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TEACHING COVENANT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT
FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH IN DALHART, TEXAS

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

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

by
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May 2024

APPROVAL SHEET

TEACHING COVENANT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT
FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH IN DALHART, TEXAS

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Defense Date: March 5, 2024

To my wife Annie, and my children Cole, Claire, and Cate. Annie is my everything, and my children inspire me to be better every day.

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PREFACE

This project has been a dream come true. I desired to pursue a Doctor of Ministry for many years, and when the time became right for me to do so, the adventure exceeded my expectations. Choosing The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has proven to be the right choice as the whole process included some of the finest people I have had the privilege of meeting. Dr. Haste, as the program director, has been a steady comfort from the beginning. The way he prepared us in the beginning for the journey was exemplary, and his availability to answer questions along the way was tremendously helpful. Dr. Allison, Dr. Harrod, Dr. Martin, and again, Dr. Haste were fantastic professors. Each seminar was an absolute joy. Their professionalism and expertise were matched only by their compassion and evident love for each of us students. Even though there were a few days I was not sure I would survive, I will look back on these seminars with great fondness.

I am particularly thankful to Dr. Jeremy D Jessen who served as my academic supervisor. I was excited from the beginning to be paired with a pastor who also serves as a scholar. I see myself as a pastor first with a passion for theology and scholarship, and I benefited tremendously from seeing the pastor/scholar modeled by Dr. Jessen. He was immensely helpful throughout the whole journey. He challenged me when I was mediocre, he encouraged me when I was weary, and he rejoiced with me when I finally got it right.

I also owe a heartfelt thank you to First Baptist Church Dalhart. Their willingness to allow me the time and space needed to attend seminars and work on the assignments cannot be overappreciated. My prayer is that the investment they allowed me to make in my education will eventually turn out to be an investment in their health and

fruitfulness. Additionally, I am thankful to everyone who participated in the assessment, course, and reassessment. I heard several times that the survey was relatively difficult, and I know it was time-consuming. They stuck with me, and the results were extremely helpful. I pray that we have all grown through this process.

My deepest gratitude is to my family. I begin with my parents who reared me to strive to reach my full potential. They have supported me in every area of my educational journey providing encouragement and financial support. Their commitment made this whole thing possible. Next, I am thankful to my children who showed respect for my goal and have always been patient when my responsibilities made me a little less accessible to them at times. I hope that I have served as a model to them that people can do difficult things and that the journey to improve themselves never comes to an end. Finally, I cannot express how exceedingly grateful I am to my wife, Annie. She is the consummate partner in every way. I cannot think of one endeavor I have undertaken that does not have her fingerprints all over it. She is my sounding board, my cheerleader, my research assistant, and my friend. Her mutual love for Jesus is the cord that keeps us on this journey together. I am completely indebted to her.

Michael Wilcox

Dalhart, Texas

May 2024

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Participating in a local church is one of the most important commitments a Christian makes and one of the most significant means that God uses to grow his people into Christian maturity. J. T. English tells the story of his own conversion through a local college ministry and shares how he left college discouraged because he felt he should have grown more in Christian maturity during that time. As he continued his Christian journey, he finally came to realize that “my discipleship was aimless because my discipleship was churchless.”¹ Thabiti M. Anyabwile recounts a story about his wife who began sobbing when asked about her journey in the church as a new Christian. She mentioned disappointment, frustration, and a sense of abandonment. Anyabwile goes on to argue,

Whether your Christian life began yesterday or thirty years ago, the Lord’s intent is that you play an active and vital part in his body, the local church. He intends for you to experience the local church as a home more profoundly wonderful and meaningful than any other place on earth. He intends for his churches to be healthy places and for the members of those churches to be healthy as well.²

This project’s purpose was to teach the members of First Baptist Church in Dalhart, Texas, (FBCD) to better understand the value and beauty of a covenant commitment to the local church.

¹ J. T. English, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus* (Nashville: B & H Books, 2020), 46.

² Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*, Building Healthy Churches (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 14.

