

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)

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Stewardship and Church Membership
Where We Go

Luke 24:13-49 (NIV)

13 Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. 14 They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. 15 As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; 16 but they were kept from recognizing him.

17 He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. 18 One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

19 "What things?" he asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. 20 The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; 21 but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. 22 In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning 23 but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. 24 Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."

25 He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

28 As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. 29 But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. 32 They asked each other, "Were not

our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

33 They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together 34 and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” 35 Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

37 They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. 38 He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? 39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. 41 And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate it in their presence.

44 He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Acts 1:1-8 (NIV)

1.1 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach 2 until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 3 After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. 4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

7 He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! We are here again in this time when we take a few weeks to focus on stewardship and church membership. Our mission statement says that “*First Christian Church exists to make disciples of Jesus.*” We fulfill that mission through our personal lives and our shared ministry as we “Gather,” “Grow,” and “Go.” First we asked, “*Why do we gather?*” Then we asked, “*How do we grow?*” Today, we’re asking, “*Where do we go?*”

[Slide 2] *Introduction*

But before we go any further, let’s remember something really important. These three words—gather, grow, go—are not isolated terms cleverly associated because they all start with the letter “G.” They are connected ideas that fit into a statement that is related to our overall purpose and our reason for existing. We “gather,” in order to help us “grow,” so that we can “go.” (And as we go, we discover that we need to repeatedly gather, so that we continue to grow, which enables us to keep going.)

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Let me illustrate that with a very obvious parallel. All across Kansas and throughout the Midwest, farmers are busy with the harvest. They are gathering various grains and other crops—wheat, soybeans, corn, oats, and so on—and bringing them to their barns and silos. Why are they harvesting? We know why. It’s not because they enjoy riding their combines. It’s to produce food for livestock and people. And the point of producing food is so that we can have something to eat—so that we can live our lives, go to work, do the things that we need to do.

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It is the same with us in the church. The point of having church has never been to go to meetings. The meetings—when we gather—are a crucial part of what we do because they help us grow. When we gather together to be taught by the Lord, we are changed so that we become more like Christ. We are better able to understand God and his word; we are better equipped to be able to share that

message about Jesus with others and better at demonstrating what it looks like to live as a follower of Christ.

So, when we talk about *stewardship*—meaning the stewardship of our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ, including our giving—or *church membership*—what it means to be actively involved with and connected to a local body of Christ, we are talking about this dynamic process of gathering, growing, and going. We are talking about fulfilling the exhortation from 2 Peter 3:18: “*But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*”

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Stewardship thus is not just about giving money, but about sharing our lives, offering ourselves to God by offering ourselves to one another. When we say “yes” to following Jesus, we are saying “*My life belongs to Jesus—all that I am, all that I have, all that I do.*” Giving is therefore an expression of my discipleship: I don’t give because I have more money than I need for my living expenses, I give because I am a follower of Christ. I give at God’s direction, not because I’ve been coerced or manipulated or made to feel guilty. I give because everything I have belongs to God, and I have agreed with him to seek his kingdom above everything else. Giving becomes a way to help the church gather funds; when I add my part to that which others do, that money grows; and the result is that the church can “go”—we can use the money we give to minister to people here in this place and to fund ministry all around the globe, and even into the future.

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Membership is about building a strong community, where we share a common faith, proclaim a common message, participate in a common life, and engage in a common mission. We come together as a community, not just as random individuals who happen to show up at a location at the same time, but as those who are committed to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. We learn and grow as we experience God together and allow his word to shape us. As a result, we are able to carry out the ministry of Jesus—loving people, teaching others how to follow Christ, nurturing them in their faith, helping them to heal from the damage of sins and traumas, worshiping God, and serving others by doing good.

[Slide 7] *Where do we go?*

This morning we read from the end of Luke’s gospel and the beginning of the book of Acts. Those two volumes of Luke’s account were always meant to be read consecutively. One of the clues that demonstrates that for us is the repetition of aspects of the ending of the gospel in the opening chapter of Acts. And one of

the key parts that is repeated is Jesus' instruction to the apostles to take the gospel to the whole world.

Luke's version of what we often refer to as the "Great Commission" reads a little differently than the passage in Matthew with which we are more familiar.

Let's compare them:

(Matthew 28:18-20)

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

(Luke-gospel 24:46-49)

He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

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(Luke-Acts 1:8) And here is the repetition from the book of Acts:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Luke's version is worded differently because he is emphasizing the importance of the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering the disciples to do the task to which he called them. But in both cases, we have the very clear command to the disciples to take the message of Jesus' resurrection and the availability of salvation in his name to the entire world, to every people group without exception.

