

Following and Church

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[0 : 00] How many memberships do you have? I think I've got something like half a dozen memberships at the moment. I'm a member at Crunch Gym. I have a subscription to Netflix and Disney Plus at the moment.

I've been a supporter of sporting teams. I need to become a member of the Chatswood RSL because there's a really great Chinese restaurant up the top there. I'm part of a wine club. I've been part of a coffee club. And I dip in and out of these. I'll get rid of Disney Plus for a while. I'll bring it back. I'll do something else.

I'll give them my dollars. I'll be one of their members. I'll go on their books to boost up their numbers. And I'll choose when I go of what I'm part of, of what I give my time to, my attention to. And if I don't like it, I'll vote by cancelling my membership, not attending, those kinds of things. I wonder if it's possible for us that we think of being a church member as just one of any other membership.

[1 : 09] You know, I've been signed up to St. Paul's for a couple of years, maybe since I was baptized or maybe I was born into the church. And I attend. I give my dollars. I'm on their books as a member of the church.

And I dip in and out. I'll pause my membership as other things come up and life gets busy. Maybe I'm still on a trial membership and I'm not really ready to commit yet. But is it possible that we have our view of what it means to be a part of a church, a member of church, shaped not by God, but by the world around us?

We are in our vision series. A time to cast the vision of the church, not just for this year, but for the next five years of who we want to be as we follow Jesus together.

And we want to be a church who is going deeper into relationship with God and deeper into relationship with each other as we follow this Jesus. At the start of the series, Steve told us that as we follow this Jesus, God has given us three wonderful gifts to help us do that.

The first was the Bible and prayer. That because we want to have a relationship with God, God has given us relationship with Him. We can actually talk to Him. We can pray to Him.

[2 : 28] We can be in relationship with Him. The second gift is the Holy Spirit, who opens our eyes to see who Jesus is, to understand who God is, who prompts us, who calls us to be more like Him, who is changing us from the inside.

And the third gift that God has given us to help us as we follow Jesus is the church. People to help us as we walk towards Jesus.

Colleagues, brothers, sisters. But to understand today, as we look at what it means to be the church, we're going to see two things. First of all, we're going to question, what is the church? And second, what is the point? What is the purpose of church? And the challenge for us today will be to have God define who the church is and who we are to be.

And not just to have a superficial membership of the church defined by all of those other memberships that we have in the world, but to take hold of God's gift of the church with both hands.

[3 : 29] So let me pray for us as we have a look at what God has to say to us. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much, first of all, that we get to know you, that we get to be people who are yours, and that you love us.

And we thank you that you have gathered us this morning. Be with us as we look at your word. Help us to be ready to have our hearts shaped to be like you and to understand who we are to be as your church.

Amen. What even is a church? The building is often called church. You know, we're going to church. But the church is so much more than that.

The word means gathering. And so in the original language, anything was that any gathering of people was referred to as a church. So you could have the church who meets at the side of the soccer pitch who is made up of shouty parents on a Saturday morning.

You could have a church of oolong tea fanatics. Whatever gathering you have, that's where the word church comes from. But over time, this word has come to be associated with religious activities and also with the building that we are in.

[4 : 51] But how does God describe his gathering? Have a look. We're going to be jumping around a couple of passages before we spend a little bit more time in that Hebrews 10 passage.

So please have your Bibles open, phones. There is our church app, which has the outline. Or you can grab a Bible. If you do not have a Bible, get a Bible from the sides, one of the brown Bibles. We've written in them that they are for you. And you've just got to write your name in there. Please take one of those and have those. We're going to be in 1 Peter 2, verse 10. So God, first of all, shows us that the church is universal, everywhere, and invisible.

And it is also visible and local. In 1 Peter 2, verse 10, Peter says, Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.

Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. What Peter's doing is he's connecting God's saving people, God's showing mercy to people, with people, with these individuals becoming part of his people.

[6 : 00] He shows mercy, and these Christians are now part of a greater people. When we are saved, when the Holy Spirit reveals to us who Jesus is and we follow him, we become part of something larger, something bigger than us, something that is universal, something that is invisible, the church that is across all time and space, that goes into the past, and that goes into the future.

