

GREATER UNION BAPTIST CHURCH

NEW MEMBER'S SUNDAY SCHOOL COURSE

STUDY OUTLINE

**GREATER UNION BAPTIST CHURCH
NEW MEMBER'S COURSE INTRODUCTION**

This series of lessons is designed to instruct you in the doctrines and principles that we deem essential to the Christian faith. This is not an exhaustive look at the essential doctrines, but an introduction to those that we think are foundationally important. The course will be comprised of five subdivisions, which are as follows:

- I. WHAT MAKES US CHRISTIAN!**
- II. WHAT MAKES US PROTESTANT!**
- III. WHAT MAKES US BAPTIST!**
- IV. WHAT THE CHURCH OWES YOU!**
- V. WHAT YOU OWE THE CHURCH!**

In the first division, we will examine five principles that we consider essential to the Christian faith. We affirm that although you may call yourself religious, you cannot truly be called “Christian” unless you properly understand these foundational doctrines. These five are distinctly and uniquely Christian doctrines, meaning no other religion will adhere to these, and these are necessary in order for one to be truly called “Christian”.

In like manner, the second division will introduce you to the doctrines that distinguish us from Roman Catholicism – those principles which make us “Protestant”. Here we will examine what are called The Five Solas of the Protestant Reformation.

The third division will introduce you to both the doctrines and the form of church government that distinguish the Baptist denomination from other Protestant denominations. We will examine the pros and cons of “Congregationalism”, and see how it differs from the “Episcopal” and “Presbyterian” forms of government.

The final two divisions will outline the church’s obligations to you and yours to the church. Here we will discuss our accountability to each other to do those things which the Word of God instructs us to do as the Church of God and Body of Christ. We will also here discuss the “Church Disciplines” necessary to ensure that this accountability is maintained and adhered to.

May God lead us to rightly divide His Word.

I. WHAT MAKES US CHRISTIAN!

The five principles that we will examine here are as follows;

1. **The Authority of Scripture,**
2. **The Trinity,**
3. **The Person and Work of Jesus Christ,**
4. **The Nature of Man, and**
5. **The Method of Salvation.**

We will examine these in a uniquely Christian light. Other major religions will have something to say about these, but we will present the Christian view of these tenets.

1. **The Authority of Scripture.**

a) Scriptural Inspiration.

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2Tim 3:16-17). This is one of the most important expressions in the New Testament regarding the divine inspiration of Scripture. It literally means “All Scripture is ‘God Breathed’”. The Bible has been breathed out by the Spirit of God (2 Pet. 1:21). As a result, the Holy Scripture is the only true, sufficient, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith and obedience. Its authority does not depend upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God, who is its author. It is therefore to be received because it is the Word of God.

b) Necessity of Scripture.

The Scriptures contain the whole council of God concerning all things that are necessary to man’s salvation, faith and practice, and God’s own glory. These are either expressly stated or necessarily contained in the Scriptures; to which nothing at any time is to be added or diminished, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or the traditions of men. We acknowledge that the inward illumination of the Spirit of God is necessary for a salvific understanding of such things as is revealed in the Word. 1 Cor 2: 11-14, “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

c) Interpretation of Scripture.

The infallible rule of Scripture interpretation is that the Scriptures interpret themselves. We always let Scripture interpret Scripture. Although God historically has gifted the church with great theological minds, whose works we can glean from, ultimately the Scripture is the criterion when interpreting Scripture. When there is a question about the true interpretation or meaning of any Scripture, it must be searched in other places where the Scriptures speak more clearly.

d) Inerrancy of Scripture.

¹We affirm that the written Word in its entirety is revelation given by God to men. This revelation was progressive. God, in His work of inspiration, utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared. We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original; and we deny that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the (original) autographs.

(¹From "Explaining Inerrancy" by R.C. Sproul.)

2. The Trinity.

a) One God.

²The Lord our God is but one living and true God, whose subsistence is in and of Himself, infinite in being and perfection, whose essence cannot be comprehended by any but Himself; a most pure Spirit, invisible, without body, who only hath immortality, who is immutable, eternal, every way infinite, most holy, most wise, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will.

b) Three Persons.

²In this divine and infinite Being there are three subsistence's, the Father, the Son (or Word), and the Holy Spirit; of one substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence: The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son; all infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is NOT to be divided in nature or being, but distinguished by several peculiar, relative properties and personal relations; which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God.