And though it is not my focus today, we can't escape the emphatic words of Jesus to the disciples about waiting for the Holy Spirit. The magnitude of the task before them and the urgency with which the command was given called for immediate action—the entire world had to hear! Yet Jesus was insistent that the disciples not do anything until the coming of the Holy Spirit. He *commanded* them to wait until they received the power of the Holy Spirit. Those disciples had listened to Jesus for three years, had seen him perform miracles, had witnessed the crucifixion and the resurrection, and had listened to his explanations of the Scriptures that pointed to him, now with new understanding in the light of his resurrection. And if they needed to wait for the Holy Spirit before attempting to

carry out his commands, what makes us think that we can do the task without the Holy Spirit? Why do we imagine that the empowerment of the Holy Spirit is an optional part of the gospel?

[Slide 9] *Who is supposed to go?*

Well, who is supposed to go? Over the centuries, there have been those in the church who have said, “*Jesus gave this commandment to the apostles, and it only applies to them.*” It is hard to fathom this, but their argument is that Jesus’ command to take the message of the resurrection to all the world was only the responsibility of those who were standing there with Jesus when he said those words. But there are a host of reasons why that is completely wrong; here are the two biggest, in my opinion.

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First, the church has always understood that the command to baptize new believers was incumbent upon the entire church, not just the apostles. The same goes for the command to make disciples—to teach and train new believers what it meant to follow Jesus. So there is absolutely no warrant for saying that making disciples and baptizing new converts is the responsibility of the whole church, but only the apostles were given the responsibility of going into the whole world with the gospel message.

Second, it would not have been possible for those who physically stood near Jesus and heard him give this command to fulfill it by themselves. The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15 that Jesus had appeared to a number of different individuals and groups following his resurrection, including a group of more than five hundred people at one time. If we suppose that all of those five-hundred-plus were present when Jesus gave this command, and all of them commenced to do what he said, they would not have been able to reach all of the people groups of the world in their lifetime.

For one thing, none of them would have had a way or means to access all of the people living in the Western hemisphere, the Pacific Islands, or Australia. They had no knowledge of the nations living in sub-Saharan Africa, and very little knowledge or awareness of the peoples living in northern Europe, central Asia, or the Far East. Their limited knowledge and means of travel meant that fulfilling Jesus’ commandment would have to be a multi-generational effort.

Now, it’s true that the original disciples (plus Paul) did a good job of taking the gospel a long way toward the ends of the earth. By the mid-second century, about fifty years after the death of the last of the first generation of disciples, there were churches all around the lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea, in the

northeast of Africa (Egypt and Ethiopia), in the lands to the east in what is now Syria, Arabia, Iraq, and Iran, and as far as southern India. According to fairly dependable traditions, some of those churches can be connected to one of the twelve apostles, or someone well known to them. We have strong indications, for instance, that John went to Ephesus in western Turkey, that Peter and Paul were in Rome, that Thomas planted the church in southern India, and that Mark was associated with the church in Alexandria, Egypt.

But that was just the beginning of taking the gospel to the whole world. It would take the whole church to complete the job.

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The meaning of the Great Commission passages, therefore, cannot be that Jesus was directing the Twelve (or the 500) to travel throughout the earth until the entire world was reached with the gospel. Rather, he was directing the church as a whole to continue to reach beyond their own borders and the limiting factors related to culture, geography, language, and comfort, to bring the gospel to every people group on the planet.

But does that mean that everyone is supposed to go to the ends of the earth? No, not necessarily. It does mean that the church as a whole, and every local church as a part of that whole, needs to be engaged in the effort to reach the world with the gospel. And it does mean that we are all supposed to go somewhere, and to reach out to someone.

[Slide 12] *Four circles of mission*

Back to our question: Where do we go? The crucial verse from Acts (1:8) helps us see what Jesus intended for his church. It gives us a pattern that we can use to show us what the church—that's us—can use to measure how we are fulfilling the command to go into all the world.

Acts 1:8 shows us four circles of mission moving outward from where we are to the outer limits of where we are to go.

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(1) Jerusalem—this is where the disciples were gathered together while they were waiting for the Holy Spirit. It was the first place they preached the gospel and began gathering as the church.

(2) Judea—this is the surrounding area immediately beyond Jerusalem. Most of the inhabitants would have been Jews, and a higher percentage of them would have been more or less devout, due to the influence of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem.

(3) Samaria—this is the area north of Judea, inhabited by a group of people who were hostile to the Jews, with a different religious tradition, but who shared a common culture with them, and may have spoken a separate dialect of the Aramaic language.

