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IMPLEMENTING BIBLICAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT  
FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH IN CORDELE, GEORGIA

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A Project  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Educational Ministry

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by  
Kaylan Von Paxton  
May 2022

**APPROVAL SHEET**

IMPLEMENTING BIBLICAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT  
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I dedicate this project to my beloved bride, Sayla. Without your loving, patient, encouragement and support, none of my educational pursuits would be possible. And to Azriela, Alyzaveth, Ayla, and Augustine: Being your dad is one of the highest honors of my life and the motivation for my striving to be better. May you come to know the sweetness of King Jesus and serve Him all of your days.

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## PREFACE

This project was completed thanks to the loving support and encouragement of my family and other people who have surrounded and poured into my life. Throughout my ministry and academic studies, I have been blessed to have numerous people who have been influential to my growth and equipping. Mentors, friends, peers, and loving church members in all the churches in which I have served, have had a seen and unseen influence on my progress in the Lord and as a pastor.

It is truly a privilege to have studied at several institutions that have helped shaped me and taught me, not only how to exegete Scripture, but the beauty and delight of digging deep in God's revealed Word. Many professors at the Criswell College and Midwestern Seminary have been influential on me personally and my development. It has also been a great honor to study at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS). The institutional commitment to the inerrant Word of God and the edification of the bride of Christ is evident through the professors and staff. My walk with Christ and ability to lead the local church has been enhanced through my studies at the Southern Baptist Convention's (SBC) flagship seminary.

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Cordele, Georgia

May 2022

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The church of Jesus Christ is the most important institution the world has ever seen. Indeed, two of the most prevalent metaphors in Scripture for the church are the body of Christ (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 10:16-17; 12:12; Eph 1:22; 4:4; 5:23; Col 1:18, 24; 2:19) and the bride of Christ (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:21-33; Rev 19:7-9). That the second person of the Trinity would call the church His bride and body speaks directly to its value and importance. As such, how “members” of the body of Christ treat the body of Christ matters eternally to the person of Christ. The First Baptist Church of Cordele, Georgia (FBCC) has been blessed with a rich history that spans over 130 years and has procured a firm place in the community. Unfortunately, biblical church membership has been a glaring shortcoming at FBCC throughout her history. FBCC has an opportunity, however, to continue well into the future by pursuing biblical church membership that will lead to a healthy church witnessing to a community in darkness for the glory of Christ.

#### **Context**

FBC Cordele, like many First Baptist Churches in the south, was founded in the nineteenth century. Over the course of the past 130 years, FBCC has had many highs and its fair share of lows. Although the church has a rich history, largely due to the age of the church and what it has meant as a community institution in Cordele, the lack of biblical church membership has led to many problems in her history. From division to pastoral disqualification to bloated membership rolls to no standards for joining or disciplining members, almost every “low” in FBCC’s past can be traced to the lack of biblical, healthy, robust church membership.

The last twenty years have especially been difficult for FBCC. In the late nineties the long-time pastor resigned after multiple moral failures. The pastor who followed him led the church for over ten years. During his time at FBCC, he led the church in a building campaign, which relocated the church from its long-time home to the other side of town. Before the move, the church split into two worship services based solely on musical genres. The building move caused the church to go into deep debt, and while the church experienced great numerical growth, many in the church became disillusioned with the pastor, which led to division along generational lines and his forced resignation.

The church was then left without a pastor or music leader, and a deep divide amongst the generations. Because of this, the Georgia Baptist Mission Board (GBMB) sent a team of consultants to attempt to help the church determine what went wrong and how to move forward. The findings stated that FBCC was a divided church along things such as the “worship wars” and age, perpetuated by the two worship services, which, as noted, were based solely on musical genre, as well as Sunday School classes divided based exclusively on affinity.<sup>1</sup> Following this, an interim pastor was called and a pastor search team was formed.

Musical leadership was filled in with two volunteers until a pastor could be called. However, an opportunity came up to hire a talented and qualified music leader during the interim. Controversy arose among a small group of people in the church who had/have racial biases and made them known as the church was considering calling an African American music leader. Although FBCC exists in a racially diverse community, its membership and regular attendees are not. The church decided to not pursue the

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<sup>1</sup> The two worship services were divided into a “traditional” service featuring exclusively hymns, anthems, and choir specials, and a “contemporary” service that featured a “praise band” and only “contemporary” songs. Naturally, the senior adults attended the “traditional” service, and the younger generations attended the “contemporary” service, effectively creating two churches within the one, divided across generational lines.

candidate because of the small (but vocal) minority, and no church discipline was pursued even though some made racial bias publicly known.

In August 2018 I was called as pastor of FBCC and have continually learned the members, past, and ecclesiology of the church. FBCC has never had a formal entrance procedure into membership except for the traditional model of those desiring membership walking down the aisle at the end of a regular worship service where they are presented to those in attendance and considered members henceforth. No membership class or expectations have previously existed for joining or continuing in membership. The membership roll has ballooned up to over one thousand names while averaging two hundred fifty in morning worship attendance, without a procedure to clean the roll or make the roll more reflective of those who attend regularly.

Despite the recent past and broken ecclesiology, FBCC has many members who desire biblical fidelity and health. A majority of the active and attending members have been worn out by the infighting and division and realize how unbecoming such actions are for the bride and body of Christ. While many have not been taught biblical membership through sustained expository preaching, they have evidenced a strong desire to be shown through Scripture God's will for His church and submitting to what is thus revealed. Though the past is blighted in many ways, the future is bright for FBCC should she continually submit to Scripture, even when it is costly.

### **Rationale**

Based on the contextual factors at FBCC, the Bible's insistence on the importance of the church, and Scriptural witness to church membership, the need for teaching and implementing sustainable church membership is necessary and urgent. There are several factors apparent in the context covered, which make a renewed emphasis on biblical church membership so important. First, since many church members have not been taught the importance given in the New Testament to the church, member

posture toward the church is unbiblical and consumeristic. This is partially due, not only to the lack of teaching on membership, but on the lack of emphasis on how important the New Testament gives to the church itself.

Second, building off the first, there are no formal membership entrance requirements in place. Prospective members, as mentioned, simply expressed desire to join, were presented to the church gathering, and deemed members of the church. A formal process, including candidate interviews, membership classes, and a vote from the church gathered, would aid in teaching expectations on the front end. Further, hearing conversion stories, why the perspective members left their previous church, and a delay before a vote of affirmation, could help to guard the church from accepting unregenerate members into the fellowship.

Third, there is no church discipline in place. Neither formative (aside from the pulpit ministry) nor corrective discipline exists on any level of the church. Members must understand (1) the importance of the church in God's program, (2) the New Testament emphasis on sanctification and Christocentric ethics, (3) that church members are "members of one another" (Eph 4:25) and, (4) that lack of discipline can bring ruin to the church (1 Cor 5:6). The hope, then, once members understand these principles, is that discipline will be practiced and truly understood by all.

Fourth, a robust, corporate realization and internalization of biblical church membership in light of the gospel of Christ will be an important ingredient to church health. A church without biblical church membership cannot be healthy and will drift towards consumerism, division, and even heresy. Further, a church's ecclesiology will speak to how it views Christ and prizes the gospel. As Klyne Snodgrass said, "Christology is soteriology is ecclesiology is ethics."<sup>2</sup> Thus, the future health, witness,

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<sup>2</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 146.

and gospel flourishing of FBCC is at stake. What we believe about Christ will inform what we believe about the gospel, which informs our posture toward the church, which informs biblical church membership to the glory of God.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to implement biblical church membership at the First Baptist Church of Cordele, Georgia.

### **Goals**

Implementing church membership at FBCC was guided by several goals.

1. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of church membership among leaders and members of FBCC.
2. The second goal was to develop a sermon series on what Scripture says regarding the importance of the church and member obligation to one another.
3. The third goal was to develop a new member class curriculum that taught membership candidates on the front end. The curriculum covers the basics of the gospel, statement of faith including the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (BF&M), the Scriptural support for church membership, expectations of members, and explanation of church ministries and goals.
4. The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan for continuing education and practice of biblical church membership.

The methodology used to measure the success of these goals will be detailed in the section that follows.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> All 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.

## Research Methodology

Four goals determined the effectiveness of this project. The first goal was to assess the current understanding of church membership among leaders and members of FBCC. This goal was measured by providing a pre-sermon series Biblical Church Membership Inventory (BCMI) to active members, staff, and deacons who were willing to participate.<sup>4</sup> The questionnaire gauged participant understanding on what they believed at the time of the survey on what the Bible teaches regarding church membership, and whether FBCC's current policies align with Scriptural understanding. This goal was considered successfully met when fifty active members, deacons, and staff completed and returned the BCMI, which was then reviewed and analyzed, offering a clearer picture of the current understanding of church membership at FBCC.

The second goal was to develop a sermon series on what Scripture says regarding the importance of the church and member obligation to one another. This goal was measured by the pastoral staff of FBCC who used a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, clarity, and relevance of the sermon series.<sup>5</sup> This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of ninety percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceed the sufficiency level.

The third goal was to develop a new member class curriculum that will teach future membership candidates on the front end. The curriculum covers the basics of the gospel, statement of faith including the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (BF&M), the Scriptural support for church membership, expectations of members, and explanation of church ministries and goals. This goal was measured by an expert panel made up of two associate pastors at FBCC, an associational director, and a professor at SBTS who utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix 1.

<sup>5</sup> See appendix 2.

applicability of the curriculum.<sup>6</sup> This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of ninety percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan for continuing education and practice of biblical church membership. This goal was measured by an expert panel of local pastors and denominational leaders who will utilize a rubric to evaluate the functionality of the plan, communication processes, training elements, and action steps to move FBCC to a more robust understanding of biblical membership.<sup>7</sup> This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of ninety percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level.

### **Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations**

The following definitions of key terms were used in the ministry project:

*Biblical membership.* Jonathan Leeman offers this helpful definition of membership: “Church membership is (1) a covenant of union between a particular church and a Christian, a covenant that consists of (2) the church’s affirmation of the Christian’s gospel profession, (3) the church’s promise to give oversight to the Christian, and (4) the Christian’s promise to gather with the church and submit to its oversight.”<sup>8</sup>

*Ecclesiology.* Put plainly, *ecclesiology* is “the theology of the church.”<sup>9</sup> A broader definition is offered by Gregg Allison:

Ecclesiology . . . develops the church’s nature (e.g., gospel centered, Spirit empowered, confessional, missional), its attributes (e.g., unity, purity, apostolicity, catholicity), and its marks (e.g., preaching, administering the sacraments, church discipline). Ecclesiology also considers the church’s offices (e.g., eldership, diaconate) and government (e.g., episcopalianism, presbyterianism,

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<sup>6</sup> See appendix 3.

<sup>7</sup> See appendix 4.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 217.

<sup>9</sup> E. A. Livingstone, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 188.

congregationalism), as well as its ministries (e.g., worship, preaching, mission, discipleship).<sup>10</sup>

With these definitions in mind, we can define Ecclesiology as the theology of the church which flows out to the church's practices, polity, and beliefs.

One limitation applied to this project. The accuracy of the BCMI was dependent upon the willingness of the respondents to be honest about their knowledge and understanding of the church as it stood before the sermon series. Participants may have been tempted to offer the answers desired rather than with honesty. To mitigate this limitation, the respondents were promised that their answers would remain nameless.

Two delimitations were placed on the project. First, only church members eighteen and older could participate in the BCMI. Second, the sermon series was limited to ten weeks. It is simply not possible to cover all that needs to be covered regarding membership and ecclesiology in those timeframes.

### **Conclusion**

God's love and care for the church (both local and universal) is evident throughout Scripture. However, church members may still be unaware of just how much the Bible speaks to the church and membership. There is a desperate need for robust biblical church membership to be established at every local church, but more specifically, First Baptist Church in Cordele, Georgia. The following chapters will show the biblical basis of membership, as well as a plan to implement biblical church membership at FBCC.

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<sup>10</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 49.

## CHAPTER 2

### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR THE NECESSITY OF BIBLICAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

The idea of biblical church membership as imperative to the health of local congregations has fallen by the wayside over the last century.<sup>1</sup> But the Bible offers example after example for the necessity of regenerate membership in the local church and such membership being crucial to the health and mission of the people of God. The New Testament especially supports the notion of church membership through its emphasis on communal accountability. And while a thread of biblical membership runs throughout the New Testament, four passages in particular stand out: Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-8; Hebrews 10:23-25; and Hebrews 13:17.

#### **Biblical Membership Guards Church Purity**

Of all the Gospel authors, Matthew alone uses the word *ekklēsia* (Matt 16:18; 18:17 x2) and, says Jonathan Pennington, “many scholars understand these references as reflecting a later, developed ecclesiology.”<sup>2</sup> As one reads through the New Testament beginning with Matthew, their first encounter with the concept of the church comes from Jesus Himself. As such, Jesus cares about the purity of the church, for He is her head (Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18; 2:19), her husband (Eph 5:22-23), and promises His

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<sup>1</sup> R. Albert Mohler, “Church Discipline: The Missing Mark,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (2000), 16-17. Mohler argues that the twentieth century American church had abandoned church discipline due, in part, to a capitulation to American culture and its high value on individualism: “Individuals now claim an enormous zone of personal privacy and moral autonomy. The congregation – redefined as a mere voluntary association – has no right to intrude in this space. Many congregations have forfeited any responsibility to confront even the most public sins of their members. Consumed with pragmatic methods of church growth and congregational engineering, most churches leave moral matters to the domain of individual conscience.”

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 89.

perpetual presence with her as the church gathers (Matt 18:20), because, notes Patrick Schreiner, “Jesus so identifies with his church, that they are one.”<sup>3</sup>

Matthew 18:15-20 presents one of the most important texts regarding the purity of the church, ascribed by Jesus Himself. In this lesson from Jesus, a scenario is presented wherein a “brother” sins and at least one other member of the community is aware of it. Jesus envisions a four-fold process: (1) the brother is confronted by the one with knowledge of the sin (Matt 18:15), if the brother repents, he is “won.” If the brother refuses to repent: (2) he is confronted again, this time with two or three additional members of the community in tow (Matt 18:16). Should the brother still refuse: (3) he is brought before the church (Matt 18:17a). If he *still* refuses, he is to be “treated as a Gentile and a tax-collector” (Matt 18:17b).<sup>4</sup>

With the larger picture of the church as body and bride of Jesus, what Jesus presents here makes perfect sense. While confrontation with the erring brother is about more than purity in the *ekklēsia*, it can never be less. As Jesus forms a people, He entrusts them with responsibilities to care for one another. The *ekklēsia* is clearly more than a social or civic club with loose affiliations. The one being confronted is no mere acquaintance or friend, but a “brother,” who, in the context of this passage, refers to a member of the community of recognized believers.<sup>5</sup> This means that church discipline is pursued (with reconciliation and restoration in view) by, as Joseph H. Hellerman puts it, “brothers who share their stuff with one another and brothers who share their hearts with

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick Schreiner, *The Body of Jesus: A Spatial Analysis of the Kingdom in Matthew* (New York: T&T Clark, 2016), 149.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations come from the New American Standard Bible.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 40.

one another.”<sup>6</sup>

The responsibility to call back a brother or sister in error is not presented by Jesus as resting on the shoulders of an assigned group or leader(s). Rather, the entire community has an individual duty to attempt to “win” back their sibling in Christ. Says R.T. France, “the wider community is involved only when that individual initiative proves inadequate, and then only to back up the individual’s concern.”<sup>7</sup> The fact that there is no mention of leadership being involved is highly significant, for then it shows that the responsibility to care for church members belongs to fellow church members.

Verse 17 is especially important for evidencing the biblical case for church membership. While verses 15-16 picture brothers in a community, close enough to know if one is engaged in ongoing and unrepentant sin, verse 17 gives the key to membership: one cannot be removed if he or she were not considered “in” in the first place. Should the church gathered examine the evidence and deem the sin ongoing, grave, and lacking repentance in the “brother,” the church is to consider him a “Gentile and a tax-collector.” To treat someone as a Gentile or tax-collector is to regard them as unredeemed and unclean.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the church treats the man no longer as regenerate, but as an outsider who no longer has any business participating in the church’s activities.<sup>9</sup>

That the man can be removed inherently demonstrates that he was included in the community in the first place. But without formal membership, how can someone be removed? One must be recognized and deemed as part of the community at some point if

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 154.

<sup>7</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 483.

<sup>8</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 241.

<sup>9</sup> David Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2008), 445.

they are to be removed at all. Remarks Benjamin Merkle, “The authority given to the church is to admit members as well as to remove them if needed . . . if it is biblical to remove someone from the church, it must be the case that such unrepentant sinners were formal members.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus here establishes both discipline and church membership, for without membership, discipline is not possible.

In Matthew 16:19, Jesus first uses the language of binding and loosing when He tells Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” While it appears that Jesus is giving the authority to bind and loose to Peter exclusively, Craig L. Blomberg notes that Peter is the disciples’ spokesman/representative, and therefore represents all the disciples.<sup>11</sup> With the same language used in Matthew 18:18, it appears that authority is given to the church gathered. Then in Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus commands the disciples to go and spread His kingdom rule by both teaching and baptizing. The church, then, has the authority to deem someone as “in” the church and does so through baptism.

Millard J. Erickson says regarding baptism that, “It is almost universally agreed that baptism is in some way connected with the beginning of the Christian life, with one’s initiation into the universal, invisible church as well as the local, visible church.”<sup>12</sup> With the language of binding and loosing in Matthew 18:18 combined with the call for disciples to make disciples and baptize them in the name of the Triune God in Matthew 28:19-20, baptism was to act as the entrance rite into the church under Jesus’s rule. Therefore, baptism was to be the way in which converts identified with the

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<sup>10</sup> Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” 41.

<sup>11</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 217.

<sup>12</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 1018.

community as the church used its authority to bind and loose in order to affirm their salvation. The convert was therefore declared “in” the community and to be held accountable to the body of believers and could be disciplined, even to the point of being put “out” of the church when their life constantly contradicts their profession.

While each member has an obligation to confront an erring brother, since they have both covenanted together through baptism, and because church discipline begins at the most intimate stage possible, the church gathered are the ones who finally act to put out the unrepentant man. In verses 15-17, the “you” is singular, signaling that the corrective and restorative process begins with individuals acting out of genuine concern for one another as they become aware of the problem.<sup>13</sup> In verses 18-19, however, the “you” moves to the plural and the “binding and loosing” phrasing from 16:19 (as noted) is recapitulated and applied to the church. Now the authority to bind and loose is extended to the church gathered.<sup>14</sup>

Not only does this passage show that putting someone “out” entails them having been recognized as being “in,” but it also shows that Jesus explicitly gave the church authority when it gathers. To not exercise the authority Jesus gave would be to operate less than a church. As the church accepts new members, they are recognizing and testifying to that person’s regeneration. The church’s “ability to remove someone from membership presupposes an overarching authority to assess a person’s gospel words and deeds and to render a judgment,” says Leeman.<sup>15</sup>

As they gather and remove a member, they consider the evidence, and with tears, cast out the offender with the authority of heaven behind them (Matt 18:18). This

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<sup>13</sup> France, *Matthew*, 482.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 180.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 61.

“binding and loosing” refers “to the judicial authority of gathered Christians to decide cases on the basis of God’s law” and “by removing an unrepentant sinner from Jesus’s community, believers merely ratify the heavenly court’s decree.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus makes clear, not only does the church render judicial decisions in concert with heaven, they do so with Jesus’s very presence in their midst (Matt 18:20). With Jesus’s presence, authority, and instructions, the church thus lives out what it means to be a church that implements membership as it was intended.

### **Biblical Membership Disciplines for the Good of the Body**

Whereas the Gospels only mention *ekklēsia* three times (all in Matthew, as mentioned above), the rest of the New Testament mentions *ekklēsia* 114 times, sixty-one of those in Pauline epistles.<sup>17</sup> Many important aspects of Paul’s view of what the *ekklēsia* should be, and how it should act, appear with force in 1 Corinthians. As in Matthew 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 5:1-8 offers instructions on church discipline. The difference between the two texts is, while Jesus gives instructions for future church discipline matters, Paul instructs concerning a specific case that the Corinthians refuse to act upon (1 Cor 5:2). The two share several other themes as will become evident below.

A reading of the opening four chapters of the first epistle to Corinth reveals a clear picture of disharmony in the church (1 Cor 1:10). This disunity was based on a number of factors including the members’ dividing into camps based on who their favorite leader was (1 Cor 1:12; 3:5). The presence of unchecked sin in the church was yet another threat to church unity and, the unity of the *ekklēsia* “entails the solidarity and corporate identity of the church . . . even one ‘moldy part’ can render the whole

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<sup>16</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 454.

<sup>17</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, “Church,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 124.

worthless.”<sup>18</sup> More is at stake than just the guilty brother’s soul in this church discipline case. The very unity of the church hinges, in part, on the faithfulness of her members. A robust church membership guards against unrepentant sin, which aids the church’s ability to be united and, in turn, makes for a more effective witness.

First Corinthians 5 and 6 act as transition points for a letter rife with ecclesiological lessons. In both chapters judicial matters are addressed, of which the Corinthians have failed to act appropriately twice. In chapter 5, it is revealed that the Corinthians failed to act judicially when they needed to, and in chapter 6, the Corinthians took judicial matters outside of the church when they should have handled them internally.<sup>19</sup> Both were egregious failures and are introduced with a tone of near disbelief as Paul gets directly to the issue: there is a man in the church who “has his father’s wife” (1 Cor 5:1).

In a society notorious for accepting a wide range of sexual behavior, the Christian community was to stand a part as being distinct and pure, but instead, the Corinthians were tolerating something even the pagans (with their broken ethic) found shameful.<sup>20</sup> Instead of grieving the ongoing, unrepentant sin of a brother, the Corinthians have become puffed up and arrogant (1 Cor 5:2). Paul expects an interconnectedness in the *ekklēsia* that would cause them to not only be aware of the man’s sin, but also experience pain themselves due to his rebellion. Comments Mark Taylor, “The term used here for mourning occurs in other contexts indicating genuine anguish of soul over sin, whether one’s own sin or the sin of others.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, no such pain appeared to be present.

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<sup>18</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 213.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community at Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 151.

<sup>20</sup> Witherington, *Conflict and Community at Corinth*, 153.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 26.

Herein lies an important lesson for biblical church membership. Christians in the *ekklēsia* should know one another enough to recognize when a brother or sister is in continual error and realize that, as Joseph A. Fitzmyer notes, “what each believer does affects the whole community.”<sup>22</sup> Christians in a local church should be far more than mere casual friends or acquaintances that see each other once a week. The Corinthian church shows, while shockingly apathetic (evident by lack of action on the matter), that they are familiar enough with one another that ongoing sin was common knowledge. Ideally, the man would have been confronted before knowledge of the sin escalated, following the pattern of Matthew 18:15. But knowledge without action only takes one so far, as is evident by the necessity of the steps Paul commands in the following verses.

But why did the church allow such a blatant sin in its midst? If the sin of the man in question was (1) open enough for the community to have knowledge of it, and (2) egregious enough that even pagans found the sin abhorrent, why did the church turn an intentional blind eye to it? It is entirely possible that the man enjoyed a certain amount of freedom because he was a wealthy patron in the church.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the church even met occasionally in his home. With a church so obsessed with wealth (11:22), wisdom (1 Cor 2:1), and honor (1 Cor 4:10), that they would allow leeway for the well-to-do man makes perfect sense.<sup>24</sup>

Herein lies a hidden lesson from this text on church membership. The church must not show partiality to anyone (Jas 2:1-7). Paul insists that all members be on equal

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<sup>22</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *1 Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 229.

<sup>23</sup> John K. Chow, *Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 139-140.

<sup>24</sup> Witherington acknowledges that the text of 1 Corinthians does not explicitly go into that kind of great detail about the man. He does say, however, that it is entirely possible since the expectations for clients was to support their patrons “since they knew which side their bread was buttered on. At the very least they would be afraid to challenge the patron.” Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 157.

footing, and even give deference to “less honorable” members (1 Cor 12:23). If the sinful man is indeed a wealthy patron, Paul is clearly unimpressed, and calls the church to take action regardless of his status. Aside from the cross, church membership should be the great leveler for Christians. All members have equal status in the fellowship of the redeemed. Whether the member is wealthy or poor, if they are in ongoing, unrepentant sin, the church has an obligation to act for his good and the unity and purity of the body.

Since the Corinthian church has refused to act on the matter, Paul renders judgment (1 Cor 5:3), but not without Corinthian contribution (1 Cor 5:4). Although Paul uses his apostolic authority to “pronounce judgment on the man” (1 Cor 5:3 ESV), the church was still to act when they were assembled in the name and power of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor 5:4). Leeman locates the setting for the actions Paul is instructing the Corinthians to carry out in four places: (1) as “an assembly, (2) assembled in the name of Jesus, (3) with his apostolic spirit present, (4) together with the power of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>25</sup> The Corinthians are to carry out the judgment from Paul when they are “assembled,” and thus, participate with Paul and the Lord in doing what they should have done before it ever came to Paul’s attention.

A connection to Matthew 18:20 is found in Paul, (1) reminding the church that Jesus is present as they gather, and (2) the fact that they are connected enough to be aware of one another’s sin. Richard Hays observes, “all in Christ’s church are bound together closely, responsible for one another, and profoundly affected by one another’s actions.”<sup>26</sup> Jesus assumes such interrelatedness in Matthew 18 and promises His presence as they both meet and carry out discipline. The connection goes even further, says Thomas Schreiner,

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<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Leeman, “A Congregational Approach to Unity, Holiness, and Apostolicity: Faith and Order,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 357.

<sup>26</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 83.

We should not miss the allusion to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18. Jesus says that He is "in their midst" (my translation; *en mesō autōn*, Matt 18:20). But Paul says the sinner should be removed "from your midst" (my translation; *ek mesou humōn*, 1 Cor 5:2). Such blatant sin must not remain in "the midst" of the Corinthians when Jesus Himself is in their "midst."<sup>27</sup>

Paul levies the unrepentant man's excommunication in stark terms: "I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor 5:5). As in Matthew 18:17, the man is to be put out of the church and treated as unregenerate. In fact, Paul exhorts the Corinthian church to not even "eat with such a one" (1 Cor 5:11). Taylor argues that this exclusion was not from private meals, say, in homes, but a withdraw from the ability to partake in the Lord's Supper with the church.<sup>28</sup> James M. Hamilton makes the case for the meaning of "not to eat with such a one" as removal of the man from the Lord's Supper table by stressing the Lord's Supper being the "new Passover," due to the abundant Passover imagery in the chapter (1 Cor 5:6-8).<sup>29</sup>

The removal from one's ability to partake in the Lord's Supper meal was no small thing. The Lord's Supper was an incredibly important event, as is clear in Paul's lengthy treatment in chapter 11. As the body met together, they were not merely sharing a meal to satisfy their appetites. Rather, as John S. Hammett asserts as wide-spread agreement on the meaning of the Lord's Supper, the church members enjoy both communion with the Lord and with one another as they partake.<sup>30</sup> The Lord's Supper, says R. Alan Streett, "was a joyous time for sharing food, honoring Christ, remembering

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, "The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline," in Hammett and Merkle, *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 114.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 113.

<sup>29</sup> James M. Hamilton, "The Lord's Supper in Paul," in *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 90.

<sup>30</sup> John S. Hammett, *40 Questions about Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015), 207.

the martyrs, and using their gifts, talents, and resources to minister to one another.”<sup>31</sup>

Witherington notes that the way a community behaved at meals was a “*barometer . . . of the group’s character in microcosm*. In other words, what went on at meals most revealed the character of the diners, and was *supposed* to most mirror the values that this particular group upheld.”<sup>32</sup> Taken together, this would be a serious consequence for the man’s ongoing and unrepentant sin as the Lord’s Supper was a community-creating event, and the man’s expulsion from the meal affirmed the church’s ethics as distinctive from the surrounding world. Further, the man loses far more than the ability to share a meal with the church by being removed from the fellowship, Allison states this in stark terms: “This action entails removal from church membership and ministry, exclusion from the Lord’s Supper, and rupture of relationship with the church and with God.”<sup>33</sup>

This process, as severe as it may seem, is meant to be restorative rather than punitive. The aim of discipline properly carried out is always reconciliation and never to shame or punish the offender. Paul instructs the church to remove the man in hopes that his soul will “be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:5). Perhaps the shock of the public reading of this letter would cause him to repent and be restored before the expulsion could take place.<sup>34</sup> The church, with the backing of Paul’s apostolic authority and the presence of Christ, are empowered to render judgment: this man acts as an unbeliever, he should be treated like one. Says Schreiner: “Delivering a person over to

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<sup>31</sup> R. Alan Streett, *Subversive Meals: An Analysis of the Lord’s Supper under Roman Domination during the First Century* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), chap. 2, “The Roman Banquet as a Model for the Lord’s Supper,” para. 1, Kindle.

<sup>32</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord’s Supper* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 35, emphasis original.

<sup>33</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 54.

<sup>34</sup> Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 158-59.

Satan is another way of saying that he or she is expelled from the church; all unbelievers are in Satan's sphere since he works in all who are disobedient."<sup>35</sup>

The lesson from Matthew 18:15-20 is reinforced: that one can be removed from the community means there was a point when they were considered a member of the community to begin with. As Paul opened the letter, he noted that he was glad that he had not baptized more of them, for if he had done so, the divisions based on favorite teacher might be stronger than they already were (1 Cor 1:11-17). Baptism was a sign that one identified with the community of the kingdom of Christ.<sup>36</sup> Allison says that baptism in the early church was "the initial rite of Christianity, followed by the Lord's Supper."<sup>37</sup> In other words, baptism was the entrance point into the community, and only once one was baptized could one partake in the Lord's Supper, which was the continuing affirmation of one's identity with Christ and community.

The sinful man was presumably baptized when he joined the church, and thus, considered part of the community. Indeed, he was considered part of the *ekklēsia* and deemed a "brother" (1 Cor 5:11) through some process the church maintained. Baptism, both biblically and historically, was the means by which believers were (are) recognized as fellow kingdom citizens. The man's ongoing sin was a breach in the community standards and worthy of dismissal, for he neither lived out the implications of the new life of baptism nor could approach the Lord's Table in a worthy manner (1 Cor 11:27). Baptism and the Lord's Supper, says Leeman, "present the borders and boundaries of church membership."<sup>38</sup> The Corinthians' failure to recognize this man's action as out of

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2018), 111.

<sup>36</sup> R. Alan Streett, *Caesar and the Sacrament: Baptism: A Rite of Resistance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 187.

<sup>37</sup> Greg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 612.

<sup>38</sup> Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 268.

step with his profession of faith was a failure indeed, but like a good father (1 Cor 4:14), Paul corrects their mistaken views of what it meant to be a true *ekklēsia* of God.

Paul then restates how dangerous the Corinthian church's arrogance is (1 Cor 5:6a) before offering a metaphor regarding the perils of unchecked sin in the body (1 Cor 5:6b). Unchecked sin in the church will eventually spread throughout the entire church for "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" (1 Cor 5:6b). David E. Garland notes an interesting many layered meaning to this picture of leaven: leaven causes the dough to rise and become "puffed up," which is what the Corinthians have become (1 Cor 5:1, 6) as well as leaven being a metaphor for sexual sins in Hosea 7:4.<sup>39</sup> Further, leaven itself was "made by keeping back a piece of the previous week's dough" and was, quite literally, "moldy dough," which could become bad and contaminate the batch making this a "fitting symbol for the infectious power of evil."<sup>40</sup>

Following this, Paul restates in a different manner the charge to remove the man from their midst (1 Cor 5:7). In his current unrepentant state, the man's presence is analogous to moldy dough in a batch of bread that will both puff up and infect the rest of the batch. They are to remove the bad batch and replace it with the new, which is fully within their ability to do so made possible by Christ who is their "Passover" who has been sacrificed on their behalf (1 Cor 5:7). In other words, their actions should reflect what they already are: "The imperative to cleanse out the old leaven is predicated on the indicative: they *are* unleavened."<sup>41</sup> They are to celebrate an ongoing feast in light of Christ's sacrifice which includes putting away "malice and wickedness" and replacing them with "sincerity and truth" (1 Cor 5:8).

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<sup>39</sup> David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2003), 178.

<sup>40</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 178.

<sup>41</sup> Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 179.

1 Corinthians 5:1-8 offers a clear picture of church membership in practice. Through a church discipline case, which the church failed to act upon initially, we see a man being put “out” of the church showing us that the early church had a process to recognize who was “in.” The members had a vested interest in one another’s lives *and* were responsible for maintaining a Christocentric ethic where only a Roman “ethic” had previously existed. The Christocentric ethic that Paul is exhorting them toward would mark them off as separate and distinct from their surroundings as God intended them to be: “for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are” (1 Cor 3:17).

Although 1 Corinthians calls for many standards that the church at Corinth failed to enforce, the standards existed, nonetheless. Without standards for membership, there would be no way to put the man out of the church for failing to adhere to the ethic of the “already leavened” gathering bearing the name of the crucified Christ. Observes Merkle: “Apparently, there was a clear division or distinction between those who were inside the church and those who were outside the church . . . And once someone was a member of the church of Christ, he was expected to live to a higher standard.”<sup>42</sup> 1 Corinthians on the whole repeatedly bears this out, particularly in 5:1-8.

### **Biblical Membership Entails Frequent Gathering in Order to Edify the Saints**

As demonstrated above, the church is responsible for one another’s holiness and growth in the Lord. Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-8 confirm the need for church membership and mutual accountability. Christians must be known by a local church in order for them to be both accountable and edified. Says Hammett, “All those who come to Jesus he wants to connect with other believers in the local church . . .

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<sup>42</sup> Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” 43.

Church membership is . . . necessary to be an obedient Christian.”<sup>43</sup> But membership, and all of the lessons and exhortations found in Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5, as well as obedience, can only be possible if believers gather with the saints as a life priority. Hebrews 10:23-25 points to church membership as well, by exhorting the believer to prioritize edification of the body and the corporate gatherings.

Hebrews 10:23-25 is the end of a brief section begun in 10:19. In fact, the verses that comprise 10:19-25 are one sentence in Greek, and the exhortations therein serve to encourage and strengthen the audience.<sup>44</sup> It is important to note that the imperatives in verses 23-25 flow out of the indicatives of verses 19-21. The death of Christ and His role as truer and better High Priest informs the commands to not neglect the gathering and to build one another up until the end. In other words, Christ’s finished work is the basis for the commands that follow. F.F. Bruce states this well:

In view of all that has been accomplished for us by Christ, he says, let us confidently approach God in worship, let us maintain our Christian confession and hope, let us help one another by meeting together regularly for mutual encouragement, because the day which we await will soon be here.<sup>45</sup>

Without the finished work of Christ, none of the imperatives of 10:23-25 are possible. The Christian thus must “draw near” (Heb 10:22) and “hold fast to the confession of hope without wavering” (Heb 10:23). This “drawing near” is a conscience, intentional decision that needs to be made persistently.<sup>46</sup> Explains Gareth Cockerill, “Perseverance in faithful living is dependent on an adequate grasp of Christ and his

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<sup>43</sup> John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2019), 175.

<sup>44</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 249.

<sup>45</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*.

<sup>46</sup> Brad J. Eastman, “Hope,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 500.

sufficiency.”<sup>47</sup>

Gathering with the church serves a multi-layered function: (1) it will aid the believer in drawing near to Christ which will, (2) motivate him to draw near to others for, (3) mutual edification. Attentive listening to the preaching of the Word will show forth the beauty of Christ, draw the believer’s attention to his work, and help the believer to rest in that work. But not only will he be aided in looking back at Christ’s finished work, the “holding fast” to the “confession of hope” is eschatological as it points to the hope that awaits the faithful follower at the end of the age, which in turn causes him to “keep the faith,” and plays into 10:25. Notes Witherington, “Our author clearly thinks that ‘keeping the faith’ is more likely to happen if the faithful continue to congregate together.”<sup>48</sup>

The audience is exhorted to “consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (Heb 10:24). The “considering” that the author commands them toward, offers David L. Allen, “conveys the concept of careful consideration, thoughtful attention and deep concern.”<sup>49</sup> The members are to *think of one another*. Who are they supposed to think of? All Christians? Of course, in some sense, all Christians should pray and have affection for the universal church. But to functionally obey Hebrews 10:24, the believer must join themselves to a local congregation. The believer, then, is to “consider” (and keep on considering) fellow believers they have covenanted to in formal church membership.

The primary means by which church members covenant with one another, and renew their covenant with one another in an ongoing fashion, is through baptism and the

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<sup>47</sup> Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 219.

<sup>48</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies to Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 287.

<sup>49</sup> David L. Allen, *Hebrews An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 447.

Lord's Supper. Paul Ellingworth notes that references to the two ordinances are "allusive" in Hebrews, however, he states, "It is unnecessary to conclude that the author belonged to, or was writing to, a community which did not practice these sacraments; but it is clear that his main concern lies elsewhere."<sup>50</sup> While there is some debate regarding whether or not Hebrews 6:4 and 10:22 are speaking of the Lord's Supper and baptism, the presence of explicit mentions of the ordinances in Hebrews is unnecessary. One can assume, like Ellingworth asserts above, that the two ordinances handed down explicitly by the Lord are present in the earliest churches.<sup>51</sup>

Baptism as an entry rite into the body, and the Lord's Supper as an expression of an ongoing covenantal bond, aid in the believers "drawing near" to one another and know to whom they are to draw near. Leeman states well how the ordinances guide the church in covenant:

On the one hand, the local church practices baptism, as commanded by Christ in . . . Matthew 16, 18, and 28. On the other hand, the local church practices the Lord's Supper, as commanded when Jesus promised a *new covenant* in Matthew 26. If we bring these two things together, we have the two marks of church membership. Church members are simply those marked off by baptism and the Lord's Supper in a local congregation. . . . *The covenant of membership between Christians is nothing more or less than the existence of the local church – the visible church on earth.*<sup>52</sup>

Andrew M. Davis offers another perspective on the emphasis of 10:24. Rather than the focus being on *how* to stir up one another, the emphasis is on the people to whom the Christian focuses their affection: "The direct object of the verb 'consider' is 'one

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<sup>50</sup> Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Greek New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 68.

<sup>51</sup> Commentators appear divided on what Hebrews 6:4 and 10:22 are referencing. Allen, for example, dismisses Hebrews 10:22 as a possible reference to the Lord's Supper and baptism for two primary reasons: "First, there is never any reference in the New Testament to the Lord's Supper being described in terms of sprinkling. Second, the use of the perfect tense precludes reference to the Lord's Supper since, unlike baptism, it is a repeatable ordinance of the local church. For further arguments, see Allen, *Hebrews*, 445. Schreiner on the other hand, acknowledges the division among commentators but says, regardless if the text is explicitly referencing baptism that, "It seems natural that believers would think of baptism when the washing of the body is mentioned." Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 319.

