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TRAINING MEMBERS AT CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH IN
PARIS, KENTUCKY, WITH A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING
AND PRACTICE OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

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PARIS, KENTUCKY, WITH A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING
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In memory of my grandfather,
Melvin Shoults (1926-2017),
who loved the church
and taught me to do the same.

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PREFACE

I am thankful for my wife, Katie, for her loving support of this project, and for our children—Adeline, Norah, and Jack—for being constant sources of joy in my life.

This project would not have been possible apart from the generosity of my parents, John and Janet Scherer. I am thankful not only for their years of love, support, and encouragement, but also for their belief in the importance of theological education.

I am thankful for my grandmother, Juanita Shoults. She’s my “Lois” in 2 Timothy 1:5. I am unsure where I would be apart from her prayers.

I am thankful for the members of Central Baptist Church. I am grateful for their prayers, patience, support, encouragement, and participation.

I am thankful for my supervisor, Dr. Bill Henard, for his guidance and help. My project is better because of his insight.

Most importantly, I am thankful to God for His grace—grace in salvation and grace to finish this project. Any good fruit this project bears is His doing.

Steven Matthew Scherer

Paris, Kentucky

May 2018

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The notion of church membership has fallen on tough times. Churches are full of regular attenders (non-members). Inactive church members remain on inflated membership rolls. Church members have deficient knowledge of what church membership entails. Little is communicated to new or potential members desiring to join. All of these issues are symptomatic of a deeper problem—a departure by churches from upholding the biblical model of church membership. Some may argue little is at stake. Others disagree. “I’m convinced,” writes Mark Dever, “that getting this concept of membership right is a key step in revitalizing our churches, evangelizing our nation, furthering the cause of Christ around the world, and so bringing glory to God.”¹

Context

This ministry project took place at Central Baptist Church (CBC) in Paris, Kentucky. CBC is an established and fairly traditional church located in the downtown area of Paris.

Three contributing factors related to the ministry context are pertinent to this project. First, the CBC membership roll is inflated. Total membership is 1,017, including 721 resident members² and 296 non-resident members.³ Average Sunday School attendance is 200 while morning worship attendance is 290, with a certain percentage

¹Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 148.

²Resident members live within reasonable proximity of the church to attend on a regular basis.

³Non-resident members do not live within reasonable proximity of the church to attend on a regular basis.

being visitors and regular attenders (non-members). On a typical Sunday, hundreds of resident members do not attend. Little effort in recent years has been made to contact or locate inactive members. Many inactive members continue to receive church newsletters and emails and monitor the activities of the church from a distance. Some inactive members have lost all contact with the church. Inactive church membership is detrimental to the health of CBC and to the spiritual health of those absent members.⁴

Second, CBC has a significant number of regular attenders. These regular attenders are active and contribute, but have yet to join for various reasons. Some see no need or benefit of church membership. Some are from other denominations and do not wish to be baptized by immersion. Others disagree with certain key doctrinal positions and fear that joining would compromise his or her beliefs. Some are timid, held back for fear of walking the aisle and being publicly introduced in front of the church. Though these regular attenders are vital to the health and ministries of CBC, church policy limits their involvement because of their lack of formal commitment. Regular attenders are neither able to vote on church matters at business meetings nor can they teach Sunday School, serve on many committees, or even volunteer in the church nursery. Limited involvement can be injurious to the spiritual health of these believers if spiritual gifts are being neglected due to the inability to serve.

Third, a biblical understanding of church membership has not been communicated. The first two contextual factors are symptoms of this root problem. Teaching about membership has been absent from the pulpit. Expectations for members have not been formulated or affirmed by the church. Membership classes are not offered

⁴Not only is inactive church membership detrimental to the church and inactive members, it also damages the church's gospel witness in the community. Writing about churches that permit inactive church membership, Dever laments, "What do such churches convey about Christianity to the world around us? What do we understand this to mean about the importance of Christianity in our lives? And what is the spiritual state of those people if they haven't attended church for months or even longer? Is their nonattendance really any of our business?" Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 148-49.

for new members and converts. Membership candidates from other churches wishing to join are unaware of what CBC believes doctrinally or expects from those granted membership. As a result, the church membership roll remains inflated, regular attenders show little desire to join, and membership means little for active and inactive members alike.

While CBC has enjoyed more than seven decades of ministry in Paris, the matter of membership has been neglected in recent years. Meaningful membership must be restored if CBC is to flourish in the decades to come.

Rationale

The ministry project was needed at CBC for four reasons. First, there was a need to create a culture of meaningful membership. Prior to this project, a casual and unbiblical view of membership pervaded CBC due to the neglect of biblical instruction on membership. Expectations were not understood or communicated. Little concern was expressed over the inflated membership roll. Membership meant very little. The project sought to create a culture of biblical and meaningful membership that will continue for many years to come.

Second, there was a need to create a pathway to membership. Prior to this project, potential new members were unable to attend a membership class where they could learn more about the church or even learn how to join the church. Unless candidates for membership initiated membership conversations with the pastoral staff, little was done to encourage or cultivate formalizing membership. The project sought to create clearer pathways for potential members to take steps toward membership.

Third, there was a need to create a context for the sharing of doctrinal distinctives and membership expectations. Prior to this project, a brief membership interview with the pastor was the sole but unwritten requirement before membership

candidates were brought before the church for a vote.⁵ Previously, candidates learned what CBC believed by listening to sermons, attending Sunday School classes, or through casual conversations with pastoral staff or other leaders. Candidates learned membership expectations by observing involvement and activity by active members. The project sought to centralize and formalize the communication of both what CBC believes and what CBC asks of members.

Fourth, there was a need to raise expectations, involvement, and commitment level of active CBC members. Prior to this project, members were unaware of any failure to uphold membership obligations because membership obligations were not expressed. This project sought to infuse a biblical understanding of membership into the fabric of CBC.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to train members at Central Baptist Church in Paris, Kentucky, with a biblical understanding and practice of church membership.

Goals

The following five goals were established to train members at Central Baptist Church with a biblical understanding and practice of church membership. Each goal reflected a necessary component that was addressed so that this ministry project could be successful.

1. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of church membership among new and existing members of CBC.
2. The second goal was to develop a six-week sermon series on biblical church membership.
3. The third goal was to increase the knowledge of biblical church membership by preaching the sermon series.

⁵Upon being interviewed by the pastor, membership at CBC is granted by congregational affirmation. Members may join by profession of faith followed by baptism, transfer of letter from another SBC church, or statement of faith and previous baptism by immersion.

4. The fourth goal was to develop a four-hour curriculum for a membership class.
5. The fifth goal was to increase the knowledge of new and existing church members by implementing the membership class.

Each goal had a defined means of measurement and success was determined as measured by its benchmark.⁶

Research Methodology

Five goals determined the effectiveness of this project. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of church membership among new and existing members of CBC. This goal was measured by administering the Biblical Church Membership Inventory (BCMI)⁷ to 75 church members eighteen and older. This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 50 members completed the BCMI and the inventory had been analyzed, yielding a clearer picture of the current understanding of biblical church membership among members at CBC.

The second goal was to develop a six-week sermon series on biblical church membership. A panel consisting of the pastoral staff of CBC plus three additional pastors measured this goal, using a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, clarity, and relevance of the sermon series.⁸ This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level. If the initial feedback yielded less than 90 percent, then the sermon content was to be revised in accordance with the panel's evaluation until the criterion met or exceeded the sufficiency level.

The third goal was to increase the knowledge of new and existing church

⁶All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

⁷See appendix 1.

⁸See appendix 2.

members by preaching the sermon series. This goal was measured by administering pre- and post-sermon series surveys, which were used to measure the change in knowledge regarding biblical church membership.⁹ Twenty-four church members completed both surveys. This goal was considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores.

The fourth goal was to develop a four-hour curriculum for a membership class. The membership class covered CBC's theological and doctrinal beliefs, communicated information about the staff and ministries of CBC, shared membership expectations, and provided a general orientation to CBC. A panel consisting of the pastoral staff of CBC, seven deacons, and one seminary professor measured this goal, utilizing a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the curriculum.¹⁰ If the initial feedback yielded less than 90 percent, then the curriculum was revised in accordance with the panel's evaluation until the criterion met or exceeded the sufficiency level.

The fifth goal was to increase the knowledge of new and existing church members by implementing the membership class. Twenty members were asked to participate in the class, including ten new members and ten existing members.¹¹ This goal was measured by administering pre- and post-membership class surveys to each class participant, which were used to measure the change in knowledge regarding biblical church membership and membership expectations at CBC.¹² This goal was considered

⁹See appendix 3.

¹⁰See appendix 4.

¹¹New members had been members of CBC for less than two years. Existing members had been members of CBC for more than two years.

¹²See appendix 5.

successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following key terms are used in the ministry project.

Church membership. Though not prescribed, the basis for church membership is implied in Scripture. Jonathan Leeman defines church membership as “a formal relationship between a church and a Christian characterized by the church’s affirmation and oversight of a Christian’s discipleship and the Christian’s submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.”¹³

Local church. In Scripture, *church* can refer to “local, regional, and universal bodies” of gathered believers.¹⁴ For the purposes of this project, the local church will primarily be in view. Dever describes the local church as “the collection of people committed to Christ in a local area.”¹⁵

Two delimitations were placed on the project. First, only church members eighteen and older could participate in all aspects of the project, including the initial assessment, pre- and post-surveys, and the membership class. Second, the project was limited to fifteen weeks, which included adequate time for pre-assessment, sermon development and delivery, membership class curriculum development, and implementation, and post-assessment.

Conclusion

Maintaining biblical church membership is a vital component to church health

¹³Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 64.

¹⁴John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2013), 1020.

¹⁵Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 149.

and revitalization. This project addressed the membership deficiencies that existed at CBC prior to its implementation. The sermon series and membership class proved to be positive interventions toward the recovery of a biblical understanding and practice of church membership. Each part of the project underwent analysis and changes were made to ensure the successful completion of the project.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR CHURCH MEMBERSHIP THAT IS REGENERATE, EQUIPPED, AND RELATIONAL

Although some churches dilute membership expectations for fear of losing members, Scripture presents an alternative model—regenerate and equipped members relationally committed to one another. Three passages reveal God’s plan for robust membership expectations in the local church: Acts 2:41-42, 47; Ephesians 4:11-12; and Hebrews 10:24-25.

Regenerate Church Membership (Acts 2:41-42, 47)

Acts 2:41-47 reveals a glimpse into the life of the early church. After Jesus ascends (1:9), His followers prayerfully wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit (1:12-26). The Holy Spirit descends on the Day of Pentecost (2:1-4), prompting Peter to stand and preach the gospel (2:14-36). Peter’s preaching and call to repentance convicts the crowd of their sin and results in 3,000 conversions in one day (2:37-41). The early church is born and is, according to David Peterson, “a model of what could happen when people [are] bound together by a belief in the gospel, an understanding of its implications, and an enjoyment of its blessings.”¹

Faith and Repentance: Requisites for Church Membership (2:41, 47)

As Peterson notes, shared belief in the gospel is what binds the church. Belief in the gospel also builds the church. Peter’s proclamation of the gospel to those gathered

¹David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 159.

in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost produced within his hearers the inward conviction of sin needed to believe and repent. Luke writes the convicted were “pierced to the heart” (κατενύγησαν τὴν καρδίαν) (2:37), an expression that means, according to Darrell Bock, “a sharp pain or a stab, often associated with emotion.”² Spiritually desperate, they ask Peter and the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” (2:37) to which Peter replies, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38).

Luke records the response: “Those who had received his word were baptized” (2:41). To “receive” (ἀποδεξάμενοι) means “to show approval by accepting”³ and in this instance, “receiving his word” means the hearers responded favorably to Peter’s exhortation to repent by repenting. Both of these summary responses to the gospel follow Peter’s quotation of Joel 2:32 in his Pentecost sermon. Peter pressed the hopeful and confident words of the prophet upon his audience: “And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (2:21). Bock argues all three expressions (“call upon the name of the Lord,” “repent,” and “receive”) point “to a different dimension of the embrace of the gospel that saves.”⁴ It is apparent that Peter and the apostles grasped the significance of both the proper understanding of and the proper response to the gospel. Bock summarizes, “Salvation comes to the one who believes, repents, calls on the Lord’s name, and receives the gospel. All four of these responses mean fundamentally the same thing: one has embraced God’s grace through Jesus and the Spirit.”⁵ Luke reports the number of those who embraced Jesus on Pentecost: “And that

²Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 140.

³Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 109.

⁴Bock, *Acts*, 147.

⁵Ibid.

day there were added about three thousand souls” (2:41). The regenerate membership of the early church now stood at approximately 3,120.

Numerical growth in the church did not stop on Pentecost; in fact, growth became the norm. After detailing church life in 2:42-47, Luke adds a statement similar to 2:41 at the conclusion of 2:47: “And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” This statement reinforces the pattern previously established: only those who have repented and believed in Jesus for salvation are admitted into the membership of the church.

God’s sovereignty over growth in membership and salvation is evident in two ways in 2:47. First, “the Lord” is the one doing the “adding” (προσείθει) to the church. Bock notes, “The imperfect προσείθει is iterative: God is continuously adding to the numbers. As it is the Lord God who calls (v. 39), so it is the Lord God who adds to his community.”⁶ In 2:47, one finds Jesus’ promise to build His church (Matt 16:18) fulfilled.

Second, “the Lord” is the agent responsible for “those who were being saved.” Eckhard Schnabel notes, “God is the author of the salvation of the new converts (note that ‘being saved’ [σφζομένου] is a passive participle).”⁷ The converts were being acted upon by an outside source, in this case, by God, and Luke quickly acknowledges God’s role. “It is the Lord’s prerogative to add new members to his own community,” F. F. Bruce concludes, “It is the joyful prerogative of existing members to welcome to their fellowship those whom he has accepted.”⁸

The fact that the Lord added ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό, translated in 2:47 as “to their number,” provides additional support for the concept of regenerate membership in the early church.

⁶Bock, *Acts*, 154.

⁷Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 185.

⁸F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

There were those considered part of their number and those that were not with the distinction hinging upon one's response to the gospel. Peterson speculates that ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό appears “to be used by Luke in a semitechnical way for the community of disciples formed by Jesus in the course of his earthly ministry and subsequently expanded through the preaching of the gospel.”⁹ This “number” forms the basis for admitting into membership only those with a credible profession of faith in Jesus.

The Practices of Regenerate Church Members (2:42-47)

A close reading of 2:41 and 2:47 results in the conviction that membership in the local church is reserved for those that have experienced conversion. These two verses bookend the passage that Bock describes as “a portrait of the first Christian church.”¹⁰ The picture Luke paints of life in the early church is compelling, and it is not surprising that unbelievers were drawn to Jesus because of the church. “The fellowship practiced in the private homes of believers,” Schnabel writes, “had missionary consequences. The meetings of the believers in the temple and in their homes were so attractive that unbelievers started to attend. As individual people came to faith in Jesus Christ, the church grew numerically, at a regular pace.”¹¹

Luke summarizes what life in this compelling community of faith was like in verse 42: “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” This verse, John Polhill asserts, “provides a glimpse into the manner in which new converts were incorporated into the believing community.”¹²

⁹Peterson, *Acts*, 164-65n120.

¹⁰Bock, *Acts*, 158.

¹¹Schnabel, *Acts*, 184.

¹²John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman,

The “apostles’ teaching” (διδασκαλίαν τῶν ἀποστόλων) played a prominent role in the early church.¹³ “This teaching was authoritative,” Bruce writes, “because it was the teaching of the Lord communicated through the apostles in the power of the Spirit.”¹⁴ Since the apostles directly interacted with Jesus and were personally taught by Him, they were uniquely qualified to pass along His teaching with those in the early church. I. Howard Marshall suggests the apostles “may have been regarded as in a special sense the guardians of the traditions about Jesus as the church grew and developed.”¹⁵

From reading apostolic sermons in Acts, Schnabel surmises that the apostles’ teaching

focused on Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection, and on his significance in God’s plan. The following themes stand out: Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and Lord; the Son of David and God’s servant; the holy and righteous Savior; the prophet like Moses and the judge of humankind; the necessity of repentance in view of God’s revelation in the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus and in the bestowal of the Spirit of prophecy; and God’s offer of salvation through Jesus, who is Israel’s Messiah and Lord, available only in personal allegiance to Jesus.¹⁶

Acts and the remainder of the NT bear witness to the importance of right doctrine in the church. Church history has proven that abandonment or neglect of apostolic teaching (and later, the Bible) is always detrimental to the church and has been since the time of the apostles.

“Fellowship” (κοινωνία), according to William Mounce, is “the mutual interests and sharing of members in the community of faith, the church. . . . In the context of the early church in Acts, such sharing involved not only associating with each other, but also

1992), 118.

¹³For additional verses in Acts about the teaching ministry of the apostles, see 4:2, 5:42, 13:12, 15:35, 18:11, 20:20, 28:31.

¹⁴Bruce, *Acts*, 73

¹⁵I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 83.

¹⁶Schnabel, *Acts*, 178.

sharing food and other necessities of life.”¹⁷ The word highlights the relational dimension that is to exist among regenerate members in a given church. This dimension is also found in Acts 4, where Luke provides another snapshot of early church life and hints once more of the sharing and mutuality present among members. Luke reports the people “were of one heart and soul; and not one *of them* claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them” (4:32).¹⁸

The early church did not just devote themselves to apostolic instruction; they also devoted themselves to one another, and Luke’s church history in Acts illustrates the appealing benefits of this intentional *κοινωνία*. Bock’s observation of the members of the church is instructive: “There is a real sense of connection to, between, and for each other.”¹⁹

The third practice of regenerate church members in 2:42 is the “breaking of bread” (*κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου*). While some see in this phrase a reference to the Lord’s Supper,²⁰ others, like Peterson, suggest regular meals are in view:

Some scholars have argued that the expression in v. 42 is a technical term for the Lord’s Supper and that this was already separated from their ordinary meals. However, the term describes the initiation of an ordinary meal in the Jewish fashion of breaking a loaf with the hands and giving thanks to God. To “break bread” was to eat together. The adoption of this term as a title for the Lord’s Supper is not formally attested until the second century AD.²¹

¹⁷William Mounce, ed., *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 247.

¹⁸The expression translated “all things were common property to them” is the Greek *πάντα κοινά*. The words *κοινωνία* and *κοινά* are closely related.

¹⁹Bock, *Acts*, 150.

²⁰Marshall, *Acts*, 83, writes, “Thirdly, there was the breaking of bread. This is Luke’s term for what Paul calls the Lord’s Supper. It refers to the act with which a Jewish meal opened, and which had gained peculiar significance for Christians in view of Jesus’ action at the Last Supper and also when he fed the multitudes.”

²¹Peterson, *Acts*, 161.

If ordinary meals are in view, as it would seem, one can understand how “fellowship” and “breaking of bread” work together to cultivate friendships among members. Bock sees in the expression κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου a connection between meal sharing and closeness: “The phrase suggests the intimate interaction and mutual acceptance that was a part of community life.”²²

“Prayers” (προσευχᾶς) is the final practice to which early church members were devoted. Translations and commentators disagree as to the exact meaning of “the prayers” (ταῖς προσευχαῖς), as the text literally reads. The plural form plus the article in front of this word leads Peterson to believe this “reference is to specific ‘prayers’ rather than to prayer in general. In the context, this most obviously points to their continuing participation in the set times of prayer at the temple.”²³ Polhill is sympathetic to the temple explanation but he argues for a broader explanation:

The presence of the article in the Greek text before prayers has led some interpreters to see this as a reference to their keeping the formal prayers hours of Judaism in the temple. They may well have done so to some extent, for their faithfulness in attending temple worship is noted in 2:46 and 3:1. The reference, however, is probably much broader and involves primarily their sharing in prayer together in their private house worship.²⁴

If Polhill is correct, which seems likely, then devotion to prayer, both private and public, balances out church life. A regular intake of hearing and digesting apostolic teaching, combined with a healthy mixture of fellowship, meal sharing, and prayer with other members, leads to balanced but growing believers and a balanced but growing church. The early church, as well as its model of membership, Polhill concludes, presents “an ideal for the Christian community which it must always strive for, constantly return to, and

²²Bock, *Acts*, 151.

²³Peterson, *Acts*, 162.

²⁴Polhill, *Acts*, 119-20.

discover anew if it is to have that unity of spirit and purpose essential for an effective witness.”²⁵

Equipped Church Membership (Eph 4:11-12)

Ephesians 4:11-12 reveals God’s plan for how ministry is to occur within the local church. The model presented does not assign ministry to be accomplished solely by pastors. Rather, Paul reveals that one purpose pastors have is to equip members so that they may be prepared to do the work of the ministry. Clinton Arnold summarizes these two verses by explaining that Jesus has

gifted certain individuals within the community to establish churches, minister the Word of God, and equip others for service in the church. Christ gives these gifted leaders to the church not to do the ministry for the various members of the body while they passively receive, but to help prepare each one of them to actively serve in the ways he has gifted them.²⁶

Given to Equip (Eph 4:11)

When Jesus promised to build His church (Matt 16:18), it is unlikely the disciples understood then that He would both add members (Acts 2:47) and ensure that each church possessed everything needed to function and thrive (Eph 4:11-12). In 4:11, Paul identifies the gifts that Jesus gives to churches to help them: “And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers.” Francis Foulkes observes that Jesus’ gifts “are the people. All, in their particular ministries, are God’s gifts to the church. ‘To Christ,’ says Calvin, ‘we owe it that we have ministers of the gospel.’”²⁷

²⁵Polhill, *Acts*, 122. An exegesis of 2:43-47a will lead to similar conclusions as have been arrived at from the above exegesis of 2:41-42, 47. In 2:43-47a, Luke paints with a broader stroke about life in the early church and does address the witness of the church in the community. As noted, a regenerate church membership functioning according to God’s design will have “missionary consequences,” as 2:47 implies. Schnabel, *Acts*, 184.

²⁶Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 255.

²⁷Francis Foulkes, *The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians*, Tyndale Commentaries (Grand Rapids:

Paul lists four categories of gifts to churches: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors/teachers. Each serves a unique purpose in the church.

“Apostles” (ἀποστόλους) are mentioned first. An apostle, according to Harold Hoehner, is “an official delegate of Jesus Christ, commissioned for the specific tasks of proclaiming authoritatively the message in oral and written form and of establishing and building up the churches.”²⁸ Apostles, as well as prophets, played a pivotal role in the church’s beginning as Paul reveals that God’s household, the church, was “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone” (3:19-20). In 4:11, as Arnold notes, Paul is not “reflecting back on the beginnings of the church but is speaking about its present and ongoing structure. Christ is continuing to give these leaders to the church for the equipping of the individual members and facilitating their growth to maturity.”²⁹

Hoehner explains the different categories of apostles in the NT and identifies which category Paul has in view in 4:11:

There are three kinds of apostles mentioned in the NT: those who had been with Jesus in his ministry and had witnessed his resurrection (Acts 1:21-22); Paul, who was born out of season (1 Cor 15:8-9); and those who received the gift of apostleship. The first two categories are to be regarded as offices, whereas the last is a spiritual gift to the church. In the present context the apostle refers to the third kind, the gift of apostle.³⁰

Barnabus, James (Jesus’ brother), Apollos, Titus, Epaphroditus, and others are those that fit this third category of apostles.

“Prophets” (προφήτας) are the second category Jesus gifts to churches.³¹ These prophets are to be distinguished from the OT prophetic role, and, as Hoehner explains,

William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 125.

²⁸Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 541.

²⁹Arnold, *Ephesians*, 256.

³⁰Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 541.

³¹Apostles and prophets are listed together in 1 Cor 12:28, Eph 2:20, and Eph 3:5, and occupy

the prophet in the NT was “one who was endowed by the Holy Spirit with the gift of prophecy for the purposes of edification, comfort, encouragement (1 Cor 14:3, 31), and further, to understand and communicate the mysteries and revelation of God to the church.”³² Prophecy is listed among spiritual gifts (Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:10) and the importance of this gift is displayed when Paul urges the Corinthian believers to “desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophecy” (1 Cor 14:1).³³

“Evangelists” (εὐαγγελιστάς) are mentioned third. These were, according to Arnold, individuals “within the churches whom the ascended Christ had especially gifted to make known the redemptive message of ‘the gospel.’”³⁴ The gift and work of evangelists are infrequently mentioned in the NT. Other than in 4:11, Paul only mentions “evangelists” when he uses the word to encourage Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim 4:5). Elsewhere, Philip is described as “the evangelist” (Acts 21:8).

Peter O’Brien suggests a connection between apostles and evangelists and then speculates further about their work and role in the early church:

As proclaimers of the gospel, evangelists carried on the work of the apostles. While the term probably included itinerant individuals who engaged in primary evangelism, it was not limited to them. The admonition to Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist” is set within the context of a settled congregation, which presumably meant a ministry to believers and unbelievers alike, while the cognate verb, rendered “preach the gospel,” covers a range of activities from primary evangelism and the planting of churches to the ongoing building of Christians and the establishment of settled congregations. Here in Ephesians 4 evangelists are given by the ascended Christ for the purpose of building his body, and this included both intensive and extensive growth.³⁵

a place of respect in the NT.

³²Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 542.

³³Arnold acknowledges there is no universal agreement as to the continuation of gifts and roles, especially those of apostles and prophets. Interpreters will sometimes “draw a line between the first two gifts on the list and the latter three and argue that the gifts of apostle and prophet ceased in the late first century or early second, but that evangelists, pastors, and teachers continue to function in the church.” But he also makes the case that “this cannot be argued exegetically in Ephesians.” Arnold, *Ephesians*, 257-58.

³⁴Ibid., 259.