(4) The “ends of the earth”—this is code language used to refer to the Gentiles, the non-Jewish nations of the world. These peoples would be far different, with differing customs and cultural patterns, different religious ideas and traditions, and speaking different languages. Much of what they believed and practiced were directly contrary to core beliefs and practices of the disciples.

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How does this pattern fit us today?

“Jerusalem” represents where we live, the people who are similar to us. We speak the same language, we share a common culture and background. It is easy for us to communicate with one another. We generally have a lot of things in common: experiences, patterns of life, assumptions, basic beliefs.

So, if you are looking for where it is you’re supposed to “go” with the gospel, you start where you’re at. Start with the people you know in the place where you live. Start with the people you see all around you most of the time—the folks who shop at the same Dillon’s store, who work where you work, who live in your neighborhood. Start with the people you know from your hobbies, who work out at Rock Chalk Park at the same time you do, or who you always bump into at CVS or WalMart.

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Then you can branch out. “Judea” represents people who are like you, but who live a bit further away. Maybe they are generally from your culture, but grew up or live in a different part of the country. So, you have a lot in common, but you speak with a Midwestern drawl, and she speaks in a Chi-caw-go accent. You are accustomed to life on the farm and she likes the bustle of a busy downtown. There’s a little bit you have to overcome to relate to these people; but it’s not hard to communicate or to understand how they think—it’s different, but generally comprehensible.

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The third circle is a bit more of a stretch. “Samaria” represents people who are sort of like you, but with some sharp differences, who also live further away. It takes some effort to reach them. And when you do, you find that there are some significant challenges when you try to relate to their experiences, their customs, and their beliefs. You have to work to find common ground if you’re going to

share the gospel with them. So, for instance, those of us who are European in ancestry might think of a group of immigrants from Poland or Estonia who have settled in Minneapolis; Latinos could imagine a group of immigrants from Cuba or Venezuela who have settled in Miami. These immigrants would be people whose English isn't strong, but who have grown up in a westernized culture in a country that is fairly well-developed; with a heritage that has been somewhat formed by Christianity, even if that faith has been eroded or even abandoned in much of the society from which they came.

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The fourth circle (“the ends of the earth”) represents people who are very different from you, and who live a long way away. The culture, language, heritage, and beliefs are all very unlike what you know; the obstacles to communication and relationship are many and difficult to overcome. It takes a great deal of effort and determined study to figure out how to understand them rightly, so that you can share the gospel with them in a way that makes sense to them without misrepresenting the message. The challenges of getting to them are substantial; meeting those challenges costs a lot of money and time and could even require a great deal of sacrifice.

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Jesus has commanded the church as a whole, and our church as a part of the whole, and us as individuals, to be actively involved in this mission. As individuals, generally, we can only be personally active in one of those circles; maybe two. But as a church, we have the advantage of combining our efforts to do more than what one person can do.

That's why we recognize the importance of supporting missionaries—not as a luxury when we have leftover money, but as an essential aspect of who we are as a local church. Supporting the mission of Jesus Christ, the shared mission of the church, is not the responsibility of some group with the word “missions” in their name. It is the mission that Jesus has entrusted to the church, and we are a part of his church, with the command to take the knowledge of salvation to the nations, the peoples of the earth. Our stewardship of that mission is absolutely essential to our identity as a church. *If we do not do our part in this work of evangelizing the world—and Lawrence, Douglas County, our world—we really don't have the right to claim the name of Christ or the status of being a church.*

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That is precisely why we support missionaries like the Swansons and the Kerstetters and Rachael Costello; why we support local ministries like Family

Promise and L.I.N.K. and the Insight Women's Center. It is why we are looking to get involved with campus ministries that are reaching KU with the gospel a couple of blocks from our door.

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It is also precisely why the elders have approved the recommendation of the Missions Advisory Council (MAC) to increase the amount of support for missions from our operating budget for 2022. Because our operating budget is not simply what it costs us to keep the lights on in the building and to pay the staff. Our budget is a reflection of our mission and our purpose—what it is that we believe God has told us to do; our assignment from heaven, as it were. And part of our mission and purpose is to reach the world with the gospel. That means supporting like-minded people who can represent us as they take the word of God and the love of God to the nations.

This decision to increase our missions giving was not made lightly or casually. The Missions Advisory Council has been working for nearly a year, thinking through some tough questions about how we build a biblical framework for understanding what God wants us to do; how to fit what our history has been within that framework; what our priorities and values should be; how to gauge the Holy Spirit's leading for us in this moment of our history, given our limitations and our resources. From all of that work has come a consensus about how to move forward. And I believe we are moving in exactly the right direction, not only in terms of our spiritual understanding of the place of missions in our church's life, but also in terms of the practical steps necessary to translate our beliefs into actual practices, policies, and commitments that govern our involvement with missions organizations, missionaries, and outside ministries.

