

God's Gift to You this CHRISTmas: Strength

"A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 ¹

*"Two are better than one," the Bible says, "because they have a good return for their labor: ¹⁰ If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. ¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? ¹² Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. **A cord of three strands is not quickly broken** (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).*

Have you ever paid attention to the fact that rope of any size is usually made of at least three smaller strands, which may in turn be made up of multiple strands? Even string is usually stranded. This passage from Ecclesiastes reminds us that we're all stronger when we're together and in more danger when we're apart.

We've noted in recent weeks that whatever else God intends to do in this universe and beyond, the Bible makes it very clear that God's purpose on Earth is to populate this planet with born-again persons who of their own free will choose to join their lives together in a community of relationships that only God can build. Life as we know it is, when all is said and done, a recruiting office and a training camp to prepare persons of every "*tribe and language and people and nation*" (Revelation 5:9) for the New Heaven and the New Earth that are to come.

Those who sign on are known as "the church," and the creation of this unique community is God's real purpose in all that happens on planet Earth. The Bible calls this remarkable group of people who are known as the church "*the family of God*" (Ephesians 1:5), and Paul wrote that this family is actually one body, with one Spirit, one Lord, one Father, one faith, one baptism, and one glorious future (Ephesians 3:4-6). It is this body that claims our attention this morning.

I won't ask for a show of hands, but I wonder if you've ever had a toothache? When you have a toothache or some other kind of infection, that one source radiates pain throughout your entire body. In a similar but opposite way, a good foot rub radiates pleasure throughout the entire body though the massage actually touches only a small part of it.

It's in a similar sense that the Bible tells us, speaking about the Body of Christ, "*If one part [of the body] suffers, every part suffers with it, if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it*" (1 Corinthians 12:26-27).

Where the New International Version speaks about "parts" of the body, both physical and spiritual, the King James Version speaks about "members" of the body. To be a "member" is to be a part of a larger whole, whether that whole is a club, a society, a team, or a congregation. Members of groups work together for common purposes, and the Body of Christ has that characteristic in common with other groups, but the Church is also unique in a number of ways.

First, the Bible says that "*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*" (Ephesians 5:25). That's not true of any other organization; and, although the Body of Christ does have organization, even as our physical bodies have organization, both bodies are far more than "organization": they are *organisms*—they are *living* things.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on December 9, 2012, the Second Sunday of Advent.

Second, Jesus said, “*I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it*” (Matthew 16:18, NLT). There’s no other group of which that is true. For all its faults, the Church, the Body of Christ, is God’s chosen instrument for the redemption of the world.

God’s purpose for us in the Church is that we live together in Spirit-empowered unity and love. Such unity is not at all natural for humans, fallen as we are, nor can we achieve it apart from the work of God’s Spirit. So as you and I choose to join our lives together in this Body that only God can birth, this miraculous unity gives testimony to the Truth of the Gospel and draws other people to Jesus (John 13:34-35, 17:20-21).

Several years ago I was talking with one of my nieces who was then a first-year medical student (she’s now a medical resident in Denver). As we talked about what she was learning, she said, “The body is just too wonderful to be an accident.” That’s true about the Body of Christ as well as our physical bodies. Both have been created for the glory of God.

Jesus had a special word for members of His Body who were functioning as He intends for them to function. Jesus called such members “disciples,” and He told us to go into all the world, making such disciples and teaching them to obey all of His commands (Matthew 28:20). To say that a bit differently, the Body of Christ is composed of those persons who *witness* to the reality of the Kingdom of God, who *embody* the life of that Kingdom in daily experience, and who continually seek to *enlarge* the compass of that Kingdom in the world.

There are numerous benefits to being a member of the Body of Christ in a local community of faith, and I don’t know anyone who has done a better job of summarizing those benefits than Rick Warren did in his best-selling books *The Purpose Driven Life*² and *The Purpose Driven Church*.³ Rick pointed out that being a member of a local Christian congregation:

1. IDENTIFIES you as a genuine believer (Ephesians 2:19; Romans 12:5);
2. Provides a spiritual FAMILY to support and encourage you in your walk with Christ (Galatians 6:1-2; Hebrews 10:24-25);
3. Gives you a place to discover and to deploy your GIFTS in ministry (1 Corinthians 12:4-27);
4. Places you under the spiritual PROTECTION of godly leaders (Hebrews 13:17; Acts 20:28-29); and
5. Gives you the ACCOUNTABILITY you need to grow (Ephesians 5:21).⁴

Membership in a local congregation provides benefits that can’t be found anywhere else:

1. **WORSHIP** helps you focus on God and prepares you spiritually and emotionally for the week ahead;
2. **FELLOWSHIP** helps you face life’s problems by providing the support and encouragement of other Christians;
3. **DISCIPLESHIP** helps you strengthen your faith by learning the truths of God’s Word and applying biblical principles to your life;
4. **MINISTRY** helps you discover, develop, and deploy your talents in serving others;
5. **MISSION** helps you fulfill your purpose of reaching your friends and family for Christ.⁵

² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996).

⁴ *Purpose Driven Church*, p. 313.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 313-314.

Those five benefits ought to sound familiar—they're the same five principles around which our congregation is organized. To put them in a different way, "God created the church to meet your five deepest needs: a *purpose* to live for, *people* to live with, *principles* to live by, a *profession* to live out, and *power* to live on." Rick noted that "There is no other place on earth where you can find all five of these benefits in one place. There is nothing else on earth like the church!"⁶

Now there are two common mistakes people make with respect to church membership. The first mistake is to think that we don't need to be members of a local church at all.

