

Net•Work Notes

Week 11, Day 1: Communion—Life with God and his People

Net•work Notes Special Edition

In this edition of Net•Work Notes we will spend some time giving special attention to the questions which are asked to people who want to join the church. There is no way to answer every question you may have before you decide to become an “active member” of Saint Andrew Presbyterian Church, but we will try to answer as many of them as we can. Over these next several Net•Work Notes pages, we will look at the different parts of the questions used for becoming a member of Saint Andrew and relate them to our Christian faith and our confession of faith.

Living as a Disciple of Christ in Christian Faith

Over the many weeks of our Notes, we have been listening to and making sense of the Bible’s story of God’s acts and works with humankind and the rest of God’s creation. One reason for this is to understand Jesus Christ himself. The Bible’s whole story points to Jesus Christ and finds its center and key in Jesus Christ. We have discovered how we were part of God’s purposes from the very beginning of his good creation, reflected on how human life got complicated and troubled by our rejection of God, and how God has been persistently working to heal our broken relationship with him. Through Christ, and his offering of his life for us in his death on the cross, God brings us back to a love relationship with him and makes us part of God’s people, his children. This is what the apostle Paul calls “being saved by grace through faith.” Faith is trusting God’s grace to make us whole through our being joined to

Jesus Christ. Faith is trusting and loving Jesus Christ and being a follower of Jesus Christ.

Faith is like a journey. We never start a journey knowing everything we will face along the way or knowing all the “answers” before we begin. But like a journey, we do take “steps” forward. In Christian faith, this means giving over our lives to Jesus Christ. Through being united to Jesus Christ, God forgives our sin which separates us from God and through God’s Spirit, God continues to shape and influence our lives to reflect more of God and God’s ways.

When we decide to make a public confession of faith, we are making a decision to tell others that we trust Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and are committing our lives to following him and becoming more like him. That is really the only simple reason for making a public profession of faith. If you have entrusted your life to Jesus Christ, there is no reason to delay making a public profession of faith.

Spend some time thinking over the story of Christian faith as we have gone over it. You may want to pray, lifting up those parts of the Christian faith that are most meaningful for you.

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Week 11, Day 2: Communion—Life with God and his People

The Turn

If Christian faith is like a journey, it begins with a turn, a decision. As we have seen, the basic condition that we find ourselves in, is as creatures out of relationship with the living God. Sin is living as our own gods, separated from God. To live as our own gods leads to death in all its many shapes and forms. To live in touch with a death-dominated existence is to know the power of evil. We don't always think about it this way or call it this. We normally just call it "doing our own thing" or "not being religious."

Faith begins with God calling us to turn away from a self-ruled and self-centered life dominated by sin. The first question that we ask people in worship when they become a member of the church in order to profess their faith is:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

Answer: I do.

Think about this question. What does it tell us and what do we live out by confessing it? First, it tells us that we depend upon God for the power to live a whole life. It is God's "gracious mercy" that is the

well-spring of life. Gracious mercy is another way of saying "God's surprising love that reaches us even when we are a long way from God." We discover that God has first loved us through his Son, Jesus Christ. Responding to that love, we trust God with our whole lives and the re-building of our lives.

Second, a life of trust in God involves us in saying "no" to a lot of the choices available to us in the world! Living for God means rejecting many paths that people around us have told us are good or fun. Sin and evil are ways of naming the acts, thoughts, or influences that would encourage us to live selfishly, proudly, and ignoring God's will.

So, as Christians confess their faith, we say that because of God's love for us, we put our trust in God. Trust or faith is the beginning of a new life with the living God.

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Week 11, Day 3: Communion—Life with God and his People

Key to Life

Real life cannot be lived negatively. We are not really living if all we are doing is merely rejecting options around us. We are not really living until we begin to live for someone or something. So, even if faith involves saying no to sin and evil in the world, faith is not complete until we say yes to the Lord of Life. The key to life is discovering someone who is worth giving our lives to, pouring our energies, talents, and futures into.

We have discovered from the Bible that all of God's actions and promises point to Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, the Word of God (another name for the living God) "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1.14). Jesus was full of the grace and truth of the living God. God's promises pointed forward to his "anointed one" (the Messiah or Christ) who would save God's people and be their king. Christians trust that Jesus is this Savior and Messiah.

So, the second question we ask people professing their faith is as follows:

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as you Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?

Answer: I do.

Notice that this question tells us that our "turn" is complete when we turn to Jesus Christ. We face God and the truth about ourselves when we give our lives to Jesus Christ.

We say so much when we confess that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. For someone to be our Lord means that we are trusting our whole lives to him: our decisions, our relationships with parents and friends, our work (and our preparation for work in school and college, etc.), our social lives, our leisure time, our sex lives, our future marriages and families (if these are part of our futures), what we do with our money and possessions, everything is under the guidance of our Lord. Christians believe that Jesus Christ will guide us in a way that leads us to live life obediently, fully, and abundantly.

