

Introduction to Christ Church Ventura

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INTRODUCTION TO CHRIST CHURCH VENTURA: OUR HISTORY

In the summer of 1999, under the direction of Christ Presbyterian Church (CPC) in Santa Barbara, a group of 10-15 believers led by Roger Phelps gathered to study the Letter to the Hebrews in Ojai. Several months later, this group of people asked CPC to consider planting a daughter church in the Ojai Valley. In response, CPC assigned their pastoral intern, Jim Bailey, to teach through the Acts of the Apostles. The group subsequently met to pray and to study the doctrinal standards of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). As a result of this study the group committed themselves and their resources to calling a church planter and establishing a new church.

In the summer of 2000, Christ Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Santa Barbara asked Teaching Elder Roy Bennett to consider planting a daughter church in the Ojai Valley. Roy and his wife, Norma, agreed to visit this emerging group of believers and assess the potential of planting a PCA church in Ojai. After a second visit, the Bennetts, the Ojai group, as well as the session of CPC, were persuaded that God was bringing them together to establish a new congregation in the Ojai Valley.

In the fall of 2000, Roy was approved by the Mission to North America Committee of the PCA General Assembly and accepted a call to undergo a church planting partnership with CPC in Santa Barbara. Along with the goal of planting a new church in the Ojai Valley came the responsibility of raising three hundred thousand dollars for the church planting project. Within a few months, enough funds were raised for Roy and Norma to move their family into the area and their labor of networking and gathering began. To the midweek Bible study was added the Sunday afternoon "Causerie" as a teaching forum in Ojai.

By the summer of 2001, 60% of the Ojai project funds were pledged and a committed group established. By September we saw many amazing provisions, among them were: a committed launch team, a few people with new faith in Christ, several positive local contacts, a convenient and affordable place to worship, and a gifted musician. On September 9, 2001, we held our first public worship service in Ojai.

In the spring of 2004, still under "mission" status, Christ Church Ojai responded to the growing interest in the PCA by hosting special events in the cities of Ventura County to assess the potential of extending their ministry. After many months of good attendance at Sunday evening gatherings, a committed launch team was formed and on January 8, 2006, a second worship site was established in the City of Ventura. On June 4, 2006, Christ Church Ojai/Ventura was particularized as a multi-site congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America and called Roy Bennett as the first Pastor. In November 2007, the Session of Christ Church decided to merge the two worship sites into a single congregation meeting for worship in Ventura.

The Session of Christ Church Ventura is delighted with the development of this ministry and is excited about the future to which God has called us. We are committed to the proclamation and integration of the Gospel into all of life, the renewal of worship and fellowship in Christian community, the propagation of the Reformed faith and mission to the world.

Teaching Elder: Roy Bennett and Ruling Elders: Robert Glass, Eric Halvorson, and Roger Phelps

SEMINAR PURPOSE

This seminar is designed to provide you with information about Christ Church Ventura and the opportunities for you to become involved in ministry. It is also designed to answer some common questions about what it means to be a believer in Christ, what it means to be a part of a Presbyterian Church (PCA) in general, and what it means to be a member of Christ Church Ventura in particular.

We will explore how you can best take advantage of and become involved in the opportunities that come with being a part of our church community here in Ventura. Specifically, we will look at the five promises, and their implications, which members must "affirm" in order to join Christ Church Ventura.

We hope that *Introduction to Christ Church Ventura* will be just the first step in a long and fulfilling process of spiritual growth and fruitful service in our church. We are glad that you are here to inquire about becoming a member of Christ Church Ventura (see page 24 for details).

Working Together

1. Are you a native to Ventura County or did you move here from some where else?
2. How did you find out about Christ Church Ventura?
3. What keeps you coming back?
4. What has been the most surprising thing about your experience at Christ Church Ventura so far?

PART ONE: VISION, MISSION, & VALUES

CHRIST CHURCH'S VISION:

— Empowered by the Gospel, we aim to experience God's pleasure by fostering true knowledge, holy affection, and faithful obedience through historic worship, biblical learning, genuine community, and cultural outreach to the end that God's people are gathered and Christ's Kingdom is extended in Ventura County and beyond —

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT YOU?

CHRIST CHURCH'S MISSION:

*Exalting Christ through Worship,
Learning, Community, and Outreach*

CONNECTING THE PEOPLE OF VENTURA TO CHRIST THROUGH . . .

- ***God-Centered Worship*** — God loves to meet with His people in “relational dialogue.” Our liturgical worship services are designed to glorify God, renew those who believe, and to challenge and help those who doubt or seek.
- ***Christ-Centered Preaching*** — The word of God is a means of His grace to us. Our preaching aims to feed the people of God by proclaiming the sufficiency of Christ from every text of Scripture and applying the gospel to every aspect of life.
- ***Community Group Network*** — The Bible assumes significant community life within the church and so we seek to develop a network of small study groups and ministry teams, in which vital, caring, face-to-face friendships emerge.
- ***Family Life Ministries*** — Life has a way of wearing us out and we need refreshment, courage, and instruction. Hospitality, parties, events, and teaching ministries to women, men, and children are intended to enable us know, enjoy, and relate to one another as family.

DEVELOPING BELIEVERS INTO MATURE SAINTS THROUGH . . .

