (only the failure to try ministry might be considered “wrong”). But logically we think in the following terms:

1. What are your “passions”?

If we are truly seeking to serve God, then the desires of our hearts may reflect desires planted there through the Spirit. Note what the Psalmist says:

Psalm 37:3-4

*Trust in the Lord, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
[4] Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

You can understand these words to mean that, if we are very good, God will give us what we want. But you can also understand these verses to mean that, if we concentrate on trusting and serving God, then the “wants” we have will flow from God.

What are you really interested in? That may well be your best arena for ministry. If you love children, look at children’s ministries. If you have a concern for an issue, that issue may lead you to ministry. Ask yourself, “What do I really think is important and wish the church were doing more about?” Your heart may be leading you to your ministry.

2. What are your gifts?

Romans 12:1-8; I Corinthians 12:27,28 and Ephesians 4:11 list spiritual gifts that are apportioned among the church. Spiritual gifts differ somewhat from pure talents or skills that you have in that these are given by the Holy Spirit to empower ministry. How do you know you have these gifts? Spiritual gift inventories can be taken to help you discern your major gift. But you might sit down with a friend or spouse and ask them, “What do I seem to do effectively?” If you are a good listener, that might indicate the gift of mercy. If you can express ideas well, that might suggest the gift of teaching. If you love organizing, you may have the gift of administration.

You will operate best in your strongest gift (and you might have more than one gift). Teachers do best if they teach and so on. This does **not** mean that you should do **only** what you feel “gifted” to do. We are all called to be evangelists. Whether or not we “feel” like being merciful, Jesus commands us to have mercy. Still, you will do your best ministry in your strengths.

3. What skills and experience do you have?

Your life skills and experiences can be very useful in ministry. If you can build things, then VIM building projects or Habitat for Humanity work days may be just for you. If you are a doctor or a nurse, you might want to use your medical skills in ministry.

However, you should not let your immediate skills limit your ideas for ministry. Executives may find that God has something special to teach them and does not want them to do “administration” just because they are good at it. There may be times in our lives when we are

called to ministries for which we are not yet skilled in order to learn to trust God. Someone with a beautiful voice probably should look to music ministries—but not just that. God may want you to be a teacher or caring helper or some other ministry that will stretch you beyond your skills.

4. What is your personality?

What you do in ministry will also reflect the way God put you together as a person. If you are introverted, you may not want to be a soloist in front of the whole church. Likewise, an extrovert may find it hard to do intercessory prayer. What is your personality? Do you work well with people, or not? Are you good at extended tasks, or do you need things to happen “right now”? Taking on a long-term project with deferred results might drive some people nuts, or be just the thing for another.

Again, understand your personality, but treat it like your “skills” and life experiences—don’t limit God’s will for you with pre-determined ideas about your personality. God sometimes uses unlikely people in unlikely places. There are introverts with marvelous public ministries, and extroverts who become excellent counselors. You have to rely more on God when you go in directions different from your natural inclinations, but that can be a wonderful experience.

Take all these together: your passions, your gifts, your talents/experiences, and your personality. Share how you see yourself with a friend or spouse. What ministries seem to “fit” you?