

## Will You Be A Faithful Member?

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 16, 1994, the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Scripture Lessons: Job 38:1-7; Psalm 104:1-9, 35c; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Last month, on September 17, Citizenship Day, about 25 men, women, and children living in Lancaster County became citizens of the United States. Those who were interviewed spoke of what a joy it was for them to fulfill their dreams United States citizenship. Now they're citizens with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities. They can vote. Their children enjoy the benefits of citizenship. And they get to pay taxes. ALL RIGHT! They remind me of Eryn, Carolyn, Elizabeth, Thomas and Kathleen and Bill and Karen who will be joining the church this morning.

Compare, for a few minutes, citizenship in a nation with membership in the church of Jesus Christ. First, compare how one becomes a naturalized citizen of the United States with how one becomes an active member of the Church of Jesus Christ. Every alien seeking citizenship must have lived in the United States for a period of time. They must demonstrate some understanding of the U.S. political system, follow generally accepted moral standards, and demonstrate that they're able to communicate to some degree in the English language. Then they take the following oath of allegiance to the United States:

"I hereby declare... that I ... renounce... all allegiance... to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; ... I will support and defend the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; ... I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same.... I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God."

That's very much like the way we become active members of the church of Jesus Christ. Those desiring to become active members participate in a five week

new members class where they learn what we believe and how our church is governed. At the end of those new member classes they meet with the Session. They publicly renounce sin and evil and publicly pledge their allegiance to Jesus Christ. After we all confess our faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed I ask them, "Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?" To which they respond: "I will, with God's help." So that's how you become an active member of the Church of Jesus Christ in general and the Oxford Presbyterian Church in particular. It's very much like the process of becoming a citizen.

Secondly, like citizens of a nation, active members of the church of Jesus Christ have certain rights. Citizens have the right to vote, the right to hold public office, and the right of free speech. Active members of the church have similar rights. Our Book of Order says, "An active member is entitled to all the rights and privileges of the Church, including the right to participate in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, to present children for baptism, to take part in meetings of the congregation, and to vote and hold office." Part of those privileges include pastoral care: When you're sick or maybe even dying I want to visit you and pray with and for you, assuring you of God's unconditional love that comes to us through Jesus Christ. There are even special funds available in the church when you become financially strapped. The church, as your family in Christ, is here to help. At the time of death or illness or when there's a birth in your family, we try to provide meals to ease the burden. When you become shut-in and unable to attend worship services I will visit

Christian Ed, A place to  
meet for worship, study,  
service, & prayer. It is to  
be all that and more with  
us.

you with an elder to receive Holy Communion. Those are just a few of the privileges that church members receive.

Thirdly, not only do citizens and active members of the Church of Jesus Christ have rights, we also have duties. Citizens of the United States are expected to obey laws and pay taxes. Members of the church of Jesus Christ also have duties and responsibilities. <sup>↑</sup> ~~Statistics of surveys that citizens are more concerned with rights & privileges than~~ <sup>And the citizens are much more concerned about</sup> We're often more concerned about rights and privileges than our duties. That was the problem of James and John in our Gospel lesson.

"Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." Privileges! Rights!

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked.

They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." Like so many of us they thought of active church membership in terms of special privileges rather than service. Many church members have that attitude. I used to know a Presbyterian who came to church three times in his whole life. When he got hatched, when he got matched, and when he got dispatched. He was in church for his baptism, marriage, and burial.

"Do for us whatever we ask." James and John thought of membership primarily in terms of privileges. Jesus told them that active membership in his church requires service. We have a mission to accomplish; to proclaiming (in word and deed) the unconditional love and leadership of Jesus Christ to the local and world community. That mission is so great that it can be accomplished only in the power of the Holy Spirit and by grace of our Lord Jesus Christ through the faith, hard work, and financial contributions of God's people.

We can't accomplish that mission merely by being a name on the membership rolls. It does no good to have your name on the membership roll unless you have an active faith in Jesus Christ, are showing his love and trusting in his grace and love. Names on a roll don't worship and serve Jesus Christ, people do. Names on a roll don't pay for pastoral care, utilities, Sunday School books. Names on the roll don't visit the sick and the prisoner, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, bind up the wounded, and preach the gospel to the poor. Living, breathing, thinking, loving, serving men and women do these things.

There are many ways to be active in the work and worship of the church. Here are just a few ways our Book of Order suggests: taking part in the common life and worship of our church; praying and studying Scripture and the faith of the Christian Church; supporting the work of the Church through the giving of money, time, and talents; demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the Church; and responding to God's activity in the world through service to others.

*→ best way pay a NHC member new point about no stewardship money - This is part of being an active member*

Accepting the privileges and responsibilities of membership in the Church is a commitment to Jesus Christ and not just to the human and fallible institution we all know the church to be. Accepting the privileges and responsibilities of membership binds us to the fulfillment of the obligations of membership. The elders of the church are responsible to encourage members to regularly review and evaluate the integrity with which they're involved in the ministry of the Church and consider ways in which their participation in the worship and service of the Church may be increased and made more meaningful.

The session also has a responsibility to review the roll of members at least

once a year, and to counsel with those who have neglected the responsibilities of membership. Members who do not participate in the work and worship of the church are placed on an inactive list. Inactive members have all the rights of members except they can't vote for church officers or serve as elder or deacon.

So, I've spoken to you about how we become an active member of the Church of Jesus Christ and outlined some of the privileges and responsibilities of active church membership. I've said this for the benefit of all of us, not just the new members. I've said it for the benefit of all of us because every member of the congregation soon will be receiving in the mail a letter with a pledge card inviting you to financially support the mission of this church.

I urge each one of us, this morning - renew your faith in Jesus Christ. Turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world. Turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as Lord and Savior. Trust in his grace and love. Be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love. I address everyone of us who is already a member of this church - Be faithful, active members of this congregation, sharing in its worship and ministry through our prayers and gifts, our study and service, and so fulfill our calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we have decided for your kingdom and dared to be baptized with your baptism and to take your cup. But we confess that we don't understand the fearsome consequences of obedience. When we're brought to the test steady our nerve and hold us in our faith; that we may sail through heavy seas, and ride the frightening storm. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.