(² From The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689.)

3. The Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

a) His Person (Two Natures)

The Deity of Christ

Faith in the deity of Christ is necessary to being a Christian. It is an essential part of the NT gospel of Christ. John's gospel reveals Christ as being not only preexistent to creation, but eternal. He is said to be in the beginning with God and also that He is God (John 1: 1-3). That He is with God demands a personal distinction within the Godhead. That He is God demands inclusion in the Godhead. Other evidences of the divinity of Christ are His claims to be Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), and to have authority to forgive sins (Mark 2: 1-12). He receives worship, as when Thomas confesses, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20: 28). Paul says about Jesus that "in Him dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9), and hails Jesus the Son as the Father's image and His agent in creating and upholding everything (Col. 1: 15-17). In Romans 9: 5, Paul states of Christ that He "is over all, the eternally blessed God." He also states that Jesus is our "God and Savior" (Titus 2: 13). Paul prays to Him (2 Cor. 12: 8-9), and sees Christ as the source of divine grace (2 Cor. 13: 14). The testimony is explicit: faith in Jesus' deity is basic to Paul's and the NT's tenets and theology.

The Humanity of Christ

That God the Son took upon Himself a genuine human nature is again a crucial and essential doctrine of the Christian faith. The great ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451 affirmed that Jesus is truly man and truly God, and that the two natures of Christ are so united as to be without mixture, confusion, separation, or division, each nature retaining its own attributes. The Gospels bear record of Christ's humanity in that He is seen lying in a cradle (Luke 2: 40), growing in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:52), and subject to distress (Mark

14: 33). He hungers in Matt. 4:2, He cries in John 11: 35. And finally He is subject to death and burial. In Gal. 4: 4 we read, “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman”, and in Heb. 2: 17, “He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest.” We must place emphasis on the fact that in His humanity He is sinless. The New Testament teaches that Jesus was entirely free from sin (John 8:46; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5). This means not only that He never disobeyed His Father, but also that He loved God with all His heart, soul and mind. Jesus’ moral nature was unfallen, as was Adam’s prior to his sin, and in Christ there is no prior inclination to sin, as there is in us, for Satan to exploit. For our salvation it was necessary that He be free from sin. He was “a lamb without blemish and without spot,” able to offer His “precious blood” for us (1 Pet. 1:19). If He had been sinful He would have needed a savior Himself, and His death would’ve been of no benefit to us.

b) His Work.

The saving ministry of Jesus Christ can be summed up in the statement that He is the “Mediator between God and men” (1 Tim. 2: 5). A mediator is one who brings together parties who are estranged or at war with each other. The mediator must have links with both sides so as to identify with and maintain the interests of both, as well as to represent each to the other on a basis of goodwill. Every member of our fallen race is by nature at “enmity against God” (Rom. 8: 7), and are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2: 3). Reconciliation of the alienated parties is needed, but can only occur if God’s wrath is quenched and the human heart, that opposes God and motivates a life of rebellion, is changed. In mercy, God sent His Son into the world to bring about the needed reconciliation. God’s motive was love (John 3: 16). Jesus Christ, by His perfect obedience and sacrifice of Himself, procured the salvation and purchased an everlasting inheritance for all those whom the Father has given to Him. He obeyed the law that bound us and endured the punishment for lawlessness that we deserved, and so “merited” our justification. Our justification is on this basis (Rom. 3: 25,26), with Christ’s righteousness reckoned to our account (Rom. 4: 23,24; 5: 19). One of Calvin’s great contributions to Christian understanding was his observation that the NT writers expound Jesus’ mediatorial ministry in terms of three “offices”; prophet, priest and king. These three aspects of Christ’s work are found together in the letter to the Hebrews, where Jesus is both the messianic King, exalted to His throne (1:3, 13; 4:16; 2:9), as well as the great High Priest (2:17; 4:14 – 5:10; chs. 7 – 10), who offered Himself to God as a sacrifice for our sins. In addition, Christ is the messenger who preached the message concerning Himself (2:3). He is also called “Prophet” in Acts 3: 22. The three offices can be summed up as follows – the prophet speaks to the people for God; the priest intercedes to God for the people; the king governs. While in the OT these were fulfilled by separate individuals, all three offices now coalesce in the person of Jesus Christ.

