

## **SLIDE 1. ANCHORED: A Study of What We Believe and Why**

Teaching: **Article 5: Nature of the Church**

*Sunday November 26, 2023*

### **SLIDE 2. APPETIZER**

**"You don't need to go to church to be a Christian. If you go to Taco Bell, that doesn't make you a taco."**

**SLIDE 3. "You don't need to go to church to be a Christian. If you go to Taco Bell, that doesn't make you a taco." *Justin Bieber***

### **SLIDE 4+5. MAIN COURSE**

**Nature of the Church: We believe the church is the covenant community called by God through Jesus Christ to live a life of discipleship and witness as empowered by the Holy Spirit. The local church gathers regularly for worship, fellowship, and accountability, and to discern, develop, and exercise gifts for ministry.**

"Covenant" is an interesting – and I think appropriate – word to use here.

As you probably know – a "covenant" is different from a "contract."

A contract is a legal agreement to exchange goods or services without any moral or relational requirements – like an employment contract where an employee agrees to perform a service in exchange for a certain income from the employer.

Covenants are different.

In ancient times, a covenant was a process whereby two parties agreed to unite as one and remain in loyal relationship forever. Covenants were made (or cut) between different types of people in all kinds of situations – like when a victorious king would annex a newly conquered territory.

In ancient times, they did some crazy stuff to seal such agreements:

- a. animals would be slaughtered, split along the spine, and laid out on the ground each piece across from its other half.
- b. partners would exchange outer robes to symbolize the taking on of a new and combined identity.
- c. covenanting parties would exchange weapons with a promise to come to each other's defense when needed.
- d. they would exchange belts to symbolize the offer of strength and the access to each other's wealth and resources.
- e. they would comingle their blood by making a cut in their arm or hand and either dripping the blood into a cup from which they would each drink or by clasping hands allowing the other's blood to flow directly into each other's bodies.

f. they might rub dirt or ash into the wound to create a permanent scar as a visible reminder of this covenant.

g. they might exchange rings, set up a pillar, plant a tree, dig a well, or in some other way create a permanent sign of the covenant.

Then, the parties would pass between the slaughtered animal halves. They'd call blessing down upon the other person if they upheld the agreement – curses if they didn't.

The animal halves would be sacrificed. And a feast would be prepared and eaten together to establish this new relationship of unity.

There are all kinds of examples of covenants throughout the bible – like the water rights agreement between Abraham and Abimelech (Gen. 21:22-33) – like the covenant of love and loyalty between Jonathan and David which led to succession of the throne (1 Sam. 18:1-5) – like the marital rights and responsibilities struck between Jacob and his uncle Laban to care for his uncle's daughters (Gen. 31:43-55).

And then, of course, there are those covenants God made with his people – with Noah to not destroy the earth by water again (Gen. 8:20-9:17) – with Abram - and changed his name to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-9) – with the Israelites when he liberated them from slavery in Egypt (Ex. 19:4-8).

And to the church today.

God promised a new covenant between Him and humankind – whereby sins would be forgiven, and everyone would have the chance to know Him (Jer. 31:31-37).

**SLIDE 6. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel (and to believers today by extension), declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.**

**SLIDE 7. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."**

Jesus declared the establishment of that new covenant at His last Passover meal with his disciples – which we will remember and celebrate today when we share communion.

God initiated this new covenant through Jesus who identified with us as human – who conquered sin and death and Satan – and who rises to our defense.

Jesus shows us what God is like and how to live a life in healthy relationship with God – who sent His Spirit to dwell in us – like a kind of co-mingling of blood.

When we enter this covenant with God – when we say YES to Jesus as our Lord and Savior – we are transfused by His shed blood on the cross – our sins forgiven – we welcome and partner with His Spirit to be changed and changing - we take on a new identity as adopted children of God – to represent Him to each other and to represent Him to the world (2 Corinthians 5:17–21; John 13:34–35; Acts 1:8).

This is the church – aka. the people of God, the saints, the new creation, the body of Christ - in covenant with God – by His initiative – and in covenant with one another – as brothers and sisters in Christ.

For *discipleship* and *witness*. To be a faith community *for* each other and *to* those who don't know God.

I was at Wagner Hills Farm this past Monday – as part of a panel of pastors who were invited to talk about the reason for church and how the church can play a role in addictions recovery.

**SLIDE 8.** Here were the questions we were given:

**What do you see as the purpose of the church? Why does it matter today?**

**What are some of the challenges for someone new in the church and how can they overcome them?**

**Do you see any common themes for people who are flourishing in your community?**

Think about those for a moment. I wonder how we would answer.

This is what we said on Monday – and by we – I mean those on the panel and those in the program...

That the church exists to glorify God and to orient people to the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

That the church should be a community characterized by love and forgiveness. That the church should be an honest and vulnerable people-space. That the church should be a people who challenge and encourage one another in their faith.

The church matters because we need each other – to function as the body of Christ – with our spiritual gifts.

The church matters because we need each other – to keep each other oriented towards Jesus.

The church matters because we need each other – to encourage each other in this counter-cultural time.

As for the challenges new people face when they drop-in to church...

We said – it's hard for unknown people to come into communities where people know each other.

We said – it's made easier by a friendly greeting at the door – and people who remember our names.

We said – a great place to break into community is to serve – even in increments – from greeter to teacher to music leader – for instance.

We said – the best place to be known and to get to know others is in a small group.

As for common themes we saw for people who are flourishing in our communities – we answered – as pastors...

Those who are fascinated with Jesus Christ – who He is and what He has done for them – seem to be flourishing,

Those who focus on gratefulness – seem to be flourishing.

