

EXPLORING MEMBERSHIP—SESSION THREE

THE JOURNEY



FIRST SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCH

Exploring Membership

Exploring Our Vision (Session Three)

It is our vision to bring God glory in all we do as His children. We believe one of the greatest ways we can do that is to be on mission for God in our daily lives. We are becoming a people who are operating as a missional community. In this session, we will discuss what the marks of a missional community are and what things often distract us from living life on mission.

Missional Community. A community of covenanted believers living life on mission for God in everyday life.

Six Marks of Missional Community

In Genesis 12:1-4, God is calling Abraham to follow him:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

In this covenant, God promises Abraham that through him, all of the nations would be blessed. That is, through his family line, one would come who would do what God promised Adam and Eve in the aftermath of the fall into sin—your seed will rise up and crush the head of the serpent and defeat sin, Satan, and death. To Abraham, God reiterates the promise of a blessing to the nations in the person of Jesus Christ, his Son. Note here that God always intended the good news to go to all nations, not just to Abraham's family that we know as Israel.

God always keeps his promises!

We see this promise realized as we read in the opening verses of Matthew 1:1,18:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.... Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way...

Between those dots, there are seventeen verses in which Matthew details 42 generations between Abraham and Jesus. In doing so, Matthew opens his gospel account by showing that God indeed fulfilled his promises to Abraham that the nations

would be blessed through his offspring and he shows the promise God made to King David was too fulfilled in Jesus. The promise that one from his own family line would sit on his throne for eternity.

God always keeps his promise!

So with this in mind, let's look at the closing verses of Matthew where Jesus details how he will keep his promise to tell the nations of his love and sacrifice in order that they too may be blessed and become true children of Abraham.

We are going to find out that just as God used Abraham and his family to show the world who He is, so his mercy plan includes using our Christian family right here to tell this surrounding area and beyond about his love and grace. God has chosen to use his people to tell others about him. This is God's economy and this is how he designed it. Therefore, He would have us hear his words with a fresh intent to be obedient.

These words of the Great Commission, were not only for the disciples in his day, but they are for us as well:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

The question before us is "What does it look like for our Christian community to live life on mission with God and to be a part of his promise that people from every tribe, tongue, and nation would be redeemed?"

In answering that question, we discover six marks of missional community from the Great Commission.

MARK 1: WE UNDERSTAND UNDER WHOSE AUTHORITY WE OPERATE

And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Evaluation: Do you see Christ as the functional head of the church?

MARK 2: WE ARE INTENTIONAL IN OUR EFFORTS

Go therefore...

Evaluation: Are you taking intentional steps to engage lost?

MARK 3: WE LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS AND THE NATIONS

...and make disciples of all nations...

**Evaluation: How well are you loving your neighbor and telling them of Jesus?
How well are you discipling your family?
Are you engaged with another nation in some way?**

MARK 4: WE COMMIT TO HONOR GOD THROUGH OUR TESTIMONY OF BELIEF AND LIVE IN COMMUNITY WITH HIS CHILDREN

...baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...

Evaluation: Are you living out your public confession of faith with fellow believers in genuine biblical community? Have you shown this confession of faith through public baptism by immersion?

MARK 5: WE ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT TEACHING

"...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

Evaluation: What ways are you currently teaching others?

MARK 6: WE ARE DEPENDENT UPON HIS PRESENCE

"And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Evaluation: Are you practicing his presence daily?

Missional Distractions

As a church, we must regularly remind ourselves that God has called us to be a light on this hill for this community and to regularly tell the story of Christ's sacrifice. It says in 2 Chronicles 16:9:

For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.

When God looks across Southern Indiana, it is our prayer that we are those people. We pray that we will be a people on mission, living life as fully committed followers of Jesus Christ.

Luke recounts in Acts 2 how the early church worked out their redeemed identity by being devoted to prayer, teaching, fellowship, worship, meeting needs, and actively pursuing relationships that would allow evangelistic opportunities. The result of these ways of living was that thousands were added to the church and more each day; and something else pretty astonishing—the church had favor with “all people”. That is, the church had a great reputation and the community was overwhelmingly favorable toward them.

It is helpful to look afresh at Acts 2 and consider the missional lifestyle of the apostles and the early church, and ask ourselves what is it that is distracting us from living the same way.

Let's consider the missional distractions that are likely limiting our gospel impact and let's regularly call one another to repentance, so that when God looks to and fro in Southern Indiana he will see this church as one whose heart is completely his and that he will choose to strongly support this faith community.

