

Membership (1)

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Preacher: Philip Wells

[0 : 00] Thank you for your patience. I do now have the presentation. I chose as a background that picture of a man building a wall by fitting stones together.

! I think that's entirely appropriate. The Church of Jesus Christ is like a building. We are like living stones. We come to Him.

We're built up together. It's the Lord who builds the house. It's for Him. He does it. He gets the glory. But we're part of it.

So that's the background picture. Hopefully it won't be intrusive. But hopefully when your eye lights on it you will think that there's the right way of thinking.

So that was the plan. I think the plan now is we will have about an hour on what sort of two sessions. One is a biblical session and then one is a looking at recent history session.

[1 : 08] So let's do the biblical bit first. So you will need a Bible. If you haven't got one please try and find one. Let's do the biblical [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] what God has said to us, and understanding the shape of it and the way it all fits together.

You can't get away from that. That's what it is. It isn't just a set of sayings or proverbs. There is an understanding of God's purposes as he reveals them to us.

And I'd like to think for about half an hour about what we're to understand about Christians and the church, and in particular, church membership. So let's start off with an objection, which you might be thinking, and you might be thinking, why bother with this thought, this idea of church membership? And you might say, I've read the New Testament from one end to the other, and I cannot find a single use of the word church membership. I cannot find a single example of anybody who stood in front of a church like you do at Calvary and made those promises.

I can't find that at all. You might say, it's unnecessary. Don't have to do that. You might say, it's useless. It doesn't achieve anything. You might say, it's legalistic. You might say, it's adding to the New Testament rules that aren't there, that Jesus never commanded.

You might even say that this whole idea of making promises to other Christians before the Lord, you know, to love them, making promises to work with them, making promises to pray with them, making promises to stand with them, making promises that it's okay if you're out of order, that they tell you that you're out of order, all that sort of stuff. You say that's opposite to the main points of Christianity. You might say that. You might say, Christianity is about me and the Lord. You might say, Christianity is about being free to do whatever I want. You might say all of those things. And my answer would be, in a way, you're right.

[4 : 04] There is no... I doubt very much in the New Testament whether they did exactly what we do. I doubt whether they did exactly what we do. There's no reference or ceremony called membership in the New Testament. NT means New Testament. But I would also point out that there is no such word as Trinity in the New Testament. But it doesn't stop us believing in the Trinity. It doesn't stop us understanding that the Trinity is there throughout the New Testament. What I would say is that what is meant by church membership, what we mean by church membership, floods the New Testament. So when I say floods the New Testament, I mean wherever you prick the New Testament, you will find the ideas that we are calling membership come spurting out of there because the New Testament is full of this idea and these thoughts. So let's... We've got about half an hour to try and hit some of the nails on the head. And as I was preparing this, I thought, there's so much to say here. Maybe we should spend the month of October, Sunday mornings, all

being well, looking at these things in detail because there's some very rich subjects.

But just trying to knock a few nails on the head in half an hour. What I would say is it is very, very, very clear that New Testament Christianity is about a functioning community that is ordered from outside this world. So let me just say that again. I'm saying that this is something which is not debatable. It is very, very, very clear that New Testament Christianity is about... Well, it's about Jesus Christ. That's... I didn't write that. I hope that's taken as read. It's centrally about Jesus Christ, that being about Jesus Christ involves us as night follows day in a functioning community community that is ordered from outside this world. I chose my words as carefully as I could. A functioning community means it works, it does stuff. So, in contrast with if you join a motoring organization, you join the AA. Anybody here in the AA? Automobile Association, I mean by that. Well, just me. Okay.

Are you in the AA as well? I had no idea. I had no idea you were in the AA. And to be honest, it makes no difference to me whatsoever that you're in the AA. Because the AA is a community, but we don't have to love each other, do we? I mean, I do love you, but we don't have to do that to be in the AA. But it's hardly a community. We're all members of the AA, you and I. But what difference does that make to the way we think of each other? The church is a functioning community. So, we do know one another.

And it is ordered from outside this world. So, it's different to the National Trust or the Automobile Association or the Bevan Dean Community Association. All of those things are generated. They build their constitution. They have their meetings as they prefer. They make that up themselves. That's exactly right for them to do that. But the community of the church is ordered not from us, but from someone outside this world who is the Lord of the church, who's Jesus Christ. And the church is constituted not by us, but by him. And that makes the church a very, very different thing to the knitting group or the Batcham Ramblers or whatever it might be. It's a functioning community that is ordered from outside this world. So, individual Christians, are they like pepper sprinkled from a pepper pot? There they are.

Answer, no. Individual Christians, are they like snooker balls on a snooker table that bump into each other from time to time. But that's all there is to it. They just go bang, bang, bang, bang. That's fine.

[8 : 59] No. I think Christians are more like water in a water droplet. That's supposed to be a water droplet. I ran out of artistic, I ran out of time for the artistic, the aesthetic side of that. Have you noticed that if you sprinkle water on the worktop in the kitchen and the water drops get near each other, they sort of go boom and cling together and make something? They make a globule and the globule tends to have a certain shape. It tries to get as round as it possibly can. And I would say Christians are a bit like that because when they meet together, they tend to bond together. Have you had that experience?

