

The Big Three:

Baptism, Communion, Church Membership

When we talk about the most prominent entities in a group, we sometimes call them “The Big Three.”

When we talk about TV networks, the big three are: ABC, NBC, and CBS.

When we talk about automobile manufacturers in the U.S., the big three are: General Motors, Ford, and Fiat Chrysler.

When the subject is superheroes, the big three are Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman.

When we talk about the finest universities in the nation, the Big Three are Harvard, Yale . . . and Millersville.

When talk sports, the big three in NCAA, Division 1, football in PA are Penn State . . . Penn State . . . and Penn State!

This summer we have been talking about twelve essential choices that we can make, like the early church in *Acts*, so that we can be a dynamic movement of God’s Spirit in which people decide to follow Jesus, grow in Christlikeness, serve others, and go to all people.

Even more basic than these twelve choices are the “big three” **steps of obedience** in the Christian life: baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and church membership.

Two of these—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—are commands of Jesus; the third, church membership, is commended by the *example* and *exhortation* of the NT church.

These “big three” steps of obedience are the foundation, the walls, and protective cover for a life that is built on Jesus—and lived for his glory and praise.

Church Membership

First, consider church membership.

This is the one step that some Christ-followers skip.

We have come a long way since 1909 when Henry Ford said of his Model T Ford:

“Any customer can have a car painted *any color that he wants* . . . so long as it is black.

We live in a country with lots of *options*.
 Vehicles come in all sizes and colors and kinds.
 The shelves of grocery stores are filled with options—
 except for toilet paper, paper towels, and disinfectant.
 When we look for something on Amazon,
 we find many variations of the same product.

And when it comes to churches in America,
 we can find all kinds within driving distance of our home.
 With all this choice, why stick to one church?
 Why not keep our options open, like so much else in American life?!

The answer is: because we need the *safety* and *protection*
 of *sustained* participation in the *same* local church.

In the book of Acts 2:46, newly baptized believers
 spontaneously gathered into the first local church:

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They
 broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere
 hearts . . .

The book of Hebrews explains the pitfalls
 that make this vitally important.

Hebrews 10:23-25, ESV

23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he
 who promised is faithful.

The fact is: our hope does waver at times;
 it is uneven; sometimes it's strong, at others times it's weak.
 We need help to hold fast to a *steady* confession of our hope!

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good
 works,

There are times we need stirring up.
 We cannot do this ourselves;
 we need others to push and challenge us in following Jesus

25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,

I have to wonder how many people, during COVID restrictions, are neglecting to worship—in any venue, whether by *zoom* or *livestream* or *lawn* or *inside* a church. Our default tendency—let’s be honest—is to skip corporate worship.

And the safeguard, in verse 25, is this:

Encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

The Greek word, “encourage,” is a fascinating word. It has a double meaning. It means comfort or exhortation. affirmation or correction, a “pat on the back” or “kick in the pants.”

Sometimes, I need a kick in the pants (by someone other than Connie). I need correction. I need exhortation.

And I will not get this essential help unless I am committed to *stay* in a local church where I will receive comfort, and affirmation, and “pats on the back” and, *when I need this*, exhortation, correction, and a “kick in the pants.”

When I encounter someone or something I don’t like in my church, and begin to look for other church options, I short-circuit the tough but essential aspect of encouragement—the exhortation, the correction, the kicks in the pants—that are a vital source of spiritual protection.

Think about a three-pronged electrical plug. Some electrical plugs have only two prongs, equivalent (for the point I want to make) to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Some Christ-followers think: That’s enough. That’s plenty. That’s all I need.

The third prong is the ground conductor. It is a round prong, just under the two flat prongs. if a short circuit or another fault develops inside an electrical device, this third prong provides an emergency path for electricity; it allows life-threatening electrical current to ground out at the receptacle instead of running through us, for frying the device, or burning down the house.

For full *protection* and *safety* in our Christian life we need a covenant commitment to a local church—a firm decision to stick and stay where we will be loved and *encouraged* in both ways: with comfort and exhortation.

The Lord's Supper

Another of the "big three" steps of obedience is communion or the Lord's Supper in which we participate, regularly, at the command of Jesus.