³⁵Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary

Like apostles and prophets, Jesus gifted evangelists to the church in order that the church might be built as the gospel goes forth. Bruce summarizes, “The evangelists given by the ascended Christ continued to exercise the gospel-preaching aspect of the apostolic ministry, so that the church might grow in succeeding generations by the adhesion of new believers.”³⁶

“Pastors” (ποιμένας) and “teachers” (διδασκάλους) round out Paul’s list of gifts given by Jesus to churches. Some commentators believe Paul had one ministry in view here, not two.³⁷ Others disagree. O’Brien agrees the two are closely related, but argues persuasively they should be viewed as two distinct gifts and callings:

The pastors and teachers are linked here by a single definite article in the Greek, which suggests a close association of functions between the two kinds of ministers who operate within the one congregation. Although it has often been held that the two groups are identical (i.e. “pastors who teach”), it is more likely that the terms describe overlapping functions. All pastors teach (since teaching is an essential part of pastoral ministry), but not all teachers are also pastors. The latter exercise their leadership role by feeding God’s flock with his word.³⁸

Hoehner takes a similar approach and concludes, “Hence, while there is a distinction between the two, the distinction is not total.”³⁹

Jesus gifts “pastors” (ποιμένας) to churches. The noun ποιμήν is Greek for “shepherd” and is translated “pastor” in 4:1. Andrew Lincoln explains the use of ποιμήν in the NT and its specific meaning in 4:11:

Though the noun ποιμήν, “shepherd, pastor,” is used of Christ himself in John 10:11, 14; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25, it is employed for church leaders only here in the NT. The cognate verb does, however, describe their function in Acts 20:28 and 1

(Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 299.

³⁶F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 347.

³⁷Bruce argues that a pastor, “according to 1 Tim 3:2, should be an ‘apt teacher.’ Teaching is an essential part of the pastoral ministry; it is appropriate, therefore, that the two terms, ‘pastors and teachers,’ should be joined together to denote one order of ministry.” *Ibid.*, 348.

³⁸O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 300.

³⁹Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 544.

Pet 5:1-4 and Peter's activity in regard to the Church in John 21:16. It suggests the exercise of leadership through nurture, care, and guidance.⁴⁰

It is the function of pastors, rather than the office, that is important for the modern reader to grasp in 4:11. Shepherding was a common occupation in NT times and the original audience would have little trouble relating the work of shepherds to the work of pastoring. A pastor's work, according to Hoehner, includes "ministering to troubled saints, exhorting and comforting all believers, and administering the activities in the local assembly."⁴¹ It is this type of work that Paul has in view. Foulkes summarizes the duties of pastors by writing they are to "feed the flock with spiritual food and to see that they are protected from spiritual danger."⁴²

Jesus also gifts "teachers" (διδασκάλους) to churches. Lincoln explains their function as

preserving, transmitting, expounding, interpreting, and applying the apostolic gospel and tradition along with the Jewish Scripture. They were specialists in the inculcation of Christian norms and values and the conduct appropriate to them, and in this way became particularly associated with the qualities of wisdom and knowledge.⁴³

Being gifted to teach in the church was and remains an honor; but with the honor the teacher assumes a degree of risk that non-teachers do not face. James writes of this risk when he warns, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment" (Jas 3:1).

To remain true to His promise of building His church, Jesus gifts His churches with apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors/teachers. Individuals with these gifts are not to use them for "self-promotion," Hoehner writes, "but for building up the saints."⁴⁴

⁴⁰Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 250-51.

⁴¹Hoehner, *Ephesians* 544.

⁴²Foulkes, *Ephesians* 127.

⁴³Lincoln, *Ephesians* 251.

⁴⁴Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 547.

Paul’s teaching about gifts to the church in 4:11-12 is consistent with his teaching elsewhere about spiritual gifts, as spiritual gifts also are to be used “for the edification of the church” (1 Cor 14:12) and “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7).

Equipped to Serve (Eph 4:12)

Though each of the gifts Paul lists in 4:11 has their unique functions and nuances, he generalizes their purpose in 4:12: “For the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.” Jesus gives gifts to the church so that, as Hoehner summarizes, they may “prepare believers for the work of the ministry for edifying the body of Christ.”⁴⁵

Paul begins 4:12 with the prepositional phrase, “for the equipping of the saints” (πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων). While “equipping” (καταρτισμὸν) occurs only here in the NT, the cognate verb καταρτίζω is found frequently and means “to cause to be in a condition to function well” or “to prepare for a purpose.”⁴⁶ Both meanings hint at the meaning of καταρτισμὸν. O’Brien believes, “The notion of equipping or preparing, in the sense of making someone adequate or sufficient for something, best suits the context.”⁴⁷ Hoehner agrees and explains, “Gifted persons were given to the church for the immediate purpose of training or preparing believers. It is important to be endowed with the gift(s) of the Spirit but it is also important to learn to use the gift(s) effectively in the church for its edification.”⁴⁸ Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors/teachers are stewards of this mandate to help “the saints” (τῶν ἁγίων) develop and use their Spirit-given gifts.

The equipped membership model Paul presents in 4:12 has radical implications for church life, both for pastors, and how they steward their time, and for members, and

⁴⁵Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 547.

⁴⁶Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 526.

⁴⁷O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 303.

⁴⁸Hoehner, *Ephesians* 550.

the expectations they have of who should be doing ministry. Rather than pastors spending all their time ministering, regular time should be allotted for training and equipping the laity to do the same. Arnold elaborates,

Christ has given gifted leaders to the church not merely to do the ministry, but to invest their time heavily in developing and preparing fellow believers to engage in ministry to the body. The model Paul presents is therefore one of mutual service in the community and not one of professionals serving a group of consumers.⁴⁹

“For the work of service” (εἰς ἔργον διακονίας) is the reason pastors equip their members.⁵⁰ The noun διακονία appears 34 times in the NT and means “service, ministry.”⁵¹ While διακονία is typically associated with deacons, Mounce argues it “is not limited to the specific office of deacon but is the foundation of NT fellowship as believers serve others in the body who are in need (Acts 4:32-37; 2 Cor 9:13). This type of ministry edifies the entire church (Eph 4:12).”⁵²

“Service” is a spiritual gift (Rom 12:7), but Hoehner does not believe Paul has the spiritual gift of service in mind in 4:12:

The present text is not speaking of a specific gift for it includes every saint and not all saints have the same gift (1 Cor 12:28-30). The most frequent use of the word in connection with the ministry, the service of the Lord (Acts 20:24; 21:19; Rom 11:13; 1 Cor 16:15; 2 Cor 4:1; 5:18; 6:3; 1 Tim 1:12; 2 Tim 4:5, 11). It is this concept which is used in the present context. It conveys the idea of serving the Lord by ministering to one another. This word promotes the idea of activity. Gifted individuals are given to the church for the purpose of preparing all the saints toward the goal of service or ministry.⁵³

⁴⁹Arnold, *Ephesians*, 262.

⁵⁰Arnold explains the grammatical connection between πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων and εἰς ἔργον διακονίας: “The second prepositional phrase, ‘for the work of service,’ is then dependent on the first. The preposition εἰς indicates the goal of the equipping.” Ibid., 263.

⁵¹Mounce, *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary*, 635.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 550.

Twice Hoehner mentions the scope of who is to be involved in this work: “every saint” and “all the saints.”⁵⁴ Diluted membership expectations where little or nothing is expected from members is, though perhaps unintentional, an abnegation of Paul’s teaching. Foulkes agrees and writes optimistically that “it is thus implied that every Christian has a work of ministry, a spiritual task and function in the body.”⁵⁵

“To the building up of the body of Christ” (εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ) is a related and additional reason why members are equipped. O’Brien tracks the movement toward climax in 4:11-12: “All that has been spoken of in v. 11 and in the first two phrases of v.12 is directed towards the goal of building the body of Christ, so that together the ministers of v. 11 and ‘the saints’ serve this divinely appointed goal.”⁵⁶

When ministers equip and members serve, the goal is attained and the body of Christ, the church, is edified. Mounce explains οἰκοδομὴν can mean “either a building or building up. In other words, it can refer to a physical structure or to the process of building the structure.”⁵⁷ In 4:12, Paul uses the latter meaning, as it relates to building up the church.⁵⁸

Frank Thielman points out how οἰκοδομὴν connects 4:12 with 2:20-22:

Οἰκοδομὴν is reminiscent of 2:20-22, where the “building” (οἰκοδομὴν) under construction is the “dwelling place” (κατοικητήριον) of God. Its foundation is the apostles and prophets, Christ is its guiding and crowning stone, and its building blocks are believers from both Jews and Gentiles. Here the same idea is under consideration, but now evangelists, pastors, and teachers are involved in addition to apostles and prophets, and their job is to equip all believers (“the saints”) to participate in that construction. Already in 2:21 the architectural metaphor had started to break out of its boundaries when Paul says that the “building . . . grows” (οἰκοδομῆ . . . αὐξῆι). Here too the metaphor suddenly becomes organic since

⁵⁴Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 550.

⁵⁵Foulkes, *Ephesians*, 128.

⁵⁶O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 304.

⁵⁷Mounce, *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary*, 88.

⁵⁸For additional Pauline uses, see Rom 14:10, 15:2; 2 Cor 10:8, 12:19, 13:10; Eph 4:16, 29.

believers are constructing not a building but “the body of Christ,” a metaphor Paul has already explained as referring to “the church” (1:22-23).⁵⁹

Paul concludes this section in 4:16 with a final usage of οἰκοδομήν. He again celebrates the contribution that members make in service to one another, which “causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (4:16).

Relational Church Membership (Heb 10:24-25)

Hebrews 10:24-25 reveals the relational nature of church membership. Though an independent and isolated mentality exists among some in the church today, in this passage the author of Hebrews provides a corrective to this erroneous and detrimental thinking. “Christian faith and witness will flourish the more vigorously,” Bruce writes, “in an atmosphere of Christian fellowship.”⁶⁰ Believers and churches thrive when a culture of mutual care, interdependence, and love is present.

Provoked to Love and Good Deeds (Heb 10:24)

The author of Hebrews recognizes that, left alone, few believers will reach their potential in Christ. Believers need one another to help one another, in the context of a church, leading the author to write in 10:24, “. . . and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (καὶ κατανοῶμεν ἀλλήλους εἰς παροξυσμὸν ἀγάπης καὶ καλῶν ἔργων).

The expression “and let us consider” (καὶ κατανοῶμεν) signals the importance of what follows. The verb κατανοῶμεν means more than “consider, perceive, look,” as the word is often translated. According to Mounce, these words “do not communicate the depth of knowledge presumed by this verb. It is best understood as a focusing of one’s

⁵⁹Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 280.

⁶⁰F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 256.

complete attention on something.”⁶¹ Donald Guthrie agrees about the seriousness of *κατανοῶμεν*: “It is significant that the word *κατανοῶμεν* is used here, for what the writer is urging evidently demands concentrated thought.”⁶²

Concentrated thought and effort are needed so the members may “stimulate” (*εἰς παροξυσμὸν*) one another to action. The word *παροξυσμὸν* is also chosen for effect; it can be defined as “rousing to activity, stirring up, provoking.”⁶³ Bruce adds that the word

is a strong one; it appears in one other place in the New Testament, and there in a very different way, of the “sharp contention” that broke out between Paul and Barnabas when they could not agree on taking Mark with them on a second apostolic visit to Cyprus and South Galatian (Acts 15:39).⁶⁴

The author of Hebrews urges the audience to stimulate or provoke one another to “love and good deeds” (*ἀγάπης καὶ καλῶν ἔργων*).⁶⁵ Both love and good deeds are needed because, without love, good deeds will be done with impure motives. Jesus stressed the importance of loving God and others (Matt 22:36-40) and shared the principle that loving those in the faith is what distinguishes His disciples from others (John 13:35). Without love, Paul writes, a faith strong enough to move a mountain is of no account (1 Cor 13:2). John reasons that since God is love, a failure to love means one does not know God (1 John 4:8).

⁶¹Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary*, 134.

⁶²Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Tyndale Commentaries (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 215.

⁶³Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 780.

⁶⁴Bruce, *Hebrews*, 256.

⁶⁵Gareth Cockerill does not miss the author's provocative choice of language. “Thus, with intentional irony,” he writes, “the pastor underscores his exhortation: as forcefully as some ‘provoke’ others to anger, God's people should ‘provoke one another’ to ‘love and good works.’” Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 478.

If love is vital to a life of faith, why would the author of Hebrews use jarring language to make his mundane point about love? Guthrie argues the word selection “seems to suggest that loving one another will not just happen. It needs to be worked at, even provoked, in the same way as good works. This combination of love and good works is remarkable in emphasizing that love must have a practical outcome.”⁶⁶ Indeed, the order of love and good works is important. David Allen agrees, “Love is the internal attitude and spiritual disposition that expresses itself in outward tangible good works.”⁶⁷

Meeting Together and Encouraging One Another (Heb 10:25)

Stimulating one another to a life of love and good works is a relational endeavor, as is what the author of Hebrews writes next. If members are to help each other love one another and practice good deeds, then they must also be diligent about “not forsaking” (μὴ ἐγκαταλείποντες) their church’s corporate gatherings. These gatherings, referred to as ἐπισυναγωγὴν, possibly “refer to worship meetings,” Guthrie speculates, “although this is not stated. It may purposefully be left ambiguous so as to include other gatherings of a more informal kind, but the Greek word suggests some official assembly.”⁶⁸

Whether large or small gatherings, these opportunities for worship and fellowship were essential to the spiritual health of the members. To provoke one another to love, believers must be near each other at regular intervals. Members are wise to heed Bruce’s advice: “Therefore, every opportunity of coming together and enjoying their fellowship in faith and hope must be welcomed and used for mutual encouragement.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 215.

⁶⁷David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary, vol. 35 (Nashville: B & H, 2010), 518.

⁶⁸Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 215-16.

⁶⁹Bruce, *Hebrews*, 257.

Not every member, however, valued these assemblies. Following his exhortation to not forsake assembling together, the author of Hebrews adds, “As is the habit of some” (ἔθος τισίν). Mounce defines ἔθος as “the tendency of convention by which things are done, a habit or custom.”⁷⁰ Philip Hughes, however, frames the practice of neglecting to meet with other believers not in terms of habit but as something more serious—a failure to love. Philip Hughes explains,

The failure of love shows itself, then, in selfish individualism, and specifically here in the habit of some of neglecting to meet together. Such unconcern for one’s fellow believers argues unconcern for Christ himself and portends the danger of apostasy, concerning which our author is about to issue another earnest warning (vv. 26ff).⁷¹

If Hughes is correct, then 10:25 rebuts the common sentiment that one attends worship or other church gatherings primarily for oneself, to focus on one’s relationship with God. While an individual’s relationship with God is and should be cultivated during these occasions, the author of Hebrews suggests more is required. Members of local churches have obligations, not just to God, but also to one another. Hughes continues,

It is important, therefore, that the reality of Christian love should be demonstrated in the personal relationships and mutual concerns of the Christian community. And it will be found that not only does love promote fellowship but also that fellowship stimulates love.⁷²

The exhortation regarding failure to gather with the church is preceded by a positive one: “But encouraging one another” (ἀλλὰ παρακαλοῦντες).⁷³ Cockerill writes that the word παρακαλοῦντες “encompasses the full range of meaning available for this term—‘rebuke,’ ‘warn,’ ‘encourage,’ ‘comfort.’ The pastor wants his hearers to do for

⁷⁰Mounce, *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary*, 153.

⁷¹Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 415.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 216, writes, “The word used here could equally be rendered ‘exhorting.’ The basic idea is that Christians should strengthen and stimulate one another.”

each other what he has done for them in this ‘word of encouragement’ (13:13).”⁷⁴

Encouragement and exhortation grounded in the Bible is ideal, coupled with Paul’s admonition to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). Rich, relational fellowship, according to Guthrie, is “not just a nice idea, but an absolute necessity for the encouragement of Christian values.”⁷⁵

The author of Hebrews concludes 10:25 with an urgent reminder of why heeding these exhortations matter: “And all the more as you see the day drawing near” (καὶ τοσοῦτω μᾶλλον ὅσω βλέπετε ἐγγίζουσιν τὴν ἡμέραν). Speculation about the meaning of “the day” (τὴν ἡμέραν) is abundant. Allen summarizes the two main possibilities:

The “day” may refer to the impending destruction of the city of Jerusalem if the author were writing just prior to AD 70. Another option is to interpret the term to refer to the eschatological “day of judgment” at the time of the second coming of Christ. This day, known in the New Testament as the “Day of the Lord” (found many times in the Gospels, as well as in Acts 2:20; 1 Cor 3:13; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:2; Jude 6; Rev 6:17; and many other places in the New Testament), is an eschatological day that comes when Christ returns to the earth and brings judgment.⁷⁶

Regardless of the meaning, the point is the same: time on earth is short and the future is not guaranteed. Or, as Guthrie asserts, “The imminence of the day was considered to be plain. It is not to be regarded as secret. Christians were to live as if the dawning of the day was so near that its arrival was only just beyond the horizon.”⁷⁷

Conclusion

A survey of only three NT passages (Acts 2:41-42, 47; Eph 4:11-12; Heb 10:24-25) reveals a breathtaking portrait of God’s design for membership in the local church. Rather than diluting membership expectations, prudent churches raise them, not higher than the NT demands, but in line with what the NT reveals. A model of church membership

⁷⁴Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 481.

⁷⁵Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 216.

⁷⁶Allen, *Hebrews*, 519-20.

⁷⁷Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 216-17.

that includes regenerate and equipped members relationally committed to one another is not only warranted by the Scriptures, but it will also lead to healthy, revitalized churches prepared to embrace the missional mandate given by Jesus to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19).

CHAPTER 3

PRACTICAL SUPPORT FOR THE RECOVERY OF BIBLICAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

According to the 2016 Annual Church Profile, Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) churches claimed 15,216,978 members but averaged 5,200,716 in weekly worship attendance.¹ The discrepancy between membership and attendance is disconcerting and points to a deeper problem—the loss of a biblical understanding and practice of church membership.² Churches can take practical steps toward the recovery of a biblical understanding and practice of church membership by offering membership classes, formulating a church covenant, carefully receiving new members, and cleaning up membership rolls.

Membership Classes

Membership classes provide the ideal platform for churches to communicate a biblical understanding of church membership to new, potential, and even existing members. In their study of 300 turnaround churches, Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson discovered 53 percent of these churches raised requirements of church membership and of the churches that did, 93.2 percent did so by adding a new member class.³ Thom Rainer

¹Southern Baptist Convention, “Fast Facts about the SBC,” accessed December 11, 2017, <http://www.sbc.net/BecomingSouthernBaptist/FastFacts.asp>. Both membership and attendance decreased from 2015 data: 15,294,764 and 5,577,088, respectively.

²Admittedly, membership encompasses more than attendance but not less, as the author of Hebrews exhorts his audience to not neglect meeting together with the church (Heb 10:25). Attendance is one component of biblical church membership.

³Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 124.

studied the connection between new member retention and new member classes and concluded, “The relationship between assimilation effectiveness and new member classes is amazing.”⁴ John Mark Yeats suggests several solutions for SBC churches struggling with inflated membership rolls, one being a membership class. “A membership class,” Yeats writes, “is the most important change many churches can implement immediately for maximum impact.”⁵ With benefits this critical and varied, membership classes are often a good first step toward the recovery of a biblical understanding and practice of church membership.

The Purposes of Membership Classes

Membership classes have many purposes. The first, and perhaps primary purpose of a membership class, is to orient new and potential members to the church. Orientation includes a variety of topics including the communication of the church’s mission, vision, core values, and covenant; an examination of the budget, constitution, and by-laws; a discussion of the church’s denominational affiliations; a brief history of the church and overview of key historical events; an explanation of the church’s polity and organizational structure; and a relay of practical information such as office hours, contact information, and ways to stay informed about church events and activities.⁶

While the topics mentioned are important and needed, instruction about the church’s doctrinal beliefs and key distinctives are a non-negotiable part of the membership class. Yeats agrees: “In these classes we must articulate what we believe.

⁴Thom Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville: B & H, 1999), 105.

⁵John Mark Yeats, “More than Fifteen Million Southern Baptists?” in *The SBC and the 21st Century: Reflection, Renewal, & Recommendation*, ed. Jason Allen (Nashville: B & H, 2016), 107.

⁶For a more detailed list of common topics addressed in membership classes, see Chuck Lawless, *Membership Matters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 65.

The confession of faith is essential.”⁷ Rainer arrived at a similar conclusion when he surveyed high-expectation churches with membership classes. “More than any single topic,” Rainer writes, “doctrine was considered the most critical issue to be covered in a new member class.”⁸ With the waning concern for doctrinal precision coupled with growing biblical illiteracy, membership classes provide a unique opportunity for pastors and church leaders to highlight and teach on essential doctrines of the faith.⁹

A second purpose of a membership class is to communicate membership expectations and responsibilities. Though doing so seems counter-productive and counter-intuitive to many in the church today, research demonstrates the opposite is true.¹⁰ Again, Rainer explains,

In simplest terms, churches tend to receive in commitment what they expect from the new members when they join. A church that communicates no expectations or commitment levels is much more likely to lose members to transfer or inactivity than a high-expectation church. . . . “Frontend” requirements or expectations were deemed much more effective than the communication of expectations later in their tenure. And the new member class, more than any other venue, was the vehicle by which expectations were most effectively communicated.¹¹

Raising expectations and then carefully communicating these expectations in the context of membership classes leads to more commitment, not less. “Strong church membership,” Lawless asserts, “begins with the *front door process*. People tend to be much more

⁷Yeats, “More than Fifteen Million Southern Baptists?,” 107.

⁸Rainer, *High Expectations*, 109.

⁹According to his research, Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 70, reveals the two most common theological subjects covered in membership classes: the plan of salvation and the nature of the church. Other theological subjects to highlight, time permitting, include the doctrine of Scripture, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, perseverance of the saints, and the biblical evidence for church membership. *The Baptist Faith and Message* could also prove helpful as it provides a succinct formulation of key Baptist doctrines and beliefs.

¹⁰Rainer, *High Expectations*, 106-7, acknowledges the reluctance of pastors to raise and communicate expectations for fear that “raising the requirement levels for membership would reduce the number of new members added to the church, and this would reduce the church’s overall growth rate.”

¹¹*Ibid.*, 106.

committed if the church publicly expects them to be committed up front—and a membership class provides a place to communicate these expectations.”¹²

Stetzer and Dodson record similar findings in their research. The authors write of the importance of churches creating an “atmosphere of expectation” and how “comeback leaders stated that increasing expectations is a key to creating an atmosphere for mobilization of the laity. Church members are expected to be involved and to use their God-given gifts, talents, and skills.”¹³

The communication of expectations before members join or shortly after helps to combat what Rainer refers to as the prevalent “country club” view of church membership. Country club church membership is membership that “is about receiving instead of giving, being served instead of serving, rights instead of responsibilities, and entitlements instead of sacrifices.”¹⁴ He argues correctly that this view of membership is unbiblical. The country club view of membership is “man-made, man-centered, and man-maintained. It is totally contrary to what the Bible teaches. It has no place in our churches.”¹⁵

If country club church membership is contra biblical church membership, what then is biblical church membership? Rainer continues,

Biblical church membership, gives without qualification. Biblical membership views the tithes and offerings as joyous giving. There are no strings attached. Biblical church membership serves and ministers as a natural way of doing things. Biblical church membership is *functioning* membership.¹⁶

When new or prospective members understand and learn that their church asks members to be functioning members, research reveals the likelihood of functioning

¹²Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 32.

¹³Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 136-37.

¹⁴Thom Rainer, *I am a Church Member: Discovering the Attitude That Makes the Difference* (Nashville: B & H, 2013), 11.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

membership is strong. Communicating expectations in membership classes moves churches and church members toward the recovery of a biblical understanding and practice of church membership.

A third purpose of a membership class is creating space and time for interaction between the leadership of the church and those desiring to join the church. Interaction between new or potential members and the senior pastor is key. When asked how participation in the membership class influenced their lives, participants indicated to Lawless an increased comfort level with their pastor: “I would be more comfortable talking to my pastor now” scored high in the survey results.¹⁷

Depending on factors such as the length of the membership class, the level of involvement by the senior pastor in teaching the class, and the size of the congregation, few opportunities in churches provide the level of access to the senior pastor that membership classes do. Lawless’ research reveals that members desire to know the senior pastor. Thus, pastors miss important opportunities to influence members when they take a small role in the class.¹⁸ He shares the impact time spent with the pastor can have on members:

In the relaxed atmosphere of a membership class, church members saw their pastor up close. They had permission to ask questions they couldn’t ask during a sermon. They listened as he prayed for them by name. They often learned about his devotional habits and strategies. In the end, the hours spent with the pastor left a significant mark in the lives of these class members.¹⁹

Membership classes provide unique opportunities for interaction between church leaders and potential members. When possible, other ministerial and support staff should

¹⁷For more responses, see the full list in Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 51.

¹⁸Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 55, warns, “Pastors who do not lead the class may miss a prime opportunity to influence members for years to come. Even a few hours of personal interaction can make a difference.” Dever and Alexander advise the senior pastor, at minimum, to “teach the statement of faith class (since you are the primary doctrinal teacher of the congregation) and consider having non-staff elders or leaders teach the other classes.” Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 61-62.

¹⁹Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 53.

also be available during the membership class for introductions and relationship building.

A fourth purpose of a membership class is to share the gospel with the participants. In most cases, not all who attend the class will be believers and the membership class provides an opportunity to articulate the gospel simply and clearly. For Yeats, communicating the gospel is a vital component of communicating the church's doctrinal beliefs: "Many churches discover that focusing on theology enables them to see individuals come to faith in Christ during that meeting."²⁰

Historically, SBC churches have cherished and upheld the doctrine of regenerate church membership, meaning believers only comprise the membership of the church.²¹ With the previously mentioned statistics highlighting the discrepancy between membership and attendance, one must wonder if regenerate church membership, what John Hammett argues has been "the central principle of Baptist ecclesiology,"²² is still held in esteem and practiced. One prudent way to help recover the principle of regenerate church membership is to accentuate the gospel, explain how one receives salvation, and teach how salvation is a prerequisite for church membership.