<sup>52</sup> Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 247-248.

another,' so the focus of the thinking is *people*, not method: 'Let us consider *one another* . . . The body of Christ should be thinking about other members of the Body of Christ as *people*.'"<sup>53</sup> But again, which people? Ongoing edification can only result from intentional pouring into a specific group of Christians that the believer both knows and loves.

Considering people (to use Davis' phrasing), *should* result in love, love that flows out of the love of Christ shown supremely in His substitutionary death. In fact, love and good deeds are connected by the author earlier in the epistle in 6:10. Offers Allen, "The order is important: love is the internal attitude and spiritual disposition that expresses itself in outward tangible good works."<sup>54</sup> A love that does not act is not love. Therefore, consideration of people in the community leads to love, but love is not a mere feeling, it must result in good works that benefit the *ekklēsia*, if it is truly biblical love.<sup>55</sup>

The word translated "stimulate" used in 10:24 is *paroxysmos* and can mean "pester," but carries a positive sense here to "motivate the apathetic or fearful to do something."<sup>56</sup> This makes perfect contextual sense as the author is writing to a community that is afraid, and some are even in danger of falling away from Christ.<sup>57</sup> The Christian must actively and intentional consider ways in which to stir one another up. Says Schreiner, "The author calls upon the readers to contemplate ways in which they

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<sup>53</sup> Andrew M. Davis, "Leading the Church in Today's Word: What It Means Practically to Shepherd God's Flock," in *Shepherding God's Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 326, emphasis original.

<sup>54</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*, 446.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation, vol. 36 (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 321.

<sup>56</sup> Witherington, *Letters and Homilies to Jewish Christians*, 287.

<sup>57</sup> Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 311.

could stimulate others to love and good works.”<sup>58</sup> There is no passivity involved here: to edify is an intentional work by caring Christians informed by Christ’s past, present, and future work.

The “good deeds” that the believer is to pursue are antithetical to the “dead works” of which they have been cleansed by Christ (Heb 9:14).<sup>59</sup> Some of these good deeds are fleshed out in 13:1-6 and include (but are not limited to) showing hospitality (Heb 13:2), remembering the imprisoned and sharing in their suffering (Heb 13:3), sexual purity (Heb 13:4), and freedom from covetousness (Heb 13:5). John Calvin offers a clarifying and helpful alternative translation of 10:24 that stresses the importance of works toward the community and what motivates them: “Let us notice the state and circumstances of each other for the purpose of stimulating love and acts of kindness and benevolence, its proper fruits.”<sup>60</sup> Calvin then adds, “Love is the principle, and good or benevolent works are what it produces.”<sup>61</sup>

The follower of Christ ought to put away all dead works and pursue the good works found in the New Testament. In every situation, the believer must pursue good deeds to all people. However, in the context of Hebrews 10:24, the people they are to “consider” and intentionally find ways to “stimulate” are those in the *ekklēsia* they have covenanted with. Church membership gives Christians an opportunity “to grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love.”<sup>62</sup> Church membership shows the Christian whom they are to supremely consider and stimulate to love and good deeds even as they aim

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<sup>58</sup> Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 320.

<sup>59</sup> Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 220.

<sup>60</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to The Hebrews*, ed. and trans. John Owen, Calvin Commentaries vol. 22 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 239. Hereafter, all citations will be given as “Calvin, *Hebrews* (Owen, 239).”

<sup>61</sup> Calvin, *Hebrews* (Owens, 239).

<sup>62</sup> Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 168.

their own good deeds to those in the covenant community. Verse 25 bears this out.

The exhortations of 10:24 simply cannot be accomplished if Christians keep one another at arm's length.<sup>63</sup> Verse 25 contrasts two present tense participles: Christians are to not forsake . . . but encourage.<sup>64</sup> Christians who abandon the assembly cannot encourage, nor do they act as an encouragement. Further, if they do not make attending the gathering of the redeemed a life priority, they will not be known and will not know anyone enough to pursue 10:24 in a meaningful way.

Not only will those who abandon the gathering not be able to pursue 10:24 in a meaningful way, they will be actively harming the church. Those who abandon the gathering cannot edify the saints, and they leave the assembly vulnerable to peril. As Cockerill puts it, those who forsake the church “leave them in the lurch and thus deprive their brothers and sisters of needed support.”<sup>65</sup> Schreiner takes it one step further: “If believers renounce meeting with other Christians, especially because they fear discrimination and mistreatment, they are in effect turning against Christ.”<sup>66</sup>

The author of Hebrews adds to the exhortation to not forsake the assembly with “as is the habit of some” (Heb 10:25). Apparently, some in the early *ekklēsia* had begun to abandon the fellowship. The reasons are not given and are beyond the scope of the text, but it is possible various hardships that the community has faced led some to depart.<sup>67</sup> Abandoning the fellowship was a serious violation and those who made a habit of staying away from the gathering “risk[ed] exclusion from the community of the

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<sup>63</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 257.

<sup>64</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*, 446.

<sup>65</sup> Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 220.

<sup>66</sup> Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 321.

<sup>67</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 258.

faithful, and thus forfeiture of the ultimate salvation that Christ provides for his own.”<sup>68</sup>

The immediate following verses bear this out, as the author warns of impending judgment for those who “go on sinning willfully” (Heb 10:26).

Habitually ceasing to meet with the assembly is a dangerous prospect and, while there are no explicit calls for church discipline in this passage, discipline is implied. Connected to the command to not stay away from the gatherings is the call to “encourage one another,” followed by the consequences of those who make a habit of abandoning the fellowship. It is then on the assembly (both as individuals and as a corporate body) to “encourage one another” toward faithfulness to attend the gathering.

If the gathering can recognize that a member is absent consistently, they must have been recognized as being part of that particular *ekklēsia*, at least often and long enough for their absence to be noticed. The dangers of staying away are apparent in 10:26ff. It thus behooves the members to “encourage” their brother or sister by warning them and then, if necessary, removing them from fellowship. Says Leeman, “The person who neglects meeting with the saints is on his way toward God’s judgment, and the dim picture of that judgment represented by church discipline is a merciful act of warning.”<sup>69</sup>

“Encouragement” is *parakaleō* which, says Allen, “connotes both notions of encouragement and exhortation.”<sup>70</sup> The community not only “encourages” one another in the strictly positive sense of the word, they exhort one another to growth in the Lord and toward everything the author of Hebrews has himself pointed them to. Sometimes these exhortations take the form of gentle rebuke to bring the brother and sister out of sin. *Parakaleō* signifies “urgent insistence,” says Ellingworth, “especially that of eschatological urgency,” which is the sense in which it is used 13:19 and 13:22 as the

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<sup>68</sup> Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 221.

<sup>69</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 316.

<sup>70</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*, 447.

author offers his concluding remarks.<sup>71</sup> The believer will find encouraging and exhorting others (and being encouraged and exhorted himself) increasingly challenging if his attendance in the gathering is infrequent, erratic or ceases completely. Leeman adds, “The gathering must be ‘regular’ because occasional or one--off gatherings are generally incapable of performing the work of affirmation and oversight with any integrity.”<sup>72</sup>

The task before the church to meet, edify, and encourage is an urgent matter indeed as the author adds to these exhortations to do these things “all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Heb 10:25). The audience is assumed to know what the author is referring to as “the day,” since no other explanation is given, which likely means that it is unnecessary. Witherington says this “day” is “clearly a reference to the parousia and the judgment day associated with that event.”<sup>73</sup> Attached to the imminent arrival of the “day” is the necessity to watch one’s ethical behavior, as is apparent in other New Testament passages (cf. Rom 13:12; Phil 4:5; Jam 5:7-8; 1 Pet 4:7; 2 Pet 3:11 ff.).<sup>74</sup> The closer the day of the Lord gets, the more believers ought to make the assembly a priority.<sup>75</sup> Cockerill puts it well, “Warning joins hope as motivation for perseverance.”<sup>76</sup>

Hebrews 10:23-25 offers further proof of the presence of biblical church membership in the New Testament. Through a series of exhortations, the author builds on the truth of Christ’s work, a work which motivates and informs the life of the believer. The fact remains, the believers are sojourners in a hostile world (1 Pet 2:11) and in need

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<sup>71</sup> Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 529.

<sup>72</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ’s Rule* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 365.

<sup>73</sup> Witherington, *Letters and Homilies to Jewish Christians*, 287.

<sup>74</sup> Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, vol. 15 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 219.

<sup>75</sup> Calvin, *Hebrews* (Owen, 242).

<sup>76</sup> Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 221.

of encouragement and accountability. The New Testament's way to help ensure the believer holds fast to the faith is through committing to a local church and not neglect gathering with them as a life priority. The day of the Lord is impending and sure, every day the church marches ever closer to the end of the age. As Christians see the day approach, they must draw nearer to one another even as Christ draws near to them. Church membership helps them do just that.

### **Biblical Membership Entails Submission to Particular Leaders**

A common thread that runs through Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-8; and Hebrews 10:23-25 is accountability. Church discipline assumes the Christian has submitted themselves to a local church where their profession of faith was considered credible and they were recognized as "in" the community of the redeemed (Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 5:1-8). The admonishment to not abandon the fellowship presupposes associating with a local *ekklēsia* where one's prolonged absence will be noticed (Heb 10:23-25). The thread of accountability necessitating church membership continues in the concluding exhortations of Hebrews, specifically 13:17, which reads, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

As was the case in Hebrews 10:23-25, Hebrews 13:17 is one sentence in Greek and features a double exhortation: to obey and submit to leaders in the church.<sup>77</sup> Allen states that, "The present imperative 'obey' probably has an iterative sense of 'continue to obey' or 'obey on a regular basis.'"<sup>78</sup> "Submit" is *hypeikete* (also present, active,

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<sup>77</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*, 519.

<sup>78</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*.

imperative) and appears only here in all of the New Testament.<sup>79</sup> *Hypeikete* initially meant “to withdraw” or “give way to” in Greco-Roman literature, but came to mean “yielding to authority.”<sup>80</sup> Says Allen, “It is stronger and more specific word than the preceding ‘obey’ and carries with it the implication that one is to yield when the leader's rule is at variance with the reader's wishes.”<sup>81</sup>

Submission to church leaders means the church member is to give “due deference” to their leader(s), even when they disagree with the decision being made.<sup>82</sup> This “yielding” does not mean blind followership or ignoring the sinful or unbiblical. Rather, when the church member disagrees with their pastor, they should approach him in private, once that has happened, however, the member should “get behind him and support his leadership whether [they] agree with him or not.”<sup>83</sup>

The word translated “obey” is *peithō* and, says Cockerill, “is often used of those who have been persuaded to obey rather than for obedience to constituted authority.”<sup>84</sup> Adds Cockerill, “it is an appropriate response from those who hear to those who proclaim God’s word.”<sup>85</sup> Schreiner emphasizes the importance for submission and obedience to be given to the leaders that teach sound doctrine: “The author assumes in giving this command that the leaders teach and live in accord with the theology articulated in the letter. Hence the call to submit to the leaders is not universal. The

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<sup>79</sup> Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 277.

<sup>80</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*.

<sup>81</sup> Allen, *Hebrews*, 519-520.

<sup>82</sup> Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 723.

<sup>83</sup> Daniel L. Akin, “The Single-Elder-Led Church: The Bible’s Witness to a Congregational/Single-Elder-Led Polity,” in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, ed. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: B&H, 2004), 66.

<sup>84</sup> Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 309.

<sup>85</sup> Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*.

readers should not submit if leaders deviate from the gospel.”<sup>86</sup> The submission and obedience, then, are not total in that the leader must be one who is striving to preach and teach (and live) what is found in Scripture.

The call to obey and submit to the leaders is not for no reason. Indeed, what the author offers next reveals the weight of pastoral responsibility: “for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account” (Heb 13:17b), with the image of shepherds watching over their flock implied.<sup>87</sup> The responsibility of the member to obey, says Bruce Ware, “flows out of the sobering and weighty responsibility that they (leaders) are given.”<sup>88</sup> The verb *agrupnēo* (“keep watch”) is also found in Ephesians 6:18 where Paul exhorts the Ephesian church to “be on the alert” in prayer and petition. The leader “keeps watch” in that they remain constantly vigilant over those God has placed under their care, like a shepherd watches over his sheep.<sup>89</sup>

The members obey and submit, not only because the leaders watch over them, but because the leaders will have to give an account for how they led. The fear of members who read this passage and wonder if they should obey arrogant or domineering leaders will hopefully be abated if their leaders are also taking this passage seriously. The leaders will answer for how they led to God, who is “the judge of all” (Heb 12:23) and is a “consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). This realization, says Luke Timothy Johnson, “should be a powerful check against the natural tendency toward arrogance among those placed in such a position.”<sup>90</sup> When one realizes that they will have to answer for their oversight of

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<sup>86</sup> Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 424.

<sup>87</sup> Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 723.

<sup>88</sup> Bruce A. Ware, “Putting It All Together: A Theology of Church Leadership,” in *Shepherding God’s Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 304.

<sup>89</sup> Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 277.

<sup>90</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 350.

the church to God the judge, domineering and arrogant leadership should be far less attractive.

The phrase “give an account” is mentioned five other times in the New Testament and, notes Merkle, “It is always used in the context of a lesser having to explain the rationale or justify something they did (or did not do) to someone who is their superior.”<sup>91</sup> The leaders will be held accountable “for the spiritual well-being of those placed in their care” by Christ, the Chief-Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4).<sup>92</sup> In light of the context of the epistle and the aforementioned truth of the “day drawing near” (10:23-25), the need for spiritual watch care is all the more urgent. Says Schreiner, “In the context of Hebrews where apostasy is the danger, not following leaders who proclaim the gospel would lead to judgment and destruction.”<sup>93</sup>

Members submitting to their leaders is mutually beneficial: “Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Heb 13:17c). Grief is contrasted with joy, but also, says Ellingworth, connotes shame from the leader if they must render a negative account before the Lord.<sup>94</sup> Submission to leadership will serve to benefit both the leaders and the members as leading with grief harms everyone involved.<sup>95</sup> If the members reject or resist a leader who is faithfully preaching the Word of God and living lives worthy of emulation (Heb 13:7), they cause their leaders to do so with “groaning” rather than joy, and this is in no way advantageous to the church

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<sup>91</sup> Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” 37n18.

<sup>92</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 385.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “Overseeing and Serving the Church in the Pastoral and General Epistles,” in *Shepherding God’s Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 116.

<sup>94</sup> Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 724.

<sup>95</sup> James W. Thompson, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2008), 284.

members.<sup>96</sup> As the leaders have responsibility to lead, the members have a responsibility to follow that leadership. As said, if the leaders are discharging their duties faithfully and the stubbornness of disobedient members causes them to lead while burdened, the members would be disadvantaged and their leaders' ability to continue to serve faithfully, would be seriously hampered.<sup>97</sup>

Hebrews 13:17 offers further proof of the New Testament's insistence on Christians committing to a local body of believers. The questions begging to be asked of this verse are two: (1) To whom are Christians supposed to submit? (2) Who are leaders supposed to oversee?<sup>98</sup> If there were no formal biblical church membership then there would be no answer to either of these questions. Without being recognized as a member of a church that has recognized leaders, the Christian could not obey Hebrews 13:17. Further, for whom will the leader give an account, if there is no expectation of formal membership? Merkle notes, "If a leader must give an account, he needs to know not only that he is a leader (which implies some formal position recognized by the church) but also who he is accountable to lead (which implies a distinction between the leaders and the followers)."<sup>99</sup>

Without biblical church membership, Christians would either (1) not know which leaders to submit to, or (2) outright disobey Hebrews 13:17. Additionally, without biblical membership, leaders would not truly be leaders since there would be no formal body for which they would lead or be recognized as such. Church membership is "The

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<sup>96</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews*, Christ-Centered Exposition (Nashville: B&H, 2017), 232.

<sup>97</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 386.

<sup>98</sup> Matt Chandler, "Is Church Membership Biblical?" *9 Marks Journal* (May/June 2011): 7.

<sup>99</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 54.

only context for such leadership and accountability,” as is given in Hebrews 13:17.<sup>100</sup> For Christians to submit to leaders they must formally join a church and it is those leaders who they are to follow. Without church membership, Christians can very well ask from this verse, “Must I submit to leaders of every church in my town?” Leaders could also rightly ask, “Am I to be held accountable for every Christian in my city?” The answer to these questions is surely “no,” since they are not only impractical, but ignore the wealth of evidence in the New Testament.

Christians are not to submit to all leaders, nor to all churches and those church’s members. Christians are to obey and submit to *their own* leaders. Hence, “Obey *your* leaders and submit to *them*.” The same logic applies to pastors as they oversee a particular body of believers. Only when the pronouns of Hebrews 13:17 are defined can they be obeyed. Observes Jeramie Rinne, “church membership helps an elder know which specific sheep are the ones under his oversight. He will give an account to God for *them*.”<sup>101</sup> The commands of Hebrews 13:17 and the consequences for disobeying them become utter nonsense without identifiable church membership, as church membership is the only biblical way for a people to know which leaders to submit to, and the leaders to know for whom they are responsible.<sup>102</sup>

The gravity of this verse should not be skirted, but taken seriously, in which case, church membership must be embraced. It is good for church members to be shepherded by joyful shepherds. Members’ souls would be benefited by faithful leaders administering the word to them with joy and not grief or groaning. The alternative is

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<sup>100</sup> John S. Hammett and Thomas White, “The Why and Who of Church Membership,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 170.

<sup>101</sup> Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God’s People Like Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014, 62, emphasis original.

<sup>102</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What is a Healthy Church Member?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 65.

disastrous for the both the leaders and the church members.

Further, by not joining a church at all, Christians signal something else inherently negative and counter-biblical: “By not formally joining a church, a person is essentially communicating to the leadership that they do not want to be held accountable.”<sup>103</sup> Without formal membership and the individual Christian’s recognition of the need to join a church, they signal that they are outside the need to be held accountable, connoting either a kind of individualistic arrogance or an antinomian approach to the Christian faith and walk. But combine this text with the church discipline texts of Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 and a robust picture of healthy church membership forms. Members will both know who they are to submit to, have others to help them walk faithfully, and leaders will know whom they will be held accountable for.

### **Conclusion**

In Ephesians 5:25, the Apostle Paul tells the church in Ephesus that Christ loved the church to such an extent that He died for her. In 1 Corinthians 3:17, Paul states that if anyone would try to destroy the church, God would destroy them. God cares deeply for the church. While the New Testament is full of letters to the church and instructions about the church, four texts in particular stand out as arguing for a clear line between the church and the world, as well as a case for the need of purity in the *ekklēsia* of God. The Bible is the church’s ultimate guide for how it ought to treat the church and how the church must function. Leeman puts it well:

When the boundary line between church and world gets blurred, God’s picture of the loving, forgiving, caring, holy, righteous community becomes less clear. . . . The argument for church membership and discipline is an argument for a clear line between church and world, as clear as the line between the inside of Eden and the outside of Eden, the inside of the ark and the outside of the ark, the inside of the

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<sup>103</sup> Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” 38.

Israelite camp and the outside of its walls.<sup>104</sup>

In Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-8; Hebrews 10:23-25; and Hebrews 13:17, the church is held high as a place for edification and purity as well as signaling clear lines that one can be considered “in” while the unregenerate world is considered “out.” For Jesus, Paul, and the author of Hebrews, the church has a responsibility for one another and their growth in Christ, as well as to their recognized leaders, as they faithfully follow in the church they have committed to. While moderns may argue against the need for church membership, the New Testament paints a picture of the need for a robust, healthy membership for the good of the saints, the furtherance of the mission of Christ, and the glory of God.

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<sup>104</sup> Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 20.

CHAPTER 3  
THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES OF  
BIBLICAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

In his book *Democratic Religion*, Gregory A. Wills, writing about church discipline in Baptist churches during the nineteenth century, states plainly, “To an antebellum Baptist, a church without discipline would hardly have counted as a church.”<sup>1</sup> The statistics bear this out in striking ways, as does the seeming decline of discipline only a single century later which continues to this day. Discipline in Baptist churches in the south began a decline, says Wills, in the 1840s, was briefly halted in the 1870s, before continuing its decline.<sup>2</sup> Wills further states that Georgia Baptist churches, for example, “excommunicated annually an average of 201 persons per 10,000 church members.”<sup>3</sup> In one hundred years, this decreased “by more than ninety percent, with churches excluding an annual average of only 18 per 10,000 members.”<sup>4</sup>

Another alarming statistic illustrates a decline in discipline, and thus, biblical church membership and accountability specifically in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). According to the 2020 SBC annual report, the SBC had 14,525,579 members but only a 5,250,230 average weekly worship attendance, a discrepancy of nearly ten million.<sup>5</sup> Regarding the ever-growing discrepancy between SBC members and attenders,

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 117.

<sup>3</sup> Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

<sup>4</sup> Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

<sup>5</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, “Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention 2020,” accessed February 3, 2021, [http://media2.sbhl.org.s3.amazonaws.com/annuals/SBC\\_Annual\\_2020.pdf](http://media2.sbhl.org.s3.amazonaws.com/annuals/SBC_Annual_2020.pdf).

R. Albert Mohler Jr. says, “Put bluntly, the total membership numbers as compared to attendance calls into question whether we really believe in regenerate church membership. Members who do not act like members should not be counted as members.”<sup>6</sup>

It would seem that, while the New Testament assumes Christians will be covenanted to a local church to which they regularly attend, there has existed a steady decline in meaningful church membership for quite some time. As Wills notes, Baptist churches went from insisting discipline must exist in order for a church to even be considered a true church, to barely practicing church discipline at all. The standard for membership lowered over time, becoming more and more consumeristic, with members becoming less and less accountable for their life and walk in Christ. The above examples speak profoundly to this truth.

Contrary to the modern individualistic and consumeristic approaches to life and the church, however, the Bible insists on church members exhibiting Christlike humility and committing to being in community together. A robust approach to membership drawn from Scripture alone will aid in the practice of church discipline and care, which would end the unbiblical practice of non-attending member, something the Bible knows nothing about. This chapter will explore the way in which Biblical church membership calls especially for members to exhibit an other-focused approach to the church and this approach accompanies a commitment to mutual submission and accountability.

### **Biblical Membership Calls for a Christlike, Other-Focused Approach to the Church**

“Individualism, consumerism, reluctance to commit, and skepticism,” are all

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<sup>6</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., “The Future of the Southern Baptist Convention: The Numbers Don’t Add Up,” May 31, 2019, <https://albertmohler.com/2019/05/31/the-future-of-the-southern-baptist-convention-the-numbers-dont-add-up>.

part of the current culture of America and are tied directly to the way in which the local church is viewed and treated, says Jonathan Leeman.<sup>7</sup> This current culture inevitably leads to an approach to the church as if it were a transaction, an exchange of goods and services, rather than a covenant community one gives oneself away to in order to focus on others. Leeman locates further the source of the problem:

in a culture where the physical surroundings of our lives – from houses to clothes to dinner plates – are all the product of our choices, where divorce is up and job permanence is down, where all truth is held with a loose grip, and where people are enamored with statistics – in this kind of culture, we will grow up comparatively convinced of our ability to make wise choices about our spiritual condition. We'll think that we can manage our spiritual lives quite well. Compared to people in other times and places, therefore, we will probably be more likely to view a commitment and submission to one local church with either indifference or suspicion; and we'll justify doing so by redefining *love*. . . . I believe it's fairly reasonable to conjecture that Christians living in an individualistic society are more likely to find the doctrines of church membership and discipline a stumbling block, at least compared to Christians living in a culture less inclined to defined individuals as isolated units.<sup>8</sup>

If one does not have the proper view and place for biblical love, then, church membership (which is inherently selfless and other-focused, biblically speaking) is simply one relationship among many that fill our lives that we can take or leave. Biblical church membership is a way to push back against this faulty view of love. It challenges worldly assumptions, calls for a higher commitment, and requires members to look beyond themselves.

Commenting on 1 Corinthians 8, Ben Witherington makes a crucial point regarding the place of love in the church and how that should inform the way in which church members view and relate to one another: “Love as a basis for Christian living and behavior deflates elitism, since it entails self-sacrificial service even to the weak, not self-aggrandizement. . . . Before action one must ask: ‘Is this loving? Does it build up the body of Christ?’ Salvation is fleshed out not in self-helping actions, but in self-sacrificial

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 62.

<sup>8</sup> Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 62-63, emphasis original.

actions.”<sup>9</sup> This is a thread, as noted in chapter 2, that runs through New Testament texts regarding church membership. Indeed, the Christian life on the whole ought to be focused on others, never on self, this is lived out supremely in the life of a local church. After all, says Mark Dever, “The duties and responsibilities church members have *toward one another* summarize the life of the new society that is the church.”<sup>10</sup> It is important to realize, then, that Biblical membership does not call Christians to anything that Scripture itself does not. In fact, membership helps Christians follow Scriptural calls in community. Further, membership gives members an avenue to pursue the obedience that Christ calls for.

Biblical church membership is only possible when members lose the consumer mentality that plagues much of modern western society. Not only is biblical membership only possible when it is not approached in a consumeristic way, but it also helps keep it at bay. Says Joseph Hellerman, “We will successfully swim upstream against the raging river of personal sin and selfishness only in the context of community as God intends it.”<sup>11</sup> Hellerman’s assessment is correct because a biblical view of membership emphasizes a focus on others, the necessity of being held accountable, and a covenantal approach to the church. This context, when pursued rightly, will challenge sin, and selfishness at every turn of church life.

To have a posture that counteracts consumerism, each church member has a price they must pay, in other words, biblical church membership is costly, which is likely why it is not pursued in every church. R. Kent Hughes notes that today the church is confronted with something otherwise unknown in the history of Christendom: churchless

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<sup>9</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community at Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 196.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 160, emphasis original.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 85.

Christians.<sup>12</sup> Hughes points out why this is so damaging, “If you don’t join, you don’t have to attend, serve, or give. You can be on the perpetual ‘take.’ And it never costs. . . . Consumerism without paying—that’s the ultimate. Actually, there is a price that will be paid, and the price may be higher than ever dreamed.”<sup>13</sup> While giving oneself over to a church in covenant membership costs, keeping oneself away from the church, never committing, driven from church to church, costs far more.

Dean Inserra points out, for example, that cultural Christians are typically drawn to churches that function more like a country club than a New Testament church.<sup>14</sup> Country club churches subsequently feel the need to do whatever it takes to retain their members because they fear losing them (and their tithe check) to another church. In order to be a country club church, the leaders must make the church a place where the members do not focus on others, nor feel the need to serve, but focus entirely on being catered to:

Country clubs thrive only to the extent that they cater to their members. If the members of the club aren’t happy, they will leave for another club across town. . . . A church that refuses to call people to die to themselves and follow Christ is going to be full of people who admire and are ‘cool’ with Jesus, as long as He doesn’t interfere with their lives.<sup>15</sup>

Country club churches seem to be partly to blame for the disconnect between church attendance and membership. If the church is a country club, one can take or leave church attendance. But whereas country clubs actually require paying dues, this is not

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<sup>12</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Set Apart: Calling a Worldly Church to a Godly Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 177.

<sup>13</sup> Hughes, *Set Apart*, 177.

<sup>14</sup> Inserra defines cultural Christians as a faith that “looks very Christian on the surface, but is merely Christian by culture, rather than conviction. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not part of the equation.” Later he states, “Cultural Christianity is the mindset that places one’s security in heritage, values, rites of passage (such as a first communion or a baptism from childhood), and a generic deity, rather than the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. These false gospels pose serious challenges to pastors and local church members who are seeking to live on mission and remain faithful to the Great Commission where the Lord has them living working, and being part of local life.” Dean Inserra, *The Unserved Christian: Reaching Cultural Christianity with the Gospel* (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 13, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Inserra, *The Unserved Christian*, 83.

even necessary to retain membership in many churches. It is therefore possible that churches may have lower standards than secular country and civic clubs! This is not to say tithing should be required, but it does need to be expected, and that expectation needs to be clearly communicated. The problems with a country club approach to church membership are legion, but what members (or casual Christians who refuse to join a local church at all) miss in this approach is focusing on self rather than others, is actually harmful to one's walk and growth. To be sure, a self-centered life is antithetical to growth and joy in the Lord.

The New Testament makes clear that the Christian life is one of other-directed focus and service, contrary to everything the world sells Christians in their day-to-day life. Other-directed focus and service, unlike worldly consumerism and selfishness, is the essence of Christian love. Witherington says this sort of love “puts up with a lot, but it also gives generously without thought of return. It is not the sort of love associated with jealousy or envy . . . . Those who express Christian love are not self-inflated windbags. . . . It does not seek its own ends, nor is it hot or quick-tempered.”<sup>16</sup> As Witherington says plainly, the kind of love called for in the New Testament cannot be self-serving or engrossed by what it receives, it only cares about what it can give. It is thus wholly contrary to a country club approach to the church.

This other-focused, selfless view and posture towards others is none other than what Christ emulated for His followers. To take it even further, Christ empowers and enables His followers to love in this way since it is an other-worldly love, which cannot be obtained by mere effort. The call to selflessness towards other believers is clear, however, as Paul writes to the church at Philippi, he exhorts his Christian audience to “do nothing out of selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves” (Phil 2:3). The call is plainly stated: do nothing

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<sup>16</sup> Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 270.

within the community of the redeemed for yourself or out of selfish motives in order to acquire anything for yourself. Rather, the church member must focus exclusively on others.

G. Walter Hansen translates 2:3b as “value others above yourselves” then says of this, “The focus is not negative, but positive. Let the needs and interests of others surpass yours: put them in first place; give them the place of honor; respect them; listen to them; speak about them; serve them; strengthen them; encourage them.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, Gordon D. Fee says that the type of selfishness mentioned here, and the selfishness that is being discouraged by Paul “stands at the heart of human fallenness, where self-interest and self-aggrandizement at the expense of others primarily dictate values and behavior. People with such a ‘mindset’ not only stand over against the apostle . . . but also over against God, whose Son fully displayed God’s character when he took on a servant’s role.”<sup>18</sup>

Even as Paul calls the Philippians to do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, they are to care about the interests of others (Phil 2:4). As difficult as all of this may seem, the Christians are equipped to pursue this type of other-worldly selflessness because they ought to have the attitude in them “which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5). Richard R. Melick Jr. translates 2:5 as, “Think this in you which Christ thought in him,” which is an exhortation to imitate Christ and His servant posture of emptying Himself, entering flesh in the incarnation, and living a sacrificial life leading even through a cross, which is expounded upon in 2:6-11.<sup>19</sup>

Christ supremely and perfectly exemplified what it means to live what

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<sup>17</sup> G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 116.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 117.

<sup>19</sup> Richard R. Melick Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1991), 100.

Hellerman calls the “cruciform life,” and this is the life all Christians must strive toward: “The Christian life, at its essence, is a cruciform life. It is a life that is shaped like – and shaped by – the cross of Jesus Christ. To genuinely know Christ is to be ‘conformed to His death’ (Phil 3:10).<sup>20</sup> Thom Rainer draws a line directly from Philippians 2 and the bearing it has on church membership: “Keep in mind that Philippians 2 is not only a description of the obedience of Christ; it is an example for us to follow. We are to be servants. We are to be obedient. We are to put others first. . . . So if we approach church membership from the perspective of entitlement, we have it upside down.”<sup>21</sup>

In *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, Rainer tells of common threads of churches that died. Every single church that Rainer and his team autopsied had some level of the problem of being preference-driven. Says Rainer, “A church cannot survive long-term where members are focused on their preferences. . . . The lifeblood of a healthy church is one that is more like the mind of Christ in the members’ attitudes. . . .when church members increasingly demand their own preferences, the church is steadily not becoming a church.”<sup>22</sup> When members are preference-driven, they are functioning in a way utterly opposite to Christ’s example, to the rest of Scripture, and, as Rainer said, a church that functions this way can hardly be considered a church.

Hellerman makes another very important ecclesiological point on the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 on the whole, and 2:6-8 in particular: “Paul outlined the humiliation and exaltation of Christ in order to encourage the Philippians to adopt in their mutual relations the same attitude toward power and social status that Jesus exhibited

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<sup>20</sup> Hellerman says that the word “cruciform” has existed for some time in academia “as a catchword for Paul’s other-centered approach to Christian life and ministry. ‘Cruciform’ literally means ‘in the shape of the cross.’” Joseph H. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry: Power and Status in the Early Church and Why it Matters Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *I Am a Church Member: Discovering the Attitude that Makes the Difference* (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 39.

<sup>22</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 49-50, 52.

during the incarnation. Paul's introduction to his sweeping narrative made this immediately clear: 'Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus' (2:5)."<sup>23</sup> Paul's goal then was for the Philippians to imitate Jesus in their relations with one another. If Jesus, who of all people could have "grasped" (2:6) equality with God, emptied Himself for the benefit of others instead, surely the Philippian Christians who have this same "mind" in them, could do the same by the power of the Lord.

This vision for the church runs counter to the consumeristic approach of many modern American Christians. In fact, the reason this posture is so rare is due in part to an unbiblical church membership that has become commonplace in America and beyond. When one joins a local church, the approach of "what can I get out of this?" is a failure from the start. Why is there such a disconnect between members and attenders in the SBC, for example? One cannot help but wonder if it has primarily to do with low standards for membership and a lack of understanding that to be a member of a church inherently means, at the most basic level, to focus on others, attend regularly, to give sacrificially, to pray together and for others, and to serve.<sup>24</sup>

When considering the texts mentioned in chapter 2, all of them are difficult (if not impossible) to obey and adhere to without a disposition that the other members are to be treated as "more important than" oneself. To obey Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-8 in the realm of church discipline means that the member approaching a sinning brother is so focused on them that they know that they are in sin and so concerned for their well-being that they will endure the discomfort of a confronting and loving rebuke. To commit to the gatherings as is instructed in Hebrews 10:23-25 means to gather with the saints in order that they may be stimulated in love and good deeds. To submit to recognized leaders means one has a humble posture that desires to ensure the

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<sup>23</sup> Helleman, *Embracing Shared Ministry*, 140.

<sup>24</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 168.

leaders can lead with joy and not grief. One simply cannot pursue even these four texts without having an other-focused approach towards the church.

The Scriptural calls to a Christ-imitating, other-focused attitude toward the church flies right in the face of preference-driven approach to the church. No robust membership can exist in a church that does not teach or expect biblical selflessness modeled through, and commanded by, Christ. To be sure, true joy in the church is found in thinking away from self and towards others. Matt Merker writes that adopting a biblical view of the worship gatherings will protect members “from some of the forces that tend to weaken our worship today.”<sup>25</sup> The approach to the gatherings ties directly to how one sees oneself as a member of the body. Losing a consumer mentality safeguards true worship and brings joy: “The good of the whole church is more important than being comfortable or having my preferences met. Each believer experiences the joyful freedom of taking the focus off self and putting it on God and others.”<sup>26</sup>

The call to biblical church membership is an outward focused call at every turn. When the church mimics the world, however, adopting its practices, transforming membership into a way to please customers, one can hardly expect anything other than an environment of selfishness and disharmony. A church that functions as a provider of goods and services, should see it as no surprise when the membership roll becomes bloated as members are transient because they can easily bail on the church once it fails to provide what they expect. Says Jared C. Wilson,

When a church mirrors the values of the world outside by embracing the functional methodologies of pragmatism, consumerism, and legalism, we should not be surprised when congregants think of the church as the place where their individual desires are met (or not met), not as a place to unite with others in commitment and

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<sup>25</sup> Matt Merker, *Corporate Worship: How the Church Gathers as God's People* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 52.

<sup>26</sup> Merker, *Corporate Worship*, 53.

selfless service.<sup>27</sup>

A church whose membership reflects more a civic, social, or country club will inevitably foster a membership that is inwardly focused and an attitude that is the antithesis to the one Christ modeled. Churches that do not require or teach what membership means from Scripture can expect members to continue to treat the church as consumers hoping to be placated and performed for. Biblical membership then should be in the very DNA of the church, since only a consistent, biblical, healthy membership can fight against the pull towards a church that is indistinct from the world. When a church devotes itself to membership as the Bible intends and the members consistently understand what membership means, they will shine the light of Christ as they put others before themselves.

The cure for a selfish, inwardly focused, preference-driven membership begins with a steady diet of expository preaching. Pastors have a responsibility to feed the sheep good food, and Scripture is the most important source. The pastor has no authority aside from the Word, and if they care about the souls of their members, they will give them the pure Word from the pulpit week in and week out. Says Andrew M. Davis, “The most significant force in the revitalization of any local church is the ongoing ministry of the Word of God from the pulpit Sunday after Sunday. . . . I believe that expositional preaching is by far the most effective and powerful form of preaching in the revitalization of a church.”<sup>28</sup> Churches without healthy, biblical church membership are in need of revitalization, and even those that have biblical membership continue to need to fight against the culture of consumerism that their members live in.

Churches that love their members will teach them what it means to be a

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<sup>27</sup> Jared C. Wilson, *The Gospel-Driven Church: Uniting Church-Growth Dreams with the Metrics of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 174.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 88-89.

biblical church member, since it both originates in Scripture and helps them put actions to their confession in Christ. Speaking of country club churches, Inserra says, “The cure for a country club church is not to care for members less but to care for them more. Loving them more means calling them to what Christ already called them to, and that is Himself. . . . My friends who are Cultural Christians attend churches where their version of Christianity isn’t challenged, and they don’t realize it’s not Christianity at all.”<sup>29</sup> Many members may have never encountered (or thought about) what the Bible calls for them regarding church membership. They may not realize that they are following Jesus in a way that is foreign to Scripture. Their shepherds have a responsibility to show them from Scripture at every opportunity what Christ calls them and the church to. If the members allow the Word to work in their hearts, they will see that church membership focused on others in emulation of Christ is where freedom and joy is found.

### **Biblical Membership Requires Commitment to Mutual Submission and Accountability**

A key aspect in Jesus’ own example of humility is His voluntary submission to the Father while on earth. In all four Gospels, Jesus is shown praying to the Father at Gethsemane the night before His crucifixion, asking that, “if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me” and submits His will to the Father’s: “yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matt 26:39; see also Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42; John 6:38). Similarly, in Philippians 2:8, Paul states that Jesus “humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.” Jesus submitted His will voluntarily, even as He is eternally co-equal with the Father (Phil 2:6), and even if it meant a gruesome death, He was willing to cede His will in obedience for the benefit of others.