- ***Corporate Prayer*** — Because prayer is not supplemental, but fundamental, we must support all our ministries and strategies with prayer and reliance upon God's grace. We gather in groups for prayer to seek God's presence and praise him for what he has done.
- ***Leadership Training*** — Through groups, classes, and mentoring relationships, our goal is to help new Christians mature into servant-leaders, identify and involve emerging leaders in apprentice relationships, and nurture and support existing leaders in their ministries.
- ***Pastoral Care*** — In addition to the ministries of Word, Sacrament, and prayer, we will seek to understand, support and administrate the overall work of the church by matching resources (people, skills, and finances) with the best place for service.
- ***Biblical/Theological Studies*** — The highest aim in life is to glorify and fully enjoy God which means that the knowledge of God is necessary. We cannot love what we do not know and we must give ourselves to study the Bible and examine what we believe as Christians.

SENDING SERVANT-LEADERS TO ENGAGE THE WORLD THROUGH . . .

- ***Cultural Outreach*** — We seek to proclaim God’s love and advance Christ’s kingdom by reaching out to: students, retired folk, spiritual inquirers, artists and musicians, and families. We aim to encourage and develop the dialogue in this community on matters of relationships, creativity, life, meaning, and redemption from a Christian worldview.
- ***Mercy Ministry*** — Through support groups and classes we hope to provide a nurturing context for spiritual growth, renewal, healing, justice, and reconciliation. We will also begin work on our counseling ministry and diaconate to help people with particular needs.
- ***Church Planting and Renewal*** — We don't want to simply grow our own church here in Ventura, but to be a part of a gospel-centered church planting movement throughout Ventura, Los Angeles, and Orange Counties.
- ***World Mission Projects*** — Evangelistic outreach must not end at our own borders, but extend around the world. Our congregation will participate in the ongoing endeavors of our sister PCA churches across the country and around the world.

CHRIST CHURCH'S VALUES:

- 1.** We value the Gospel which sets people free from the idols of sex, money, power, pleasure, and even people.
- 2.** We value lost people. They matter to God, and matter to us and we want to care for those seeking faith.
- 3.** We value the practice of love, patience, gentleness, acceptance, forgiveness, generosity, and humor.
- 4.** We value a safe environment where tough questions can be asked without embarrassment.
- 5.** We value the multigenerational nature of the church including children, young people and the elderly.
- 6.** We value single, married, and family lives which promote relational, emotional, and spiritual growth.
- 7.** We value discipleship that equips people to serve others and live all of life from a Christian worldview.
- 8.** We value character and integrity more than talent. We prize honesty, authenticity, and accountability.
- 9.** We value worship that connects us with our Christian heritage, builds believers, and helps those who doubt.
- 10.** We value cultural relevance and biblical faithfulness and will reflect it in preaching, teaching, and worship.
- 11.** We value an active relationship with churches beyond ourselves and within our denomination and community.
- 12.** We value the living demonstration of racial, cultural, and social respect and reconciliation in our lives.
- 13.** We value compassion to the downtrodden, the poor, the discouraged, the oppressed, and the burdened.
- 14.** We value the community of Ventura and the energy and opportunities that it gives us for ministry.
- 15.** We value God-given gifts in both men and women and their energetic use in the church as God has directed.
- 16.** We value excellence in our efforts. We believe this honors God and inspires people to greatness
- 17.** We value open admission of moral failures and human limitations through repentance and believing prayer.

THE GOSPEL

What is it that safeguards the integrity of an organization, business or family trust? Great corporate endeavors may have common methods, structure, and vision, but it is their values to which they cling tenaciously regardless of the prevailing business climate. Although Christ Church Ventura is not a business, we too, are driven by our "values" all of which derive from the Gospel.

What is the Gospel? It is the good news of the entrance, infiltration, and even gentle invasion of God's kingdom into our present reality. We know this because the King has come. He lived the life we should have lived, died the death we should have died, rose from the dead, and then ascended into heaven. Even now He rules in our hearts by His Spirit.

We believe the Gospel is the singular core value of the church—the genetic code. It is the power that can transform anyone, the unseen leaven that permeates all of life from the inside out. The gospel changes, defines, informs, and renews everything and we must proclaim and delight ourselves in it!

We want people know the great good news that God has taken it upon Himself to do something for us that we were powerless to do for ourselves. The Gospel is simply this: sinners are forgiven and accepted by God because of the work of Jesus Christ. Trust in Christ's finished work, however, is not just the beginning of the Christian life, but it is the means and end as well. The Gospel is what must be applied more and more deeply in order to live as a Christian. The Gospel is not merely about improvement and image, but redemption and reality.

Jesus tells us that we are not only to pursue His kingdom, but we are also to extend its influence. We seek to do these things, not because we need to gain God's approval or attention, but because the Gospel changes everything.

1. *The Gospel changes people.*

Through the continual application of the Gospel we become more like Christ. "Christ came into the world to save sinners." (1 Tim. 1:15) That is what we are. Paul lists the common stock of sinners in 1 Cor. 6:9-10, and then says, "such were some of you." In other words, when a person trusts Jesus he or she is no longer defined by their sin, but by His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). Look around the congregation the next time you gather to worship. What you will see is a diverse group of folks who have been changed, are being changed, or will soon be changed by the Gospel. Knowing that the Gospel can change any person or institution gives us joy and courage to proclaim it boldly.

2. *The Gospel produces joy.*

The Gospel sets us free from condemnation and self-righteousness to enjoy God fully. The finished work of Christ as our righteous substitute addresses our deepest fears. We find peace by delighting ourselves in the fullness of God as revealed in His Son. God's glory is exalted as we turn from our anxiety, trust in Christ, and express our satisfaction and joy in Him through praise and service.

3. *The Gospel defines community.*

In union with Christ, we become adopted sons and daughters—God’s new people. When a person trusts Jesus, they not only become united to him, but also united to the rest of those who have trusted him. God has “stuck us together” through adoption as sons and daughters. Because of this, the unifying principle of our church is not age, gender or socioeconomic sameness, but Jesus. We envision people from every background, and occupation living life together in community.