Those who give of their lives in service – inside and outside the church – seem to be flourishing.

I was SO blessed by that conversation.

Then I was blessed by one of the best club sandwiches on whole grain bread that I have ever eaten – when I sat with everybody for lunch.

Which I only mention to mention this – that we (SLC) were given a whole whack of mini-cupcakes which have been sitting in the donated stand-up freezer in the Community Room for a month or so. With permission – we donated them to Wagner Hills Farm!

What a joy to pass along the blessing – very much like the joy of sharing our monthly COBS bread donation with our Sunshine St. community.

Community FOR community!

Which reminds me: THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU – to those of you who baked cookies for our blessing / outreach to our Sunshine St. community.

We'll wrap them in cellophane bags and ribbon some time in the first week of December. Please – give me a shout if you LOVE to wrap things.

We'll pay you in cookies!

Church matters!

So much so that Martin Luther famously said, "Apart from the church, salvation is impossible." Which is not to say that the church saves us – only God saves!

It is to say this though: that it is impossible to fulfill what it means to be a Christian if we live apart from the body of Christ.

The metaphor speaks for itself: the body cannot function without its parts!  
We need to discern, develop and exercise our gifts for ministry.

We need to challenge each other when we have a sense of any of us spiritually drifting or when any of us is flat-out o.k. with our sins.

But we also need to encourage each other when we see each other acting as the hands and feet of Jesus.

Like when someone said to someone else this week, "Good for you to stay in that friendship – even if it is as difficult as it is. You are giving your friend what she needs (space and time and forgiveness) – not what she deserves (for you to walk away). This is the very definition of grace!"

Like when someone said to someone else this week, "It's so cool that you have so many friends you are praying for – friends who don't know Jesus or choose not to believe in Him. I love that you keep showing up and you keep praying. I love that you have told yourself that you want to see them in the next life because you love them."

Like when someone said to me this week, "My husband told me how much he enjoys your preaching."

Words of life for me – esp. after last Sunday – when I thought I didn't preach very well!

We need each other.

My time at Wagner Hills Farm helped me remember this. So did this recent post in my social media feed from my Salvation Army colleague and friend...

**SLIDES 9, 10, 11, 12. As church attendance numbers fade across the nation and online services become very convenient it's important to remember why church attendance for you and your family matters so much.**

**You can't serve from your sofa. You can't have community of faith on your sofa. You can't experience the power of a room full of believers worshipping together on your sofa.**

**Christians aren't consumers. We are contributors. We don't watch. We engage. We give. We sacrifice. We encourage. We pray by laying hands on the hurting. We do life together.**

**The church needs you. And you need the church.**

On Sunday morning – to start our week refocused and refreshed by time in prayer, singing songs to God, and to opening the Word of God together in community.

And – through the week – in our mid-week times of prayer at the church – or in our homes where we meet as small groups – or even on this floor – where we meet with each other and others who don't know God or who don't have a church community - to play pickleball, soccer, and ball hockey on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday nights respectively.

This is what it means to live in covenant with God and one another.

**SLIDE 13. *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving 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 (Heb. 10:24-25).***

We need each other.

We are the church - the people of God, the saints, the new creation, the body of Christ - in covenant with God – by His initiative – and in covenant with one another – as brothers and sisters in Christ.

For *discipleship* and *witness*. To be a faith community *for* each other and *to* those who don't know God.

We have talked a fair amount this morning - about *discipleship* (albeit indirectly). We have talked even less (or not at all) about being a *witness*.

Fear not – my friends - we *will* dive deeper on both these subjects in days to come.

**SLIDE 14. For today – here's what I'd like you to remember: **We - are not tacos. And maybe *Taco Bell* isn't even the best place to get tacos. We – are the church. We need each other – to challenge and to encourage one another in our faith. There's no where else to go!****

TAKE OUT

Now – let's reinforce this idea of church with a liturgical reading of our Confession of Faith on the *Nature of the Church*.

No one can lay a foundation other than the one which was laid, which is Christ Jesus **He has called us from darkness into His glorious light. He builds us into a holy temple, a house of prayer for all the nations, and the gates of hell will never overpower it.**

You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

**God's spirit makes us one, breathing unity into diversity, breaking down the walls that divide.**

There is neither male nor female, nor any walls of nation, race, or class, but one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one body.

**We commit ourselves to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, as we live out our mission to be Christ's hands and feet, ears and mouth, mind and heart, His body for a broken world.**

You are a holy people, a royal priesthood, God's special property, created to do His will.

**We gather to build up the body of believers and to make God's praise glorious! We celebrate God's faithfulness and grace, we hear the word of the Lord, bread for our soul, we offer prayers as incense to the Lord, we prod each other on to love and good works, we seek God's will for our life and mission, we baptize, eat and drink as Christ commanded, awaiting with joy the Great Banquet to come.**

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

**And when we fail, merciful God, bring us lovingly back to Your truth, so that we might learn again now to bring each other back from sin and error. We commit ourselves to the common good of Your people, humbly submitting to one another, according to our Lord's example and Spirit.**

When Christ was enthroned at the right hand of God, He poured out His Holy Spirit upon His followers, men and women, young and old, according to the promise of the Father.

**We receive God's Spirit as the gift and promise of eternal life. We yield ourselves to the Spirit, that God might work through us, in our ministry to the body and our mission to the world.**

God gives the church spiritual gifts to equip the whole body for ministry. Those with gifts of leadership have a high calling, as models of Christlike living and servants entrusted with the care and equipping of God's people.

**We receive those whom God has given to us and commit ourselves to pray for them, to support them and correct them in a spirit of love. Bless them, O God, bless us through them, that Your people might be built up and Your good news announced to the world.**