²⁰Yeats, "More than Fifteen Million Southern Baptists?," 107.

²¹John Hammett, "Membership, Discipline, and the Nature of the Church," in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John Hammett and Benjamin Merkle (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 14, explains how a theocentric view of the church fuels regenerate church membership:

As the people of God, the church is God called, God owned, God related, and shaped in every way by its relationship with God. This means that church membership cannot be a purely human arrangement, with humans at liberty to shape it as they desire. Membership in God's people can only be by God's standard. Thus, churches—in establishing standards, requirements, or criteria for church membership—must carefully consider what God requires. . . . At least one requirement for membership in God's people is that which is established by a response to God's call—that is, a faith relationship to God. In other words, because the church is the people of God, the church should be composed of those alive to God through faith in Christ.

For a brief history of regenerate church membership in Baptist life, see John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 91-98.

²²Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 82.

Stetzer and Dodson share their own convictions about the role of communicating the gospel in membership classes. They argue that not only should there be “a clear presentation of what it means to become a Christian,” but also “teaching about salvation is indispensable.”²³ They continue,

Most people seeking church membership do not understand the fundamentals of the Christian faith. They want to be “good,” and church membership is a helpful part of being good. They want to be “right,” and sense that membership is right. However, they need to be taught that none are “good” and none are “right.” Only by experiencing the truths of the gospel can someone be truly good and be righteous. We take about one hour in every membership class to teach the truth of the gospel. This is about 25 to 30 percent of the total time necessary to complete an effective membership class.²⁴

Time allotted to sharing the biblical gospel in membership classes can have far-reaching impact on those who may hear and believe.

In addition to the four purposes mentioned, membership classes have further benefits: relationships amongst new and potential members are cultivated; new and potential members learn of ways to get involved and serve; spiritual gift assessments are administered; and new and potential members receive instruction on evangelism and spiritual disciplines. The benefits of membership classes are endless, and churches must determine what is most important to include. Lawless’ findings are encouraging:

The churches in our study used their membership classes to emphasize concisely and clearly what matters to the church. Consequently, fifty-one of the fifty-two churches surveyed asserted that their churches are stronger because of their membership classes, and the same high number told us that the work of planning and executing classes is well worth the effort.²⁵

The Logistics of Membership Classes

While the purposes and benefits of membership classes are similar for most churches, other more logistical factors vary from context to context. When preparing to launch a membership class, churches should think through questions such as, what day of

²³Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 126.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 33.

the week should the class be offered?, how many hours should the class last?, how many times throughout the year should the class be offered?, who should teach the class?, is the class required or optional?, and how many can take the class at one time? These questions and others are vital for the successful launch of membership classes.

Although answers to these questions are largely determined by a church's context, Lawless shares common trends. Based on churches surveyed, 82.7 percent reportedly offered membership classes on Sunday. Two reasons were given for Sunday: the availability of childcare and people were already accustomed to gathering at church on this day.²⁶ Research also revealed the average membership class met for five and a half hours, and as expected, nearly 60 percent of these classes met multiple times over a number of weeks.²⁷ Finally, of the 52 churches surveyed, 31 offered classes on a quarterly or monthly basis (16 and 15, respectively).²⁸

Church Covenants

In addition to offering membership classes, another practical and related step toward the recovery of a biblical understanding and practice of church membership is the formulation of church covenants. Church covenants help church members solidify commitments to God and fellow church members upon formally joining a church.

History and Definition

Though not as common today, church covenants have been part of Baptist life for over five centuries. Charles Deweese writes,

Baptists worldwide have written and used hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of church covenants since initiating that development in England in the early 1600s. . . .

²⁶Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 34.

²⁷Ibid., 37.

²⁸Ibid., 41.

Covenants deserve careful evaluation because they helped shape Baptist church membership standards and practices.²⁹

Earliest Baptist ecclesiology reflects the high merit given to covenants by Baptist pastors and theologians. Gregg Allison explains, “With the rise of Baptists in the early part of the seventeenth century, ‘covenant’ was regularly delineated as an essential characteristic of the church.”³⁰

History reveals the primacy of church covenants in Baptist churches did not last. Hammett details the waning: “In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the practice of covenanting declined.”³¹ Many factors could be to blame, according to Hammett, “among them the sacrifice of the ideal of regenerate church membership to the ideal of numerical growth, the general secularization of American society, and the unwillingness of church members to hold one another accountable.”³² Michael Haykin explains that what began as essential to the church has now “fallen into disuse in recent days.”³³

What are church covenants and how can they help with the recovery of biblical church membership? Rainer defines a church covenant as “an agreement between the members of a church and the corporate body itself.”³⁴ Lawless understands covenants as

²⁹Charles Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), v.

³⁰Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 125-26. Allison continues tracing the history of covenants through prominent figures such as John Smyth and Benjamin Keach. Early Baptist confessions like the London Baptist Confession of 1644 and the 1833 New Hampshire Baptist Confession of Faith both give credence to the importance of covenants. For an even briefer overview of the history of church covenants. See Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 114-15.

³¹Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 117.

³²Ibid.

³³Michael Haykin, “Some Historical Roots of Congregationalism,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 41.

³⁴Rainer, *High Expectations*, 62.

“expectations in writing.”³⁵ Dever and Alexander give more detail: “As mentioned before, a church covenant answers the question, How do we commit to living together? The form of the covenant is the way we express our commitment. The content of the covenant is the way we understand our commitment.”³⁶ Deweese elaborates and expounds, “A church covenant is a series of written pledges based on the Bible which church members voluntarily make to God and to one another regarding their basic moral and spiritual commitments and the practice of their faith.”³⁷

Essentially, the purposes of a church covenant are twofold. First, covenants allow churches to formulate in writing those non-negotiable expectations and commitments that church members are expected to adhere by if good standing with the church is maintained.³⁸ Historically, Baptists have been unencumbered from communicating these expectations and responsibilities. Writing about Baptists from previous centuries, Dever explains how covenants originally functioned:

From the earliest of times, Baptist churches have tended to summarize duties in church covenants. These Christians accepted that they had duties to pray for their pastors, to pay them as they could, to respect them, to obey them (Heb 13:17), and to defend them. . . . They also acknowledged in them that they had a duty to those other members of the congregation, to care for them and watch over them. That care included confronting and even working to excommunicate them if the attempt to bring the sinning member to repentance failed. By covenant, they would pledge personal holiness, carefulness for each other, prayer, bearing one another’s burdens, working together to advance the gospel, and regularly meeting together on the Lord’s Day. Such covenants summarized what they understood church membership—and indeed, the Christian life—to involve.³⁹

³⁵Lawless, *Membership Matters*, 89.

³⁶Dever and Alexander, *Deliberate Church*, 62.

³⁷Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, viii.

³⁸Covenants vary from statements of faith in one primary way, as Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, 117, explains, “These documents are different from confessions of faith in that conduct is emphasized more than doctrine, though doctrine is often mentioned secondarily.” Charles Deweese adds, “The ethical dimension of the Christian life is prominent in covenantal promises.” Charles DeWeese, *A Community of Believers: Making Church Membership More Meaningful* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1978), 20.

³⁹Mark Dever, “The Practical Issues of Church Membership,” in *Those Who Must Give an*

Church covenants summarize duties and allow church members to know what is asked of them as part of a particular local church.⁴⁰

Second, church covenants, when signed or agreed to, allow church members to formally and publicly pledge agreement to fulfill duties as prescribed in the church covenant. Covenants are intended for the good of the membership and the flourishing of the church. Deweese details how church covenants can lead to greater church health:

Faithful attention to the contents of a carefully formulated, biblically based covenant can deepen the quality of a church's fellowship, sharpen a church's awareness of vital moral and spiritual commitments, clarify biblical standards for Christian growth, and create and maintain a disciplined membership.⁴¹

When members pledge commitment to the covenant, the covenant serves as a perpetual reminder of the commitment. In short, church covenants foster accountability amongst the membership. In Rainer's study of high expectation churches, only 7 percent of churches required members to sign the covenant with an additional 11 percent highly encouraging members to do so.⁴² He found that in churches requiring members to sign the covenant "retention was extremely effective" and these churches "were twice as effective in assimilation compared to the other churches in our study."⁴³ In addition to better retention and assimilation, Rainer discovered that churches using covenants "had an attendance virtually equal to their memberships."⁴⁴ A side benefit, then, of church covenants is the deflation of inflated membership rolls.

Account, ed. Hammett and Merkle, 87.

⁴⁰It is important to note that church covenants do not add extra-biblical requirements. Rather, as Deweese, *A Community of Believers*, 23, argues, the covenant "accents ethical teachings of the Bible. A covenant does not create ethical standards and obligations; it condenses and reflects ethical duties which are biblical in origin."

⁴¹Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, x.

⁴²Rainer, *High Expectations*, 62.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

Dever and Alexander recommend the signing of covenants because of the accountability the covenant naturally cultivates:

Requiring people to sign a church covenant lets them know they will be expected not only to believe the statement of faith but to live it out. It also lets them know how they will be expected to live it out—i.e., in clear ways that build up the corporate body and enhance the corporate testimony of the church in the community.⁴⁵

Covenants move churches toward the recovery of biblical and subsequently meaningful church membership because of the inherent accountability. The authors continue:

Church covenants make membership meaningful because they clarify the spiritual and relational commitments that membership signifies. Clarifying the commitments of membership promotes the health of the local church because it keeps nominalism at bay and keeps us accountable to growing in real Christian piety.⁴⁶

While the use of church covenants is not explicitly prescribed in the Bible, using covenants is, according to Jonathan Leeman, “a reasonable matter of prudence with all upsides and no downsides, particularly if the church makes regular use of the covenant and doesn’t merely affirm it and then shut it up in a file drawer.”⁴⁷ Making regular use of the covenant is key. Deweese suggests, “The occasional reading of a covenant is inadequate” and then proposes a number of ways to use the covenant in church life, emphasizing the meaningful role covenants can have in baptism and the Lord’s Supper.⁴⁸ Leeman affirms the benefit of reading the church covenant often: “My own church, for instance, reads our covenant aloud every time we partake of the Lord’s Supper together. That means we speak those promises to one another over twelve times a year. As a result, its refrains are familiar to all of us.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵Dever and Alexander, *Deliberate Church*, 62.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 299.

⁴⁸Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 206-7. For all six uses, see “Ways to Use a Church Covenant” on pp. 206-12.

⁴⁹Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense*, 299.

Churches using covenants often experience health and growth due to the benefits derived from the content of the covenant itself. When members know what is asked and when members covenant before God and fellow church members to do what is asked, the church covenant becomes more than words on paper. Deweese speaks of the power the covenant can have in the life of the church: “A covenant is a living agreement whose biblical principles offer continuing sustenance for a church genuinely trying to be regenerate. Baptist history validates this possibility.”⁵⁰

Formulating Church Covenants

The potential benefits of church covenants outweigh the effort and time required to prepare them. While many churches adopt standardized covenants, both Deweese and Hammett advise against this practice.⁵¹ “A church which relies on the internal creativity of its membership in preparing a covenant,” Deweese writes, “will probably experience far more covenantal values than a church which perfunctorily adopts a uniform covenant from an external source.”⁵² Hammett agrees, adding that churches who write their own covenant “owns it as *their* covenant, not one imposed upon them.”⁵³

The covenant writing process is straightforward. Hammett suggests churches should “discuss among themselves who and what they are as a church, and what type of commitments Scripture calls them to make to one another as a body of believers.”⁵⁴

Deweese advises the church to form a “church covenant committee” comprised of a

⁵⁰Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 210.

⁵¹Numerous SBC churches have adopted the standardized covenant written by J. Newton Brown in 1853, which is found often in present day hymnals, hung on the walls of churches, and in other contexts. Deweese advises against using this covenant and delineates three liabilities to consider when using the Brown covenant. See Deweese, *A Community of Believers*, 24-26, or DeWeese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 202.

⁵²Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 201.

⁵³Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 118, emphasis original.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

“broad spectrum of the total membership.”⁵⁵ He then recommends the covenant committee be tasked with two primary responsibilities: “Adopt principles by which the content of the covenant will be determined” and “define and write the contents of the covenant.”⁵⁶

As the committee adopts principles and begins to formulate the covenant in writing, the purpose of the covenant should remain in view. The purpose of the covenant is to express the biblical expectations and responsibilities given to church members concerning their life and conduct as it relates to their local church. The covenant “provides a biblical standard of behavior for members, notifying them of what it means to be a member of the local church, and reminding them of the obligations that membership entails for our lifestyles and interactions with each other,” writes Dever and Alexander.⁵⁷ The critical point for the committee to remember during the writing stage is how the covenant is to reflect the Bible. The Bible shapes and forms the content of the covenant. Covenants that ask more than the Bible asks are detrimental to the health of the church and the membership. Deweese observes,

A covenant can function best if its individual elements are viewed as biblical principles which guide conduct rather than as rules which govern conduct. It is a misuse of a covenant to treat it as a legal document. The strength of a covenant does not lie in a legalistic attachment to its wording but in a reliance upon the biblical principles which lie behind the wording.⁵⁸

Once the committee has written a draft of the covenant, the committee then shares the covenant with the congregation and asks for input and evaluation. Revisions are made based on received input, followed by a vote for church wide adoption. After the covenant is affirmed, the church decides the role the covenant will have in church life.

⁵⁵Deweese, *A Community of Believers*, 29.

⁵⁶Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 204-5.

⁵⁷Dever and Alexander, *Deliberate Church*, 62.

⁵⁸Deweese, *A Community of Believers*, 30.

The benefits of church covenants are numerous particularly when they reflect the Bible and are used effectively. Covenants move a church toward a healthy understanding and practice of church membership. Deweese offers a warning and an encouragement:

A covenant is not a panacea for solving all the problems surrounding the meaning and practice of responsible church membership. But when placed in context with other key New Testament convictions which help safeguard the integrity of the church, such as believer's baptism and church discipline, an innovative and biblically based statement of church member obligations can help a congregation learn more fully what it means to be the regenerated people of God.⁵⁹

Receiving New Members

As churches take practical steps toward recovering a biblical understanding and practice of church membership by launching membership classes and formulating church covenants, a separate but related issue comes in view—how churches receive new members. While the issue of how churches receive new members may seem inconsequential, a closer look reveals this issue is likely a leading cause of nominal membership and inflated membership rolls.

The Common Approach

The process of receiving new members is a process deserving careful attention because how a church receives new members communicates the way in which membership is viewed in the church. Hammett laments the common approach churches take in receiving new members:

In most Baptist churches in North America today, what happens when someone comes forward at the end of a service and asks for membership? There may be a few moments of whispered conversation but after a few perfunctory questions the person is presented for a church vote. The problem is the church members have no basis for voting on such a person. No one would think of opposing his or her request for membership and so the vote becomes a meaningless gesture, a relic of an earlier time when churches took membership more seriously.⁶⁰

⁵⁹Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 200.

⁶⁰Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 120-21.

Could it be the lackadaisical process Hammett describes above is a primary contributor in the current dismal state of membership in many, if not most, SBC churches? Where are two-thirds of church members listed on membership rolls each Sunday? Some, no doubt, are providentially hindered from attending, but many, according to Dever, fall in the category of what he labels “non-attending members.”⁶¹ He laments, “I fear, however, that most of our members are perfectly able on most Sundays to attend church, either here or elsewhere. But they do not.”⁶² If churches desire to regain meaningful membership, rethinking the process of receiving members is critical.

A Better Way

The key to a healthier process of receiving new members, according to Hammett, is to have a “clear separation between welcoming someone who applies for membership and the official granting of membership itself.”⁶³ Biblically, since membership is reserved for believers only, pastors and churches have the responsibility to take steps to ensure that those who are granted membership truly have been converted.⁶⁴ Hammett proposes an alternative way to handle the potential member who comes forward for membership:

A better approach would be to welcome such a person and rejoice with her or him over the decision made, whether it is to transfer membership or seek baptism and then church membership, but to delay a vote on the request for membership until a later time, when other requirements for membership have been met.⁶⁵

⁶¹Mark Dever, “Regaining Meaningful Church Membership,” in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, ed. Thomas White, Jason Duesing, and Malcolm Yarnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 45.

⁶²Ibid., 46.

⁶³Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 120.

⁶⁴Dever and Alexander, *Deliberate Church*, 65, acknowledge the limitations of this responsibility: “At the end of the day, we simply have to admit that the wheat will grow with the tares (Matt 13:24-43) until the Lord returns. But that fact doesn’t give us license for pastoral irresponsibility in the way we take new members into our churches. We need to be faithful to do all we can to externally ensure that no unconverted person becomes a member of our local church.”

⁶⁵Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 121.

The separation and delayed vote Hammett mentions to safeguard membership allows churches to walk potential members through three processes, two of which have been addressed—membership classes and church covenants. Membership classes afford potential members opportunities to learn more about the church and to discern if a good fit exists between the church and the individual. Membership classes also help weed out those truly interested in membership with those desiring to join on a whim. If a potential member is unwilling to commit to a multi-hour and potentially multi-day membership class, this same potential member is unlikely to be a functioning member, if granted membership.

Church covenants add an enhanced level of accountability as membership expectations are communicated plainly and formally. Membership classes provide a suitable context to discuss the covenant expectations. Dever explains how a clear explanation of the covenant and doctrinal statement in the context of the membership class is helpful to potential members: “It is a loving thing to present carefully the expectations others will have of them and what they, in turn, can expect from the congregation. Carefully teach through the statement of faith and the church covenant before asking prospective members to sign them.”⁶⁶ If membership is granted immediately at the end of a worship service on the day the potential member presents himself as a membership candidate, no time is allotted for thought and consideration of the church covenant.

The third process for potential members to complete before congregational vote is the membership interview. Upon completion of the membership class and review of the church covenant, potential members meet with the church’s pastor or pastoral staff, membership committee, or some other group assigned to interview potential members. Dever and Alexander provide direction for interview:

⁶⁶Dever, “The Practical Issues,” 97.

Once a list of people is collected who have indicated interest in a membership interview, it is wise for the pastor (or an elder, if the church is large) to conduct an interview with each potential member individually. This is usually a thirty- to forty-five minute interview, and part of the purpose is to gather simple data such as personal contact information and family status. But the primary purpose is to gather important spiritual information.⁶⁷

Dever and Alexander suggest five spiritual and theological areas to explore with potential members during the interview. First, explore the potential member's understanding of salvation by asking for a brief explanation of the gospel. The gospel question is "the most important question for the protection of the purity of the church."⁶⁸ If potential members are unable to articulate a basic understanding of the gospel, more instruction is likely needed before he or she is ready for membership.

Second, explore the potential member's church background. Dever and Alexander advise to probe deeper if the potential member is coming from a church a short distance away. The authors give this advice to those asking questions: "Be sure to ask why they want to switch. Don't perpetuate the shuffling of sheep or someone's potentially irresponsible pattern of behavior simply because you want your church to get bigger."⁶⁹ They also suggest the potential member to acquire a letter of recommendation from the pastor at the previous church.

Third, explore the potential member's baptism history. If the candidate has not been baptized or was baptized by a mode other than immersion, inquire if he or she is willing to be baptized by immersion.

Fourth, explore the potential member's previous experience with church discipline. If the candidate has been disciplined by a church, inquire the reason.

Finally, ask the potential member to share his or her testimony. Dever and Alexander counsel the interviewer to focus on "the home they were brought up in, when

⁶⁷Dever and Alexander, *Deliberate Church*, 64.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

and how they were converted, and their lifestyle since then, looking particularly for evidences of repentance after conversion.”⁷⁰

Walking potential members through the processes of the membership class, review of the church covenant, and membership interview helps to ensure that not only is the principle of regenerate church membership protected but also these processes allow potential members to have ample time to confirm their own commitment to the local church. The processes communicate to the potential member that membership is important.

Hammett explains the final step of the membership process:

At the time when the largest number of church members gather (the main worship service or a members-only meeting), the prospective new members should be formally presented and introduced to the congregation. By this point they should have gone through the new member class, given evidence that their professions of faith are credible, experienced believer’s baptism, and agreed to make the covenant commitment. Those who led the new member class or interviewed them should briefly introduce them, vouch for them, explain that they have completed all the requirements for membership, and then recommend them for membership.⁷¹

Receiving new members in the way described helps churches move toward the recovery of a biblical understanding and practice of church membership.

Cleaning Up Membership Rolls

Churches serious about recovering a biblical understanding and practice of church membership offer membership classes, formulate church covenants, and develop processes to receive new members. Even if churches implement all three correctives, most churches will still be left with a glaring problem—inflated membership rolls.⁷² Cleaning up membership rolls is a difficult but necessary part of recovering biblical membership.

⁷⁰Dever and Alexander, *Deliberate Church*, 65.

⁷¹John Hammett, “The What and How of Church Membership,” in *Baptist Foundations*, ed. Dever and Leeman, 195.

⁷²Membership rolls are inflated if average attendance is significantly less than membership on the roll. Yeats, “More than Fifteen Million Southern Baptists?,” 107, provides an historical perspective: “In generations prior the normative experience of most Baptist congregations was that members were outnumbered by attendees every Sunday. Now in many established congregations the number of members

High Stakes

Inflated membership rolls seem harmless until one realizes what is at stake. Hammett warns, “Christ is not honored by membership rolls bloated with ‘members’ who give no sign of genuine faith yet are trusting that their membership makes them acceptable before God.”⁷³ When framed in terms of dishonoring Christ and possible false assurance of salvation, the crisis of inflated membership rolls becomes a matter of urgency.

In addition to confusion about salvation, Dever asserts that inflated membership rolls

confuse both real members and non-Christians about what it means to be a Christian. We “active” members do the voluntarily “inactive” members no service when we allow them to remain members of the church. Membership is the church’s corporate endorsement of a person’s salvation. Yet how can a congregation honestly testify that someone invisible to it is faithfully running the race?⁷⁴

Patterns of blatant non-attendance is actually grounds for church discipline, according to Leeman. He reasons,

The church eventually has no choice but to say, “We can no longer credibly affirm your profession of faith and oversee your discipleship because you’re not here. We don’t know where you are or what you are doing.” When a church does not remove longtime absentees from its membership, it’s committing a kind of fraud. It’s claiming something that it has no right to claim.⁷⁵

If Hammett, Dever, and Leeman are correct, inflated membership rolls must be addressed.

A Path Forward

Regardless of the path churches take to address inflated membership rolls, prudence is advised since division on the issue amongst even active members is likely.

far outnumbers regular attendees. If regenerate church membership meets the standards we have articulated here, it is impossible for churches to run in this manner.”

⁷³Hammett, “The What and How of Church Membership,” 197.

⁷⁴Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 175.

⁷⁵Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense*, 316.

Before any action is taken, instruction on regenerate church membership is necessary. Biblical teaching on membership will propel future action, though resistance is expected.⁷⁶

Churches have two primary options in cleaning up membership rolls. First, the more traditional way of cleaning up rolls is for churches to contact via letter, phone, or personal visit all absentee members and inquire about their standing with the church. Churches will learn that a percentage of absentee members have joined other churches or passed away; these members are then removed. A larger percentage of absentee members remain in the area and for various reasons, no longer attend. Churches can lovingly encourage the absentee members to return, explaining the nature of church membership and membership expectations, including the biblical imperative to regularly gather with the church for worship. Churches can then also communicate a generous timetable of when absentee members can return in order to remain in good standing. If absentee members do not return to active involvement once the timetable has expired, absentee members will be removed from the membership roll.

A second path for churches to follow is to begin what Hammett calls “an annual church renewal event.”⁷⁷ The church renewal event centers around an agreed upon church covenant. Once a covenant is formulated by the church, “the church would vote to dissolve the present membership and reconstitute around those who sign their names to the church covenant,” Hammett writes.⁷⁸ Ample written notice of the church renewal event would be given to all members—active and absentee—including a copy of the proposed covenant, the plan to reconstitute around it, as well as the date of the signing event.

⁷⁶Yeats, “More than Fifteen Million Southern Baptists?,” 107, observes, “The nature of regenerate church membership flies in the face of our consumer culture, and therefore maintaining any level of meaningful membership will fly in the face of cultural expectations at every turn. It is worth the fight, but we must engage always. The price is too high.”

⁷⁷Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 119.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 118.

One benefit of the church renewal event, according to Hammett, is that this procedure places the burden on the individual. The church does not “kick out” or “excommunicate” anyone. It does, however, respect the decision of individuals who choose to not come and sign the church covenant. They have chosen not to be members of the church.⁷⁹

Either path is problematic in the sense that a segment of both active and inactive members will be upset. As close to church-wide consensus before moving forward with any plan to clean membership rolls is needed to ensure the process goes as smoothly as possible.

Conclusion

If churches desire the recovery of a biblical understanding and practice of church membership, then offering membership classes, formulating church covenants, carefully receiving new members, and cleaning up inflated membership rolls are practical first steps. Each step represents change and, as William Henard acknowledges, “initiating change represents one of the most difficult tasks, if not the most difficult task, pastors face.”⁸⁰ Hammett warns specifically about the difficulty of initiating change in the area of church membership: “No doubt any attempt to move toward a recovery of membership that is meaningful, that involves genuine commitment and evidence of regeneration, is fraught with dangers.”⁸¹

Initiating change and embracing dangers are inherent to church revitalization. If pastors and churches are convinced, as Dever is, that biblical church membership is a “living commitment,” rather than “simply the record of a statement we once made or of affection toward a familiar place,” then the outcome is worth the risk.⁸²

⁷⁹Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 119.

⁸⁰William Henard, *Can These Bones Live? A Practical Guide to Church Revitalization* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 209.

⁸¹Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 114.

⁸²Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 175.

CHAPTER 4
PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

The project to train members at Central Baptist Church (CBC) in Paris, Kentucky, with a biblical understanding and practice of church membership began in August 2017, and concluded in November 2017. The project lasted fifteen weeks.