So as we compare our way of living against the way the early church lived life, you are invited to consider the truths from Acts 2:42-47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

In this passage, we see an ideal portrait of the young Christian community. It was all new, it was fresh and it was powerful. As one writer puts it,

“They were witnessing the Spirit’s presence in the miracles of the apostles, sharing their possessions with the needy among them, sharing their witness in the temple, [and] sharing themselves in the intimacy of their table fellowship. Their common life was marked by praise of God, joy in the faith, and sincerity of heart.”¹

This church in Jerusalem consisted of a people who were devoted to:

- Biblical teaching (disciple)
- Unceasing Prayer (worshipper)
- Joyful, Christ-centered fellowship (family)
- God-focused worship (worshipper)
- Mercy ministry where physical needs were being met without hesitation—all motivated by the gospel (servant)
- Intentional evangelism in the temple courts (witness)

Resulting in God-given growth and favor among the non-believing community. The Jerusalem church had an excellent reputation!

What is interesting in the list of descriptors is that they relate perfectly to the nature of our redeemed identity in Christ. Think about it:

- We are worshippers, so were they
- We are disciples, so were they
- We are family, so were they
- We are servants, so were they
- We are witnesses, so were they.

So we should not be surprised that in their obedience to the great commission given to them by our Risen Savior, they simply did what came natural to a redeemed child of God. They simply lived out what God had worked into them. They lived out their redeemed identity in obedience to the mission that Christ had charged them with.

It is this very same charge we have been given in this city and if we too, are obedient by simply being who we are in Christ, then we will see God-given growth and favor among the people. Here is the ugly truth though. The further we read the book of Acts, we find this ideal giving way, at times, to opposite ways of living.

One Lukan scholar writes,

“Sincerity sometimes gave way to dishonesty, joy was blotched by rifts in the fellowship, and the favor of the people was overshadowed by persecutions from the Jewish officials.”²

¹ John Polhill. New American Commentary: Acts.

² Ibid

Luke's summaries are helpful however for us today because they point us toward the ideal for the Christian community that we should strive for and return to regularly and create a pathway for newcomers to discover.

This will be possible if we maintain unity in the Spirit as it says about them:

...they continued to meet together (in one accord)...

This word "together" is commonly used in Acts to express unity of purpose and particularly applies to the "one heart and mind" of the Christian fellowship. This unity is rooted in our common union in Christ as redeemed children and in the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

For us the question is if this is the natural way for a christian to live, then are we doing so. If not, what is distracting us from this kind of missional living? If you simply take a survey of American culture you'll find the reasons why the American church by and large is not a missional church.

MISSIONAL DISTRACTION 1: Self-Idolatry versus God-Focused Worship

Let's start with our self-obsession. Unredeemed people are by nature self-idolatrous. That is, the putting of oneself above the existence and demands of God. Worshipping self over worshipping God is what is meant here.

MISSIONAL DISTRACTION 2: Relativism versus Biblical Teaching

Humans prefer to choose their own sources of authority, normally those that play to their already preferred positions. So what happens in terms of one's understanding of the nature and source of truth is that it results from an amalgamation so called "truth" streams. This results in a diminished view of the Christian Scriptures.

MISSIONAL DISTRACTION 3: Individualism versus Christ-Centered Fellowship

We live in a culture that celebrates individualism. We call it the American spirit. We are free to be all that we can be. We are encouraged to pursue our personal pathway to success and happiness. It is the holy trinity of self—" ME, MYSELF, & I".

Please do not get us wrong. We are all about personal ambition and drive in life, but when that individualism forsakes the collective whole of say one's earthly family or one's church family; then perhaps we have crossed line. For Americans, this is radically countercultural. If we are going to drive home a collective mindset of a people who are committed to Christ and to one another and who have made a commitment to intertwine their lives; then we are going to have to be intentional about fighting overt individualism and isolation! We need one another. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are his children. We are family. And family considers one another more important than self—the essence of a humble, others focused lifestyle.

MISSIONAL DISTRACTION 4: Materialism versus Generosity

Acts 2:45 states

They sold property and possessions to give...

This is the essence of generosity. It is by very definition descriptive of the Gospel. For we have a heavenly father who gave his “only begotten son that whosoever believes in him will not perish but would have everlasting life”. We have a heavenly Father who reveals himself to the patriarch, Abraham, as Jehovah Jirah, the Lord provides. We have a heavenly Father who supplies our every need in Christ Jesus and who has lavished upon us his great love.

Why then is it so easy to fall prey to the materialistic fabric of our culture? It seems that we are always going to be satisfied when... when we have a larger home or better furnishings or a sportier car or more money in the bank or better food on the table or more dramatic vacations. We will be satisfied when...But if we are honest, the when almost never arrives. Even if our income has increased and our leisure time lengthened. It is never enough. It is one of the greatest evil traps that we face. Oh may we become a more generous people, free from the bondage of materialism becoming eager givers.

MISSIONAL DISTRACTION 5: Consumerism versus Service

Luke writes that they

...gave to anyone who had need...

It was a servant's heart on display among this people. Their hearts were overflowing in recognition of all that they had received in Christ and they were desirous to serve others in the name of Christ as a means of expressing the Gospel.