Context

First Baptist Church has been a positive influence in Dalhart, Texas, for 120 years. It was founded in 1901 as part of a railroad ministry that planted churches along the rail lines during the westward expansion. Eleven people began holding services in a railroad car until they were able to move into a newly built schoolhouse. Since that time, FBCD has experienced fruitful ministry moving to three other locations during its history, and they have consistently provided a gospel presence in this growing community. However, over the past decade, FBCD has experienced a significant decline in attendance and influence in the community.

Dalhart has become a hub for the thriving agricultural industry in the Texas panhandle. Many successful farming, ranching, and agricultural operations have a long legacy of success. Compared to many of the other small towns in West Texas, Dalhart possesses higher levels of education, per capita income, and housing values than many others. Along with its financial prosperity, Dalhart also enjoys a warm and friendly spirit. One of the values that many Texans boast about is a strong sense of hospitality and helpfulness, and Dalhart is no exception. The citizens of Dalhart pride themselves on their friendliness, generosity, and willingness to lend a helping hand to their neighbors. These demographic distinctions reflect the membership of FBCD, where loyalty to the broader community often outweighs loyalty to their church family.

Most members are middle to upper-class Anglo families from agricultural industries who see themselves as generous and friendly. FBCD members have a high commitment to the community of Dalhart where they spend much of their time supporting community events such as local fundraisers, school activities, and livestock shows. While this type of community support is admirable, it often comes at the expense of commitment to regular church attendance. Members who regularly miss Sunday worship are steady fixtures at high school football games, civic programs, and community events.

Another commitment issue is that church members have the means and the opportunity to spend much of their time traveling. Because Dalhart is a small town in the middle of a rural region, people must drive several hours to larger cities to enjoy amenities such as department stores, movie theaters, and restaurants. The mountains of Colorado and New Mexico are only a few hours away, so families also spend many of their weekends enjoying time away. All of this leads to many church members being regularly absent.

Before Covid-19, FBCD averaged roughly 180 people during its Sunday morning worship service, whereas the records report that FBCD has approximately 230 people who attend on some type of regular basis, be it weekly, monthly, or quarterly. This means that over 20 percent of its regular members are absent on any given week for the central worship activity of the church. These intermittent members create disappointment among other members who desire fellowship, deprive the body of their spiritual gifts, and confuse non-Christians because of their poor testimony to their commitment to Jesus Christ.

Life after Covid created its own set of challenges. Sunday morning worship attendance did rebound, but there were still large numbers of people who did not return. Many members remained cautious, staying home because they were in higher risk categories and felt it was necessary to avoid large crowds, and that was honored and appreciated. However, other members are seen at social gatherings or community events, seemingly without hesitation or concern while no longer making church attendance a priority.

Covid exposed a trend that the church has experienced for some time where Sunday morning attendance is becoming less of a priority for church members. A Gallup poll from 2009 affirms this trend, claiming, “Weekly attendance among Protestants has been fairly steady over the past six decades, averaging 42% in 1955 versus 45% in the

middle of the current decade.”³ Gallup asked the same question again in 2018 and came to the same conclusion: “The 45% of Protestants who reported attending church weekly from 2014 to 2017 is essentially unchanged from a decade ago and is largely consistent with the long-term trend.”⁴ The American church has had a terrible problem for a long time that has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

This lack of commitment to church attendance is a discipleship issue. Many people at FBCD place a premium on personal salvation while neglecting the corresponding commitment to Christ’s body that flows from their salvation. FBCD needs a greater understanding of the fullness of the gospel and how a commitment to Jesus necessarily involves a commitment to his body.