We are part of something that is much larger than us. Paul talks about this church in Romans 8, verse 15.

He says, The spirit you received does not make you slaves so that you live in fear. Rather, the spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.

And so the church is saved as part of this universal group of people who are sons, who have the full legal standing of a male heir in Roman culture, who have access to everything from the Father.

And so we are part of God's family as his children across the globe and across time and space. And Hebrews 12 talks about this in verse 22.

[7 : 15] You have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.

And so in one sense, the church right now is universal and invisible. We cannot see the church at the moment. We can see us here, sitting here. But the church is much larger.

The church is those who have been adopted into God's family as his children. And also, the church is also, in a spiritual way, gathering around God in heaven already.

There is this spiritual element to the church in heaven. And so the Bible, just having a look at these couple of verses, we can talk more about this if you like later, describes the church as one whole people of brothers and sisters made one family who are already in heaven in a spiritual way.

And this is one of the reasons it is so encouraging to meet another Christian. I'm not sure if you've ever met another Christian in a totally random setting. There is just something unique. It's more than just, oh, here's another person who has a similar like to me.

[8 : 34] You know, they follow a sporting team. But it's this person also knows the same Jesus. They've also been loved by the same Jesus. And they know that there's nothing special about them, but they've been saved by the living God.

There is just something about being part of this family which unites us. The youth around Easter are going up to Kik. Kik is a gathering of youth from all over New South Wales.

And they go to Katoomba and there's thousands of them there. And it's so encouraging to be part of a youth group of say 30 kids and then to go and see 3,000 kids and go, oh wow, there are all of these other people who follow the same Jesus as me.

This is really wonderful. This church that we are part of is huge. It is massive. It is universal.

It's invisible. We can't see it. But the wonderful truth of it is it doesn't stay invisible. It shows up in real and physical locations.

[9 : 37] The universal becomes local. The invisible becomes visible. The church has a street address. This church is on the corner of Fuller's Road and View Street in Chatswood. And there are faces and names of people.

There's tangible people. There's Gary over there. I can see Allie. There's Leslie in front. This church is no longer invisible. It's local and it's tangible. And so Paul, when he writes letters to the church, they're to specific churches.

It's to the letter, to the church of God in Corinth, to the church in Galatia, to the church of the Thessalonians in Thessalonians. In Thessalonians. I can't even say that word.

It's okay. I'll just skip it. I'll get it later. The church shows up in a time and in a place. If we're really part of God's body, the church, it doesn't just stay an abstract idea up in the clouds.

I'm a part of the church. We don't just get baptized into a church and then never go again and say, oh yeah, I'm a member of that church. I was baptized there. When we are part of the heavenly church, the family of God, it shows up on earth in a time and space at 9 a.m., at 11 a.m.

[10 : 52] on a Sunday morning in Chatswood. Being a member of the universal and invisible church must become visible in regular local gatherings.

The church is those that God has called out to be His, to be His family. Brothers and sisters who show up and meet together regularly. I think there's a helpful way to understand this and this is through McDonald's.

Does anybody love Maccas? No, the younger people are nodding. Yeah, James, yeah, James.

Thank you, dear brother. That's why we need to support you, to help you.

Maccas has got a franchise model. It's universal. It's everywhere. It's everywhere on the planet. I'm sure there'll be one on the moon soon. Head office sets the color scheme.

They set what the staffing conditions are going to be like. They set the type what the stores look like. But you don't go to the head office to get a cheeseburger.

[11 : 58] You've got to go to a local store. You've got to go to the one in the Chatswood Interchange across from the train station if you want to get a cheeseburger. I can't say that I go to Maccas unless I actually turn up.

Unless I actually, you know, walk in the door and push the buttons because you don't really talk to the people there anymore. The local and universal church is like McDonald's. Hopefully, we don't make you feel sick in 30 minutes or less.