We have a choice— our intent will either be to serve one another and our community or to consume for own benefit.

So how does consumerism appear in the modern church? One author referenced this phenomena as the "McChurch syndrome". This is the idea that people select a church primarily based on the consumeristic desires of the church shopper. Do not hear incorrectly, we all have specific things we are looking for the life of a Church, but when it is more about our own personal consumption rather than our locking arms to serve the body and the community, we've crossed the line and landed in American consumerism.

MISSIONAL DISTRACTION 6: Temporal versus Eternal

Luke writes in verse 46

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts...

The Christian presence in the temple testifies to their zeal for witness. In Jerusalem the temple was the primary place where crowds would be found, and there the Christians went to bear their witness (3:11–12; 5:21, 42).

As Christians in our local culture, where then do we go? Jesus commanded his followers—"Go, therefore and make disciples". He invited the disciples into relationship with him and made him a promise that he would make them "fishers of men". So they were going to the temple fishing for the souls of men and women.

Are you fishing? And do you have a favorite fishing hole?

We are either apathetic about eternity or we are engaged in regular and bold proclamation. We are either focused on the temporal or the eternal. We need to hear author and missionary, Lesslie Newbigin's reminder that we are a "pilgrim people" not residents. We can become so complacent in our residency on earth that we fail to remember that our citizenship is in heaven and that we are servants of the most high King whose kingdom has already broken in and will come to full fruition when he returns.

Member Expectations

We are a people who have covenanted together and are bound by the Scriptures and the following commitments³:

Having been led, as we believe by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour, and on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, in the presence of God and this congregation, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another, as one body in Christ.

We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love; to strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines; to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations.

We also engage to maintain family and personal devotions; to religiously educate our children; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements and exemplary in our conduct; to avoid all gossip, slander, and excessive anger; to abstain from the abuse of alcohol and controlled substances, and to be zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Saviour.

We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember each other in prayer; to aid each other in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy and courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation, and to seek to grow in fellowship with one another.

We moreover engage that when we remove from this place we will, as soon as possible, continue gathering with other believers where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's word.

I agree to wholeheartedly uphold, with God's grace and power, this family commitment.

³ This is the church covenant that each member is expected to abide by and fully support. It can be found in the church constitution and by-laws.

Next Steps in Church Membership

Well, we have come to that place in exploring membership that we would want you to ask yourself--Is God leading me to First Southern? Is this a church where I can and will serve well. Am I excited by the vision of living missionally in my everyday life? Will I faithfully follow the leadership God has placed among this church family? Will I pray regularly for the ministry of this church? Will I give generously through this local church to kingdom work?

There are many more questions you will want to ask in making your final decision, but at the heart of it, is a simple question of commitment. We unapologetically ask for a passionate and deep-seated commitment to Christ and to His church. If this is the place, then let's think about the next steps.

Step One: If you know Christ as Savior but have not been baptized by immersion, set up a time to speak with a church leader / pastor so that any of your questions can be answered and your baptism can be scheduled. If you are a baptized believer in Christ, then you are ready to move toward membership.

Step Two: Review and be familiar with the materials from the Exploring Membership sessions, review the membership expectations (church covenant) and agree to uphold these family commitments.

Step Three: Complete the membership information form and submit it to a designated church leader / pastor.

Step Four: Schedule a time to meet with a church leader / pastor to discuss your testimony and current walk with Christ. The intent of this time is for encouragement in the Lord, as well, it will provide an opportunity to begin a long spiritual journey together. It will also be a time to talk about how you have been spiritually gifted and help you find a place of ministry at First Southern.

Step Five: Make your desire to join the church known to the entire fellowship by coming forward at the end of a worship service so that you can be introduced and welcomed.

Step Six: The church will vote on your membership at the next regularly scheduled members meeting.

Next Steps in Discipleship

Obviously, we would be excited about you joining First Southern as we believe that church membership is vitally important for *every* Christian; however, we are most concerned about your growth in Christ. If we are going to be the missional community that God has called us to be, then we must be a people who are formed in the image of Christ. This requires regular interaction with other believers, the practice of spiritual disciplines (such as prayer, bible reading and study, scripture memorization, giving generously, serving well, participating in worship gatherings), and the ongoing participation in a small group. We want to help you engage in these kinds of habits, therefore we would suggest that you:

- Faithfully attend a small group bible study
- Develop a strategy to regularly read your bible and pray
- If you are married and/or have children living in your home, regularly pray and read the bible with your spouse and children
- Find a place of service in the church that best utilizes your gifts / abilities and that excites you
- Determine your plan of faithful giving of financial resources to the work of God's Kingdom through First Southern
- Determine to make five new friends in the fellowship within in the next two months. These are people who will be able to encourage you in your walk with God.
- Make a list of folks that you can intentionally build a deeper relationship with for the purpose of engaging them with the gospel