Rationale

To address the problem listed above, FBCD needed to recover a biblical understanding of their commitment to Christ and how this informs commitment to his body, the church. The more members grew in their knowledge and understanding of God’s Word and his intention for his church, the more they appreciated the necessary commitment to attend, serve, and support their local church. Michael E. Osborne describes the importance of church membership clearly:

Many Christians never join a church or see any reason for doing so. Perhaps it’s because they don’t see church membership taught in the Bible. Or they’ve been hurt by a church in the past and are reluctant to get hurt again. Or they are confused by the plethora of Christian denominations and ministries out there these days and can’t decide what to do. Or they simply enjoy living on the periphery of a local fellowship and don’t want to give up their independence. Whatever the case, they are missing something very important to their spiritual growth and the advance of the gospel.⁵

³ Lydia Saad, “Churchgoing among U.S. Catholics Slides to Tie Protestants,” Gallup, April 9, 2009, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/117382/Church-Going-Among-Catholics-Slides-Tie-Protestants.aspx>.

⁴ Lydia Saad, “Catholics’ Church Attendance Resumes Downward Slide,” Gallup, April 9, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/232226/church-attendance-among-catholics-resumes-downward-slide.aspx>.

⁵ Michael E. Osborne, “Why Church Membership?,” *Table Talk Magazine*, December 6, 2018, <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/posts/why-church-membership>.

The Bible gives sufficient teaching about the Christian life that informs believers that the best expression of their Christian life is in the context of a local body of believers.

First, gathering with the community of Christ is something clearly demonstrated and commanded in Scripture (Acts 2:42–47; Heb 10:25).⁶ A primary motif of the Bible is that God is redeeming a people who will reflect and expand his glory to the ends of the earth. In the Old Testament, these people are the nation of Israel, and the apostle Peter applies the Old Testament language to the church: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:9–10).

Second, the New Testament clearly teaches that every member is necessary for the church to function properly (Rom 12:3–8; 1 Cor 12:4–27). Each individual believer is a member of the body who is gifted through the Holy Spirit to perform certain functions that are indispensable to the fruitfulness of the church. Gregg Allison writes, “The church is composed of many diverse members who work together and use their diverse gifts to build up the body.”⁷ When all of the members are present and active, the whole body is built up and encouraged and strengthened. When members are consistently absent, the body suffers.

Third, not regularly participating in the life of the church significantly hinders one’s own fruitfulness as a Christian. It is in the context of consistent fellowship that believers practice the “one another” commands that Scripture has given to the church: “encourage one another” (1 Thess 5:11), “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2), “accept

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version.

⁷ Gregg R. Allison, *The Church: An Introduction*, Short Studies in Systematic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 20.

one another” (Rom 15:7), “comfort one another” (2 Cor 1:4), and dozens more. When members withdraw from the church, it can be extremely difficult to maintain a steady faith and a consistent passion for the glory of Jesus Christ. J. T. English makes this argument saying, “Each member of the family is indispensable to the growth of the rest of the family. The family members need one another.”⁸

Fourth, regular attendance and participation in the local church is paramount in the church’s testimony to the world. A unified, loving, and faithful church is the primary way believers show the world the unifying and loving truths of the gospel. In John’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that their love for one another will show the world that they are his disciples (John 13:34–35). Lack of church faithfulness sends confusing messages to unbelievers about the importance and necessity of Christ in the believers’ lives.

Fifth, participating with and loving other believers gives a believer assurance of salvation. It is not uncommon for a believer to experience a lack of confidence in their salvation at times. The trials of life, sinful habits, and disillusionment with other believers can often lead to doubt. Doubt can be a regular part of the Christian life, as Philip Yancey argues, “Doubt always coexists with faith, for in the presence of certainty who would need faith at all?”⁹ However, John writes that one of the ways a believer can find assurance of his faith is by recognizing a growing love for the brothers and sisters in the body of Christ (1 John 3:14; 4:20). When a believer has a growing desire to involve himself in the life of the church, he can better trust that the transforming power of the gospel is working in his heart.

⁸ English, *Deep Discipleship*, 59.

⁹ Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God: What Can We Expect to Find?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 40.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to teach covenant church membership at First Baptist Church in Dalhart, Texas, in order to enhance the church's health leading to greater gospel effectiveness.

Goals

Four goals governed the process of teaching covenant church membership. These goals concentrated on strengthening the current member's understanding of covenant church membership.

