

What To Look For In A Church: Right Practice

I'm thankful to have this opportunity again this evening as we wrap our study on What To Look For In A Church. Of course, we're competing with the Super Bowl, so for those that remain I trust that it will be even more of a blessing to you tonight.

I want to review a little bit about what we've covered so far to make sure we're up to speed on things. We're asking the question, "What should I look for in a church?" And I noted that we have several new members as well as regular attenders, and it's always a difficult question to sort through in your brain what should be the defining characteristics of a good church. So hopefully you can use this series to either confirm or guide your decisions, and we would love to see you decide to become a member if you are not already. But more than that, I hope you realize that most churches do not have these characteristics, and there are many folks in those churches who just want something better, but they don't know where to go. So maybe you can use this series as a launching pad to reach out to those people and invite them here so they can be part of a Biblical church community.

Recall that I suggested three areas to look for in a church: right leadership, right doctrine, and right practice. In the first week, we saw the necessity of right leadership, where a local church is shepherded by a plurality of qualified men who fulfill Peter's command in 1 Peter 5 to "shepherd the flock of God among you." There were two key points that I want you take away from that: first, that shepherds are to be examples of the flock. Remember that they are to be a "type" of Christ, or a die that has been stamped by the image of Christ through repetition. Second, the way that pastors are to be that example is through continual and repetitive expository preaching and teaching. As the pastor devotes himself to the study and exposition of Scripture, that impacts his life, and then he communicates that study to us by "preach[ing] the word", and then is able to show us what that looks like because he's already wrestled with the text and come to grips with it in his own life.

So that was the crux of Right Leadership. Then, last week, we looked at Right Doctrine. And we studied through 1 Timothy 4 where Paul commands Timothy to "Pay close attention to yourself and the teaching." We saw that doctrinal preaching and teaching in the church, by gifted and qualified pastors and other teachers, is of paramount importance. And that stands in sharp contrast to most churches today, where most so-called "sermons" are just feel-good pep-talks that designed to puff up your ego or make you feel better about yourself, instead of drilling biblical, doctrinal truth into your brain so that the truth of God's Word is deposited in your heart and then is lived out in your life.

Finally, tonight, we're going to round out our series by looking at the third aspect of a good church, and that is Right Practice. What does a church do, or what should a church look like in its corporate life? That's the question we want to look at tonight, and we're going to do that by looking in Hebrew 10.

Now, the question of Right Practice of a church has been a widely debated question with many answers throughout church history. The Reformers answered the question in this way: they identified three markers of right practice within the church. First, they said "Wherever the gospel is preached rightly." They used that as more of a blanket statement along the lines of what we've covered the last two weeks, meaning qualified men preaching sound doctrine. So that was the first marker for the Reformers.

Second, they said that a church should be the place where "The Sacraments are rightly

administered.” Many Reformers viewed communion and baptism as what we call “means of grace”, and to delve into what they meant by that is a little beyond us tonight, but in terms of a good church, what they meant at a minimum was that communion and baptism were only administered to those within the church that were in good standing. So, as far as the visible church goes, communion and baptism were the means by which churches made the public statement to the world that because of Christ’s blood on the cross, here is who partakes of that.

Third, and related to those ordinances, was “The right exercise of church discipline.” For the Reformers, excluding unrepentant sinners from communion and withholding baptism from them was the most visible sign of church discipline. We see the Lord’s pattern for church discipline in Matthew 18. Church discipline is an often misunderstood topic. Some think that’s a tool for the pastor to keep the folk in line; some think it’s a tool for retribution against someone you don’t like; mostly today people aren’t even aware of church discipline or what it is supposed to be. But reading through Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5, and 2 Corinthians 2, it’s clear that church discipline has a Biblical, twofold purpose: first, it’s goal is to restore a wayward sinner to fellowship within the church. It’s not a punishment, it’s a rescue mission. Second, it’s designed to maintain the purity of the church. Unchecked sin running rampant within a church will destroy that church, and so church discipline functions as the corporate body’s immune system to regulate and expel the leaven of sin.

So those were the three markers of a true church according the Reformers: pure preaching of the gospel, pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline. Those are good markers, and I encourage you to research some of the historical confessions and the Reformers’ writings if you want to find out more about those three items.