You've met believing Christians perhaps at work and you have a bit of a bond? Can I pray for you? Did you read something in your Bible this morning? And it tends to, and you get little groups of Christians like Christian unions, the universities for example, they meet each other and they tend to form a little globule like water. But of course, none of those pictures is what the New Testament says about the community of Christians. It gives the picture of a body, which as you realise, has all sorts of implications. So a body, you'll appreciate the medical knowledge that went into this superb drawing. But there's the parts of the body, so you've got feet, arms, hands, eyes, nose, hair, internal organs. I didn't dare try and draw any internal organs.

The word membership should be thought of as nothing more nor less than the parts of the body. So in the authorised version, the old authorised version, it would say, don't you know that you are the body of Christ and each one is a member of it?

So think of member as meaning a part of the body, the hand, the arm, the foot. The way the church of Jesus Christ is, is that it fits together and functions as each people being members. So Christians are not like grains of pepper, they're not like snooker balls, they're not even like water droplets, but like with a body with many parts of functioning, ordered community. And if you think of the ordering thought, in different, the body idea is used in different ways, but one way is to say Christ is the head and we are the parts of his body. So if Christ is the head, we're to understand that he, without wishing to read back 21st century medical knowledge into first century literature, but I think it is saying that the head is the important thing that directs the way the rest of the body goes. Does that make sense? Okay, thank you.

[12:21] Thank you. So I want to hit about 10, I think this is what I'm going to do. Yeah, I'm going to hit about 10 nails, which I think are the things that we need to light on to understand New Testament themes. These are fundamental New Testament themes. When I say fundamental, I don't mean I'm going to try and prove church membership by finding one obscure verse and reading it in a rather odd way that nobody else would agree with because I'm a Baptist and try and persuade you like that. I don't want to do it like that. I want to say, here are some mainstream fundamental ideas. And when we have church membership, what we're simply doing is saying yes to these. We're just standing up and saying to one another, yes, yes for that, yes for that, yes for that, yes for that. As opposed to saying, please excuse me, but as saying it as opposed to saying no, no, no, no, no. Or saying, well, slightly, or well, maybe under some certain circumstances.

Being church members just saying yes. Yep, yep, yep, yep, yep. Okay, what are the themes?

Number one, love. Please can we look at John chapter 13, verse 34.

John chapter 13, verse 34. 34 and 35.

John 13, 34 and 35.

Julia, please could you read those two verses in a nice loud voice? And you command, I give you, love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, all men will know that you are my disciples.

[14:39] You love one another. Thank you very much. So let me ask you, first of all, would you say this was an obscure verse, somewhere on the edge of the New Testament that doesn't carry much weight. Would you think it is that?

No. In fact, we can be very sure it is not an obscure verse right on the edge of something for a number of reasons, which we could do more slowly, but I'll try to do quickly.

It's a command. A new command I give you. And actually, if you look at the number of commands in John's Gospel that Jesus gives, it's actually one.

There is one command to love one another. And it is supposed to actually happen. By this, all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

Now, I don't think Jesus is saying he expects all, meaning to say, let's say, somebody in a village in Pakistan, to know that we here in Brighton are his disciples.

[15:49] He doesn't mean it like that. How could that person in Pakistan possibly know that we're his disciples and see the way that we love one another? But it does mean that, in principle, if the gentleman from Pakistan came and had kids, brought them to the Caterpillars group, that he'd be able to say, oh, there's a sort of atmosphere here in this group.

They seem to get on very well together in this group. There's something rather special about this.

Maybe when I come next week, actually, they'll be bad-tempered and irritated with each other.

You come again next week. Actually, they still seem to love one another. There's something going on here. It ought to really happen. And my point is that in church membership, we simply say yes to that.

I'm up for that. I don't want it to be theoretical that, oh, yeah, I love all Christians. I love them all.

Rather like the way that the American president, I don't know whether Donald Trump might do this one, I think American presidents in the past have said to a huge gathering, I love you all.

Well, how can that possibly be true? If you've got real people, if you're going to love them, it's got to be real people that you actually know, actually care about. If they're poorly, you go around and see them.

[17:19] That's what love is, isn't it? So, number one, love. Fundamental thing, being a church member is saying yes to that. Number two, Mark 10, 42, service.

42 to 45.

Mark 10, 42 to 45. Please could Ruth read that in a nice loud voice. Mark 10, 42 to 45. Jesus called them together and said, You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles, born in Lutheran, and their high official exercise authority over them.

Not so did you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slain of all.

For even the son of a man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a rather than any. Thank you very much. Thank you very much.

[18:36] So let me ask the same question. Do you think this is an obscure verse tucked on the edge of the New Testament that doesn't really count for much in any particular way at all? Do you

think it's that sort of verse?

No. No. And if I were to ask why you think that, you might say it's Jesus speaking, and you might say it's Jesus giving an insight into the fundamental motivation and methodology of his whole mission.