1. The first goal was to assess the understanding of covenant church membership among current members of FBCD.
2. The second goal was to develop a six-session curriculum that outlined the basic biblical principles governing covenant church membership.
3. The third goal was to teach a three-week Sunday night course to current FBCD members.
4. The fourth goal was to reassess the current membership to determine the growth of their understanding of covenant church membership.

Successful completion of these four goals was determined by a detailed research methodology that measured the effectiveness of each goal.¹⁰ This methodology is described in the following section.

Research Methodology

Successful completion of this project depended upon the completion of these four goals. The first goal was to assess the understanding of covenant church membership among the current members of FBCD. This goal was measured by administering the Biblical Church Membership Survey (BCMS) to each member family of FBCD. This survey included three sections. The first sought personal information such as age, gender,

¹⁰ 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.

and how long they had been a Christian. The second section determined the member's biblical understanding of church membership and participation, and the third sought to determine the actual attendance habits and practices of the member. This survey was made available to each member both by physical and electronic means. This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of twenty-five members completed the BCMS, and the survey was analyzed yielding a clearer picture of the biblical understanding of covenant church membership among the members of FBCD.

The second goal was to develop a six-lesson curriculum that outlined the biblical principles governing covenant church membership. This curriculum explained the biblical texts that describe the covenantal nature, marks, polity, and mission of the New Testament church and how these texts apply to FBCD's current context. This goal was measured by an expert panel that utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, scope, and applicability of the curriculum. This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criteria met or exceeded the sufficient level.

The third goal was to teach a six-session Sunday night course to current FBCD members and attendees. Once the curriculum met or exceeded the appropriate level, the course was scheduled and advertised to the members of FBCD. Each week focused on particular elements of biblical church membership. Session 1 covered the ontological nature of the church and explained how this nature creates the biblical paradigm of church membership. Session 2 discussed the marks of the New Testament church. Session 3 demonstrated how the church relates to God through covenant, and session 4 showed how that relates to the way church members should relate to one another. Sessions 5 and 6 taught the practical benefits of covenant church membership. The goal was considered successful when a minimum of 90 percent of the course attendees faithfully completed the six-week Sunday night course.

The fourth goal was to reassess the current membership to determine the growth of their understanding of biblical church membership. The goal was measured by readministering the BCMS to the members who participated in the six-session Sunday night course. The BCMS was given again after the final session of the course. The goal was considered successfully met when 50 percent of the original participants completed the post-course BCMS and when the t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-course survey scores.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

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

Church membership. Church membership refers to the commitment Christians make to one another to be a functional body with a common purpose. James Leo Garrett Jr. defines membership as, “The unity of the human body and the plurality of its members or parts are analogous, according to Paul, to the oneness of Christ’s body and the plurality of its human members. To be members of the body of Christ is to be members of the church of Jesus Christ.”¹¹

Covenant. For the purposes of this project, I linked the covenantal nature of church membership to the covenant characteristics established by God in the Old Testament. Allison defines covenants clearly: “(1) Unilateral (established by God and God only); (2) create or formalize a structured relationship between God and his covenant partners; (3) feature binding obligations; and (4) involve covenantal signs or the swearing of oaths.”¹²

Three limitations applied to this project. First, the impact I hoped this project would have on our church is that members would be more committed to one another and

¹¹ James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 2000), 589.

¹² Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 64.

to the mission of the church. This outcome was limited by the fact that just because members have gained greater knowledge of the biblical-theological importance of active church membership, it does not mean that they have necessarily changed their behavior. It is my experience that knowing better does not always lead to doing better, especially in the short term. To mitigate this limitation, I worked intentionally with church leaders to implement better church accountability to encourage our church members to apply this biblical teaching. Second, the project could have been limited if the survey respondents were not honest in their responses. To mitigate this limitation, the pre- and post-surveys were completed anonymously. Third, this project could have been limited if an appropriate number of members did not participate in the survey. To mitigate this limitation, I offered a paper copy of the survey along with a digital version to accommodate the members' preferences and time restraints.