Five goals determined the effectiveness of this project. The first goal was to access the current understanding of church membership among new and existing members of CBC. This goal was measured by creating and administering the Biblical Church Membership Inventory (BCMI)¹ to seventy-five church members. During weeks 1 and 2, fifty-five church members completed the survey, satisfying the minimum requirement set for this goal. The goal was considered successful after the BCMI was analyzed, yielding a clearer picture of the understanding of biblical church membership among CBC members.

The second goal was to develop a six-week sermon series on biblical church membership. During weeks 3-5, the sermons were written based on analysis of the BCMI. A panel consisting of the two associate pastors of CBC plus three additional pastors used a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, clarity, and relevance of the sermon series.² This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level.

¹See appendix 1.

²See appendix 2.

The third goal was to increase the knowledge of new and existing church members by preaching the sermon series. This goal was measured by administering pre- and post-sermon series surveys, which were used to measure the change in knowledge regarding biblical church membership.³ During week 6, the pre-sermon series survey was administered. During weeks 7-12, the sermons were delivered. During week 13, the post-sermon series survey was administered. Twenty-four church members completed the surveys. This goal was considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre-and post-sermon series survey scores.

The fourth goal was to develop a four-hour curriculum for a membership class. During weeks 13 and 14, the curriculum was developed. A panel consisting of the two associate pastors of CBC, seven deacons of CBC, and one seminary professor evaluated the curriculum, utilizing a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the curriculum.⁴ The goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level.

The fifth goal was to increase the knowledge of new and existing church members by implementing the membership class. Nineteen members participated in the class, including nine new members and ten existing members. During week 15, the membership class was held. This goal was measured by administering pre- and post-membership class surveys to each class participant, immediately before and after the class.⁵ This goal was considered successfully met when the t-test for dependent samples

³See appendix 3.

⁴See appendix 4.

⁵See appendix 5.

demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores.

Biblical Church Membership Inventory

To access the current level of understanding of biblical church membership, the BCMI was administered to seventy-five church members. Fifty-five members completed the survey. Respondents were asked six demographic questions followed by twenty-nine statements to be evaluated using the Likert scale. Statements covered a wide variety of topics related to church membership.

Inventory Analysis

Results of the BCMI proved interesting and revealing.⁶ Demographic questions demonstrated that nearly 60 percent of the respondents were at least fifty-one years old while 67 percent indicated they had been Christians for a minimum of thirty-one years. Thirty-five percent of the respondents had been members of CBC for ten years or less while 25 percent had been members for thirty-one plus years.

Surveyed members of CBC indicated a firm belief in the value of church membership. When asked their level of agreement with the statement, “The Bible places a strong emphasis on church membership,” almost 82 percent of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed. The statement “Church membership is important to me” revealed a near consensus—95 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Even to the statement “All Christians should be church members,” all but one respondent indicated they somewhat agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed.

While CBC members largely agreed on the value of church membership, less consensus was reached on what to do with inactive resident and non-resident members. Members were asked their level of agreement with the statement on inactive, resident

⁶See appendix 6.

members: “A resident, inactive church member (who lives close enough to attend church but does not attend) should remain on the membership roll if he/she chooses.” Sixty-five percent indicated they strongly disagreed, disagreed, or somewhat disagreed while 35 percent somewhat agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed.

Table 1. Views on inactive, resident members remaining on membership roll

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
5%	33%	27%	22%	11%	2%

Even less agreement was found amongst respondents when asked their level of agreement with the statement on inactive, non-resident members: “A non-resident church member (who lives too far away from the church to regularly attend) should remain on the membership roll if he/she wishes.” Fifty-six percent indicated they strongly disagreed, disagreed, or somewhat disagreed while 44 percent somewhat agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed.

Table 2. Views on non-resident members remaining on membership roll

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
7%	27%	22%	18%	22%	4%

The strong value placed on membership by CBC members in relation to the disparity in how to deal with inactive members points to confusion as to the nature of biblical church membership. The sermon series and membership class were designed with this disparity in view.

Sermon Series

A six-part sermon series entitled “Meaningful Membership” was written to provide instruction on biblical church membership to the entire church.⁷ The series consisted of an introductory sermon on membership followed by five sermons on membership expectations.⁸ A membership diagram was also introduced as an aid to remember the expectations and to use for future membership classes.⁹ Insights gleaned from the BCMI plus research from chapters 2 and 3 were catalysts for sermon content.

Sermon 1

“The Case for Church Membership” was delivered on September 17. The sermon’s key statement was, “Church membership is implied in the pages of the New Testament.” The argument was made in the sermon that while church membership is not explicitly stated in the New Testament, without the clear boundaries church membership provides, little about the church makes sense. Boundaries of church membership allow pastors to identify who they are to shepherd and allow church members to identify who they are to follow (Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:1-3). Boundaries also allow for the practice of church discipline (Matt 18:15-17) and allow churches to provide care where care is needed (Gal 6:9-10; 1 Tim 5:9-11, 16).

Sermon 2

“Believe” was delivered September 24. The sermon’s key statement was, “In the New Testament, the church is comprised of believers only.” The argument for regenerate church membership was made from Acts 2:42-47 as well as other places in the

⁷See appendix 7.

⁸Six short films were also produced to accompany and enhance each sermon. Twenty-five church members (ranging in age between eight and ninety-five) were interviewed about membership and helped explain each expectation. Films were viewed before each sermon was delivered. To view the films, visit Central Baptist Church, “Membership,” accessed December 15, 2017, www.centralbaptistparis.com/membership.

⁹See appendix 8.

early chapters of Acts. Only those who had believed were added to the church. Potential dangers of inflated membership rolls were also given, including the possibility of giving inactive, uninvolved members false assurance of salvation and the possibility of hindering the witness of Jesus and the church in the local community.

Sermon 3

“Gather” was delivered October 8. The sermon’s key statement was, “Membership means regularly gathering with the church for worship, mutual encouragement, and partaking in baptism and the Lord’s Supper.” The author of Hebrews exhorts his audience to meet together on a regular basis (Heb 10:24-25). Part of the purpose of meeting together is to encourage one another. It was even argued that some are deprived of ministry they may need from members when the members are absent. Gathering with the church for worship is about receiving from God but it is also about giving to others. Jesus modeled the importance of gathering with other believers as He was found in the synagogue on Sabbath days (Luke 4:16). Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the two ordinances of the church and are practiced when the church gathers.

Sermon 4

“Belong” was delivered October 15. The sermon’s key statement was, “Membership means belonging to a small group which provides the most conducive atmosphere for growth in discipleship.” The witness of Scripture points to the importance of relationships (Gen 2:18) and culminates with the witness of Jesus and the close friendships He formed with a relatively small number of people (Luke 9-10). Small groups allow members to practice the “one another” passages and outside research demonstrates that spiritual growth flourishes in small groups.

Sermon 5

“Contribute” was delivered October 22. The sermon’s key statement was, “Membership means contributing to the work of the church by praying, serving, and

giving.” Members pray for the church and with the church (Col 4:2-3; 1:3-5, 9-10). Members serve others with their spiritual gifts and talents (Matt 20:26-28; 1 Cor 12:7, 11; 1 Pet 4:10). Members give money to support the mission and ministries of the church (2 Cor 9:6-7). All three ways of contributing are vital for the health of the church and the members.

Sermon 6

“Go” was delivered October 29. The sermon’s key statement was, “Membership means going to our neighbors and the nations with the good news of the gospel.” Jesus’ final marching orders to His followers includes the mandate to make disciples (Matt 28:18-20). Disciple making is done at home and across the ocean. Jesus has sent His followers out and if the church desires to obey, the church must go (John 20:21). Churches naturally drift inward unless an intentional effort to make disciples is kept in view.

Sermon Series Evaluation

Before being delivered at CBC, the sermons were evaluated by a panel of five pastors.¹⁰ The panel used a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, clarity, and relevance of the sermon series. The panel provided helpful insight and suggestions to improve the sermon series. Changes were made to the sermons before preaching based on the feedback provided by the pastoral panel. This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level. The sermon series exceeded the minimum requirements on the first attempt.

¹⁰The panel consisted of Mickey Ballard, Associate Pastor of Music and Worship at CBC; Jonathan Graves, Associate Pastor of Youth and Families at CBC; Howard Beauman, Pastor of Russell Cave Road Baptist Church in Lexington, Kentucky; David Stokes, Executive Director at Central Kentucky Network of Baptists; and Alex Kinchen, Church Consultant at Central Kentucky Network of Baptists. See appendix 2 for the evaluation rubric.

Pre- and Post-Sermon Series Surveys

The pre-sermon series survey was administered before the sermon series began. The survey consisted of four demographic questions, followed by twenty-two statements members evaluated using the Likert scale. The statements were derived from sermon content. The post-sermon series survey was administered in the week following the final sermon. Twenty-four members completed both surveys.

Survey Analysis

Since the pre- and post-sermon series surveys were identical, a t-test for dependent samples could be used to measure positive change in understanding.¹¹ The null hypothesis states that there is no difference between the means of the pre-survey and post-survey scores. The research hypothesis states that there will be a difference in the pre-survey and post-survey scores. Upon running the t-test, the results revealed the sermon series on church membership made a statistically significant difference resulting in the increase of understanding of church membership ($t_{(9)} = 8.852, p < 0.00000000072$).¹²

Analysis demonstrated each of the twenty-two statements displayed a positive change in understanding.¹³ Members were asked to respond to statements covering a variety of issues relating to church membership, including “When a church member misses church, he/she deprives others of the ministry they may need to receive from the absent church member.” This question had the largest increase in mean score, from 4.42 on the pre-survey to 5.5 on the post-survey, a mean increase of 1.08. The statement, “Church membership helps allow pastors to identify who they are to shepherd” showed

¹¹See appendix 9.

¹²See appendix 10.

¹³See appendix 11.

the second largest increase, from 114 on the pre-survey to 139 on the post survey, a mean increase of 1.04.

Membership Class

Chapter 3 research demonstrated the many and varied benefits of membership classes. Since CBC did not have a membership class, curriculum for a membership class was developed as part of this project.¹⁴ The class was designed to meet for four hours on a single day; lesson plans for four one-hour sessions were developed.

Nineteen members attended the membership class on November 5.¹⁵ Ten participants had been members of CBC for longer than two years and nine participants had been members of CBC for less than two years. Each class member received a binder with the curriculum and other essential documents enclosed.

Session 1

“Who We Are” was the theme of session 1. The purpose of this session was to introduce and orient participants to who CBC is as a church family. The session began with a quick overview of the doctrine of the church, with sub points such as “Jesus is the head of the church,” “the church is universal and local,” and “the church is a family.” Applicable Scripture references were used to explain each point.

A brief history of CBC was then shared. A “Timeline of Key Events” was used, tracing how the church began as an offshoot of First Baptist Church in Paris in 1946. A list of the ten men who have served as pastors of CBC was listed, with accompanying dates of service.

¹⁴See appendix 12.

¹⁵Only members were allowed to participate in the membership class. The initial class served as a trial-run for future membership classes at CBC. Future classes will be targeted at mainly new and/or prospective members. Beginning in 2018, membership classes will be offered quarterly.

Pictures and brief biographies of all ministerial and support staff was reviewed next. The biographies were condensed from what is listed on the church website. Phone numbers and email addresses were included under each biography.

The next part of session 1 entailed a brief biblical look at the role of deacons. Passages like Acts 6:1-6 and 1 Timothy 3:3:6-13 were reviewed. Specific ways deacons serve at CBC was shared followed by a list of all active deacons.

Session 1 concluded with a review of CBC's mission, vision, core values, denominational affiliations, and key ways to stay informed about events and activities. Practical information such as office hours, which door to enter during the week, and information about the monthly newsletter was shared. Also included in the binder was a facilities map with clearly labeled parking, Sunday School classroom locations, church staff offices, and restroom locations.

Session 2

“What We Believe” was the theme of session 2. The purpose of this session was to communicate CBC's beliefs on essential doctrine. Discussion began with the doctrine of the Bible and a brief overview of the Bible was given. Terms such as inspiration, inerrancy, and authority were explained and how these words express CBC's view of the Bible.

A detailed articulation of the gospel was then presented. The purpose of the gospel presentation was three-fold: so those in the class would learn how CBC understands the gospel and how to be saved, so all in the class would hear the gospel and have the opportunity to be saved, and so that those who were believers would learn a model for how to share it. The gospel was articulated using the God, man, Christ, response framework, which helps ensure the whole gospel is communicated.

Next, time was allotted to explain CBC's two ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper. When baptism was described, baptism by immersion following conversion was communicated as the biblically correct understanding of baptism.

Session 2 ended with an explanation and overview of The Baptist Faith and Message, which CBC recognizes as its statement of faith.¹⁶ Attention was given to Article V, “God’s Purpose of Grace.” Article V addresses the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer, which is a doctrine CBC affirms.

Session 3

“What We Do” was the theme of session 3. The purpose of this session was to provide information about the ministries of CBC. Corporate worship, Sunday School, music, children, youth, missions and outreach, women’s ministry, and senior adult ministry were amongst the topics covered. Pertinent details and descriptions of these ministries were given, including ways to get involved.

Session 3 concluded with an overview of the three special missions offerings CBC collects each year: Annie Armstrong Easter Offering, Eliza Broadus Offering for State Missions, and Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. Pictures of the three women were shown, followed by descriptions of each offering and their significance to the spread of the gospel in Kentucky and around the world.

Session 4

“What We Ask” was the theme of session 4. The purpose of the final session was to share with class participants the five expectations and responsibilities of church members at CBC. Content for session 4 was derived from the “Meaningful Membership” sermon series delivered at CBC the previous six weeks.

Participants in the membership class were reminded that meaningful membership is found when members believe, gather, belong, contribute, and go. The membership diagram first shared during the sermon series was used once more as a visual reminder of membership expectations.

¹⁶A pamphlet-sized copy of the Baptist Faith and Message was included in each binder.

Next Steps

The membership class concluded with the “Next Steps” phase through which participants could take in response to the membership class. By filling out the “Next Steps” card in the participant’s binder, the participant could indicate if he or she desired to talk further with a staff member about salvation or membership, joining a Sunday School class, volunteering in one of the ministries of the church, or getting enrolled to receive emails and church newsletters.

Membership Class Evaluations

Before teaching the membership class at CBC, the class curriculum was evaluated by a panel of two pastors, seven deacons, and a seminary professor.¹⁷ The panel used a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, scope, methodology, and practicality of the curriculum. The panel provided helpful insight and suggestions to improve the class. This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level. The membership class curriculum exceeded the minimum requirements on the first attempt.

Pre- and Post-Membership Class Surveys

The pre-membership class survey was administered to nineteen participants immediately before the membership class began. The survey consisted of six demographic questions followed by twenty statements participants evaluated using the Likert scale. The statements derived from membership class curriculum. The post-membership class survey was administered immediately following the completion of the membership class. All nineteen members of the membership class completed both surveys.

¹⁷The panel consisted of Mickey Ballard, Associate Pastor of Music and Worship at CBC; Jonathan Graves, Associate Pastor of Youth and Families at CBC; CBC deacons Tony Sosby, Bill Sprinkle, Glenn Mackie, Gayle Fields, Doug Bechanan, Karl Kilburn, and Jim Pry; and Timothy Beougher, Associate Dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Ministry at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. See appendix 4 for the evaluation rubric.

Survey Analysis

Since the pre- and post-membership class surveys were identical, a t-test for dependent samples could be used to measure positive change in understanding.¹⁸ The null hypothesis states that there is no difference between the means of the pre-survey and post survey scores. The research hypothesis states that there will be a difference in the pre-survey and post survey scores. Upon running the t-test, the results revealed the membership class curriculum made a statistically significant difference resulting in the increase of understanding of church membership ($t_{(9)} = 9.155, p < 0.000000034$).¹⁹

Analysis demonstrated each of the twenty statements displayed a positive change in understanding.²⁰ Among the statements with the largest mean score increases were statements related to the workings of CBC's denominational affiliations, including statements concerning the Cooperative Program, the Central Kentucky Network of Baptists, the Southern Baptist Convention, and denominational missions offerings. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement, "I have a basic knowledge and understanding of the Cooperative Program." This question had the largest increase in mean score, from 3.26 on the pre-survey to 5.68 on the post-survey, a mean increase of 2.42. The statement, "I'm familiar with the work of the Central Kentucky Network of Baptists" showed the fourth largest increase, from 4 on the pre-survey to 5.58 on the post-survey, a mean increase of 1.58. "I'm familiar with the work of the Southern Baptist Convention" registered the fifth largest increase, from 4.16 to 5.63, a mean increase of 1.47. The statement, "The names Annie, Eliza, and Lottie mean something to me" tied for the sixth largest increase, from 4.53 to 5.90, a mean increase of 1.37.²¹

¹⁸See appendix 13.

¹⁹See appendix 14.

²⁰See appendix 15.

²¹The Annie Armstrong Easter Offering, Eliza Broadus Offering for State Missions, and Lottie Moon Christmas Offering are three offerings CBC collects each year that benefit missions and missionaries

mean score was 5.17. The post-sermon series survey mean score was 5.75. The total mean score increased .58. The membership class surveys showed a larger overall mean increase. The pre-membership class survey total mean score was 4.64. The post-membership class survey total mean score was 5.75. The mean score increased 1.11.²²

Second, membership expectations were communicated and raised. Prior to the membership project, membership expectations were haphazardly and casually communicated to potential members before membership was granted. No expectations were communicated to existing members. No membership class existed. Now, expectations have been communicated and these expectations will be shared in quarterly membership classes and regularly with the church. While expectations have not been formally adopted by the church, the expectations communicated during the sermon series can serve as a starting point for future discussion.

Third, the membership project sparked thought and conversation about the problem of CBC's inflated membership roll.²³ Two questions on the BCMI asked participants to respond to statements about inactive members, as previously noted. The first sermon in the "Meaningful Membership" sermon series also addressed the problems and potential dangers of inflated rolls. While no official action has been taken in response to the discussion, further discussion amongst CBC members ensued, laying the groundwork for possible action in the future.

²²The larger increase of overall mean score for the Membership Class Survey could partly be explained by participants immediately completing the post-survey upon the conclusion of the class. All participants were also present for the entirety of the four-hour class. The Sermon Series post-survey, on the other hand, was completed the week after the sixth and final sermon was delivered, seven weeks after the first sermon was delivered. Some survey participants did not hear all six sermons.

²³As of this writing, CBC has 1,017 (721 resident; 296 non-resident) members with an average attendance of 290.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

Introduction

This ministry project served as a needed intervention to spotlight the deficiencies in CBC's understanding and practice of church membership. In previous years at CBC, little attention had been given to the biblical model of membership. Although church membership is not explicitly commanded in the New Testament, it is everywhere implied and assumed. Membership is important and without the clear boundaries of membership, little written about the church in the New Testament makes sense.

The project resulted in a renewed emphasis on the importance of church membership. Not only were deficiencies identified, but practical steps toward the recovery of biblical membership were taken. Clear biblical teaching on membership was given and structures and pathways were put in place to safeguard membership in the future. Data from administered surveys indicate positive change occurred during the implementation of the project.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of the project was to train members at Central Baptist Church in Paris, Kentucky, with a biblical understanding and practice of church membership. Because of contextual factors and specific identifiable deficiencies in understanding and practice related to membership, CBC was receptive and responsive to the instruction and changes that accompanied this project.

The means by which positive change occurred included a sermon series and membership class. A six-part sermon series, "Meaningful Membership," was written and delivered. Curriculum for a four-hour membership class was developed followed by the

launch of the membership class. The purpose of the project was successfully accomplished because statistically significant changes in understanding and knowledge were measured upon the conclusions of the sermon series and membership class.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

Five goals were set at the outset of the project to guide the project to a successful completion. The goals were accomplished sequentially, and each goal served a unique purpose in the overall scope of the project.

Goal 1

The first goal was to assess the current understanding of church membership among new and existing members of CBC. This goal was accomplished by creating and administering an inventory to a wide swath of active members. Seventy-five members agreed to complete the inventory and fifty-five did. Although fifty-five members represent approximately 20 percent of morning worship attendance, a larger response would have helped ascertain a clearer assessment of CBC's understanding of church membership.

Respondents were not randomly selected to take the inventory, which may have also skewed the data to some degree. Members could sign-up voluntarily. Members volunteering and agreeing to complete the inventory, on average, were amongst the most active members of CBC in terms of attendance and involvement. Active church members likely view church membership differently than less committed members. Inventory results may have been different had a truly random sample of members been taken.

Despite the limitations mentioned, the goal was successfully completed because the minimum number of required inventories were submitted. Overall, the data revealed few major surprises. Agreement with biblically aligned statements was common, even on potentially divisive matters, such as practicing biblical church discipline, the importance of tithing, and identifying and using spiritual gifts. Ninety-six percent of respondents even "somewhat agreed," "agreed," or "strongly agreed" with the statement, "Church

members should attend business meetings.” It was outside the scope of this project to measure actual practice.

Goal 2

The second goal was to develop a six-week sermon series on biblical church membership. The aim of sermon 1 was to make the case that membership is implied in the New Testament. The aim of sermons 2-6 was to share five basic membership expectations. The goal was successfully met when the pastoral panel evaluated the sermon manuscripts and indicated the sermons met or exceeded the required sufficiency level.

The pastoral panel was composed of five pastors of varying age, ministry experience, and level of education. All five provided unique perspectives about sermon content. The feedback was encouraging and helpful. One consistent theme was the need for more illustrations. Overall, the feedback improved the quality of each sermon in the series.

Goal 3

The third goal was to increase the knowledge of new and existing church members by preaching the sermon series. To measure for an increase of knowledge, members were asked to take identical surveys before the first sermon and after the final sermon. Of the members that agreed to take both surveys, twenty-four submitted surveys that could be matched and used for evaluation. A larger number of surveys submitted for use could have provided a clearer assessment of the effectiveness of the sermon series.

Respondents were not randomly selected to take the surveys. As with the inventory, members voluntarily agreed to participate. Although the t-test revealed a positive, statistically significant change between pre- and post-surveys, several factors may have contributed to the smaller-than-desired mean score increase. First, the six sermons in the series were not preached in consecutive weeks. Two sermons were preached, followed by a one-week break, followed by the final four sermons. The one-

week break was due to an unforeseen and unavoidable situation that prohibited the third sermon being delivered as scheduled. The rhythm of the series was affected, and the length of the series stretched an additional week. Second, some of those taking both surveys were not in attendance all six weeks of the sermon series. Though sermon audio was available online, it is unlikely that all twenty-four respondents listened to all six sermons. Third, seven weeks passed between the completion of pre- and post-surveys, which is a lengthy time to retain information.

Goal 4

The fourth goal was to develop a four-hour curriculum for a membership class. The aim of the membership class curriculum was to orient new and potential members to CBC in ways previously discussed. The goal was successfully met when the panel evaluated the curriculum and indicated the curriculum met or exceeded the required sufficiency level.

The panel was composed of the two associate pastors of CBC, seven CBC deacons, and one seminary professor. Each evaluator brought a unique perspective and most provided substantive feedback. The feedback was encouraging and improved the quality of the curriculum.

Goal 5

The fifth goal was to increase the knowledge of new and existing church members by launching the membership class. To measure for knowledge increase, members were asked to take identical surveys before the class began and after the class concluded. The goal was successful because the t-test revealed a positive, statistically significant increase in knowledge.

The four-hour membership class was held on a Sunday afternoon and included dinner for the participants. Only members were allowed to participate in the class. Of the

twenty that voluntarily signed-up, nineteen attended. All nineteen were present for the duration of the class.

Strengths of the Project

This ministry project was multi-faceted and had wide-reaching effects. While not everything during the project went as planned, four aspects could be considered strengths.

Raised Expectations

If the project accomplished nothing else, membership expectations were raised, which is positive and is a step toward changing the membership culture of CBC. Expectations were raised through the sermon series and through the launch of the membership class. Five expectations were communicated in multiple ways over the duration of the project: believe, gather, belong, contribute, go. These five expectations are simple, biblical, and achievable for nearly any person who truly desires to be an active, functioning member. The introduction of the membership diagram served as a visual reminder of the expectations and will be used as the expectations are shared in the future.

Established a Starting Point for Formalized Membership Expectations

Although the scope of the project did not include the church voting to affirm membership expectations or the writing and adoption of a church covenant, the five membership expectations communicated can serve as a starting point for future conversations about these important steps. The formulation of a church covenant is a major step toward the recovery of biblical church membership. Patience is advised. By introducing the five expectations during the sermon series and by continually sharing them via the membership class and on other occasions, these expectations will slowly become part of the fabric of CBC. As a result, the adoption of a church covenant at a future date may face less resistance.

Established Membership Class

Of the varied benefits CBC experienced as a result of this project, the launching of the membership class may prove to bear the most fruit long-term. As of this writing, plans are in place to offer the class on a quarterly basis in the future.

In addition to submitting pre- and post-surveys, participants provided invaluable feedback and suggested ways to improve the class. Before the class is offered again, the curriculum will be revised. Ongoing revision will be necessary to ensure the class remains fresh and relevant.

One of the primary strengths of the membership class is the relaxed atmosphere that is conducive for casual interaction between new or potential members and the pastor. The class also provides an excellent platform for the pastor to informally communicate the church's mission, vision, core values, and other vital information about the church. The relaxed, informal setting of this project's membership class proved an effective setting for learning. The membership class registered a mean score increase of 1.11, while the sermon series mean score increased by only .57.

Sparked Discussion about the Problem of Inactive Members

A final strength of the project was the conversation sparked concerning the problem of CBC's inflated membership roll. As mentioned, hundreds of members on the roll do not attend. While the BCMI results revealed disagreement on what to do with inactive members, thought and conversation about the problem is positive despite not reaching a consensus. Cleaning up the membership roll was not part of the scope of this project, but groundwork was laid if CBC desires to take this course of action in the future.