Verse 45. Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

He says, that's what motivates me. That's my method of life to serve, and that is a key value in any and all of my followers.

Verse 43. Not so with you. Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. Church membership is just saying yes to that.

[19:50] It's just saying yes, I agree with that. And I don't want that to be theoretical. I don't want it to be a bit pick and choose. You know, I'll serve those people on Thursday, and a month later I'll serve those people over there, and I might have a little break from serving for a month or two.

And it's saying my day in, day out, my week in, week out will be, I've got a group of people, and I'm going to put it into practice that I will be serving in that functioning community.

So being a church member is just saying yes to that. Does that make sense? Yes. Thank you. Let's look at another mainline teaching.

So this is the teaching and gifts. Romans chapter 12. Now this is a point at which it's crying out for a sort of half-hour treatment, but I will just try and restrain myself and just find a nail and hit it on the head if possible.

So Romans 12 moves, notice the first word, therefore, and in the first 11 chapters of Romans, he's given us a very comprehensive, profound description of the depths and height and complexity and wonder of the Christian gospel.

[21:28] So that's what salvation is. And then he says, chapter 12, verse 1, therefore, I urge you, in view, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing, and perfect will. So saying, now this is where you're at, now you've received the gospel, you are now in this position of offering yourselves wholeheartedly, without reservation, willingly and gladly to God as a living sacrifice.

And what does that look like? Verse 3, By the grace given me, I say to every one of you, don't think of yourself more highly than you ought. Rather, think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you, just as each of us has one body with many members. And these members do not all have the same function. So in Christ, we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.

[22:49] Then he gives a list. The man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve. If it is teaching, let him teach.

If it is encouraging, let him encourage. If it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously. If it is leadership, let him govern diligently.

If it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. And you see, he moves seamlessly from the gospel and the individual response to the community and says, that's how you live it, that's how you do it. And we have this whole matter of if you are a believer, you have gifts. Gifts is one way of saying it. The other way of saying it is you are a part of the body with a function, a way of blessing others, a way of contributing to the whole. And it's interesting, that list of gifts, some of them, some of them are quite mundane.

[24:00] Verse, halfway through verse 8, if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously. There's a, it doesn't say spiritual gifts, it's actually the New Testament hardly ever, I think maybe once, says spiritual gifts.

But, if this is a gift given by God, let's call it a spiritual gift, this is having a good income. You've got a good income, you can give some money.

That's a gift that God may have given you and may not have given other people in the fellowship.

Well, if that's your gift, you do it. So, there's a whole teaching there about gifts, which we will save to

another time.

Let's, did that make sense? Yes. Yeah. The approval rating is going down because that was only Mark that time. Did that make sense?

Yes. Yeah, okay. Yes, well, I thought it would, but I'd just like to make sure that everybody's still with me. 1 Corinthians 12. Now, this is another one of the classic passages on the body.

[25 : 17] And we did actually look at it at the prayer time the other evening. 1 Corinthians 12. And rather than try and do the whole thing, let's just pick up verses 4 to 6.

In case you're thinking 12 verse 1 says, ah, it does say about spiritual gifts, I will say that the word gifts is not in the original, it just says about spirituals.

Whatever he may mean. 4 to 6. There are different kinds of gifts, but the same spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.

There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all, presumably all, rather than all men. That's Trinity, isn't it?

Am I right? Spirit, Lord, God. This is the Holy Trinity at work. When he says Spirit, he puts it in terms of gifts.

[26 : 23] When he says Lord, this is chapter 12 verse 5, he puts it in terms of service. When it is God, he puts it in terms of working.

So I ask the same question, is this thought a sort of bit off the wall peripheral teaching that only a few cranky people would mention?

And the answer is no. It's a very profound, fundamental thing about the community which God forms through the gospel.

In this community, this functioning community, ordered from outside itself, the Holy Spirit gives gifts through the Lord. There is serving, and God is at work in this community.

It's a community unlike any other. it is from outside this world that it functions. And the point that I was going to put in there, and I can't, let's just see if I can find a verse that will do it quickly.

[27 : 37] Verse 21, we're talking about parts of the body, and in verse 21 it says, the eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you, and the head cannot say to the feet, I don't need you.

On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable are treated with special honor.

And verse 26, if one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. So I've put that down as interdependence.

This idea that I'm not meant to live the Christian life on my own, as a snooker ball bouncing around and hitting into other Christians from time to time.

I'm not meant to live the Christian life as a grain of pepper that just gets scattered and left to itself. I am meant to live the Christian life in a functioning community, in which I see other people of whom I say, I need you, and they say to me, and I need you, and I say to them, if you are suffering, I suffer, and they say to me, and if you are suffering, we suffer.

[29 : 01] We're in this together. it is so obvious, so clear. Well, there we are.

Membership is simply saying yes to that. Yeah, I'm up for that. I'm not a grain of pepper on the outside watching you lot. I'm not a snooker ball who will bump into you every now and again.

I mean this. Number five is another thing from 1 Corinthians, unity and variety.

you will have noticed, you could just look around and check, Christians come in all sorts of different shapes and sizes, don't they? All sorts of different types of people.