Three delimitations applied to this project. First, I limited the number of weeks for instruction to three where I taught two sessions per week. I believe it was important for a large percentage of our members to attend the teaching sessions to make the largest impact on the culture of our church. It was very difficult to get large numbers of people to commit to long-term courses that go longer than just a few weeks. Second, I limited the availability of the post-survey to those who completed at least two of the six teaching sessions. To gain an accurate understanding of the course's effectiveness, only those who completed at least two of the sessions were given accurate evaluation. Third, I limited those who were allowed to complete the surveys to those in high school and older. Even though younger children benefited from the course content, they did not have the maturity to give thoughtful and helpful responses.

Conclusion

FBCD needed to answer the questions of how it could become a place for members to grow and flourish and how it could create a culture where people prioritize

commitment to the church body. Surely the Lord is not pleased with half-way commitment and shallow participation from his people. Mark Dever helps, “What do such churches [having less than 50% of the membership at a service any given week] convey about Christianity to the world around us? What do we understand this to mean about the importance of Christianity in our lives? And what is the spiritual state of those people who haven’t attended church for months or even longer?”¹³ For churches to turn around, there needs to be a renewal of what it means to be a member. Dever concludes, “I’m convinced that getting this concept of membership right is a key step in revitalizing our churches, evangelizing our nation, furthering the cause of Christ around the world, and so bringing glory to God.”¹⁴

To help FBCD get the concept of membership right, chapter 2 of this project explores the biblical-theological underpinnings of covenant church membership. Chapter 3 discusses the practical benefits of covenant church membership. Chapter 4 details the plan I followed to teach the curriculum which details these biblical-theological underpinnings and practical benefits of covenant church membership. Chapter 5 evaluates the overall effectiveness and success of this project’s goal of helping the members of FBCD better understand covenant church membership.

¹³ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed., 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 156.

¹⁴ Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 156.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR COVENANT MEMBERSHIP IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

In this chapter, I will argue that church membership is a covenantal relationship between Christians built on the covenantal nature of God. First, I will demonstrate how God relates to his people through covenants. Next, I will establish that the nature of the church flows out of the nature of a covenantal God. Finally, I will conclude that because the church flows out of the nature of our covenantal God, church members should relate to one another in a covenantal relationship.

God Establishes the Nature of His Relationship with His People through Covenant

In Genesis 1, we read that in five days God built a world of land and water, light and darkness, vegetation and creatures perfectly suited to support the pinnacle of his creation. On the sixth day, man was created with a unique and privileged role as the only part of the world created in the image of God (Gen 1:1–27). The concept of the image of God is too broad to adequately explain here, but for this project, we can begin to deduce that God created man with a special role in his purposes for the earth. In Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton’s *A Survey of the Old Testament*, they argue, “A key message of Genesis is that humans were created in the image of God. The world was created for them and with them in mind. When the first human pair is created, they are accorded

dignity and entrusted with responsibility.”¹ God designed mankind to exist with him in a special relationship with a special purpose.

God demonstrated his commitment to preserving this special relationship with those who would represent his image on the earth by making covenants. Oren Martin describes covenants as one of the most important ways God establishes his reign and rule on the earth “for they form the backbone of Scripture and are crucial for understanding its overarching story, from creation to new creation.”² Gregg Allison explains: “covenants (1) are unilateral (established by God and God only); (2) create or formalize a structured relationship between God and his covenant partners; (3) feature binding obligations; and (4) involve covenantal signs or the swearing of oaths.”³ Martin also adds, “Scripture presents numerous covenants at crucial times in salvation history, all of which serve to reverse the curses of Eden and bring about the escalated re-establishment of the universal expansion of God’s kingdom.”⁴

These covenants perform a vital role in defining and organizing the whole story of the Bible. Thomas Schreiner acknowledges that some scholars “argue that covenant is the center of Scripture, the theme that integrates the message of the entire Bible.”⁵ Though he believes this may push the idea too far, assuming the Bible has only one center is a mistake, he agrees that “we can rightly say that covenant is one of the most important notions in the Bible.”⁶ The covenants display how God intends to act

¹ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 68.