Christians in emulation of Jesus must also gladly and voluntarily submit to a local church that they covenant with. As part of this submission, they must also be held

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<sup>29</sup> Inserra, *The Unsaved Christian*, 85.

accountable by its members because, whereas Jesus was sinless, Christians still reside in the age between Eden and New Jerusalem and thus continue to battle darkness, always in danger of slipping into ongoing, unrepentant sin. Church membership helps safeguard the Christian. But for the membership to be biblical, they must functionally submit to one another (Eph 5:21) and humbly accept accountability. Says Leeman, “Christians are called, as a matter of obedience to Christ, to submit to the affirmation and oversight of local churches.”<sup>30</sup>

This kind of submission and accountability is a fundamental part of what it means to join a church. Without it, a church’s membership cannot be considered either biblical or helpful. Mez McConnell and Mike McKinley articulate this point well: “Membership requires commitment, and it clarifies in biblical terms what it means to be part of the church. When people become members of the congregation, they are promising to love and care and pray for and be accountable to all of the other people in the church.”<sup>31</sup> This is what ought to happen when one joins a church: the new member submits themselves to the church and entrusts the care of their soul to everyone in the church who mutually holds them accountable. Church membership without these aspects (submission and accountability) is utterly powerless, and indeed, even pointless.

Since baptism is both a sign of entrance into the New Covenant and entry rite into the community, it is essential that church leadership ensure the member candidate has been baptized by immersion in the name of the Trinity. Those who have not been baptized ought to submit to baptism as their entry into church membership.<sup>32</sup> Notes

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<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 44.

<sup>31</sup> Mez McConnell and Mike McKinley, *Church in Hard Places: How the Local Church Brings Life to the Poor and Needy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 126.

<sup>32</sup> Southern Baptist churches, believing that immersion in the name of the Trinity is the only recognized, valid baptism, may require re-baptism for those who have been baptized in other traditions. For

Shawn D. Wright, “Biblical religion is a corporate affair, and baptism is a key marker of a new believer’s entrance into the life of the church.”<sup>33</sup> Since baptism is necessary for entrance into the church (being baptized into Christ *and* community), it is directly related to submission to the authority of the church.<sup>34</sup> Leeman helpfully notes, “Repentance is publicly demonstrated in submitting to the church’s authority. Submit to Christ . . . by submitting to the church. Baptism doesn’t mean only this, but it means at least this.”<sup>35</sup>

If the church has authority from Christ, given the keys to the kingdom (Matt 16:19), and given authority to accept and remove members based on their fruit (Matt 18:15-20), and if baptism is an entrance rite into the community, then it follows that submission to Christ’s kingdom outpost is connected to the ordinances. Gregg R. Allison states regarding baptism and membership,

baptism symbolizes incorporation into the new covenant community, the church. As the initial rite of integration into the new covenant, baptism signals a new convert’s intention to follow faithfully and obediently the covenant mediator, Jesus Christ, in the nurturing and missional community context of the church.<sup>36</sup>

Baptism, as initiatory rite into the community of the church proclaims, in effect, “I will

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example, a member candidate may have been baptized as an infant in a Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, or other tradition that practices pedobaptism. Mark Dever notes, “Defining what constitutes baptism leads to defining what baptisms a local congregation may accept as true baptisms. So, for example, a baptism of an infant is in no sense the baptism commanded in Scripture.” Churches must thus be ready to answer questions like, “what about a believer who was baptized upon his profession of repentance and faith, but in a non-Baptist church? Is the administrator or congregation essential to the ordinance? Or are some matters normal but nonessential? Could there be a baptism that is true, but irregular? If so, what would such irregularities be?” Mark E. Dever, “Baptism in the Context of a Local Church,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 289.

<sup>33</sup> Shawn D. Wright, “Baptism in History, Theology, and the Church,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 125.

<sup>34</sup> Leeman says on baptism as a prerequisite to church membership: “Baptism does not save a person, but Jesus means for his saved individuals to publicly identify with him and his people. It’s one piece of how citizens become official. It’s how they wave the flag. In the same way, churches have for two thousand years treated baptism as a prerequisite for membership.” Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 89.

<sup>35</sup> Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 199.

<sup>36</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 356.

follow Christ as king above all and this church can expect me to act in accordance with this confession even as it helps me do so.”

Baptism ties directly to church discipline in its declaration of intent to follow Jesus faithfully in the community and the expectation that the church will exhort them to obedience and rebuke them when engaged in ongoing and unrepentant sin. Says Benjamin L. Merkle,

In the early church . . . an official ceremony might have taken place at a person’s baptism after which he would have been considered a ‘brother’ in Christ. Such a person would then be expected to live according to the commands given in the Bible. If this person lived in open, unrepentant sin and refused the admonition of the church, then he was to be removed from church membership and thus considered as an unbeliever.<sup>37</sup>

Wills states that Christians in the Antebellum South knew that submission and accountability were inextricably tied to church membership and excommunications especially bore this out: “Excommunication brought the full force of ecclesiastical authority to bear on offenders. Its significance was not lost on either the sinners or the saints. *They had bound themselves to mutual accountability for moral behavior.*”<sup>38</sup>

Mohler, commenting on Wills’ study, notes that these pre-Civil War Baptists held one another accountable to safeguard both doctrinal purity and moral conduct, “Members were disciplined for behavior that violated biblical principles or congregational covenants, but also for violations of doctrine and belief. Members were considered to be under the authority of the congregation and accountable to each other.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 43.

<sup>38</sup> Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 45, emphasis added.

<sup>39</sup> Mohler further states, “By the turn of the century, however, church discipline was already on the decline. In the wake of the Enlightenment, criticism of the Bible and of the doctrines of evangelical orthodoxy was widespread. Even the most conservative denominations began to show evidence of decreased attention to theological orthodoxy. At the same time, the larger culture moved toward the adoption of autonomous moral individualism. The result of these internal and external developments was

One can hardly overstate the danger of a biblical membership that emphasizes (or expects) neither submission nor accountability. As baptism is the initiatory rite of entrance into the community and a willingness to submit to the community, the Lord's Supper maintains and reminds about this commitment. At the church at Corinth, for example, the danger of lack of submission and accountability was highlighted throughout Paul's first epistle, but especially in the Lord's Supper. The lack of humility, submission, and focus on others led to a party spirit and abuse of the Lord's table (1 Cor 11:17-22).

In a church that clearly lacked biblical discipline and embraced liberty (1 Cor 5:1-12), the members who abused the Lord's table and mistreated poorer members, went unrebuked and undisciplined. Wrong treatment of the body at the Lord's Supper led to illness and even death (1 Cor 11:27-32). All of this could have been avoided if they would have "discerned the body" rightly (1 Cor 28-29). Says Witherington, "This disaster could be avoided, Paul believed, if they would simply examine themselves and their behavior before partaking."<sup>40</sup>

The Lord's Supper is a way for members to regularly, not only remember the Lord's death on their behalf, but to remember their place in the body of Christ, to physically look around the fellowship and, says John S. Hammett, examine themselves "in terms of renewing love for the body of believers [which] is necessary to partake rightly, because in our participation we say, 'We are one body; we are brothers and sisters.'"<sup>41</sup> The Lord's Supper is an ongoing examination of one's treatment of the church and as one "examines himself" in the midst of the body before he or she partakes, they

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the abandonment of church discipline as ever larger portions of the church member's life were considered off-limits to congregations." R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Church Discipline: The Missing Mark," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 44-45.

<sup>40</sup> Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 252.

<sup>41</sup> John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2019), 325.

are reminded that they are accountable to and for those they are partaking with. Bobby Jamieson writes on the Lord's Supper's relationship to membership and accountability,

Paul's argument presupposed that participating in the Lord's Supper entails responsibility for the church. This responsibility is so crucial that to neglect it vitiates the Lord's Supper itself and incurs the Lord's judgment. . . . According to Paul, participating in the Lord's Supper entails responsibility to love the church and preserve its unity.<sup>42</sup>

It would seem that church membership divorced from submission and accountability is a relatively new phenomenon in the history of Christendom. Timothy Keller points out further danger (aside from what is mentioned above from 1 Corinthians) of not being held accountable in a church: "we all know by experience that it is far harder to live godly lives as individuals. Unless we make ourselves accountable to someone, we will repeatedly slip and fall away."<sup>43</sup> The ever-present danger for Christians sojourning in a broken and fallen world is that they will give into the enticements that stand before them at nearly every waking moment of their day. Who will help keep them from wandering off the path, giving into sin, and going deeper and deeper into those sins if they have not made themselves accountable to anyone?

Church membership helps safeguard the believer as they navigate a dark and fallen world. God, in His grace and love, provides several means by which Christians can battle the dark pull of the world and their hearts, says Jamieson, "In addition to the internal supply of the Spirit, God provides the external support of the church's accountability. Now, those who claim to be God's people but whose lives contradict that claim are warned, entreated, pleaded with, and, if necessary, excluded from membership

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<sup>42</sup> Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 120.

<sup>43</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2012), 313.

in the church.”<sup>44</sup> As mentioned in chapter 2, even the “excluding from membership” is done out of love, not as a punishment, but in hopes of repentance and restoration.

Accountability is crucial to the life of the believer.

The Christian, although transferred from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Col 1:13), must still fight the pull of sin that is ever present in their hearts. Christians live in a present evil age (Gal 1:4), an evil day (Eph 5:16), in constant danger of the arrows of the evil one (Eph 6:16), who also has control over this evil world (1 John 5:19). Who will help them fight against the darkness? Who will hold them accountable so that they do not fall further and further into sin? The church, writes McConnell and McKinley, helps the Christian keep unstained from the world:

All Christians need the spiritual accountability and discipline that being a member of a local church brings. It stops us from drifting. It offers a context for encouragement and rebuke. It provides a community to stir one another on to love and good deeds. . . . accountability is not just a friendly chat with our pals; it’s a humble submission to our church leaders and other members.<sup>45</sup>

When joining a church, the leadership of that church has the responsibility of communicating to the membership candidate that accountability and submission to the leadership and fellow members of the church is a necessary part of what membership means. Upon entrance in the church, new members should understand their relationship to the church, that they are accountable to the body, and joyfully enter into this covenant, seeing it, not as a legalistic burden, but a joy done for the good of their soul and as a protection for their walk in the Lord. Says John S. Hammett: “Giving others the right to hold you accountable is part of the covenant commitment made in membership. Having people actually care enough to hold you accountable is an *incalculable blessing that may*

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<sup>44</sup> Bobby Jamieson, “A Biblical Theology of Church Discipline,” *9 Marks Journal* (Winter 2017): 16.

<sup>45</sup> McConnell and McKinley, *Church in Hard Places*, 93.

*save you untold heartache.*<sup>46</sup>

When one joins a church, not only do they covenant to submit to the church, willingly, in some sense, *asking* to be held accountable by their brothers and sisters in Christ, but they commit to holding others accountable as well. Says Hammett, “Members promise to love and care for these people who will also be loving and caring for them. . . . It should also include explicit acceptance of the church’s right and responsibility to discipline them should they stray.”<sup>47</sup> The covenant, then, goes both ways, in effect saying when one enters membership of the church, “I will be held accountable by you, and I will hold you accountable in love for the good of your soul.” Members submit to oversight while also lovingly coming alongside their fellow members and caring for their souls.

When joining a church, members must understand that they are not entering a causal relationship that can easily be left when it becomes too inconvenient or uncomfortable. Writes Helleman,

Our culture has powerfully socialized us to believe that personal happiness and fulfillment should take precedence over the connections we have with others in both our families and our churches. So we run from the painful but redemptive relationships God has placed us in. The tune of radical individualism has been playing in our ears at full volume for decades. We are dancing to the music with gusto. And it is costing us dearly.<sup>48</sup>

Church membership is a God-created way to fight the pull both to sin and this radical individualism. It helps us to “dance to another tune,” as it were. Christians have an opportunity to give their entire selves to something that will help them, help others, put the gospel on display, and glorify God.

Rejecting the pull to consumeristic individualism and bail culture, the member has an opportunity in a biblical church membership paradigm to give themselves away, to

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<sup>46</sup> Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 180, emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 180.

<sup>48</sup> Helleman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 4.

involve themselves in the church with their whole selves. Giving one's entire self to the church as Scripture intends cannot be done without submission to an authority outside of oneself in a covenantal commitment. Leeman, addressing biblical submission and authority in the church, says,

if Christ's submission is our model for looking to the interests of others, then we are called to do something more involved than check off a list. We are called to wrap our identities with theirs and share in their lives. . . . We involve every area of our lives. We give ourselves physically, socially, affectionately, financially, vocationally, ethically, and spiritually.<sup>49</sup>

In a world full of contractual relationships built on reciprocity, the Christian with an understanding of biblical church membership, in a church that provides an environment of healthy membership, can speak a better word to the watching world.

Biblical church membership also helps the members know who exactly they are responsible *to* and who they are responsible *for*. Without formal membership carried out in a biblical manner, not only does the Christian remain without accountability, but the Christian does not know *for* whom and *to* whom they are accountable. Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop note that there must be some kind of self-conscious relationship and understanding between the church and the members for church discipline texts like Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5 to make sense: "Jesus assumes that each of his followers would be part of a church. And he assumes a degree of authority that the congregation bears over the individual."<sup>50</sup> Further, say Dever and Dunlop, with formal church membership, which includes accountability and oversight, "The believer understands who he is accountable to, and the church understands who it is accountable for. It understands who is 'inside' and 'outside.'"<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 340.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 59.

<sup>51</sup> Dever and Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*, 59.

Can the above level of commitment be found in the American church in our time? Surely there are churches pursuing biblical church membership featuring humble submission and accountability, but many more churches may not. One major reason is likely because church members have simply not encountered the type of biblical church membership needed to make healthy, vibrant churches under God's power and Christ's authority. Members must leave behind their "take it or leave it" approach to the church and give themselves away to a local church, otherwise no accountability can happen. Richard F. Lovelace locates the typical approach many today have toward the church, an approach that pastors and churches must battle against from Scripture:

The "ultimate concern" of most church members is not the worship and service of Christ in evangelistic missions and social compassion, but rather survival and success in their secular vocation. The church is a spoke on the wheel of life connected to the secular hub. It is a departmental sub concern, not the organizing center of all other concerns. Church members who have been conditioned all their lives to devote themselves to building their own kingdom and whose flesh naturally gravitates in that direction anyway find it hard to invest much energy in the kingdom of God. They go to church once or twice a week and punch the clock, so to speak, fulfilling their "church obligation" by sitting passively and listening critically or approvingly to the pastor's teaching.<sup>52</sup>

Truthfully, a member who attends twice a week today would be a positive step in the right direction. Thom Rainer states that, "About 20 years ago, a church member was considered active in the church if he or she attended *three times a week*. Today, a church member is considered active in the church if he or she attend *three times a month*."<sup>53</sup> Church members are somehow even less committed than they were only two decades ago. But without attending the church gatherings as a life priority, none of the accountability and oversight needed to maintain a biblically healthy membership can happen. In other words, low commitment equals little to no accountability.

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<sup>52</sup> Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 204-05.

<sup>53</sup> Thom Rainer, "Five Reasons Church Members Attend Church Less Frequently," Church Answers (blog), May 22, 2017, <https://churchanswers.com/blog/five-reasons-church-members-attend-church-less-frequently>, emphasis added.

The church cannot stay on the peripheries of the life of the Christian. Church membership must be explained to church member candidates on the front end and to members currently who have committed to a church, even if they were not taught what church membership truly means according to Scripture when they joined. Getting to a place of healthy church membership is a long process, but well worth the time and effort. The problem, of course, is that for many pastors and churches, this means a consistent teaching in every area of the church from new member class to Sunday school to the pulpit ministry. Members and potential members need to be shown from Scripture that God cares how the church is treated and that it does indeed have much to say about how the church ought to be ordered.

A major roadblock in reforming church views and practices about biblical membership involves the issue of authority. Unfortunately, ours is an age of rugged individualism and personal autonomy that, says Carl R. Trueman, “carries with it a basic historicist relativism and a deep suspicion of any claims of traditional authority,” which are “now basic to our contemporary world.”<sup>54</sup> This suspicion of traditional authority includes, of course, the church. This is not to say that all authority is rejected wholesale, as Leeman says, “The individual may temporarily cede his or her authority to another for the sake of a strategic advantage.”<sup>55</sup> These arrangements, however, typically do not last: “But all such arrangements are finally temporary because they are contractual and rely upon the consent of free and equal parties.”<sup>56</sup> To modern American Christians, then, “the ideas of love and authority remain almost wholly at odds.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 189.

<sup>55</sup> Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 67.

<sup>56</sup> Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*.

<sup>57</sup> Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 68.

A rejection of authority, an embrace of radical autonomy, a skewed view of love, and relationships that are viewed as perpetually contractual are part and parcel for modern people. Christians live and move in a world of acceptable selfishness and self-defining individualism. As Leeman points out, even if they enter some kind of agreement and commitment, they will forsake it once they feel it has outlived its usefulness to them. The kingdom of Christ, however, calls for a different way of life, utterly opposed to all of these approaches to life.

Members, guests, and membership candidates must be shown from Scripture that the posture of this world must be rejected and that a refusal to submit to authority is a slippery and unbiblical slope that leads to potential ruin. If one rejects the authority of the church, then what will stop them from rejecting the authority of Scripture next? And if God's very Word cannot be trusted, then how can one trust God? From whence do they derive their source of what it means to be a Christian? A rejection of authority for a Christian, then, is dangerous and untenable. Unlike many of the contractual relationships in American Christian's lives, the church must be seen as not just an authority, nor simply a casual relationship but a community deriving from Christ as head (Eph 1:22; 5:23; Col 1:18; 2:10), and under His authority. Says Dever and Leeman,

to be suspicious toward all authority is both naïve and harmful to oneself and others. . . . The difference between what people call "community" and what the Bible calls the "church" comes down to the question of authority. Jesus actually gave authority to the local assembly called a church (Matt 16:13-20; 18:15-20; Heb 13:7, 17; 1 Pet 5:1-5). This assembly is not only a fellowship but an accountability fellowship. . . . It exercises oversight. And exercising such affirmation and oversight *meaningfully* means gathering regularly and getting involved in one another's lives. . . . Discipleship to Christ involves submitting ourselves to his Word and his people.<sup>58</sup>

For members to participate in, and maintain, a church that has healthy membership, they must submit themselves to the authority of others. The submission

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<sup>58</sup> Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman, preface to *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H, 2015), xvii-xix, emphasis original.

required to maintain a biblical church cannot happen when the members are so autonomous in themselves that they refuse any authority except themselves. How can one submit if they recognize no authority? Members must thus say to the church and their fellow members, “I recognize your authority over me, and I submit to you to hold me accountable.” But they must also submit to their leaders (Heb 13:17) and, in so doing, they help their leaders who will know which Christians they are answerable for on the last day.

Since the present context of America is one of expressive individualism and consumerism, the church has an opportunity to shine like a light through its distinctive approach to life in community. A world used to civic, social, and country clubs with shallow affiliations; a world that sees relationships as having a contractual shelf life, ending when they outlive their usefulness; will surely take notice when the church maintains membership that is covenantal, self-giving, other-focused, submissive, and for life.<sup>59</sup> Leeman again helpfully notes, “When Christians pursue unity in their churches by submitting to one another, then their churches will glow like porch lights on a dark city street, like lanterns in the nighttime woods. *That* is a life worthy of the gospel and a church worthy of the gospel.”<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

Jesus said that a primary way in which the world will know that His disciples

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<sup>59</sup> Trueman makes a similar point when he says, “If the message about the self is that of expressive individualism or psychological man, and if that message is being preached from every commercial, every website, every newscast, and every billboard to which people are exposed on a daily basis, the task of the church in cultivating a different understanding of the self is, humanly speaking, likely to provoke despair. Yet there is hope: the world in which we live is now witness to communities in flux. . . . Our moral consciousness is very much shaped by our community. And for this reason, the church needs to be a strong community. Yes, there may be hard in an era when the proliferation of denominations and churches has made ecclesiastical commitment potentially just one more form of consumer choice. But we have no power to change that general context, and we cannot allow it to excuse us from behaving as a community.” Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 404-05.

<sup>60</sup> Leeman, *Church Membership*, 94, emphasis original.

are truly His disciples will be by their love for one another (John 13:35). The love that Jesus calls for is the kind mentioned above: other-focused, emulating His love for the world, commitment to His bride, and submission to that bride for their own good and the good of others. Thabiti M. Anyabwile comments,

The mark of Christian discipleship is love – love of the kind that Jesus exercised toward his followers, love visible enough that men will recognize it as belonging to those people who follow Jesus. . . . a healthy Christian is one who is committed to expressing this kind of love toward other Christians. And the best place for Christians to love this way is in the assembly of God’s people called the local church.<sup>61</sup>

Church membership, then, is an opportunity to put the gospel on display to the watching world. Following Christ, submitting to Him, His Word, and His church, will look strange and attractive to the watching world. The world simply is not used the kind of community that the Bible commands.

Biblical church membership pursued faithfully in the local church is God’s design for Christians, churches, and their leaders. Biblical membership, contrary to the individualist and consumeristic world, is a life-long commitment that provides an environment to emulate Christ in focusing on others in word and deed. Further, this kind of membership cannot be either pursued or maintained unless members are taught a robust biblical understanding of membership and thus submit to the authority of the local church, under Christ, its head. Brett McCracken writes, “Society tells us love means accepting others ‘just as they are,’ without asking them to change. But biblical love is not about solidarity in brokenness; it’s about committing to each other’s holiness.”<sup>62</sup>

Churches grow their members and protect their souls by pursuing Christ-exalting, other-focused, submissive, membership.

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<sup>61</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What is a Healthy Church Member?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 67.

<sup>62</sup> Brett McCracken, *Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 90.

## CHAPTER 4

### DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The purpose of this project was to implement biblical church membership at the First Baptist Church of Cordele, Georgia (FBCC). The intent was to start by gauging the current knowledge of what the members of FBCC believed about membership in the local church followed by teaching them from Scripture God's idea of church membership. Four goals were established to pursue implementation of biblical church membership: (1) assess the current understanding of church membership among leaders and members of FBCC, (2) develop a sermon series on what Scripture says regarding the importance of the church and member obligation to one another, (3) to develop a new member class curriculum that would teach membership candidates on the front end, and (4) to develop a ministry plan for continuing education and practice of biblical church membership. This chapter will outline the process of preparing and implementing the project.

#### **Weeks 1-4: BCMI**

In order to assess what current members of the church believed about church membership, a Biblical Church Membership Inventory (BCMI) was created during the project proposal phase and given to fifty members before the church membership sermon series was prepared and preached.<sup>1</sup> The BCMI consists of thirty statements and members were asked to mark whether they strongly agreed, agreed, agreed somewhat, strongly disagreed, disagreed, or somewhat disagreed regarding each statement. Statements ranged

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix 1.

from considering whether one needed to be a Christian to be a member of a local church to statements about church discipline and the ordinances. In addition, members were asked if they had been previously discipled, how long they have been a member of FBCC, their age, and whether or not they were staff or in leadership positions.

### **Weeks 1 and 2, BCMI Organized and Distributed**

During week one, the BCMI was organized and fine-tuned to ensure statements provoked deep thinking on a large swath of pertinent topics. During week two the BCMI was handed out to members who were willing to participate in the survey. I explained to the members the essence of what the survey was attempting to measure and that it both served the purpose of aiding my continuing doctoral work as well as benefiting my leading the church forward to a more biblical membership model. I explained that the participants were not to fill out the survey according to what they thought I would want to hear, but that they should feel the freedom to be honest and that I would be the only one who saw the surveys.

### **Weeks 3 and 4, BCMIs Collected and Talled**

During weeks three and four I collected the surveys from the members. The goal was to have fifty surveys completed and returned within two weeks of when they were issued. Approximately thirty-five surveys were returned promptly while I needed to press a bit more to collect the final fifteen. Once fifty surveys were returned, I compiled and evaluated the results in week five. I tallied the results and found both expected and unexpected beliefs among church members, which stressed the need to me for this project.

Participants seemed conflicted over what they had always believed about membership with what was logical, biblical, and prudent. For example, a majority disagreed with the statement, “non-active membership is a biblical concept,” while also

disagreeing less strongly (or agreeing, in some cases) with the very next statement, “a member who lives too far away should be kept on the membership roll as long as he/she wishes.” These statements are clearly at odds. Many members, however, believe that someone can be inactive (by virtue of living too far away) and kept on the roll, but that non-active membership is not biblical. Another somewhat alarming result was thirteen (26%) members disagreeing (three strongly, seven disagreeing, and three disagreeing somewhat) that one needed to be baptized in the name of the Trinity to be a member of the church, a basic doctrine historically among Baptists.

Overall, the results were both positive and negative, offering an overall reason for optimism into the next phase of the project’s implementation. Although there were some inconsistent thoughts noted above, there were notable positives. For example, on the very first statement, “The New Testament places a strong emphasis on church membership,” forty eight (ninety six percent) answered with one of the three “agree” options. Another positive was on statements seven and eight: “I believe the Bible is absolutely sufficient and authoritative to inform the church’s practices and beliefs” and “Church discipline is a biblical concept,” respectively, were answered with one of the “agree” options by one hundred percent of the participants. All told, the BCMI results showed that there were expected misunderstandings of membership as well as reasons for optimism.

### **Weeks 5-14: Biblical Church Membership Sermon Series**

In weeks five through fifteen I preached a ten week sermon series entitled “The Dearest Place on Earth: A Study on Biblical Church Membership.”<sup>2</sup> The pastoral staff of

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix 5.

FBCC were given the sermon series evaluation rubric and the texts were selected.<sup>3</sup> The texts chosen for the series focused on identifying what the church is, the importance of the church to God and for His plan to reach the world, members' role in the church, the ordinances, and polity.

### **Week 5, Sermon 1**

The first sermon focused on Matthew 16:13-20 and 18:15-20. The goal of this sermon was to establish that church membership is in the Bible and written throughout the New Testament. I began in Matthew 16 and 18 because they are the only places in the Gospels to mention the church explicitly. I showed from Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ (Matt 16:16) and Jesus' response that "on this rock I will build my church" (Matt 16:18), speaks to what should inform the church's structure and practices: the writings of the apostles, along with introducing the idea of "binding and loosing" (Matt 16:19). I also emphasized Jesus' declaration that He will build *His* church to demonstrate that Jesus is the founder, head, owner, creator, and husband of the church. As Christ owns the church and cares deeply for how it is stewarded, we must submit to His design, not our own, since He is Lord over the church.

We also connected the language of "binding and loosing" (Matt 16:19; 18:18) between the passage and the truth that the church is granted authority under Jesus' Lordship to guard the purity of the church. When a church accepts someone into membership (and keeps them on the membership roll), the church is declaring to the world, to the person, and to heaven that they believe the person to be a Christian (who continues to walk in faithfulness). The church thus has a corporate responsibility to ensure (to the best of their ability) that the new member candidate is a regenerate person,

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<sup>3</sup> Matt 16:13-20; 18:15-20; 1 Cor 12; Heb 10:19-25; Phil 1:27-2:18; 1 Cor 5; Eph 4:1-16; Matt 18:16-20; 1 Cor 11:17-34; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Tim 3:1-13; Acts 20:17-31; Heb 13:17; 1 Cor 3:10-17, see appendix 2.

*and* that the church has the *authority* to do so. While Matthew 18 is an important text regarding church discipline, I chose to focus on the fact that since the church could remove someone, that it logically followed that they must have a process for recognizing who is “in” and who is “out.” In other words, Jesus sees a clear division between those who are inside and those who are outside the church.

### **Week 6, Sermon 2**

The second sermon focused on 1 Corinthians 12 and the fact that “member” is actually a biblical word and not borrowed from civic or social clubs. From Paul’s analogy of the body, I pointed out that membership means physical attachment to the body. We also saw, once again, the emphasis on God’s Lordship over the church as the Spirit sovereignly gives spiritual gifts for the common good of the other members (1 Cor 12:7, 18). Paul also emphasizes unity in equality in the body, even among a diversity of gifts. When one member decides not to do their part, the whole body suffers because all members are connected, and the rest of the members must make up for the erring or non-participating member. Members must do their part, be concerned for one another, and be determined to build others up even as they are built up by others.

### **Week 7, Sermon 3**

The third sermon came from Hebrews 10:19-25 and the necessity to attend the corporate gatherings as a life priority. I pointed out that the author of Hebrews connects the vertical drawing near to the throne of God to the horizontal drawing near to fellow believers in the church. The author of Hebrews shows that holding fast to the confession (Heb 10:23) is aided by their fellowship *and* that members aid one another in holding onto to the confession through their stimulating one another to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24). The question was then asked, “What Christians are you to consider and functionally gather with and stimulate?” The answer must be the local church of which one has covenanted with. How can one stimulate others and encourage others (Heb

10:25) if they do not attend the gatherings with meaningful frequency? Hebrews 10:19-25 points us to church membership and prioritizing the gatherings as we focus on others and all the more as the “day draws near” (Heb 10:25).

#### **Week 8, Sermon 4**

The fourth sermon explored Philippians 1:27-2:18 and the necessity of focusing on others in the church. Paul emphasizes unity in 1:27-30 and the need for church members to strive together, linked by common allegiance to Christ. Philippians 2:1-5 points even further to the necessity of selflessness and focus on others by doing *nothing* from selfishness and conceit (Phil 2:3). The point is stressed even further in 2:5-11 with the example of the eternal second person of the Trinity humbling Himself, taking on flesh, and dying in place of sinful man. Who are we to boast in ourselves or fight for first place in the community of the redeemed in light of the humble Christ?

#### **Week 9, Sermon 5**

Sermon number 5 was from 1 Corinthians 5 and church discipline. The goal of this sermon was to stress the responsibility that members have to one another and their pursuit of holiness and sin-killing. Since church discipline has been caricatured and misunderstood as a graceless exercise or an archaic overreach, my goal was to show from Scripture why discipline is, in reality, an act of grace and love for the good of the offender and the holiness of the body. I also wanted to show that church discipline does not mean automatic excommunication (like many seem to think) but happens on a relational level among members out of concern for one another. I pointed out that Paul’s call in 1 Corinthians 5 is not to the elders or leaders but to the members; it is the church that must act. I also pointed out a similar point from the first sermon: the fact that someone can be put “out” must mean they were recognized as “in” at some point, another argument for membership in Scripture.

## **Week 10, Sermon 6**

Ephesians 4:1-16 was the focus of sermon number six. Since FBCC has a history of division along several non-biblical lines, I emphasized once more the importance of unity in the body. I noted that the gospel imperative of unity in the church that opens chapter 4 is based on the gospel indicatives of the previous three chapters of Ephesians. Unity, as Paul says, is not something created by the church and its members, but already exists as a gift from the Spirit and must be zealously *preserved* (Eph 4:3). Paul's stress on unity is explicit, not only in his outright call to preserve unity, but in his repetition of the word "one" in verses 4-6 as he lists essential truths that bind.

A further goal I had from this text was, once again, highlighting the need for attendance at the worshipping gatherings of the church. These gatherings are not designed to entertain but to equip since it is the job of the pastors to train the members to leverage their lives for the work of ministry (Eph 4:11-12). Members not only come to the gatherings to get equipped for ministry in their lives, but so they can build up one another in maturity. The goal of ministry and membership is to build others toward the likeness of Christ. Jesus is both the prize and the goal of the church and ministry.

## **Weeks 11-12, Sermons 7-8**

In sermons seven and eight I turned our focus to the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper and how they are inseparably connected to biblical church membership. My goal through these two sermons was to show that, when a church baptizes someone, they are exercising the keys of the kingdom to bind and loose saying, in effect, "As far as we can tell, this person has made a credible profession of faith." When a church partakes in the Lord's Supper and welcomes people to the Table, they are declaring that those they are allowing to the Lord's Table are faithfully striving to follow Jesus and are not in ongoing and unrepentant sin.

In week seven, I discussed baptism from Matthew 28:16-20 in order to show that baptism must be required for church membership and partaking of the Lord's Supper

since it is the initial step of obedience to Christ and His chosen means by which His followers publicly show their oath of allegiance, respectively. We also looked at Romans 6:1-7 to show how baptism pictures the gospel and identification with Jesus' death and resurrection, and thus, is a public renunciation of Satan and his ways, telling the church that they can count on overseeing the new walk in Christ, and that they can observe change progressively in them. I also took the church to Acts 2:37-42 to show that the first Christians proclaimed Christ after repentance, were baptized, and then added to the church in Jerusalem. Baptism, then, shows that the Christian not only identifies with Christ, but identifies with other Christians.

To teach about the importance of the Lord's Supper we looked at 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. I explained the contextual situation that Paul was addressing in Corinth and how the well-to-do Corinthians were abusing the Lord's Supper through their disregard for poorer members. Paul explicitly shows how the Lord's Supper is an act of the church by his use of "when you come together" three times in three verses (1 Cor 11:17, 18, 20), adding "*as a church*" in 11:18. Gathering is an essential marker for the church and for church members. If a church does not gather, it is not a church.

As the church gathers for the Lord's Supper, they must do so in unity or else they are profaning the ordinance (1 Cor 11:20) and drinking and eating judgment upon themselves (1 Cor 11:29). One of the points I wanted to underline was the importance of "discerning the body" when one takes the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:29) and this "discerning" is how one examines himself (1 Cor 11:28). When one takes the Lord's Supper divided or while at odds with a fellow member, they are taking the Lord's Supper in an "unworthy manner." Church membership makes it possible to take the Lord's Supper rightly, to discern properly, and to guard the Lord's Table, fencing partaking from those under discipline or unregenerate. Without church membership, who are the partakers to discern? Which "body" are they to consider? Church membership helps give shape to meaningful communion and helps to remind the church of, not only Christ's

substitutionary and atoning sacrifice, but of member's relations and responsibility to one another.

### **Week 13, Sermon 9**

In sermon nine I addressed the question of polity from various texts beginning by pointing to the need for authority and that the ultimate authority the church submits to is Christ and His headship. My goal was to show through various passages in the New Testament the idea of an elder-led, deacon-served, congregationally-ruled polity. Since many of the previous sermons touched on the authority of the congregation to oversee the lives of the members, including accepting and removing members, I touched only briefly on the congregational side of polity. I did make sure to note, however, that congregationalism is only coherent and healthy when regenerate membership is enforced.

From Acts 6:1-7 I showed how deacons are intended to serve the physical needs of the body, rather than acting as pseudo-elders, which has been how they have historically ruled at FBCC. I also used this text to show how the congregation has authority to elect officers in the church. We explored the qualifications given in Acts 6 as well as in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and noted the differences between elders and deacons to show that deacons support the elders to free them up for the ministry of the Word and prayer. While discussing elders (something foreign to many congregants) I was sure to note that the ideal is a plurality of elders who are equals and bring a variety of gifts to the table to complement one another. Finally, I landed on Hebrews 13:17 to make a further argument for church membership. The only way to obey Hebrews 13:17 is by covenanting with a local church so that the Christian and leaders know (1) what leaders the Christian is to submit to, and (2) who the leaders will answer for before the Lord.

### **Week 14, Sermon 10**

In the tenth and final sermon in "The Dearest Place on Earth" series we focused on 1 Corinthians 3:10-17 and the question, "What will you do now that you have

learned about biblical church membership?” From 1 Corinthians 3 my goal was to show that every member must choose *how* they build upon the foundation of Christ (1 Cor 3:10). I emphasized a final time the necessity of building in unity and the importance of focusing on others and their edification in the Lord. A further point emphasized was just how important the church is to God. How one treats the church clearly matters to God as each person will answer to Christ as judge for how they built (1 Cor 3:13).

In 3:16-17 Paul says something truly striking: the church gathered is the temple of God because the Spirit dwells among them *and* those who try to destroy the church will themselves be destroyed. I ended by calling the church to a time of quiet contemplation and prayer about what God revealed to us in His Word over the previous ten weeks. Together we prayed that biblical membership will be something we all pursue, even when it is difficult, through the power of the Holy Spirit, informed by His Word.

### **Weeks 15-20: New Member Class Curriculum Development**

In weeks 15-20 I developed a new member class intended to be taught to future prospective members of FBCC in hopes of teaching them a robust ecclesiology on the front end before they become official members. The curriculum covers the basics of the gospel, statement of faith including the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (BF&M), the Scriptural support for church membership, expectations of members, and explanation of church ministries and goals.<sup>4</sup> Once the curriculum was successfully completed, the extended outlines were given to an expert panel made up of two associate pastors at FBCC, an associational director, and a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) who utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the curriculum.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix 6.

<sup>5</sup> See appendix 3.

### **Week 15, Lessons 1 and 2**

In week 15 I developed the first two class sessions: class one, “What is the Gospel?” and class two, “FBCC Core Beliefs.” Many new members class curricula I have encountered did not touch on the basics of the gospel, something that is important for perspective members to understand and to provide another opportunity (in addition to membership interviews with an elder) in order to hear their own articulation of the gospel, as well as supplementing possible misunderstandings. The curriculum for class one was intended to teach students, beginning with creation, through the biblical narrative culminating with the work of Christ and how the gospel’s aim is to point believers to pursue God’s created design for His people.

In session two, FBCC core beliefs were explored including a brief history of the church. Class members will be given a copy of the BF&M, which is the core basic beliefs of FBCC and given space to ask questions they have regarding that statement. In addition to the BF&M students were given copies of both the Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed to offer historic basic Christian beliefs and to formulate coherent thoughts regarding the Trinity. Also covered is an explanation of FBCC’s mission which is to love God, love His church, and love our neighbors, adapted from Matthew 22:23-40. The member candidates will be shown how everything the church does must be filtered through those three goals.

### **Week 16, Lessons 3 and 4**

In week 16 I developed new member class sessions three and four. Session three focuses exclusively on the BF&M and four focuses on membership sightings in the New Testament. While the entirety of the BF&M could not be covered in one session, students are encouraged to read the BF&M and bring any questions or disagreements they have with it to the session. Due to its length, essential items (God, Man, Salvation, God’s Purpose of Grace, and the Ordinances) are given more time while the rest of the articles are treated with an overview. The students will also be told that the ordinances

will be covered more in a future session.

In week four, the first set of membership sightings in the New Testament are explored. Specifically, the session focuses on Matthew 16; 18; Acts 2; and 1 Corinthians 12. The main objective of this session is to introduce students to the fact that church membership is indeed in the Bible, the foundations laid by Jesus Himself in Matthew. The students are also shown from Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12 the importance of interconnectedness for the Christian and the essential nature of edification and attachment to the body of Christ as well as having an other-focused disposition.

### **Week 17, Lessons 5 and 6**

In week 17 I developed lessons five and six, which continues the exploration of membership sightings in the New Testament as well as an extended look at the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. While the first lesson on membership sightings in the New Testament focused primarily on Matthew and Acts, session five focused on other sightings from the epistles, specifically Hebrews 10:19-25; 1 Corinthians 5; Ephesians 4; and Hebrews 13:17. These texts are intended to further show the students that the idea of membership is not only biblical, but given a specific shape such as the necessity of regular attendance, accountability, gifting, and submission to elders as they shepherd and watch over the flock.