More recently, however, others have answered the same question differently. Phil Johnson has given a sermon in the last few years where he takes those same three points that the Reformers gave, and he summarized them by expositing through Revelation 2, where Jesus scolds the church at Ephesus because they had “left your first love.” And Phil Johnson concludes that if you had to identify just a single characteristic that encapsulates everything a church should be, it should be their love for Christ. And so he goes into more detail on that, and I encourage to listen to that sermon as well. You should be able to search for “phil johnson love for christ” or “phil johnson revelation 2” or something like that and you should be able to find it. If you can’t, and you’re interested, let me know and I’ll find it and send it to you. It’s well worth it.

So those are just some historical and recent ideas that others have had about what a church should look like. And tonight I want to take a different approach, and I want to answer that question by expositing through Heb. 10:19–25. You can turn there with me, and as you are finding that passage, we’re going to see what some of the fundamental characteristics of corporate church life should look like according to God’s Word. So Hebrews 10, starting in verse 19. The author writes,

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure

water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Before we get into these verses in detail, I want to walk you through the context leading up to these verses so you can pick up the train of thought that the writer of Hebrews has here in this passage. These verse in Hebrews 10 are really the end of a long section that really began back at the end of chapter 4. So turn with me there back to Heb. 4:14–16. Last week we saw Brett preach on Sunday morning on Jesus sympathizing with our weakness. That is really the introductory thought that the writer of Hebrews uses to build the idea that Jesus is a better and greater high priest. You see in verse 14 that the writer identifies Jesus as a “great high priest”.

Then, starting in chapter 5, the author then shows how Jesus is a priest that comes from a greater spiritual office and lineage than did Aaron. Aaron was a Levite, and under the Mosaic covenant the priesthood rested with Aaron and his sons. However, there was a priesthood before Aaron, and that is why the writer identifies Jesus as a “high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” throughout chapter 5 and chapter 6.

Then in chapter 7, we see why Jesus, as a priest according to the priesthood of Melchizedek, is so much better: he appeals to a kind of “federal headship”, and in effect says that because Abraham was the father of the Levite tribe from which we have Aaron and the Levite priests, then because Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, then in effect Aaron and the Levites also paid tithes to Melchizedek, making Melchizedek a superior priesthood to Aaron’s priesthood. He then moves to argue that because Aaron’s priesthood could never attain perfection by itself, there was a requirement for a better priest to arise from the greater priesthood, the priesthood of Melchizedek. And so the question in chapter 7, is “Who is that priest?”

We find that out in Heb. 8:1. Look with me at that real quick. We see a plain statement about the author’s thesis when he writes, “Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest.” In other words, the author identifies Jesus as the superior high priest that comes from the priesthood of Melchizedek. Then, throughout chapter 8, chapter 9, and all the way into chapter 10, he then shows why Jesus, as the high priest from the priestly line of Melchizedek, is so much better.

He starts by reminding us of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 33, then in chapter 9 he highlights the shortcomings of the Old Covenant, the Mosaic Law, as being unable to truly take away sins, and then he points to Jesus as the mediator of the New Covenant, which is better, because through instituting the New Covenant, Jesus did what the Levite priests with all their sacrifices could never do: permanently and forever take away our sins. Jesus became the once-and-for-all sacrifice that fulfilled the righteous requirement of the Law to atone for sin, and because He has provided forgiveness for us, there no longer remains a need for continual offerings and sacrifices. That’s the point in Hebrews 10, up through verse 18, and that brings us to verses 19–25 and our passage tonight.

Now, you might be looking at these chapters, and saying to yourself, “Well that’s a lot of ground you just covered! How do you know this is all a single, related section?” Well, I’m glad you asked. Let me show you. Look in verses 19–25 of chapter 10, and I want you to notice two phrases that occur in a specific order: first in verse 22, we see “let us draw near

with a sincere heart”. Then, in the next verse, verse 23, we see the phrase “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope”. Do you see those? Got it?

Ok, flip with me back to chapter 4. Look in verses 14–16 again, and what do we see there? We see first in verse 14 a similar phrase, “let us hold fast our confession”, and then in verse 16, we see again, “let us draw near with confidence”. And notice that those two statements are in the reverse order from how we see them in chapter 10. In other words, Hebrews 4:14–16 and Hebrews 10:19–25 are acting like kind of bookends that bracket this central flow of thought in the chapters in between. In fact, we even have more detail as to the connected nature of these several chapters, because we’ve already looked at 8:1, where we are told what the main point of the writer is, and that occurs approximately in the middle. So there is clearly an intent by the writer to structure these chapters in such a way as to make a coordinated argument for a central point, and we’re told what that central point is in chapter 8, and our passage tonight represents the part where he wraps up that thought and finishes it.