The famous preacher Dwight L. Moody was visiting a prominent Chicago businessman when the subject of church membership came up. "I believe I can be just as good a Christian outside the church as I can be inside it," he said.

Moody didn't say anything. He walked over to the fireplace, blazing against the winter cold outside, and took one burning coal from the fire and put it alone on the hearth. Without speaking, the two men watched the ember gradually cool and go out.

"I understand," his friend said.⁷

Rick Warren observed that people sometimes say, "Well, I'm a Christian, but I don't want to belong to any church." That's like saying, "I'm a football player, but I don't want to be a part of any team." That's like saying, "I'm a tuba player, but I don't want to be a part of an orchestra." That's like saying, "I'm a bee, but I don't want to be a part of a hive." A Christian without a church family is an orphan. God meant you to be a part of a family.⁸

The other main mistake we make about church membership is to fail to join our lives to a congregation where we currently live. Jimmy Carter almost made that mistake:

"When I was first elected Governor [of Georgia]," he said, "and knew that I was going to come to Atlanta . . . I went to visit a woman who was ill and was under my responsibility as a deacon. I told her that I was so loyal to my church in Plains that, even though I was going to be Governor, I was going to retain my membership in Plains.

"She said, 'Brother Jimmy, you're making a serious mistake. My momma always said that when you move your stove, you move your church membership. You're going to be cooking in Atlanta, and I think you ought to worship in Atlanta.'

"When you're elected Governor," Jimmy said, "many Baptist churches in Atlanta would like to have the Governor be a member of that church. It's even a greater desire when you become President and move to Washington. But Rosalynn and I decided quite early that we would choose the geographically closest (Baptist) church to the Governor's mansion and then later to the White House. So that is what we did."⁹

My friends, if you're not currently a member of a church where you live, I encourage you to remember that "God created the [local] church to meet your five deepest needs: a *purpose* to live for, *people* to live with, *principles* to live by, a *profession* to live out, and

⁶ *Purpose Driven Life*, p. 136.

⁷ Keith Long, *Room to Grow* (Hendrickson, 1999).

⁸ Rick Warren, sermon, "You Were Formed for God's Family."

⁹ Jimmy Carter, in John Pierce, "A Baptist-to-Baptists conversation with Jimmy Carter," *Baptists Today*, November 2003, 16.

power to live on. . . . There is nothing else on earth like the church!”¹⁰ Be a member!
Be a player! Be a disciple! Do it now.

Membership Options at Columbia Baptist Fellowship

If this is your Situation	These are your Opportunities
If you are currently an Associate Member of CBF . . .	There is a one-time opportunity now to have your Associate Membership converted to Full Membership with no further action on your part (“grandfathering”). You may make that desire known during the invitation time during any service this month, and this conversion will be confirmed at the next Business Meeting.
If you have never publicly professed your faith in Jesus as your Lord & Savior . . .	You may make that profession during the invitation time in any service. After you have discussed your commitment with one of our pastors, you will be baptized by immersion during a special service of celebration and commitment that will be scheduled later in room 100, usually on a Sunday afternoon. Your membership will be confirmed at the next Business Meeting.
If you are currently a member of another Baptist church . . .	You may ask to have your membership transferred from that congregation by making that desire known during the invitation time in any service. After you have discussed your commitment with one of our pastors, we will write to your previous congregation to alert them to your desire to move your membership, and your membership will be confirmed at the next Business Meeting.
If you are not able to transfer your membership from another Baptist congregation, or if you’re currently a member of another Christian denomination . . .	<p>If you’ve been born again and have received Christian baptism by any mode following your confession of faith in Jesus (that is, you have received “believer’s baptism” rather than “infant baptism”), you may express your desire to become a member of CBF during the invitation time in any service. We’ll ask you to affirm your faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior and to confirm that you have previously received believer’s baptism (by any mode). After you have discussed your commitment with one of our pastors, your membership will be confirmed at the next Business Meeting.</p> <p>If you’ve been born again but have not experienced believer’s baptism, you may either request baptism (which will be by immersion in this case) or you may ask to become an Associate Member. After you have discussed your commitment with one of our pastors, your membership will be confirmed at the next Business Meeting.</p>

¹⁰ *Purpose Driven Life*, p. 136.

If you've been born again and baptized in another Christian church and wish to worship with CBF and participate in CBF programs and ministries, but do not want to become a Member . . .

If your membership is in a Christian church in which believer's baptism is not the norm (such as faith groups that practice infant baptism followed later by confirmation), and you don't wish to be baptized by immersion at this point in your journey, you may ask to move your membership and to become an Associate Member of CBF during the invitation time in any service. Associate Members are able to vote in Business Meetings and are able to exercise their gifts among us in every position except Pastoral Staff and Church Moderator. After you have discussed your commitment with one of our pastors, your membership will be confirmed at the next Business Meeting.

Sometimes persons come to us from other Christian congregations and wish to retain membership in that previous congregation. In that case, you would not be "moving your membership" to CBF and would ask to become an Associate Member at CBF while remaining a member of the other congregation ("dual membership"). As stated above, Associate Members are able to vote in Business Meetings and are able to exercise their gifts among us in every position except Pastoral Staff and Church Moderator. After you have discussed your commitment with one of our pastors, your membership will be confirmed at the next Business Meeting.