In lesson six, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper and their relation to church membership is explored. From Matthew 28:16-20 the students are shown that discipleship is inextricably tied to baptism in the name of the Trinity and teaching obedience to what Jesus has said. Baptism as commanded by Christ is thus the first step of obedience to the Christian life as well as the entrance rite into membership in the local church. From 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 the Lord's Supper is explored as the continuing rite of ongoing faithfulness. The Lord's Supper offers opportunities to discern one's relation to the body, to express unity, and to exercise the keys to the kingdom by

allowing or barring members from the table, as well as proclaiming Christ to the world and looking forward to the consummation of the kingdom in fullness.

### **Week 18, Lessons 7 and 8**

In week 18 I wrote the two final lessons for the new member class. Lesson seven focused on the expectations of the members to the church, as well as what members can expect from the church to them. Students were given nine expectations of them using the biblical texts explored throughout the previous weeks: (1) be devoted to God's Word, (2) commit to coming to the weekly gatherings as a life priority, (3) love their fellow members and be involved in their lives, (4) give of their resources, (5) to pursue fellowship, (6) to strive to maintain unity, (7) to desire to praise God with their fellow members, (8) a devotion to pray for the church, leaders, and fellow saints, and (9) a devotion to evangelism.

Students were also told they could expect all of the above from their fellow members and leaders. In addition to the nine expectations of members, students can expect their leaders to meet biblical qualifications along with teaching sound doctrine and guarding the church from false teachers and lovingly exercising discipline when necessary. In this session, students are also instructed on the mission of FBCC and to count on their leaders shepherding the church toward that mission. In session eight the new member class is wrapped up through instructions on the polity of FBCC, a meet and greet with all the staff members, an explanation of FBCC's ministries, and a time for questions and answers.

### **Weeks 19-20, Expert Panel Review**

In weeks 19 and 20, I submitted the new member class curriculum to an expert panel for review and evaluation.<sup>6</sup> The expert panel was given two weeks to carefully read

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<sup>6</sup> See appendix 3.

the curriculum and evaluate whether it accomplished its stated goals. The feedback was positive, and revisions were unnecessary, however, the associational director suggested more interactive opportunities for the students be added to the curriculum. Based on his recommendation (although the curriculum reached its benchmark), some interactive elements were added at various points throughout the curriculum.

### **Weeks 21-24: Ministry Plan Development and Implementation**

In weeks 21-24 I began developing and writing a ministry plan for continuing education and practice of biblical church membership.<sup>7</sup> Once the plan was completed, it was given to an expert panel of local pastors and former denominational leader who utilized a rubric to evaluate the functionality of the plan, communication processes, training elements, and action steps to move FBCC to a more robust understanding of biblical church membership.<sup>8</sup> The plan features an introduction to the context of FBCC and five steps designed to make church membership a priority and to weave it into the life of FBCC.

### **Weeks 21-22, Plan Development**

In weeks 21 and 22 I wrote and developed the ministry plan to ensure that biblical church membership is not simply something taught in a single sermon series nor only to new members candidates in the new member class (though an ongoing new member class is the first step in the strategic ministry plan). The new member class portion of the long-range plan not only includes requiring the class to become a member of FBCC but includes membership interviews by an elder along with a vote from the church to accept new members into the fellowship. Membership will also be a topic that

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<sup>7</sup> See appendix 7.

<sup>8</sup> See appendix 4.

is taught regularly in the gatherings and in Sunday School. While I preach expository sermons through books of the Bible, occasionally I will preach topical sermons and a refresher on biblical membership as well as weaving elements of church membership regularly in sermons when the opportunities from the text arise, will also be essential.

A great need that I realized immediately once arriving at FBCC was the necessity of changes to the bylaws and constitution. The requirements in the bylaws for membership are lackluster, the bar is low, and the polity is unbiblical, to say the least. Going forward, the bylaws will be examined and incrementally updated, which will create a rhythm for bylaw updates as well as addressing pressing needs like the bloated membership roll. In this vein, steps must be made to clean up the membership rolls in order that they would more accurately reflect present regular attending members, which will help give testimony to how seriously FBCC takes membership. Finally, the covenant will be updated and incorporated into the life of the church such as reading the covenant together before partaking in the Lord's Supper and business meetings.

### **Weeks 23-24, Plan Evaluation**

In weeks 23 and 24 I finished the long-range ministry plan and distributed it with the long-range plan evaluation tool to the expert panel.<sup>9</sup> It was explained to the expert panel the nature of the project along with the necessity of the project. The panel was given two weeks to thoroughly review the plan, complete the evaluation tool, and return it to me for review. The feedback was positive, the benchmark was met, and revisions were unnecessary.

### **Week 25, Plan Implementation**

In week 25 the implementation of the plan began. Since the plan itself is a long-range plan, only initial implementation steps could be taken. For example, the

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<sup>9</sup> See appendix 4.

bloated membership roll will likely take years to purge as needed. A membership roll that reflects attenders, as well as removing non-attenders, is a new subject to members of FBCC. Long-term teaching on membership will need to be taught and embraced by the current active, attending members before the first steps to roll-purging can be taken.

Since the new member class curriculum is completed and reviewed, it will begin to be taught by me for eight weeks during the Sunday School hour once there is a sufficient number of new member candidates. Membership is being taught incrementally in sermons and through Sunday School classes when the topic is prudent and fits well into the text, so this part of the plan is already in full swing. The bylaws and covenant changes will also take some time; however, the process is already in motion. Recently a new bylaw committee of solid members who, both understand the need for changes to membership, as well as the toxic past of the church, was elected by the members in conference and will begin meeting to discuss the best way forward to make necessary changes to the church's official documents.

### **Conclusion**

At the conclusion of week 25, all four goals of the project had been evaluated and implemented where able and prudent. The goals of this project were to assess the current understanding of church membership among leaders and members of FBCC using the BCMI. The second goal was to develop and preach sermon series on what Scripture teaches regarding the importance of the church and member obligations to one another. The third goal was to develop a new member class that teaches membership candidates the basics of church membership and Baptist life on the front end. The fourth and final goal was to develop a long-range ministry plan for continuing education and practice of biblical church membership. These initial goals have already proven fruitful, and will continue to be rewarding, as they are implemented more and more and become part of the very DNA of FBCC. Reflections on the project will be addressed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

#### **Introduction**

What is the church? Jonathan Leeman defines the church as

a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ's name to preach the gospel and to affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ with the authority of the keys through baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is an embassy of Christ's kingdom on earth, whose corporate life embodies a rule that has been imported not across geographic space from the end of time.<sup>1</sup>

Leeman's definition of the church is an excellent one. The church is the most important institution the world has ever seen and will outlast every institution that has ever existed or will ever exist. The importance of the church catholic, as well as the local church, has been the motivation behind this project on implementing biblical church membership in a local church that has not previously known the incredible importance of the church. While chapter 4 explored the introduction and implementation of biblical church membership at FBCC, this chapter will be an evaluation of the project, and will include strengths, weaknesses, and reflections.

#### **Evaluation of the Project's Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to implement biblical church membership at the First Baptist Church of Cordele, Georgia (FBCC). While full implementation of biblical church membership is something that will take years to achieve, this project has allowed FBCC to take the necessary steps to move in that direction. Through this project,

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Rule* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 386.

and the four goals outlined in chapter 1, members of FBCC have been introduced to the concept of biblical church membership. Through the sermon series, members were shown that church membership is written all throughout the New Testament. It has been important for FBCC to see that church membership is not a new invention nor the religious alternate to civic or social clubs, but shaped by Scripture, and eternally important to our Triune God.

When I began this project, COVID-19 had yet to spread throughout the United States. Due to the pandemic, FBCC is further along in the process of integrating biblical membership in the life of the church than it would have been had the pandemic never happened. Like all hardship, the pandemic revealed much about FBCC and its members. Some members of FBCC abandoned the fellowship during the pandemic due to various surface-level reasons, and many of those members had been ones who had previously opposed small steps I had taken toward biblical membership. Further, many of the long-standing structures that exacerbated division and hampered change were stripped back by necessity.

Since COVID-19, we have been able to rid the church of a committee-driven polity, have repurposed the deacons, stripped down the committees to only those mandated by the bylaws, restructured Sunday School to teach sound curriculum that fits with the church's mission and opened them to all adults, rather than them being divided by affinity. Those who took the biblical church membership inventory (BCMI) and listened to the sermon series were members who were more receptive to change driven by Scripture. While much must still be done to make biblical membership a permanent part of the life of FBCC, this project has meant massive steps and a positive direction for the future of FBCC and its long-term health.

### **Evaluation of the Project's Goals**

There were four goals for this ministry project: (1) assess the current

understanding of church membership among leaders and members of FBCC, (2) develop a sermon series on what Scripture says regarding the importance of the church and member obligation to one another, (3) develop a new member class curriculum that will teach new member candidates on the front end, and (4) to develop a ministry plan for continuing education and practice of biblical church membership. The success of each goal was determined by a related measurement. Each goal will be briefly explored in the subsections below.

### **Goal 1: BCMI**

To assess the understanding of biblical church membership before the sermon series was preached, a Biblical Church Membership Inventory (BCMI) was given to active members, staff, and deacons who were willing to participate.<sup>2</sup> The measurement for success was to receive 50 BCMI's back before the series was to begin on April 11, 2021. The limitation on this goal was that members would fill out the survey with the responses they believed I wanted to hear rather than reflecting what they truly believed. To mitigate this limitation, participants were told to answer according to their own beliefs and that I would be the only one to see their BCMI's. The goal was successfully met, and the results were analyzed, revealing both surprising and expected results, as explained in the previous chapter.

### **Goal 2: Sermon Series**

The second goal was to develop and deliver a sermon series on what Scripture teaches regarding the importance of the church and member obligation to one another.<sup>3</sup> Initially the sermon series was to be eight weeks but was extended in order to ensure as much as possible could be covered while also not going too long. This goal's success was

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup> See appendix 5.

to be measured by the pastoral staff of FBCC who used a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, clarity, and relevance of the sermon series.<sup>4</sup> This goal was considered successful when over 90% of all the rubric evaluation indicators were met or exceeded the sufficiency level. Aside from the sermon series rubric being successful, the series itself was received well by many members who expressed appreciation for the topic. Many members said that this was the first time they had been taught about church membership and that they did not know that the topic was so pervasive in the New Testament.

### **Goal 3: New Member Class**

The third goal was to develop a new member class curriculum to teach membership candidates of FBCC about biblical membership while they are in the process of joining.<sup>5</sup> The curriculum was designed to cover the basics of the gospel, FBCC statement of faith including the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (BF&M), the Scriptural support for church membership, expectations of members, and explanation of church ministries and goals. This goal was measured by an expert panel made up of two associate pastors at FBCC, an associational director, and a professor at SBTS who utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the curriculum.<sup>6</sup>

The new member class curriculum was developed as an assignment for a seminar at SBTS taught by Matthew D. Haste *Foundations of Teaching*. Once the assignment was completed, I gave a copy to two associate pastors at FBCC, SBTS professor Timothy K. Beougher, the Director of Missions for the Hunt Baptist

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix 2.

<sup>5</sup> See appendix 6.

<sup>6</sup> See appendix 3.

Association in Greenville, TX, Jim Gatliff, and Matthew Haste, who graded it initially for *Foundations of Teaching*, and once more according to the rubric. This goal was considered successful when over ninety percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators were met or exceeded the sufficiency level. While the curriculum was originally going to be four sessions, it was expanded to eight to both meet the assignment requirements of *Foundations for Teaching* as well as to ensure all the necessary topics were sufficiently covered.

#### **Goal 4: Long-Range Ministry Plan**

The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan for continuing education and practice of biblical church membership.<sup>7</sup> Because of the previous three goals, steps have been taken to introduce the concept of biblical church membership to long-time members, and to teach new member candidates on the front end of life at FBCC. The hope of this project is that these will be the first steps to weave biblical membership into the very DNA of FBCC. The fourth and final goal, then, was to develop a long-range ministry plan to continue FBCC on the path of healthy membership.

The long-range ministry plan included five aspects: (1) the attached eight-week new member class as a requirement for joining FBCC, (2) membership taught regularly through sermons and Sunday schools, (3) incremental bylaw change to reflect a biblical ecclesiology, (4) clean membership roll so that it more accurately resembles those who are active and attending members, and (5) an update to the church covenant and to incorporation into the life of the church. This goal was measured by an expert panel of local pastors and a former Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT) president, Jeff Johnson, who utilized a rubric to evaluate the functionality of the plan, communication processes, training elements, and action steps to move FBCC to a more robust

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<sup>7</sup> See appendix 7.

understanding of biblical membership going forward.<sup>8</sup> This goal was considered successful when over ninety percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators were met or exceeded the sufficiency level, which was met.

### **Strengths of the Project**

The greatest strength of the project was being able to get the members of FBCC to think about church membership in depth for perhaps the first time. Every church member has an idea for what a church is, what a member is, and what a member should be and do. As mentioned throughout this project, the lack of knowing what the Bible says about membership and the church has been detrimental to FBCC for more than three decades. Allowing the members space to think deeply about church membership, and to challenge their beliefs on various ecclesiological topics, has been a huge step in the pursuit of health according to Scripture.

The BCMI was, in a similar vein, a strength of the project as it caused members to confront how FBCC has viewed membership historically. Some members admitted to struggling with the statements because they had not considered some of the choices before. A central need of this project was to cause members to question what they have always thought about the church and membership and to begin to be shaped by what the Bible said about membership rather than what they had either “always done” or preferred. The BCMI was able to start this process in their minds and get them prepared to be challenged by the sermon series.

Another strength of the project was my own personal growth and knowledge of ecclesiology. While I have been passionate about ecclesiology my entire time in ministry, I found myself constantly challenged and needing to articulate biblical ecclesiology in new ways and through many SBTS seminars. Through writing this project, multiple

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<sup>8</sup> See appendix 4.

papers for courses, preparing new sermons and membership curriculum, I feel more equipped than ever to lead FBCC into future health as well as realizing I still have much to learn. This project has not only accomplished the goal of introducing biblical membership to a church in desperate need of revitalization, but it has also helped me as I lead them into the future to those ends.

### **Weaknesses of the Project**

While there were multiple strengths in this project, there were a few weaknesses. The first weakness was the BCMI. While the BCMI was also an incredible strength, as noted above, the fact that only fifty members participated in it was a weakness. While I believe the BCMI was helpful overall, it would have been even more helpful if more members had participated. Receiving fifty BCMIs back was a struggle, however, having double that number would have offered an even more accurate picture of the beliefs of the church on the whole.

A second weakness with the project was the length of the sermon series. I initially did not intend to preach ten weeks on biblical church membership, but I felt as I was laying out the texts that it needed *at least* ten weeks. In hindsight, a church that has never heard (to my knowledge) a series on membership, or have been confronted with such a differing view from than what they have always held, may not have been prepared for that much content at once. Hearing about topics like church discipline, a different form of polity, and regenerate church membership may have been jarring to some who have seen the church as another social club and membership as a right to life in Cordele, Georgia. A shorter series may have been easier to handle for many members, as I will discuss below.

### **What I Would Do Differently**

In light of the weaknesses mentioned in the previous subheading, I would do several things differently. For one, I would attempt to get more members to fill out the

BCMI. Although I believe it would have been a great challenge, if I could get twenty-five or fifty more inventories, I could have had an even clearer picture of the church's beliefs on membership. A second thing I would do differently is also related to the BCMI. For this project I only required a survey before the sermon series, but I did not have a survey for after the sermon series. I think it would have been helpful to have a BCMI given immediately following the sermon series to the same individuals that filled one out before the series. I could then compare the beliefs before and after the series to gauge the cumulative effect of the sermons.

A third thing I would do differently is shorten the sermon series and perhaps ease the members in better. In my zeal for ecclesiology and desire to see FBCC become healthy with biblical membership standards, I packed in so much and assumed the members would receive it well since it was Scripture. To be sure, many members did receive it well, but I can see in hindsight that it could have been a challenge to hear, in essence, that how one has viewed membership the majority of their lives was inaccurate, and that the church they have attended for so long, may have gotten it wrong. A shorter series given with a gentler hand could have had an even more positive effect.

### **Theological Reflections**

Before I began this project, ecclesiology, church revitalization, and church health were already topics of interest to me. Because of this interest and passion, analyzing FBCC when I first arrived made the need for this project clear and urgent. But while my interest has been in ecclesiology for years, I have learned so much more about the topic through doctoral seminars along with researching and writing for this project. Having Benjamin Merkle as a professor, for example, for the seminar "Ecclesiology in the Local Church" was an incredibly rewarding experience and exposed me to helpful books that I will continue to draw from for years to come.

While ecclesiology and church revitalization have been points of interest and

study for me for some time, I have continued to grow through every seminar and all of my research. Because of these experiences and challenges, I can articulate the importance of biblical ecclesiology better than I have previously. More than ever, I see how seriously God takes treatment of His church and how much He loves the bride and body of Christ. I pray that my studies at SBTS and emphasis on ecclesiology and revitalization will propel me into a life-long journey of learning and growing in these topics, never satisfied that I know enough or am an “expert.” Encountering again and again the importance of the church both *to* God and in God’s program to grow the saints and reach the world has reminded me (and will continue to remind me) of the awesome responsibility I have as Christ’s under-shepherd to lead FBCC well.

Another reflection that serves as an encouragement is the way in which church success and health should be measured according to Scripture. I have become easily discouraged when evaluating “how our church is doing” by the standards of the world and numerical success (i.e., attendance numbers, baptism numbers, new member count, budget size, etc.). Members of FBCC are also prone to these measures of success, as these have been how the church has evaluated whether or not they were “doing well.” It is easy to see why, since these are readily available, tangible, popular ways of measuring success.

What this study has reminded me with a force is that God’s measurements for success are not the same as ours. Church health rarely has correlation to numerical success and Scripture bears this out. While writing this chapter I came across this important reminder from Mark Dever in his newly published fourth edition of *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* as he talked about four popular models of the church:

All assume that evident relevance and response is the key indicator of success. The social ministries of the liberal church, the miracles of the prosperity gospel church, the music of the seeker-sensitive church, and the programs of the traditional evangelical church all must work well and work *now* to be considered relevant and successful. Depending on the type of church, success may mean so many fed, so many involved, or so many saved, but the assumption that all these kinds of churches share is that the fruit of a successful church is readily apparent. . . .

Biblically, we must realize that the size of what our eyes see is rarely a good way to estimate the greatness of something in the eyes of God.<sup>9</sup>

Dever later says, “We need churches in which the key indicator of success is not evident results but persevering biblical faithfulness.”<sup>10</sup> I constantly need reminders that the way God judges success in a church is different than how the world, or how churches for the last several decades, measure what makes a successful church. When introducing something like biblical ecclesiology to a church that has not experienced it previously, measuring success through faithfulness and biblical fidelity is new and even frightening. How do we measure how we are “doing” if not by tangible means? This study has reminded me of a better, more fruitful, and longer-lasting way.

A final theological reflection is in the form of another reminder: God’s sovereignty. This theological reflection is related to the previous one. When I am tempted to skirt biblical ecclesiology because FBCC is not achieving numerical “success,” I must remember that God is sovereign over His church, and He desires for her to flourish. The attractional model is surely easier, quicker, and more tangibly “successful,” however, it is not God’s design for the church. If God is sovereign (which He is) and He has designed the church to operate a certain way, then surely pursuing His model cannot fail. Christ declared plainly that the gates of Hades will not prevail against her (Matt 16:18). I must trust God’s sovereignty and remember that my part in His plan is to lead FBCC to biblical fidelity and faithful ecclesiology, and God will handle the results in His sovereign timing and in His sovereign way.

### **Personal Reflections**

Naturally, this project has been the most challenging thing I have done in academia. It has also been the most rewarding. This journey at SBTS has not only

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 4th ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 33, emphasis original.

<sup>10</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 34-35.

allowed me to grow in knowledge of ecclesiology, FBCC, and the church's great need of faithfulness, it has also taught me things about myself. One of the biggest things taught to me through this study has been my need to be patient with the process and patient with the people I am attempting to shepherd toward health. Dan Miller rightly said, "Shepherds lead sheep and sheep are slow creatures — *really* slow creatures! They don't change or move quickly. By nature, they meander and mosey, hesitate and halt. Pastoral impatience with slow moving sheep is understandable. It is also lethal."<sup>11</sup> I struggle with patience in just about every area of life, and although it took me years and years to realize what God is saying through His Word about what a church is and does, I can still find myself impatient with sheep who are themselves learning these things for the first time.

God has been incredibly patient with me and my repeated failures to obey, I must develop an understanding patience with sheep who struggle with ecclesiology. FBCC member's struggle is understandable because biblical ecclesiology is new and scary to them, requiring change from what they have always been taught. What the members of FBCC require from me is to teach them correct ecclesiology and lead them to organizational change, but they also need me to shepherd them into these things. What I must do is act as a responsible shepherd and be patient, loving, calm, and understanding, knowing this venture will take time. Turning a 130 year ship around is quite the task and one that must be undertaken with care and forbearance.

Related to leading patiently is a dangerous inclination I have to love ecclesiology and my deep desire for FBCC's health that I can fail to love members well. Jonathan Leeman articulated this well and helped me realize this in myself when he said, "we can love our vision of what a church should be more than we love the people who comprise it. . . . This is an implicit danger for all of us who have learned much from God-given books and conferences and ministries about 'healthy churches.' We start loving the

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<sup>11</sup> Dan Miller, "Patience: A Pastor's Superpower," *9 Marks Journal* (June 2020): 53.

idea of a healthy church more than the church God has placed us in.”<sup>12</sup> I noticed this, not only through coming across Leeman’s article, but through my preaching the sermon series for this project. I noticed a frustration with the unhealthiness of FBCC in years past that have led to this present moment and a lack of empathy knowing that the sheep are only partially to blame since they have not been shepherded toward correct ecclesiology. More than ever, I realize the importance of loving the people well, which will make my preaching, teaching, and leading even more well received because the people will know I am leading them this direction because I love them, not because I am trying to fix them.

A final reflection is simply on God’s goodness through this project and to FBCC. The COVID-19 pandemic was difficult on every church and was (and continues to be) a challenge filled with uncertainty. As mentioned in the evaluation subheading above, the pandemic was able to reveal a lot of things that I knew about FBCC, but the members may not have been aware. While many churches report losses of members (whether marginal attenders became non-attenders or members abandoned the fellowship to go elsewhere) during the pandemic, FBCC’s seemed more apparent in a small community like Cordele. Members have left FBCC but to a person the reasons have been consumeristic and have revealed that they may have loved an *aspect* of the church, rather than the church itself. By this I mean they loved their class, their curriculum, their favorite program, their being platformed in choir, rather than loving FBCC *for FBCC*.

The bad ecclesiology of FBCC has never been more obvious than through the pandemic. In God’s kindness and providence, this has been uncovered and made apparent to the members who have stayed because of their love for the church. The fertile ground was already present when I began the sermon series, which made the members see clearly the purpose of the church and that what should unite FBCC members is Jesus and not

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Leeman, “Love Your Church More than Its Health,” *9 Marks Journal* (June 2020): 107-08.

some other common affinity for an aspect of the church, which undoubtedly could not bear the weight of unity. While no one should desire members to leave a church, those who have left FBCC have seemingly taken their conflict with them, made what they actually love about the church clear, and have made moving forward to biblical health somewhat easier. While the work is still difficult (as noted), the remaining members see a need for change and are patiently baring with me as I cast God's vision for a healthy church.

God has been so incredibly kind to me and FBCC during the pandemic and beyond. While I do not rejoice at the losses, I can rejoice that during the pandemic we have been provided space to evaluate what we have "always done" at FBCC. I can rejoice at the opportunity to walk with the members of FBCC and show them that God has a better way. Personally, I have needed to rely on God more than ever and have become more aware of His lovingkindness and faithfulness as I trust His sovereign care for His bride through our obedient response to His grace.

### **Conclusion**

In the course of my studies before and during my time at SBTS I have come across many profound statements regarding the church. Of all the statements I have encountered, one by John Piper in a sermon from 1981 entitled "The Cosmic Church" may be the most powerful and weighty at stressing the importance of the church and it is worthy of placement here as I conclude and reflect on this project:

The church of Jesus Christ is the most important institution in the world. The assembly of the redeemed, the company of the saints, the children of God are more significant in world history than any other group, organization, or nation. The United States of America compares to the church of Jesus Christ like a speck of dust compares to the sun. The drama of international relations compares to the mission of the church like a kindergarten riddle compares to Hamlet of King Lear. And all pomp of May Day in Red Square and the pageantry of New Year's in Pasadena fade into a formless grey against the splendor of the bride of Christ. . . . The media and all the powers, and authorities, and rulers, and stars that they present are a mirage. . . . The gates of Hades, the powers of death, will prevail against every institution but one, the church. . . . Lift up your eyes, O Christian! You belong to a society that will never cease, to the apple of God's eye, to the eternal and cosmic

church of our Lord, Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup>

No doubt can be left that the church is the most important institution in the universe that will outlast all the others. This realization is key to proper ecclesiology. Indeed, even *desiring* biblical ecclesiology comes from knowing how much Christ cares about His body and bride. This project has made me more acutely aware of the importance of the church as well as my role in aiding others to see this important truth as well. But knowing this truth and acting on it are two different things, although the latter flows out of the former.

Through this project I have implemented several goals that begin the process of biblical ecclesiology finally shaping First Baptist Church of Cordele, Georgia. Because of God's kind providence, FBCC is beginning to take slow and steady steps toward embracing God's church in God's way. The work, however, has only just begun. Through the steps taken, and the steps mapped out *to be taken*, FBCC is headed into a direction of biblical fidelity and health. The journey ahead is sure to be slow, filled with unexpected speed bumps and trials, but pursuing faithfulness is always worth the cost. My prayer is that I will grow as FBCC does, leading with patience, humility, love, and with God's glory through this local church in Cordele, Georgia to shine forth to the community and world.

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<sup>13</sup> John Piper, "The Cosmic Church," March 22, 1981, *Desiring God*, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-cosmic-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 First Baptist Church in Cordele, Georgia of the biblical basis and approach of church membership. The research is being conducted by Kaylan Von Paxton 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. Please answer as truthfully as possible.

By completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

- I agree to participate  
 I do not agree to participate

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name (or 4 digit code): \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been a member of First Baptist Church? \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Section I**

The first section of this questionnaire will obtain some demographic information.

Directions: Answer the following multiple-choice questions by placing a check next to the appropriate answer.

1. Have you ever been disciplined by another believer?  
\_\_\_\_ A. Yes  
\_\_\_\_ B. No

2. Have you ever taken a new member class at First Baptist Church or any other church?  
 A. Yes  
 B. No
3. Are you currently on staff, a deacon, a life group leader, or a Sunday School teacher?  
 A. Yes  
 B. No
4. How long have you been a Christian?  
 A. 0-5  
 B. 6-10  
 C. 11-15  
 D. 16-20  
 E. 21-25  
 F. 26 and over
5. How long have you been a member of First Baptist Church?  
 A. 0-5  
 B. 6-10  
 C. 11-15  
 D. 16-20  
 E. 21-25  
 F. 26 or longer
6. What is your age in years?  
 A. 18-24  
 B. 25-34  
 C. 35-44  
 D. 45-54  
 E. 55-64  
 F. 65 and over

## Section II

**Directions:** Please mark the appropriate answer. Some questions may 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 New Testament places a strong emphasis on church membership.   | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 2. | The New Testament insists that every Christian be a member of a local church.                                | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 3. | The New Testament teaches that only Christians should be members of a local church.                          | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 4. | Baptism by immersion in the name of the Trinity is necessary to become a church member.                      | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 5. | Non-active member is a biblical concept.   | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 6. | A member who lives too far away to attend should be kept on the membership roll as long as he/she wishes.    | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 7. | I believe the Bible is absolutely sufficient and authoritative to inform the church's practices and beliefs. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

8.	Church discipline is a biblical concept.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
9.	If I were to move, I would join a local church as soon as possible.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
10.	Church membership is important to me.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
11.	Attending weekly worship gatherings is necessary to be an active member of the church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
12.	A church member should financially support his/her church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
13.	A church member should serve in some area of ministry in his/her church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
14.	The New Testament teaches that every member is vital to a healthy church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
15.	God has given each church member a specific spiritual gift.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
16.	The New Testament instructs Christians to submit to pastoral leadership and oversight.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
17.	I know what spiritual gift God has given me is.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
18.	Every member should submit to other members.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
19.	The Bible instructs me to be unselfish.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
20.	Fellowship among members is vital for church health.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

21.	Church discipline is corrective rather than punitive.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
22.	Church members should regularly attend the Lord's Supper.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
23.	I can currently articulate from the Bible why church membership is biblical.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
24.	The Bible instructs members to encourage one another.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
25.	Inactive membership is dangerous.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
26.	How I treat the church matters to Jesus.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
27.	Church members should be part of a Life Group or Sunday School class.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
28.	A church membership class can benefit prospective members.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
29.	The New Testament teaches that it is my responsibility to disciple another Christian.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
30.	The New Testament teaches that it is my responsibility to grow the church spiritually and numerically.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

## APPENDIX 2

### SERMON SERIES RUBRIC

The following evaluation will be given to the pastoral staff of FBCC who will use the rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, clarity, and relevance of the sermon series.

Name of evaluator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Biblical Church Membership Sermon Series Evaluation Tool</b>					
<b>1 = insufficient; 2 = requires attention; 3 = sufficient; 4 = exemplary</b>					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
<b>Biblical Faithfulness</b>					
The content of the sermon series is hermeneutically sound. All Scripture is properly interpreted, explained, and applied.					
The content of the sermon series is theologically sound.					
<b>Scope</b>					
The content of the sermon series sufficiently covers each issue it is designed to address.					
The sermon series sufficiently covers the basics of biblical church membership.					
<b>Methodology</b>					
The sermon series sufficiently addresses the biblical basis for church membership.					
The sermon series makes use of quotes and illustrations.					
<b>Practicality</b>					
The sermon series includes practical applications.					
At the end of the series, the congregants will have a better understanding of the biblical case for church membership.					

Please include any additional comments regarding the curriculum below:

## APPENDIX 3

### NEW MEMBER CLASS CURRICULUM EVALUATION

The following evaluation will be sent to an expert panel of two associate pastors at FBCC, an associational director, and a professor at SBTS. This panel will evaluate the course material to ensure it is biblically faithful, sufficiently thorough, and practically applicable of the curriculum.

Name of evaluator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>New Member Class Curriculum Evaluation Tool</b>					
<b>1 = insufficient; 2 = requires attention; 3 = sufficient; 4 = exemplary</b>					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
<b>Biblical Faithfulness</b>					
The content of the class is hermeneutically sound. All Scripture is properly interpreted, explained, and applied.					
The content of the class is theologically sound.					
<b>Scope</b>					
The curriculum sufficiently covers denominational distinctives, membership expectations, and other important information about FBCC.					
Overall, the lessons are clear.					
<b>Methodology</b>					
The curriculum sufficiently addresses the biblical basis for church membership.					
The curriculum makes use of various learning approaches.					
<b>Practicality</b>					
The class includes opportunities to interact with the teacher and material.					
At the end of the class, participants will have a better understanding of the biblical case for church membership and membership expectations.					

Please include any additional comments regarding the curriculum below:

## APPENDIX 4

### STRATEGIC PLAN EVALUATION RUBRIC

The following rubric will be used to evaluate the long-range plan for continuing education and practice of biblical church membership at FBCC developed by the author and will be distributed to an expert panel of local pastors and denominational leaders.

Name of evaluator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Long-range Strategic Plan Evaluation Tool</b>					
<b>Lesson to be Evaluated:</b>					
<b>1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary</b>					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The plan is clearly relevant to the issue of disciple-making.					
The plan is biblical and theologically consistent.					
The plan clearly lays out the case for biblical church membership.					
The plan addresses the area of the importance of church membership in the life of the church.					
The plan clearly lays out goals for long-term follow-up and accountability.					
The plan lays out further training goals to help current members grow deeper in their understanding of biblical membership.					

## APPENDIX 5

### SERMON SERIES EXTENDED OUTLINES

#### **Sermon 1**

*Matthew 16:13-20; 18:15-20*

#### **Introduction**

Everyone has views on what they think church membership should entail, and I wonder, when you think of church membership or the church on the whole, what do *you* think of? What does it look like? What does it entail? And once you have that settled in your mind, the question then must be asked: from whence do you derive your beliefs on what a church is, what a member is, and how the church ought to be ordered? Where do your beliefs on these topics come from?

What is a church and a church member? How ought the church be ordered? Does it matter? What role do the ordinances of baptism and Lord's Supper play? And does the Bible actually address church membership or are we free to form and shape it to our liking? These are the questions we will explore in this series.

These questions are absolutely crucial to get right, and I believe that if we humbly submit to the Word of God, no matter how much it might push back on what we believe about the church and membership, that at the conclusion of this series we will have renewed vigor to pursue biblical church membership, perhaps for the first time in our church's history.

My goal in this series is to show you what God's Word says on church membership. These are not things I thought up or created or invented – they also are not new. What we will see are things Baptists have believed and practiced for 500 years, what the Reformers believed and taught, what the Church Fathers believed and taught, and what the early church believed and taught.

And as I stand on their shoulders, it is my contention that a church cannot be healthy – it cannot be everything it was meant to be – it cannot properly reflect the image of Christ in the way that it was intended to – without biblical church membership. A church can indeed have a large bank account, thousands in attendance, classes and programs for every conceivable walk of life, a full calendar, and still be unhealthy because none of those things (while not bad), are in the bible, but guess what is? Church membership. And church membership is a mark of faithfulness, and faithfulness ought to be the only measurement for success.

There seems no better place to start than the words of Christ Himself in Matthew 16 and 18. In these two texts I want us to observe 3 very important things.

**I. What ought to inform membership?**

- A. Jesus asks His disciples, who do people generally say that He is, then who the disciples say that He is.
  - i. Peter declares Jesus is the Christ and Jesus declares He will build His church upon “the rock.”
  - ii. We can affirm that Peter and the rest of the apostles (since Peter is shown to be their representative in this gospel) are the foundation/rock because of their role in spreading the gospel and authoring the New Testament.
  - iii. This helps us answer the question, “what ought to inform our beliefs and practices about the church?” It ought to be the teachings of the apostles and prophets, also known as the Scriptures. It is the common salvation, the faith which has been handed down to the saints once and for all (Jude 3). And we affirm Scripture’s own witness of itself, which is that it is sufficient for faith and practice.
  - iv. From where should we get our beliefs and practices about church membership? From Scripture and Scripture is not silent about the church and membership.
- B. Who owns the church?
  - i. Matthew 16:18-19.
  - ii. Jesus both declares His intention to build and gives the keys to the kingdom to the church.
    - 1. Kingdom and church are inseparably linked.
    - 2. Jesus is the owner; He is the establisher of the church. Jesus is the one who can give authority, but even if He does, those who He gives authority to are merely stewards, not owners.
      - a. What do stewards do? They care for someone else’s property. They do not get to define or change or do what they please with someone else’s stuff, they merely care for it.
      - b. We cannot forget who is in charge. We forget whose house we’re talking about here. We forget that we are not the owners, but we are stewards, and the King of glory expects us to treat the church with care as we order it the way He said, not according to our whims, wishes, or to mimic what we see in secular clubs, organizations, or businesses.
      - c. The fact that the church is Christ’s, the fact that He intends for it to last forever, the fact that He is trusting us to fulfill His purposes, should stress to us how important the church is and that how we

treat it matters eternally. We must then treat the church with gravity and care, and we must do so in accordance with the instructions of its founder, head, and husband.

## **II. The church has authority from Christ.**

A. Matthew 16:19; 18:18.

B. Jesus first gives the binding and loosing power to Peter and then to the church itself.

- i. Binding and loosing was used of judicial-type authority of convicting and acquitting. What does that mean in the context of the local church? It means, and this is very important, that Jesus is giving the church authority to affirm the profession of faith of Christians who would join the church. That means when someone joins a local church, the church is doing far more than just adding them to a list kept in the church office.
- ii. When the church accepts someone into membership, they are telling the person who is joining, the rest of the church, the world, and heaven that as far as they can tell, this person is a follower of Christ, and they are committing to the oversight of that person's life so that they may continue to affirm that they are faithfully following Christ.
- iii. The authority to bind and loose is authoritative only insofar as it corresponds to divine will. The church is merely ratifying or affirming what heaven has already declared, which is that this person is a Christian as far as they can tell by observing this person's life and walk in accordance with what Scripture says a Christian is and does.
- iv. The whole church is saying that they believe the person is a follower of Christ and that they will be obligated to help that person continue to follow Christ faithfully.
- v. Jesus envisions a clear line between who is "in" the church and who is "out." Matthew 18:15-20 clearly evidences this.
  1. If one can be put "out" of the church, they must have been considered "in" at some point.
  2. Consequence: every single person on the membership roll of the church is someone that the church is saying to that person, to one another, to the community, and to heaven itself, that they are a Christian walking faithfully with the Lord and that they can attest to that fact through observing their life and participation in the church community.
  3. Question: Can a church continue to affirm the salvation and faithful walk of someone who they do not see on a regular basis?
  4. According to Jesus, the church is more than just a series of names on a list. It is a body of believers gathered in His name and when they accept people into membership they

are committing to mutual care and oversight of them to ensure that they walk faithfully for the good of their soul and the witness of the church to the world. And the member is committing to the gathering, and selfless service as they also care for their family in Christ.

**III. The church has familial responsibility for one another.**

- A. Jesus means for members to so care about one another, that when they see their brother or sister in danger, in ongoing sin that they engage in and do not repent of, that they have the responsibility to go to them.
- B. Use of “brother” and “sister” is no accident or empty phrasing.
- C. Without the familial language, you can rightly read this as overbearing, overreaching, and intrusive. But when you see it in the context of family, these steps only make sense because you are not pursuing them in order to punish them or to be hard on them: you are doing it because you care about their soul and eternal destiny.
- D. What is worse is if you see your brother or sister in danger and you do not do anything about it.
  - i. *That’s* unloving and dereliction of duty. And when someone joins a local church and the church accepts them into membership, they are taking responsibility for the oversight and care of that individual and the individual submits to the church’s authority given them by Christ, as they also commit to care for others. To not do so would be to be derelict in our duty.
  - ii. Church membership is a question of discipleship. Do you want to help people know Jesus more? Do you want them to live out the commands of Christ in light of the gospel? Do you want to protect their souls? Do want them to be a true and faithful witness to the watching world?