But the church is universal. It's everywhere across all time and space. It's in heaven in a spiritual way. It's on every continent. But I can't say that I'm part of a church unless I show up.

Being part of the church means that I show up. And here at St. Paul's, we get to rub shoulders with people from the universal church. not all of it but an expression of it.

And so, being a member of this church means you're also part of the church everywhere. And so, what is a church? A church is universal. It's invisible but it doesn't stay that way.

[13 : 02] It becomes visible and it becomes local when we turn up. It's a gathering of God's people in a time and space. Now, I know what I'm supposed to do when I go to McDonald's.

When I go there, I'm usually there to eat or if I'm on a long car trip, I'm there to use the bathroom. And there, that's what McDonald's is for. But what is the church supposed to do? What's the purpose of it?

We're all here together in one room. What is the point? That's our second point for today. What is the purpose of the church? As we saw in 1 Peter, our God is showing mercy to people, calling a people to himself.

The church is a restoration of the vertical relationship, of God restoring the relationship with us, his people. It's a restoration of the vertical. Humanity and God are reconciled.

But there's also a horizontal reconciliation that happens as the church. The purpose of the church is to bring unity, unity to a scattered, diverse, very different collection of warring people.

[14 : 10] Church is the reconciliation between God and people, but also the reconciliation of people and people, bringing people back to unity. And so in Ephesians chapter 2, I've got a couple of passages from Ephesians 2, so go to Ephesians 2, verse 11.

Paul says, Paul says, therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called uncircumcised by those who call themselves the circumcision, which is done in the body by human hands, remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenant of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

So all people were scattered and divided from each other. There was real painful division between people groups, between the Jews and the Gentiles, between the Gentiles and the Gentiles, between countries and ethnicities.

But, verse 13, but now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace who has made the two groups one.

He's destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace.

[15 : 42] And in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross by which he put to death their hostility. And so Jesus gathers to himself people who now have peace.

The dividing walls that people have put up between each other, between nations, between ethnicities, between next door neighbours, big fences, these get torn down in Jesus.

God's great plan is to gather people to himself to restore that vertical relationship, but also to restore people to each other. And so this, so that people would know how great God is.

God puts warring people together, the lion and the lamb, and they don't tear each other apart, there is actually peace. In Jesus, wars have been ended, people who have been divided have been brought back together.

together. And so before the church is about us, the church is about seeing what God has already done and giving him the glory.

[16 : 53] We are, you only have to look around at the different ethnicities in the church and go back a hundred years and think about the wars that were fought based on countries and nations to realise that our God does wonderful things.

if the US president, Joe Biden, is able to unite his divided country even in a small way, it'll be amazing. The US at the moment is divided on social issues, healthcare, Democrats versus Republicans, on so many issues.

But if the US president is able to bring a sense of unity back to the United States, they'll be carving his face on Mount Rushmore. He will have done a great job.

But what God has done in Jesus is far, far greater. He has united people across time and space, different languages, ethnicities, personal preferences, and he has brought us together in one family. Not a family at war with itself, one with peace. That is who we are to be. One showing God's awesomeness in bringing peace. A multi-ethnic, multi-generational, socio-economically diverse gathering of people declaring that Jesus is Lord for God's glory.

[18 : 15] That is who we are to be. And that's why I was thrilled to have the kids back in church with us this morning because they are part of who we are as a church. They are not something we push over to one side because they're noisy and distracting.

They are part of who we are as the church. That is the big picture purpose of church, of what being a part of following Jesus means here at St. Paul's.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews gets more specific for us, more practical about the purpose of the church for each other. So please turn to Hebrews chapter 10, starting in verse 19.

It should also be on the screen. Verse 19, Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way open for us through the curtain that is his body, since all that Jesus has done, since all that he has done in his death and resurrection, his blood, the author to the Hebrews has a series of let us statements.

Let us together as a group do these things. Verse 22, Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with a full assurance that faith brings.

[19 : 34] Let us draw near to God. We follow the Lord with faith only because of the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and we can understand who this God is by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as we read his word.