Weaknesses of the Project

With any project of this nature, strengths are typically accompanied by weaknesses. The project could have been stronger if the following four weaknesses had been anticipated and addressed before the project was implemented.

Members-Only Membership Class

Only CBC members were allowed to participate in the membership class. The decision to allow members only was made because the inaugural membership class was viewed as an experiment of sorts, a trial run. Knowing that only members of CBC would be part of the class permitted a certain level of “comfort” to settle in, knowing the class participants were likely already familiar with most of the instruction. Had potential members of CBC been part of the class, a different mindset and even vocabulary would have been required. With potential members, no assumptions could be made. In hindsight, a mixture of members and potential members would have made the class better. Future classes will likely be comprised of potential members or members who have recently joined.

Next Steps Follow-Up

The final minutes of the membership class were spent walking participants through “Next Steps,” or ways participants could respond to the instruction they had received during the class. Participants were encouraged to indicate on the “Next Steps” card included in their binder what, if any, steps they would like to take. Participants could request to speak to a pastor about salvation or church membership. Participants could indicate the desire to learn more about Sunday school classes or ways to get involved. Since only members were in the class, the assumption was that no one would indicate any next steps. Multiple members, however, indicated on the card their desire to take next steps. No systems or structures were in place to follow-up or walk people through the various steps they wanted to take. Anticipating responses to the Next Steps segment is critical before the membership class is offered again.

Appeal to Non-Members

The audience in mind for the majority of the “Meaningful Membership” sermon series was the current membership of CBC. With the exception of sermon 1, “The Case for Church Membership,” the five sermons that followed had strictly members in

view. While members benefited from hearing instruction on membership expectations and responsibilities, prime opportunities were missed for engaging non-members not only with the gospel but also with exhortations to become members. An appeal was made to believing non-members at the end of the first sermon, but little else was mentioned throughout the remainder of the series. The sermons could have been prepared in such a way to appeal to members and non-members alike. An allotment of time in each of the six sermons asking non-members to commit to church membership could have made the series stronger and more applicable to everyone in the audience.

Survey Participants

As mentioned previously, survey data was possibly skewed because of the natural tendency active and involved members have to volunteer. When active members hear of ways to help at church, whether filling ministry gaps or filling out surveys, they are often the first to sign-up. Survey participants from this project included the most active members of CBC. While grateful, of course, for their help, their views of membership are likely different from those active but less involved members. One weakness of the project was the failure to get a truly random sample of members to fill out surveys.

In addition to securing a more random sample, an increased number of participants could have proved helpful, especially for the sermon series surveys. Although over forty members completed both sermon series surveys, only twenty-four were able to be used. The remainder of the surveys were unusable because matches between the pre- and post-surveys could not be found.

What I Would Do Differently

If given the opportunity to repeat the project, improvements inherent to each weakness mentioned would naturally lead to changes. Non-members would be allowed to participate in the membership class. More preparation would be done to anticipate next

steps. All six sermons in the sermon series would be directed to members and non-members alike. Securing a more random sample plus more survey participation would be attempted. These four improvements plus the four changes listed next would further strengthen the project.

Enlist a Membership Class Assistant

The successful planning and implementation of a single day, four-hour membership class requires a lot, logistically. From printing materials to getting the room set-up to arranging dinner for participants, these things and more require careful planning and execution, if they are to be done with excellence. Even though I will continue to do the majority of the teaching, sharing the burden of the planning, implementing, and following-up can effectively be done by a membership class assistant. The assistant will commit to assisting me in all aspects of the class.

Enlisting such an assistant has multiple benefits. The assistant will begin to take ownership of the class, and I will feel less burdened. Class participants will also be able to get to know another key leader in the church, because a non-staff member will be present during all classes. If the project could be started again, a membership class assistant would be identified and invited to be part of the class.

Shrink the Membership Class Size

The membership class size was capped at twenty and nineteen attended. While there are some advantages to a class of twenty—more people hear the gospel and more people are oriented to the church, to name two—a smaller class would create a more intimate setting. Ten to fifteen may be the ideal size to maximize the effectiveness of the class. If a purpose of the class is to create an environment in which potential members can casually and comfortably interact with the pastor and with other new or potential members, then ten to fifteen would be more likely to accomplish that purpose.

Of the nineteen members that attended the membership class, approximately half to two-thirds verbally engaged at some point during the four-hour class. The newer and more introverted members may have felt intimidated to speak or ask questions in a class of nineteen. Experimenting with class size during future classes will eventually lead to an understanding of the optimal class size.

Plan a Commitment Day

The intended audience for the “Meaningful Membership” sermon series was primarily active members of CBC. As previously noted, opportunities to encourage believing regular attenders (but non-members) to formally commit to CBC were not maximized. If given the chance to re-work the project and sermon series, planning a membership informational meeting followed by a commitment day could have significantly improved the project’s impact and outcome.

The membership informational meeting could have been planned for the week before the final sermon in the series was delivered. All those considering membership would be invited to attend the meeting with a special push to encourage believing regular attenders (but non-members) to participate. During the meeting, the biblical basis for membership could be explained followed by how membership is granted at CBC. Non-members ready to join could then set-up another time to meet individually with the pastor before the following Sunday.

The next Sunday would be commitment day—the final day of the sermon series and the day set aside for those desiring membership. If multiple individuals, couples, or families presented themselves for membership, the church could celebrate the decisions made as well as the importance and significance of what had been taught in the series leading up to the conclusion.

Develop a Strategic Plan

The sermon series and membership class were major steps toward the recovery of the biblical model of church membership at CBC. As good as these steps were, however, one sermon series and one membership class will not bring permanent change to the existing membership culture. More work is needed.

A one-, three-, and five-year strategic plan outlining additional steps and goals to reform and revive the membership culture at CBC could greatly benefit the church and ensure that the work done as part of this project will continue to bear fruit. The strategic plan was outside the scope of the project; in hindsight, however, such a plan is an integral part of the project's long-term success.

Theological Reflections

The underlying conviction propelling this project, and subsequently, the attempt to restore a biblical understanding and practice of church membership, is the conviction that the local church is God's design, is important to Jesus, and flourishes when functioning as Scripture guides. If God's design for the church is flawed or if the church matters little to Jesus, then this project is for naught. Biblical and theological evidence suggests, however, that the church is paramount in God's mind and was instrumental in why Jesus came. Church membership, then, is also important.

Jesus Loves the Church

The church matters because the church mattered to Jesus. In fact, Paul writes, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25). If the church was unimportant to God or if God cared little about the church, then the church would be unimportant to Jesus, because He is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) and He has "made him known" (John 1:18). Jesus not only cared about the church, but He loved the church and died on behalf of the church.

Before departing Ephesus, Paul summoned the church elders and gave them final instructions: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the

Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28). Context reveals the flock is the local church. Paul further exhorts the elders to “care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Jesus’ death on the cross demonstrates the extent of His care and love for the church.

Jesus is Head of the Church

Local churches do not ultimately belong to pastors or deacons or wealthy and generous benefactors. Jesus understood His relation to the church when He asserted, “I will build my church” (Matt 16:18). Paul echoed Jesus when he declared, “And he is the head of the body, the church” (Col 1:18). The church belongs to Jesus. He governs and leads.

Jesus is the head. The church, then, is described as His body. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Cor 12:27). Members of the church are united under the authority and headship of Jesus and together gather in His name.

Jesus Promises to Build the Church

Jesus not only loved the church, but He also promised that the church would be built: “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18). Jesus does not promise the flourishing of every local church—some churches fold and do so for a variety of reasons. Rather, Jesus promises the church universal will prosper and will, in the end, accomplish all that God intends and plans. Aligning oneself with the church is wise.

Jesus acknowledges the building and flourishing of His church will not be without conflict. Pastors and those involved in ministry understand the satanic opposition “the gates of hell” mount against the church. Little in ministry is easy, including moving a local church toward the recovery of a biblical understanding and practice of church membership. The enemy prefers inflated membership rolls and lackadaisical approaches

to membership. Inactive, uninvolved members rarely sound the alarm or appear on the radar of the enemy. Churches where membership is meaningful, however, should prepare for battle, believing the promises that Jesus will build His church and that “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18) is rightfully His.

Personal Reflections

This ministry project was arduous at times but worth it in the end. Final reflection of the process and project yielded a renewed appreciation for the local church, for CBC, and for my calling as a pastor.

Kindled Love for the Local Church

The local church is the gathering of God’s people in a particular location at a particular time. The gathered covenant together before God and commit to worship, proclaim the Word, observe the ordinances, share life, and serve one another and others in love. The church in the early chapters of Acts and local churches in existence today are all united by the same saving gospel—the good news that Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected in order that sinners may be saved to the glory and praise of God.

Local churches come in all shapes and sizes. They are similar but also diverse. Polity, worship style, denominational affiliation, beliefs, and practices all vary from local church to local church, but all gospel believing local churches share in “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:5-6).

This project has kindled within me a refreshed love for the local church. Local churches can be messy, but the mess is never reason enough to abandon what God has designed. Local churches are the instruments God uses to reach communities, counties, states, and nations with the gospel of grace.

Kindled Gratitude for CBC

The members of CBC exhibited an inordinate amount of grace, patience, and willingness to help me during the planning and implementation of this project. Without the

prayers, encouragement, and support of CBC, the project could not have been completed. It truly was a group effort. I would like to extend gratitude and thankfulness to each member who prayed for me, listened to sermons, attended the membership class, completed surveys, offered an encouraging word, or helped in any other way. Members of CBC are loving, caring, and exemplify all that is good about the local church. CBC was an excellent church in which to carry out this ministry project.

Kindled Appreciation for Being a Pastor

The work of the pastor is demanding but fulfilling, exhausting but energizing, challenging but simple. “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you,” Peter wrote to a group of pastors. Shepherding, he continued, is to be done “willingly” and “eagerly” (1 Pet 5:2). Shepherding sheep and shepherding people are not all that dissimilar. The daily grind of pastoral ministry is a labor of love and consists of both the giving of the gospel and the giving of one’s own life (1 Thess 2:8).

Laboring to complete this project kindled a deeper appreciation for the work God allows me to do as a pastor. Church membership is important, and it was a joy to work alongside the members of CBC in this endeavor. I am thankful for His calling and for the grace to do what He asks.

Conclusion

A biblical understanding and practice of church membership is needed in every local church. The aim of this ministry project was to bring such an understanding to Central Baptist Church in Paris, Kentucky.

Changing the membership culture of CBC was not feasible over a fifteen-week ministry project, but strides were taken to begin the process. The “Meaningful Membership” sermon series combined with the inaugural membership class not only raised awareness of the importance of membership, but also raised membership expectations. The

membership class will be offered on a quarterly basis in the future to ensure that new and potential members are thoroughly oriented to CBC's beliefs, practices, and expectations.

More work is needed if the membership culture is to be further reformed. The inflated membership roll remains a problem. No church covenant has been written or affirmed. At this point, many members would be unable to articulate the five membership expectations as presented in the sermon series and membership class. By God's grace, these problems will be addressed in the future.

God used this ministry project to bring a positive change to the membership culture of CBC. Training members with a biblical understanding and practice of church membership was a worthwhile project and a project that was needed. It is my prayer that God will be glorified as members further grasp the duties, responsibilities, and privileges that accompany membership in the local church.

APPENDIX 1

BIBLICAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP INVENTORY (BCMI)

Agreement to Participate

The survey in which you are about to participate is designed to assess the understanding at Central Baptist Church of the biblical basis for church membership. The research is being conducted by Steven Scherer for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. By completion of this survey, you are providing informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

The first section of the survey will obtain some demographic information about the individuals taking this survey.

1. What is your age?

- 18-35
- 36-50
- 51-74
- 75+

2. How long have you been a Christian? _____

3. How long have you been a member of Central Baptist Church? _____

4. Are you currently serving as a ministry leader, teacher, or discipler of other believers?

- a. Yes
- b. No

5. Have you ever taken part in a new believers/church membership class offered by Central Baptist Church or another church?

- a. Yes
- b. No

6. Have you read *I Am a Church Member* by Thom Rainer?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Directions: Please mark the appropriate answer. The following questions ask you to give your opinion using the following scale:

- SD = strongly disagree
- D = disagree
- DS = disagree somewhat
- AS = agree somewhat
- A = agree
- SA = strongly agree

- | | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 1. The Bible places a strong emphasis on church membership. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 2. Church members should attend business meetings. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 3. The Bible teaches that only Christians can be church members. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 4. Baptism by immersion is a requirement for church membership. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 5. A non-resident church member (who lives too far away from church to regularly attend) should remain on the membership roll if he/she wishes. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 6. Church discipline is a biblical concept. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 7. If you were to move, you would join another church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 8. Church membership is important to me. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 9. A church member should financially support his/her church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 10. The Bible teaches that every church member is vital to the health and flourishing of the church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 11. Church members should regularly attend the main worship gathering of the church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 12. All church members have the responsibility to serve in and through the church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 13. God has given all church members at least one spiritual gift. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 14. The Bible instructs church members to submit to pastoral oversight and leadership. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

15. I can identify the spiritual gift God has given me.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
16. A resident, inactive church member (who lives close enough to attend church but does not attend) should remain on the membership roll if he/she chooses.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
17. Fellowship amongst church members is important for church health.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
18. Church members are accountable to the church for his/her actions and lifestyle decisions.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
19. All Christians should be church members.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
20. I support church discipline in certain circumstances (such as in the case of blatant and unrepentant sin that is public in nature).	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
21. I can make the case from the New Testament that church membership is a biblical concept.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
22. Church members should regularly observe the Lord's Supper.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
23. Church discipline is a biblical concept.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
24. The Bible instructs church members to encourage one another.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
25. I need help discovering my spiritual gifts.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
26. Church members should attend worship services three times each week, including Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
27. Inactive church membership is spiritually dangerous.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
28. The Bible teaches that some church members are more important than others.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
29. A new member class could benefit new and prospective members.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
30. Church members should be part of a Sunday School class or small group.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

APPENDIX 2

SERMON SERIES RUBRIC

Biblical Church Membership Sermon Series Evaluation 1 = insufficient; 2 = requires attention; 3 = sufficient; 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Biblical Faithfulness					
The content of the curriculum is hermeneutically sound. All Scripture is properly interpreted, explained, and applied.					
The content of the curriculum is theologically sound.					
Scope					
The sermons sufficiently cover the New Testament's teaching on church membership.					
Overall, the sermons are clearly presented and will be helpful.					
Methodology					
The series sufficiently addresses the biblical basis for church membership					
The sermon series makes use of illustrations, quotes, and refers to helpful books on the subject.					
Practicality					
The series includes application and relevance to today's context.					
At the end of the series, the congregation will have a greater understanding of church membership.					

Additional Comments:

APPENDIX 3

PRE- AND POST-SERMON SERIES SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

The survey in which you are about to participate is designed to access the understanding at Central Baptist Church of the biblical basis for church membership. The research is being conducted by Steven Scherer for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. By the completion of this survey, you are providing informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

You will be asked to take this survey twice—once before the sermon series begins and once the series is over. In order to measure any change in your understanding of church membership, it is vital that you agree to complete both surveys.

Date: _____

Four Digit Code (last four #s of SSN): _____

The first section of the survey will obtain some demographic information about the individuals taking this survey.

1. What is your age?

____ 18-35

____ 36-50

____ 51-74

____ 75+

2. How long have you been a Christian? _____

3. How long have you been a member of Central Baptist Church? _____

4. Are you currently serving as a ministry leader, teacher, or discipler of other believers?

a. Yes

b. No

Directions: Please mark the appropriate answer. The following questions ask you to give your opinion using the following scale:

SD = strongly disagree

D = disagree

DS = disagree somewhat

AS = agree somewhat

A = agree

SA = strongly agree

- | | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 1. Church membership is implied in the New Testament. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 2. Church membership entails regularly gathering with the church for worship, mutual encouragement, and partaking in baptism and the Lord's Supper. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 3. Church membership entails contributing to the work of the church by praying, serving, and giving. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 4. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) is the mission of the church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 5. Spiritual growth flourishes in the context of small groups. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 6. When church members fail to use their spiritual gifts, this hinders the effectiveness and ministry impact of the church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 7. Church membership helps determine the boundaries of the church, signaling who has formally committed to the church and who has not. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 8. Church membership helps allow pastors to identify who they are to shepherd. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 9. Church membership allows for the practice of church discipline. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 10. Church membership is a gift we should treasure. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 11. A pastor will give an account before God for the souls of those church members in his congregation. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

12. Church membership entails going to our neighbors and the nations with the good news of the gospel.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
13. When a church member misses church, he/she deprives others of the ministry they may need to receive from the absent church member.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
14. It is spiritually dangerous to consistently skip church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
15. Regular synagogue attendance on the Sabbath was a priority for Jesus.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
16. Spiritual isolation is detrimental to our spiritual health.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
17. Deep friendships were important to Jesus.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
18. Praying for my church is important.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
19. In the New Testament, a church's membership is comprised of believers only.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
20. Spiritual gifts are given by God to church members so that the church may be built up.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
21. Churches should expect things from their members.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
22. Church membership entails belonging to a small group which provides the most conducive atmosphere for growth in discipleship.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

APPENDIX 4

MEMBERSHIP CLASS CURRICULUM RUBRIC

New Member Class Curriculum Evaluation					
1 = insufficient; 2 = requires attention; 3 = sufficient; 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Biblical Faithfulness					
The content of the curriculum is hermeneutically sound. All Scripture is properly interpreted, explained, and applied.					
The content of the curriculum is theologically sound.					
Scope					
The curriculum sufficiently covers doctrinal distinctives, membership expectations, and other vital information about CBC.					
Overall, the lessons are clearly presented.					
Methodology					
The curriculum will be taught in a manner conducive to learning.					
The curriculum makes use of various learning approaches such as lecture, discussion, case studies, and homework.					
Practicality					
The curriculum includes opportunities to interact with the teacher.					
At the end of the course, participants will be better equipped to serve as members of CBC.					

APPENDIX 5

PRE- AND POST-MEMBERSHIP CLASS SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

The survey in which you are about to participate is designed to access the effectiveness of the new member class. The research is being conducted by Steven Scherer for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. By the completion of this survey, you are providing informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

You will be asked to take this survey twice—once before the new member class begins and once it is over. In order to measure any change in your understanding of what is being taught, it is vital that you agree to complete both surveys.

Date: _____

Four Digit Code (last four #s of SSN): _____

The first section of the survey will obtain some demographic information about the individuals taking this survey.

1. How long have you been a Christian? _____
2. How long have you been a member of Central Baptist Church? _____
3. Are you currently serving as a ministry leader, teacher, or discipler of other believers?
 - c. Yes
 - d. No
4. Have you ever taken part in a new believers/church membership class offered by Central Baptist Church or another church?
 - c. Yes
 - d. No
5. Where you present for the entirety (four hours) of the new member class? (Post Survey only)
 - c. Yes
 - d. No
6. If “no,” how many of the four hours did you miss? _____

Directions: Please mark the appropriate answer. The following questions ask you to give your opinion using the following scale:

SD = strongly disagree

D = disagree

DS = disagree somewhat

AS = agree somewhat

A = agree

SA = strongly agree

- | | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 1. I'm familiar with the content of the Baptist Faith and Message. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 2. I can identify our church's mission. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 3. I have a basic knowledge and understanding of the Cooperative Program. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 4. Our church believes the Bible is inspired, inerrant, and authoritative. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 5. I understand and can communicate the gospel. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 6. I know what our deacons do. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 7. I know how to reach our church staff. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 8. I can identify our church's vision. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 9. I'm familiar with the work of the Central Kentucky Network of Baptists. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 10. I can identify the two ordinances of our church. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 11. I know which Sunday School classes are available for me to attend. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 12. I can identify ways our church reaches out to our community. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 13. The names Annie, Eliza, and Lottie mean something to me. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 14. I can identify our church's core values. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 15. I'm familiar with the work of the Southern Baptist Convention. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

16. I can identify the five membership expectations of our church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
17. I know the three main ways I can contribute to the work of our church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
18. I know what our church believes about key doctrines.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
19. I'm familiar with the church budget.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
20. I can explain the meaning of our church logo.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

APPENDIX 6

BIBLICAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP
INVENTORY RESULTS

Table A1. Inventory results

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The Bible places a strong emphasis on church membership.	4%	0%	2%	11%	46%	37%
Church members should attend business meetings.	2%	0%	2%	13%	39%	44%
The Bible teaches that only Christians can be church members.	2%	4%	0%	13%	44%	37%
Baptism by immersion is a requirement for church membership.	0%	5%	9%	15%	38%	33%
A non-resident church member (who lives too far away from church to regularly attend) should remain on the membership roll if he/she wishes.	7%	27%	22%	18%	22%	4%
Church discipline is a biblical concept.	0%	0%	0%	9%	44%	47%
If you were to move, you would join another church.	0%	2%	0%	7%	27%	64%
Church membership is important to me.	0%	0%	2%	4%	20%	74%
A church member should financially support his/her church.	0%	0%	0%	2%	27%	71%
The Bible teaches that every church member is vital to the health and flourishing of the church.	0%	0%	0%	2%	35%	63%
Church members should regularly attend the main worship gathering of the church.	0%	0%	0%	4%	36%	60%
All church members have the responsibility to serve in and through the church.	0%	0%	0%	6%	36%	58%
God has given all church members at least one spiritual gift.	0%	0%	0%	2%	40%	58%
The Bible instructs church members to submit to pastoral oversight and leadership.	0%	2%	3%	15%	55%	25%

Table A1 continued

I can identify the spiritual gift God has given me.	0%	4%	2%	36%	33%	25%
A resident, inactive church member (who lives close enough to attend church but does not attend) should remain on the membership roll if he/she chooses.	5%	33%	27%	22%	11%	2%
Fellowship amongst church members is important for church health.	0%	0%	0%	0%	40%	60%
Church members are accountable to the church for his/her actions and lifestyle decisions.	0%	2%	2%	18%	49%	29%
All Christians should be church members.	0%	0%	2%	18%	41%	39%
I support church discipline in certain circumstances (such as in the case of blatant and unrepentant sin that is public in nature).	0%	0%	5%	17%	46%	32%
I can make the case from the New Testament that church membership is a biblical concept.	0%	2%	4%	20%	47%	27%
Church members should regularly observe the Lord's Supper.	0%	0%	0%	4%	38%	58%
I need help discovering my spiritual gifts.	4%	15%	25%	27%	20%	9%
Church members should attend worship services three times each week, including Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening.	7%	11%	18%	31%	22%	11%
Inactive church membership is spiritually dangerous.	0%	0%	6%	18%	31%	45%
The Bible teaches that some church members are more important than others.	47%	35%	9%	5%	4%	0%
A new member class could benefit new and prospective members.	0%	0%	0%	4%	47%	49%
Church members should be part of a Sunday School class or small group.	0%	0%	0%	7%	36%	57%

APPENDIX 7

“MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP” SERMON SERIES MANUSCRIPTS

“The Case for Church Membership” (Sermon 1 of 6)

Today we’re kicking off a new and relatively brief sermon series called “Meaningful Membership” and I realize that probably no one here but me is excited about this. Most of you didn’t get up this morning and think, “I can’t wait to hear the pastor’s sermon today about what it means to be a member of the church.” Church membership is not exactly a *trending topic* anywhere that I’m aware of. We think about church membership when we join the church. We think about membership when it comes to who can vote for the budget at the business meeting. We think about membership when we need to use the fellowship hall for a baby shower. We think about membership when we read the obituaries in the paper and we see that “so and so” was a longtime member of this church or that church.

For most of us when we’re honest, we just don’t give church membership much thought. We like the perks, the occasional benefit, the peace of mind that church membership gives some of us but how many of us have ever considered that there may be more to church membership than the few benefits we enjoy on occasion? Could it be that *expectations* also accompany church membership? Some of you are thinking, “Hold on now, pastor. I didn’t think churches were allowed to *expect* things from their members! I thought the only expectation for membership was walking the aisle and taking a dip in the baptistery?” And for many of us, that is the beginning and the end of what we believe about membership—that’s all we’ve ever known or that’s all we’ve ever been taught. But friends, what if there *is* more to church membership than that? What if God *has* revealed to us in the Bible what church membership is all about?

Most of us would agree that expectations for membership in nearly all organizations we can think of or that we’ve joined are *higher* than the expectations we find when we join most churches, including our own at this point. There’s a good chance when you joined our church you were not asked to agree, at least in any formal way, to a set of expectations. If you’ve joined since I’ve been around you *may* have heard me communicate a brief, verbal list of expectations as we met in my office to talk about membership but I haven’t always done that and the list of expectations I’ve shared over the past few years has not always been the same. We don’t have a membership class right now or even just a sheet of paper with a basic overview of what it means to be a member of a church. There’s nothing, really, when it comes to expressing what we believe or what we think the Bible says about church membership.

And church, I’m becoming more and more convinced that this is a problem because it signals intentionally or unintentionally to me, to you, to our new people that membership in our church doesn’t mean a whole lot to us. *Expectations are not communicated which in and of itself communicates that we expect very little from our people.* Author and motivational speaker Zig Ziglar is attributed with the well-known saying, “If you aim at nothing, you’ll hit it every time.” Author Thom Rainer has said something similar about

churches, “We usually get what we expect and we expect very little!”

If these two guys are correct, which I think they are, the question, “Why a series on church membership?” becomes a bit more pertinent. Two answers to the question, “Why a series on church membership?” First, this series is part of my doctoral studies and developing and delivering this series of sermons is one of a number of things which must be done if I’m to graduate in May, which I really, really hope to do. Second, and honestly more important, this series and our first membership class we’re going to have in November, Lord-willing, is for the health and good of our church. Focusing our attention on membership can lead to greater church health. The healthier our church, the more effective we can be in reaching new people for Christ.