**Conclusion**

The gospel creates a people. And the way Jesus set it up to be followed is to do it with other people. And the way we are to know we are following Him is other people continually confirming that in us as they observe our lives and walk with us. So, we can rightly say that church membership puts the gospel on display to the world.

Without being an active, covenanting, engaged, participating member of a church – and without being a church that takes membership seriously and covenants to care for the members with oversight and love – how does one know that they are walking faithfully with Christ?

Without biblical membership, how do you keep from drifting? Without biblical membership, how do you obey the over fifty “one another” commands in the New Testament? How do you know that you are embodying the fruits of the Spirit and not the works of the flesh? How do you help other people follow Jesus? How do you use your spiritual gift?

Without a church being dedicated to church membership, how do you equip your members to walk faithfully? How do you keep them from drifting? How do you show love and care? How do you fulfill the Great Commission and Great Commandment? If, as a church, you have low standards for membership – if your membership is indistinct from local clubs and organizations – what makes you unique to the world?

It cannot be that the only difference between a local church and a local civic organization is that the church has religion in common rather than golf or business or a desire to better the community through projects. But do you not see that this is often the only difference? But that is not what Jesus envisions here, and it is not what the apostles handed to us in the Scriptures.

I hope it is clear through just these 2 passages just how important Jesus sees the church. That He is the owner, that it belongs to Him, that He intends to build her through the faithfulness of His people, that they are made up of “called out ones” bought by His blood, a new society in the resurrected Christ, reflecting His love to the watching world, caring for one another in mutual covenant for one another’s good, to the glory of the only wise God.

But there is more. The New Testament has a lot more to say and we will be exploring many passages to give you a clearer picture of what Christ intends for His church, His body, His bride, His family.

## **Sermon 2**

### ***1 Corinthians 12***

#### **Introduction**

Many self-professed Christians today have little or nothing to do with the local church. The justification, of course, is that the local church is simply unnecessary for the life of the Christian and that one can live their Christian life, and even “do ministry” without being attached to the local body. In other words, they think they can be a “member” of the universal church without being a member of a local church. Is this a correct view, though, biblically speaking?

Some define “membership” and “member” in much the same way the word would be defined in a country or civic club: infrequent attendance, taking rather than giving, relationship is based on an exchange of goods and services, and willing to leave when things are not done according to their desires.

The problem, it seems, is not only a misunderstanding of the fact that when Christ saves an individual, He saves them *into a people*, into a family, into a bride, into a body, into a living temple. But it also misunderstands, at the most fundamental level, what the word “member” itself *means*. And this is what will be our focus from our text this morning.

As we continue our series on biblical church membership we want to answer – from Scripture – the most basic ideas of what God intends and means for the church to look like. So, what does it mean, biblically speaking, to be a “member” of a church? What does that word “member” mean? And what does it, at the most basic level, entail?

**I. Being a member means physical attachment to the Body.**

A. The church is the body of Christ, He is the head which means that He has authority over the body, and He provides provision and direction for the body as well as leading it to growth.

i. The Spirit has ordered the body the way that He alone has sovereignly determined (1 Cor 12:7, 18). It is God who has placed members into the body and gifted them the way He sees fit.

ii. The body is made up exclusively of people who make the profession that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor 12:3). Only those who have the indwelling Spirit can genuinely make that profession, and every Christian is thus given a spiritual gift that the Spirit sovereignly chooses *for them* (1 Cor 12:7), but to what end?

1. For the common good of the body, and these members were baptized, verse 13, into the body of believers both by the Spirit and through the initiatory act of water baptism.

iii. They are thus “members” of the body of Christ in much the same way that your arm is a member of your body, or your leg, or your eyes, or your ears, or your foot, or your elbow, or your fingers.

iv. The church is not borrowing the word “member” from the world. “Member” is a deeply biblical word packed with meaning.

v. Members need to be physically near each other in order to build others up. We must consider what the Bible says membership is, letting it define it, and consider what is best for the health of the body of the Lord Jesus Christ and for its members, even if it pushes against what we have always believed about membership.

**II. Membership means unity in diversity and equality.**

A. Contextually, Paul is writing to a fragmented and splintered church. The Corinthians are dividing over seemingly everything. Paul is heavily emphasizing the importance of unity throughout the letter which is clear in 1 Corinthians 12.

B. Notice how many times he says the words “one” and “same.” And notice the Trinitarian emphasis of verses 4-6. The members of the Trinity are united around the same purpose and goal, so should you be.

i. Verse 7, the Spirit gives gifts for the *common* good; verse 11 *one* and the *same* Spirit; verse 12 the body is *one* yet has many members but it is still *one* body; verse 13, by *one* Spirit you were baptized into *one* body and we are all made to drink of the *one* Spirit; verse 18, body is singular; verse 20 *one* body; verse 25 no division in the body because members have the same care for one another.

- C. Paul is also clear that while the body is united, it is still diverse. Not all members of the body are the same.
- i. The members are diverse because they will need to be interdependent. They will need to rely on others for the proper functioning, growth, and good of the whole. If they are all the same, nothing would get done. If they do not use their gifts, nothing would get done either. If they have different goals instead of one common goal, then it would be harmful to the whole. But if they all need one another to function, none can be considered unimportant.
  - ii. No gift is more important than any other gift – they are all necessary for the body to function as Christ intended.
  - iii. The Corinthians needed to learn this, and we need to learn this.
  - iv. No member is more or less important than any other member. In the body of Christ, all are equal.
  - v. At FBCC you are a member of the body of Christ, and whether you are an arm, or a foot comes from whether the Holy Spirit has made you thus, not from what you are in the world, and your role is therefore to function in an other-focused direction in unity to build up the body.
  - vi. Unless all members are treated equally, and see themselves as a part of the whole, no unity can be maintained.
  - vii. This diversity is good because it speaks profoundly to the world about what only Jesus can do.
  - viii. Unity in diversity in the body tells the world that this is something only the blood of Christ can do. A church divided tells the world that it is not much different than it, after all, and that the blood of Christ is not enough of a common factor for them. And a church indistinguishable from the world is a church that has forsaken its call from Christ and cannot rightly call itself the body of Christ because, as Paul asked in 1:13, “Is Christ divided?” The answer is “no.”

### **III. Mutual concern leads to growth.**

- A. Membership means physical attachment, it means the use of spiritual gifts for the common good worked in selflessness with unity in diversity, and that kind of attachment, that kind of other-focused-ness, breeds mutual concern and care to the point that, what one member feels, the others feel with them (1 Cor 12:24-26).
- B. Paul combines unity with the emotions of the church rising and falling together.
  - i. Division in the church find their roots in someone, or even a group, wanting to have first place, jealous of others. They do not see themselves as members of the whole, they see themselves as more important than others, and thus, they should get their way. And their way rarely has to do with the bettering, or growth of the body,

- but what can benefit them and those who are in their group, or what makes them most comfortable, or fits with their preferences.
- ii. Division and fighting in the body are signs of immaturity (1 Cor 3:1-3).
  - iii. The body of Christ is to be a bunch of different people from different walks of life and at different places in their walk with Jesus, and they are walking at different paces, but they do it together.
  - iv. Members rebuke and edify, they exhort and serve, they hurt together, laugh together, rejoice together, and focus only on one another.

## **Conclusion**

What is a church member? It is someone who confesses that Christ is Lord and means it, and thus has the indwelling Spirit, and thus has a spiritual gift necessary for the growth of others. A church member is someone who commits and covenants with a local body and attaches itself to it for life. A church member physically gathers at every conceivable opportunity with the body they have covenanted with.

A Church member thinks of others first and foremost and uses the gift the Spirit has given them to serve the mission of Christ. A church member endures, stays, loves, gives of themselves, hurts with the hurting, and rejoices with the rejoicing. A church member fights for unity, despises disunity, and dies to self in order to maintain the unity of Christ. A church member is intentional about getting around people that do not look like them and rejoices in unity in diversity. A church member loves Jesus, adores their fellow members, and would do anything for their good.

So, when you hear me talk about biblical membership and health, *that* is what I am talking about. *That* is what we are trying to point you to. This is what we should strive for in light of the gospel, in light of Jesus moving heaven and earth to redeem us and placing us in the family of the redeemed that He cares deeply for.

We must pursue this. Will we do it perfectly? No, but we must pursue it constantly and never let up. And we can do that by the power of the Spirit, for the glory of God, because of the uniting power of Christ. And even though it will still be teeming with faults, it will still be the dearest place on earth to us.

## **Sermon 3** ***Hebrews 10:19-25***

### **Introduction**

Must one physically go to church in order to grow? Is the church, and attendance therein, optional for the Christian? Can one truly practice their Christianity the way that they see fit? Can one worship just as well alone in the woods as with other Christians? Is this the

design given to us in Scripture? And if one is a member of a church, must they really go and attend the gatherings? Is there a correlation between membership and regular attendance? And what ought to be our focus when we go?

There are many texts (as we have already seen in this series) that bear out the answers to these questions but perhaps none offer such obvious answers as this present text with such vivid clarity. Here we have a text that explicitly commands attendance in the church gathering.

In context we see the author of Hebrews connect the vertical drawing near to God (Heb 10:19-21) with the horizontal drawing near to others who are fellow believers in the church (Heb 10:19-25). In other words, the truth of what Christ has done must flow out to the fruit of how we relate to others. The imperatives of how we are to be members in the church flows out of the indicatives of Christ's selfless sacrifice on our behalf to achieve our redemption and place us into His family.

Do not miss this: the author of Hebrews connects church membership, and the posture we have toward the body of Christ, with our redemption. If we are redeemed, then we ought to have fruit of that redemption, and that is shown forth primarily in how we draw near and treat Christ's church. Why else would the command to gather be in the same sentence as a reminder of the gospel and our salvation?

Church membership, and commitment to the gatherings of the church with which we have covenanted with, aids us in drawing near to God, it gives us assurance, it helps us hold fast to the confession of hope without wavering, so says the author of Hebrews.

## **I. Church membership is other-focused.**

- A. In light of Christ's work, Christians are to consider others.
  - i. Biblical membership calls us to take the attention completely off ourselves, not to consider ourselves, but to carefully consider, and keep considering fellow members.
  - ii. Instead of always thinking "What about me and my group?" we ought to ask, "How can I serve others and help them love Jesus and the church and do good deeds for the glory of Christ?"
- B. The question looms large in this text: Who are you supposed to be considering?
  - i. All Christians? In some sense, yes.
  - ii. Functionally speaking, the author of Hebrews has in mind a local congregation you have covenanted with. You can rightly obey this passage when you have committed to one church whom you can continually consider, and think of, and spur on to love and good deeds.
  - iii. Since this an ongoing action, the continual building up of "one another" can only result from intentional pouring into a specific group of people that the believer knows and loves and has committed their life to.

- iv. This love flows out of the love from Christ shown supremely in His substitutionary death on behalf of you and your siblings in Christ. Consideration, therefore, of people in the church leads to love, and love, by definition, acts for the good of the object. Otherwise, it is not love.

## **II. Church membership means gathering.**

- A. Gathering in the worship of the local church is plainly commanded in 10:25.
  - i. Gathering is not given as optional for the Christian.
  - ii. Further, obedience to verse 24 and the second half of verse 25 is not possible if one forsakes the assembly of the local church. To do so, is to, says the author, leave your fellow brothers and sisters “in the lurch” and thus deprives them of needed support.
  - iii. You cannot consider and keep considering if you abandon the fellowship. You cannot spur others to love and good deeds if you absent yourself from their continued presence.
  - iv. Jesus designed the church in such a way to make Christians dependent on one another for faithfulness and growth. To cast off the church and regular attendance as a necessity and non-negotiable of life is to cast off Christ’s very design for what it looks like to follow Him.
  - v. If Scripture is commanding us to not neglect the assembly, and if going to the assembly is the fruit of the gospel of 19-23 having taken root in our hearts, then to abandon the assembly is willful and unrepentant sin.
- B. Those who neglect the assembly cut themselves off from the very means by which Christ designed for the Christian to flourish.
  - i. “Forsaking” or “neglecting” in verse 25 carries with it a heavy meaning that communicates that when one makes a habit out of not going to the weekly gathering, they are, in reality, abandoning or deserting their fellow believers.
  - ii. To withdraw from the church and the gatherings is to court spiritual disaster. The author of Hebrews says that only by remaining united could they preserve their faith and witness.
  - iii. If you are not regularly attending a local church that you are a covenant member of, who holds you accountable? Who helps you stay on the narrow path of discipleship? Who keeps you from wandering into destructive sin? How do you know you are following Jesus and not a deified version of yourself?
    1. These questions matter because look what follows the command not to abandon the gatherings in verse 25: do these things... “all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” What day?
    2. The Day of the Lord. The day that Jesus will close this age out and will judge the living and the dead.

3. Every person without exception will stand before the throne of the living Christ. And they will have to answer to the King of the universe for how they lived and how they treated His bride.
4. Those who neglect the gatherings regularly are doing far more than skipping out on some meeting. They are communicating something about what they cherish and flashing a neon light to you that something is going on in their heart and life that is not good. And it is the role of the church to call them back, to rebuke them in love out of concern for their souls, so that they may be stimulated (and stimulate others), and all the more as judgment day draws near.

### **III. Church membership means encouraging one another.**

- A. If it is true that making a habit of neglecting the gathering is spiritually dangerous (which it is), then the members must “encourage” one another to continue attending and focusing on how to stimulate others to love and good deeds.
  - i. The community not only “encourages” one another in the strictly positive sense of the word, they exhort one another to growth in the Lord, and toward everything the author of Hebrews has pointed them to.
  - ii. It thus follows that the believer will find encouraging and exhorting others (while they are encouraged and exhorted by others) increasingly difficult if his or her attendance in the gathering is infrequent, erratic, or ceases completely.
- B. All of us need encouragement and exhortation.
  - i. All of us need others to spur us on to love and good deeds, all of us need to be reminded of the truths of 19-23, lest we get discouraged and fall back to believing our assurance depends on our performance. Do not you need that? I need that.
  - ii. We have zero right to walk into the presence of God. We were far off, and deservingly so. God could have crushed us, and He would have been just to do so. And so sinful are we that it took the shedding of blood of – not just anyone – but the perfect God in flesh. And He died and rose to bring you near – that is how sinful and helpless you are.
  - iii. We are prone to doubt, and we are prone to rely on our record, our morality, and we become arrogant (thinking we are doing this thing on our own) or we become downcast (thinking we have failed too much to approach God), and we are this ball of inconsistency as we stubbornly follow our fickle hearts.
  - iv. Remembering that it is Christ and His merit that walks us into God’s presence should both humble and encourage us. And that is what the church is meant to remind us of.

## **Conclusion**

Remembering the truths of 19-23 should make us recognize how unable we are to live this Christian life outside of God's design for us, which is in the local church. Because it is there that we can shed our selfishness, focus on others as they focus on us, as they remind us of the blood of Christ, as they remind us of our confession of hope, as they remind us that He who promised is faithful, as they spur us on to selfless love and good deeds, and as they encourage and exhort us to live in light of the gospel.

You need the church, and the church needs you, and that means committing, covenanting, coming, and staying. It means being uncomfortable because you know that it is in discomfort that we grow. It means having your mind absorbed by how you can help others in the church grow in love for Jesus and one another.

It means falling over yourself trying to serve others, especially when it is inconvenient, and even when you would rather be doing something else. It means singing songs you would not play in your car because you know they are about exalting Christ, and your singing will encourage the people sitting around you.

It means missing out on other things because you do not want to miss the best, which is gathering with the church of Christ, which is a foretaste of heaven itself. It means encouraging others who you have nothing else in common with but Christ and all the more as time marches on. It means you invest in the soul-care of your fellow church member, which is often uncomfortable and messy, but is worth it because you want what is best for their eternal state.

*That* is what it means to be a church member.

## **Sermon 4**

### ***Philippians 1:27-2:18***

## **Introduction**

Texts like the one we are considering together this morning fly right in the face of, not only our modern western ideals, but of our fallen human nature, which is one of the reasons why it's so good.

As we continue our series on biblical church membership, we want to continue to ask what church membership looks like and what it entails. We have seen through texts like Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 12, and Hebrews 10 that church membership is indeed in the New Testament. We have seen that it is characterized by such things as formal entrance into the church, that membership is a church declaring to the world who they can say through observing the lives and walk of their members that they are faithful followers of Jesus. We have seen that membership means physical attachment to the body, use of spiritual gifts, prioritizing attendance at the gathering, focusing on others, and encouraging one another.

We have seen that very little of what the bible commands us to do in response to the gospel is possible unless we commit to one local church and physically attend the worship gatherings and involve our lives in it as much as is possible. Through this text, we will see four more marks of church membership.

**I. Church membership means living out our heavenly citizenship (Phil 1:27-30).**

- A. Paul says the Philippians' primary address, primary loyalty, true and lasting allegiance is to Christ, and if it costs them, then they should count themselves blessed for the honor of suffering for such a king, because he will indeed vindicate them in the end, since He is the true ruler and true Lord.
  - i. Believers, verse 27, must live out their heavenly citizenship here and now, they must conduct themselves as citizens of the kingdom of Christ, which presupposes that there are behaviors and ethical demands on the Christian in light of the gospel and such things as selfish ambition, vain conceit, grumbling, and disputing are *not* in keeping with their heavenly citizenship, since they do not reflect the ethical character of the gospel but of the world.
  - ii. In light of this, church members are to advance the gospel and stand together, engaging side by side and helping one another persevere in the face of calls and pressure to compromise.
- B. How do you take a stand and make advances for the gospel in your community when you try and do it by yourself? And how do you live out your heavenly citizenship if you are not attached formally to an outpost, an embassy, a colony of the kingdom which is what the local church is?
  - i. Paul is calling for the church to stand side by side, stand firm, stand together, and their unity would help fend off the assaulting arrows of the persecutors and the devil. This is far more advantageous than a lone soldier, with their lone shield, standing in a field trying to win the battle singlehandedly. At some point, the arrow will find its mark because one cannot cover all sides by themselves. This is why, says Paul, you need to do this thing together.
- C. But he also wants the kingdom of Christ to be their primary concern in life. Their heavenly citizenship should take first place in their priorities and concerns. And where is this primarily lived out? In the local church.
  - i. The local church is an embassy of the kingdom of Christ. And church as embassy should replace in our minds any thought of the church as service provider or club.
  - ii. The church advocates for another, better kingdom, in the face of many challengers vying for first place and lordship in the lives of people.

- iii. Biblical church membership reminds us at every turn that I am part of something bigger than myself and something bigger even than the whole world that will outlast every other kingdom and king.

II. **Church membership means being a uniter (Phil 2:1-5).**

- A. Paul offers four “if any” statements here: If any encouragement, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and compassion then...have the same mind, same love, united in the Spirit, intent on the same purpose.
  - i. Paul says that if these various realities of life in Christ and the Spirit mean anything to you at all...then make my joy complete by being of one mind.
  - ii. Paul is saying that those who have given their allegiance to Christ show forth that allegiance by having the posture of verses 2-4.
  - iii. A selfish, self-centered, divisive posture stands starkly against Jesus and His design and will for the church. Instead, church members are to have the same mind, love, spirit, and purpose.
- B. Church membership means being united around the same goal.
  - i. The unity of mind is to agree together that Christ is King, and He has handed us His mission to be done in His way for His glory.
  - ii. A healthy church is a united church. Nothing speaks quite as profoundly to the inherent sickness of a church than disunity, division, and factionalism.
  - iii. Disunity is the opposite of the mind of Christ.
  - iv. Where does division come from? From selfish ambition and vain glory. The surest safeguard against division, then, is considering others more important than oneself as a basic orientation of the Christian life and approach to the church.

III. **Church membership means submitting to the church (Phil 2:5-11).**

- A. A better word than “join” is “submit.”
  - i. Jesus submitted His will and even His ability to grasp and benefit from His divinity for the sake of others. He submitted Himself to the Father and was obedient to death. And Paul tells us to emulate this posture of Jesus.
  - ii. 2:1-4 sounds like submission to the church.
  - iii. Think back to the last three weeks: is church membership not submission to the oversight and care of your walk with the Lord by the church? Is it not submitting your own desires for the good of the whole body? Is it not giving fellow members permission to speak hard words into your life for your good and growth? Is not joining together with a singular purpose and goal and motive and doing nothing from selfish ambition or empty glory and considering others more important than self not submission to the church and elevating its gospel priorities over your own preferences?
- B. Church membership is, in a sense, pouring oneself out as Christ poured Himself out.

- i. It is an emptying of oneself for the good of others as they empty themselves out for your good, just as Christ did.
- ii. When verse 7 says that Jesus “emptied himself,” this does not mean He lost any of His divinity or anything like that, it means He “poured Himself” out. When we submit to the church, we do not lose our individuality or uniqueness, we simply “pour ourselves out” like Christ did.
- iii. If Paul were filling out one of the surveys I handed out before we started this series and he came to the statement “Every member should submit to other members,” he would circle “strongly agree.”
- iv. Paul is putting before our eyes the fact that the King of all things voluntarily submitted in order to secure your salvation.
- v. Paul is saying that if you want to know how to do Philippians 1:27 – to conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel – look no further than your Savior, and emulate Him, and His self-sacrificial, and His obedient life.

**IV. Church membership submits for the sake of the family of faith and the witness of the world (Phil 2:12-18).**

- A. Paul pulls it all together.
  - i. He is saying that you (plural) work out your (plural) salvation (singular) with fear and trembling. This is a corporate call.
  - ii. What does he mean by “work out your salvation”? He is not talking about getting saved, he is saying that you are to live out your salvation ethically the way that Christ commands as you emulate Him. It is about obedience.
- B. It is God who supplies the power to obey. You need to lean into the power of God, you need to lean into the Spirit at work in you and amongst the church, to be able to pursue biblical church membership in this way.
  - i. Paul says that we ought to do the things he has said through God’s empowering for God’s good pleasure, in the midst of a crooked and perverse world, because we will stand as lights to the dark world.
  - ii. Paul knows Philippi is dark, he knows the Hellenistic world that these people lived in looked down on humility and lowliness and weakness and submission to others, and he knew the world would stay dark until the end of the age. And it is in this space that he is calling the church to shine like stars on the dark canvas of the communities in which they find themselves.
  - iii. Paul also knows that believers will shine the brightest when they shine together. Having one flashlight does very little, but if you join it with hundreds, that will shine in a way that one or two cannot do alone.

## Conclusion

Imagine how Philippians 1:27-2:18 sounds to the self-professed Christian utterly separated from the local church. Now imagine how a local church actually pursuing these things would look like to a community in darkness like ours.

The church would shine like stars against the canvas of a dark sky because biblical church membership will stand out to the world. The world will be forced to stand up and take notice at a church that has high expectations in an environment for grace in a world of low expectations and low commitment. They will take notice at a group of people who have very little in common standing shoulder to shoulder to push back against the darkness in one another's lives.

It will be peculiar to see a group of people with all kinds of different opinions putting them aside for the sake of the singular gospel goal of Christ's glory and one another's good. It will look strange to see people allowing the gospel they profess to inform how they do nothing from selfishness or vain glory but embody a humility reminiscent of their Savior because He is empowering them to count others as more significant than themselves. It will look attractive to see people who seem to believe what they say about loving God, loving neighbor, and loving each other truly without grumbling or disputing.

A place like that will be like a lighthouse or city on a hill, piercing the darkness and calling others to know the same transformative gospel that informs everything they do.

All of history is pointing to and leading up to and getting closer to the day when verse 10 is a reality. Every person and created being that you have ever met, or seen, or heard about will one day bend knee to King Jesus and confess Him as Lord of all things to the glory of God the Father. Some to their vindication, others to their damnation, and those are the only two roads.

As a church, as an embassy of the kingdom of this cosmic Christ, it is our job to usher one another to that day of vindication. And it is our job to go and get as many people as possible and tell them about this beautiful Savior and, as far as it depends on us, keep them from damnation. Biblical church membership points us to these things because those are the primary, uppermost reasons why the church exists.

We all have to make a choice if that is what we want to see and if we will pursue it. Let us choose this model, and let us pray for God's empowering, and let us follow the Spirit's leading, and let us confess Christ as the center of all that we do, to the glory of our Triune God.

## Sermon 5 1 Corinthians 5

### Introduction

To our ears, church discipline sounds very bizarre and, honestly, very negative and harsh. It seems passé, archaic, legalistic, pharisaical, and intrusive. But could it be that what we think of when we think about church discipline is actually a caricatured strawman and not the real thing? Could it be that church discipline, biblically speaking, is not only positive, but the only loving recourse for people navigating life together as sojourners in a dark world? Could it be that without biblical discipline, church membership makes little or no sense?

Discipline is an outflow of the gospel of grace, *and* without discipline, church membership makes exactly zero sense. If we are not taking responsibility for one another's lives, if we are not invested in one another enough to help one another kill sin, if we are not loving enough to see something harming our brother or sister that we have covenanted with and do something about it before it goes further and causes more damage, then membership just has no place whatsoever.

But if every text we have looked at this past 4 weeks are true (which they are) then this is a natural outflow of biblical church membership.

Now, even though we are looking at a case where Paul instructs the gathered church to excommunicate the offender, church discipline is not just throwing people out of the church. This is the final step, and it is not done lightly, quickly, or mechanically, as we see in Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18.

We can categorize discipline in two categories: *formative* and *corrective*. Formative is what we are doing right now and every time we gather to hear the Word preached. It is discipline through instruction. Corrective helps correct the disciple through correcting sin, which is what this text speaks to.

#### I. Discipline is an act of grace.

- A. Paul is responding here to a man who is sleeping with his stepmother, and the church is not doing anything about it.
  - i. Paul is incredulous, he cannot believe it.
    - 1. He cannot believe they are tolerating a sin the world thinks is strange, *and* that, verse 2, the church is arrogant about it.
  - ii. Note: Paul's rebuke is not to the leaders of the church, nor the offender, but to the church as a whole for their laxity.
  - iii. Tolerance of sin is not an act of grace.
    - 1. Grace that gives license to sin, is not a gospel grace.
    - 2. Grace that God gives is not a blank check to sin as much as we please, it is the divine impartation of the Holy Spirit and placement in a community of faith *so that we can kill sin*.

- 3. Christ died to save you from your sin. Not just the eternal consequences, but from its slavish bondage in the present.
- iv. This is not an expelling of everyone who sins.
- v. This is about things that are clearly sinful according to Scripture, and only as long as the person refuses to repent. It is gracious to help one another walk in faithfulness, it is not gracious to turn a blind eye to one another's sin because sin kills.
- vi. Discipline means we care enough to call one another on ongoing, unrepentant sins, so that we can kill it together and grow in Christ.

## II. Church discipline is a church act.

- A. Notice in 3-5 and verse 13 that Paul tells the church that when they gather, when they are assembled, to put the man out of the church. This tells us many things.
  - i. We have a clear-cut example that church membership is a biblical concept.
  - ii. Paul expects them to assemble. He expects them to gather *as a church*, which he mentions again in chapter 11.
  - iii. This is what churches, do: they gather, they assemble, they come together for worship, to observe the ordinances, to act on Christ's behalf on earth and to be equipped.
- B. The fact that the man can be put out of the church must mean that there was some formal entrance and recognition that he was *in* in the first place. How can you be put out if you were never in?
  - i. Discipline is not removing people from membership, but the fact that the church is given authority by Christ to remove someone, the fact that the church at Corinth is to remove this man, must mean that Scripture has in mind church membership with formal entry requirements, and recognition of who is in and who is out, plus requirements for staying in.
  - ii. Paul's instructions are not to the leaders of the church, are they? He does not tell the leaders to carry this act out, does he? Then if you look at Matthew 18 and Jesus lays out these three-fold steps where a brother goes to a brother and shows him why his ongoing sin is wrong and harmful, if he rejects him, then he takes 2 or 3 others, then he does what? He is to tell it *to the church*. Because discipline is an act for the whole church.
  - iii. We all participate, we all take care for one another because we are trying to help one another pursue holiness and Christlikeness. Truly, if we are not trying to help one another grow in Christ, what is even the point of being a church at all? Is that not why it exists? To glorify God, building up the saints, and evangelizing the lost? Discipline helps us do all of that.

## III. Discipline is for the good of the offender.

- A. Verse 5

- i. This letter would be read in the gathering. Paul still hopes this would bring the man to repentance before he is removed from the body.
    - ii. This judgment is tantamount to Jesus' "treat such a one as a tax collector or pagan" (Matt 18:17).
    - iii. In other words, it is to treat him as if he is not part of the covenant community because he is acting contrary to his profession of faith in Christ as Lord and King.
  - B. The man's actions are showing that he may be self-deceived.
    - i. He may think he is a Christian, but his behavior betrays his profession. Someone who truly follows the Lord will not see Christ's commands as optional and irrelevant.
    - ii. The man is saying with his life, "I don't care what God says." So, is he a Christian? Paul is essentially saying, "We will find out, because true Christians do not obey perfectly, but they do actually *try to obey*. They do not cast off the commands of the Lord they claim to follow."
    - iii. Our lives should back up our profession of faith. We need to love each other. We need to hold each other accountable, because all of us will have times when our flesh wants to go in a way different than what God has revealed in Scripture.
    - iv. This is an act of mercy. If the man is saved, he'll repent. If he is not, then he will go and be in the world with the rest of the unbelievers. Essentially, the church is giving the man a choice: Jesus or sin? If he does not repent of a clear, obvious, unrepentant sin, he is making his choice clear.
  - C. Verses 6-8.
    - i. Paul is not calling the Corinthians to do anything that is not within their means to do. He is telling them to be what they already are.
    - ii. Paul says, "You are unleavened because Christ our Passover has been sacrificed." So, it is within their means to clean out the "leaven," which is a metaphor for sin and draws off the first Passover in Exodus.
    - iii. If you were in danger, you would want someone to stop you from the danger if it was in their means to do so. If you were in danger, and someone who said they loved you was watching you, and just stood by, even if it was in their realm to help you, would you conclude that they love you? What kind of love is that? That is not love.
    - iv. Biblical love sees someone in danger and cares enough about them to be uncomfortable by having a hard conversation.
    - v. Remember the aim: the aim is always renewed repentance, and therefore, renewed fellowship with God and His people.

#### **IV. Discipline is for the good of the church.**

- A. Verses 6-8 again.
  - i. A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

- ii. In other words, it is damaging to the church to allow unchecked, unrepentant sin to continue because it will infect the whole church.
- iii. Unchecked, sin spread through the whole church. It defiles the conscience of weaker believers; it teaches new Christians that sin is not a big deal and does not need to be pushed back against in their lives.
- iv. Unchecked, unrepentant sin in the church is like putting a drop of black ink into a glass of milk. It is not going to stay static; it is going to darken the whole thing.
- v. The watching world will think that we do not even believe what we say we do. They will not see unchecked sin as attractive, they will see the church saying one thing and doing another, and if the church does not look different from the world, why would the world want what the church has?
- vi. It would be more attractive to see people loving each other in Christ, shedding their posturing, admitting sin, and spurring one another on to changed lives reflecting their Christ.

B. Verse 9-13.

- i. The concern of the church ought to be the purity of the church.
- ii. Their job is not to judge the world. People who are not Christians, act like people who are not Christians.
- iii. Both Jesus and Paul believe that the church should be distinct from the world. That is why there is church membership, it is declaring that these people are, from the best that we can tell from their professions and lives, Christians following their Lord.
- iv. A church does not make someone a citizen of the kingdom, it does, however, have a responsibility for declaring who does and does not belong to Christ's kingdom (like a passport). This is authority explicitly given to them by the head of the church – Jesus Himself.
- v. The actions of 1 Corinthians 5 are not to pronounce the person's final condemnation *but to seek to avert it*.

## Conclusion

In our day, we are tolerant, expressive individuals with radical autonomy, and we keep each other at arm's length. We say, "you have no right to speak into my life and I will not bother you, either." If that is our posture, we do not want the church – we do not want real community – not in its biblical form, not in what Jesus envisions for us.

How can we say we love one another if we do not do everything we can to keep one another from sins that harm us, our families, and the church? How can we say we follow Christ if we throw off His commands? How can we say we want to win the world when we will not protect our witness *before* the world; the witness that we are a distinct people, set apart by God for Christ's purposes?

Recently I stumbled upon our very first covenant from 1889. Here is the opening paragraph of the church covenant they adopted when they formed FBCC: Hoping and believing we have experienced the regenerating grace of God and accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior we do now solemnly covenant with each other to walk together in brotherly love and do what we can to promote the precious cause of our [common] Lord that we will exercise a Christian call and watchfulness over each other.

Have we ever done things the way we have been talking about today and in previous weeks? You bet we have. But somewhere along the way, we lost it. And that is not unique to us, we may simply have been doing what other churches were doing or what we thought was right at the time or what was most pragmatic or comfortable.

But by God's grace, we can return, not only to the covenant of those who founded FBC Cordele 130 years ago, but to our Baptist forebearers, to the Reformers, to the early church, and to the vision Jesus and His apostles had and have for the church.

Will it be easy? Will it be comfortable? No, it will not. But Jesus never promised ease, did He?

But will it be worth it? Obedience to Christ is always worth it. Let us choose faithfulness. For our good, for our witness, to be a light in the darkness, and for God's glory.

## **Sermon 6**

### ***Ephesians 4:1-16***

#### **Introduction**

It is important to note before diving into the text the context in the epistle in which it is placed.

The gospel indicatives appear in the first 3 chapters. Paul then uses the final 3 chapters to give the gospel imperatives. In other words, he spent 3 chapters saying what Christ has done for us, and then spends the last 3 chapters telling us how we ought to respond to that gospel. If we had just the first 3 chapters, we would not know how to respond and live in light of the gospel. If we had just the last 3 chapters, we would not know from whence we derive motivation and power to pursue these commands.

It is after 3 chapters of gospel goodness that Paul begins chapter 4. It is interesting that after his beautiful telling of the gospel, the very first thing he talks about in regards to how to respond to the gospel has to do with the our approach to the church.

He begins chapter 4 with the word "therefore," which basically packs with it the meaning of, "based on everything I have said, this is what you should do with that information." He thus implores them to walk in a manner worthy of the calling of the gospel of Christ. And by "walk" Paul means in every area of one's life. Walk is the disposition and actions of a person day-to-day.

And so, what is the very first thing he talks about in regards to walking in a manner worthy of the Gospel? The Christian's relation to the church. Why? Because the natural outflow of actions by a heart gripped by gospel truth is lived out in the local church. A response to the gospel that does not find its expression in the local church is one that is disconnected from the model given in Scripture, as we have seen.

And if we are to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel, this means Paul envisions Christians living in a distinct way from the world. And it reminds us that church membership is only for Christians.

Paul envisions life change in every facet of our lives that is ethically different than the fallen world because what he said about the gospel in chapters 1-3 is true. Christ really has saved us so that we can pursue life the way God intended before the fall. And so, Paul envisions church membership as helping us walk in this manner worthy of the calling of the gospel.

It gives shape and direction to our lives, it reminds us of the glorious truths of the gospel, it holds the beauty of Jesus before our fickle and wandering eyes, and it joins us to other people who will call us on our wanderings to help guide us back to the narrow path – and that is the essence of the discipline we talked about last week. Church membership and discipline helps us from rejecting the gospel with our lives, it helps us to repent and pursue faithfulness because we all – each and every one of us – are susceptible to giving into sin and waywardness.

**I. A healthy church member zealously preserves unity.**

A. Paul does not call them to *create* unity but to *preserve* it.

- i. When God creates a people, when He forms the church, He does so on the basis of what Christ has done.
- ii. When God creates the church, unity is already inherently present.
- iii. The unity is in the Holy Spirit who both creates and sustains it. But that does not mean we are free from our role in *preserving* unity. Because, although unity is already present, it needs to be maintained.
- iv. Although the church does not have to generate unity, it nonetheless must work diligently to preserve it because many factors will come along that threaten to corrupt or destroy the Spirit-given oneness. And the same propensity to divide that we see in the world, exists in our hearts, but we must fight it with the gospel.

B. Verses 4-7.

- i. This is where we find unity.
- ii. Chapter 3 tells us that Jesus died for the creation of the unity. Jesus gifts unity to the church. Dwell on that for a moment. The Second Person of the Trinity entered flesh, was rejected, scorned, abandoned, nailed to a Roman cross, died naked and alone, had the wrath of God poured out on Him, so that He could offer Himself,

and the Spirit He and the Father sent, as the common denominators for a new people to rally around to reach the world and glorify God.

- iii. The perfect Son of God died to bring unity and create a people. Then He handed the church the gospel to steward, and the church thus rallies in one body, the one binding Spirit who points to the only hope for the world in the one Christ, and the singular gospel, baptizing people into the same faith, serving the one God who is over all and in all and through all.
- iv. When we see division perk up in our hearts or in others in the church, we go in the spirit of love and remind them of the uniting gospel. *That* is walking worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

C. How do we maintain unity?

- i. Verse 2 says we must embody at least these 4 characteristics: humility, gentleness, patience, and putting up with one another in love.
- ii. This again shows us that church membership is a biblical idea. How do you obey even verse 2 without covenanting with a local church?
- iii. Since clearly God's calling on the Christian is not a private relationship, but expressed in community, it is essential, fundamental, paramount, that members embody these four characteristics. Think of what kind of an environment where every member was committed to just what we see in verse 2 would look like. Would that not enhance life together?

**II. A healthy church member is zealous to do ministry.**

A. Verse 8-10.

- i. Christ has given the church apostles and prophets who laid the foundation and gave us the Word that we hold, and of which should inform our lives and churches.
- ii. He has given us missionaries, and he has given the church pastor/teachers: what we call pastor or elder.
- iii. What is their task? To teach and lead and equip the church for what? To do the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ.
- iv. Paul sees the church as Christians who have covenanted themselves to one another to come to the gatherings in order to be equipped to go and do the ministry in their day-to-day life.
- v. In other words, the role of the pastors is to lead and train the members in order that they may be equipped to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which they have been called" (Eph 4:1).
- vi. This is why we both emphasize the importance of coming to the gathering as life-priority *and* the fact that ministry does not primarily happen here at this building.
- vii. Think of the enormous impact this can have, of being equipped here to go spread throughout the community, doing the work of

ministry. Think of the impact you can have just by walking in the gospel in the position God has placed you in your work, recreation, and neighborhood.

- viii. Healthy church members come to the gatherings as often as possible, they make it a life priority for them and their family, they get fed from the Word of God, which shapes them and molds them, they fight for unity, and they go and leverage their lives for the glory of Christ.