4. *The Gospel points outward.*

Gospel freedom prevents approval seeking, engenders authenticity and curbs pride. People often jest that the pastor’s job is to make them uncomfortable and they are right! As we seek to live out the values of Jesus’ kingdom, our only corporate option is to live for the sake of others and this is rarely “comfortable.” On the other hand, the more we understand what Jesus has done for us, the more motivated we will be to serve our unbelieving friends, neighbors, and coworkers.

5. *The Gospel informs attitudes.*

As Christians, we desire the peace and well-being of our community. Christians should not simply stand above or against or in the midst of their city, but should stand as agents of God *for* their city and its welfare. Only as the Gospel permeates our hearts and minds, will it permeate our city. God urges his servants to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” and to “pray for it”.

6. *The Gospel removes barriers.*

Reconciliation humbles us so that we may be wounded healers and reconcile others. Racial reconciliation follows naturally from the finished work of Christ on the cross. The dividing wall between peoples has been broken down and Christ has brought them together into one new people without racial distinction. The Church is now God’s vehicle for racial reconciliation by means of the gospel. The gospel instructs Christians to be somewhat critical of all cultures including their own recognizing they too are saved by grace alone and are superior to no one.

7. *The Gospel renews culture.*

All of life matters to God and we are to pursue all vocations with excellence. Christians are often taught, implicitly or explicitly, that missionaries and clergy “do ministry” full-time, while “lay-people” do as much as they can, when they can. The Bible teaches that our vocation (law, landscaping, teaching, etc.) is our primary ministry. We desire to see growing Christians working in their vocations with both excellence and Christian distinctiveness, thus transforming the culture from the inside out. Vocation is part of our spiritual service of worship.

8. *The Gospel builds momentum.*

Church planting is both the result of and means to fulfilling the great commission. In the future, we expect to help, start and encourage new communities of faith with our same Gospel-centered values. We want to foster a movement of the gospel, not only in the communities of Ventura county, but also among the urban population of Los Angeles and Orange counties.

PART TWO: BEING A MEMBER

UNDERSTANDING THE KINGDOM:

The gospel tells us that Jesus came to usher in the kingdom of God. God's kingdom is his power, his rule. When anything is brought back under Christ's rule, it is restored to health, beauty, and freedom. (See Genesis 3:17-19; Romans 8:19-21; Psalm 96:11-13; Matthew 5:3-10.)

In the Old Testament epoch, the Jews believed that the Messiah would usher in the New World of God's kingdom and the Old World would pass away. But when Jesus came, although he did bring the kingdom (see Matthew 12:28; Luke 12:32-33; 17:20-21), he did not destroy the Old World. Between his first and second comings, the kingdom of God and the Old World "over-lap."

When people become Christians, they enter the kingdom (John 3:5), the power of the Old World over them is broken (Galatians 1:4; Colossians 1:13), and they begin to experience freedom and restoration from the effects of the fall (Romans 14:17). As we serve God in the world, we bring "kingly blessedness" and peace to others (Matthew 5:3, 10) which bring healing from the ravages of sin. Yet this healing, though substantial, is always partial (Romans 7:14; 8:20-21; Philippians 1:6). To be a Christian is to live in this age with the life of the age to come.

In summary, the kingdom of God is the renewal of the world through God's supernatural and "kingly" power, which is substantially, yet still partially present.

The rest of this seminar will be looked at from this perspective. By utilizing the five "membership promises" of Christ Church Ventura, we will talk about what it means to enter the kingdom, live the kingdom, support the kingdom and submit in the kingdom.

A. PROMISES 1 AND 2: ENTERING THE KINGDOM

- 1. Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure and without hope except through his sovereign mercy?***
- 2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon him alone for salvation as he is offered in the gospel?***

All of us, whether we have been believers for only a short time or for many years, need constantly to focus on the same truths of the gospel. You see, one becomes a Christian and one grows as a Christian in exactly the same way, by embracing the gospel, by turning from sin and trusting in Christ. A Christian is a gospel-centered person.

What does it mean to be a Christian? Well, there are many ways to summarize what it means to follow Christ, but to keep it simple we will use the alphabet as a tool—**ABCD**.

- 1. There is something to ADMIT.** Christians are people who acknowledge that they are weaker, guiltier, and more sinful than they would ever want to admit. Both by nature and by choice we are out of relationship with God - even though for such a relationship we were created. Instead, we are living a self-centered, rather than God-centered lifestyle, and we are helpless to break this pattern without the power of God.
- 2. There is something to BELIEVE.** Christians are people who believe that God loves people so much that he sent his only Son to earth to become a man, Jesus Christ, and that Jesus died on the cross as our substitute and was raised from the dead in order to offer us complete forgiveness and restoration. Through Christ, we are more loved, valued, and accepted by God than we would have ever dared imagine.
- 3. There is something to CONSIDER.** Christians are not naive, but have counted the cost of following Jesus. Being a Christian involves acknowledging Jesus' authority and lordship in every area of life, welcoming his work to change us from the inside out, and rejoicing to spend time with him and with his followers in the life of the church.
- 4. There is something to DO.** We receive Christ as Savior and Lord by self-consciously turning from sin and self-centeredness, (which the Bible calls repentance) and trusting in Jesus alone for forgiveness and acceptance by God (which the Bible calls faith). Rest is an act of faith by which we hold to the righteous merits of Christ on our behalf.

Working Together

1. What is your "religious" background?
2. How is it different than what you've heard so far in the seminar? How is it the same?
3. How many times must a person "believe the Gospel?"