If the Lord-wills, today and over the next five Sundays, I’m going to lay out for us as clearly and as simply as I can some church membership basics. Today we’ll look at whether or not church membership is even found in the Bible and then over the next five Sundays we’ll think about what God expects from us as members of the church. In Micah 6:8 we find the question, “What does the Lord require of you?” and while the answer in that context is a little different, the question itself is a good one and obviously a biblical one! *What does God require of us as church members?* That’s a question we will tackle in the weeks to come.

But for today, our question is this, “Is church membership a biblical concept or is it something some preacher came up with at some point in church history?” If you’re a student of the Bible, then you may know that you won’t find a verse in the New Testament that says, “I beseech ye therefore brethren, joineth your church.” We don’t find that one anywhere. But we also don’t find the word *Trinity* in the Bible. The concept of the Trinity is there, from Genesis to Revelation, and I’m persuaded that the concept of church membership is also there. You won’t find the words “church membership” in a Bible dictionary or Strong’s Concordance but we can make a pretty strong case for it as we examine the New Testament. So we’ll make what some call “an argument from implication.” So here’s our key statement for the day: *Church membership is implied in the pages of the New Testament.* (repeat)

When we’re looking at evidence for church membership, what we’re really after is whether or not the churches mentioned in the New Testament have any formal way of distinguishing who is “in” and who is “out”—who is *part* of the church and who *isn’t*. Pastor and author Mark Dever says it this way—“Church membership is a means by which we demarcate the boundaries of the church.” (repeat) A boundary is a dividing line, it’s a way to signal what is included and what isn’t. If you are a homeowner then you are likely aware of the importance of property lines. If you think property lines aren’t important, begin building something in your neighbor’s yard and you’ll soon discover that property lines matter—at least they do to your neighbor!

So it is with the church. It seems to me as we look at churches in the New Testament, not only do clear boundaries exist but boundaries allow the church to function as God intends. Without boundaries and without church membership, much of what we read about the church in the New Testament makes little sense. Consider how boundaries and church membership shape the following four areas, as they relate to the church:

1) BOUNDARIES ALLOW PASTORS TO IDENTIFY WHO THEY ARE TO SHEPHERD

Thankfully it’s clear in the New Testament the work that God expects pastors to do. But let me ask you this—as *your* pastor, do I have any responsibilities toward you that I don’t have towards, say our friends over at First Baptist? Would they be surprised if I show up at the hospital to visit them when they are sick? Would they allow me to attend their

deacon's meetings uninvited? On Sundays when they have baptisms or the Lord's Supper would it be OK with them if I jump in the baptistery or start passing the bread and juice plates around? If I show up to preach over there without being invited, they'd send me out of there back to you. These are all silly examples because we all inherently recognize that as your pastor, I have specific duties and responsibilities toward you that I do not have towards members of any other church.

What evidence do we find for this in the New Testament? Let's start with Hebrews 13:17: **¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.** We'll come back to the first part of verse 17 in just a moment but I want to zero in on the middle and final part of the first sentence: **for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.** The pronoun **they** refers back to **your leaders** at the beginning of the verse and the context reveals this verse is written to a church or a group of churches. Some of you have heard me say of this verse before, but this verse makes me really *uncomfortable*. According to this passage, God has charged me to keep watch over the souls in our church and based on the authority of Scripture, I will give an account before God for how well I do this. That's enough to make any honest pastor want to leave the ministry and find another vocation! Most of us don't leave the ministry because of this verse but what an incredible responsibility God has given to pastors. But here's the point, church—of which **souls** am I called to *keep watch over* and of which **souls** will I *give an account* for before God? Am I responsible to watch over the souls of those at First Baptist or the souls of those at my home church back in Missouri or the souls of those at Southland or at Spears Mill? Of course not! That'd be ridiculous. *But what sense does this passage make apart from clear boundaries and church membership?* If someone just walks in the door one Sunday am I going to give an account before God for that person's soul? I don't think so. How can pastors obey this passage if there is not such a thing as church membership? When I stand before God, I believe I will give an account for the souls of those who have formally committed to membership *at our church*. I have duties and responsibilities towards our members that that I do not have towards anyone else.

Another passage that speaks to this is 1 Peter 5:1-3: **¹ So I exhort the elders (elder is used interchangeably with pastor in the New Testament—the words refer to the same office) among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.** Twice in this passage Peter identifies those who pastors are to shepherd by using the word *flock*: **shepherd the flock of God that is among you** (verse 2) and **but being examples to the flock** (verse 4). This shepherd and sheep metaphor is fairly common in the Bible to describe the relationship between the pastor and the church. The word pastor means shepherd so the pastor is to shepherd those in the church, the flock. Actual shepherds have duties and responsibilities toward the sheep in their flock that they do not have towards sheep in the next flock over. And so it is with pastors. Boundaries and church membership allow pastors to identify those they are to shepherd.

2) BOUNDARIES ALLOW CHURCH MEMBERS TO IDENTIFY WHO THEY ARE TO FOLLOW

Pastors have duties and responsibilities to those in their flock and the opposite is true—those in the flock have duties and responsibilities towards their pastors and leaders. Sometimes we push back at this but friends, this is what the Bible teaches! So we can accept it and believe it or we can go the Thomas Jefferson route. He had his own version of the Bible with only those teachings he liked. Let's look once again at Hebrews 13:17:

17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Scripture teaches that God places leaders, in this case pastors or elders, in churches to be *lead* and *guide* and *shepherd* and *admonish* and *protect* and *nurture* and *encourage* and *equip* and *serve* those in the flock. Jesus is the head of the church and the pastor submits to the headship and authority of Jesus just as all in the church do. But God designed the church to have a leadership structure for the good and health of the church and the leadership structure God has given to churches includes pastors or elders.

Have pastors in the past abused their leadership? Of course, and as we've seen already, pastors *will give an account* before God for how they steward their responsibility. But we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater when God has spoken about something. Here's the point—do you have the same duties and responsibilities towards me that you have towards pastors of other churches? To use the language of Hebrews 13:18, are you called to **obey** and **submit** to their oversight and leadership? The answer is obviously *no!* God doesn't expect you to do that. But when we formally commit to membership, the membership is to be under the pastoral oversight that God has provided to the church at that time. Pastoral leadership is not totalitarian leadership. Pastoral leadership is godly leadership which is *servant* leadership. Pastoral leadership is *humble* leadership. Godly leaders are committed to leading like Jesus who came not to be served but to serve. How can believers obey Hebrews 13:17 apart from boundaries and church membership? I don't think it's possible. Boundaries allow church members to identify who they are to follow.

3) BOUNDARIES ALLOW FOR THE PRACTICE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

It just gets better and better, doesn't it? Who doesn't like to talk about church discipline? I don't think we can actually talk about church discipline *apart* from boundaries and church membership! Church discipline only makes sense where meaningful membership exists—where members have formally committed themselves to a local church; where, as members we say to one another, as pastor Mark Dever writes, “I am now your responsibility and you are now my responsibility.” That's what membership entails. When we join, we are saying to the leaders and fellow members, “I am entrusting you with my discipleship and I'll do the best I can to help you with your discipleship, as well.”

Most would agree the idea of church discipline has fallen on hard times these days but let's not forget who began the conversation. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 18:15-17: 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.** The point of church discipline is *repentance* and *restoration*. Church discipline gets a bad-wrap because we have a distorted and unbiblical view of love. Love, as defined by our culture, is unconditional acceptance. You love me if you allow me to make any decision that I want, free from judgment. You don't love me if you say that what I am doing is wrong. Friend, that's not love according to the Bible and that's not the way Jesus showed love. In the Bible, real love is doing whatever it takes to help a person follow Jesus and live a life of holiness. Paul teaches in Ephesians 5 that Jesus loved the church and gave His life up for her. Why did Jesus have to give up His life for the church? Because the church is comprised of sinners who have disobeyed God and who need rescue. God doesn't operate on our culture's idea of love—if He did, then Jesus would not have had to die. God calls sin for what it is and the most loving thing we can do is the very same thing.

Jesus says, if your brother sins against you and he won't repent, confront him about it. If he still won't repent, take one or two others with you and confront him again. If he still won't repent, bring the person before **the church**. What **church** does Jesus have in mind if not the local church where there are clear boundaries as to who is *in* and who is *not*? Jesus teaches that if the brother *still* will not repent when he's brought before the church, the church is to treat him as an unbeliever—because he is acting like an unbeliever. We don't expect for unbelievers to repent but we do expect for believers to repent when they are confronted with their sin.

We get a real-life example of this in Paul's letter to the Corinthian church. A man who is part of the church is involved in sexual sin and Paul admonishes the church to expel the man so that he'll repent. They had not done this—in fact, the church was tolerating the man's sin, according to 1 Corinthians 5:1. Let's pick up in verse 2: **² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. ³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.** Then skip down to verses 12-13: **¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."**

It seems to me the Corinthian church had clear boundaries—they knew who was in and who wasn't. Listen to the clarity that pastor and author Matt Chandler brings to this passage: "How can you kick someone 'out' if there isn't an 'in'? If there is no local commitment to a covenant community of faith, then how do you remove someone from that community of faith? Church discipline won't work if local church membership doesn't exist." Boundaries allow for the practice of church discipline.

Finally,

4) BOUNDARIES ALLOW THE CHURCH TO PROVIDE CARE WHERE CARE IS NEEDED

The New Testament has a lot to say about the way Christians are to interact with those outside the faith but we also find a lot about how we're to relate to fellow Christians, and even more specifically, those who are part of our own church family. One passage that comes to mind is Galatians 6:9-10: **⁹ And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. ¹⁰ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.** Galatians is what we call an *occasional letter* which means Paul is writing to a specific church at a specific time for a specific reason. The context of the phrase **the household of faith** seems to point to the local church or churches in Galatia at that time. Paul reminds us that we're to do good to those in our church family.

Another indicator of the boundaries that existed at this time occurs in 1 Timothy 5. Here Paul refers to what seems to be a formal list of widows within the church at Ephesus who receive special care from the church. Let's start in verse 9: **⁹ Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, ¹⁰ and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work. ¹¹ But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry...¹⁶ If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.** So for this

passage to make sense, there must have been a clear boundary as to who was in the church and who wasn't and then there seems to be an even narrower boundary that included this list of widows who are **enrolled** in the widow ministry. Church membership allows the church to direct care where care is needed.

What's interesting about all of these passages that we've thought about this morning is that church membership is not the main point of any of them! As we said from the beginning, we've been arguing from *implication*—church membership is implied and assumed in each of these passages but it's not explicitly stated.

If we're to restore meaningful church membership at our church, we must first be persuaded that the concept of membership is found in the Bible. Not only do I believe the concept of membership is found in the Bible, I agree with author Thom Rainer in his book, *I am Church Member*, that church membership is actually a gift from God to be treasured. Many of you have read that book and you may remember that he makes the case that we often treat membership in the church like membership in a country club—we pay our dues and we receive benefits. He writes, "We join the church to see what we can get out of it. The pastor is to feed us through his sermons. We have specified an acceptable range for the length of his sermon. The music is to fit our style exactly. Any deviations are not acceptable. The programs and ministries are for our benefit. We will determine what we like and don't like. We are members who expect perks, privileges, and service."

Then Rainer lays out another way of operating. "But there is a second option to church membership. It's the biblical option that sees membership as a gift, something to be treasured. We respond to gifts with gratitude. Membership means we have the opportunity to serve and give rather than the legalistic option to do so. Our entire attitude is different when we approach membership the biblical way." That's my prayer for us—that we'll approach membership the biblical way.

For our *church members*, my prayer is that this series will strengthen us and challenge us to treasure our membership as a gift.

For our *regular attenders who are Christians but who are not members*, my prayer is that this series will propel you to membership. Make the commitment. Formalize your part in our church family. What is it that's holding you back? Membership is a biblical concept! It's time move from courtship to marriage!

Finally, to our *guests and others who may attend sporadically*, my prayer is that you'll be challenged first, to come to faith in Christ if you haven't already and second, that you'll consider whether or not membership in our church is where God is leading you.

“Believe” (Sermon 2 of 6)

A couple of months ago, my wife Katie and I were enjoying an evening out together—I believe my mother was in town so we thought we’d take advantage of the childcare we had available to us. Neither of us had ever been to Costco but many of you shop there and we’re always hearing people talk about it. We had never been so we decided to see what all the fuss was about. We’ve been members of Sam’s Club before so we were familiar with how the whole membership thing works—you pay an annual fee which gives you access to the store. Flash your membership card and they let you walk in and then give your membership card to the cashier and then you can check out. And I guess, in theory, your savings at the store over the course of the year helps you recoup the cost of the annual fee. So we, the consumers, give Costco or Sam’s Club *money* to be able to spend *more money* in their stores—that’s a pretty solid business model if you ask me!

We were in the car headed that way and we were talking about how much we’d be willing to spend to get a membership. We didn’t know how much it cost and we hadn’t asked anybody or looked it up online. We decided \$50 or less—that was our limit, we thought that’s about what it cost to join Sam’s Club. It’s good to go in with a budget, right? Dave Ramsey, who’s always in my ear, would be proud. We get there and we go to the customer service counter and the lady begins to talk to us about membership. Now this lady was the right lady for the job—I’d like for her to come talk about membership at our church. She was persuasive. She said belonging to Costco was like belonging to a family. She did all of her shopping there. Her husband worked there, as well. You get travel discounts. You can sign up for bottled water delivery. People shop there for the bacon, which is the best in town, she said. Huggies makes their store brand diapers. And if we’d sign up today, we’d get a \$20 gift card plus coupons in the mail for all kinds of free stuff—beef jerky, bagels, and I can’t remember what else. I was hooked after hearing about the free beef jerky.

We were still undecided at this point so she said, “Go look around the store and then come back and we’ll talk.” So we did and we get back to the counter and we start talking more specifics about membership. Two options—the basic membership level for \$60 and the executive membership level for \$120. Of course, the executive membership level comes with extra perks—including 2% back on all of your purchases. The lady assured us she recouped nearly all of her annual fee last year and that most people go with the executive level and that it’s worth the extra \$60, especially when you take into account the \$20 gift card and the coupons. So, we signed up and of course, we splurged for the executive membership—sorry Dave Ramsey. I walked out of there thinking that we had actually done Costco a favor by signing up. Here’s \$120, Costco, and thank you for the privilege of being an executive member of your store. Costco knows a thing or two about membership, don’t they?

Last week you may recall we began a new series called “Meaningful Membership” and we made the case that church membership is a biblical concept, that churches in the New Testament had clear boundaries for knowing who was *in* and *out*. We argued that many passages about the church in the New Testament simply don’t make sense apart from membership. If you weren’t here last week I’d encourage you to go online and listen to the audio. Today we shift gears and we begin thinking about the question, “What does God ask and require of church members?” Today and over the next four weeks, we’re going to discover *five membership expectations* and we’ll use single words that capture and summarize each of the expectations. We also have a membership diagram that we’ll use to help us to remember each of the expectations.

The first expectation for membership is captured by the word BELIEVE—which goes at the top position of the diagram—by the cross. This expectation is, or should be, the most

obvious to us. Here's a key statement for the day: *In the New Testament, the church is comprised of believers only.* (repeat) This doesn't mean non-members or unbelievers are not welcome in the gatherings of our church—it just means membership is granted to only those that have believed in Jesus. We find this in a number of places but perhaps first and most clearly in Acts 2:42-47:

42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Obviously, we need some context here. The book of Acts begins with post-resurrection Jesus appearing to His disciples before He ascends to heaven. Acts 1:3 says: **3 He presented Himself alive to them after His suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.** Jesus then tells His followers to remain in Jerusalem after He ascends where they are to wait until the promised Holy Spirit descends. Jesus *ascends*, the Holy Spirit will *descend*. Peter and the disciples do what Jesus asks them to do and they assemble in an upper room in Jerusalem—verse 15 says all total there were 120 followers of Jesus at this time. They replace Judas with Matthias which brings us to Acts 2—an incredibly important chapter in the Bible! Because it's here in Acts 2 where the Holy Spirit descends on the Day of Pentecost and indwells these gathered believers in Jerusalem. Take a look at verses 2-4: **2 And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.**

The text tells us the believers are now able to speak in such a way that people from all different nationalities could understand what they are saying in their own native language. According to verse 11, these believers are telling of God's mighty works to all who would listen and according to verse 13, the best explanation the crowd can give for the strange things going on is that the people are drunk.

This accusation and misunderstanding prompts Peter to stand and preach and what a sermon he delivers that day! Peter boldly proclaims to all of the Jews who are listening that day that the day had come that the prophet Joel had predicted hundreds of years before in Joel 2—God will pour out His Holy Spirit. Then Peter goes on and says to the audience that they had played a part in the death and crucifixion of God's Messiah, the Promised One who had come to rescue His people. This Messiah was Jesus and 'you nailed Him to the cross,' Peter says. But Jesus did not remain in the tomb. Just as God predicted in Psalm 16, Peter argues, the Messiah will rise. He will overcome death. Jesus was not just a prophet or a teacher or a good moral man. Jesus was and is God's Son and according to verse 32, **32 This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses,** Peter proclaims. The sermon ends in verse 36: **36 Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.** Upon hearing these words, those in the audience are **cut to the heart**, verse 37 says. The Greek here, according to commentator Darrell Bock, points to "a sharp pain or a stab, often associated with emotion." The audience on that day is profoundly moved and convicted. Utterly broken and they don't know what to do so they ask Peter and the apostles: **Brothers, what shall we do?** Peter says, **Repent and be**

baptized every one of you...receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Friend, repentance is the proper response to God when we are cut to the heart over our sin. *We repent*, we turn from our sin, we have a changed mind about it and at the same time *believe* that Jesus has substituted Himself on the cross for our sin. He took our place. Repentance is a radical reorientation of our lives—Jesus is now the center. He is now Lord and Savior. Then after we repent, we are to publicly profess our faith in Jesus—that Jesus is our Redeemer and our Rescuer and we do this through baptism. Verse 41: **⁴¹ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.**

So now there are roughly 3,120 followers of Jesus which brings us to our passage in Acts 2:42-47. This passage has been described in a number of ways but one commentator has written that it paints “a portrait of the first Christian church.” Not the First Christian Church right beside us, but the first church in existence. Isn’t that remarkable?

Verse 42 describes four common practices that characterized this first church:
⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Those in the church were *first*, committed to listening to and to the teaching of the Word, the *apostles’ teaching*, which certainly centered around the gospel—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The text says they were **devoted** to it. They longed for it, looked forward to it, craved hearing the Word proclaimed. This no doubt formed the centerpiece of the worship gathering at that time. *Second*, they were committed to **fellowship**, the Greek for *koinonia*, which is the sharing of life together, the sharing of one’s spiritual life with others—formed and shaped around Jesus and the gospel. Biblical fellowship involves much more than just small talk about sports or the weather—it’s this deep relational connection that has at its root a shared love for God and His Word. *Third*, those in the church were committed to **the breaking of bread**. Most think this refers not just to sharing meals together in homes but also sharing the Lord’s Supper with one another on an ongoing basis. And *finally*, those in the church were committed to literally, **the prayers**. Some think this points to the set prayers offered in the temple but others believe this points to corporate prayer, the commitment of those in the church to approach the throne of grace together, with one another, at regular times.

What was the result of these commitments? **⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common.** I want to stop us here and point out what hopefully is obvious to us. The people being described here in this part of Acts, the people who are committed to these four practices in verse 42, the people who comprise the 3,120, allow me to ask you something—*are these people believers and followers of Jesus?* Of course, they are! Verse 41 made it clear: **⁴¹ So those who received his word** (those who repented and believed in Jesus, in the gospel, in response to the deep conviction of the Holy Spirit) **were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.** This last phrase is important—**there were added that day about three thousand souls.** To me this implies a boundary—a set number of people who were *in*, so to speak, before this day, and then the 3,000 were added to this existing number. Then we encounter in verse 44 an even clearer reference: **⁴⁴ And all who believed were together.** If this passages truly describes the first church in history, is it not plain for all to see that *in the New Testament, the church is comprised of believers only.* This must always be the first expectation for church membership! There is no

category in the New Testament that I've found at least, for a Christian not associated with a church. Sadly, that's a category we've invented. I do not believe a person can fully follow Jesus apart from active membership and involvement in a local church. This is what is implied in verse after verse, chapter after chapter, book after book in the New Testament!

We see evidence and further proof of our key statement one final time in verse 47. But first let's pick-up in verse 45 and we'll see how the gospel has transformed those who had believed in Jesus: **⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.** How do you explain this apart from the radical change produced by the Holy Spirit? This type of generosity is difficult to make sense of unless these people were believers, unless the gospel had taken root in their souls! **⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people.** And notice the last sentence of verse 47 and see if this doesn't reinforce our point—**And the Lord added to their *number* day by day those who were being saved.** The Lord added to their **number**. A clear boundary.

These folks may not have had all 3,120 members on an Excel spreadsheet in the upper room in Jerusalem, but it seems that they knew who was “in” and who was “out.” Those who were “in” had repented and believed and those who were “out” had yet to do so. Consider a few more texts in the book of Acts that support the idea of what we might call “regenerate church membership,” a fancy way of saying that membership is reserved for believers only.

Acts 4:4—**⁴ But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.**

Acts 4:32—**³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul...**

Acts 5:14—**¹⁴ And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.**

Acts 6:1—**¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.**

Acts 6:7—**⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.**

Acts 9:31—**³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.**

Alright, we get the point! Why belabor this seemingly obvious point that church membership is reserved for only those who have believed? Here's why it's important friends. It's important because when a person joins a church, that church is essentially giving its stamp of approval on the person's salvation. When we allow someone to

become a member of our church we are giving our *endorsement* that the person joining is a Christian.

Is that not, in a sense, what's going on when someone joins? Absolutely that's what's going on! That's why it's so important that we do our very best to discern, as best as humanly possible, if someone is actually a believer *before* we allow them to join our church! Here's the problem, though, friends and this is where our *practice* sometimes contradicts what we say we *believe*. We literally have hundreds of inactive, uninvolved people on our church roll that we consider members who we have not seen for years or even decades, in some cases. Tell me this, what evidence do we find those people have been converted and are following Jesus? How do we know they have been saved? We don't know because they aren't around! Sure, only God knows the condition of the heart, but Jesus has a lot to say about the fruit our lives bear. When we have little desire to be around other believers, when we ignore and disobey the command to regularly gather together with the church for worship and encouragement, when our lives bear little fruit, we are in dangerous territory, biblically speaking.

What's at stake when we allow our membership roll to remain inflated?

1) We *potentially* give inactive, uninvolved members false assurance of salvation.

If this is true, this is an *unloving* thing for us to do. Yes, only God knows the heart. We believe that and affirm that. We also believe and affirm that as Christians, our lives take the shape of Jesus and among other things, Jesus gathered in the synagogue every Sabbath. And the rest of the New Testament affirms the importance, dare I say the *necessity*, of gathering with the church on a regular basis. How do we reconcile this *necessity* with the disregard of this necessity by hundreds of people on our roll? I am not categorically saying that those on our roll who never attend are not believers. They may be and I hope they are—only God knows for sure. What I am saying is that obedience to the commands and principles in Scripture is a better indicator of assurance of salvation.

2) An inflated membership roll *potentially* tarnishes the reputation of Jesus in our community.

God designed the church to be a means of accountability. When we join, what we are saying is, "I am now your responsibility and you are now my responsibility. We're going to help each other follow Jesus faithfully." So for example, if someone on our roll is living in sin and claims to follow Jesus and yet is never lovingly confronted about it by the church and repents, the witness of Jesus is hindered. His name is dishonored and the person brings shame to His reputation. That's a pretty serious thing.

3) An inflated membership roll *potentially* tarnishes the reputation of our church in our community.

The same logic applies here as our previous point. If someone claims to be a member of our church and yet never attends and lives as an unbeliever lives, it says to the community that our church has a very deficient view of what it looks like to follow Jesus. So not only is the reputation of Jesus tarnished, so is the reputation of our church.

4) Pastors must give account for those entrusted to their care.

How can pastors care and shepherd those in the flock when those in the

flock are always absent or can't even be located? Hebrews 13:17 says pastors are: ¹⁷ **keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.**

The first stake we drive into the ground as we consider what the New Testament says about church membership is the necessity to BELIEVE. The New Testament is abundantly clear— *the church is comprised of believers only*. This does not mean that those who have yet to believe are unwelcome at our gatherings—of course not! But it does mean that only believers are allowed into our membership. As we labor to become a healthier church, let us start by affirming this clear expectation we find in God's Word—we welcome those who believe into our church family.

“Gather” (Sermon 3 of 6)

A Gallop poll came out back in April that measured the reasons for why people attend or do not attend church on a regular basis. About 1,500 people all across the United States were interviewed and the results are fairly interesting and worth noting.

Those that attend church at least once a month were asked to indicate how important a number of factors were for why they attend church. They were to mark each factor as being a *major* factor, a *minor* factor, or *not* a factor. Here’s a breakdown of some of what the study revealed:

	<u>Major Factor</u>	<u>Minor Factor</u>	<u>Not a Factor</u>
-Sermons or talks that teach you more about Scripture	76	16	8
-Sermons or lectures that help you connect religion to your own life	75	16	8
-Spiritual programs geared toward children and teenagers	64	21	15
-Lots of community outreach and volunteer opportunities	59	27	13
-Dynamic religious leaders who are interesting and inspiring	54	28	17
-Social activities that allow you to get to know people in your community	49	36	14
-A good choir, praise band, or other spiritual music	38	36	25

I’m not sure if these numbers surprise you or not but to be honest, I was a *little* surprised by how high sermons scored in the poll—three out of four people say the sermon is a *major* factor for why they attend! That’s surprising to me because a lot of people I know prefer *short* sermons—or at least people in *other* churches like short sermons. You all prefer long sermons to short sermons, I know. Some people appear bored in sermons and even occasionally sleep through sermons—again, I encountered those people in other churches I’ve served in. But this poll says 75% of you show up on Sunday mornings largely to hear a sermon. That’s a humbling thing for a pastor to consider.