In other words, our passage tonight represents the conclusions based on that thought. Now, recall what that main point is. The main point of this whole big section from chapter 4 all the way through to chapter 10 is that Jesus is that high priest. He mediates a new and better covenant because He Himself became a new and better and final sacrifice to atone for the sins of His people. And now, starting in verse 19 of chapter 10, we see the writer begin to connect the dots from that great truth to what we’re going to look at tonight. Look at the beginning of verse 19. We see the word “Therefore”. Of course you’ve heard the little jingle about Bible study that whenever you see the word “therefore”, you should look to see why is it there for. I like how one dictionary translates this word: “here’s how the dots connect.”

Notice how the writer connects the dots for us: as a result of Jesus being that great high priest who has once and for all atoned for sins because of His sacrifice, because of all that, we have confidence to enter the holy place. In the ancient Hebrew tabernacle, and then later in the temple, there was a special room in the center where the Ark of the Covenant lay. It was the place where the very presence of God dwelt under the Mosaic covenant. It was separated from the rest of the tabernacle and temple by a thick veil.

It was called The Most Holy Place, or The Holy of Holies. And no one was allowed in except for one time per year, the high priest of all Israel would cleanse himself, don his priestly garments, and enter the Most Holy Place to make sacrifices to Yahweh on behalf of himself and the entire nation. You and I couldn’t go in; only the high priest could enter, and only once per year.

But now, look in verse 20: Jesus, as the Great High Priest of new and better covenant, has opened for us a “new and living way”. He “inaugurated”, or instituted something that was novel and has not been seen before. And notice the path this new way takes: it goes straight through the veil. Recall that Matthew records in Matt. 27:51 that Jesus “yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” In other words, when Jesus died, God supernaturally tore the veil separating Himself from His people so that all who belong to Him now have unfettered access.

But notice that this new way isn’t just the absence of the veil. The veil has been replaced by something new; something different; it has been replaced not by a something, but by a someone. The writer says this new way through the veil is through “His flesh”. Recall what

Jesus told His disciples in Jn. 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”

This new and living way is not through the ritual sacrifices and observances of the Old Covenant, the Mosaic Law, in which you could only come to God by proxy through the ministry of the high priest, but instead all of God’s people have access to the Father through faith in Jesus Christ. This, verses 19-20, is a powerful, powerful statement on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith. Our relationship with God is no longer by proxy; but it is through simple faith in Christ Alone that we all have access into the Holy of Holies.

But notice that the basis for this access is not *just* based on Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. Look in verse 21: “and since *we have* a great priest over the house of God.” Jesus didn’t offer Himself as a once and for all sacrifice, fulfill the righteous requirement of the Law on our behalf, and then after He died and was buried, and that was it. No, what happened after that three days later? He rose again! He was resurrected and lives forevermore! So He continues to be our “great priest over the house of God”. In fact, look back in Heb. 7:25: “Therefore He [that is, Jesus] is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.” Our Great High Priest not only offered Himself as a perfect and final sacrifice for our sins so that we might have unfettered access to the Father, but He also rose again and continues as our Great High Priest because He Himself is the way to the Father, and He continues His ministry as our Great High Priest by interceding on our behalf.

So these two doctrines, the Doctrines of Justification by Faith and the Doctrine of the Resurrection, these are core, powerful doctrines that the writer uses to establish the basis for our three points tonight. So back in Hebrews 10, let’s look at verses 22–25, and we’re going to see three points that the writer extracts from these two powerful doctrines. What does the right practice of a church look like? The writer answers that based on the reality of faith in Jesus Christ, His death, burial, and resurrection, the right practice of a church looks like this: Be Saved, Be Sanctified, and Be Serving. And so we’re going to look at each of those in turn.

Our first point tonight: Be Saved. Look in verse 22. Because we now have free access “to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus”, we are to “draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

We are to “draw near”. Literally, we are to “go towards”. We, who were far away, are now to come to the holy place, the very presence of God, so that we are now close beside. But notice there is a particular manner in which we are to draw near. We are to have “a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.”

The idea of a “sincere heart” is something that’s true. Something that’s genuine. Something that reflects reality. And what is it that is characterize this true reflection of reality. What is it that is supposed to be genuine? It’s a “full assurance of faith”.