### **III. A healthy church member zealously pursues maturity.**

#### **A. Verses 12-16.**

- i. Body and building metaphors to communicate unity and growth.
- ii. The goal of ministry and of membership is this: the building up of the body of Christ into maturity.
- iii. Paul's desire here is clearly that the Christians will reflect Christ's virtues and likeness in their own lives. The beauty of what Paul is painting here in saying that Christ gives grace, which includes gifts, and that we are members of one another like body parts and bricks in a building. Christ both grows us *and* gives us the ability to grow one another.
- iv. Paul also contrasts mature manhood with ceasing to be children who are tossed about by the waves, being hoodwinked by false teaching and licentious behavior that relaxes the gospel imperatives to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel.
- v. As we hold tight to the gospel, do the work of ministry, use our spiritual gifts, hold one another accountable, love one another in word and deed, we will mature one another and shed our childlike propensity toward false doctrine, divisiveness, and laxity.
- vi. Your goal as a church member should be to help your fellow member grow into maturity. That means, like a good parent, disciplining one another in love to help one another learn and kill sin. Our goal is Christ, to look like Him, and to embody His characteristics, to be holy as He is holy, and He gives us the resources to do it by both the indwelling Spirit and one another.

### **Conclusion**

Church membership means taking responsibility to oversight and care of one another till we all reach mature manhood. It means protecting one another from deceitful teachings, it means reining one another in when we see a brother or sister tossed about by the waves of false doctrine or unrepentant sin with the goal of restoration. It means coming to the gathering, getting equipped, using our gifts, and speaking the gospel to each other.

Church membership means pursuit of humility, gentleness, longsuffering, and bearing one another. It means being diligent, to make haste – to be zealous – to be eager – to spare no effort – to *preserve* the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It means holding

fast to the confession of faith, to contend for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.

It means seeing the blood of Jesus as the most powerful binding force in the universe and more powerful than whatever threatens to tear us apart. It means confessing one Lord, in one body, being joined together by one Spirit, having been baptized into the one faith, and being first and foremost concerned with the glory of the one God who is over all and through all and in all. It means committing, it means staying, it means selflessly serving, it means getting equipped in order to build up, grow up, working in harmony until we all attain the likeness of Christ.

## **Sermon 7**

### ***Matt 28:16-20***

#### **Introduction**

Baptism sits in this nebulous place between not being a first order issue on the level of the deity of Christ, or His substitutionary death, or His bodily resurrection, or the doctrine of the Trinity, while also not unimportant nor non-essential. Nor is it a mere symbol, as we typically think, but it is more than that. Baptism is both not necessary for salvation but also not given as an optional practice for the Christian in the New Testament as it carries heavy significance for New Testament people.

While we may regard baptism as minor or insignificant or maybe even relegate it to an individual matter – up to each person – the fact is that the early church would not have shared those sentiments. And clearly, not even our Baptist forbearers would have said that since they were willing to die for their beliefs on baptism. The fact of the matter is, to a New Testament person, a non-baptized Christian would be a contradiction in terms. They simply would not have a category for it, and neither should we.

So, as we continue our series through biblical church membership, it is important that we spend a couple weeks on what are called the “ordinances” of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. As Baptists, these are our 2 ordinances, and they are given the name “ordinance” because these are the two practices that Jesus commanded us to do, or were “ordained” by Him, and they go hand-in-hand.

Baptism, as we will see, is the initiatory rite into following Christ and the Lord’s Supper is the continuing rite of ongoing faithfulness.

#### **I. We baptize, and are baptized, to obey Christ.**

##### **A. Matthew 28:16-20.**

- i. Jesus has resurrected bodily, He has appeared to His disciples and hundreds of others, and before He ascends to the right hand of the Father, He commissions His disciples.
- ii. Jesus declares that He has all authority that there is to possibly possess, therefore, He can issue commands.

- iii. He then commands the disciples (and us) to go and to make disciples, doing what? Baptizing them *into* the name of the Triune God – into the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and also to teach them everything Jesus has commanded.
- iv. Discipleship, then, is inextricably tied with (1) baptism into the name of the Trinity and (2) teaching obedience to what Jesus has said. Nothing Jesus said is off the table nor do we have the power to say what is and isn't valid in Jesus' teaching. All of Jesus' teaching from incarnation to ascension are for us to teach one another, and for how long? Until the end of the age with the promise that Jesus is with us while we do it.
- v. *Baptism is commanded by Christ*. To be a disciple means that you are coming under the authority of King Jesus, which means He *can* command you, and you agree to pursue His commands. This does not mean your obedience will be perfect, but it does mean there will be a striving toward faithfulness for all of your days.
- vi. It is the first step of obedience in the new believer's walk with Christ.
- vii. Baptism is a public oath of allegiance to God's King, God's Messiah, God's anointed One – the King of ages who has been handed authority over every square inch of every galaxy in all the cosmos.

B. Who is baptism for?

- i. Recipients of baptism are disciples who are capable of hearing the word of Christ, understanding it, and responding obediently to it. The one and only pattern indicated in the New Testament is the baptism of people who heard the gospel, repented of their sins, and believed in Jesus Christ.

**II. Baptism is done to show our identity with Jesus.**

A. Romans 6:3-4.

- i. Those who identify with Jesus are baptized into His death and into His resurrection.
- ii. Although baptism does not save, it symbolizes – or pictures – our identification with Jesus' own death and resurrection.
- iii. This language of being baptized *into* Jesus is a pledge of fidelity.
- iv. Paul says that baptism signals an end to our former way of life, it tells Satan, the world, the principalities, and the powers that you no longer identify with the kingdom of darkness.
- v. It proclaims new allegiances.
- vi. It says that what was buried was your old self – your old way of life – your old allegiances – you are no longer on Satan's payroll, walking in darkness and disobedience.
- vii. When baptized you are telling the church that they can count on overseeing their walk.

B. Romans 6:1-7.

- i. Baptism pictures that we identify with Jesus in His substitutionary death on our behalf, that we will walk in a new way in light of His death and empowering Spirit, *and* that we will be resurrected in the same way that He was at the end of the age.
- ii. Not only does it picture present hope and life-change, it signals future hope that one day our mortal bodies will be glorified and raised bodily, in the same way that Jesus' was.
- iii. This also helps us to answer questions about mode of baptism. What mode of baptism should we practice?
- iv. Immersion.
  - 1. For one, this is the way Jesus was baptized. We are told in the gospels that Jesus literally went under and came up from the water.
  - 2. Second, the baptisms we see in the New Testament appear to all be by immersion.
  - 3. Third, baptism by immersion is the only mode that pictures the burial and resurrection that we see in places like this present text.

C. 1 Peter 3:18-22.

- i. Peter contrasts our baptism in the water with Noah's ark. Noah and his family were saved *through* the water from the wrath that God was pouring out on the wicked world.
- ii. It was an escape from divine judgment, and so Peter is saying that our baptism pictures the same kind of thing: our deliverance, or escape, from divine judgment because God's judgment was poured out on Christ – He went through the waters of judgment so that we could arrive safely in the end. We deserved the judgment, but because of Christ and His work, we escape it.
- iii. Our baptism, says Peter, is an appeal to God *for* the new covenant blessing of a good conscience *on the basis* of Jesus' resurrection, which is what verse 21 says.
- iv. Peter is not saying that we are saved by baptism itself – he is saying that baptism is a symbolic appeal to God on the basis of Jesus' resurrection. You are not trusting in the baptism itself to save you, you are trusting in God's mercy through Jesus' resurrecting power to save you.
- v. Like Romans 6, baptism here pictures the washing away of our sin and guilt – the cleansing power of Jesus' blood to wash away all of our sins (and even sin's grip on us), which is why Peter says that the waters do not remove dirt, but the water *does* symbolize an internal washing that has already taken place.
- vi. Baptism does not itself make us clean, but it *does* vividly picture the cleansing that Christ's salvation provides us.

**III. Baptism is done to show our identification with God's people.**

A. Acts 2:38-41.

- i. After Peter’s sermon, the people ask what they must do to be saved (Acts 2:37). Peter tells them to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38) and this *added to the church’s number* (Acts 2:41).
- ii. Note that, again, the initial step into obedience to Christ is to repent and believe in the gospel and then to be baptized.
- iii. So, once again, we have a picture of people who can repent and believe being the ones who are baptized *and* that they were baptized both into Christ and into the church because they were “added” to the 120. In other words, they were added to the church and the church had a record of who was in it.
- iv. Their baptism, you understand, did not baptize them into individualism and a self-driven Christianity – it baptized them into Christ *and* into His people.
- v. These are inseparable and are why, ordinarily, (1) baptism should be required for church membership and (2) why when someone is baptized, they ought to thus become a member of the baptizing church.

B. Other texts.

- i. Think back to our text last week in Ephesians 4.
  - 1. Paul links common baptism to church membership. He says that your brothers and sisters in the church were all baptized with the same baptism – you all took the oath of allegiance by being buried and raised through the water, which symbolized your common faith, Lord, Spirit, and Father.
- ii. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 Paul said, “Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit, we were all baptized *into one body* – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”
  - 1. Paul explicitly says that when we were baptized, we were baptized into the church.
  - 2. When we were baptized, we were baptized *into one another*.
  - 3. Baptism simultaneously pictures our identification with Christ *and His people*.
- iii. The task before the church is to take baptism seriously and to understand that those being baptized are to be people who can make a credible profession and after their baptism, they join together with the body and submit to its oversight and care.
- iv. Putting together everything we’ve said so far, we can say that baptism is an oath taken in obedience to Christ that pictures our public identification with Jesus and His church.

**IV. An exhortation to you and us: remember your baptism.**

- A. 1 Corinthians 10:1-14.

- i. When was the last time you thought about your baptism? Do you think about it every day? Every week? Every month? Do you think about it every time we take the Lord's Supper? When you are tempted, do you draw off of it?
- ii. Paul is drawing off Israel's wilderness experience which we also have been exploring in our study of Exodus for the better part of two years. And what Paul does is he (1) calls them our fathers, (2) he reminds us that the pre-incarnate Christ was present in the wilderness, and (3) he draws a line of similarity between Israel's going through the Red Sea and their eating manna in the wilderness with our baptism and the Lord's Supper.
- iii. And he reminds them that even though the Israelites had been rescued in this glorious way by the hand of God through the plagues, through the parting of the Red Sea, and the eating of the miraculous bread in the wilderness, that those things in themselves did not save them.
- iv. Paul says that they were *all* baptized into Moses, yet their baptism in the sea was no guarantee that they would reach their final destination. As we have said, although they were taken out of Egypt, it seemed some of them never got the Egypt out of them.
- v. They forgot their "baptism," which affected the way they lived.
- vi. Remember your baptism, remember the oath that you took when you were plunged under the water, how that symbolized the death of your old way of life, and how you were pulled back up from the water, how that symbolized your new life in Christ who is the resurrection and the life, *and* how He enables you to kill sin, flee idolatry, kill grumbling in your heart, so that you will withstand temptation and stand before the Lord at the end of the age and be told, "Well done, my good and faithful servant" (Matt 25:23).

## Conclusion

Paul is saying that those who have baptism but don't have faith in what they were baptized into will not withstand the Day of the Lord. We need to remember our baptism and draw off of the pledge that we made when we undertook that act.

So, when temptation sparkles before your eyes, when the thrill of sin gets your heart pumping, when grumbling percolates in your heart and on your tongue, remember your baptism. At all times, remember your baptism. Remember what it represented, remember what you were telling Christ and the world and the church, remember your vows, remember that you proclaimed the end of your old life – and with it the sins that once held you captive, remember that Christ is yours and you are Christ's, remember that nothing in this world can satisfy you the way Christ can, and remember what awaits you in the future: a resurrection like His resurrection.

Remember your baptism, friends, and rest, not in your oath or your ability to keep it, but in the One whom you made the oath in and through, for He His faithful, and He will carry you safely to the shores of redemption. Even so, He empowers you to live in light of it, as you walk in newness of life for the glory of our Triune God.

## Sermon 8

### *1 Corinthians 11:17-34*

#### Introduction

By whatever name you want to call it, the continuing rite of the church, the second of two ordinances handed down by the King of the universe, is a serious matter. But like baptism that we talked about last week, I wonder if we realize the gravity of the ordinance.

Do we see it as a special time to commune with the Lord and other believers? Do we expect the Lord to show up when we partake? Or do we see it, like baptism, as a mere symbol of which it matters little how we approach, how we practice it, and if we miss it?

Consider what Paul says at the end of this passage. He says that some in Corinth have failed to discern the body, failed to examine themselves properly, failed to treat the church with the respect and selflessness that Christ called them to, and *that* is why some, verse 30, are weak and ill, and some have died. But, says Paul, if you *had* approached the Lord's Supper properly, you would not have been disciplined in this way. If only they had treated the Lord's Supper with the respect that it deserves. If only they had seen that the way they treat the church leading up to taking the Lord's Supper matters greatly.

We are being shown here that we must treat the Lord's Supper with great care, and this is inextricably tied to how we treat the church.

Remember: Baptism is the initiatory rite into following Christ and the Lord's Supper is the continuing rite of ongoing faithfulness. In other words, Baptism is a group-creating ritual, while the Lord's Supper is a group-sustaining or renewing ceremony.

#### I. The Lord's Supper is a church act.

##### A. 1 Corinthians 11:17-20.

- i. Paul says 3 times in 3 verses, "when you come together."
  1. Verse 17, "because *when you come together* it is not for the better but for the worse." Verse 18, "*When you come together as a church.*" Verse 20, "*When you come together*, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat." He also mentions coming together in verse 34, as well.
- ii. We have, yet again, a sighting in the New Testament of the concept of biblical church membership. Paul expects them to do what? Gather – to come together – what? *As a church.*
- iii. Gathering is a necessary part of what it means to be a church and to be a church member. If we do not gather, we are not a church. If

we say we are a church member, but we never come to the gathering, we have an unbiblical (at best) and incoherent view of what it means to be a member.

- iv. Paul expects the Corinthians to come together literally and physically *as a church*.

B. Lord's Supper was given to the church to, in part, exercise the keys to the kingdom.

- i. By accepting members into the church, the keys are exercised because the church is saying about that person that, "as far as we can tell, this person is a Christian."
- ii. When the church baptizes, they are using the keys and binding and loosing and saying, "This person has given their allegiance to Christ, and we take responsibility for oversight of their continued faithfulness."
- iii. When the church partakes in the Lord's Supper, they are saying that those who partake are faithfully striving to follow Christ, that they ongoingly repent of their sins, and covenant with the church.
- iv. The Lord's Supper, then, is, in part, an act of discipline for the church. Because you'll remember when we looked at 1 Corinthians 5 that Paul is barring the unrepentant man from the Lord's Table. He told the Corinthians that the man in ongoing and unrepentant sin is not welcome at the Lord's Table. Why is barred?
  - 1. Because, through his actions, through his rejection of Christ's commands, the church cannot affirm his salvation.
  - 2. So, those who are under discipline, those who are in unrepentant sin, those who have something against their brother or sister, those holding grudges, those treating the church improperly, should not partake in the Lord's Supper until they repent and are restored.
  - 3. The church has a responsibility to what's called "fence the Table." They must protect the integrity of the Lord's Supper as well as protect those who should not partake from discipline from the Lord with the hopes that they will repent and be restored.

## II. The Lord's Supper is an act of the church's unity.

A. Context.

- i. The wealthy members would get to the gathering early while the poor members were still at work. And they would eat up all the food, they would drink all the wine, and by the time the poor members showed up, the food was gone, and the wealthy people were drunk.
- ii. The wealthy members treated the gathering the way they would treat a Roman banquet where the wealthy people got the good stuff, and the poor and slaves were relegated to another room with the leftovers.

- iii. Paul is rebuking the Corinthians – literally shaming them – because they mistreat their brothers and sisters through their actions. They are still operating by the worldly standards instead of how Jesus calls them to behave.
    - iv. Verse 18: It is almost unbelievable that someone could bear the name of Christ and treat their fellow members this way.
- B. Paul says that there are divisions among them, and this shows that they do not take the Lord’s Supper when they come together, even if they think they are.
  - i. The Lord’s Supper is a uniting action, it speaks to the church’s unity in Christ, it vividly (like baptism) pictures the gospel and Jesus’ sacrificial death.
  - ii. Since Christ’s death creates a people and tears down walls of division, to be divided as a church *while taking the Lord’s Supper* means, at best, you are not taking the Lord’s Supper, and at worst, means you are attempting to re-crucify Christ. Why do I say that?
    - 1. Notice that Paul injects in the middle of this discussion a recalling of the institution of the Lord’s Supper at the Last Supper. Notice how Paul mentions that it was on *the night when Christ was betrayed* that He instituted this ordinance. Now, why would he mention that?
    - 2. Why of all things that happened on that day and weekend does Paul mention that Jesus was betrayed?
    - 3. Why does Paul say that those who partake in an unworthy manner are guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord? Why does he say they drink judgment on themselves?
    - 4. Because those who divide the church, those who bring their divisions to the Lord’s Table, those who believe their status in the world or wealth should give them first place in the church, stand with the betrayer Judas with their actions.
    - 5. Those who divide the church, those who abuse the body, are partaking in an unworthy manner, and thus, are guilty concerning the body and blood of Christ. They are joining Judas in betraying the Lord of glory for a bag of silver – they are standing with the Roman crucifiers mocking Christ at the cross.
- C. Notice how Paul twice says that Jesus said “Do this in remembrance of Me.” Verse 24, “this is my body, which if for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” Verse 25, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”
  - i. Paul emphasizes twice that to partake in the Lord’s Supper means to reenact Christ’s sacrificial death and remembering entails corresponding actions.
  - ii. Paul twice mentions remembering Jesus’ sacrificial death because doing so was supposed to lead to self-sacrificial actions.

Remembering that Jesus voluntarily died for the sake of others should lead to Christians voluntarily getting over themselves and sacrificially serving and thinking of others before themselves, which is a uniting act.

### III. **The Lord's Supper is an act of discerning.**

- A. Paul emphasizes the manner in which one takes the Supper in 11:27.
- i. Verse 28, Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks what? *Without discerning the body.*
  - ii. Paul does not mean that those who are themselves unworthy cannot partake of the Lord's Supper because no one is worthy, in themselves, of taking the Lord's Supper.
  - iii. Paul says that it is the *manner in which you take* the Lord's Supper that is the issue. It is not the worthiness of the person but the manner in which they take it.
  - iv. What is taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner? At minimum it is to take it will you have something against a brother or sister, it is to take it while you are divided, it is to take it while you are fighting amongst yourselves, it is to take it while you have a death grip on your grudges and unforgiveness, it is to take it while you are trying to have primary place in the body, it is to take it while you are self-aggrandizing, it is to take it while not considering others more important than yourself.
  - v. Thus, to examine yourself when you take the Lord's Supper, not fundamentally about examining whether or not you have sin. That is something you should do on an ongoing basis so you can repent of it and kill it every day.
  - vi. Rather, you are to examine yourself, verse 29, while you discern the body. In other words, when you partake, and while leading up to partaking, you are to examine yourself *in relation to the church.*
- B. Before we move to our last point, we need to note one more thing.
- i. Does not the fact that you must "discern the body" also point to biblical church membership and to the fact that only Christians should be participating in the Lord's Supper?
  - ii. How do you discern the body if you are not a member of a local church and how do you discern the body of a church you never attend? How can you discern your treatment of the church when you aren't actual *with the church?*
  - iii. To obey this passage rightly, to take the Lord's Supper correctly, I must be present, active, and committed.

### IV. **The Lord's Supper is a serious act.**

- A. When we partake, we are communing both with Christ and with one another.
- i. And while we do not believe that Jesus literally inhabits the bread and drink, He is present with us when we partake and so is the

Holy Spirit – not only indwelling each believer, but amongst us binding us together.

- ii. The elements do not change before or during the Lord's Supper, but something special *is* happening.
- iii. If it were not special, if it were not important, why would Paul even bother writing what he does here and why would he say it the way that he does?
- iv. Why would he say, verse 31, that we must judge ourselves truly, so that we will not be judged? Why would he make it clear that this time is not a time of posturing or self-deception, but that it is a time of honest introspection to examine how we relate to the body of Christ: the church? Why would he say that if we do not, that we may, verse 29, be drinking and eating judgment on yourself? And why would God literally make people ill, or even take them out in divine discipline, if it did not matter how we approached and took the Lord's Supper?
- v. This is a serious matter, and it is a matter of obedience for us as individuals and as a church.
- vi. It is a means by which we act like a church because we are saying to everyone who partakes that we believe they are kingdom people striving toward unity and faithfulness in Christ.
- vii. Taking the Lord's Supper helps remind us that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, it is a covenant renewal of sorts telling our fellow members that we remember what we have covenanted to be and do with them, and that we will continue to strive for their good and God's glory as we consider them more important than ourselves.

## Conclusion

Let me ask you this: when we partake in a few minutes, how will you be partaking? Will you be partaking in a worthy or unworthy manner?

Consider what we are doing. The text says we must, at minimum, do the following 4 things: We must, (1), look back at the life, substitutionary death, bodily resurrection, and ascension of Christ. We must, (2), look ahead, verse 26, to the future when Christ returns and brings the kingdom in fullness, when He will judge the living and the dead, when He will make all things new, when He will make every sad thing come untrue. We must (3) look within and examine ourselves and our identity in Christ. And (4) we must look around at our brothers and sisters in the church and examine how we relate to them and treat them. Then we can partake.

And we allow all of this to spur us on to action in light of it in our day-to-day lives. In other words, like we remember our baptism, we remember what we did in the Lord's Supper and let it inform us.

And when we partake in the Lord's Supper, we are proclaiming Christ to one another and to the world. As baptism proclaims one's initial allegiance to Christ, the Lord's Supper proclaims one's ongoing allegiance to Christ.

## **Sermon 9**

### ***Various Texts beginning with Matthew 18:15-20***

#### **Introduction**

If you have been listening to the sermons in this biblical church membership series, you cannot help but have seen that much of it has to do with authority. The authority of Christ, the authority of the Bible, the authority of the church gathered (and our need to submit to all three) – these have been recurring themes throughout. Without authority, church membership is utterly incoherent.

Which brings us to the question of today: what should be the polity of the church? Polity is a word that basically means the form of government that an organization has. So, in other words, how ought the church be structured and governed?

To be sure, the topic of polity matters greatly. You cannot escape the question of polity. Polity is like theology in that everyone has a theology – everyone has a set of beliefs about God and man and the world – even atheists. The question is whether your theology is right or wrong. Similarly, every church has a polity. The only question is whether one's polity is coherent, orderly, and most importantly, biblical.

Surely if it is true that Christ is the head of the church, died for the church, rules over the church, and cares how she is treated, then He must have a design for how she is ordered and governed, right?

If Christ is the founder and head of the church, surely, He has a structure given to us in Scripture that we ought to follow and thus, whether we do or not is a matter of obedience. Because you can hear about this topic and think it does not have much to do with you, but it does because members have a responsibility to pursue and safeguard biblical polity and obey Christ.

But polity is one of those things in the Bible where you cannot just turn to a single chapter that has the nifty heading of “on church government.” Nor can you turn to the “book of church polity.”

Polity is, in fact, in the New Testament – it is there, but you have to be paying attention – which is why we will be exploring several passages and not just one single passage.

So, what is the structure or polity that the bible gives us? This is what we will see: the biblical polity, or form of governance under the headship of Christ is: plural-elder-led, deacon-served, congregationally-ruled.

## I. Congregationalism.

### A. Matthew 18:15-20.

- i. Jesus has given the keys of the kingdom to the local church gathered to bind and loose.
- ii. The congregation clearly has authority over the members of the church – so you do not join a church, you submit to it – and the church thus has a responsibility to testify to members’ ongoing faithfulness, to rebuke them in love if they are in ongoing and unrepentant sin, and to watch over their discipleship.
- iii. Verse 17. If the process of discipline fails twice, it is to be brought before the church. It is the church who has the authority to remove someone should they no longer be able to testify to their striving to follow Christ.
- iv. The church has the authority to add and remove members – this is their first and greatest authority.
- v. Now think about this: the fact that the church has the authority to vote on spiritual matters like adding and removing members and electing deacons and elders and even voting on budgets and property matters – does this not point to the importance of having high expectations for what it means to be a member?
- vi. The acts of the church are inherently spiritual in nature, because they have to do with exercising the keys to the kingdom. But if you do not believe it is even necessary for members to attend the gathering on a regular basis, you are saying that it is okay for people you cannot testify to the salvation of to come and vote on kingdom matters.
- vii. Congregationalism diminishes when we do not have membership standards. Because not only will you likely have unbelievers making spiritual decisions, but you will also have people who are not committed, who are not involved in the life of the church, coming to make decisions for the future of a church that they are not actually engaged in.
- viii. We see here in Matthew 18 it is the church who has the responsibility to take care of who is and is not to be part of the church – to have a clear line between the church and the world. We saw the same thing in 1 Corinthians 5. There Paul told the church to act in removing the man– he did not tell the leaders – he told the church. It was the church’s responsibility to guard membership and one another’s walk – they thus had the authority to remove the man and they had the authority to restore him, should he repent.

### B. Acts 6:1-7.

- i. Context.
  1. Some in the church were being neglected in the daily distribution. The apostles said that the task was too big for them, and to do it themselves would mean to neglect the word and prayer.

- ii. So, they move to create this new office in the church, and they lead the church to elect 7 men who are of good repute, full of the Spirit and wisdom. The church elects the men listed, and the men get to the work of service, and the apostles can give their whole selves to the word and prayer, and what happens in verse 7? Because of this, not only did the church maintain unity, the church actually multiplied.
- iii. So, in our discussion of the authority of the church and of congregationalism, we see another way that this is exercised: in the election of offices, of which there are, like the ordinances, 2: deacons and elders though only deacons are mentioned here.
- iv. So, putting congregational authority together so far, we can say this: the local church has authority from Christ to exercise the keys to the kingdom. The authority, you will note, is given to the church gathered, not individual members nor groups within the church – it is the church gathered that has the authority here. The authority they are given is to add members, remove unrepentant members, practice discipline, elect candidates for church offices, and even evaluate and confirm things like statements of faith, bylaws, constitution, budgets, buying and selling property and things like this. In other words, the church has the authority in major church decisions.

## **II. Deacon-served.**

- A. In Acts 6 we also see the precedent set for what deacons do.
  - i. The office of deacon is an essential one in the life of the church, but it is one that ought to be pursued according to Scripture not the pragmatic extra-biblical way that it has in many churches.
  - ii. In this text we see solid men, full of the Spirit, and what do you they do first and foremost? They unite, they keep the peace, they do not inject division, they serve diligently to keep the church together. And they served in such a way that freed the apostles to focus on preaching and prayer and were thus instrumental in what happened in verse 7 – the church grew and multiplied and stayed together and were a multiethnic witness to the watching world.
  - iii. When deacons are doing their biblical work, they are a blessing to the church. And here in Acts 6 we observe their main responsibilities which we can summarize as: (1) spotting and meeting physical needs, (2) protecting and stimulating unity in the church, and (3) serving and supporting the work of the elders.
  - iv. While elders are not in this passage (nor are they synonymous with apostle), the task of preaching and prayer are later given to the office of elder in the New Testament. So, we can say that deacons act as shock absorbers for the elders, and they assist in executing the vision of the elders.

- B. 1 Timothy 3:1-13.

- i. Deacons and elders are not the same – they hold different offices – but they complement one another. They are not separate competing power blocks.
- ii. This is why in Philippians 1:1 Paul says in his greeting: “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.” And it is why Paul gives two separate lists of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3.
- iii. Notice Paul calls the elders “overseers.” In the New Testament the titles bishop, presbyter, overseer, pastor, and elder are all interchangeably used for the same office. The word “elder,” however, is the most common, used some 17 times in the New Testament.
- iv. Paul is focusing on the character of elders and deacons. You’ll notice what is missing from the list of qualifications. Paul is not at all concerned with whether or not the deacons are good at business, financially astute, good at investments, in the church a long time, or any such thing. Rather, he focuses on what type of person they are. Is he flexible? Is he humble? Is he a uniter? Is he teachable? Does he yearn to serve?
- v. Notice the differences and similarities in these qualifications. Both elders and deacons are to be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to wine, and not greedy.
  - 1. But there are differences. Elders must be able to teach, whereas deacons are not required to be able to teach. Elders teach and preach, they ministry the word, they feed the flock, and they are also responsible for the direction of the church’s education.
  - 2. This doesn’t mean non-elders cannot teach, but it does mean that those who do, do so under the elders’ oversight because the elders are to protect the flock from false teaching and from those who would harm the flock through destructive doctrine.

### **III. Elder-led.**

#### **A. Differences between elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3.**

- i. You will also notice, we are told that elders must manage their households well, like deacons. But with elders Paul adds, “for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of God’s church?” Deacons are not called to manage the church, but elders are.
  - 1. In 1 Timothy 5:17 you will see the same word “rule” is used there in connection to elder and is the same word that was translated “manage” in chapter 3. This managing is connected to the preaching and teaching of the Word. Then you have another set of qualification similar to this one in Titus, and in 1 Peter 5.

- ii. Elders must shepherd the flock and exercise oversight. Elders are responsible to teach, lead, pray, shepherd (which includes teaching and oversight), feed, rebuke, warn, steering the correct direction, train in righteousness, and as we saw in Ephesians 4 a few weeks ago, they are to equip the church members to do the ministry.

B. Acts 20:17-31.

- i. Note that the word “elder” is in the plural in those verses.
- ii. Paul called for the elders (plural) of the church (singular) to come to him. And what is their charge? They are to watch over the flock that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers, to care for the church – this language rules out authoritarianism, but also gives them authority, which we will see in Hebrews and also saw in 1 Timothy – they are to watch out for wolves and be alert for those who would prey on the church.
- iii. What does it mean to have a plurality of elders, practically speaking? It means you have multiple men who hold the same office with the same qualifications. It means you have elders who are on staff, like the lead or senior pastor and associate pastors, but also men who qualify who are not on staff but have vocations outside of the church. But it means they are all equal according to office and they share the weight together.
- iv. A plurality of elders is a desire to, not only follow the clear biblical model, but to share the responsibilities with other qualified men both on and off staff.
- v. The benefits are numerous. To name a few, it helps with accountability, balancing gifts, burden sharing, it is also a better picture of the church, because it shows that ministry is not just for a select few, paid “professionals.”
- vi. Also, think of how they will make up for one another’s deficiencies. No pastor is the complete package – every pastor has things they are gifted and good at, and other things they are not so good at, and need to work on. When you have a plurality of elders, they make up for one another’s deficiencies and complement one another to better serve and lead the church.
- vii. Congregationalism: It is the church gathered who affirm these men and elect them and follow them as they lead. But if they cease leading the church in a biblical direction, if they consistently fail to meet their qualifications, if they cease to teach and preach the Word of God, if they teach heresy, the members have an obligation to confront and, if necessary, remove.

C. Hebrews 13:17.

- i. Here is a word we do not like: obey. But this word “obey” means something like “give deference to.” It means that if you disagree with an elder (or elders) you, of course, can (and should) go to them in private and express your reasons, hopefully from Scripture.

- ii. If what the elders are doing is in keeping with the Word or is something the Word is silent about, you give deference and support them knowing that they are keeping watch over your soul, as ones who must give an account.
- iii. “Watching over” assumes the elders are doing so according to the preached word, and so the members give them deference so that they do not lead with groaning, but lead with joy, because if they are leading with groaning, they are of no advantage to you. They cannot lead in a way that benefits the members if they are not doing so with joy.
- iv. Here is my question to you on Hebrews 13:17: it says to submit and obey *your* leaders, right? *Your* leaders. Which leaders?
- v. And here is the question to leaders and them giving an account for how they led: which people are they supposed to oversee? Who are they giving an account for?
- vi. Are Christians supposed to submit and obey all pastors? Must you submit to all leaders in the city? In the state? In the world? Am I as a pastor going to be held accountable for every church in town?
- vii. Christians are to submit to *their own leaders*, which implies a formal recognition of their participation in a church with particular recognized leaders. Church membership helps Christians formally recognize to whom they are to follow and church membership helps an elder know which specific sheep are the ones under his oversight.
- viii. The commands of 13:17 are nonsense and unbeyable without formal church membership. Formal membership is the only biblical way for a people to know which leaders to submit to and the leaders to know for whom they are responsible.

## Conclusion

Does church polity matter? It matters greatly. Jesus Christ, the eternally existing Creator-God entered flesh, lived a perfect life, died a substitutionary death on behalf of guilty rebels, and rose three days later from the grave, then ascended to the right hand of Father to take His rightful place on the throne of the universe. He is thus the head of the church, the same church He died for and established, the same church He calls His beloved bride, the same church He said would prevail against hell itself, the same church He said He would build.

And in His infinite grace He has handed over to the church responsibility under His headship to steward rightly. And He has specific ideas, handed to us by the apostles and inspired by the Holy Spirit on how the church should be ordered and how it should operate.

So, on the most basic level, this matters because it is a matter of obedience. But it also matters because we each need regular reminders of what our roles are and how they complement one another so we can pursue the mission faithfully.

We must be reminded how we as a gathered church have authority from heaven to bind and loose. How we have authority to exercise the keys to the kingdom in the way we accept and remove members, elect deacons, elect elders, and how we expect them to meet qualification to watch over us as they serve and lead.

Jesus expects elders to lead the ministry, deacons to facilitate the ministry, and the congregation to do the ministry. And friends, if we pursue biblical membership and polity, we will be a united people who pursue the mission of Christ in the way of Christ, for the glory of Christ, until the day of Christ.

## **Sermon 10**

### ***1 Corinthians 3:10-17***

#### **Introduction**

As we reach the end of our biblical church membership series, we look back on some challenging and revealing texts.

Looking back on the history of FBCC, one cannot escape the fact that this church has gone through an inordinate amount of trauma over the last several decades. And one of the culprits is inescapably the lack of biblical church membership. The trauma has been the check engine light from the Lord telling us that something was amiss in the engine – in the very lifeblood of the church towards the right destination – but I wonder if we have not ignored the light and kept driving, assuring ourselves that at some point we would stop for an inspection. Or maybe, we avoided the inspection because we were afraid of what it would reveal.

And such things are hard to hear, there is no doubt about that, but we cannot escape the fact that this series and these texts of Scripture have shown us quite a bit. These words from God on what it means to be a member of Christ's bride have been the mechanic's instructions on what needs to happen to fix some of the problems in the engine, and we thus have a choice to make.

Perhaps before these past 9 weeks you may never have been taught about biblical church membership and polity, and maybe never even really thought about it. So, your not pursuing it was likely from simple lack of being genuinely aware.

But now you know, and you must do something with it. And that is our question today: what will you do?

In our present text what we will see before us is 3 choices on what kind of builders we can choose to be. But before we get into that, we need to be reminded of what it is we are building, and we need to make sure we never forget.

## I. Overview.

### A. The foundation and owner.

- i. Paul, you will notice in verse 10, calls himself a wise master builder which is like saying he is a skilled architect and engineer all rolled into one. And he came to Corinth, he brought the gospel, he planted the church, and he laid a foundation, and that foundation is Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor 2:2), which is another way of saying that Jesus Himself, and all of who He is and what He has done, are the foundation for the church.
- ii. Because you look at verse 9 and you see that Paul calls the church both God's field and God's building. Verses 10-17 zoom in on the building metaphor. Then you jump down to verses 16-17 and what does Paul say?
  1. See, in English we see the word "you" and there is no difference in the English spelling of "you" singular and "you" plural. Whether or not "you" in 16-17 are plural or singular changes the meaning.
  2. Every time you see "you" in 16-17, it is in the plural.
  3. Paul says, in essence, "Do you not know that you (plural) are a temple (singular) of God and the Spirit of God is among you when you gather?"
- iii. Think of the Old Testament tabernacle and temple and the holy of holies. That's where the presence of God was, it was not in the surrounding complex per se, but in the holy of holies. So, what is Paul saying? He is saying, and you need to get this – you need to let this settle into your very bones – that the gathered church is now tantamount to the holy of holies.
- iv. Paul says that the church is the temple of God, why? Because the Holy Spirit dwells in and amongst the church when it gathers. The very presence of God is present when the church gathers.
- v. And the temple is whose temple? It is God's temple – the church is owned by God, not by man. The church is God owned, Spirit-indwelt, under Christ's headship. So, when we talk about and approach the church, we need to remember what we are talking about here.
- vi. If Jesus Christ – Lord of all things – who literally died to purchase the church – handed to us the faith through the inspired, infallible, inerrant writings of His apostles, specific instructions on how to treat, view, and order the church – ought we not pursue those instructions?

B. So now you have choices before you. Now that you have seen what God has revealed to us the last 9 weeks, now that you are reminded who owns

the church and how He expects it to be built, you are being charged with building up the church, but not according to your way, power, or authority, but by His.

- i. And make no mistake, you are one of the builders that are present in this text of which there are 3. The only question is, which will you be?
- ii. Do you see the emphasis at the end of verse 10? “Let each one take care *how they build.*”
- iii. Because, verse 13, *each one’s work will become evident*, for the Day will disclose it. The quality of each one’s work will be revealed by fire. In other words, every single person will have to answer on inspection day for how they built, approached, and treated Christ’s church.
- iv. On the “Day,” which is judgment day, Christ will see with the fire if you built in accordance with the foundation of Christ or not.
- v. And remember, the foundation is crucially important, and Paul is calling on us who have the foundation to not just build upon the foundation, he is telling us we must build *in accordance* with the foundation. That means we allow the foundation of Christ and Him crucified to inform how we build. Our foundation of Jesus must be the most important thing about us as individuals, and as a church, and we must draw from Him as He carries the weight while we build and live.
- vi. And though the crux of this passage is paying attention to *how* we build, building well does us no good if we have a weak or non-existent foundation. And the only foundation that will do for a life well lived, and for a life of solid building, is Christ. If we do not have Jesus as our foundation as a church, or as individuals, then our building will collapse even before the building inspector can scrutinize it.
- vii. If we truly have the gospel foundation, if we truly understand what Christ has done, if we truly understand who Christ is, then we ought to allow that gospel to inform how we approach the church. The gospel is inherently selfless, other-directed, and self-sacrificial, is it not? Have we not seen in every single text in this series that to approach the church rightly is to do so with an utterly other-focused, Christ-exalting disposition?
- viii. If we say we have the foundation of Jesus Christ and Him crucified, should that not inform our whole lives, especially our treatment of the church? A refusal to consider others and the mission of Christ as more important than ourselves, or a selfish, self-aggrandizing, self-promoting, self-preferential posture is to build in such a way that forgets the foundation and it is disastrous.
- ix. So, you *will* build, each person *will* build. And what are we building? The temple of God – not a building made of brick and mortar – but the building that is the church made up of the

redeemed of God. This means it matters eternally how you approach and treat and build the church.