What about those who do not attend church? And actually, Gallop interviewed people who attended at least monthly growing up but who do not attend at all today. These people were also asked to indicate how important certain factors were for why they no longer attend:

	<u>Major Factor</u>	<u>Minor Factor</u>	<u>Not a Factor</u>
-You prefer to worship on your own	44	21	34
-You don’t like organized religion	36	25	37
-You aren’t very religious	33	32	33

-You haven't found a church or other place of worship that you like	22	24	53
-You don't have time	19	28	52
-You aren't sure what religion is right for you	17	23	59
-You don't like being asked for money when you attend	16	25	55
-Poor health or other problems prevent you from going	10	19	71
-You don't feel welcome when you do attend	9	25	65

This data is actually quite helpful for those of us in the church as we think about ways to reach out to those who do not attend. As I mentioned before, we have a lot of people on our roll who attended at one time but for any number of reasons, no longer do. My heart and hopefully your heart is to see these people re-engage in the life of our church. That's what we want to happen. Imagine how strong our church could be if we had a few hundred more people attending and serving and giving and going.

Regardless of why we actually *do* attend church, we *should* be very concerned about what God has to say about church attendance in the Bible. *Does* God have anything to say about this? Is church attendance an activity that we can opt-in or opt-out of as Christians? *Can a person fully follow Jesus outside active involvement in a local church?* All of these are important questions and the answers we come to will influence how we spend our time on Sunday mornings.

Today I want to introduce to you what I believe is the second expectation that we find for church members in the New Testament. Two weeks we found the word BELIEVE at the top of the membership diagram and today we'll find the word GATHER—beneath and to the right of BELIEVE. As church members, we BELIEVE and we GATHER. In the New Testament, the church is comprised of believers only—that was our key statement last time. Today our key statement is this: *Membership means regularly gathering with the church for worship, mutual encouragement, and partaking in baptism and the Lord's Supper.* (repeat).

Let's take a look at what we find in the Bible. We'll begin with what is perhaps the go-to passage when it comes to the mandate we have for gathering with other believers—Hebrews 10:24-25:

²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

The exhortation we find here **to stir up one another to love and good works** is actually the third of three exhortations we find in verses 22-25 of Hebrews 10. If you back up even further to verses 19-21 we find the author of Hebrews reminding his audience of two spiritual realities that both stem from the person and work of Jesus on the cross. He writes first, in verse 19 of the **confidence** we now have to **enter** into the **holy places**, the very presence of God. We have this confidence not because of anything we've done but only **by the blood of Jesus** which forges **a new and living way** that He opens for us

through *the tearing of the curtain*, or veil in some translations, pointing back to Matthew 27. There the veil in the temple separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies is torn from top to bottom immediately after Jesus is crucified. Now the Holy of Holies, representing the very presence of God and once accessible only to the high priest, can be accessed by everyone Jesus redeems.

The second spiritual reality is found in verse 21, where the author of Hebrews reminds his audience of **the great high priest** they now have who does not sacrifice animals to atone for sins—that practice is now obsolete. This new and final **great high priest** is Jesus who is the once-for-all sacrifice for sins.

With these two realities in mind, three “let us” exhortations follow in consecutive verses: verse 22: **22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith**; verse 23: **23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering**; and finally our verse, verse 24: **24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works**. The first two exhortations are *vertical* in direction as they relate to our relationship with God. Because of what Jesus has done, we’re to *draw near to God* and *remain committed to the truth of the gospel*, which forms the basis of our hope. The third exhortation is horizontal in direction as it relates to our relationship with other believers—because of what Jesus has done, *provoke and encourage others to love and do good deeds*. But not just other believers generally speaking but, according to the context of the letter, other believers who are part of our church.

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.

Commentator David Allen writes that the Greek word translated **consider** points to “careful consideration, thoughtful attention, deep concern” which means, in other words, we’re to really deliberate and ponder how we’re to do what the author of Hebrews exhorts us to do in this verse, which is **to stir up one another to love and good works**. Let me ask us what’s perhaps an embarrassing question this morning—have we ever given much if *any* thought to how we can be a catalyst for an increase in love and good works in the lives of others? How can we encourage and compel people to have more love in their lives and to do more good things in the name of Christ? That’s what the author of Hebrews is after here.

According to verse 24 we’re to **stir up one another to love and good works**. The NIV says we’re to **consider how we can spur one another on** while the King James captures best the jarring effect of the original word: **let us consider how to provoke one another**. The word for **stir up** or **spur on** or **provoke** normally has a negative connotation when it is used—it’s often used in the context of anger or disagreement. Here the use is unusual because it’s used positively and it means to spark or incite more love and more good works in the lives of our fellow church members. We have this exhortation because this doesn’t come normal or natural to most of us.

Here’s another question for us, church—how can we obey this command if we are not *with one another* on a regular basis? I don’t think we can! This is what the author of Hebrews addresses in the very next verse: **25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near**. The audience of this letter lived in a culture and society that was largely hostile and resistant to their faith which is why the author strongly stresses the *absolute necessity* of gathering with one another on a *regular* basis. The author knew that if those in these churches were going to survive and persevere they needed each other! They need the regular interaction and accountability and face-to-face ministry in order to persevere. God did not create us to live isolated from one another! How can we obey this command to **stir up one another** and nearly every other “one another” passage in the New Testament if we do not regularly gather with the church?

Not only are we to **stir up one another to love and good works** when we gather but verse 25 also says we're to **encourage one another**. The word for **encourage** is a general word with a range of meanings including "rebuke, warn, admonish, exhort, and encourage." Most commentators believe that what the author of Hebrews is referring to here occurred in the context of *the main worship gathering* of the church at that time. Sure, that probably looked a little different than it does in our context but the point is the same regardless of how we happen to worship in a particular location or time. We gather together and we do so for *worship*, of course, but we're learning here that *we do so also for the benefit of others*—so that we may minister to and encourage other people. This could lead to a shift in our understanding for why we gather with the church on Sundays.

I'm not sure if you've caught this up to this point. The author of Hebrews is instructing us and reminding us that we have duties and obligations towards one another when the church gathers. If that is true then we must also agree that we don't just gather with the church solely so that we can worship and so that will be ministered to. Let's let that sink in for a moment. The main worship gathering and the time before and after the main worship gathering is not a time for us *only* to sit and soak and worship. Sure, we sit under the preaching of God's Word, which is certainly a means of grace that God has designed to help us grow, and we worship as we sing and pray and give. But let us not keep believing that when we gather, it's only about us and how others are to pour into us. We may be poured into and in fact we should be as others **stir us up to love and good works** and as others **encourage** us but it's also to work the other way around.

Let's think about it another way—what's at stake when we do **neglect to meet together**, when we do not gather when the church gathers? What difference does it make if we decide to stay home one, two, three Sundays a month or when we stop showing up at all? Who is impacted by this? Is it just us or are others negatively impacted, as well? If the author of Hebrews is correct, which he is because God inspired this author to write what he does, when we don't show up when the church gathers, we are actually depriving *others* of the encouragement and ministry that they may need at that particular time. When we're not at the worship gathering, we can't encourage anyone. We can't put our hand on someone and pray for that person. We can't greet anyone. We can't love and serve anyone. Listen to what author and pastor Tim Challies has written about our passage: "This passage does, indeed, warn of the serious consequences of skipping church, but its focus is not what we might expect through our Western, individualized eyes. This passage does not warn us that when we skip church we put ourselves at risk. Rather, it warns us that when we skip church we put other people at risk. *The first sin of skipping church is the sin of failing to love others.*"

This could be a brand-new way of thinking about our gatherings. Usually when we think about skipping church we don't give anyone else any thought. We think in terms of only *us* missing the Sunday School lesson or the sermon or hearing the choir sing. While it's true we miss these things to our detriment, let us also now begin to think of others in our church family that possibly need us to encourage them and minister to them. We need others and others need us.

We posted a great article to our church Facebook page back in August that some of you may have read. The title is "5 Spiritual Dangers of Skipping Church" and it's by Nathan Rose, a pastor in Liberty, MO. He begins the article by saying of the 16 million members on the rolls of Southern Baptist Churches, only about 6 million of them can be found in a church on a given Sunday. He then lists his five dangers: 1) You will miss out on God's primary design for your spiritual growth and well-being. 2) You disobey God. 3) You make a statement to the world that God is not worthy to be worshiped. ("what we spend our time on shows what we truly value" 4) You can't minister to anyone. 5) You skip out on a foretaste of heaven.

Maybe you're convinced this morning of the importance of showing up and maybe you're not. So what about Jesus? What did He have to say about this? Did Jesus do or say anything about our need for gathering with others for worship and encouragement? He does, actually. And it's not what He *says* but what He *does* that's so persuasive in my mind. Jesus simply *assumes* that we'll gather for worship. For example, in Matthew 5 He speaks of offering our gifts at the altar. This is different than our worship experience but it was a worship experience of some sort. Jesus says that if we are offering our gift at the altar and then remember that a fellow brother in the faith has something against us, He says to go and reconcile with our brother and then come and offer our gift. So it's assumed that we'll be gathering for worship. But what did Jesus *practice*? Did He regularly gather with others in the synagogue? He does, actually, and the gospel writer Luke tells us He does. Luke 4 speaks of Jesus beginning His ministry and we find these words in verse 16: **16 And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read.** Apparently, it was the custom of Jesus to be *in* the synagogue *on* the Sabbath. Should it not also be our custom to be with our church family on Sunday?

You may remember that our key statement concludes with something we haven't mentioned. Let's read the key statement once more: *Membership means regularly gathering with the church for worship, mutual encouragement (we've covered this!) and partaking in baptism and the Lord's Supper.* The significance of baptism and the Lord's Supper are often underestimated in many churches. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the two ordinances of our church. An ordinance is a fancy way of referring to a practice that we continue administering until Jesus returns. An ordinance is an outward, visible expression of an inward, spiritual reality.

Both ordinances are given to us by Jesus. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus includes baptism as part of the Great Commission: **19 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.** Baptism is the ordinance that you are to partake in when you first come to faith in Christ—that's the pattern and model we find in the book of Acts and the remainder of the New Testament. Baptism in the New Testament is done by immersing one totally in the water and it represents the union we have with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism is the first and primary way we identify with Christ publicly and it symbolizes our faith and trust in Him. Baptism is our declaration to the world that we belong to Jesus, that He has saved us, and that we follow Him. In the New Testament, faith always precedes baptism. It's never the other way around.

The second ordinance we partake is the Lord's Supper or "communion" as it is sometimes called. Baptism is done *once* after one's conversion while the Lord's Supper is done on an on-going basis. Who told us to practice the Lord's Supper? Jesus did. Paul records the words of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 11:24: **24 and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of Me."** Paul himself then said this in verse 26: **26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.** Just as baptism points to the initial union we have with Christ, the Lord's Supper points to the on-going union we have with Him. The bread we eat represent the broken body of Jesus and the juice we drink symbolizes the blood that Jesus shed on the cross for us.

Both baptism and the Lord's Supper are gospel rich, saturated with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Simply put, when we disregard or abandon the practice of either ordinance, we disobey the direct words of Jesus.

The first stake we drove into the ground as we considered what the New Testament says

about church membership is the expectation to BELIEVE. The New Testament is abundantly clear— *the church is comprised of believers only*. The second stake we drive into the ground as we consider what the New Testament says about church membership is the expectation to GATHER. *Membership means regularly gathering with the church for worship, mutual encouragement, and partaking in baptism and the Lord's Supper*. May the Lord help us to obey His Word.

“Belong” (Sermon 4 of 6)

When you begin reading the Bible from the beginning it doesn't take long to discover that God designed human beings with this *innate* need for one another. It's part of our DNA. It's hardwired in—we can't do anything about it. In order to be healthy, we need to relationally connect with other people. God Himself declares in Genesis 2:18 that **It is not good for the man to be alone**. The context there reveals that God had created Adam but at that time there were no other human beings. So what does God do? He creates a wife for Adam and the very first marriage happens at the end of the second chapter in the Bible. Now keep in mind that sin has *not* entered into the world at this time—that doesn't happen until Genesis 3. Even though God and Adam enjoyed perfect fellowship with one another God knew that Adam needed another human being to connect with so God provides Adam with a suitable companion and friend.

I'm always excited when modern science and research supports what the Bible has been saying all along. Scientists and doctors have known for some time but in recent years a number of studies have been coming out further warning of the dangers associated with *loneliness*. Loneliness is a real problem and it's something that a lot of people struggle with. An article from 2013 cited a study that said that close to 40% of the adults interviewed said they were lonely, up from about 20% in the 1980s. Loneliness is a major cause of depression and alcoholism. Loneliness raises a person's stress hormones and blood pressure. Loneliness undermines the regulation of your circulatory system, causing your heart to work harder than it normally does. Loneliness impairs your immune function and boosts inflammation.

Loneliness even hinders your sleep. A study came out a few years ago which measured brain activity during sleep of lonely people compared to non-lonely people and it was discovered that lonely people are more prone to what is called “micro-awakenings” which “suggests the brain of a lonely person is on alert for threats throughout the night.”

Sadly, lonely people are between 30-60% more likely to experience pre-mature death. I've shared this quote with you before but it's definitely worth repeating. According to John Ortberg, “Researchers found that the most isolated people were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections. People who had bad health habits but strong social ties lived significantly longer than people who had great health habits but were isolated. In other words, it is better to eat Twinkies with good friends than to eat broccoli alone.” Can I hear an amen?!

What about the rise of social media? Surely social media helps loneliness, since it's now easier to “connect” with people? I'm not sure about its effect on loneliness but an article that appeared in 2013 studied Facebook users and the study concluded that the amount of time you spend on Facebook is actually *inversely* related to how happy you feel. Just think about that for a moment. I'm sure there are exceptions to this but the data was conclusive. It would seem that Facebook leads lonely people to feel even more lonely and sad and disconnected.

So what's the answer? God declared the answer in Genesis 2 long before modern scientists began to study this problem. **It is not good for the man to be alone**. We need other people in our lives. You say, “Pastor, what does this have to do with church membership?” I believe it has everything to do with church membership because verse-after-verse in the New Testament points to the *corporate* dimension, the *communal* component of our commitment to follow Jesus. What does that mean? It means that God never intended for us to follow Jesus on our own, isolated from other believers. Just as loneliness is detrimental to our health, spiritual isolation is detrimental to our spiritual health. It's not what God intends.

We discovered last week the GATHER expectation for church membership and the emphasis was upon the importance of showing up for the main weekly corporate worship gathering of the church and we learned how we show up not just to be spiritually fed but also so we can help and invest in others. Our key statement last week was this: *Membership means regularly gathering with the church for worship, mutual encouragement, and partaking in baptism and the Lord's Supper.*

Today we learn our third expectation for church membership and it's captured by the word BELONG. BELIEVE, GATHER, *BELONG*. You'll notice BELONG on our membership diagram—beneath GATHER. Let me explain what I mean by the word BELONG by sharing with you our key statement for the day: *Membership means belonging to a small group which provides the most conducive atmosphere for growth in discipleship.* (repeat) So when we use the word BELONG we're referring to more than simply belonging to the church and showing up for the main worship gathering. Right now in our church we have two types of small groups I believe can potentially provide this atmosphere for growth—Sunday School classes and discipleship groups. These are the groups we offer and the majority of us are already in one of these and a number of people are in both.

Where do we see the necessity of small groups in the Bible? Because you may be thinking, "I don't recall seeing a verse that says, 'join a Sunday School class' or 'be part of a discipleship group.'" And to that I would agree—we don't find those exact words but I do believe we can pretty easily make the case for small groups from Scripture. Consider four reasons for why it's imperative that we BELONG to a small group of believers:

1) Jesus cultivated deep friendships with a relatively small number of people.

As we encounter Jesus in the four Gospels, we may not find many verses where He instructs us to be in a small group but we really find something *better* than Him teaching on this—we actually find Jesus living this out. Jesus modeled for us very well, very plainly, the importance of sharing our lives with other believers. Think about it. At different times in His ministry, Jesus had a multitude of people who wanted to be around Him, all with varying levels of commitment. We see this in a number of ways in Luke 9-10. In Luke 9 we find the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5,000 with only five loaves of bread and two fish. The text actually says there were 5,000 men which means there were likely thousands of others if you include women and children. All of these folks had come out to hear Jesus—they were there for Him. Literally thousands of people. There was no way Jesus could speak personally to all of these people. Everywhere Jesus went He drew a crowd. When you can do the kinds of things Jesus can do, people will always be around. But these crowds were mixed—some believed and followed while others were just there for the show and in this case, for the food.

Within the crowd you had His committed followers—those who had trusted in Him personally and were following Him. In Luke 10 we find Jesus sending out 72 of His followers to preach and serve and minister in His name. Probably Jesus knew all of these by name. At the beginning of Luke 10, we find the instructions Jesus gives to them before He sends them out so we can assume these followers had some individual time with Jesus. We have the massive crowds and we have His followers that He actually knew.

Back in Luke 9 we also find Jesus sending out His 12 Disciples—an even smaller circle. These are men Jesus personally selects to be part of His ministry. Mark 3 says Jesus calls these men so that **they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach.** These men travel around with Jesus nearly everywhere He goes. They witness first-hand the miracles Jesus performs and they hear the majority of His teaching. In a very real sense, Jesus stakes the future spread of Christianity on these men. These men

Jesus knows well and we see the ups and downs of the relationship He has with them in the four Gospels.

Jesus also has personal friends outside of the 12. In Luke 10 we're introduced to a couple of these when Jesus enters into the home of Martha and Mary. Their brother Lazarus isn't mentioned in Luke 10 but we read about him in other places such as John 11. We don't have to wonder how Jesus feels about these friends because John 11:5 tells us: **5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.** Jesus had friends and He modeled the importance of close friendships.

Finally, we can drill down one level further—Jesus has an inner circle of three. Luke 9 records the Transfiguration of Jesus and Jesus takes only three of His 12 Disciples with Him—Peter, James, and John. In Mark 5 when Jesus brings back to life the daughter of Jairus He allows only these same three to accompany Him. Just hours before Jesus is arrested He takes all 12 of His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane with Him to pray but listen to what we read in Mark 14:33-34 about what Jesus does once they arrive in the garden: **33 And He took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. 34 And He said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.”** Jesus shares this incredibly intimate and painful moment with the three men we can assume were His closest friends—Peter, James, and John. This was the ultimate discipleship group! Jesus cultivated deep friendships with a relatively small number of people.

2) Small groups provide the best context for obeying and living out the “one another” passages.

This is really important, church, and I think this is an *underappreciated* benefit of being in a small group. Throughout the New Testament we find almost 60 passages where we are exhorted to act in a certain way towards other people and often the context reveals the other people are fellow believers. You may recall in Matthew 22 where Jesus is asked about the most important commandment in the Old Testament. He quotes Deuteronomy 6:5: **You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.** And then Jesus says there is a second one, and the second one is like the first one and He quotes Leviticus 19:18: **You shall love your neighbor as yourself.** So it's pretty important that we know how to love our neighbor, isn't? Is loving other people simply thinking good thoughts about them and saying hello when we see them at church or at the store or is more in mind? How do we love our neighbors and how do we love other believers? I can't come up with a better answer *than to obey the “one another” passages in Scripture.*

Here are a few examples of what we're talking about:

- Serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13)
- Be patient, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2)
- Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32)
- With humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves (Philippians 2:3)
- Encourage one another and build up one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:13)

You say, “Pastor, these things don't necessarily have to be done in a small group.” And they don't—I'll give you that—but would you not agree these and many others passages like these can be obeyed *best* in a small group, amongst people that we know well and that we often interact with? It's one thing to *hear* a sermon about forgiving one another

and just assenting to the idea of it intellectually; it's quite another thing to actually *grant* forgiveness to a friend that we care about in our discipleship group or Sunday School class who has wronged us in some way. Which leads to greater spiritual growth and maturity—hearing someone teach about being patient with one another and bearing with one another in love or actually practicing these things with that person in our Sunday School class that gets under our skin? Who best should we exhort in order not to be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin? A random person at church that we barely know or a member of our discipleship group who we know well enough that we know specifically which sins the person struggles with? Small groups are fantastic places to obey and live out the “one another” passages. They may even be the best place.

3) Spiritual growth flourishes in small groups.

It *flourishes*. Healthy churches have healthy church members. Healthy church members are committed to discipleship and spiritual growth. If we are *all* growing and maturing in our faith then our church is going to be in a pretty good spot. Listen to Paul describe how we're supposed to live and grow as Christians. Colossians 2:6-7: **6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, 7 rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.** When I read these verses all I think about is growth and discipleship—this process of being conformed to the image of Jesus. Peter writes in 2 Peter 3:18: **18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.** I don't know about you but I want to grow, I want to make progress in my faith!

So here's the question we need to ask—How does a person best situate themselves for spiritual growth and growth in discipleship? The answer is to *be part of a small group of believers who have the same goal*. We need each other, remember? We need others to help us and others need us to help them. But does the research support this claim? *Is there evidence that spiritual growth and discipleship are more likely to occur when a Christian is part of a small groups?* Authors Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger wrote *Transformational Groups* and in that book they compare Christians who were not in any kind of group with those who attended weekly group meetings, which could be a Sunday School class, a discipleship group, or something along these lines. Here are the results:

	Not in Group	Active in group
-I intentionally spend time with other believers in Order to help them grow in their faith	22%	63%
-I am intentionally putting my spiritual gifts to use serving God and others.	42%	73%
-Throughout the day I find myself thinking about spiritual truths.	45%	74%
-Read the Bible	27%	67%
-Pray for my church/church leaders	30%	64%
-Pray for fellow Christians I know	54%	82%
-Do you currently have regular responsibilities at your church?	25%	63%

The percentages are relatively the same for every category that was measured and these were just a few of them. There was a significant statistical difference between those in groups and those not in groups and in *every single case*, those in groups *vastly* outperformed those not in groups. Could it be friends, that God designed us to spiritually flourish when we are intentional about sharing life with other believers? If this is true, why would we not want every member of our church in a group of some sort?

4) If you are not in a small group, you probably will not be part of our church in five years.

So this one isn't in the Bible, obviously, but research supports this. Thom Rainer wrote two books we've read at church the past few years—*I am a Church Member* and *I Will! Nine Traits of the Outwardly Focused Christian*. Rainer isn't the Holy Spirit but his research and insights have proven to be accurate and helpful over the years to many people, including me and some of you. You may remember this from *I Will!* and the chapter "I Will Grow Together with Others": "Church members who became involved in some type of group in the church were five times more likely to be active in the church in five years compared to worship attenders only. More than 83% of those who joined and were involved in a small group were still active but only 16% of those who attended worship services only remained in the church five years later. If you are not in a group, the likelihood of your dropping out of church is high."

The first stake we drove into the ground as we considered what the New Testament says about church membership is the expectation to BELIEVE. The second stake is the expectation to GATHER. The third stake we drive into the ground as we consider what the New Testament says about church membership is the expectation to BELONG. *Membership means belonging to a small group which provides the most conducive atmosphere for growth in discipleship.* It's here where life transformation can occur. It's here where we experience biblical community. It's here where we best share God's Word with one another. It's here where we best model authenticity and transparency. It's here where we best practice accountability. It's here where we best form and cultivate deep, gospel-centered friendships. May God help us to obey His Word.

“Contribute” (Sermon 5 of 6)

One of my first introductions to the idea that *obligations* accompany *membership* occurred when I was in middle school, circa 1995. I have an older brother and a few years before we were given our first CD boom box for Christmas and really from that time on we were just enthralled with music and accumulated as many CDs as we could. One of our first CDs was Diamond Rio’s self-titled album that was released in 1991 that had classics on it like “Meet in the Middle,” “Mirror, Mirror,” and who can forget, “Norma Jean Riley.” Every time I hear that song I go back to my late elementary school days. Another one of our first CDs was Garth Brook’s “No Fences” which went on to sell a few copies. “Thunder Rolls,” “Unanswered Prayers,” “Friends in Low Places” were a few of the songs on there you may be familiar with.

About the time middle school rolled around we began to notice in the mail advertisements for Columbia House and BMG, which were both mail-order CD clubs. And these companies were offering these *amazing* deals—deals that middle school boys who loved CDs just could not pass up. You could get 12 CDs of your choice for a penny or something like that. And you may remember that some of these advertisements would have these little perforated stamps with pictures of the albums on them and when you signed up you’d cut out the stamps of the CDs you’d want or tear them off and then place them in the appropriate boxes. Then you’d send the envelope in and within a couple weeks you’d get this beautiful box in the mail with all 12 of your CDs—it was like Christmas morning. And when you initially signed up you could pay a few more dollars up front and get three or four more CDs included with your 12, which was even better.

We were proud members of Columbia House and BMG—we rotated back and forth a number of times—but we never really cared too much for the *obligations* that came with *membership*. The obligations were always spelled out somewhere on the little card you’d fill out and send in. If you were ever in one of these clubs I know you remember the obligations. You’d have to buy “x” number of CDs at full price over the course of a year or two, which at Columbia House a full priced CD was \$18 or \$19—and that was in the mid-90s—much higher than you’d pay at Walmart. And what was even worse than that, they’d send you an offer in the mail each month and if you didn’t send the offer back with “no” clearly marked, they’d send you a CD and you’d be required to buy it at full price, even if you didn’t like that particular artist or band.

Even though we didn’t like buying \$18 CDs, Columbia House and BMG helped to teach us even then, that *obligations* typically accompany *membership*. Something we all know but something we tend to balk at a little bit when it comes to church membership. “We better not tell someone this upfront because they may not join.” “Let’s not expect too much from our people because they may leave.” “Let’s not be too demanding because people may get upset and find another church to attend down the road.”