***Although the only requirement for joining
a PCA church is a credible profession of faith,
before joining you should know
some of our distinctives.***

PRESBYTERIAN AND REFORMED BELIEFS

A. Salvation-Grace Alone Through Faith Alone

1. Our Condition

Because of the fall, we are more broken and misguided up than we could ever imagine (Jeremiah 17:9). Not only have we been credited with Adam's sin (Rom. 5:12-19), but we are also responsible for our own sin. Our nature, in its original state, not only will not choose to obey the Gospel, it cannot (Rom. 8:5-8).

2. The Initiative of God, the Father

Because of our inherent brokenness and sin, God's choice of the sinner, not the sinner's choice of Christ is the ultimate cause of salvation. God's initiative toward certain sinners began before the creation of the world. This initiative is a result of nothing less than his good pleasure and is not the result of anything we do.

3. The Work of Jesus, the Son

On the Cross, Jesus' death was a substitutionary endurance of the penalty of sin on behalf of those with whom God has taken initiative. In other words, at the Cross, Jesus did not simply make it possible for some to be saved, but he actually saved some.

4. The Work of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit applies to the sinner the salvation purchased by Christ. How? By convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and by renewing our wills (giving us new hearts). This is how he persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus, freely offered in the Gospel.

5. The Promise of the Gospel

He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it (Phil. 1:6). This means that all those who by God's strength and initiative have trusted Christ will persevere to the end. In other words, if God has embraced you, he'll never let you go. How do I know he has embraced me? I have embraced him by faith.

Together these are known, historically, as *The Five Points of Calvinism*

B. A Covenantal Perspective

Covenant theology views all of Scripture as an unfolding covenant relationship between God and His people in which God's dealing with them since the fall is based consistently throughout on grace. Old Testament saints were saved by' grace through faith, just as New Testament believers.

Furthermore, there is continuity between Old Testament Israel and the Church of the New Testament. There is one covenant of grace expressed in two administrations. There is one people of God consisting of both Old and New Testament believers. (See Gal. 3:1-29, 6:15; Matt. 21:31-45; John 15:16; Acts 15:15-18; Rom. 8:23-28, 11:17-20; I Pet. 2:9)

C. The Sacraments

1. Infant baptism

Because in all of God's dealings (covenant promises) with humanity the children of his followers have always been included in the people of God, most Christians believe that the infant children of Christians are to be baptized. We do not believe that baptism automatically saves anyone, whether infant or adult.

2. Modes of baptism

The "official" position of the Presbyterian Church in America is that baptism is by sprinkling or pouring and not necessary by immersion; although that may be acceptable. Presbyterians believe that putting water on the person, rather than putting the person in water, best symbolizes the meaning of baptism.

3. Real Presence of Christ in Lord's Supper/communion

We believe that in the Lord's Supper, Christ is really present with his people through the Spirit. While no physical changes take place in the bread and wine during the sacrament, those who come in faith have true communion with the living Christ and are blessed and strengthened as they spiritually feed upon the merits of Christ's Sacrifice. The Lord's Supper is a memorial of the finished work of Christ, but it he is also truly present in this celebration of his Body and Blood.

D. Charismatic Issues

The PCA and Christ Church Ventura are not part of what is often called the "charismatic movement."

- 1.** We believe that direct, verbal revelation from God was completed when the New Testament was finished with the death of the last apostle.
- 2.** Therefore, while God may give us extraordinary new insights into his word, this probably should not be called prophecy, and, while some Christians may pray using free vocalization, we think that this is probably not what Paul called "speaking in tongues."
- 3.** We thank God for all of our brothers and sisters in Christ and for the graces his imparts to His people. We seek to equip believers for service and to employ our gifts for the spiritual benefit of the body of Christ. Therefore, we confess our need for the Holy Spirit's work in our lives.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

1. *Christ Church Ventura is committed to Catholic doctrine.*

By catholic, of course, we are not referring to the Roman Catholic Church, but to the original meaning of the term, which is "according to the whole" or "universal." In other words, we hold to those basic teachings which have been believed and proclaimed by all Christian churches throughout history. Those teachings are expressed in the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds. Those three basic teachings are (a) the Trinity (one God in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), (b) the Incarnation (that Jesus Christ is both God and man), and (c) the Atonement (that Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead in order to save sinners).

2. *Christ Church Ventura is committed to Evangelical doctrine.*

By evangelical we are referring to those doctrines so forcefully reclaimed in the Reformation of the 16th century—that time of revival in which many under-emphasized doctrines were reclaimed. By using the word evangelical, we are also stating that we reject the downplay of these doctrines by some 19th and 20th century "modern" critics. Specifically, we believe that the Scriptures are completely trustworthy, without error, and authoritative for our beliefs and our practices. We believe that salvation comes through God's grace alone, and is received solely by faith in Christ. We believe in the historicity of the biblical miracles, the virgin birth, and the return of the Christ.

3. *Christ Church Ventura is committed to Presbyterian doctrine.*

We believe that God is sovereign in all things including salvation and that the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper not only signify but also seal to believers what they represent. We are committed to a Presbyterian system of church government and to practicing the Lordship of Christ over all of life.

You don't have to be a Presbyterian to be a Presbyterian!

In other words, you don't have to know every point of Reformed theology or Presbyterian government in order to join Christ Church Ventura. You do have to enter God's kingdom through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Entering the kingdom, of course, assumes that a person is also willing to live out the kingdom's values, which points to Promise 3.