This question also expresses that we give our lives to Jesus because we believe he has saved us from sin and death. He is our Savior because he gave his life for us to overcome and defeat death and a death-dominated life.

Accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior means to trust that Jesus Christ is alive and active in the world and watching over his people (the church). That is why we say we are "trusting in his grace and love". Christians are joined to, united with Jesus Christ (like branches on the vine; cf. John 15). Jesus Christ does not leave us alone, but sends the Holy Spirit (his Spirit) to live in us. Prayer is our way of talking with Christ in the Spirit.

Jesus Christ is the key to life. As Paul puts it, Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone to a truly complete life with God. What good news this is!

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Week 11, Day 4: Communion—Life with God and his People

A New Way of Life

Jesus told his disciples that he was “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). By saying this he reminds us that being a Christian is more than just believing certain things about God and Jesus Christ. We confess our faith as part of living out our faith. Following Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior requires our day by day living as well as our thoughts, words, and beliefs.

It is a reflection of the grace of Jesus Christ that such a life, the way which he leads us on, is a blessed life. We experience more of the fullness of life and the vitality of life when we follow the way of Jesus Christ. One of the first names of the early church was “The Way” (Acts 9:2).

Christian faith and trust join us to Jesus Christ and we become his followers, committed to living his way in the world. So, the third question we ask confirmands when they profess their faith is:

Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?

Answer: I will, with God’s help.

This question expresses our commitment to live out our faith day by day. A disciple is a follower of a

leader and teacher. We are committed to following the teachings and commands of Jesus. That is why followers of Jesus are committed to reading and understanding the Bible. The Bible is the way we hear the Word of Jesus Christ, so that we can obey him. Remember the commandment of Jesus: love one another as he loved us (sacrificially, completely, and committed to God’s holiness). By this, says Jesus, people will know we are his followers (John 15:12-13).

Such a life is a huge challenge. It is so much easier to live selfishly. I’d rather grab for all the satisfaction I can reach. But the challenge is worth it. We discover true satisfaction in deep, loving relationships with Christ and with others.

Because living a life of obedience and love is such a challenge, we don’t try to live this life by our own strength and power. We commit to this life “with God’s help.” God promises that He will supply us with His Holy Spirit to refresh us, encourage us, and to remind us of what God desires. The Holy Spirit empowers a faithful life, and Jesus prays for us and feeds us day by day.

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Week 11, Day 5: Communion—Life with God and his People

Personal Confession—Public Communion

There are two more parts of your public profession of faith when you go before the church: one last question and the reciting of the Apostles' Creed. Both the question and the creed are the reminder of something that is very important: we do not live out the Christian faith alone.

First the question (though actually it will follow the creed):

You have publicly professed your faith. Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Answer: I will, with God's help.

When we are united with Jesus Christ by faith, we become a part of the body of Christ, the church. We are part of a community whose foundation is Jesus Christ (cf. Ephesians 2:19-22). We are part of the "holy catholic church, the communion of saints". Catholic is another word for saying "world-wide" or "universal". So when we say the church is catholic, we are saying it includes the followers of Jesus no matter where they are found in the world. ("Catholic" in the Roman Catholic Church also means universal, but refers to the church that has its roots in Rome and is head by the Pope). So, when you become a Christian, you are part of a world-wide family, not just the Presbyterian Church, USA. Presbyterians believe that there are a number of faithful ways to live out Christian faith; you do not need to be a Presbyterian to be a "true" Christian. But to be a Christian means to be a part of a particular congregation, too. You are making a commitment to being a part of this congregation. But your life may also take you to new communities and circumstances, and later you may join another congregation, denomination or branch of the

world-wide church. Just because you are joining St. Andrew doesn't mean you commit to doing everything this congregation does; but it does mean that this is the people whose lives you will share and whose faith you will encourage.

Though there are many ways to organize a church, Presbyterians in trying to think biblically had made the decision to be led by elders. Elders are men and women, elected by the congregation, who because of their gifts and maturity in the faith are chosen to lead and make decisions for the church. We also choose deacons who are called to special servant ministries in the church. Decisions in the Presbyterian Church, USA are made by vote with equal numbers of elders and pastors on different regional levels (Presbytery is local and encompasses East Iowa, Synod is regional and encompasses the states of Iowa, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin, and General Assembly is our national "congress"). Because elders have the responsibility of leading the church, that is why you first share your Christian faith with the elders when you join a Presbyterian Church.

And then there is the saying of the Apostles' Creed. This you will do with the whole church. We say this together, because the good news of Jesus Christ does not belong to an individual, but is given to the whole church. We live out this good news in our commitment to Jesus Christ. The creed puts together some of the main parts of the Christian faith in a way that is easily remembered, so that we can help one another grow in faith. We use it to remind one another who we are as God's people.