We discovered, for instance, a number of things that we had not realized when we began this process. We learned that each of the missionaries whom we supported were seriously underfunded, that they were living well below the recommended minimum level of support that their organizations said they should have. We can't be the total answer for that problem, but it made us think very hard about what we were doing. We also learned that in 2021, our total giving to missions represented only 3.4% of our undesignated income. And the unanimous consensus of the Missions Advisory Council was that we needed to do better. And the elders agreed.

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The reason that percentage is significant has to do with an important biblical pattern related to stewardship and membership and giving. As I mentioned last

week, the Bible distinguishes three types of giving: tithes, offerings, and alms. All three are considered important, and based on the New Testament teaching, including what Jesus specifically said, Jesus instructs his followers to be generous and to include all three types of giving as a part of their lifestyle.

(1) The first type is the tithe. Tithing is giving ten percent of one's earned income. In Malachi 3:10, God told the Israelites to bring the tithe into the "storehouse;" the New Testament church took that to mean that the believers should direct their tithes to the local church in order to facilitate ministry and support those who were involved in preaching and teaching (1 Timothy 5:17-18).

(2) Offerings are additional gifts that are above the tithe. They may be given to specific ministries within the church (such as our building fund or missions), or given to support other Christian ministries.

(3) The third type is alms—donations for the relief of the suffering of the poor. This could be done by giving to the church's benevolence fund, or to other relief organizations, or by buying a bag of groceries for someone in need, filling up their gas tank, or helping them with their rent.

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Because we teach tithing on the personal level—not as a requirement or as a way to gain status with God or a formula for getting rich, but as a spiritual discipline that carries the promise of God's blessing—it is only right that we should model that as a church. That would mean raising the amount that we give to missions from 3.4% of our undesignated income to 10%. It is the consensus of both the MAC and the elders that this is what God wants us to do.

But we have some limiting factors; we have financial obligations that we cannot ignore (such as maintenance and utilities for a large, aging facility). We must be responsible stewards, not just idealistic crusaders. So the elders, at the recommendation of the MAC, have directed that we increase our giving to missions from 3.4% of our income to 7% for this year, with the hope that we can reach 10% or more in the following year.

For the coming year, therefore, we will be raising the amount of support we give to the Swansons, the Kerstetters, and Rachael Costello. We are also looking for ministries and missions with whom we can partner to reach our Jerusalem, our Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

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Let me close by sharing a very practical aspect of this decision. And don't forget—in everything related to giving, we operate on the principle that whether

you give and how much you give is between you and God. Telling us what you're going to give by making a stewardship commitment simply helps us plan.

Last week Steve Nicolai encouraged us all to direct the majority of our giving to the general budget instead of designating it for other causes, or for specific expenses that fall under the general heading of our operating budget. I want to echo what he said—designated offerings restrict what we can do with that money. I remember a man came to me once; he wanted to direct that his tithe go entirely to cover my salary. I appreciated his intentions. I suspect that he had come from a church where they had disrespected the pastor by not paying him or some such thing. But I told him that we could not do what he asked. I trusted the leadership of that church to do the right thing, even when it meant they couldn't pay me. And frankly, I wouldn't give to a church if I didn't trust its leadership.

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I trust the leadership of this church. They have proved themselves worthy of our trust—both the elders and the trustees have the good of this church in mind and they are being diligent to protect God's interests and yours. No single person is controlling what we do with our money, and no one is getting everything that they would like to get. We are all seeking to hear from the Lord and do the very best we can to follow his lead. I think most of the time we're getting it pretty close to right.

So, I'd like to offer another way to look at what Steve mentioned last week. If you are persuaded that tithing is a biblical principle, when you fill out your stewardship commitment (and when you give), put the full amount of your tithe toward the general budget. Instead of splitting your tithe up, trust God and trust the leadership of the church to use your sacrificial giving in the best way we can. If you also want to give additional offerings toward things you care about, you can indicate the amount you would like to give to any of the designated funds (building, missions, benevolence). If you're not sure that you can or should give to any of those, just leave those lines blank on your commitment card. If things change during the year, you can always let Melinda know that you are changing your stewardship commitment, or you can simply give without modifying your commitment. After all, it's still between you and God.

We gather—as God's people. We grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And then, we go to share the gospel of Christ and the love of God with people right around us, with people God brings to us, and with people on the other side of the world, through our missionaries who represent us and whom we support with our giving. That's stewardship of our church and our lives. It's all a part of what it means to follow Jesus Christ.

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Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]

Invite people to receive prayer; mention membership