And you might look around and you might even think privately, I wouldn't, if I weren't a Christian, I wouldn't actually even know some of these other people.

[30 : 05] people. And I might not have bumped into them, I might not even want to know them. But here we are as Christians and because of that we have this enormous range of different people.

And of course that's part of the teaching of the body, isn't it? You have hands, you have eyes, you have feet, you have intestines, you have a liver, you have a kidney, they all look different.

Some of them are presentable, some of them are a bit unpresentable, some of them, you know, your kidney and so on, you wouldn't hang a picture of that over your living room, would you? That's my kidney there, rather nice.

But you jolly well need your kidney, don't you? Where would you be if you didn't have the kidneys? And the New Testament gives us this amazing way of having unity and variety together.

variety. Most groups go for the unity and cannot cope with the variety. They can't cope with it because, you know, if it's the railway engine society, you've actually all got to be interested in railway engines.

[31 : 23] And that doesn't give you much of a way of coping with other differences that there may be. but the church of Jesus Christ is different.

We have unity in variety. And that's the richness and wonder of it. And I'll move on. Matthew 18 is about accountability.

And this is one of the most robust angles, or one of the most robust nails that I'm going to try and at least tap on the head this morning.

Matthew chapter 18. This is when things go adrift. And as Christians, we acknowledge from day one that we are sinners, don't we?

That's part of what it is to a Christian. So we know that we're sinners, we know that we've got it badly wrong in the past, we know that because we remain sinners until we go to glory, there's a possibility that we will get it badly wrong in the future.

[32 : 38] We confess our sins to the Lord day by day, and there is the possibility that we will need somebody to tell us, brother, you're out of order on that.

If you carry on doing that, you're going to wreck everything for you and other people as well. And that is what this bit is about. Matthew 18, 15 to, let's do 15 to 18.

So, Matthew 18, 15 to 18. John Bickley, could you read that to us please? Yes. Yes.

Yes. Thank you very much.

Thank you very much. So just quickly, just to recap what's happening there, this is when something goes wrong. I think it's a sort of general template that covers a lot of things, but the particular thing is here, if somebody has sinned against you, you go and show them their fault, and you do it in a private way, which preserves his dignity and doesn't get everybody else involved in taking it.

[34 : 23] Taking sides. If he listens to you, you've won your brother over. If he doesn't listen, you take one or two other people with you. If that doesn't work either, then what do you do? Now you say, what do you do? Do you take it to ACAS? Do you take it to the European Court of Human Rights? Do you go to the police?

Now, safeguarding, child safeguarding sort of puts a bit of a, what's the word, fly in the ointment, because we now have legal obligations to tell the police things.

But that's, let's put that to one side for the moment here. What he says is that the highest court to which you can take this is the church.

If he refuses to listen, tell it to the church. Now, Jesus does not mean the church universal. He does not mean all the thousands and thousands and millions of people who are believers. That's his church.

He doesn't say tell it to all the people. He means tell it to that little water droplet that's condensed where you are. Tell that group of people.

[35 : 45] And Jesus is saying, I am so with that group of people, that functioning community. I'm so ordering that, that if somebody doesn't listen to my church, if they won't listen to my church, then treat them as a pagan or a tax collector.

And it goes on to say that whoever is bound on earth will be, what you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. And what you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. He's saying that the church, that this community has that authority to, as it were, speak the things that I'm speaking in heaven or I endorse the things that they speak on earth.

That's a huge thing that's said about the church. And if you're just a grain of pepper, nothing to do with the church, how can that work?

Or if you're just a snooker ball that bounces off, how can that possibly work? Being a church member is saying yes to that. Yeah. If I go wrong, there is a church. I'm just saying yes to this. And it's you guys.

That if you seriously tell me I'm wrong, I need to listen to you. And if I still won't listen, I accept that you will treat me like a pagan or a tax collector.

[37 : 16] It's taking seriously and saying yes on this matter of accountability. So let me hurry on. 1 Timothy 3.14 says something about the church.

And it says, 1 Timothy 3.14.

He says, And without trying to make too much of it, what is he saying the church is there?

He's saying the church is God's household, family. And he's saying it's the pillar and foundation of the truth.

And what does he mean? I suppose if we were own Catholics, we would say that what he means is that if the Pope says something, then we know it's true. So the church is the source of truth.

[38 : 41] I don't think that's what he's saying. I think what he's saying is, in this world, there is darkness and there is truth. And you find the truth somewhere.

You find the truth being upheld somewhere. You find the truth being proclaimed somewhere. And the somewhere is the church. The church has a mission and a purpose into this world. It isn't just for mutual benefit. Although it is for mutual benefit. It isn't just for that. You know, a body isn't just so that it can be healthy. A body is used for, you know, if you're a bricklayer, for laying bricks.

If you're a carpenter, you use your body for making furniture out of wood. And the body of Jesus Christ is there not just to sort of do bodybuilding and that sort of thing.

Don't look at me for a clue on that. But to spread the light of Jesus Christ into this world, to speak the truth into this world. Now, so I'll just, I think I'll do this almost in one sentence.