4. The Nature of Man.

a) Man Before the Fall.

God created man upright and complete, and gave him a righteous law, thereby entering into a covenant of works with him upon the condition of perfect obedience, forbidding him to eat of the tree of knowledge (Gen. 2: 16,17). This covenant of works had a promise annexed to it, and a threatening. The promise was, ‘Do this and live’ (obey); the threat was, ‘In dying thou shalt die’ (disobey). God created man, male and female, with reasonable and rational souls, rendering them fit unto that life to God for which they were created. God made man in His own image, writing His law in their hearts. Along with this, man had power to fulfill this law, as well as the power to transgress it. Man had the ability not to sin, as well as the ability to sin.

b) Man After the Fall.

In Genesis 3 there unfolds the disastrous results of the fall. Upon their disobedience in eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, the immediate effects of sin can be seen in Adam and Eve. Following their transgression, Adam and Eve experienced personal guilt, evidenced by attempts to cover their nakedness. Next, efforts to hide themselves from the presence of the Lord suggest that they suffered a breach in relationship with God, or spiritual death. The pair's evasive answers to God’s interrogation and casting of blame upon each the

other further illustrate the depravity which had overcome the human heart. Finally, the fall resulted in physical death. Mankind after the fall suffers extensive spiritual deprivation. Although the image of God in man remains to a degree (Gen 9:6), he is no longer at liberty to choose God and the good (John 8:34; Rom. 3:9-18). Man is not only said to be spiritually blind (1 Cor. 2:14), but worse – spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1,5). Once able not to sin, the sinner is now incapable of not sinning (Gen. 6:5). Mankind is now in bondage to sin (Psalm 14:3), born in sin (Psalm 51:5), imputed with the sin of Adam (Rom. 5:17-19), and has a corrupt heart (Jer 17:9). Man's grim life of sin after the fall is outlined in Romans 1: 21-32 and 3: 9-18.

5. The Method of Salvation.

Salvation is the subject matter of the Holy Scriptures. Jesus, at His conception in the womb of Mary, is announced as Savior. Saviorhood and salvation go together. It is the role of the Savior to save. Yet we may ask, "What do we need to be saved from?" The biblical meaning of salvation is broad and varied. In its simplest form the verb to save means "to be rescued from a dangerous or threatening situation. When Israel escapes from the hands of her enemies when in battle, she is said to be saved. When people recover from a life-threatening illness, they experience salvation. The bible also uses the word salvation in a specific sense to refer to our ultimate redemption from sin and reconciliation to God. We will examine some of the doctrines surrounding the biblical plan of salvation.

a) Election

To "elect" means to select or choose. According to the Scriptures, before creation God selected from the human race those whom He would redeem, justify, sanctify, and glorify in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:28-39; Eph. 1:3-14; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:9-10). This divine choice is an expression of free and sovereign grace. It is not merited by anything in those who are chosen. God owes sinners no mercy, so it is a wonder that He should choose to save any of us. According to the Canons of Dort, election is defined as "the unchangeable purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world, out of the human race, which had fallen by its own fault out of its original integrity into sin and ruin, He has, according to the most free good pleasure of His will, out of mere grace, chosen in Christ to salvation a certain number of specific men, neither better nor more worse than others, but with them involved in a common misery." Election involves both the elect's salvation and the means to that end. God chose the elect "to be holy and blameless in His sight...to be adopted as sons" (Eph. 1:4-5). The elect are those whom God "foreknew...predestined...called...justified...glorified" (Rom. 8:29-30). God chose the elect "to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13). Therefore the preaching of the gospel is indispensable in effecting God's election (Rom. 10: 14-17). The salvation of the elect, which originates in decrees before time, is realized through means in time, and culminates in eternal glorification.

b) Regeneration

Regeneration is the theological term used to describe rebirth. It refers to a new generating, a new genesis, a new beginning. It is more than "turning over a new leaf"; it marks the beginning of a new life in a radically renewed person. Jesus says "unless a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Peter speaks of believers "having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, though the Word of God which lives and abides forever" (1 Pet. 1:23).

Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit upon those who are spiritually dead (see Eph. 2:1-10). The Spirit recreates the human heart (Eze. 36:26), quickening it from spiritual death to spiritual life. Regenerate people are new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). Where formerly they had no disposition, inclination, or desire for the things of God, now they are disposed and inclined toward God. In regeneration, God plants a desire for Himself in the human heart that otherwise could not be there.

Regeneration is not the fruit or result of faith. Rather regeneration precedes faith as the necessary condition for faith. We do not in any way dispose ourselves toward regeneration or cooperate as coworkers with the Holy Spirit to bring it to pass. We do not decide or choose to be regenerated. God chooses to regenerate us

before we will ever choose to embrace Him. To be sure, after we have been regenerated by the sovereign grace of God, we do choose, act, cooperate, and believe in Christ.

c) Faith

Christianity is often called a religion. More properly it is called “the faith”. We often speak of the Christian faith. It is called the faith because there is a body of knowledge that is affirmed or believed by its adherents. It is also called the faith by virtue of the fact that “faith” is central to its understanding of redemption. The book of Hebrews gives a definition of faith: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). In simple terms this means that we trust God for the future based on our faith in what He has done in the past. There is every reason to believe that God will be as faithful to His promises in the future as He has been in the past. There is a reason for the hope that is within us.

Through faith we also trust or believe that God exists. And although God Himself is unseen, the Scriptures make it clear that the invisible God is made manifest through the things that are visible (Rom. 1:20). Though God is not visible to us, we believe that He is there because He has manifested Himself so clearly in creation and in history.

Faith includes believing in God. Yet every kind of faith is not particularly praiseworthy. James writes, “You believe there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe – and tremble!” (James 2:19). Here sarcasm drips from James’ pen. To believe in the existence of God merely qualifies us to be demons. It is one thing to believe in God; it is another thing to believe God. To believe God, to trust in Him for our very life, is the essence of the Christian faith.

Saving faith involves the “content” of what we believe. We are not saved by believing just anything. Some have said, “It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you’re sincere.” That sentiment is radically opposed by the Bible. Salvation is not attained by sincerity alone. We may be sincerely wrong. Right doctrine, at least the essential truths of the gospel, is a necessary ingredient of saving faith. If our doctrine is heretical in the essentials, we will not be saved. If, for example, we say we believe in Christ but deny His deity, we do not possess the faith that saves. Even if a person understands the gospel and affirm its truths, they may still fall short of saving faith. The Reformers defined saving faith as including three necessary elements;

(1) Knowledge (notitia). This refers to the content of faith. To be saved, one must believe certain basic information. To be saved may not require an exhaustive knowledge of God, for none possess this. But we must have some knowledge and we must have some right knowledge of God and the gospel.

(2) Assent (assensus). The second essential element of saving faith is intellectual assent. Intellectual assent involves the assurance or conviction that a certain proposition is true. In assenting to the gospel we agree or recognize that the content of the gospel is true.

(3) Trust (fiducia). There is an element of trust in saving faith. It involves personal reliance and dependence upon the gospel. We can believe that a chair will bear our weight, but we do not exhibit personal trust in the chair until we sit on it.

Trust involves the will and the mind. To have saving faith requires that we love the truth of the gospel and desire to live it out. We embrace with our hearts the sweetness and loveliness of Christ.

d) Justification.

Justification may be defined as that act by which unjust sinners are made right in the sight of a just and holy God. The supreme need of unjust persons is righteousness. It is this lack of righteousness that is supplied by Christ on behalf of the believing sinner. Justification by faith alone means justification by the righteousness or merit of Christ alone, not by our goodness or good deeds. The issue of justification focuses on the question of merit and grace. Justification by faith means that the works we do are not good enough to merit justification. As Paul puts it, “By the deeds of the law will no flesh be justified in His sight” (Rom. 3:20). Justification is forensic (a legal matter, as in a judicial court). That is, we are declared, counted, or reckoned to be righteous when God imputes the righteousness of Christ to our account. The necessary condition for this is faith.

e) Sanctification

According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 35), sanctification is “the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die to sin, and live unto righteousness.” It is a continuing change worked by God in us (Phil. 2:13), freeing us from sinful habits and conforming us to Christ’s image (Rom. 8:29). This conforming work is a real transformation, not just the appearance of one. The basic meaning of “sanctify” is to set apart to God. God works in those whom He claims to be His own. This moral renovation, in which we are increasingly changed from what we once were, flows from the agency of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:13; 1 Cor. 6:11, 19-20; 2 Cor. 3:18; 2 Thess. 2:13). God calls His children to holiness, and graciously gives what He commands (1 Thess. 4:4, 5:23). Regeneration is birth; sanctification is growth. In regeneration, God implants the desire for Himself, for holiness, and to love God and man; in sanctification, the Holy Spirit “works in you both to will and to do” according to God’s purpose, enabling His people to fulfill their new, godly desires.

