

**The Congregational Social Club and the Living Church of Christ/
or Glued to the Vine
John 15:1-8**

“I am the main program, you are the sub-routines, and my Father is the programmer. Every sub-routine that does not produce the appropriate results He cuts out of the program, and every sub-routine that functions as it should He tweaks the code so that it runs more efficiently. You are already reduced to the minimum code because of the word I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the sub-routine cannot produce results by itself, unless it is a part of the primary execution program, neither can you, unless you abide in me.”

“I am the primary program; you are the sub-routines. He who abides in me, and I in him, produces appropriate out-put; for without me you can do nothing. If anyone does not connect his code to mine, he is eliminated from the program and his code breaks down; and the quality assurance people gather the pages of code, and cast this code into the shredder. If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, you will ask what you desire, and it will be done for you. By this is my Father exalted and His name proclaimed in the world, that you produce much out-put; so you will be my students and followers.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the opinions expressed in this morning’s sermon are solely my own. I do not speak for Pastor Stirdivant or Pastor Nickel.

Roughly thirty-six years ago, the president of the Florida-Georgia District asked me to serve as vacancy pastor for a church across the St. John’s River from the Naval Hospital where I was stationed. Marilyn and our children attended that church. The pastor of the congregation had become frustrated with what he concluded was a lack of faith and fruit on the part of the congregation’s members, many of whom were military. He pleaded, cajoled, and berated his parishioners to become more involved in works and outreach. He hammered away with the Law. One Sunday, during the service, he removed his stole and hung it on the crucifer. He stated, “I work for Christ, not for you. It is about time you came alongside me and worked also.” Several weeks later, in frustration he threatened to resign from the congregation. The Elders and voters’ assembly took him at his word and released him. Consequently, with permission from the Naval Hospital Commanding Officer, I served as vacancy pastor for nine months.

This incident highlighted a question of identity that I have observed many times. Just what is the true nature of a congregation or of the church at-large? From whence comes the fruit of faith, and how is it expressed? What differentiates between a community of believers grafted into Christ, from a social club or a fraternal organization? Both have their rites of membership, responsibilities and expectations. Today I would like to examine the marks of the church as a social club as opposed to the marks of the living church of Christ.

I. The two are not the same.

Many years ago, a young woman sat across my desk at St. Luke Lutheran Church, Cleveland, Ohio. I did not know her or recognize her name. I could not find her family name on the congregation’s membership rolls or in the baptismal and wedding records. “Pastor,” she said,

“my fiancé and I would like to get married in your church. My parents were members here years ago.”

“That’s nice,” I responded. “What are your reasons for choosing St. Luke over the church you or your fiancé are presently attending?”

“We do not have a church home,” she replied, “so we thought that since my parents attended here years ago that we would use your church for the wedding. Naturally, we hoped you would officiate at the ceremony.”

“Are you interested in becoming members of the congregation?” I asked.

“No,” she replied. “We just want to use the church for the ceremony.”

“In that case, I am sorry that I cannot accommodate you,” I answered. “The church is not a social hall that we rent for weddings and other special occasions.”

What do you think? Was I overly rigid and legalistic? Once a person or a family unites with a congregation does that confer special privileges or a lifetime membership? What responsibilities do Christians incur when they are grafted to the body of Christ? I wish I could say the foregoing was an isolated incident, but I have encountered it many times in regard to weddings, baptisms, funerals, and similar ceremonies.

The congregational social club and the living church of Christ are not the same. I think the word *church* leads to much of the confusion. Do you remember the five definitions for *church* that you learned in catechism? First, we define church as the total number of people who confess faith in Christ. We call this the visible church; it includes unbelievers as well as believers. We can see people, hence the visible church. Second, we can define the word church as the total number of true believers. We call this the invisible church since we cannot determine what people hold in their hearts. Third, we can define the word church as a *collection of people* who hold certain beliefs and practice a common form of polity. Hence, we talk about the Lutheran Church, the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church and so on. We frequently use the synonym denomination for this meaning of church. Fourth, we can define church as the *assembly of believers* meeting in a given location. The local assembly practices the rites and ceremonies given to the larger church. The members may call a pastor, erect a building, and write a constitution. We frequently call this church a congregation. Finally, church is the name we give to a *building* where an assembly of believers gathers for worship, prayer, study, sacramental ministry and so on.

I am afraid that too many people look at the church, most specifically the local congregation, as some sort of club or fraternal organization. The congregation or local church as a country club stands on a faulty understanding of the church, its purpose, and what it means to be a believer. I quickly can think of three errors in logic or understanding.

Some people think the congregation is autonomous and exists for itself. These people overlook the fact that the local congregation is just a part of the larger assembly of believers. Even independent, non-denominational churches are part of the larger collection of believers. Because

God and Christ gave certain privileges and responsibilities to the larger church, forgiveness of sins and absolution of sins, for example, the small assembly can exercise these things. However, the smaller assembly must remember from whence it derives its rites, power, and privileges.

Another dangerous perception is that once a person joins a local congregation, he or she has a lifetime membership. You pay one fee — confirmation — and you are set for life. You gain all the privileges — marriage, baptisms, funerals, and so on. You never need attend worship, participate in a voter's assembly, or contribute to the budget. However, when you need the congregation for any reason it is there. My question has been, if you do not participate in worship, attend or pray, why would you want to be a member? Do you think membership confers an automatic insurance policy that guards against fire and judgment? Jeremiah wrote to the Israelites when they had slipped into a similar mindset, "Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these.'" (Jeremiah 7:4)

The last faulty idea is that the members have no connection with one another — other than attachment to the organization or building. You can join the local Rotary and do not need to do anything more than attend lunch once in a while. You do not need to associate with the other members outside the twice-monthly meeting. However, as members of the body of Christ, the church, we are supposed to be brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow redeemed with one heavenly Father. We assemble with like-minded people. We strengthen and support one another. We come alongside each other during trying times. We worship together to keep the faith alive and orthodox. This involves much more than a mere association.