² Oren R. Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land: The Land Promise in God's Redemptive Plan*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 34 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 42.

³ Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 64.

⁴ Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 42.

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World*, *Short Studies in Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 11.

⁶ Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World*, 11.

toward his creation as it responds both positively and negatively to his covenantal invitation. A brief survey of the biblical covenants demonstrates the nature of God's relationship with those created in his image.

Survey of Biblical Covenants

Looking at the beginning of Genesis, God's relationship with Adam and Eve takes center stage. There is some debate about the covenantal structure of this relationship as some do not consider this relationship to be built on a covenant because the word "covenant" is not used in the narrative. However, others argue that even though the word is not used, the nature of the relationship and its stipulations demand that it be considered covenantal. Schreiner argues, "We have good reasons to see a covenant at creation because the constituent elements of a covenant were present at creation. There were two partners: God and Adam/Eve. God as the covenant Lord gave stipulations or requirements Furthermore, there were cursings and blessings for disobedience and obedience."⁷

Assuming Schreiner is right, we see that Adam and Eve did not live up to the stipulations and requirements of this covenant and received the promised curse, ultimately being separated from God's presence. This ushered sin and chaos into the world where man is described as "every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen 6:5). But God, who had determined to preserve his creation, renewed his covenant with Noah. Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard assert, "Noah and his family provide a link with the old creation order, but the language of the Noahic covenant echoes the language of Genesis 1–2 in such a way as to see that Noah is in effect a new start."⁸ God was not willing to give up on his people. God had determined

⁷ Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World*, 21.

⁸ Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1994), 53.

to preserve his people and provided a vehicle to ensure their salvation. God had covenanted with Noah to never again destroy mankind by the flood.

However, the new start with Noah did not last long. As the narrative moves forward, the condition of man's relationship with God is again marked by rebellion. Hill and Walton explain, "After the flood, the blessing was renewed, but degeneration occurred rapidly. The compiler continues to build his case for the insidious effect of man's fallen nature, seen even in Noah's own sons."⁹

God's plan to restore a right relationship with his people makes another significant move as God called Abraham to leave his father and mother and go to the place that God would show him. God made covenant promises to Abraham that he would bless him, make his name great, and make him into a great nation (Gen 12:1–3). From this point forward, God's redemptive plan of living in right relationship with his creation would be carried out through a family. Bernhard Anderson traces the flow of the Old Testament to this point and concludes,

We have seen that the exposition of Old Testament theology begins with the self-disclosure of the Holy God who chooses to enter into relationship with a particular people. This community is to be God's "treasured possession out of all the peoples" (Exod. 19:5) and to be the agent through whom divine blessing is mediated to other families of the earth (Gen. 12:3).¹⁰

The Abrahamic covenant was meant to begin the process that would restore mankind to a right relationship with himself.

The next significant move in the story of Scripture is the establishment of the Mosaic covenant. God is continuing the work of restoring the relationship with his creation and rebuilding that which was lost in the fall. Schreiner explains that in the Mosaic covenant, "they [the nation of Israel] are marked out as the children of Abraham.

⁹ Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 70.

¹⁰ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 74.

So just as Abraham was, in some respects, a new Adam, so too Israel is a new Adam. The blessing for the whole world will come through Israel.”¹¹ Martin writes, “God’s deliverance of and covenant with Israel is an advancement of his re-establishment of the Edenic purposes, for through the exodus of the nation his creation plan for the world moves forward.”¹²

Dillard and Longman assert that the Law becomes the central element of God’s covenant with Israel: “Perhaps the single most important occurrence during the journey took place just three months after their departure when they arrived at Mount Sinai. Here God made his powerful presence known to them again as he revealed his will to Israel through the law.”¹³ The law was given to govern how Israel was to relate to their creator God and how they were to relate to one another. Schreiner states, “The stipulations of the Sinai covenant are declared in the Ten Commandments. Here the charter regulations of the covenant are outlined in broad strokes, detailing what it means for Israel to be loyal to their covenant Lord and King.”¹⁴