That phrase, “full assurance of faith”, is usually translated just like that: “full assurance”. But there are other occurrences in Scripture where it is also translated as “accomplished”. One dictionary defines this word as “bearing the work of God to the fullest extent”.

But taking it just as it, let’s summarize so far and see where we’re at with this verse: because of Christ’s work as our Great High Priest, we are to go towards and be near Him, and we are to do so because we have a genuine heart that reflects the reality of our full

assurance of faith.

Now, what is the characteristic of our “full assurance of faith”. Well, the writer tells us, “having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” The idea of our hearts being sprinkled clean and our bodies being washed is the idea of a ceremonial cleansing. It recalls the high priest, as part of the ritual sacrifices in the Most Holy Place, would sprinkle blood as a symbol of being covered with Christ’s blood.

Look with me in Leviticus 15. Leviticus 15 is where we find the instructions for observing the Day of Atonement, which was the one day of the year where the high priest would enter the Most Holy Place and offer sacrifices for himself and for the entire nation of Israel. Look in verse 4: the high priest was to first bathe his body in water and then put on the ceremonial garments of his office. Then in verse 14, we read, “he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the mercy seat on the east side; also in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times.” Then again in verse 19, we see that the high priest is to sprinkle blood, but this time it says the purpose is to “cleanse it, and from the impurities of the sons of Israel consecrate it.”

In other words, back in Hebrews 10, where the writer says that our hearts are to be sprinkled clean and our bodies washed, this is a reference to our inmost being, our self, being consecrated unto God and therefore having our hearts “sprinkled clean” from the defilement of our sin nature and as a result our outward lives reflect that inward “cleaning” by being “washed”.

In other words, verse 22 is talking about being regenerated unto saving faith! This points to the first right practice of a church, and that is regenerate church membership. In order for a church to function properly, we first have to recognize that a church is made up of only believers. Today, unfortunately, the practice of churches to have regenerate church membership seems to have fallen by the wayside, and most churches now correctly deduce that our mission is to reach the lost, but they do so by bringing the lost into the church, and thinking that by “meeting people where they’re at” that the lost will be more receptive to the gospel, and therefore be converted.

And the problem with that is that it doesn’t work. What happens in those instances is that the lost aren’t converted, and the church then becomes populated with unbelievers, and eventually begins to look more like the world than the church. And the reason for that goes back to our text tonight: they didn’t observe the first right practice of a church. Be saved!

Let’s look at our second point now: Be Sanctified. Look with me in verse 23. The author says, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.” This idea of “holding fast” is an interesting word. Paul uses this word in his letter to Philemon. Look with me in Philemon quickly, starting at verse 12. Recall that Paul was in prison in Rome, and a runaway slave from Colosse, named Onesimus, had found his way to Rome, come into contact with Paul, was converted by the gospel, and now Paul was sending him back to his master, Philemon, in Colosse.

Now, Paul didn’t want to send Onesimus away, but he was doing so because it was the right thing for Onesimus to do. Look in verse 12, where Paul writes, “I have sent him back to you in person, that is sending my very heart, *whom I wished to keep with me.*” That phrase, “keep with me”, that’s the same word as our text that says we are to “hold fast”. Paul wanted Onesimus to stay and minister with him. He wanted Onesimus to continue on with Paul in Rome and be his partner in ministry.

And that's the idea in Hebrews 10:23 of "holding fast". We are to continue in our confession of hope. Other synonyms include "keeping in memory", stay, holding firmly, or occupy. It's the idea of persistence or continuity. It is to be a continual and perpetual thing.

Now, notice that we are to hold fast in a certain way: we are to do so "without wavering". The Greek word for "without wavering" is literally "unbending". Our holding fast is to be characterized by being unyielding or unbending with a steadfast, immovable conviction towards the confession of our hope. Paul puts it this way in 1 Cor. 15:58. He writes, "Therefore, my beloved brethern, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."

So that's the idea of "without wavering". Lets recap quickly: we are to hold fast the confession of our hope, and we are to do so without bending. Now, what is this "confession of our hope". Well, as you may know, in the Bible when you see the word "confession", that generally means "agreement". It's literally translated, "to say the same thing about". It takes on the idea of a profession that is based on a firm conviction.

That conviction is "our hope". Today what we call "hope" is really just something that we wish for, and maybe or maybe not it will happen. Usually it doesn't. But that's not how the Bible talks about hope. Hope in the Bible is always derived from expectation of something that will happen. It's a certainty. A guarantee.