And so whenever we gather, we gather as a church around this Jesus and him revealed in the Bible. That is why, without a doubt, week in, week out, we read the Bible.

When Steve or I preach or when anybody else is on the pulpit, we point to the Bible. I'm calling you to be reading the Bible as we read. These are just not my thoughts in isolation, but I want you to see what God's word has for us today.

And so we draw close to God as the church, growing in faith around his word. Verse 22 continues, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed

with pure water.

This understanding that we as people have been made pure by Jesus, this is why often we will say a confession together, acknowledging that we are sinful people, but we have a great God who has dealt with our sin.

[20 : 47] And so we remind each other of that. Verse 23, let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess for he who promised is faithful.

We remind each other about who our hope is in so that we can hold to this hope. So at the start of our service, Debbie led us in a creed from Colossians to say this is who our Jesus is that we follow so that we can hold fast to him.

verse 24 continues, and let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

Let us be continuing to encourage each other. How can you be loving people? How can we be doing good deeds? How can we be made more like Jesus today and every day? These are both more than what happens in our church services, but not less.

Up here, from the pulpit, we get to encourage each other to worship God, to be in the word, be praying, but also after the service as the church.

[21 : 57] As we gather outside, as we continue to gather here, as we go off for coffee, as we stand outside and watch our kids play, we get to encourage each other, to spur each other on to love and good deeds, to remind each other of the hope that we have.

The last in this list of let us's is in verse 25. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day approaching.

The author of the Hebrews is speaking about the tension between the local and the universal church. It's the thought that says, I'm a Christian, I can just stay at St. Pillow this morning, comfortable in my bed.

I can just read my Bible and pray at home, God can still talk to me. I'm a Christian, I'm part of the church, the universal church, and this is true. But it isn't true in isolation from being part of the local church.

In previous years, I may have encouraged you to be more regular at church, so that you can be encouraged to love and good deeds and you can encourage others to love and good deeds.

[23 : 13] In previous years, I may have done that. But the problem for us in the last year is that we've been able to meet, we've been unable to do what the author of the Hebrews commands us to do.

The church building was closed. We couldn't do what this says. We had to stop meeting together. And we adapted really well.

We moved online. We started streaming our services on YouTube. We had community groups over Zoom. And now we continue to live stream our services.

And it's really wonderful for those who are unable to come and join in person, for those who are looking to see what church is like.

Our dear brother, Nick Freestone, two weeks ago, had surgery and he couldn't be with us. But as he said, I loved that I could still see what was happening. I could still, in a sense, be part of church by watching at home.

[24 : 11] But since our return from COVID, there is a different challenge before us. We can face the temptation of thinking that being part of a church equals watching a service.

Thinking that watching a video of church is the same as being part of a church. Now, we actually want to increase the amount of people watching. It's one of our goals that we want.

We want so many people watching the YouTube live stream that people are getting to know who we are as a church and can get to know Jesus. But the live stream, the YouTube videos, have a purpose.

If you have a friend who is interested in finding out about what church looks like, what goes on in a service, you can direct them to youtube.com slash St. Paul's Chatswood and they can check it out. But watching a service is not being part of a church. I think for us, our view of church can be impacted by TV habits. I can watch and binge whatever I like.

[25 : 12] And I think watching church can be like watching a sport. So I could go to an AFL game. Let's say I'm going to go and watch the Swans play. I think, correct me if I'm wrong, Rach, the AFL season is starting back soon.

Yes, thank you dear sister. I could go to the game and watch it play in the rain and in the cold in the middle of the winter. Or I could watch it at home in the comfort of my lounge.

The only problem is that being at church might feel like we're just sitting. We're just watching what's going on up here. But church is actually more like we're on the field together.

We're actually doing something together. The author of the Hebrews has continuously encouraged us, let us do these things together. Let us hold each other accountable.

Let us love each other, call each other to love and good deeds. And we can't do that if we're at home. We actually have to turn up in a time and space as the local church.

[26 : 17] We are together for the church's benefit and for the individuals as well as part of the whole. And we can't do that if we stay at home. We're actually a man down if we, a person down if we stay at home.