After God establishes a covenant with the children of Abraham through the Mosaic covenant, it is time to reestablish mankind as priest-kings ruling over the earth. Schreiner recalls, “Adam and Eve were called as priest-kings and as those made in the image of God to rule the world as God’s vice-regents.”¹⁵ However, they fell prey to the deception of the serpent and lost this privileged position in God’s purposes for the earth. Now that Israel was established as a nation, it was time to re-establish the role of king. Through God’s providence, this chosen king was last in line in Jesse’s family. Schreiner

¹¹ Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World*, 67.

¹² Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 48.

¹³ Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 67.

¹⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 37.

¹⁵ Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World*, 73.

goes on to write, “King David and his sons would represent Israel, and the nation would be blessed through their obedience to Yahweh and their reign over the people. Their righteous rule would display to the world what it meant to live in the land under Yahweh.”¹⁶ The Davidic covenant ensured that a true and righteous king would always rule over God’s people and facilitate mankind’s relationship with God. Schreiner admits, “At last, it seemed, the Lord was finally fulfilling his teleological objectives through his promise of a Davidic son who would come as God’s viceregent to exercise royal rule over God’s people in the Promised Land, and thus extend God’s rule, presence, and blessing to the nations.”¹⁷

However, the bad news is that the establishment of these covenants to support a right relationship between God and his people always fell short. At every turn, God’s people reject his loving reign and rule. They fail to display his glory to the world. Adam and Eve give into the deceit of the serpent. Noah and his sons do not accomplish God’s call to multiply and subdue the earth. After Israel is established as a nation with a Law to govern their religious and civil lives, they consistently walked in disobedience. Even after it seemed that God’s purposes for his people were finally fulfilled through David and his sons, these kings ultimately rejected God and failed to lead Israel to be the people that God desired. Martin states, “The OT clearly leaves us with an unfinished story. The serpent was not yet crushed . . . The promises of the new covenant, the new exodus, the new creation, and the new David obviously were not realized.”¹⁸

Providentially, this is not the end of the story. The prophets had spoken of a time when there would be a new covenant, a new plan where the failings of the people of God in the Old Testament would be overcome. Jeremiah writes,

¹⁶ Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World*, 73.

¹⁷ Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 50–51.

¹⁸ Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty*, 428.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer 31:31–34)

This new covenant would be greater than the covenants of the Old Testament because it would deal with the reason why the Old Testament people of God continually failed to fulfill their obligations—the sinfulness of the human heart.

The new covenant in Jesus accomplishes two things. It ushers in forgiveness of sins and renews the human heart. The people of the Old Testament were alienated from God and failed to fully be the people of God because of their sin. Sin infiltrates the heart of man and makes it impossible for him to obey and follow God. First, Israel could not truly be the people of God until they received forgiveness. Jesus obtained this forgiveness by his own blood. The New Testament teaches us that the new covenant is in the blood of Jesus. Jesus lived a holy and righteous life, died on a cross, and shed his blood for the forgiveness of sin. Jesus becomes the new people of God fulfilling all the demands of the Old Testament, and now, those united to Christ by faith join him as being the people of God because they are forgiven. Schreiner asserts, “The people of God consist of all those who belong to Jesus Christ,” and he goes on to say that those who accept the proclamation of the gospel, not only Israel but all who put their faith in Jesus, become part of God’s kingdom.¹⁹

Second, God had given Israel a system of sacrifices to deal with their sin problem, but they were inadequate because they could not deal with the root of sin, the human heart. The heart of man is bent on evil all the time. Jesus accomplished what was

¹⁹ Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty*, 500.

prophesied in the book of Ezekiel. The people who had a heart of stone would receive a heart of flesh. The apostle Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17). This is accomplished through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit made possible in the death of Jesus Christ. Schreiner says, “The gift of the Spirit enables the people of God to keep God’s laws. The failure to obey that began with Adam in the garden is remedied by the new covenant.”²⁰ Now mankind can be in a right relationship with God in a way that was impossible before Christ.