B. PROMISE 3: LIVING THE KINGDOM

3. *Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes a follower of Christ?*

At times, Christians have acted as if believing the above is the way to become a Christian and that once you're a Christian, it's all up to you. Actually, it's only as we day-by-day embrace the gospel that we truly begin to grow. In order to grow spiritually and experience on-going personal renewal, the Christian must be continually centered on the gospel, reminding himself or herself of who he or she is as a child of God. Problems arise, usually, when we confuse the following doctrines:

- 1. JUSTIFICATION:** "is the act of God's free grace by which he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight. He does so only because He counts the righteousness of Christ as ours. Justification is received by faith alone."
- 2. SANCTIFICATION:** "is the work of God's free grace by which our whole person is made new in the image of God, and we are made more and more able to become dead to sin and alive to righteousness." Sanctification also comes by faith alone!

Working Together

1. According to the above definitions, what is the difference between justification and sanctification? What, if any, is the importance of making a distinction between the two?
2. According to the above definitions, what do justification and sanctification have in common? What do you suppose is the importance here?
3. What is God doing to change your life? What is God doing to change someone else's life through you?
4. Why is it important to "preach the gospel to yourself everyday?" What does this mean? (See 2 Cor. 5:17-21)

GOSPEL DISCIPLINES:

Dynamics & Disciplines: Keeping the Balance

It is true that at times the church has so emphasized the importance of disciplines in spiritual growth that the gospel has been eclipsed. This is unfortunate. When we meditate on who we are in Christ and on what God has done for us in Christ, we are motivated to pray, to study the Bible, to worship, to give, and to tell others about Jesus. All of this is done out of heartfelt thanksgiving for God's mercy and grace.

However, the work of sanctification is not complete in any of our lives! Consequently, we don't always express our gratitude as we should. Certain disciplines are essential for spiritual growth. We must have holy habits!

A focus on the disciplines without grace leads to legalism, but a focus on grace without the disciplines leads to laziness. We need both grace and discipline!

Basic Spiritual Disciplines

Traditionally, the church has taught that there are three means of grace, that is, three primary avenues that God uses to cause us to grow spiritually. These could be named and numbered differently, but the basic ingredients would be the same.

1. The Word of God

We grow spiritually as we read, study, and meditate upon the Holy Scriptures. Here are some examples of how we can make the Bible a bigger part of our lives:

- Personal reading, study, memorization, and meditation;
- Studying the Bible in small groups;
- Hearing preaching and teaching of the Scriptures by those who have been gifted for and called to this ministry;
- God's Word is also a means of grace to you when you share it with others. Proclaiming Christ to others is a real boost to your spiritual growth. And, when you encourage a fellow Christian from the Scriptures, he or she will not be the only one who grows.

2. Prayer

The second principal means of spiritual growth is spending time with God in prayer, which takes many forms:

- Private prayer, as part of a time set apart for prayer and Bible study;
- Prayer with others, one-on-one or in small groups;
- Prayers in public worship, whether led, sung, written, responsive, in litanies, etc.

3. The Sacraments

a. **Baptism.** How does baptism help you grow?

- First, the Scriptures teach that God blesses those who are rightly baptized.
- Second, we grow when we practice what the Puritans called “improving one's baptism.” (See Romans 6:1ff.) We are to remember and meditate upon all that God has done for us in uniting us to Christ, signified in baptism. It's a way of preaching the gospel to yourself!

b. Lord's Supper. Again, this is not a private ceremony, but one done in and with the church. This sacrament is the central act of Christian worship, and a chief way in which we grow spiritually.

- When you receive Communion, Christ feeds you with himself, deepening your union with him. Just as bread and wine strengthens and refreshes us physically, so the Lord's Supper strengthens and refreshes us spiritually.
- Communion is also a time to examine your life, confess your sins, celebrate the gospel, and preach it to yourself again. (See 1 Corinthians 11:7ff.)

These three—**the Word, prayer, and the sacraments**—are the primary means of grace, and, in gratitude for the gospel, we grow spiritually when we make disciplined use of these means. Note that the Bible teaches two basic patterns of spiritual disciplines:

1. Basic to the Christian life is the weekly pattern of using the means of grace in the context of worship on the Lord's Day. (Acts 20:7; Hebrews 10:25)
2. The Bible also teaches the vital importance of a daily pattern of private prayer and Bible study. (See Daniel 6:10).

Gospel Lifestyles

There is no better summary of the lifestyle to which God calls us as Christians than the Ten Commandments. Why commands? Because two truths are expressed in God's law:

1. God's law expresses his character. It tells what he is like, what he loves and hates.

2. Since we are created in God's image, we can only find fulfillment in a life centered on him, a life of law-keeping. The law expresses that for which we were both created and redeemed. "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10).

How do you reconcile law & gospel?

The Ten Commandments begin with expressing the good news; God says, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Christianity does not say, "Obey these laws in order to earn your salvation," but rather "Obey these laws in thanksgiving for the fact that you have already received your salvation." Jesus Christ has rescued us from slavery to sin; we respond with grateful obedience.

How do you reconcile law & love?

Love is blind, and needs the law for its eyes. The law shows us how to love God and our neighbor (Matt. 22:34-40; 1 John 5:3). Jesus did not destroy, but "fulfilled" the law. He emphasized its positive demands and brought it to its ultimate fruition (Matt. 5:17).

APPLYING GOD'S LAW TO LIFE TODAY (Exodus 20:1-17)

1. "You shall have no other gods before me." (v. 3)

God comes first—nothing else, not power, pleasure, possessions, relationships, sex, or money. God is to be our chief priority as well as our chief delight. Your "greatest good" is not personal freedom but, in the words of the Shorter Catechism, 'to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.' (Q&A #1).