[39 : 48] The church has a shared beginning. I think we need to look at this. Acts 2, 38 to 31. Acts 2, 38 to 41.

Acts 2, 38 to 41. Acts 2, 38 to 41.

Christopher, could you read that for us, please? Amen. Amen. Thank you very much indeed.

Here in this text, there is gospel. Peter is asked, what shall we do? What shall we do to be saved? And he replies, repent and be baptized.

You receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. You receive the forgiveness of your sins. This is the promise of the gospel. It applies to you. It applies to your children. It applies to the Gentiles.

[41 : 33] It applies to the Welsh. It applies to the Portuguese. It applies to everybody. That promise applies to everybody. It's not saying everybody should be baptized. It says the promise of the gospel applies to everybody.

And what he says is, when you begin the Christian life through baptism, you are added to the number of the church.

Do you notice the sociological aspects of it? Save yourselves from this corrupt generation. So that's the people you used to knock around with. And you now are added to the number of the church.

And you could well say, well, Philip, you're making it much more complicated than it needs to be because you not only baptize people, but you have a church membership as well. And I say, yeah, well, there's a degree of truth in that.

I'm not trying to make things more complicated than they need to be. But church membership is saying yes to that. It's saying, yes, I crossed that boundary from death to life, from that world to this community, and I consciously, I take that on board.

[42 : 47] Yes, I have joined this number. Put me down. Count me. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 2,999, 3,000. My name's on there. Okay. Okay.

And number nine, the church not only has a shared beginning, but has a shared meal. And the shared meal is the communion.

Let me move on because I've tried to hit those nails quickly but didn't quite succeed. So a church member is not a super Christian, but a normal Christian.

A church member can be young or old. A church member can be new or very experienced. A church member can be overwhelmed by the flood or walking on water.

A church member can be highly educated or actually not much good at reading. A church member can be a doctor, a barrister, a single parent, someone seeking work, somebody who is white Anglo-Saxon or Albanian or Moroccan or whatever.

[44 : 00] What a church member is, is someone who says yes to the package of what it is to follow Jesus. Okay.

That's the end of that bit. And so I'll stop and change gear. Has anybody got a burning question they would like to ask? We haven't got time for a long discussion session at this point.

Anybody got a burning question they would like to ask? Yes. Was it 1 Corinthians 12?

Okay. I'll tell you what, Steve.

I'm not going to spend a long time on it because of the way the morning's scheduled. We can...

Yeah. I did 4 to 6.

[45 : 06] I left out quite a few bits, actually. Yeah. I had a big thought there about the various gifts and the best of I see. Yeah. What's the question?

What is your church again? Do you know what the gifts? Well... What is your church again? It's a big question.

What I would say about Corinthians is he's describing the situation there. I don't think he's saying everybody ought to have all of these things.

In fact, he goes on to say that later on. And I don't have any reason from the Bible for saying it's impossible these things should exist.

But what I do have reason from the Bible, which is in the next chapter and the chapter after that, is that he says some things are more useful than others.

[46 : 07] So, if you look at 1 Corinthians 14... Where is it? 1 Corinthians 14, verse 18 and 19.

1 Corinthians 14, verse 18 and 19.

Yes. Is it the argument to that possibility? Well, I think rather than try and answer that straight off, I would say that we are given criteria for saying what is actually helpful for the church.

And he says here five intelligible words would actually be a lot more helpful than a thousand in a tongue.

So, somebody standing at the door saying, it's really good to see you. I've been praying for you. It's a helpful thing. And he's a lot more helpful than if we had a huge, long tongue session and nobody understood what happened.

[47 : 40] Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I'll say we'll talk about that.

Yeah. Any other questions that anybody wants to ask or any contributions? Okay.

So this is my bit that follows on from Chris's excellent history. I don't know whether I've got 18. So looking back at history and saying, what is Calvary DNA?

Or the subtitle being, everybody should be a church member. But the question is to understand whether this is actually the church that you need to be a member of.

Because we take views and we do things a certain way. And you might say, that's not really in my heart to do that. Okay. Well, be a church member.

[48 : 57] But don't necessarily be a church member in this church. It's just going to make you unhappy. Well, what sort of things are I talking about? So I don't know whether I got this.

Did I get this right? 1896, the meeting for railway workers? 1876. And that's Mrs. Gates whom we've thought about. And I think we've done all of this sort of stuff.

Back in those days, it was a mission hall. We need to learn from the past.

We don't want to idolize the past. We don't want to live in the past. We don't want to have a church, the main glory of which is how it used to be.

Some churches are like that. And you can go and look in the graveyard and see where Pastor so-and-so was buried. Or Pastor so-and-so. And that's the glory of the church. We don't want a church in which its glory is how things used to be.

[50 : 00] These people, people of whom we should admire. If you actually read what's written on the plaque about Mrs. Gates, it's very inspiring.

However, I would say that today we would be very uncomfortable to have a lady preaching or leading the church.

So we're grateful for Mrs. Gates, but we're not going to take Mrs. Gates as being our model for the future in that sense. So I've just put some sort of things that used to happen insofar as I know about them.