At his final meal with his disciples, as recorded in Luke 22:17-20, Jesus took a cup, gave thanks, and said:

"Take this and share it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes." And when He had taken some bread and 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."

The NT church faithfully obeyed Jesus' command. In Acts 2:42 . . .

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

The "breaking of bread" refers to communion, to the Lord's Supper, and to common meals, like our picnic later this morning.

The apostle Paul explains why this symbolic meal is so important in 1 Cor 10:16-17

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a *participation* in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a *participation* in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

The word translated here as "participation" is the Greek word is "koinonia." By this meal, we are connected with Jesus in kinship, in communion—and all the riches of his resurrected life flows into ours.

People eat in many different ways.

This is hard for me to believe, but not everyone likes pretzels and chocolate and Turkey Hill ice cream.

Given a choice, lots of kids want pizza or “fast food.”

One of our daughters has “fun food” Fridays for her family with all kinds of deep-fried delights.

A growing number of people are shifting to “healthy” foods—fruits, nuts, vegetables, fish, legumes, whole grains, and real milk to nourish and strengthen our physical bodies.

Whatever our food preferences, the best of all is “faith food” which is what we eat at the Lord’s Supper.

By this sacred meal we feed on Jesus as the bread of life; so that our hunger for righteousness is satisfied.

The juice reminds us that the blood of Jesus is infinitely precious, sufficient to cover the accumulated sin of all humankind, including ours.

This symbolic meal of bread and juice nourishes our heart, mind, and spirit—all the dimensions of our spiritual life.

Our natural life is sustained and strengthened by healthy food, day by day; our spiritual life is sustained and strengthened by this sacred meal. It is an essential—and ongoing—step of obedience.

Baptism

The third step of obedience among the “big three” is baptism.

We are interchanging the order today to fit the logistics of our service, but baptism is the first of the three steps of obedience, normally concurrent with or followed by church membership, and the Lord’s Supper as an ongoing practice

We are baptized at the command of Jesus.

In Matthew 28:19-29, Jesus said:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

This was the practice of the NT church, as reported in Acts 2:38-41.

In his preaching on the Day of Pentecost, Peter said:

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

And in response, Luke reports:

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

The apostle Paul explains the significance of baptism in Romans 6:3-6

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—

This past week Connie and I watched the 2019 movie, *Harriet*, the story of Harriet Tubman, a runaway slave who traveled 100 miles from a plantation in Maryland to Philadelphia in the free state of Pennsylvania. She returned to the south, where she could have been recaptured, again and again, as a conductor" on the underground railroad. She personally led 70 of slaves to freedom. and in the process became an American hero.

The movie depicts the rigors of escape and the danger from slave catchers. The most hazardous places were bridges that the runaway slaves would have to cross to escape to freedom. The only way around the bridges, where the slave catchers would be waiting, was to cross the rivers—to wade through the water; and this became a metaphor for freedom in the songs the slaves would sing.

Jesus used that same metaphor of water, in baptism, to depict our transition from death to life, darkness to light, from slavery to freedom.

We are slaves to sin until we repent and believe. Baptism is our the public declaration that we trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, and that we intend to leave sin behind.

In her early days in Philadelphia
 the movie depicts Harriet as still having the mindset of a slave.
 She had crossed the river, she was free;
 but at first she still had the ingrained mannerisms and responses of a slave.
 Over time, as embraced her new identity as a free woman,
 she grew in confidence, conviction, determination, and courage—
 into the full realization of her freedom.

Baptism is a watershed moment,
 In baptism we declare our repentance and faith.
 We celebrate our freedom from the slavery of sin.
 Then we grow into our new identity as free men and free women in Christ.
 Baptism is not the *end*; it is the *beginning* of a new life,
 suffused with the resurrection power of Christ Jesus
 for recovery and transformation.

Conclusion

This morning Ked and Kaile and all of us
 are celebrating the “big three” in the Christian life:
 baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and church membership.

These “big three” steps of obedience
 are the foundation, the walls, and protective cover
 for a life that is built on Jesus—and lived for his glory and praise.

When these three are in place,
 for each of us as individual believers,
 and for us as a church, this is God’s holy and sure promise
 in Ephesians 2:19-22.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow
 citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on
 the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as
 the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and
 rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being
 built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.