2. "You shall not make for yourself an idol." (v. 4)

Don't imagine God to be like yourself or lower. Love God as he has revealed himself. Worship and serve God only in the way the Scriptures teach.

3. "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God." {v. 7}

Be serious about God. Treat his name with reverence and honor him with your thoughts and with your language. Realize that his honor is at stake in everything you do. When you encounter untruths about God, guard his reputation by standing up for the truth.

4. "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." (v. 8)

Never do the "work of sin" or assume that you can earn your salvation by doing good works, but rest in the salvation won by Christ. Treat all time as "God's time," and invest it wisely for his kingdom. Set apart time for rest (which is what "Sabbath" means) and worship, especially on the Lord's Day.

5. "Honor your father and your mother." (v. 12)

Treat your parents and all those in authority with proper love and respect.

6. "You shall not murder." (v. 13)

Human life is sacred. You are not to be a person of malice, cruelty, violence, or revenge. You should struggle for the oppressed—both before they are born and after they are born (standing against homelessness, hunger, poverty, racism, suicide, abortion and euthanasia). You should seek to love your neighbor as yourself in all situations.

7. "You shall not commit adultery." (v. 14)

Sex is sacred. You are to honor it as God created it—an act of intimacy, love, communication, and (sometimes) procreation between a man and a woman within the covenant of marriage. Other expressions of sexuality do violence to us as humans. Christian couples should see sex as a positive command to seek to serve, please, and fully give themselves to one another.

8. "You shall not steal." (v. 15)

Martin Luther said, "Love to your neighbor requires you to hold sacred not only his person (6th commandment) and his marriage (7th commandment), but also his property and his due." You are to be impeccably honest. You are not to steal time from your employer or cheat on your taxes. You should pay your debts and use your money for the relief of the poor and the advance of the kingdom.

9. "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." (v. 16)

Truth is sacred. You are never to be insincere. You are never to gossip, lie, or put a spin on things that distorts reality or does your neighbor harm. You should always speak the truth in love, and speak up for your neighbor's good. You should be a peacemaker and always be zealous for your neighbor's reputation. Without being naive, you should always put the best possible construction on things.

10. "You shall not covet..." (v. 17)

Be content. Don't lust for more than you have or for what others have. Don't worry or be anxious, but delight in the love of Christ, and seek his kingdom and righteousness. Be thankful for all God's providences in your life.

NOW YOU KNOW WHY WE REALLY NEED THE GOSPEL SO DESPERATELY!

C. PROMISE 4: SUPPORTING AND SERVING THE KINGDOM

4. Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?

Practical Expectations of Membership

How do you grow into active membership at Christ Church Ventura, fleshing out your promise to "support the Church"? What does God intend for his people to do as a part of his Church? There is a proper balance between active involvement and over-commitment. On one hand, our ministry activity should not become a barrier to living a God-honoring life. On the other hand, our "life" should not hinder us from having a God-honoring ministry. Therefore, we hope to see all of our members involved in at least the following areas:

1. Daily walk with God

Regular, daily use of the "means of grace" - Bible reading and prayer methodically for your own spiritual growth. (See Mark 1:3)

2. Weekly worship with the people of God

Be consistent in attendance and participation (See Hebrews 10:24-25)

3. Membership in a Community Group

Community Groups are the main way that pastoral care occurs at Christ Church Ventura. For your own spiritual growth as well as others, you need to belong to a group. (See Ephesians 4:15-16)

4. Ministry involvement

Besides attending worship and a Community Group each member should find at least one way to minister to others. Use your gifts! (See I Peter 4:10-11)

5. Stewardship of finances through tithes and gifts

(See Malachi 3:8-10; I Corinthians 16:1-2)

6. Bring and include new people

Let the gospel overflow from your life into the lives of those around you—at home, at work, in your circle of friends. Help those whom you bring to Christ Church Ventura to be able to connect into the life of the church. (See Acts 2:41-47)

Stewardship

Supporting the worship and work of the church to the best of your ability is one of the membership vows. While this certainly includes much more than money, it does not include less.

Working Together

1. What is a tithe and why did God institute the giving of the tithe?
3. Is the tithe still in effect today?
4. On what portion of one's income and possessions should one tithe?
5. How often should one give?
6. Where should one direct his/her tithe?
7. Is tithing all that is expected of someone?

Basic contours for giving to the work of the kingdom

1. Giving must be in significant proportions. Three biblical guidelines:

- The guideline of the tithe. In the Old Testament believers were required to give a tenth of their income to the support of the ministry and the needs of the poor. While the New Testament does not command believers to keep this requirement today, neither does it teach and encourage us to give less. Thus the tithe (10%) is a kind of minimum guideline for giving.
- The guideline of sacrifice. The Apostle Paul says of the Macedonians, "they gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability" (2 Cor. 8:3). That means they gave until it meant a sacrifice in their lifestyle.
- The guideline of ability. Christians are to give "according to their ability" (Acts 11:29). There are seasons to economic life, and we all have economic responsibilities to our families and to our debts. In many cases, good planning is necessary in order gradually to move our giving into biblical proportions while still meeting personal and legal financial obligations.

2. Giving must be a joyful response to God's grace.

Paul asked for money by saying, "I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:8-9). What a test! Paul says that the difference between moralists (those who think that God accepts them because of their goodness) and Christians (those who know they are sinners saved by grace) is that a Christian wants to give as generously as he or she has received. Put starkly, we always give effortlessly to those things that give your life meaning, to your "gods."

3. Giving must be systematic and thoughtful.

Paul directed the Corinthians to set aside a portion of their wealth each week until he came to receive it, in this case for the relief of famine victims in Palestine. (2 Cor. 8:8.) Giving "spontaneously" might express your joyful response to God's grace, but it's not always in biblical proportions. You need a plan, and the church can help with reminders and directions.