What is that we confess that is a guaranteed certainty? Well, in the context of Hebrews, I believe the hope that the writer is referring to is that because of Christ's work as our Great High Priest, we now have confident access to draw near to God *and stay there*. In other words, I believe this hope to be referring to the blessing of spending eternity in the presence of God forever in Heaven. That's our hope as Christians; Christians aren't just saved and then we are left alone to be by ourselves. No, we are saved so that we might have a right relationship with God for all eternity. As Rev. 21:3 puts it: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them." That's our hope.

And because of that hope, we are to "hold fast" "without wavering". In other words, we are to persevere. Look with me 2 Pet. 1:1-8. Peter puts it this way. He writes,

Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here we see that perseverance is one of the things that we are exercise ourselves in, but notice that perseverance is tied to our sanctification. Peter is saying that because of the Imputed Righteousness of Christ, He has granted to us everything we need for life and Godliness, and that happens through knowledge of the Scriptures. And those Scriptures contain “precious and magnificent promises”, i.e., hope for us, that make us partakers of Christ. And because of all that, we are to increase in these qualities. And among those qualities are perseverance.

In other words, back in Hebrews 10, our unyielding perseverance in the confession of our hope is a marker of our increasing sanctification as we are conformed to the image of Christ. And so the second marker of the right practice of a church is to Be Sanctified!

Finally, our third point of a church’s right practice: Be Serving. Look with me in verses 24–25 of Hebrews 10. “Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

Oh boy, it’s about to get real with this verse. First, let’s look at this word “consider”. The Greek word is *katanoeo*. It’s translated elsewhere in Scripture as “observing” or “detecting”. It means literally, “to reason from up to down”. In other words, this is talking about deductive reasoning. We are to observe others in the church, detect something about them, and then do something about it.

Now, what is it we are supposed to “consider”? We are to consider “how to stimulate one another”. This is an interesting word as well. It’s the same word used between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15 where it says that “sharp disagreement” arose over John Mark. The Greek word is *paroxysmos*. It’s where we get our word “paroxysm”. It’s a convulsion fit.

Now, this isn’t saying go be a jerk to people and push their buttons until they just go off on you in an outburst of anger. The idea is that we are to consider the spiritual needs of others and then figure out a way to meet those needs in such a way that the person has a clear choice: they can either engage in service and rise to the occasion, or they can consciously sit on the sidelines.

Now look, the things we are to “stimulate” others towards are “love and good deeds”. These are two related things. The one goes with the other. We are to consider how to help others grow in their love for Christ and love for the brethren, and as a result they are to grow in their good works “which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” That’s Eph. 2:10.

Now, how do we do all that? What is required for us to be able to deductively reason how we can help each other grow in love and good deeds, such that we have no option but to respond one way or another? What’s the minimum requirement for that to happen?

Verse 25 tells us: “not forsaking our own assembling together”. This should make sense to us, right? If we call ourselves Christians, we are to “consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds”. And you can’t do that if you have forsaken the church, the very people you are supposed to stimulate.

And oh boy, do we have a problem with this today. Over the last 2+ years we have seen a totalitarian takeover of society, using a so-called “pandemic” with over a 99.9%+ survival rate as an excuse, to shut down every good thing about our lives that God has blessed us with. There have been lies after lies about statistics. Effective treatments have intentionally been discourage and even prohibited, and knowingly ineffective and even dangerous

treatments have been promoted. Churches were closed as “super-spreaders” while bars and abortion clinics remained open as “essential services”.

And churches have gone along with it!

There are still churches today that are either just starting to meet in person, or are still conducting “services” online. And it’s even worse. Now we have a suspect vaccine that has numerous concerns, known side effects, including death, that have not been addressed, and heavy-handed, illegal mandates to force it upon people whether they need it or not. And there are churches that are playing along with that evil game, requiring these things to be able to worship God. Where God has given us free access to the Holy of Holies through Jesus Christ, these hirelings have recreated the veil that separates us from God, only this time with stupid mask restrictions and overbearing vaccine mandates in order to be able to draw near and worship God.

It’s not only wrong-headed, it’s evil. And if you think this is all just a coincidence, that those who rule over us have our best interest at heart, then you are being either ignorantly naive or intentionally complicit. And by the way, the government just this week released an official memo that labels what I just said as a terrorist threat. I, who have nearly 300 combat hours in an F-15E in defense of our freedoms, am now a “terrorist threat”.