The church as a social club is built upon its benefits to the members. The living church of Christ is built upon the Gospel, the good news of Christ. Members of the true church, the invisible church must abide in Christ. They must be intimately, completely, lovingly joined to him. Christ makes five references to abiding in him in just eight short verses. He speaks of a spiritual union, one that defines the relationship and gives power. He uses an agricultural metaphor, describing himself as the vine and the believers as the branches. This relationship requires water and nourishment. The branch that is not firmly grafted into vine, does not become one with the vine, withers and dies. It produces no fruit. It gets cut away and cast into the fire.

Becoming one with the vine requires, as previously alluded, water and nourishment. Regarding the church and its members these things take the form of worship, prayer, meditation, study, service, assembly and ministry. Frequent coming together is advised. "Forsake not the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another so much the more, as you see the day approaching." (Hebrews 10:25)

II. *The two have different functions.*

The living church of Christ and the congregational social club have different functions. The latter exists solely for the benefit of its members. It protects them from harm and danger, at least that is what some people believe. When I attended second or third grade, I wanted a colored, rabbit's foot on a key chain just like many of my friends had. I begged my parents for one. Finally, my father asked in exasperation, "Why do you want one?" "For good luck," I replied. My

father responded, “But the rabbit had four feet and what good luck did they bring him?” Do we look on church membership as a talisman, some sort of God-given good luck charm?

One day a woman entered my office and asked if I would officiate at the funeral for her recently deceased father, who used to be a member of the congregation. As soon as I hear something like that, I give special attention to what follows. The person insinuates that you must grant the prior request because of prior association, even if the person has not been in church for fifty years. “Why?” I have to ask. If the person has not maintained a healthy relationship with the Savior, a church burial is not going to do him or her any good. However, in this case I officiated at the burial because the ceremony is for the living.

The Ohio District of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, like many other districts, defrays the expenses of triennial district and national conventions by levying a sort of head tax on each congregation. One year my first congregation received a support request based on 800 members (at least on record), but the congregation did not have 800 active members. It had possibly 650 baptized members and 400 communicants. The elders decided to remove the dead wood from the congregational rolls by sending a letter to everyone who had not attended worship or supported the congregation since before I arrived. The elders sent two letters advising former members of the action the congregation was about to take. Following the initial letters the elders sent a third announcing the action they had taken. Some of the people who were dropped for self-exclusion had not attended worship in over five years. I was surprised by the number of people who objected to their removal from the church rolls. “How dare you drop me since I was baptized there fifty years ago,” and so on. We forget that the way to heaven is not by association with a church or congregation, but through faith and the good works that God had prepared beforehand that we may walk in them (“bear fruit,” John 15:1ff and Ephesians 2:10). I have heard one person describe the congregational social club as the place where we “hatch, match, and dispatch.”

One last item separates the congregation as social club from the true body of Christ with spiritually alive and fruitful members. The social club does not respond to God. It turns a deaf ear to missions, refuses to be concerned about outreach, and fails to respond to the needs all around it. The congregational social club is inward looking, self-supporting, and self-preserving.

The living church, the assembly of believers, glorifies God. Christ emphasizes the production of good fruit. Jesus shared this morning’s lesson with the disciples gathered in the upper room. He advised them that he would soon depart. He provided an example of humility and service when he washed their feet. He shared, and continues to share his body and blood. He has promised to prepare a place for all his brothers and sisters. He encouraged his disciples to remain in him (by hearing his word and remembering he is the Word), to be faithful, to bear fruit (loving one another as he has loved us). This is the believer’s response to the living, loving relationship with Christ, our Savior, and with our heavenly Father. This is the reason we remain on earth, attached to the living vine. Our response is to bear fruit to God’s glory. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” (Mathew 5:16) “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:35) Way back at the beginning, God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and

told them to come alongside him in creation, that is to till the Garden, be fruitful and multiply, and to obey Him.

Fruit springs only from abiding in Christ. “Remain in me, and I in you,” he exhorted. Our works are tainted by the sin that still clings to us but our faith makes them beautiful and whole. Our faith prompts us to do the things God desires. “As you have fed, given drink, visited, and comforted the least of these, you have done it unto me.” (Matthew 25) The branches in Christ that bear fruit, God prunes and strengthens so they will bear more fruit. Adversity works patience and perseverance. The branches that fail to bear fruit God cuts out of the vine. Unfruitful branches take up space and rob nourishment from the rest of the vine. When I worked in a tomato greenhouse, I spent part of the time pulling “suckers” off tomato vines. These were the secondary branches that grew in the notches of the vine and primary branches. The suckers made the vine bushy but resulted in fewer and smaller tomatoes.

I received a phone call from a woman who had received one of the elders’ letters. She told me how terrible it was for the congregation to consider removing her from the congregational rolls for self-exclusion. I asked the woman when she had last attended worship and she answered that it had been years. “Why do you want to remain a member of St. Luke,” I asked? “When you get to heaven and stand before the ‘Pearly Gates,’ do you think God is going to ask you to which congregation you belonged? No way! Instead, He will want to know in whom you have trusted and how you demonstrated your faith!” Sorry, but the social club is closed; join the real church instead. Amen.

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Soli Dei Gloria!