Of course, I wasn't there for these. You have to do the maths. But in the 90s, 60s, and 70s, I think I got this, Ray, from something that you'd written. The flavor of the month would be Boys Brigade and Girls Brigade.

And those things were beginning to decline. And it would be a church that would have harvest festivals. It used to have a Boys Brigade Sunday evening, in which case people from, regular people from the church were welcomed in by old members of the Boys Brigade.

[51 : 07] Who hadn't been to church for years and years and years. Whose Christian faith was something in the past when they were teenagers. But the wars and life had just knocked most of it out of them.

That's the sort of thing that used to be. We used to sing Sankey's sacred songs and solos. Moody and Sankey's sacred songs and solos.

Which were flavor of the month in that era. That would be your Graham Kendrick and your Matt Redman of that time. But of course, it gets frozen in time.

So, 20, 30, 40 years later, we were still singing. Down in the ranch, my mother's moss-covered bucket, lay by the well.

You know, that was in the book. What was all that about? No idea. Very devotional songs. Can I think of Moody and Sankey one?

[52 : 11] Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine. Yeah. Devotional, personal assurance. Songs, perhaps I think a bit unbalanced in that sort of way. Not trying to say that everything, we should just emulate everything in the past or idolize it.

Just saying this is where it's come from. This is Pastor Les Hill. Who's a big, big man. And a big influence on the church.

He came here, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think I got this from what you wrote, Ray. Came in 1964. He died in service 1989. He was a school teacher.

He was never paid by the church for his work. He did it all in his spare time. Did the work of approximately 10 men. He really did. Looked after his aged mother.

Ran a school. Came back. Sat down. Read the Argus. Had a cup of tea. Then he would make a meal for eight or nine students. Students. Then he would do Bible study.

[53 : 13] Just amazing. Amazing man. Les would, if you wanted to encapsulate Les, you would have said things like this. He loved the Lord. He loved his word.

He loved his house. He would have put it that way. Every Sunday he would cook for 20 people and we'd have a church lunch in the houses next door, which is, as you will remember from what Chris said, we used to own.

And so please don't think that student work is something that has only recently been invented. Les was doing this back in those days at great cost and with a great heart.

He wanted to be a missionary. The Lord didn't let him be a missionary, but the Lord brought the mission to him. And he really, he really valued that. And he, he was wonderful caring for people. That was his profession. He was a school teacher, worked with people with particular needs. And he was, he, far, far more than I ever got the hang of.

[54 : 17] He could understand people. He had an open home for international students and national students. So I include John Benton in that, who came along as a young man.

Now, John Benton went on to be the minister of Churchy Baptist, Churchy Street Baptist Church. He's the editor of Evangelicals Now.

He's actually quite a significant figure in UK evangelicalism. And he came along as a student.

He said, oh, right there he does. And he came along as a student. And Les gave him his first opportunity to preach, which was a failure.

And Les said, I don't think you should, I think you should just leave that. And how wrong Les was. But I'm just giving you a flavor of that. And one of the things that Les brought to the church with Moody and Sankey songs and all the rest of it, which you'll see in a moment, is that he learned himself.

[55 : 23] And he taught the church. I'm going to use this label, a reformed grasp of salvation. Now, that sentence needs unpacking.

We take at least a sermon to unpack all that. But he brought that to the church. Now, the church had, at the risk of caricaturing it, had been brought up on what you would call simple gospel.

Just tell me the old, old story. Tell me about Jesus and his precious blood. And if you don't mind, tell it to me fairly quickly, because I'd like to be out of here by half past seven.

So it was said of the railway mission, I am told, that you could get saved quicker in the railway mission than any other place in... And I'm also told that on a Sunday evening, that the pulpit would be here, and those shutters would be open, and the courting couples would sit at the back and hold hands.

You could have the gospel preached to you, you could be saved, and out by half past seven quicker than anywhere else. He taught that there was a lot more to the Bible than that.

[56 : 30] And he did so, as I understand, through considerable opposition. And he just patiently taught what the Bible said. If we'd had a difficult members' meeting, or if we'd had a difficult discussion, we'd go back there, because I used to live in the house there.

He would make a big jam sandwich, and eat the jam sandwich. And the more jam there was in it, I think the more comfort he needed, let's put it that way. By Reformed, and the word Calvinistic means pretty much the same thing.

The Anglican Church, incidentally, is Calvinistic in this sense. That God rules, that what he wants to happen, happens. Nobody can stop him.

God isn't, in fact, sitting in heaven, wondering, I wonder if anybody's going to believe in me today. I wonder if anybody would believe at all. God isn't doing it. God knows his plan.

It's deeper than we can understand, but he knows his plan. God saves by his grace. God, bottom line, God says, there are a load of obnoxious sinners out there.

[57 : 46] They deserve to go to hell, but I'm not going to let all of them go to hell. This one, this one, this one, this one. I want to be with me. I will make sure that happens. And from the point of view of me as a Christian, you as a Christian, we are saying, I was lost and dead in my sin.