Together as a church we draw near to God reminding each other of what the blood of Jesus has done. And so let us hold to that hope. Let us spur one another onto love and good deeds all the more as the day approaches when Jesus is going to return.

And we need to do this because times are hard. Times are hard now. Times are going to be hard tomorrow. More and more as Christians move to the periphery of society as society moves away from its Christian foundations.

And we need each other. It's why this church has the value of treasuring Jesus together. It is so important. Let me read this value. Every member of St. Paul's has been led individually by the Spirit of God to receive Jesus Christ as the Lord, Saviour and Supreme Treasure of our lives.

The Holy Spirit gathers us from all variety of individual backgrounds and unites us together as one body of Christ. We believe the people whom Jesus has called into relationship with himself from every tribe, language, nation and generation are his church and not an institution or building.

[27 : 40] In an age of individualism, we value vigilance and accountability in treasuring Jesus together as his diverse people. This is who we want to be as a church.

Going deeper in discipleship and in relationship with God and deeper in relationship together. It's about our togetherness as a dynamic spiritual community hand in hand following and treasuring Jesus together.

For those who are unable to gather who are watching this right now, I don't mean to make you feel guilty. I just want to point out that you are missing something about being here as part of this church.

You are missing out on how God has designed us as people and how God has designed the church to be together. Because there is something unique about this universal church which becomes local.

Let me encourage you, don't stop gathering together. This vision series is not meant to be a hammer blow to make you feel guilty about how much you don't read the Bible or how much you pray or how close you feel.

[28 : 52] But four weeks ago Steve set out the vision that we want to be people who are following Jesus. Reading the Bible and speaking to God because they are wonderful things that God has gifted us with by the power of the Holy Spirit and we get to do this together as the church.

With colleagues, with close friends, dear brothers and sisters to walk with you towards Jesus in all of life. In December 2020, Kenyan runner Abel Mutai was the first to cross the finish line in a cross-country race in Spain.

At least, he thought he was the first to cross the line. Ivan Fernandez Anaya, who is the man you can see behind him, a Spanish competitor, was right behind Mutai and he knew better.

He knew that the Kenyan runner Abel hadn't actually finished the race. He thought he'd finished but he hadn't gotten across the line and Ivan, the Spanish man, had a chance.

He thought, I could have taken over. I could have won but instead of taking advantage of the situation, he plowed into him, ran into him and he gestured.

[30 : 05] He urged him forward to finish the race. He could have stolen it but he encouraged him on. We are not quite like those two runners.

We are more like the runners in this photo. We are part of a pack, a big group of people, different ages, ethnicities, genders.

We are more like the people running in this photo, running together to Jesus, urging one another on. Come on, you've fallen over. Get up.

Let me help you get up. I'm not going to leave you. The finish line is here. Jesus is here. Let's go together. Are you part of this church? Are you part of this church maybe with a trial membership? Are you deeply connected to people in this church? Have you opened your life to actually allow other people to come in so that they can urge you on when you fall down so that you can urge others on?

[31 : 15] First of all, get connected into a community group. Come and see me. Join a team. Join a team to serve with other people as we follow Jesus. Go and drink coffee.

Invite somebody out. The person sitting next to you, if you don't know them, get to know them. We can try to run this race following Jesus on our own, but our God hasn't designed us that way.

He has given to each of us each other. The church, one body, local and universal, showing the world how good this God is in uniting us as we charge towards him.

Let me pray. Amen. Heavenly Father, we ask that we would be that type of church. That we would not try to go it on our own in faith, thinking that we are an island, but Lord, you have given us each other.

Lord, we ask that you would help us to walk together, run together, to be people who are aware of the needs of the community of believers around us so that we can spur each other on.

[32 : 35] Father, give us much patience and compassion to love each other. Lord, help us to get to know each other deeply. Lord, help us to be a community that welcomes people in, but also wants to know each other, to walk together so that we can follow you with all of our lives and all of our hearts, Lord.

We ask this in your son's name and for your glory. Amen.