Here's a plan:

a. Evaluate your own heart with regard to money.

What do you most enjoy spending money on? What percentage of your income is going to (1) God's kingdom (your church, other Christian ministries) and (2) to help those in need (outside your family)? Read Matt. 6:19-34; 1 Tim. 6:6-10; 2 Cor. 8:1-5; 9:6-15. Do you need to adjust your giving in light of biblical values, in terms of eternal investments?

b. Evaluate the use of your "non-liquid" resources.

A good spiritual exercise is to assess your long term investments. Do you need to adjust your giving in light of biblical values, in order to better invest in eternal realities?

c. Do you have a regular plan for giving?

First, decide what percentage of your income you will give to the Lord's work this year. Then ask yourself if this is sacrificial and, on the other hand, if this is responsible. Last, whenever money comes in, set aside the Lord's portion first, with the understanding that it is his, not yours.

d. Prayerfully distribute the money among Christian causes.

Hopefully, your church is your primary avenue of spiritual growth, and giving to your home church will be a first priority. But there are churches, missionaries, and other ministries that are worthy of support as well.

D. PROMISE 5: SUBMISSION IN THE KINGDOM

5. Do you submit yourself to the government and discipline of the church, promising to study its purity and peace?

The Concept of Church Membership

People often ask, "Why do we emphasize membership?" "Where is that in the Bible?" The answer is actually simple. On one hand, the phrase "church membership" is not used in the New Testament. On the other hand, the concept is presupposed on almost every page! The reason for this is simple: there is no such thing as community without a covenantal commitment.

While we believe membership is important, there will be no pressure to join. We welcome your involvement with Christ Church Ventura, without becoming a member. You may want to wait and see how our church develops. But we do hope you will prayerfully consider membership eventually. Do not join unless you are ready to be committed!

The Benefits of Membership

Of course, many of the benefits of a vital church are available to anyone who attends, but there is a rationale for membership:

- 1.** Members have the benefit of accountability to the elders, the spiritual leaders. Hebrews 13:17 teaches us to "obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls." The command presupposes that you are in a covenantal relationship with certain leaders. Those who say, "I am accountable only to God" are not only in disobedience to Scripture, they are placing themselves in great spiritual danger.
- 2.** Members have the benefit of church power to shape the ministries of the congregation. It is members who choose officers who, in turn, guide the direction of the congregation. Officers are elected (Acts 6:1-6), by "the people".
- 3.** Formal membership entitles you to voting rights within the government of our church. While congregational meetings are usually open to anyone who wishes to attend, only members may pass resolutions, vote for changes to the by-laws or nominate and elect the officers.
- 4.** Membership privileges may also include priority in pastoral and private counseling, church ceremonies, such as weddings, and opportunities to lead church ministries and serve as church officers. Members may have their infant children baptized into the covenant family as well.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

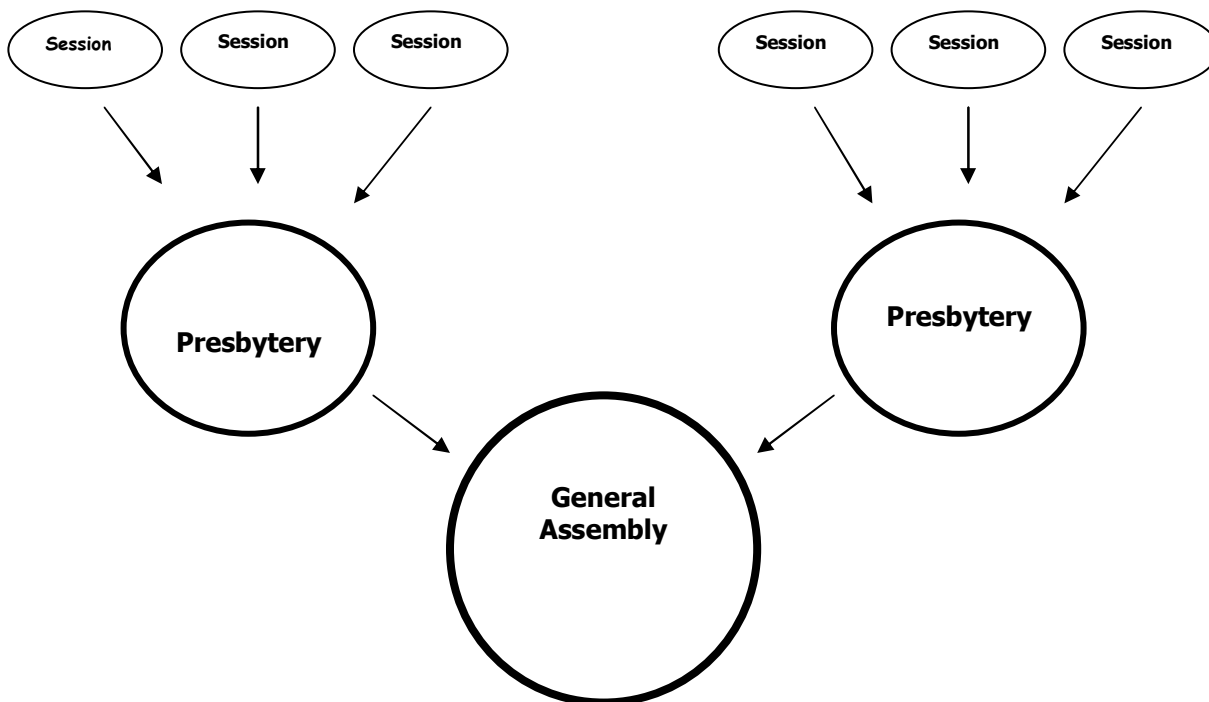
A. History and Overview

1. The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) was founded in 1973 by a group of evangelical churches leaving the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) which was commonly called the Southern Presbyterian Church. The PCA left out of their concern that the PCUS was abandoning its orthodox and evangelical witness.
2. While the PCA is strongest in the South, it has spread all over the US and into Canada. In 1982, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES) joined the PCA (Trivia: Theologian, Francis Schaeffer was part of this move.)
3. Because of a very aggressive church planting strategy, the PCA is one of the fastest growing denominations in the United States.