He saved me. To God be the glory. That's the bottom line of it. And he taught that. And here's another picture, I think, from the drop box.

And this is it all. Now, does that? Can you see that? Yeah, so there's at the back there. These are the pews. This is the wooden TARDIS machine that covered the door there so that when you entered, you hadn't really got any idea where you went.

It was sort of a dark box with wooden panels. It was almost like, if you imagine, a garden shed just put there. Some kind person put a garden shed there. And the sort of red curtains.

Was this Mrs. Lake? Because I was thinking about her this morning. I'm not sure whether it was her, but one of the old ladies said to me when I was a student, she said to me, Young man, lean on the Lord.

[59 : 06] The harder you lean, the more he likes it. Is it Mrs. Henderson? I don't think it's Mrs. Henderson. That's Doris Pocock, isn't it? That's Doris, yeah. Yeah, yeah. That's Julian.

That's Tony Banks. That's the two Phil's. That's little Phil. I was big Phil. That's little Phil. That's the son of one of the railway workers, isn't it?

Whose name I can't remember. Just gives you, that's a snapshot in time. Not saying, oh, those are the good old days. Let's make it like that. Just say that's a snapshot of how it used to be. We're not living in the past, but that's what it used to be like.

And Les, oh, I'm sorry, I clicked, brought to the church consecutive expository word ministry. So rather than taking a favorite text dotting around week by week, he would say, we're doing Romans.

[60 : 07] So this week we'll do chapter one, next week we'll do chapter two, and keep on going. That sort of thing. And correct me if I'm wrong, I think that's what he brought to the church.

And that's something I don't regret. That's something I don't say, that's for the past. We know better than that. That's something I think he, that was a gain which we ought not to let go of.

And I think the same thing for his, the depth of doctrine understanding that he brought. That was a gain that we ought not to let go of. I mean, we have a mature take on all of that, but we shouldn't let go of that.

There was a period where this was all being worked through. And it took some working through. Of course, it was all rather new stuff.

We weren't the only church working this through at that time. In a little way, it was a sort of revival of interest, of people becoming Christians, of people having a very steep learning curve of things.

[61 : 21] In a little bit of a way like revival. But things we worked through, what does it mean then, if we're going to be gospel in this deepest sense of understanding that it's God who saved me?

Reformed, I'll use that word. So, there are things we had to work through. Does it mean being antiquarian? Antiquarian means you love old things. Old books, you know, the old books, brown books, blow the dust off them.

The pages all crinkle. Wonderful. People get really into old books. Yeah, okay. Good for you.

But we don't all have to like old books. We don't all have to like the oldness of the book. Because there is a way that Christians in this grouping of Reformed can think, Ah, the heart of the matter is just to be old.

So, you'd use language, old language, because that's where it's at. So, prayers will be offered as thou. Well, we thank thee that thou hast vouched safe unto thy servant this day thy great gift of.

[62 : 43] As if that was the holy thing, is to make it old. And we worked through that. And we came to the conclusion that being old-fashioned is not a virtue. I mean, you get good stuff in old books.

But it doesn't mean you have to be old. And we also worked through, how do we relate to Christians who wouldn't sign up to the understanding and who wouldn't read the old books?

Should we separate from them? And there are branches of Reformed Christianity which say, Because we see things so much clearer, we can slate off two-thirds of our brothers and sisters because they don't see it the same way.

Should we separate from Anglicans? Are they even Christians? And we had to work that through. And you might say, well, you know, how stupid of you to have to take so long to come to a conclusion about something which is so obvious.

Well, okay, it did take us a long time. It was quite a painful process. But we worked out that it was all right in the end, it took us a while, to join something like the Sussex Gospel Partnership that has Anglicans in it and to allow ourselves to pray for CCK, even though they have a very different way of doing things in some ways.

[64 : 03] And we also had painful battles about whether we're allowed to sing modern songs. So modern in those days would have been Graham Kendrick. But were we allowed to sing that?

Or was that betraying fundamental principles? And in the end, we came to the conclusion, if the words are good, let's sing it.

If the tune's good, that's even better. Look at the words first. But the author doesn't have to have died to allow us to sing it.

Church culture. If you go to Northern Ireland, where there are Reformed churches, Stuart McNary told me this.

He was converted in such a church. And Stuart McNary was the pastor at Holland Road some years ago. When he was converted, he was converted by people who wore dark raincoats like the Reverend Ian Paisley.

[65 : 04] And he thought once he was a Christian, if he was really going to be a proper Christian, he too should get a dark raincoat. And you work through that. Is it disrespectful to preach without wearing a tie?

Is it disrespectful not to wear wearing a hat? Should the meeting begin with silence? Or should we be greeting one another as we do now?

And all those things we had to work through. Les would have been very, very big on this text. I think it's Hebrews 10.25. Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together as the manner of some is. He would have hit that nail on the head with a huge sledgehammer. You need to be here. Make sure you're here at the assembling of yourselves together to encourage one another.

So much the more as you see the day approaching, you just need to be here. He would have hit that nail on the head very, very hard. Another thing that Les would have brought to the church, which I don't regret, which I think is a gain, is that my understanding of when he came was that people would say, oh, this church isn't doing very well.