Over the past few weeks we’ve been talking about church membership and the expectations we find in the New Testament. Today we discover our fourth expectation for church membership and it’s captured by the word *CONTRIBUTE*. We BELIEVE, we GATHER, we BELONG, and we *CONTRIBUTE*. You’ll see *CONTRIBUTE* on our membership diagram—bottom left corner. Let me explain what I mean by the word *CONTRIBUTE* by sharing with you our key statement for the day: *Membership means contributing to the work of the church by praying, serving, and giving.* (repeat) All three of these components are vital for the health of our church and also vital to the spiritual health of each member of our church. Today we’re going to think about each of these for a few moments together.

We contribute when:

1) We pray for our church and pray with our church.

This one ought to be a given but it's *too* important to just assume. Praying for our church is one of the *best* things we as members can do—it's one of the *easiest* ways we can contribute and it's one of the *most helpful* ways we can contribute. I get so much personal encouragement when I hear you tell me how you've been praying for our church or when I hear you say that you've been praying for me. Please continue to pray for our church and please continue to pray for the leadership of our church. I can speak for the pastors and staff and say that we each desperately need your prayers.

Listen to what Paul wrote to the church in Colossae in Colossians 4:2-3: **² Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. ³ At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the Word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison.** Paul instructs the church to persevere and persist in prayer—to watch and wait on the Lord with an attitude of thankfulness, knowing that God will hear their prayers and God will respond. Wrapped up in this call to **continue steadfastly in prayer** is the call to pray for the church. We know this because Paul has already demonstrated his own commitment to praying for this church in Colossae. After Paul greets the church at the beginning of chapter 1, listen to what he writes next, starting in verse 3: **³ We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴ since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.** Then in verse 9 Paul returns again to this theme of prayer: **⁹ And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.** What a great model for how to pray for our church family!

Back a few weeks ago when we looked at the BELIEVE expectation we were in Acts 2 and you may remember that *praying* was something the early church did often when they were together. The early chapters of Acts are actually *full* of instances of the church praying with one another. Consider just four examples:

-the early church believers *prayed* as they waited for the Holy Spirit to descend Acts 1:13-14—**¹³ And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴ All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.**

-the early church believers *prayed* about who should replace Judas and join the 12 Disciples

Acts 1:23-25—**²³ And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴ And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two You have chosen ²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”**

-Day of Pentecost arrives, the Holy Spirit falls, Peter stands up to preach, 3,000 are converted, and what does the early church do? They *pray*.

Acts 2:42—**⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching**

and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

-Peter and John are imprisoned for their preaching but after they are released, what do they and others in the church do?

Acts 4:31—³¹ **And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.**

Donald Whitney in his book *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church* has this to say about the importance of prayer: “From its earliest days, the church has always been at its best when its people have knelt together. It is very important for us to work in the church so it can prosper. It’s imperative that we give so that the needs of the church can be met. But our work and our money can never do for the church what only the power of God can do. And the power of God never comes upon the church as it does when the church prays.”

So let’s commit to pray, to **continue steadfastly in prayer** for our church! How specifically should we pray? For me, praying Matthew 9:37-38 must be near the top of the list: ³⁷ **Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”** We can and should pray for our church staff. In *I am a Church Member*, Thom Rainer devotes an entire chapter to “I will pray for my church leaders.” He suggests praying for your pastors and their families, for their protection, for their physical and mental health. We need to pray for one another. I’ve heard it said that for church members, after your Bible, your church directory is the most important book you own. We need to pray that people would come to know Christ through the preaching and ministries of our church. We need to pray for all of the ministries of our church—Sunday School, children’s and youth ministries, discipleship groups, anything you can think of as it relates to our church. Please pray!

We contribute when we *pray* for our church and *pray* with our church. We also contribute when:

2) We serve others with our spiritual gifts and talents.

Wrapped up in following Jesus is the call to servanthood. If Jesus humbled Himself and served others, shouldn’t we, as well? Most of us are familiar with Jesus’ words in Matthew 20:26-28—²⁶ **...But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.** So the call to follow Jesus is a call to serve so we shouldn’t push back on this. We do push back on this and I know some don’t like to hear that every church member ought to be serving in some capacity. But friends, if this is what the New Testament teaches, then this is what we should believe *and* expect.

Paul and Peter both agree that all believers have been given spiritual gifts. All believers. Every single one. If the church is comprised of believers only, as we established a few weeks ago, then each member of our church has been given a spiritual gift. Where do we find this in the Bible? Paul writes this in 1 Corinthians 12:7—⁷ **To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.** According to the context of the chapter, the “manifestation of the Spirit” is another way to describe spiritual gifts. Paul says “to each is given.” To each believer. He writes a few verses later that each spiritual gift is individually and personally given to the believer by the Holy Spirit. Verse 11: ¹¹ **All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as He wills.** Isn’t that remarkable? The spiritual gifts we have, have been given to us by the Holy Spirit.

What about Peter? What does he say? 1 Peter 4:10—¹⁰ **Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.** Using our spiritual gifts to serve others is a matter of *stewardship*, according to Peter. A steward is not an owner but a manager—we’re to manage and use well what God gives to us. Peter says we’re to use our God-given gifts **to serve others**. Paul said back in 1 Corinthians 12:7 that we’re given gifts **for the common good**. Not for the individual’s good but the common good and in another place Paul writes that spiritual gifts are to be used to edify and build up the church.

The beauty of the local church is that we all have gifts, we all have different gifts, and every gift is important. Here’s the bottom line, friends—when we refuse to use the gifts God has given to us, we are depriving our church of what our church needs to function best. Paul compares the church to a body in 1 Corinthians 12 and argues that each member, each body *part*, has a function and a purpose—and there’s no mention of the appendix in this chapter so none of us can conclude that we’re not needed. Verses 14 and following: ¹⁴ **For the body does not consist of one member but of many.** ¹⁵ **If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.** ¹⁶ **And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.** ¹⁷ **If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?** ¹⁸ **But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as He chose.** ¹⁹ **If all were a single member, where would the body be?** ²⁰ **As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.** Friend and fellow church member, you have been gifted by God with at least one spiritual gift and our church needs you to use your gift. All of us should be serving and using our gifts in at least one way.

We contribute when we pray for our church and pray with our church. We contribute when we serve others with our spiritual gifts and talents. Finally, we contribute when:

3) We give money to support the mission and ministries of our church.

In the Bible, God speaks unapologetically about the importance of financial stewardship and tithing so we ought to be able to, as well. No shame, no guilt, just the truth today from God’s Word. When it comes to our money and giving, we are often mistaken about the first principle of financial stewardship. We sometimes operate under the assumption that only that which we *tithe* or *give* belongs to God when in fact the first principle of stewardship is that *everything* we have and own belongs to God. David reminds us of this in Psalm 24:1—¹ **The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.** Where does our ability to earn money come from? From God, according to Deuteronomy 8:18—¹⁸ **But remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth.** So let’s start where God starts—it’s all His. All that we have is on loan. All that we have is a gift from a generous God.

To me, this changes the conversation about giving. The conversation changes from “How much do I *have* to give?” to “How generous can I be when giving back to God?” Financial generosity is an exercise in faith and trust in God’s provision. When we give generously back to God to support the work of our local church, we know we have to learn to live with less, which most of us would agree is actually not a bad thing! Paul writes about generosity and giving in 2 Corinthians 9:6-7: ⁶ **The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.** ⁷ **Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.** So while we don’t find a verse in the New Testament which gives us a specific percentage to give, the Old Testament *tithe*, or literally “tenth,” is a great place to start.

Nearly every study I've come across reveals most Christians and church-goers give between two and three percent of their income to their local church. Rather than allocate our giving first and then arranging our budgets from there, many of us arrange our budgets and then give back to God from whatever happens to be left over. Many factors prohibit us from financial generosity—monthly payments from debt, living above our means, shopping and dining out, vacations, keeping up with our neighbors, so forth and so on. Whether we acknowledge this or not, how we spend our money is a key indicator of our priorities. Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart is also.”

We find a striking example of generosity in Mark 12 that involves Jesus, some rich people, and a poor widow. You may remember the incident. Verse 41 and following: **⁴¹ And He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. ⁴³ And He called His disciples to Him and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. ⁴⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”**

Nearly all that we do as a church has a price tag on it. As church members, it is our responsibility and really our privilege to be good stewards of our money and give as generously as we can to support the mission and ministries of our church.

The first stake we drove into the ground as we considered what the New Testament says about church membership is the expectation to BELIEVE. The second stake we drove into the ground is the expectation to GATHER. The third is the expectation to BELONG. The fourth stake is the expectation to CONTRIBUTE. *Membership means contributing to the work of the church by praying, serving, and giving.* We're all called to contribute. May the Lord help us to be faithful.

“Go” (Sermon 6 of 6)

Today we are concluding our *Meaningful Membership* series and we’re doing so by identifying one final membership expectation. We’ve covered a lot of ground over the past few weeks and we’ve done our best to keep things as simple as possible—using single words, in the form of imperative verbs, to communicate the Bible’s teaching about what it means to be a member of a local church. If we want membership to mean something at Central Baptist Church then we must ask of members *only* what God asks of members in the Bible. Meaningful membership is *biblical* membership and the aim of the series has *not* been to heap a lot of extra-biblical obligations on us—no one needs that. I don’t and you don’t. We weren’t designed to carry the weight of more than what we find in the Bible and most of us agree we struggle with obeying what we find in the Bible! When it comes to membership expectations, we don’t want to be too lax and we don’t want to be too stringent—we want to be biblically faithful. We want to ask and expect what God asks and expects. I hope that we’ve all been challenged in some areas over the past few weeks and I pray that God has been using His Word to till up perhaps some tough ground, some deeply entrenched views of membership that perhaps have not been rooted in the Bible.

Membership is reserved for those who BELIEVE the gospel—for those who trust in Jesus for salvation, for those who repent of sin and believe Jesus died and rose again. The church is comprised of believers only. We will not budge on this. Membership means we GATHER with the church on a regular basis for worship, for mutual encouragement, and for partaking in the baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Membership means we BELONG to a small group because small groups provide the most conducive atmosphere for growth in discipleship. If we want to grow, then we need to be in a group—Jesus modeled this and research supports this. Membership means we CONTRIBUTE to the work of our church by praying, serving, and giving. We pray for and with our church family. We serve others as we use our spiritual gifts. And we give of our money to support the mission and ministries of our church.

We BELIEVE, we GATHER, we BELONG, we CONTRIBUTE, and finally, we GO. We’ll find the word GO on our membership diagram—top left corner. Let me explain what I mean by the word GO as I share with you our final key statement: *Membership means going to our neighbors and the nations with the good news of the gospel.* (repeat) I don’t see how we can talk about following Jesus without talking about the Great Commission and I don’t see how we can talk about church membership without talking about the Great Commission. If the mission of the church is the Great Commission and since the church is actually its members, then can’t we assume that church members have the mandate to help the church move towards accomplishing the mission?

“The Great Commission” is what we call the final words and marching orders Jesus gives to His followers at the end of each gospel. Matthew 28:18-20 is perhaps the best-known so we’ll focus our attention here.

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

I don’t think it’s a coincidence in Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus begins and ends His ministry with a call to make disciples. You may remember at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry He identifies and calls two brothers who will be the first of His 12 Disciples. Listen to what Jesus says to them as part of His call for them to follow Him. Matthew

4:18-20: ¹⁸ **While walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen.** ¹⁹ **And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”** ²⁰ **Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.** Did you catch that? *Follow Me*, Jesus says, *and I’ll make you fishers of men*. Apparently, part of what it means to follow Jesus is to help others follow Jesus. Evangelism and discipleship, we might say, go hand in hand, two sides of the same coin.

Fast forward to Jesus’ final words in Matthew 28 and we find Him saying the same thing—make disciples. Let’s think first about the *context* of the Great Commission and then we’ll think through the *content*.

First, the context. The Great Commission doesn’t just appear out of nowhere, right? To really feel the full weight of the Great Commission we need to read all of Matthew’s Gospel if not the entire Old Testament! The entire Old Testament anticipates the arrival of Jesus and the further we make it in the Old Testament the more of a sense we get that God’s heart is not just for the people of Israel. There are a number of hints as we go along and we notice this gradual and progressive shift from God caring primarily about Israel to God caring about Israel *and* the nations. Prophet after prophet looks forward to the time when the nations will all worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This doesn’t seem strange to us but it would seem strange to Israel at that time. We know what God is up to because we have Jesus and the Great Commission—make disciples of *all* nations.

What happens in the immediate context leading up to the Great Commission in Matthew’s Gospel? In Matthew 27 Jesus is crucified. He physically dies and His body is taken off the cross and buried and a large stone is rolled in front of the tomb in order to keep everyone out. Matthew 28 then records how a group of devoted women come to the tomb a couple of days later and discover that Jesus’ body is no longer in the tomb. An angel tells them that He has risen and that Jesus would meet them in Galilee. Jesus then appears briefly to the women and instructs them to tell the disciples to leave for Galilee at once. The disciples do this and Jesus then appears to them there, which brings us to our passage.

That’s the *context*—now, the *content*. Broadly speaking, what does Jesus say we are to do here, specifically in verses 19 and 20? The grammatical structure of these two verses answers this question—*one imperative verb* surrounded by *three participles*. You say, why does this matter? It matters because the grammatical structure tells us *what* we are to do and *how* we are to do it. **Make disciples** is *the what*, the main imperative verb, and **go**, **baptize**, and **teach** is *the how*, the three participles.

Let’s think briefly about each of these four components. First, Jesus says we’re to **make disciples**. If we are to make disciples, we must know what a *disciple* is. The most basic meaning of the word disciple is *student* or *learner*. A disciple is a student or learner so a disciple of Jesus is a student or learner of Jesus. In the Gospels, to be a disciple is to be a follower of Jesus, submitting to Jesus not just as one’s teacher and friend, but as one’s Lord and Savior. Our goal is not just to make converts but to make students, learners, followers of Jesus. Followers of Jesus in the Gospels are those people who Jesus radically

transforms after they encounter Him. Followers are devoted to Him, love Him, commune with Him, abide in Him, and are being changed by Him.

How are we to *make disciples*, based on these verses? The participles tell us to **go**, **baptize**, and **teach**.

So second, we **go**: ¹⁹ **Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.** *Go* or *as we go*, make disciples. *Going* or *as we're going* means we do not remain where we are. We go and we share the good news of Jesus with others. We go and initiate opportunities to be involved in the process of making disciples. Listen to what Steve Sjogren writes: "Most people aren't going to just stumble across our door. They aren't going to, by happenstance, come and see. If there is any hope of our city coming to know Jesus, we must adopt in a wholesale way the motto go and do." Most churches operate today with the "come and see" mentality. We try to make our churches as attractive as possible and we believe that if we offer the right programs or have the right pastor or youth ministry or music that this will attract lost people. Friends, this simply is not the case. The "come and see" attractional model of doing church seldom, if ever, brings lost people through our doors. This mentality may bring believers from other churches but it will do very little to reach the lost in our community for Jesus.

We must go! Listen to what Jesus says in John 20:21: ²¹ **"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you."** Church, it's official and it's formal and it's been recorded in the pages of the Bible—we've been sent! We've been sent to go and make disciples. Listen to what Paul writes in Romans 10:13 and following: ¹³ **for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."** ¹⁴ **How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?** ¹⁵ **And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"** ... ¹⁷ **Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.** If we want to obey the Great Commission, we must go. If we want to help our church accomplish our mission, we must go. If we want to be obedient to Jesus, we must go and we must take the gospel to our neighbors and to the nations.

Third, we **baptize**. ¹⁹ **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.** Baptism is what occurs after one repents and believes. Baptism is among the first steps of obedience for the new disciple. As we're immersed in the water, we identify with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus—publicly declaring that we have died to our old self and we're raised to walk in the new life Jesus gives us.

We make disciples. We go. We baptize and fourth, we **teach**. ¹⁹ **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,** ²⁰ **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.** Disciple making involves regularly teaching the words and ways of Jesus. This does not have to be in a classroom setting but we must not neglect this component. Jesus says specifically that we are to be teaching others **to observe all that I have commanded you**. In other words, practical obedience is the aim of our teaching—not just head

knowledge that never moves to the heart. We want teaching that is aimed at both the head and the heart which translates into life change and transformation.

That's the Great Commission in a nutshell. Do we have any assurances that we can actually do this? We do, in fact. The bookends of the Great Commission are actually really encouraging for us: ¹⁸ **And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."** All authority in heaven and earth has been given to Jesus and Jesus promises to be with us always, even till the end of the age. I honestly don't know what more Jesus could do for us! We make disciples under His authority and He promises to help us as we go. What more do we need?

You say, "Pastor, how do we know the early church was involved in disciple making? How do we know they practiced evangelism and discipleship? How do we know that we too must go if we want to be faithful to the Bible? We know this because of what we read in a familiar passage in Acts 2 that we've looked at several times the past few weeks. Listen to this passage once again that describes the early church and see if you can identify how we know those in the early church were committed to the Great Commission. ⁴² **And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.** It's this final sentence that strikes me. We see God's sovereignty in salvation—it's *the Lord who is adding to their number*. But let me ask you this—how does the Lord add to their number? Or to put it another way, how were people saved in those days? I'd say the same way people are saved today. When people hear the gospel, God saves them when they repent and believe. How did people in those days *hear* the gospel? They almost certainly heard it verbally because they didn't have copies of the New Testament at that time. Who did they hear the gospel from? Those in the early church! The Lord added to their number as those in the early church faithfully obeyed the Great Commission of Jesus to go and make disciples.

What happens if we don't go and obey the Great Commission? Thom Rainer, in his book *I Will*, has this to say, "The reality is that church decline is the collective result of individuals who have decided they will not 'go.' The church thus becomes a religious country club instead of an obedient Great Commission congregation." I don't know about you, but I want our church to be a Great Commission congregation.

I came across a story not long ago that helps us think about what happens when we as church turn inward and become comfortable with where we are. The story is an illustration of what happens when we refuse to go. The story goes that there is a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, and near this spot there was once a little life-saving station. The building was primitive, and there was just one boat, but the members of the life-saving station were committed and kept a constant watch over the sea. When a ship went down, they unselfishly went out day or night to save the lost. Because so many lives were saved by those manning the station, it became famous.

As a result, more people wanted to be associated with the station and to give their time, talent, and money to support its important work. New boats were bought, new crews were recruited, a formal training session was offered. As the membership in the life-saving station grew, some of the members became unhappy that the building was so primitive and that the equipment was so outdated. They wanted a better place to welcome the survivors pulled from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged and newly decorated building.

Now the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members. They met regularly and when they did, it was apparent how much they loved one another. They greeted one another, hugged one another, shared with one another the events that had been going on in their lives. But over time, fewer members were now interested in going to out in the sea on life-saving missions. So they hired lifeboat crews to do this for them.

About this time, a large ship wrecked off of the coast, and the hired crews brought into the life-saving station boatloads of cold, wet, dirty, sick, and half-drowned people. The once beautiful meeting place became a place of chaos. The plush carpet got dirty. Some of the exquisite furniture was scratched. So before long they had a shower built outside the house where the victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting there was a rift in the membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities for good, because life-saving was unpleasant and inconvenient and really just a hindrance to the normal fellowship of the members. Some members spoke up and insisted that life-saving was their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a life-saving station. But this relatively small number were eventually voted down and told that if they wanted to continue saving lives, they could begin their own life-saving station down the coast. And that's what they did.

As the years passed, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the original station. It evolved into a place to meet regularly for fellowship, for committee meetings, and for special training sessions about their mission, but few went out to rescue the drowning people. The drowning people were no longer welcomed in the new life-saving station. So another life-saving station began further down the coast. History continued to repeat itself. And if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a string of adequate meeting places with ample parking and plush carpet. Shipwrecks are still common in the waters, but few people are rescued.

The first stake we drove into the ground as we considered what the New Testament says about church membership is the expectation to BELIEVE. The second stake we drove into the ground is the expectation to GATHER. The third was the expectation to BELONG. The fourth stake is the expectation to CONTRIBUTE. The fifth and final stake is the expectation to GO. *Membership means going to our neighbors and the nations with the good news of the gospel. We're all called to go. We're all called to make disciples. May the Lord help us to be faithful.*

APPENDIX 8
MEMBERSHIP DIAGRAM



Figure A1. Central Baptist Church membership diagram

APPENDIX 9
SERMON SERIES SURVEY RESULTS
BY PARTICIPANT

Table A2. Survey results by participant

Participant	Pre	Post	Change
1	5.91	5.95	.05
2	4.82	6	1.18
3	4.59	4.95	.36
4	5	5.95	.95
5	4.77	5.32	.55
6	5.68	5.95	.27
7	5	5.27	.27
8	5.14	5.86	.73
9	5.82	6	.18
10	5.05	5.64	.59
11	3.86	4.59	.73
12	5.68	6	.32
13	4.82	5.14	.32
14	5.32	5.95	.64
15	5.27	5.91	.64
16	5.77	6	.23
17	4.91	5.86	.95
18	5.23	6	.77
19	5.95	5.95	0
20	5.23	6	.77
21	4.55	5.41	.86
22	5.27	6	.73
23	5.32	5.95	.64
24	5.05	6	.95
Mean	5.17	5.74	.57

APPENDIX 10
SERMON SERIES T-TEST

Table A3. Sermon series t-test

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	113.6666667	126.2083333
Variance	116.4927536	77.73731884
Observations	24	24
Pearson Correlation	0.767416324	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	23	
t Stat	-8.852441767	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.000000003617	
t Critical one-tail	1.713871528	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.000000007234	
t Critical two-tail	2.06865761	

APPENDIX 11

SERMON SERIES SURVEY RESULTS BY QUESTION

Table A4. Sermon series results by question

Question	Pre	Post	Change
1	5.33	5.67	.33
2	5.46	5.83	.38
3	5.46	5.92	.46
4	5.54	5.92	.38
5	5.5	5.79	.29
6	5.13	5.63	.5
7	4.83	5.75	.92
8	4.75	5.79	1.04
9	5.04	5.75	.71
10	5.54	5.88	.33
11	4.58	5.5	.92
12	5.25	5.83	.58
13	4.42	5.5	1.08
14	5.25	5.88	.63
15	5.08	5.67	.58
16	5.25	5.75	.5
17	5.54	5.79	.25
18	5.75	5.92	.17
19	4.83	5.75	.92
20	5.13	5.42	.29
21	5.17	5.75	.58
22	4.83	5.54	.71
Mean	5.17	5.74	.57

APPENDIX 12

MEMBERSHIP CLASS CURRICULUM

Session 1: Who We Are

- The Church
- History
- Staff and Leadership
- Deacons
- Mission
- Vision
- Core Values and Logo
- Denomination and Affiliations
- Constitution/By-Laws/Budget
- Directory
- Clintonville Road Property
- Ways to Connect and Stay Informed

Session 2: What We Believe

- The Bible
- The Gospel
- Baptism/Lord's Supper
- The Baptist Faith and Message

Session 3: What We Do

- Corporate Worship
- Sunday School
- Music and Worship
- Children's Ministry
- Youth Ministry
- Missions/Outreach
- Women's Ministry
- Boomers and Seniors
- Funeral Meals
- Special Missions Giving

Session 4: What We Ask

- Believe
- Gather
- Belong
- Contribute
- Go

Next Steps

APPENDIX 13

MEMBERSHIP CLASS SURVEY RESULTS
BY PARTICIPANT

Table A5. Membership class survey results by participant

Participant	Pre	Post	Change
1	4.85	5.9	1.05
2	4.65	5.85	1.2
3	4.4	5.5	1.1
4	4.6	5.5	.9
5	4.25	5.95	1.7
6	4.8	5.8	1
7	3.75	5.75	2
8	4.15	6	1.85
9	4.85	5.85	1
10	4.55	5.95	1.4
11	4.6	4.9	.3
12	4	4.9	.9
13	5.4	5.95	.55
14	5.05	5.95	.9
15	5.7	6	.3
16	3.9	6	2.1
17	4.5	5.85	1.35
18	5.05	5.9	.85
19	5.2	5.75	.55
Mean	4.64	5.75	1.11

APPENDIX 14

MEMBERSHIP CLASS T-TEST

Table A6. Membership class t-test

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	92.89473684	115
Variance	104.3216374	44.33333333
Observations	19	19
Pearson Correlation	0.278566882	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	18	
t Stat	-9.155226497	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.000000017059	
t Critical one-tail	1.734063607	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.000000034118	
t Critical two-tail	2.10092204	

APPENDIX 15
MEMBERSHIP CLASS SURVEY RESULTS
BY QUESTION

Table A7. Membership class survey results by question

Question	Pre	Post	Change
1	5	5.37	.37
2	4.95	5.84	.89
3	3.26	5.68	2.42
4	5.74	5.95	.21
5	5.21	5.63	.42
6	4.32	5.68	1.37
7	5.58	5.9	.32
8	4.89	5.79	.89
9	4	5.58	1.58
10	4.79	5.9	1.11
11	5.16	5.79	.63
12	5	5.79	.79
13	4.53	5.9	1.37
14	4.95	5.84	1.84
15	4.16	5.63	1.47
16	4	5.84	1.84
17	4.68	5.79	1.1
18	4.63	5.74	1.11
19	4.32	5.63	1.32
20	3.74	5.74	2
Mean	4.64	5.75	1.11

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ABSTRACT

TRAINING MEMBERS AT CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH IN PARIS, KENTUCKY, WITH A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018
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The purpose of this project was to train members at Central Baptist Church in Paris, Kentucky, with a biblical understanding and practice of church membership. Chapter 1 provides the context for why the project was needed and the five goals that guided the project to completion. Chapter 2 focuses on the biblical basis for key membership expectations. Chapter 3 explains practical steps toward the recovery of biblical church membership. Chapter 4 provides details about the project's implementation at the church. Chapter 5 provides an evaluation of the project.

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