II. WHAT MAKES US PROTESTANT!

Protestantism, in its broadest sense, denotes the whole movement within Christianity that originated in the sixteenth century Reformation. The target of this “protest” may be generally described as degenerate Roman Catholicism. At issue were several deviations from the truths as taught in the Scriptures. There were multitudinous abuses, both theological and practical, connected with penance, satisfactions, and the treasury of merit. These practices were the basis of indulgences, to which Martin Luther directed his Ninety-five Theses. On October 31, 1517, Luther nailed his famous Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg. It was the eve of All Saint’s Day, a festive occasion drawing multitudes to Wittenberg, with its numerous relics, to receive indulgences. Luther wrote the theses, not in German, but Latin. This authenticates Luther’s later claim that he originally intended to offer the theses for theological discussion, not to create a public uproar.

One of the great ironies of history is that without a new technology then only recently made available, Luther’s “protest” may have been only a tempest in a small teapot, limited to the faculty at Wittenberg. The recent development of the printing press changed all that. Against Luther’s wishes his theses were translated into German, printed en masse, and circulated across the entire German nation within barely two weeks. That two-week period was pivotal for Christian history.

As the conflict between Protestants and Rome escalated, the issues expanded far beyond the matter of indulgences; yet they focused mainly on the issue of Justification. Luther came to the conclusion that the central issue was sola fide (faith alone). Hence his well known assertion that justification by faith alone is “the article with...which the church stands, without which the church falls.”

The fundamental principles of sixteenth century Protestantism included the 5 Solas of the Protestant Reformation, which are (1.) sola fide, (2.) sola scriptura, (3.) sola gratia, (4.) solus Christus, and (5.) Soli Deo gloria. Let’s briefly examine these.

(1.) Sola Fide – Faith Alone

We affirm that justification is by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone. In justification Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us as the only possible satisfaction of God’s wrath. We deny that justification rests on any merit to be found in us, or upon the grounds of an infusion of Christ’s righteousness in us, or that an institution claiming to be a church that denies or condemns sola fide can be recognized as a legitimate church.

(2.) Sola Gratia – Grace Alone

We affirm that in salvation we are rescued from God’s wrath by His sovereign grace alone. It is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that brings us to Christ by releasing us from our bondage to sin and raising us from spiritual death to spiritual life. We deny that salvation is in any sense a human work. Human methods, techniques or strategies by themselves cannot accomplish this transformation. Faith is not produced by our unregenerated human nature.

(3.) Solus Christus – Christ alone

We affirm that our salvation is accomplished by the mediatorial work of Christ alone. His sinless life and substitutionary atonement alone are sufficient for our justification and reconciliation to the Father. We deny that the virgin Mary, angels, or deceased saints in any way hold a mediatorial office; nor is the gospel preached if Christ’s substitutionary work is not declared and faith in Christ and His work is not solicited.

(4.) Sola Scriptura – Scripture Alone

We affirm the inerrant Scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches all that is necessary for our salvation from sin and is the standard by which all Christian behavior must be measured. We deny that any creed, council or individual may bind a

Christian's conscience, that the Holy Spirit speaks independently of or contrary to what is set forth in the Bible, or that personal spiritual experience can ever be a vehicle of revelation.

(5.) Soli Deo Gloria – Glory to God Alone

We affirm that because salvation is of God and has been accomplished by God, it is for God's glory and that we must glorify Him always. We must live our lives before the face of God, under the authority of God and for His glory alone. We deny that we can properly glorify God if our worship is confused with entertainment, if we neglect either the Law or Gospel in our preaching, or if self-improvement, self-esteem, or self-fulfillment are allowed to become alternatives to the gospel.