[66 : 26] The pastor isn't doing his work properly. And to which he would say, it's not the pastor who makes the church succeed. It's you lot. And if you don't pull your weight, then don't blame me.

If you don't pull your weight, then it's your responsibility, which is why the membership service has got in it. Membership does not bring so much privilege as responsibility.

I actually think it brings both, but he wanted to push the button of responsibility because there would be people sitting on the sofas saying, you know, pastor hasn't come and done this, pastor hasn't done that.

And he was trying to push back at that and say, the work of the church is not just one person, it's everybody. It's everybody. And he would even get, I remember one gentleman saying, well, they've decided to cancel the Sunday school or something like that.

To which the reply would be, it was not they who decided it because we had a meeting, we understood the decision, we decided it. And having made that decision, we say that's us.

[67 : 37] And that's the sort of thing that Les would have pushed out very hard. And another thing that he would have pushed out hard was that the doctrines of grace, so the understanding of God saving people by his grace, should go hand in hand with what Les would have called a gracious character.

Let me explain that one. Because when you read the old books and understand the doctrines of grace, you can get puffed up.

You can think that to be a Christian is just to know more. And the more I know, the better a Christian I am. And of course, the subtle thing is, and the easier it is for me to look down on people who don't know more.

Don't know as much as me. But Les would have said, the more you know, that really ought to change your character so that you become more like Jesus Christ, more patient, more understanding, more aware of your own sin, more prayerful, more witnessing, all these sorts of things.

And he would have said, to understand those doctrines sets you up to be more gracious as a person. And of course, that isn't always the connection that gets made.

[68 : 55] But Les would have pushed hard for that. So where did we get to? Les died. We had a full-time minister called John Cropley who departed in 1989.

There was the possibility of being kicked out from this building by the railway mission. I'm putting this in a rather caricatured way. We had planning blight, as Chris explained.

There was a hole in the roof. I can't remember which end it was. But we weren't allowed. Okay, we're all pointing in different directions. It was up there. But it was unsafe to be in this room.

So we all met next door. And given the number of people, it was revival because we were in a room here that was two-thirds empty. And when we moved there, it was two-thirds full just by moving room.

And of course, we were stuck because we didn't feel inclined to try and raise money to mend the roof because we weren't sure whether we were going to be kicked out a year later.

[69 : 59] It just didn't make sense. We met in the back hall only and for seven years, we prayed about this. I don't think that's an exaggeration. For seven years, we had this hanging over us.

The Lord kept us going. We prayed. And during that time, my friend Richard Hart, who was a gentleman who was here just a few weeks ago, said to me on the phone, well, Phil, is there actually a reason why God would want a church there in Preston Circus rather than anywhere else?

And we thought, is it a matter of indifference? Is God opening a way for us? Okay, we don't have a building. Let's meet in a school. Could we meet in Downs Infants?

No. Could we meet in Downs Junior? Apparently not. Could, oh, there's a place up the road. We went and met in a hall opposite Preston Park.

Seemed very nice. They would have rented it to us. It then came off the market, I think. But we tried those things out for size. And it came back to, I think God wants us to be here.

[71 : 09] And what can be done here that couldn't be done in Patchen or in Preston Park or in Downs Infant School? And we set about praying and thinking, what are the specific opportunities here?

And that led us into various things. I mean, various things like, I went round and visited the local traders because I thought, I can say to these traders, I come from the church up the road, near you.

Come to visit you because I thought if I waited for you to visit me, it would be quite a long wait. So I've come to visit you. Good morning. How are you? And I went to visit all the traders like that.

And so on and so on and so on. I think I might have got a list here somewhere. But in these recent years, we did join the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches.

We did join the Sussex Gospel Partnership. I don't know why I put that there twice. We have done outreach to the community. We did a street party. We've got involved with the car park and got involved with the traders, got involved with London Road.

[72 : 22] And at that time, we had new people come along, like Chris and Katie Fry. I don't know if you've ever heard of them. And the work has grown.

You need to understand that. It hasn't always been like it is. We're like it is because God has blessed and led. And our job these days is to say, where is God leading us now?

What's the thing to be doing now? We're not living in the past, not trying to reconstruct the past. We're trying to learn positive from the past, hold the good things. What has God got for us in the future in his grace?

So in summary, we are a church that believes the gospel spoken by God in the Bible. We preach freely offering Christ to all, but knowing that God saves by his grace.

We believe that God sets the agenda by his word and rules the church by his word and spirit. And that's us, a functioning community, ordered from outside this world by the Lord Jesus.

[73 : 29] Okay, I'm sorry, I've overrun. So let's, let me pray and then I'll hand over to Chris. Lord, thank you that we're able to review the past like this and to review your word also.

And help us in our generation, not to be hankering after the past or hindered by it, but to understand wisely how you want us to go forward into the future.

Together, please encourage us with this. Please enthuse us with this. Please enable us with this. Please humble us in this. And to you be all the glory.

Amen. Amen. I'm sorry, Chris, I've overrun.