B. Organization and Government

1. Elders govern Presbyterian churches. The Greek word for elder is "presbuteros". For the sake of convenience, ordained ministers in the PCA are called "teaching elders." Those elders nominated and elected from within the local church body are called "ruling elders." Much like the Roman Catholic Church and many other evangelical denominations, the PCA does not ordain women to the office of elder.
2. These elders meet at various levels, called "courts."
 - a. Elders govern the local church body. This meeting of the elders is called the **Session**.
 - b. A regional church body is also governed by elders - all the ministers in the region and ruling elders representing each congregation in the region. This body is known as the **Presbytery**.
 - c. The national church body- the entire PCA- is also governed by elders, this court is called the **General Assembly**.
3. PCA churches also ordain deacons, whose primary job is to oversee the ministry to the poor and needy, and to assist the elders in various ways.
4. While members of the church do not necessarily have to agree with the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are set out in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, elders and deacons must understand and subscribe to these teachings.

Presbyterian Church Government



The Church & Discipline

One of the marks of a "true" church is discipline, which has as its end the restoration of a sinner. In other words, if a member is involved in some habitual, grievous sin (for example: adultery) and refuses to repent, it is the responsibility of the church to intervene with "discipline." This can take many forms ranging from a simple rebuke to, God forbid, excommunication. However, at any point, if the person repents and desires to be restored, they will be receive with open arms.

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus clearly teaches the process for confronting sin and conducting church discipline:

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (ESV)

Most problems in every church are simply a result of failing to follow this process. The fact that we are sinners makes the need for this process inevitable from time to time.

Becoming a Member of Christ Church Ventura

Membership in Christ Church Ventura means that you have committed yourself to our family of believers and that you have agreed to participate as fully as you are able in the life, ministry, and government of our church.

1. The Membership Seminar

This INTRODUCTION TO CHRIST CHURCH VENTURA seminar is the first step in that process, although it in no way obligates you to become a member.

2. The Membership Interview

After the seminar, we can scheduled block interview times at which point you will meet with the pastor and one or more of our elders. Generally, these meetings last about 30 minutes and are designed to allow us to get to know you better, to hear how you came to be a Christian, what God is doing in your life, and to allow you to ask any questions you might have about the church. The pastor or leader will ask you to give assent to the five membership vows.

3. Reception

First, following the interview, members of the church session will meet officially to welcome new members into the church. Then, at a Sunday worship service, you will be asked to come forward and affirm publicly the five membership promises before the congregation. Those who have not been baptized will remain up front for baptism while the other new members go back to their seats. This will be your official public reception into Christ Church Ventura.

4. Baptism

If you have never been baptized, and are making your first public profession of faith, we would be honored to baptize you during the worship service. Let the pastor know during your interview and we will schedule your baptism (or for parents an infant baptism). On the date of your baptism, please arrive 15 minutes before the service to meet with the pastor.

THE CITY OF GOD AND VISION FOR THE VENTURA COMMUNITY

1. *The City of God is defined by worship and is filled with people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. (Revelation 5:9-14; 7:9-11)*

Our dream is that Ventura County would become more and more defined by the worship of the triune God. Our prayer is that our church would be a catalyst and continual agent in the transformation of our community by drawing people of every description to saving faith. Our vision is for Christ Church Ventura to serve as a sanctuary, gathering and equipping believers, as well as a mission, sending glad-hearted, God-intoxicated worshipers into Ventura County with the “good news” of Jesus Christ.

2. *In the City of God, the renewing presence of Jesus Christ permeates every aspect of society. (Revelation 21:1-5, 22-27)*

We envision so many believers in Ventura County, that the presence of Jesus Christ is felt in every aspect of our community. We long to see people of every stripe in our community forgiven, set free, and renewed by the gospel. We also envision business professionals, service people, artists, civil servants, tradesmen, students, merchants, builders, and other workers bringing the grace of God to bear on and within their various spheres of influence and fields of labor. Our witness to Ventura County will be incomplete if we do not proactively seek to incarnate the gospel among the poor, the oppressed, and other marginalized elements of the community. We are called to bring the merciful presence of Christ to people whether or not they recognize him as Lord.

3. *In the City of God's there is no curse allowing for the full redemption of relationships and vocations. (Revelation 22:1-5)*

At the end of Revelation, John saw a remnant of Eden—the tree of life. After the fall, Adam and Eve were barred from its presence and all creation was cursed. In the city of God, all nations have access to the healing of that tree, and the curse, which brought toil and thorns, is lifted. Instead of being another tribe or subculture in the midst of many, we envision a church where the nations gather. We envision our church being an advocate for the true reconciliation offered in the Gospel. We also envision Ventura County as a community of people being set free from the curse, transformed in character, and enabled to see their vocations not as toil and misery; but as service and worship. Only as more and more people become followers of Jesus Christ, and subsequently begin to view their vocations as legitimate callings from God, will Ventura County see true cultural and social transformation.