Also fundamental to sixteenth century Protestantism was the issue of the "Priesthood of All Believers." This espoused the privileged freedom of all baptized believers to stand before God in Christ "without patented human intermediaries," and their calling to be bearers of judgment and grace to their neighbors. Pastor and preacher differ from other Christians by function and appointment, not spiritual status.

III. WHAT MAKES US BAPTIST!

It is a popular misunderstanding that we, as Baptists, have as our chief concern the administration of baptism. But our convictions are primarily on the spiritual nature of the church, and the practice of believer's baptism arises only as a result of this and in the light of New Testament teaching. According to Baptist belief the church is composed of those who have been born again by the Holy Spirit and who have been brought to personal and saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. A living and direct acquaintance with Christ is, therefore, held to be basic to church membership. This involves a rejection that equates a church with a nation in that membership in the church is not based on the accident or privilege of birth, either in a Christian country or in a Christian family. The church is entered voluntarily and only believers may participate in its ordinances.

In this course, we will examine two aspects of the Baptist denomination; form of church government and the ordinances of baptism and communion.

(1) Church Government.

There are basically three types of church government; the Congregational, the Episcopal and the Presbyterian. Baptists have a congregational polity.

As the name implies, Congregationalism puts the emphasis on the place of the congregation. It would not be unfair to say that the chief scriptural support of this position are the facts that Christ is said to be the head of the church (Col. 1:18, etc.) and that there is a priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:9). It is fundamental to NT teaching that Christ has not left His church. He is the living Lord among His people. Where but two or three are gathered in His name, He is in the midst. It is no less fundamental that the way into the very holiest of all Presences is open to the humblest believer. Christ's priestly work has done away with the necessity for an earthly priest as the mediator of access to God.

Added to this is the emphasis placed on the local congregation in the NT. There we see autonomous congregations, not subject to Episcopal or Presbyterian control. The apostles, it is true, exercised a certain authority, but it is the authority of the Lord's own apostles. After their death there was no divinely instituted apostolate to take their place. Instead we see the pastors and elders are the leaders in the local congregations. Thus congregational churches are to be governed by the elders of the churches, the pastor being the ruling elder.

Elders or "presbyters" appear in the early life of the church, taking their place along with the apostles, prophets and teachers. The elders whom Paul addressed at Antioch during Paul's stay there (Acts 20:17) and those addressed in 1 Peter and Titus have a decisive place in church life. Besides their function of humble pastoral oversight, on them largely depend the stability and purity of the flock. The pastor (ruling elder) is in a position of authority which can be abused, which is why there is a governing body of elders in place. Theirs is to ensure that the pastor and membership maintain biblical integrity in their positions.

The other office in a congregational church is that of the deacon. The role of the deacon (diakonos, server) may be traced to Acts 6. There was a problem in distribution of aid that led to the appointment of seven leaders who would free the apostles from "waiting on tables". The body elected the seven, who were ordained for service by the apostles (6:2). This is not a ruling office; the deacon is to aid and assist the ruling eldership. There is at Greater Union another governing body called the Board of Trustees. This board governs certain aspects of the church that are mostly financial in nature, such as salaries, monies to be used for special occasions, etc.

In Episcopalianism, the ruling ministers of the church are bishops. Other ministers are presbyters (or priests) and deacons. In much the same vein as the Roman Catholics, an episcopacy holds to the doctrine of apostolic succession. This ruling bishop heads the "synod," which is the governing assembly of an episcopal province. Presbyters lead the local bodies, but these answer to the bishop in each province.

Presbyterianism emphasizes the importance of elders, or presbyters. Its adherents do not hold that this polity is the only one in the NT. During the Reformation the Presbyterian leaders thought that they were restoring the original form of church government, but this would not be vigorously defended today. In this system, the roles of the presbyter and elder are identical.

Presbyterian churches are independent of one another; but they have in common that they accept such standards as the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, or the Westminster Confession and they practice a presbyterial form of church government. The local congregation elects its “session,” which governs its affairs. It is lead by the minister, the “teaching elder,” who is chosen by the congregation. He is, however, ordained by the presbytery, which consists of the teaching elders from a group of congregations over which it exercises jurisdiction.

(2) Believer’s Baptism

By believer’s baptism, we mean that only whose confession evidences the fact that they have been regenerated participate in this ordinance. Therefore we do not espouse pedo-baptism, which is the baptism of infants.