## II. **The Wise Builder (1 Cor 3:14).**

A. This, of course, is the builder we all should strive to be. This is the builder that builds in accordance with the foundation of Jesus.

- i. Paul says that if the work of this builder remains, he or she will receive a reward.
- ii. If you have the foundation of Christ crucified, you must build in accordance with that foundation and according to the blueprints that you have been provided, and those blueprints are God's holy, inspired, inerrant, and sufficient Word. Everything you need to know about building the church up is right there – no additive needed – the Word is enough.
- iii. The blueprints tell us how to build in accordance with the foundation, which, among other things, means exercising the keys to the kingdom with meaningful, guarded membership; it means that we are each given a gift to use as part of a functioning body and for the good of others; it means drawing near to one another and stimulating one another to love and good deeds, not staying away from the gathering as is the habit of some; it means conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel, standing firm and striving together with one mind; it means not doing anything from selfish ambition and vain glory, but considering others more important than ourselves; it means having the mind of the selfless Christ; it means watching over one another's walk with Christ; it means earnestly maintaining unity and bearing one another's burdens; it means being one united body, with one Lord, one hope, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father over all; it means baptizing and discipling; it means renewing our vows at the Lord's Table; it means pursuing a biblical polity and guarding the gospel entrusted to us.

B. But not only do we build according to the blueprints, but we build *together*.

- i. Remember all the plurals in verse 16? We are the temple of God insofar as we are together and united as one. If we are going to build the temple of God, we need to be on the same page and unite together in purpose and mission. We cannot build a sound structure alone, nor can we do it when we segment ourselves into little subgroups, nor can we build a sound structure if we are divided.
- ii. What will you have if you have some building according to the foundation, and according to the blueprints, and others doing their own thing, building their own way, according to their own whims?
- iii. Some build according to the Word, others build according to their preferences, others still build by themselves with no thought of the rest of the workers, others fight and bicker about what to build and

how, and then what you have is either half a building, or a standstill and no work gets done.

- iv. So, while each person must take care *how* they build, they must not build in isolation – they must strive to build in concert with their fellow members and according to the blueprints given by the Lord. They must agree with one another that Scripture will be the guiding force for how they build and work together for one another’s edification, and for the mission of Christ to disciple and reach the world. They must put themselves on the shelf and work diligently for the whole.
- v. The wise builder: they build others up, they do not spend their time tearing down, they put others first, they do their part to see others faithfully follow Christ. *That* is the task of the faithful Christian; will you be the wise builder?

### III. The Careless Builder (1 Cor 3:15).

- A. This builder has the foundation of Christ crucified, meaning they are Christians, they are saved, but they do not build in accordance with the foundation, and basically ignore the blueprints. He is saved solely because of the foundation and receives no reward for whatever building he does.
  - i. Why? Because he had no part in the foundation, all of that is Christ, and what Christ has done. But this builder has failed to build the church in the way that Christ has said.
  - ii. So, at the Day of the Lord, Jesus is going to inspect their construction with fire, He will inspect it with His holy torch, and He will find that the workmanship is so shoddy that it has not lasted.
  - iii. This person builds basically however they want without thought of the foundation or the blueprints.
  - iv. That is the careless builder. They survive but it is by the “skin of their teeth,” if you will.
  - v. I am afraid that many Christians today fit this builder. Many have the solid foundation of Christ but do not build in accordance with it. They ignore the blueprints of Scripture, and they refuse to build with others. They know the blueprints are there, but they prefer their own way, and thus, they build in a careless, half hazard way, and their life and the damage they wrought on the church is evident.
  - vi. This builder professes Christ, but their building says something different.
  - vii. They will enter eternity because of the foundation, because of the work of another, namely Christ, but they will receive no extra reward. They will escape judgment, “as through fire.”

### IV. The Destroyer (1 Cor 3:17).

- A. Truly, this person really is not a builder at all – they have no foundation – they do not have Jesus Christ and Him crucified as a foundation. They do not know Him – they might think they do, but they do not.

- i. Rather than building, they simply seek to destroy what others have built or are building. Their mission in life is to tear down existing structures and to make life hard for others.
- ii. Inspection day will reveal this, it will reveal that they have no foundation, and so God has a way of dealing with them. What does it say?
- iii. “If any man destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him.” Do you feel the force and weight of those words? Do you see just how seriously God takes how we treat His temple, His church, His people?
- iv. Paul is giving here what we might call an “oath-curse” in verse 17 saying that those who mistreat God’s people are mistreating God and therefore will face punitive action.
- v. Do you see that how we build matters, how we use our gifts, how we use our time, how we rely on Christ, how we unite with one another, matters eternally to God?
- vi. So serious does God take the treatment of His church, that anyone who threatens it with destruction, will be met by His holy recompense. And we cannot just dismiss the enormity of these verses with a handwave – God cares eternally how we treat the church, and how *you* treat the church will last for eternity or it will be only fit to be burned up.

## Conclusion

So, what will you choose?

In this series did you see what God said in His word about His church and your part in it?

The most comfortable, easiest path would be to not address biblical church membership at all. It would have been far easier to reenforce the status quo, because there is truly nothing easier than that. But my desire for you and for us is to be a healthy church that pursues what the bible says and nothing else. What we want is for FBCC to be an environment where disciples are made in unity for the glory of Christ. Where we pursue our mission of loving God, loving His church, and loving your neighbor in God’s way, and where everything we do is seen through those lenses.

We *must* do something with what God has revealed to us in this series. We must do something with what God has shown us through His Word.

The best days for FBC Cordele are not behind us they are before us. And we do not have to be afraid of the future, we do not have recoil at needed change because God is already in the future, and He has promised us reward for faithfulness. And faithful is all He is asking from us in light of His gospel.

What will you choose? Which builder will you be? The choice is before you. Will you see what God has said to us these last 10 weeks, to see that God intends for us to have a biblical church membership, that God is calling us to faithfulness regardless of the cost, that God is calling you as a member to give of yourself for the sake of others, and to build up His body for His glory?

And will you let settle in your heart just how much God cares about the church? And will you let that always inform how you approach it?

God can and wants to use this church for His purposes, but we have to see the foundation of the gospel and be obedient to it to as we move forward together in God's way, by the power of the Spirit, for Christ's fame. Are you willing?

## APPENDIX 6

### NEW MEMBER CLASS CURRICULUM

#### **New Member Class Lesson Plan Session 1**

##### Context

- Introduction on Biblical church membership for new member candidates at First Baptist Church of Cordele, Georgia (FBC).
- Students range in spiritual maturity from new Christians to mature Christians who are prospective members of FBC.

##### Content

- A general introduction to the basics of biblical church membership. This class will focus on: (1) The basics of the gospel; (2) FBC's core beliefs including the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (BF&M); (3) Scriptural support for church membership; (4) expectations of church members; (5) Explanation of church ministries and goals.

##### Lesson Plan

#### 1) **What is the Gospel?**

- a) Week 1 will answer the question, what is the gospel? It will teach the students, beginning with creation, through the biblical narrative culminating with work of Christ and how the gospel's aim is to point believers to pursue God's created design for His people.
- b) *Learning Outcome: By the end of this lesson, students will be able to articulate the gospel in order to ensure they know what the gospel is and can share it with others.*

#### 2) Outline

##### a) **Introduction**

- i) In considering elements of biblical church membership, one might be expected to simply start at definitions of the church or expectations of church membership. But it is important to begin with what actually forms the church, namely, the gospel. Without the gospel, there is no church. The church is what defines and shapes everything the church is and does. So, we must begin by exploring what the gospel is and this will relate to everything else that is covered over the course of these eight class sessions.
- ii) The goal of this session is to explore how to define the gospel with the hopes that the student will be able to articulate the gospel and grow more comfortable with sharing the gospel with others. After all, if we are people formed by the gospel, we must be able to define what the gospel is and be able

to tell others. Understanding the gospel also puts into perspective why we do what we do as a church, and a continual remembrance of the gospel will help us stay focused on gospel goals.

**b) What is the Gospel?**

- i) Question: First, how would you define the gospel? If asked, by an unbelieving friend or family member, how would you explain the gospel to them?
- ii) As you can imagine, definitions of the gospel abound. Here are a few for us to consider:
  - 1) Ray Ortlund: God, through the perfect life, atoning death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, rescues all his people from the wrath of God into peace with God, with a promise of the full restoration of his created order forever – all to the praise of his grace.<sup>1</sup>
  - 2) Mark Dever: Here's what I understand the good news to be: the good news is that the one and only God, who is holy, made us in his image to know him. But we sinned and cut ourselves off from him. In his great love, God became a man in Jesus, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross, thus fulfilling the law himself and taking on himself the punishment for the sins of all those who would ever turn and trust in him. He rose again from the dead, showing that God accepted Christ's sacrifice and that God's wrath against us had been exhausted. He now calls us to repent of our sins and to trust in Christ alone for forgiveness. If we repent of our sins and trust in Christ, we are born again into a new life, an eternal life with God.<sup>2</sup>
  - 3) Tim Keller: The 'gospel' is the good news that through Christ the power of God's kingdom has entered history to renew the whole world. When we believe and rely on Jesus' work and record (rather than ours) for our relationship to God, that kingdom power comes upon us and begins to work through us.<sup>3</sup>
  - 4) John Piper: The Gospel is the good news of our final and full enjoyment of the glory of God in the face of Christ. That this enjoyment had to be purchased for sinners at the cost of Christ's life makes his glory shine all the more brightly. And that this enjoyment is a free and unmerited gift makes it shine more brightly still. But the price Jesus paid for the gift and the unmerited freedom of the gift are not the gift. The gift is Christ himself as the glorious image of God – seen and savored with everlasting joy.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Ortlund, *The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 43.

<sup>3</sup> Trevin Wax, "Gospel Definitions: Tim Keller," last modified March 7, 2008, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/gospel-definitions-tim-keller/>

<sup>4</sup> Wax, "Gospel Definitions: John Piper, last modified March 10, 2008, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/gospel-definitions-john-piper/>

- iii) Of those definitions, which do you think best explains the gospel?
- iv) Typically, gospel definitions begin with either man's sin (like "Romans Road") or with the work of Jesus. These are not necessarily *bad*, but they begin at the wrong place. An unbeliever, or someone unfamiliar with the gospel, will not automatically understand what sin does, why it is so bad, how it affects our relationship with God, and why Jesus' work accomplished in the both the short and long term.
- v) The gospel explanation should begin with God as creator, and end with His restoration of all things in the New Heavens and New Earth.
  - 1) God created perfectly and declared it "good" (Gen 1:1).
  - 2) God made man in His image, instructed them to be fruitful and multiply, to cultivate the earth, and forbade them from partaking of one single tree (Gen 1:26-31).
  - 3) Man rebelled against God by partaking of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:1-7) and this thus separated them from God (fellowship they previously enjoyed) and resulted in a whole host of consequences that man continues to live with (Gen 3:8-24).
  - 4) Within the bad news of the consequences of sin, God promised that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head (Gen 3:15).
  - 5) Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, God makes strides to further His plan of having a people for His possession who He will dwell with and who will spread His rule throughout the earth. This is the main crux of the Bible. God began by creating a people who He dwelt with in Eden, they rebelled and thus separated themselves from God through their sin. But God does not give up on this mission.
  - 6) T. Desmond Alexander: Genesis opens by recounting how God creates an earth, into which he places a human couple, Adam and Eve. This first earth . . . is designed to be a divine residence, for here God intends to coexist with people. However, the divine plan for this first earth is soon disrupted when the human couple, due to their disobedience, are driven from God's presence. The complex story that follows centres on how the earth can once more become a dwelling place shared by God and humanity.<sup>5</sup>
  - 7) God promised to bless the world through the seed of Abraham (Gen 12:1-4).
  - 8) In Exodus, God rescues the descendants of Abraham from bondage in Egypt to lead them to the physical land that He had promised their patriarchs. When God brings the people to Sinai, He furthers His plan of redemption and declares them His possession and calls them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:4-6). Israel is meant to represent God and spread His rule throughout the earth.

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<sup>5</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 14.

- 9) The rest of the Old Testament tells of how Israel failed to accomplish God's purposes for them. Throughout, God continues to offer grace and, even when He sends them to exile, He always saves a remnant.
- 10) In the midst of the Old Testament, God makes several other important promises about the coming fulfillment of His plan to have a people for His possession that He dwells with. Among the most significant is the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7:8-17) and the New Covenant (Jer 31:31-40). In the former, God promises that a descendant of David will sit on the throne of a kingdom that will last forever. In the latter, God promises that a new covenant will be established wherein, among other things, the law will be written on the hearts of God's people.
- 11) In the New Testament, we see that Jesus Christ is both God in flesh *and* everything that Israel failed to be. Jesus is God come to dwell with man (John 1:14), the descendant of David who fulfills the Davidic Covenantal promise (Matthew 1:1-17; Acts 2:14-36; Rom 1:3-4), the bringer of the New Covenant (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25), God's chosen King (Rom 1:1-4; Phil 2:5-11), and only one who can reconcile man to God (Rom 5:10; Col 1:20; 1 Tim 2:5). Jesus reconciles God and man through His substitutionary death on the cross (Mark 10:45; Col 2:13-15; 1 John 4:10; Heb 9:11-28); His resurrection from the dead is a foretaste of what His people will one day enjoy *as well as* a sign that God accepted Christ's sacrifice (Acts 17:30-31; 1 Cor 15:20, 23; Heb 1:1-4; 10:12); His ascension inaugurated the beginning of His reign (Rom 1:4; Phil 2:9; Heb 1:1-4); and sent the Holy Spirit to indwell those who give their allegiance to God's anointed king, who also seals, leads, and acts as a deposit on future inheritance (John 14:26; Acts 1:2, 5; 2:4, 33, 38; Rom 5:5; Eph 1:13; 4:30).
- 12) Further, Jesus is the chosen one whom will judge the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; Rom 14:9; 2 Tim 4:1; 1 Pet 4:5), prepares His bride for the wedding day (Eph 5:25-32), and vanquishes Satan and all evil forever (1 Cor 15:20-28; Rev 21:8).
- 13) Those who recognize their sinful state, confess their sins, and believe on Jesus Christ, will be saved by Him to new life now, to pursue obedience, to enjoy fellowship with God, to receive the indwelling Spirit, and to dwell with God forever (Matt 28:18-20; John 3:16; 6:51; Acts 2:21; Rom 10:9-10; 1 Cor 6:19; 1 John 2:17; Rev 22:5). Between now and the end of the age, Christians are to live their lives devoted to Christ and His kingdom.
  - (a) Matthew Bates: If we synthesize the biblical data, we discover that saving allegiance includes three basic dimensions: *mental affirmation*, that the gospel is true, *professed fealty* to Jesus alone as the cosmic Lord, and *enacted loyalty* through obedience to Jesus as the king.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 92.

- vi) Putting it together: Of the definitions of the gospel given earlier, I believe Mark Dever's is the closest to what we have been discussing. We can say the gospel begins by considering that God created out of nothing; He created perfectly; He made man in His image; He intends to have a people for His possession who will spread His rule; man rebelled against Him and plunged the world into sin, corruption, and separation from God; God promised in Eden, to Abraham, to David, and throughout the Old Testament that a chosen king and messiah would come and fulfill all that He has promised; Jesus (preexistent God) took on flesh, lived a perfect life, died a substitutionary death, was raised bodily by the Holy Spirit, and ascended to the right hand of the Father, where He currently resides; He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell those who give Jesus allegiance so that God can dwell with them, they can fellowship with others in the church, and can pursue their created design through obedience to Jesus; all those found in Christ will dwell with the Triune God forever and ever in a truer and better Eden: New Jerusalem and all of God's enemies will be vanquished.
    - 1) This definition is somewhat lengthy, but it is important that we hit the high points of what the gospel is intended to do. God means to have a people to dwell with and this happens through Jesus' reconciling work, the Holy Spirit's power, to the glory of God.
- c) Conclusion and Questions**
- i) What does all of this have to do with the church? Well, Christ is the One who established the church so that God would dwell amongst them in the here and now, that they would bear His name, and spread His rule (Matt 16:18; 18:15-18; 28:18-20; Acts 2:42-47; 1 Cor 3:16; Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18; 2:10). The church then is all part of God's plan as history unfolds. All of history points to Christ and the church has a responsibility of bearing His name to the community and to the nations. We must know the gospel because, not only does it save us as individuals, it brings us together as a church, and is the very purpose of our existence.
  - ii) Question: Do you have questions or comments?
  - iii) Question: How does what we covered relate to how you have been taught or understood the gospel?
  - iv) Question: Do you feel confident that you can explain the high points of the gospel?
  - v) Next time we will explore the core beliefs of FBC and in the following weeks we will explore more of what the New Testament has to say about the church.

## **New Member Class Lesson Plan Session 2**

### Lesson Plan

#### **1) FBC Core Beliefs**

- a) Week 2 will consider the core beliefs of FBC, with attention given to the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and an introduction to the BF&M. Special attention will be given to examining how these core beliefs inform everything the church does.

b) *Learning Outcome: By the end of this lesson, students will be able to articulate the basics of FBC's core beliefs and will have a better understanding of how it affects the church's ministry approach.*

2) Outline

a) **Introduction**

i) In the first session we explored the high points of the gospel and sought to answer the fundamental question, "What is the gospel?" In both that session, and the one to follow this session, the question "What does FBC in particular believe?" will be, in part, answered. In this current session, we will explore straightforwardly what FBC believes and explore the topic more when looking at the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, the statement of faith for our denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention.

b) **What does FBC Believe?**

i) FBC was founded in 1889, one year after the city of Cordele was founded and its current statement of faith is not unlike the one adopted at its founding. In essence, the current statement of faith is the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, which you have received a copy of before your membership interview.

ii) It is important to note that a statement of faith does not cover all that the bible has to say, nor does it cover necessarily every single thing a church believes. Statement of faiths, however, do summarize the most important aspects of a church's doctrine. This doctrine should inform how the church does everything.

iii) It is also important to note that we do not exist or stand on our own, nor are we the originators of the faith or statements that articulate the faith. We share the faith, not only with Christians around the world, but Christians over the course of the last 2000 years. Believers for two millennia have navigated, discussed, debated, and written down theological truths that have been handed to us. We stand on their shoulders and owe them a debt.

iv) To help us think about core beliefs, we will consider two historic creeds: the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed, which will be on the screen for you to follow along.

1) The Apostle's Creed:

(a) I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to hell.

The third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended to heaven

and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.

From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,

the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.

- (b) The Apostle's Creed helps us synthesize some of the most important points about what we believe. We see that, at the most basic level, we confess to believe in a Triune God, the members of which are eternally equal, are one, and yet have specific roles. The Father as creator; the Son was born of a virgin in the incarnation, died a substitutionary death, was buried, rose bodily, ascended to the right hand of the Father and will judge the living and the dead at the end of the age; the Holy Spirit; the universal church; and a future bodily resurrection in the likeness of Christ at the end of the age.

2) The Nicene Creed

- (a) We believe in one God,  
the Father almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
begotten from the Father before all ages,  
God from God,  
Light from Light,  
true God from true God,

begotten, not made;  
of the same essence as the Father.  
Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation

he came down from heaven;  
he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,  
and was made human.

He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered and was buried.

The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.

He ascended to heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again with glory  
to judge the living and the dead.

His kingdom will never end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord, the giver of life.

He proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.

He spoke through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.

We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look forward to the resurrection of the dead,  
and to life in the world to come. Amen.

(b) The Nicene Creed was written under very specific circumstances which made its creation necessary. The Creed was formulated as a result of a council in Nicaea in 325, which was gathered to answer the question of Christ's deity and equality with the Father. Thus, the focus of the Nicene Creed is trinitarian, dealing exclusively with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and affirming their equality while also highlighting their roles.

(c) Considering this creed helps us formulate coherent thoughts about the nature of the Trinity. There is no doubt that the doctrine is far above what we could completely understand in this life, however, Nicaea helps us avoid thinking or describing any member of the godhead in a wrong, or even heretical, way.

3) With the Baptist Faith and Message, these two creeds help shape the basic beliefs of FBC. While not all members can articulate these basics, they inform what we teach and preach at FBC. In other words, we are on a lifelong journey to teach our members sound theology, many of whom have not attend new member classes like this one, since they had not been introduced at FBC yet when they joined.

**c) What is FBC's Mission?**

- i) What we believe flows out to what we do as a church. Our beliefs about the gospel, like we covered in session one, and what we believe about the church goes directly to what we do.
- ii) Our mission statement comes from Matthew 22:23-40, and it is this: Love God, Love His Church, Love Your Neighbor.
  - 1) Everything we do as a church is to be filtered through those lenses.
  - 2) Every ministry must focus on one or more of those goals: (1) loving God, (2) loving the church, or (3) loving our neighbors. In other words, they must have a reason to exist and a goal to accomplish that fits into the total life of the church. Everything FBC does must ask and answer the question: does this help me love God more? Does it help me love Christ's church more? Does it help me serve and love my neighbor? If the ministry in question cannot answer at least one of those questions in the affirmative, it will not be further pursued.
- iii) Another way we think about how we pursue ministry at FBC is: put Christ at the center of everything we do, follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of God. In this way we also think in trinitarian ways through our ministries.
- iv) Our beliefs and doctrine are at the forefront of how FBC's leaders think because we want to make sure we do not do anything for its own sake, that everything is coherent and cohesive, and because we know that theology taught and understood properly will flow out to how our members live their lives both in the church and in their day-to-day lives.

**d) What is the Baptist Faith and Message?**

- i) The Baptist Faith and Message is “a statement of confessional commitment” and has gone through two revisions since it was first adopted in 1925.<sup>7</sup> In June of 2000, the messengers of the SBC adopted an updated version of the Baptist Faith and Message. The preamble says, echoing the 1925 and 1963 preambles, the following:
- 1) That they constitute a consensus of opinion of some Baptist body, large or small, for the general instruction and guidance of our own people and others concerning those articles of the Christian faith which are most surely held among us. They are not intended to add anything to the simple conditions of salvation revealed in the New Testament, viz., repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.
  - 2) That we do not regard them as complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility. As in the past so in the future, Baptists should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith as may seem to them wise and expedient at any time.
  - 3) That any group of Baptists, large or small, have the inherent right to draw up for themselves and publish to the world a confession of their faith whenever they may think it advisable to do so.
  - 4) That the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Confessions are only guides in interpretation, having no authority over the conscience.
  - 5) That they are statements of religious convictions, drawn from the Scriptures, and are not to be used to hamper freedom of thought or investigation in other realms of life.<sup>8</sup>
- ii) These points in the preamble serve us well in thinking about the Baptist Faith and Message which, for all intents and purposes, is our statement of faith at FBC as well. But there is still freedom as an autonomous church to shape and form our beliefs in accordance with Scripture.
- 1) The 1644 London Baptist Confession of Faith articulates well the dual state of the local church, existing both autonomously, and in partnership/cooperation with other churches in article 47: And although the particular congregation be distinct and several bodies, every one a compact and knit city in itself; yet are they all to walk by one and the same Rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help one of another in all needful affairs of the church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their only Head.
- iii) The Baptist Faith and Message has 18 articles ranging from the members of the trinity to the Christian’s relation to the social order. Some articles are more significant than others in that they explore first order doctrines. These are doctrines we must agree on. Other doctrines like “Peace and War” and the

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell, *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America’s Largest Protestant Denomination* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, “Report of the Baptist Faith and Message Study Committee to the Southern Baptist Convention,” adopted June 14, 2000, <https://bfm.sbc.net/preamble/>

chronology of the end of time with “Last Things” we can have charitable disagreements and continue in loving fellowship with one another in the church. For our purposes, we will consider the first order articles of the Baptist Faith and Message.

- iv) Question: Do you have any questions about anything covered today or last week?
- v) Question: What would you say are the high points of FBC’s beliefs as you understand it thus far?
- vi) Next time we will explore more of the beliefs of FBC by exploring several articles from the Baptist Faith and Message.

### **New Member Class Lesson Plan Session 3**

#### Lesson Plan

#### 1) **Baptist Faith and Message**

- a) Week 3 will focus on the Baptist Faith and Message 2000. From the Baptist Faith and Message and selected Scriptures, students will be shown Baptist distinctives and first-order doctrines as well as what makes the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) unique.
- b) *Learning Outcome: By the end of this lesson, students will be able to recognize first-order doctrines and differentiate them from secondary and tertiary matters.*

#### 2) Outline

##### a) **Introduction**

- i) In the first and second session we explored the high points of the gospel and sought to answer the fundamental question, “What is the gospel?” as well as considering some of FBC’s basic beliefs and introduced the BF&M. In this current session, we will explore more of what we believe at FBC by further exploring the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, the statement of faith for our denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention.

##### b) **Overview of the Baptist Faith and Message Articles**

###### i) Scriptures

- 1) We must agree on several points concerning Scripture because the rest flow from this.
- 2) The Scriptures are our guide for how we see the rest of the articles.
- 3) The Scriptures are inspired, inerrant, infallible, and sufficient for faith and practice.
- 4) Joseph Wooddell: That the Bible is inerrant simply means that it makes no false— and thus no contradictory— claims; if the Bible makes an affirmation, then that affirmation is true. If an inerrantist sees what looks like a false statement in Scripture, he gives the text the benefit of the doubt, assuming that he either does not have all the information necessary to judge the claim at issue or has failed to read the text correctly.

Affirming biblical inerrancy thus involves giving Scripture the benefit of the doubt over any would-be competitors.<sup>9</sup>

- 5) Scriptures guide how we conduct affairs of the church.
  - 6) While we look to things like the Apostle's Creed, Nicene Creed, and Baptist Faith and Message, Scripture is the ultimate authority in the church and is sufficient. History, creeds, statements of faith help to succinctly articulate what the Bible says and are not on the level of Scripture.
- ii) God
- 1) Article two concerns God and has subheadings for each member of the trinity.
  - 2) God is one, and He is Triune.
  - 3) He is, says Daniel Akin, "above us and separate from us, and yet he is also a God who can be known, truly and genuinely known, in a personal relationship."<sup>10</sup>
  - 4) All members of the trinity share the same characteristics – what can be said of the Father as, for example, all knowing, all loving, all wise, can be said of the Son and the Spirit as well.
  - 5) Like the Nicene Creed that we looked at last week, the Baptist Faith and Message is sure to note that Jesus is eternal and has preexisted with the other members of the trinity and thus, was not created or made.
  - 6) Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a perfect life, died a substitutionary death on the cross, made provision for redemption of men from sin, raised bodily, appeared to His disciples, ascended to heaven where He sits at the right hand of the Father as Mediator and ruler. He will return to close out the age and usher in new creation. He is the only way to the Father, to have the indwelling Spirit, and to salvation.
  - 7) The Holy Spirit is God, fully divine. He inspired Scripture, illuminates Scripture, enables men to understand Scripture, and exult Christ. He convicts and indwells those who turn to Christ for redemption.
- iii) Man
- 1) Man is special in creation in that he was made in the image of God. Thus, all people are worthy of dignity and honor. Man sinned by his own volition, which separated humanity from God. Jesus came, died, rose, and reigns in order to restore creation, which includes the offer of forgiveness and redemption to fallen man.
- iv) Salvation
- 1) One of the longest of the articles and has four points.
  - 2) Salvation is found in Christ alone.

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph D. Wooddell, "Article 1: The Scriptures," in *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America's Largest Protestant Denomination*, ed. Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 22.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Akin, "God, BF&M Article 2 Summary," in *An Exposition from the Faculty of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary on the Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, ed. Bryan Cribb and Lawrence Smith (Louisville, KY: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001), 2-3.

- 3) Salvation includes regeneration (new birth), justification (positional acquittal before God, the judge), sanctification (growth in Christlikeness), and glorification (final blessing of the redeemed state at the end of the age – body and soul redeemed).
- v) God's Purpose of Grace
- 1) Salvation is found in God alone and man contributes nothing to his salvation.
  - 2) All true believers will endure to the end and will not lose their salvation. Believers can and do sin, but nonetheless, will be saved in the end. That is, if they are true believers.
- vi) The Church
- 1) Every local church in the SBC is autonomous (self-governed).
  - 2) The church is made up of believers, what is called "regenerate church membership."
  - 3) Each church is responsible for its own governance, policies, and how it receives and removes members.
  - 4) Each church is responsible for the proper observance of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.
  - 5) Each church should also be on mission to reach their community and the world with the gospel.
  - 6) The article also is sure to note that each local church is a body of Christ that belongs to the universal body of Christ. The church includes FBC but also every other true church collectively and the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.
- vii) Baptism and the Lord's Supper
- 1) Baptism is by immersion in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
  - 2) Baptism is a requirement for church membership and acts as the first step of obedience for those who have given their allegiance to Jesus.
  - 3) Baptism pictures the gospel, in some sense, through the visual representation of burial, resurrection, and new life.
  - 4) The Lord's Supper also pictures the gospel through the visual elements of bread and drink, and in the participatory act of those partaking.
  - 5) The Lord's Supper causes us to look back (at Christ's work), look up (where Christ is seated), look around (at fellow believers, considering our relationship with them), and look forward (to the return of Christ and the Marriage Supper of the Lamb).
  - 6) At FBC we partake in the Lord's Supper once per month. The Lord's Supper at FBC is reserved for baptized believers who are not under church discipline here, or at any other church.
- viii) The Lord's Day
- 1) Since Christ rose on Sunday of Holy Week, we gather for corporate worship every Sunday.
- ix) The Kingdom
- 1) The Kingdom of God includes both His general sovereignty over the universe and His rule over true believers. The church is an outpost of the Kingdom of Christ, and acts as an embassy.

- 2) Christians should echo the prayer of the Lord in desiring that God's will be done on earth as it is done in heaven.
- 3) The full consummation of the Kingdom awaits the end of the age.
- x) The Last Things
  - 1) Christians disagree concerning the timing and chronology of the end of the age.
  - 2) We can (and should) charitably disagree on this.
  - 3) The most important point of agreement is that, at some point, Jesus will return, collect His saints, resurrect believers bodily in His likeness, vanquish His foes, and set up the New Heavens and New Earth.
- xi) Evangelism and Mission
  - 1) Every follower is commanded to make disciples.
  - 2) We love others and desire for those in our community and around the world to know Christ.
  - 3) As a church, we must work to seek the lost, and tell them of Christ and His redemption.
  - 4) As a church, we gather in corporate worship on the Lord's Day in order to equip the saints to do the work of ministry in their day-to-day lives.
- xii) The Final Articles
  - 1) While there are no unimportant articles, for the purposes of this class, we will not cover the final seven articles. We encourage you to read and consider those and if you have questions about any of them, let us know.
- c) Conclusion and Questions**
  - i) The Baptist Faith and Message is an important document for churches in the Southern Baptist Convention. Combined with the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed, the Baptist Faith and Message helps to give shape to our basic beliefs. As we move forward, we must also keep before us what are first order doctrines and what are doctrines we can charitably disagree on.
  - ii) Question: Do you have any questions or comments?
  - iii) Question: Which articles do you think are the most important?
  - iv) Question: Which doctrines would you consider first order?
  - v) Question: Which doctrines do you think there is some wiggle room?
  - vi) Next time we will explore some of what the New Testament teaches regarding the church and show you why church membership is a biblical concept.

## **New Member Class Lesson Plan Session 4**

### Lesson Plan

- 1) **Church Membership Sightings in the New Testament**
  - a) Week 4 will consider specific biblical texts that evidence the presence of church membership in the New Testament. This session will especially focus on early membership developments and foundations in Jesus' teachings in Matthew 16 and 18 as well as Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12.

b) **Learning Outcome:** *By the end of this lesson, students will recognize that church membership is biblical and articulate Jesus' own teachings on church membership from Matthew 16 and 18.*

2) Outline

a) **Introduction**

- i) In the previous sessions we have explored the gospel, FBC's basic beliefs, and the Baptist Faith and Message. In this session we will turn our attention to church membership sightings in the New Testament. Is church membership in the Bible? This is what we hope to see in this session, and the next.
- ii) Some may think church membership is a concept borrowed from culture, perhaps like a country club or a civic club, or maybe even somewhere like Sam's Club. What we will see is that church membership is not only a biblical concept, but that even the word "member" comes from Scripture and is packed with meaning.
- iii) For this session, we will consider three texts: Matthew 16:13-20; 18:15-20; Acts 2:42-47; and 1 Corinthians 12.

b) **Matthew 16:13-20**

- i) In this well-known scene, we see Jesus with His disciples at Caesarea Philippi when He asks them two probing questions: (1) Who do people say that the Son of Man is? and (2) Who do you say that I am?
- ii) Peter answers as the spokesperson and representative for the rest of the disciples and he says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." To which Jesus says that Peter could only have answered that way because God revealed it to him and then He says, "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church."
- iii) Jesus also says that He will give Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven and says that "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."
- iv) All of this is important for several reasons: (1) this is the first place where the word "church" is used in the Gospels, (2) because this reminds us from whence we should base our doctrine of the church, (3) it shows that Jesus is the owner and creator of the church, (4) it shows that there is a link between the kingdom and the church, and (5) it shows how important the church is to Jesus as He promises her success against even the gates of hell.
- v) That Jesus calls Peter the rock on which He will build His church should not trip us up. We can both reject Roman Catholic insistence that this is evidence of the papacy *and* affirm that Peter and the apostles are foundations for the church (see Acts 1-2; Eph 2:20).
  - 1) The apostles' writings then carry the authority of Christ. They are the contents of the faith "once for all handed down to the saints" (Jude 1:3).
  - 2) They are authoritative and instruct on how the church should conduct herself.
- vi) The fact that the church is Christ's, the fact that He intends for it to last forever, the fact that He's trusting us to fulfill His purposes should stress to us how important the church is and that how we treat it matters eternally. We

must then treat the church with gravity and care, and we must do so in accordance with the instructions of its Founder, head, and husband.

- vii) The language of binding and loosing and the word “church” also help us to connect what happens here with chapter 18.
- c) **Matthew 18:15-20**
- i) The binding and loosing language is restated here and is connected to the actions of the church gathered.
  - ii) Jesus offers a three-step process for when a fellow church member sins in an ongoing and unrepentant manner: (1) Go to the brother and lovingly rebuke them, if they repent, the process ends, but if he refuses to repent, you, (2) go to him again, this time with a small circle of two or three other members, if he repents, the process ends, but if he refuses, you, (3) go to the church gathered and tell them, if he repents, the process ends and he is restored, but if he refuses, the church removes him from membership.
  - iii) The binding and loosing language is judicial language wherein the church merely makes a declaration. It is saying, “As far as we can tell, this person is (or is not) a Christian.”
    - 1) The authority to bind and loose is authoritative only insofar as it corresponds to divine will. The church is merely ratifying or affirming what heaven has already declared, which is that this person is a Christian as far as they can tell by observing this person’s life and walk in accordance with what Scripture says a Christian is and does.
  - iv) Here we also see evidence for congregationalism in that the church (under the headship and authority of Jesus) make a decision *when they gather*.
  - v) The church is saying with everyone they accept into membership and everyone they keep on their membership rolls that “Yes, as far as we can tell by observing this person’s life and walk, they are a Christian.”
  - vi) Accepting someone into membership is thus a commitment to the life of that person by the church on the whole. The whole church is saying that they believe the person is a follower of Christ and that they will be obligated to help that person continue to follow Christ faithfully and the person joining is committing to submitting the authority of the church.
  - vii) Something else we must see is this: the fact that someone could be removed from the church means that they must have been considered “in” in the first place.
  - viii) How can someone be removed from the church in Matthew 18 unless Jesus envisioned some kind of process that recognized them as part of the church in the first place? Here we have our first sighting of church membership.
  - ix) Further, that Jesus presents this process of church discipline must also mean that He envisions a clear line between who is “in” and who is “out” regarding the church. In other words, Jesus expects there to be a visible difference in conduct between believers and unbelievers.
- d) **Acts 2:42-47**
- i) In Acts 2 we see Peter preach one of the great sermons of all time at Pentecost.

- ii) Here, the promised Holy Spirit falls and moves on the hearts of the hearers and three thousand people convert.
  - iii) When Peter is ending his sermon, we are told that the people were “cut to the heart” and they asked Peter and the other apostles what they should do in response. Peter tells them to repent and be baptized.
  - iv) Interestingly, after this, we see the new converts as gathering together as the earliest church. After conversion, where did they go? They went to one another.
  - v) The activities of this early church are significant and set the stage for what we see regarding the church in the rest of the New Testament.
  - vi) The new converts devoted themselves to (1) the apostles’ teaching, (2) the fellowship, and (3) prayer, as well as sharing their stuff, having one accord, praising God, and multiplying.
  - vii) While the early church would go on to have its fair share of problems, which Luke is honest about (see Acts 5:1-11), we see here an ideal for how the church ought to be. We also see that when someone converted, they were part of the church and meeting *with* the church.
  - viii) As a church, FBC seeks to be devoted to the apostles’ teachings in the Scriptures, teaching and preaching the full counsel of God; to join with one another in meaningful relationships, accountability, and fellowship; to pray with and for one another; to “break bread” both in the sense of sharing the Lord’s Supper and eating with one another; to be generous with one another and come through for each other when we see a need; to be in one accord in unity, focused on the mission and glory of Christ; to praise God through worship; and to multiply through evangelism and service.
- e) **1 Corinthians 12**
- i) 1 Corinthians 12 begins a new section in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians that runs through chapter 14 and deals with spiritual gifts and proper conduct in the church.
  - ii) Paul says that there are a variety of gifts, but the same Holy Spirit who gives the gifts (12:4). Paul uses trinitarian language in both verse 3 and 4-6 to emphasize the unity of the Triune God which should flow out to unity in the church, pursuing the same goals.
  - iii) Verse 7 is one of the most important verses for this section because it shows (1) that the Holy Spirit is the one who sovereignly imparts the gift(s) on each believer and (2) that the purpose of the gifts is for the common good/edification.
  - iv) All gifts are equal in importance, and the Holy Spirit gives them in order to fit together properly for the building up of the body and the furtherance of the mission under Christ’s headship.
  - v) Starting in verse 12, Paul gives an extended metaphor of the church as a body.
  - vi) Here we see the language of “member” used several times in the passage. This shows us that membership language is biblical. It also shows us several things about what it means to be a member:
    - 1) Physical attachment to the body
    - 2) A gift to use for the church
    - 3) Unity in purpose and goals

- 4) Diversity but equality (no gift is more or less important than the others)
  - 5) Interdependency
  - 6) Mutual concern (when one suffers, all suffer together, when one rejoices, all rejoice together)
  - vii) Biblical membership means all of these things and more.
  - viii) We see here that we need each other, we should physically be present with one another, we should be united, we should be attached to each other in such a way that we suffer and celebrate together.
- f) Conclusion and Questions**
- i) Matthew 16; 18; Acts 2:42-47; and 1 Corinthians 12 serve to give us very early pictures and ideas for the church. We see some of what Jesus' ideas were for the church, the importance He places on it, and how the earliest church was formed. We saw that the newest converts repented, were baptized, then were added to the church. We saw some of the characteristics of this new church, and patterns for us to follow.
  - ii) Question: Do you have any questions or comments?
  - iii) Question: How does what Jesus said about the church inform how we should view the church?
  - iv) Question: In what ways can FBC help you in living out what we see in Acts 2:42-47?
  - v) Next time we will look at more church membership sightings in the New Testament.

## New Member Class Lesson Plan Session 5

### Lesson Plan

- 1) **Church Membership Sightings in the New Testament Part II**
  - a) Week 5 will continue to examine the presence of church membership in the New Testament. This session will specifically examine church membership from the epistles.
  - b) *Learning Outcome: By the end of this lesson, students will be able to further recognize that church membership is biblical and articulate the implications seen in the local church context of the New Testament epistles.*
- 2) Outline
  - a) **Introduction**
    - i) In the previous session we turned our attention to church membership sightings in the New Testament. We explored two texts from Matthew and one text from Acts. These two texts helped give us some idea for what Jesus' intent for the church as well as how the earliest church conducted themselves.
    - ii) In this session we will explore more sightings of church membership in the New Testament, which will show us that church membership is a biblical idea and inform us in part on how we should live as a local church under Christ's headship.
  - b) **Hebrews 10:19-25**
    - i) The commands of 23-25 are given in light of the truths of 19-22.
    - ii) Because we have confidence to draw near to God because of the blood of Christ, we should hold fast to the faith and draw near to one another.

- 1) The drawing near to the faith is aided by drawing near to one another because
    - (a) We are stirred up in love and good deeds
    - (b) Because we focus on others by stirring them up in love and good deeds
    - (c) We encourage one another to continue running the race
  - iii) The author of Hebrews connects the vertical drawing near with the horizontal drawing near to others who are fellow believers in the church.
  - iv) The truth of what Christ has done must flow out to the fruit of how we relate to others.
  - v) The imperatives of how we are to be members in the church flows out of the indicatives of Christ's self-less sacrifice on our behalf to achieve our redemption and place us into His family.
  - vi) If we are redeemed, then we ought to have fruit of that redemption and that is shown forth primarily in how we draw near and treat Christ's church.
  - vii) Regular, active attendance at the church gathering as a life priority is commanded here. Obedience to what is commanded in verse 24 is only possible by committing to a local church and frequently gathering with the saints in corporate worship.
  - viii) One cannot be an obedient Christian without being an active member of a local church.
    - 1) Derek Rishmawy said, "there is no way you can claim to be a Christian who is *actually trying to obey Jesus* and grow in godliness without it. What's more, you can't say you're striving to love Jesus either. Jesus says "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15), which include those delivered by his apostles in the NT."<sup>11</sup>
  - ix) Those who neglect the assembly cut themselves off from the very means by which Christ designed for the Christian to flourish – the very means by which God designed for us to be fed, assured, and protected. To say, "I can do this alone or without regular attendance at the gathering" is to defy the very commands of Christ and the very design He has for the life of His followers.
  - x) Neglecting the assembly also harms both the church and the person doing the neglecting. It stops you from benefiting from the gifts of others, as if you did not need them, and it stops them from benefiting from your gifts, as if they did not need you.
- c) 1 Corinthians 5**
- i) The most famous church discipline case in history.
  - ii) The context: a man in the church at Corinth (which, you'll remember, is deeply divided) is sleeping with his step-mother, the church knows, but they have taken no action.
  - iii) The church is boasting, when they really should mourn like there is a loss in the family.

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<sup>11</sup> Derek Rishmawy, "Do I Have to Go to Church to be a Christian? A Few Rough Thoughts," last modified August 10, 2014, <https://derekzrismawy.com/2014/08/10/do-i-have-to-go-to-church-to-be-a-christian-a-few-rough-thoughts/>

- iv) Paul pronounces judgment and commands them as a church to remove the man from among them.
- v) Notice the object of rebuke is directed toward the church for their inaction.
- vi) This is the last step of what we saw in Matthew 18. Paul does not desire every person who sins to be removed from the church. Those who are disciplined in this way are those who are in ongoing, unrepentant sin.
- vii) The danger is also to the church in that the unchecked sin can infect the rest of the church and harm their witness to the world. After all, the Corinthians are allowing something even the pagans in a sexually permissive society considers weird.
- viii) This is also done for the good of the offender. The goal of church discipline is not excommunication. Excommunication should be done carefully, prayerfully, and with tears. The goal of discipline is repentance and restoration. Perhaps Paul hopes this will be the wakeup call the offending man needs in order to repent.
- ix) Like Matthew 18, this passage shows us church membership in that, if someone can be put “out,” they must have been considered “in” to begin with.
- x) The Corinthians must have had some way to make someone an official part of the church. They must have also had a way of knowing who was in the church.
- xi) Paul believed there should be some difference between the actions and ethics of those in the church and those outside of the church.
- xii) In 5:9-13 Paul refers to a previous letter he wrote to the Corinthians in which he instructed them not to associate immoral people. The Corinthians believed Paul meant immoral unbelievers. Paul corrects them and says that if they could not associate with immoral unbelievers, they would have to be removed from the world. What Paul meant was that the Corinthians should not associate with immoral people who call themselves brothers. Paul believes church members should act different and that they should hold one another accountable in love.
- xiii) To reiterate: this passage shows us that to be put “out” of the church means that one was recognized as “in” the church.

**d) Ephesians 4:1-16**

- i) Chapter 4 begins the second half of the letter. In the first three chapters, Paul waxes eloquent about what Christ has done for us, then in the final three chapters he talks about how we ought to respond to that gospel.
- ii) The new sections begins by urging unity in the body. The believers are to “walk” in a manner worthy of the gospel. In other words, their day-to-day lives should be informed by the gospel.
- iii) Paul urges that they responded to the gospel with humility and gentleness with one another, bearing one another’s burdens.
- iv) The Ephesians are urged to, not to create unity but to be eager to *maintain* unity. The Holy Spirit hands unity to the church because of the work of Christ. The church is united upon creation, but they must be eager to maintain that unity. They must be intentional to keep unity in the church.

- v) Paul's repeated use of the word "one" underlines how significant he believes unity in the church is. The church is one body, confessing one Lord, being joined together by one Spirit, having been baptized into the one faith, to glory of the one God.
  - vi) Like 1 Corinthians 12, Paul states that the church has been gifted. He says that the church has been given offices in order to equip the church for the work of ministry.
  - vii) When we come to the gatherings, the pastors-teachers equip the members for the work of the ministry and for the building up of the body in edification.
- e) Hebrews 13:17**
- i) This may be one of the clearest texts that help us see church membership in the Bible.
  - ii) The author of Hebrews calls the audience to obey/give deference their leaders. Why is this significant?
  - iii) The questions should be asked of this: which leaders should the Christian obey? Which sheep are the leaders responsible for and who will they answer to Christ about?
  - iv) Formal church membership helps Christians to know which leaders they are to submit to and it helps pastors know which sheep they are responsible for. Without church membership, Christians would submit to *all* leaders (which is impossible and impractical) and leaders would not know who to shepherd or who they will be answerable for.
- f) Conclusion and Questions**
- i) These texts serve to give shape to more sightings on church membership in the New Testament. We see that the word "member" is in the Bible, that we should be attached to a body, we should use our gifts, we should be involved in one another's lives, we should be distinct from the world, we should care about one another to the point that we lovingly discipline one another, we should be united and work diligently and intentionally to maintain unity, we come to the gathering in part to be equipped to do the work of ministry, and that to even obey texts like Hebrews 13:17, we must formally commit to a local church.
  - ii) Question: Do you have any questions or comments?
  - iii) Question: How does 1 Corinthians 12 point to church membership?
  - iv) Question: How does 1 Corinthians 5 point to church membership?
  - v) Question: How does Ephesians 4 point to church membership?
  - vi) Question: In light of these passages, how does church membership help us grow in Christ?
  - vii) Next time we will look at the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper and what they have to do with church membership.

## **New Member Class Lesson Plan Session 6**

### Lesson Plan

#### **1) Ordinances**

- a) Week 6 will explore the two ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Special attention will be given to their origins in Jesus' commands to practice them as well as how they relate to church membership.
  - b) **Learning Outcome:** *By the end of this lesson, students will be able to articulate the importance of the ordinances in the life of the church, as well as identifying how they relate to church membership.*
- 2) Outline
- a) **Introduction**
    - i) In the previous session we continued to explore church membership sightings in the New Testament. We saw how church membership is a biblical idea and some of what church membership entails. In this session we will look at the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper and what they have to do with church membership.
    - ii) As Baptists we have two ordinances, and they are given the name "ordinance" because these are the two practices that Jesus commanded us to do or "ordained."
    - iii) As we will see, baptism is the initiatory rite into following Christ and the Lord's Supper is the continuing rite of ongoing faithfulness.
  - b) **Baptism**
    - i) *Matthew 28:16-20*
      - 1) Following the resurrection, Jesus commands His disciples to make disciples and spread His rule throughout the nations.
      - 2) He begins by establishing His authority to command: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." All authority that is possible to possess belongs to Jesus. And because of this authority, He can command, and so He does.
      - 3) He commands the disciples (and by proxy, us) to themselves make disciples "of all nations," baptizing them in the name of the Triune God, and teaching them to observe all that Jesus commanded, which includes the apostles' teachings (the New Testament).
      - 4) Discipleship, then, is inextricably tied with (1) baptism into the name of the Trinity and (2) teaching obedience to what Jesus has said – nothing Jesus said is off the table nor do we have the power to say what is and isn't valid in Jesus' teaching – all of Jesus' teaching from incarnation to ascension are for us to teach one another, and for how long? Until the end of the age even as Jesus is with us while we do it.
      - 5) So this is what you must see for our discussion on baptism: *baptism is commanded by Christ*. To be a disciple means that you are coming under the authority of King Jesus, which means He can command you, and you agree to pursue His commands. This doesn't mean your obedience will be perfect, but it does mean there will be a striving toward faithfulness for all of your days.
      - 6) To be baptized "into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is to pledge fidelity to the Triune God. "Name" is an act of covenantal initiation and identification. It is an oath of allegiance to Christ, pledging undying fealty and loyalty to Him and His rule.

- 7) So not only is baptism commanded, and thus, to be baptized is to take the first step of obedience to Christ, it also proclaims that one *intends* on living a life henceforth *of obedience* to Christ's commands, including the commands Christ affirmed, aka, the Old Testament, and the Spirit-inspired writings of His apostles.
  - 8) Baptism then, can be compared to an oath that one takes in expressing their allegiance to something or someone.
  - 9) Millard Erickson: It is almost universally agreed that baptism is in some way connected with the beginning of the Christian life, with one's initiation into the universal, invisible church as well as the local, visible church.<sup>12</sup>
  - 10) Baptism is the means by which Jesus designed for you and I and the church to show the world that our ultimate and first allegiance is to the Triune God.
- ii) Who is baptism for?
- 1) We would obviously disagree with our brothers who baptize infants because we believe only those who can make credible professions of faith ought to be baptized.
  - 2) We see here in the Great Commission that Jesus connects discipleship with the ability to obey and understand what He commanded. Ability to count the cost and to pursue everything Jesus commanded are connected here with baptism.
  - 3) We see no explicit command in the New Testament to baptize infants nor do we see a single example of it taking place.
  - 4) Further, we don't have evidence of the early church practicing anything but believers' baptism. On top of that, we have writings from many church fathers like Justin Martyr, Arstides, Tertullian of Carthage, and Gregory Nazianzus all affirming believers' baptism by the mode of immersion.
  - 5) Therefore, recipients of baptism are disciples who are capable of hearing the word of Christ, understanding it, and responding obediently to it. The one and only pattern indicated in the New Testament is the baptism of people who heard the gospel, repented of their sins, and believed in Jesus Christ.
  - 6) The subject of baptism should be someone who, as far as the local church has good reason to believe, desires to follow Christ and be baptized and who lives consistently with an earnest confession of sin and repentance and a faith in Christ's life, death, and resurrection for him or her.
- iii) *Romans 6:1-7*
- 1) those who identify with Jesus are baptized into His death and into His resurrection. In other words, although baptism doesn't save, it symbolizes – or pictures – our identification with Jesus' own death and resurrection.
  - 2) And again, we have this language of being baptized *into* Jesus, which is a pledge of fidelity.

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<sup>12</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 1018.

- 3) Paul says that baptism signals an end to our former way of life, it tells Satan, the world, the principalities, and the powers that you no longer identify with the kingdom of darkness.
  - 4) It proclaims new allegiances, it says, “I have been crucified with Christ, I have been buried with Christ, and I will be resurrected with Christ. And I will live in light of that fact.” Baptism is an invitation to the church and world to look at your life and observe what following Jesus looks like.
  - 5) It says that what was buried was your old self – your old way of life – your old allegiances – you are no longer on Satan’s payroll, walking in darkness and disobedience.
- iv) What mode of baptism should we practice? Again, we would disagree with our brothers who practice infant baptism or sprinkling or pouring. We baptize by immersion – we put the person completely under the water and back up again, and there are multiple reasons for this.
- 1) This is the way Jesus was baptized. We are told in the gospels that Jesus literally went under and came up from the water.
  - 2) The Greek word “baptizo” where we get our word “baptize” literally means “to immerse” or “to dunk.”
  - 3) The baptisms we see in the New Testament appear to all be by immersion.
  - 4) Baptism by immersion is the only mode that pictures the burial and resurrection that we see in places like this present text. Sprinkling or pouring does not picture the death and resurrection that we participate in with Christ the same way that immersion does. Now, this does not mean there aren’t going to be occasional, extenuating circumstances that might prevent immersion such as someone who is bed-ridden, and they simply cannot be immersed. But ordinarily, those who are being baptized ought to be immersed because only immersion pictures vividly the idea of our death, burial, resurrection, and walking in new life.
- v) *Acts 2:38-41*
- 1) The initial step into obedience to Christ is to repent and believe in the gospel and then to be baptized. So again we have a picture of people who can repent and believe being the ones who are baptized *and* that they were baptized both into Christ and into the church because they were “added” to the 120. In other words, they were added to the church and the church had a record of who was in it.
  - 2) Baptism didn’t baptize them into individualism and a self-driven Christianity – it baptized them into Christ *and* into His people.
  - 3) Bobby Jamieson: “Baptism is not just inseparable from local church membership but coincident with it. Membership is the house, baptism the front door. Since a church on earth represents the kingdom of heaven, it is authorized to affirm only those who submit to its authority, which is God’s appointed means of having people submit to his authority. That is, a

church may baptize only those who are coming out of the world *and into the church* through their baptismal profession of faith.”<sup>13</sup>

**c) Lord’s Supper**

i) *1 Corinthians 11:17-34*

- 1) Remember: baptism is the initiatory rite into following Christ and the Lord’s Supper is the continuing rite of ongoing faithfulness. In other words, Baptism is a group-creating ritual, while the Lord’s Supper is a group-sustaining or renewing ceremony.
- 2) Paul says 3 times in 3 verses, “when you come together,” do you see that?
  - (a) Verse 17, “because *when you come together* it is not for the better but for the worse.” Verse 18, “*When you come together as a church.*” Verse 20, “*When you come together*, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat.” He also mentions coming together in verse 34, as well.
- 3) So, we have, yet again, a sighting in the New Testament of the concept of biblical church membership. Paul expects them to do what? Gather – to come together – what? *As a church*. Gathering is a necessary part of what it means to be a church and to be a church member. If we don’t gather, we aren’t a church. If we say we are a church member, but we never come to the gathering, we have an unbiblical (at best) and incoherent view of what it means to be a member.
- 4) The Lord’s Supper was given to the church to, in part, exercise the keys to the kingdom. By accepting members into the church, the keys are exercised because the church is saying about that person that, “yes, as far as we can tell, this person is a Christian.” When the church baptizes, they are using the keys and binding and loosing and saying, “This person has given their allegiance to Christ, and we take responsibility for oversight of their continued faithfulness.”
- 5) When the church partakes in the Lord’s Supper, they are saying that those who partake are faithfully striving to follow Christ, that they ongoingly repent of their sins, and covenant with the church.
- 6) The Lord’s Supper is also an act of church unity, which is why the actions of the Corinthians is so egregious.
- 7) The church members need to “discern the body.” They must consider their relation to the other members. If they are divided or in conflict with another member and they partake anyway, they are eating and drinking judgment on themselves and taking the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner.
- 8) This points to church membership also: How do you discern the body if you aren’t a member of a local church and how do you discern the body of a church you never attend? How can you discern your treatment of the church when you aren’t actual *with the church*?
- 9) The text says we must, at minimum, do the following 4 things:

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<sup>13</sup> Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 103.

- (a) Look back at the life, substitutionary death, bodily resurrection, and ascension of Christ.
  - (b) Look ahead to the future when Christ returns and brings the kingdom in fullness, when He will judge the living and the dead, when He will make all things new, when He will make every sad thing come untrue.
  - (c) Look within and examine ourselves and our identity in Christ.
  - (d) Look around at our brothers and sisters in the church and examine how we relate to them and treat them. Then we can partake.
- 10) And we allow all of this to spur us on to action in light of it in our day-to-day lives. In other words, like we remember our baptism, we remember what we did in the Lord's Supper and let it inform us.
- 11) And when we partake in the Lord's Supper, we are proclaiming Christ to one another and to the world. As baptism proclaims one's initial allegiance to Christ, the Lord's Supper proclaims one's ongoing allegiance to Christ.

**d) Conclusions and Questions**

- i) The Lord handed down to us two ordinances that are inextricably tied to the local church: Baptism acts as the initiatory rite into following Christ and the Lord's Supper is the continuing rite of ongoing faithfulness. Both ordinances picture the gospel and should be undertaken with seriousness by the local church.
- ii) Question: Do you have any questions or comments?
- iii) Question: How does baptism picture the gospel?
- iv) Question: How does the Lord's Supper picture the gospel?
- v) Question: How have you been taught previously about baptism and the Lord's Supper and their importance?
- vi) Next time we will look at the expectations of church members at FBC and what they can expect from the church.

**New Member Class Lesson Plan Session 7**

Lesson Plan

**1) Expectations of Church Members**

- a) Week 7 will walk through what is expected out of members of FBC, as well as what members can expect from the church, and the mission of FBC.
- b) ***Learning Outcome: By the end of this lesson, students will be able to identify what their role will be as a member, as well as articulating what is expected of them, and what they can expect from the church and its leadership.***

**2) Outline**

**a) Introduction**

- i) In the previous session we explored the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper and how they relate to church membership. In this session we will explore what is expected of members of FBC and what they can expect from the church and its leaders.

**b) Membership expectations**

- i) In an earlier session we explored Acts 2 and saw multiple responses from the new converts *were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept*

*feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

- ii) This earliest church was characterized by a devotion to God's Word, a commitment to gathering together, a love for one another (even willing to sell their own possessions in order to help others in need), a desire to fellowship, a sense of unity, a desire to praise God together, a devotion to prayer, and their witness caused them to multiply.
- iii) This offers a good picture of what the church should strive to be and what the members of a local church should strive to do.
- iv) Members of FBC are also expected to
  - 1) Be devoted to God's Word
  - 2) To commit to coming to the weekly gatherings as a life priority
  - 3) To love their fellow church members and be involved in one another's lives
  - 4) Give of resources
  - 5) To pursue fellowship
  - 6) To strive to maintain unity
  - 7) A desire to praise God with fellow members
  - 8) A devotion to pray for the church, leaders, and fellow saints
  - 9) A devotion to evangelism
- v) From the texts we have explored in previous sessions regarding membership sightings in the New Testament, we also see further insight on what the Bible expects from Christians who are joined to a local church.
  - 1) Matthew 18 – we should see one another as members of a family; we should be invested enough in one another's lives to recognize when someone is in destructive, ongoing, and unrepentant sin; submit to the fellow members for oversight and care.
  - 2) 1 Corinthians 12 – we should be physically present in regular corporate worship; pray for insight into what our spiritual gift is; use our spiritual gift for the edification of the body; see others as valuable and necessary to the mission of Christ; be concerned about one another; be united in the mission.
  - 3) Hebrews 10 – Attend the corporate gatherings regularly; encourage others; stir others up.
  - 4) 1 Corinthians 5 – submit to fellow church members; be concerned with other church member's walk; take responsibility for overseeing one another's faithfulness.
  - 5) Ephesians 4 – Remember what unites us; zealously work to maintain unity; take opportunities provided by the church to be equipped; use that equipping to build others up and do the work of the ministry.

- 6) Hebrews 13 – give deference to church leaders; follow their leadership.
- c) **What Members Can Expect from The Church**
- i) Members can expect their fellow members to pursue what is listed above.
  - ii) Members should focus on their fellow members while their fellow members focus on them.
  - iii) Members can expect their elders and deacons to meet biblical qualifications for their office and to pursue what Scripture calls them to be and do.
  - iv) Members can expect their elders to seek God’s will for FBC.
  - v) Members can expect their elders to diligently study the Scriptures and seek to follow the Holy Spirit’s direction.
  - vi) Members can expect their elders to provide sound and faithful teaching and preaching from the whole counsel of Scripture.
  - vii) Members can expect their elders to guard the church against false teaching.
  - viii) Members can expect their elders to lovingly exercise discipline when necessary for the good and health of the church.
  - ix) Members can expect their elders to also pursue all of the expectations of church members listed above and to help members pursue them as well.
- d) **Mission**
- i) In an earlier session we introduced you to the mission of FBC. As reminder, the mission of FBC is to Love God, Love His Church, and Love Our Neighbor.
  - ii) Everything we do as a church is to be filtered through those lenses.
  - iii) Every ministry must focus on one or more of those goals: (1) loving God, (2) loving the church, or (3) loving our neighbors. In other words, they must have a reason to exist and a goal to accomplish that fits into the total life of the church. Everything FBC does must ask and answer the question: does this help me love God more? Does it help me love Christ’s church more? Does it help me serve and love my neighbor? If the ministry in question cannot answer at least one of those questions in the affirmative, it will not be further pursued.
  - iv) Another way we think about how we pursue ministry at FBC is: put Christ at the center of everything we do, follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of God. In this way we also think in trinitarian ways through our ministries.
  - v) Our beliefs and doctrine are at the forefront of how FBC’s leaders think because we want to make sure we do not do anything for its own sake, that everything is coherent and cohesive, and because we know that theology taught and understood properly will flow out to how our members live their lives both in the church and in their day-to-day lives.
- e) **Conclusions and Questions**
- i) Joining a church is one of the most important things a Christian will do. As we pursue biblical fidelity at FBC, we expect members to also pursue what the Bible calls them to be and do. As your pastors, we also commit to help you pursue the commands of Scripture to the glory of God. While we will never fulfill all of these things perfectly, we still strive together for the good of one another and for Christ’s fame.

- ii) Question: Do you have any questions or comments?
- iii) Question: How does what the Bible say run counter to a consumeristic approach to church membership?
- iv) Question: What do you think is the most challenging part of the membership expectations and how can we help you in your pursuit of healthy church membership?
- v) Next time in our final session we will look at polity and church ministries.

## New Member Class Lesson Plan Session 8

### Lesson Plan

#### 1) **Polity and Explanation of FBC Ministries**

- a) Week 8 will explore the polity of FBC and the Scriptural support for polity. Students will also be introduced to various staff members, their roles, and how the ministries of FBC fit into the overall vision and mission of the church.
- b) ***Learning Outcome: By the end of this course, students will be able to articulate biblical church membership as well as understanding their place in FBC and how the church will help shepherd them in their discipleship walk towards a life that glorifies God in all things.***

#### 2) Outline

##### a) **Introduction**

- i) In the previous session we explored what is expected of members of FBC and what they can expect from the church and its leaders. In the eighth and final session we will look at biblical polity (how the church should be governed), the mission of FBC, and the ministries of FBC.

##### b) **Biblical Polity**

- i) The witness of the New Testament is that the polity of a local church should be elder-led, deacon-served, and congregationally-ruled under the headship of Christ.
- ii) We must begin by remembering that Jesus is the head and rule over the church from whence the church derives its life, purpose, and direction.
- iii) *Congregational-rule*
  - 1) Recall Matthew 18. Jesus has given the keys of the kingdom to the local church gathered to bind and loose.
  - 2) The congregation clearly has authority over the members of the church – so you don't join a church, you submit to it – and the church thus has a responsibility to testify to members' ongoing faithfulness, to rebuke them in love if they are in ongoing and unrepentant sin, and to watch over their discipleship.
  - 3) If the process to call your brother to repentance fails, do you remember what it says to do? It doesn't say that they are to tell it to the elders or deacons or board or committee or any other thing we can concoct (though, if the process gets this far, it should come to the attention of the elders), but it says to tell it to the church. And it is the church who has the

authority to remove someone should they no longer be able to testify to their striving to follow Christ.

- 4) The church has the authority to add and remove members – this is their first and greatest authority. Congregationalism means the church gathered has a responsibility to guard and keep regenerate church membership.
- 5) The authority the church is given is to add members, remove unrepentant members, practice discipline, elect candidates for church offices, and even evaluate and confirm things like statements of faith, bylaws, constitution, budgets, buying and selling property and things like this. In other words, the church has the authority in major church decisions.
- 6) Congregationalism also means that the church gathered has a responsibility to affirm who are the elders and deacons.
- 7) In Acts 6 we see this happen in response to a controversy that threatened to divide the church. The apostles instructed the church to select seven men from among them who were of good repute who were full of the Spirit and wisdom.
- 8) In Acts 6 we observe their main responsibilities which we can summarize as 3: (1) spotting and meeting tangible needs, (2) protecting and promoting unity in the church, and (3) serving and supporting the ministry of the elders.

iv) *Deacon-Served*

- 1) This brings us to the ministry of deacons.
- 2) 1 Tim 3:1-13 tells us the qualifications of both deacons and elders.
- 3) Deacons are to be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain, holding the mystery of the faith a clear conscience, a husband of one wife, managing their household well. Their wives should be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, and faithful.
- 4) Deacons serve the physical needs of the church, they act as assistance to the elders so that the elders can be freed up to give their time to the ministry of the Word and prayer, and they work diligently to maintain unity.

v) *Elder-Led*

- 1) Also in 1 Timothy are qualifications of elders which have some similarities as well as differences. For example, elders must be able to teach but deacons are not expected to (they can but they do not need to in order to be a deacon). Also notice that Paul adds “for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” Management is not given to the deacons, but it is to the elders.
- 2) In 1 Peter 5 we also see that elders are to shepherd the flock and exercise oversight. So, elders are responsible to teach, lead, pray, shepherd (which includes teaching and oversight), feed, rebuke, warn, steering the correct direction, train in righteousness, and as we saw in Ephesians 4 a few weeks ago, they are to equip the church members to do the ministry.
- 3) In Acts 20 Paul addresses the elders of the Ephesian church. The word “elder” is in the plural because the church had a plurality, not just one.

- 4) Elders are to watch over the flock that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers, to care for the church – they are to watch out for wolves and be alert for those who would prey on the church.
  - 5) What does it mean to have a plurality of elders, practically speaking? It means you have multiple men who hold the same office with the same qualifications. It means you have elders who are on staff like the lead or senior pastor and associate pastors but also men who qualify who are not on staff but have vocations outside the church. And it means they are all equal according to office and they share the weight together.
- c) **FBC Staff**
- i) At this point we want to introduce you to our elders and staff members as well as provide you a list of current deacons.
  - ii) Associate Pastor of Families oversees the ministry of children and youth, as well as seeking to equip families to walk faithfully together in the Lord. He teaches the youth and oversees the children’s ministries.
  - iii) Associate Pastor of Music and Media oversees the music ministry of FBC. With the Lead Pastor, he puts together the order of service to ensure that it is biblical and Christ-exalting.
- d) **Ministries**
- i) At FBC we subscribe to a simple church model. We are not programmatic and have designed each ministry to aid our members in growing in Christ and reaching the community.
    - 1) Sunday morning gathering.
      - (a) In our worship service we aim to be Christ-centered, Holy Spirit-led, and glorify God in all things. The Scriptures guide all that we do as we **sing the Word** (Eph 5:19; Heb 13:15) in congregational singing, **read the Word** (1 Tim 4:13; Col 4:15-16), **pray the Word** (Col 4:2-4; 1 Tim 2:1), **preach the Word** (Acts 4:24; 1 Tim 4:13), and **see the Word** (Matt 28:19; 1 Cor 11:24-25) through the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We pray that through all of this that you will be edified (1 Cor 14:26) as we focus wholly on our Triune God and His inspired Word.
      - (b) We believe that every part of the service should be participatory. By this we mean, we encourage you to sing every song, open your Bibles, read along, and take notes during the sermon, engage in responsive reading, and pray with us. We hope that through this you will grow in the Word and will behold the glory of Christ.
    - 2) Life Groups
      - (a) We know that every person needs to be both educated in the Word of God and community in order to be held accountable and enjoy fellowship.
      - (b) For the fellowship aspect we encourage all of our members to be involved in a Life Group. Life Groups meet off campus at various times during the week and enjoy food and fellowship as well as discussing the passage that was preached on the Sunday before.
    - 3) Sunday School

- (a) Sunday School is designed to cover the education aspect.
  - (b) Sunday School is provided for all ages. Adult classes rotate between curriculum and each member can simply choose which class to attend. The purpose of Sunday School is to help our members grow in the Word of God with focus on specific topics.
- 4) Mid-week
- (a) Our mid-week studies for adults focus on walking verse-by-verse through books of the Bible in an informal setting where dialogue and discussion is encouraged.
  - (b) Youth group, and Awana is also provided for students and children to grow in the Word and Scripture memorization.
- 5) Our hope is that our members will take advantage of all of these ministries to help them as they pursue Christlikeness together.
- e) **Conclusions and Questions**
- i) In our final session we have discussed biblical polity as well as introducing you to our pastors and staff and ministries. Now we can answer any questions you have about anything we have covered over the last eight weeks.
  - ii) Next steps: next you will sit down with an elder for a membership interview where they can get to know you and hear about your family and testimony. Following this, you will be recommended for membership at our next church conference and the members will vote to affirm you into membership at FBC.

## APPENDIX 7

### LONG-RANGE MINISTRY PLAN

#### **Strategic Plan for Continued Education and Implementation of Biblical Church Membership at the First Baptist Church of Cordele, GA (FBCC)**

The following is a long-range plan for continuing education and practice of biblical church membership at FBCC developed by K.V. Paxton as part of a doctoral project at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary entitled *Implementing Biblical Church Membership at the First Baptist Church of Cordele, GA*.

#### **Introduction**

FBC Cordele, like many First Baptist Churches in the south, was founded in the nineteenth century. Over the course of the past 130 years, FBCC has had many highs, and its fair share of lows. Although the church has a rich history, largely due to the age of the church and what it has meant as a community institution in Cordele, the lack of biblical church membership has led to many problems in her history. From division, to pastoral disqualification, to bloated membership rolls, to no standards for joining or disciplining members, almost every “low” in FBCC’s past can be traced to the lack of biblical, healthy, robust church membership.

Further, the previous twenty years have especially been difficult for FBC. In the late nineties the long-time pastor resigned after multiple moral failures. The pastor who followed him led the church for ten years. During his time at FBCC, he led the church in a building campaign, which relocated the church from its long-time home to the

other side of town. Before the move, the church split into two worship services based solely on musical genres. The building move caused the church to go into deep debt, and while the church experienced great numerical growth, many in the church became disillusioned with the pastor, which led to division along generational lines and his forced resignation.

The need for a biblical church membership is paramount for the future health and biblical fidelity of FBCC. The majority of members simply have no handle on what it means to be a member in a biblical sense, nor have they been taught in a meaningful way what the church is, what its mission must be, nor even the roles and duties of deacons or elders. While steps have been made by the author in the last three years to introduce robust biblical church membership, much more must be done. The very DNA of the church must change. Structures must be changed, documents must be updated and altered, and education needs to be ongoing. The following is an outline of a long-range plan to pursue these goals. The plan is designed to make church membership a priority and to weave it into the very life of FBCC.

## **Strategic Plan Outline**

### **New Member Class**

Like many churches in the Bible-Belt, FBCC has incorporated new members like this: an attender would “walk the aisle” at the end of a Sunday morning service, they would tell the pastor during the “invitation” their desire to join the church, the pastor would tell the gathering the names of the individual and their desire to join, those gathered would say “amen,” and they were thus members of the church. The problems in this are inherent: there’s no way to know whether this person was a Christian, if they had been disciplined at their previous church (or were still undergoing discipline), if they left their previous church for unbiblical reasons, if they were baptized by immersion in the

name of the Trinity, etc.

Going forward, a new member class (of which the curriculum was written as part of this project) will be required in order to become a member of FBCC. Further, an interview will be conducted with the new member candidate prior to joining by one of the elders. This interview will serve to get to know the candidate, to hear their church history, to hear their explanation of the gospel, to gauge their knowledge of what it means to be a church member, and why they want to join FBCC. Once the interview is conducted, they will be scheduled to attend an eight-week new member class which will cover the basics of the gospel, statement of faith including the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (BF&M), the Scriptural support for church membership, expectations of members, and explanation of church ministries and goals.

### **Membership Taught Regularly**

While new members will have the benefit of taking the new member class and having biblical membership explained to them, long-time members have not had the same benefit. Many (if not all) members, as mentioned, have not been taught biblical membership. In order for FBCC to be a place where membership is biblical, *all* members need to understand what the Bible says regarding the church and membership. One way to aid in this is to open the new member class to anyone who would like to attend: visitors, prospective members, and established members. However, not all members will likely take this opportunity, therefore, teachings on biblical church membership must be done regularly from the pulpit.

Since the Bible truly has much to say about what it means to live a life following Christ, which is inextricably tied to membership in a local church, it will not be difficult to incorporate biblical membership in sermons throughout the year. While we preach expository sermons through books of the Bible at FBCC, passages can be applied to church membership without doing violence to the text. Further, short topical series can

be done annually that hit the high points of church membership. This will ensure that all members of FBCC receive refreshers on membership and see that it is deeply biblical, relevant, and important for continued health of the church.

### **Bylaw Changes**

When I first arrived at FBCC I did a deep-dive into the church constitution and bylaws, both of which were written at a terrible time in the life of the church. These bylaws were written when the church did not have a pastor after the longtime pastor resigned following his second moral failure. Further, the church was at that time dually affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF). The biggest advocate for the continued presence in the CBF was chosen as the chairman of the bylaws committee. The bylaws that were written and accepted by the church were, to say the least, not good. Much of the statements on membership are vague and leave the door open for members to stay on the rolls as long as they wish without ever actually attending the gatherings.

Going forward, the bylaws will be examined and incrementally updated. Problems arise from the fact that the membership roll is bloated (a point addressed in the next subsection). This means that if the bylaws were junked and completely re-written to require frequent attendance as part of membership, hundreds of “members” could theoretically show up and vote down the proposed changes. The fact remains, however, that the bylaws *are* in desperate need of change. The best approach seems to be to elect a solid group for the bylaw committee (which is a standing committee according to the bylaws) and change one part of the bylaws at a time until it reflects what the bible actually says regarding membership. In the revisions, the bar for membership can be raised and reflect a healthy model and requirements that will aid in the ongoing health of the church.

## **Clean Membership Rolls**

As mentioned in the previous subpoint, the membership rolls at FBCC are bloated to the point that there is a disparity of approximately 1,000 between members and attenders. There are members of FBCC who are local (attending other churches) and “non-resident” living in other cities throughout Georgia and, in some cases, different states. In order for the church to pursue meaningful membership, the rolls must reflect frequent attenders. The implications are massive: (1) if someone is a member but the church never sees them, they cannot testify to their ongoing faithfulness, or even to their salvation before heaven or the world, (2) any member could show up at any business meeting and legally vote, and (3) the fact that someone can be a member but cannot be held to any expectations makes it more difficult to hold current members accountable for anything since they can simply point to those who have abandoned the fellowship, yet keep their membership status.

Rather than completely wiping clean the membership rolls and starting fresh (something that would be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible with current bylaws), we will, over time, contact every member on the rolls and ask them of their status. Once we have a mechanism in the updated bylaws to remove non-attenders, we can present different “levels” of members at a time for removal incrementally: (1) those who are deceased, (2) those we cannot locate, (3) those who live too far away to attend, (4) those who live in the area but refuse to attend. This process will likely unfold over two to three years.

## **Covenant Update and Incorporation**

Along with updating the bylaws, we must also update our church covenant, which is currently part of the church constitution. The constitution is one of the better aspects of these documents, but it can still use a reworking to reflect the expectations of members and the expectation of the church toward the members. Once the covenant is reworked and passed by the church in conference, it will be incorporated in the life of the

church to continually put before the members their duties to one another in the Lord. Examples of incorporation are: before partaking in the Lord's Supper and before business meetings.

### **Conclusion**

FBCC is, without question, in need of a turn around. Biblical church membership, while not a cure-all, is an important step for ensuring FBCC's future health, effectiveness, and vitality. To be sure, this will not be easy. However, Christ has not called us to ease, but to faithfulness. It will surely take many years to turn around a 130 year-old church in the Deep South. FBCC is ingrained with over a century of practices that must be re-aligned, and, in some cases, torn down completely. The long-range plan above will aid in setting FBCC on the right course for years to come and will, God willing, cause biblical church membership to be in the very DNA of the church until Christ returns.

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## ABSTRACT

### IMPLEMENTING BIBLICAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH IN CORDELE, GEORGIA

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022  
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The purpose of this project was to implement biblical church membership at the First Baptist Church of Cordele, Georgia. Chapter 1 describes the ministry context in which the project was conducted, the rationale, and the goals for pursuing introduction and implementation of biblical church membership. Chapter 2 explores the biblical and theological support for the necessity of biblical church membership through the exegesis of four passages: Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-8; Hebrews 10:23-25; and Hebrews 13:17. Chapter 3 examines the theoretical and practical issues of biblical church membership. Chapter 4 looks at the details and the description of this project such as the goals and implementation processes. Chapter 5 reflects upon the project's purpose, goals, strengths, weaknesses, how I grew during the process, and what I would do differently.

## VITA

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### EDUCATION

BA, Criswell College, 2013

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### MINISTERIAL EMPLOYMENT

Pastoral Intern, Ridgecrest Baptist Church, Commerce, Texas, 2011-2012

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