(3) Lord’s Supper

This is also a Believer’s only ordinance, or “sacrament.” In this ordinance, the bread and wine are the divinely given tokens of the lord’s saving grace. We do not, however, embrace the Roman Catholic doctrine of “transubstantiation,” in which the bread and wine, at their consecration, actually become the body and blood of Christ while keeping only the appearance of bread and wine. We do acknowledge that the ordinances are a means of grace. R.C. Sproul, in his book "Now That’s a Good Question", states, “We come to the Lord’s Table in a spirit of careful preparation and repentance in order to experience a renewed sense of healing and forgiveness that comes to us, flowing out of the Cross and out of Christ’s intercession for us in heaven” (p. 358). He goes on to say, “I would say that, far and above all...the most profound benefit we enjoy in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is the immediate presence of Christ” (p. 359).

IV. WHAT THE CHURCH OWES YOU!

“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-15).

This church affirms that we owe it to you to both equip you for ministry, whatever your vocation, and to edify you, which is to say, to build you up and establish you in the faith and in the knowledge of Christ and the doctrines pertaining to your salvation, so that you may be complete, thoroughly furnished to live out your Christian faith.

We affirm that we will make good use of the time that you spend here. We are not here for your entertainment, but rather for your equipping. We are not here to put on a show to solicit an emotional response, but rather for your edification. It is our duty to effectively teach and help each believer to find their own way of benefiting the rest of the church.

We affirm to faithfully preach the Word of God. This means that this church will teach the Christian gospel according to the Scripture. Any group that denies the deity of Christ, the sin-bearing Atonement, or justification by faith alone is an anti-Christian sect, of whom the apostle John says, “they were not of us” (1 John 2:19).

We affirm that we will rightly use the sacraments. This means that baptism and the Lord’s Supper will be used and explained as setting forth the Gospel of faith in Christ. Turning these sacraments into superstitions that take away the sufficiency of faith in Christ undercuts the identity of the church, like anything else that obstructs faith in Christ.

It is our duty to make disciples of you. This involves a whole range of activities for nurture, instruction and training. To produce mature disciples, Christian learning, devotion, worship, righteousness, and service are all taught in a context of care and accountability.

Since believers are required to be holy, unspotted by the morals of the world, the church itself is separated from the world, and it is necessary to define the boundary between the world and the church. The NT clearly shows that in the whole context of church life judicial procedures have a significant place for the health of churches and individuals (1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; 2 Thess. 3:6).

Jesus instituted church discipline by authorizing the apostles to prohibit or permit certain kinds of behavior. In Matt. 18: 15-17, He teaches a procedure for dealing with those who have offended, in hope that it will not be necessary to ask for the church’s public censure of them.

The purpose of church discipline in all its forms is not to punish for punishment’s sake, but to call forth repentance and so recover the straying sheep. Ultimately, there is only one sin for which a church member is excommunicated – impenitence. When repentance is apparent, the church is to declare the sin remitted and receive the offender into fellowship once again.

V. WHAT YOU OWE THE CHURCH!

What you in turn owe this church is:

- (a) Your TIME
- (b) Your TALENT
- (c) Your TREASURE

Your TIME

“Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:24-25). As we previously stated, we will make good use of your time. But you must be faithful in giving your time. The faithful preaching and teaching of the Gospel is ours; to faithfully receive these is yours. Whenever the preaching or teaching of the gospel goes forth, it is your duty to be here to receive such. For these are for your betterment. These are to establish you in the faith. These are for your sanctification. To neglect these is sin. As stated in the Hebrews passage, we are commanded not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

Your TALENT

As God has gifted you, so should you gift His church. “And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues” (1 Cor. 12:28). As it is ours to teach you and help you find your way of benefiting this church, it is yours to use those gifts to aid the body of Christ. You should not bury your talents, but rather you should use them to glorify God in His assembly.

Your TREASURE

“Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God has prospered him” (1 Cor. 16:2). It is for all of us to be sure that the financial obligations of this church are met. As pertaining to the pastor, we are commanded not to “muzzle the ox while it treads out the grain” (1 Cor. 9:9). Since the pastor has “sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if (he) reap your material things?” (1 Cor. 9:11). We have here a full-time pastor as well as other financial obligations, such as the maintenance and upkeep of the church, utility bills etc. So let us heed the words of Acts 20:25, “And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”