Summary

Covenants serve as the basis for the way that God deals with and interacts with his people. These covenants are acts of grace established by God directed toward mankind to make possible the renewal of the relationship between God and man that was destroyed by sin. At each pivotal moment in salvation history, God intervenes and establishes a way forward for man to be redeemed and set back on a path of restoration and reconciliation. However, man repeatedly rebelled and violated God’s stipulations and obligations for his covenant people. In God’s sovereign providence, he used the Old Testament covenants to move the story forward until the day of Jesus Christ when the final and better covenant was established. The new covenant is established in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross that atoned for sin and brought renewal to the human heart. Mankind now stands in right relationship with God in and through the blood of Jesus Christ.

²⁰ Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World*, 92.

The Ontological Nature of the Church Flows from the Nature of the Triune God

Because God relates to his people through covenant, it is now helpful to understand the ontological nature of the church and how it is informed by the triune nature of God.

What Is the Church?

There are various ways to describe the nature of the church. Many describe the church by its functions. Much has been written that the church is the place where certain functions take place, such as worship, fellowship, outreach, and missions. Others describe the church, in the line of the Reformers, as the place where God's Word is preached, and the sacraments are rightly observed. Craig Van Gelder, in *The Essence of the Church* affirms, "This approach proceeds from what might be described as a functional view of the church, one that defines the church primarily in terms of what it does."²¹ Even though these functions of the church are critical to fulfilling its purposes in the world, they are inadequate in explaining the nature of the church.

Others describe the nature of the church by identifying its purpose. *The New City Catechism* closely identifies the nature of the church with its evangelistic mandate. Question 48 asks "What is the church?" The answer given is, "God chooses and preserves for himself a community elected for eternal life and united by faith, who love, follow, learn from, and worship God together. God sends out this community to proclaim the gospel and prefigure Christ's kingdom by the quality of their life together and their love for one another."²² Even though all these things are critical to the life of the church, they still focus on its purpose. Van Gelder seems to lean this way, as well, as he draws a strong connection between ecclesiology and missiology. Writing about ecclesiology, he

²¹ Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 20.

²² Collin Hansen, ed., *The New City Catechism Devotional: God's Truth for Our Hearts and Minds*, The Gospel Coalition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 207.

explains, “This field of theological study focuses on understanding the church in terms of its nature, ministry, and organization,” whereas missiology, “focuses on how to proclaim the gospel and grow the church in different cultural contexts.”²³ Van Gelder argues that when the church keeps these two ideas separate, it loses its fundamental identity as missionary in nature. He goes on to argue,

From this perspective, the church, as the people of God in the world, is inherently a missionary church. It is to participate fully in the Son’s redemptive work as the Spirit creates, leads, and teaches the church to live as the distinctive people of God. With this understanding, mission shifts from naming a function of the church to describing its essential nature.²⁴

In the same way that functional understandings of the church fall short of adequately explaining the nature of the church, defining the church by its purpose also falls short of painting a complete picture of the nature of the church.

An ontological approach gives us the best method to fully understand the nature of the church. Allison explains in *Sojourners and Strangers*, “[This] approach . . . seeks to define and discuss the church in terms of its attributes or characteristics.”²⁵ Allison goes on to affirm, “I take an ontological approach to the construction of my ecclesiology, focusing first on the identity markers of the church, while properly noting the teleological [purpose] orientation of many of the church’s characteristics and while also deriving its function—its ministries and mission—from those attributes.”²⁶ In other words, when we understand the nature of the church by its character and attributes, it gives us a better perspective from which to properly appropriate its functions and purpose.

²³ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 25.

²⁴ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 31.

²⁵ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 51.

²⁶ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 53.

Biblical Images of the Church

To understand the ontological nature of the church, it is helpful to look at the biblical images of the church contained in the New Testament. There are many different images, or metaphors, used in the New Testament to help its readers understand God's intention and design for the church. Many of them revolve around family imagery where God is a father (Eph 3:14), Jesus is an older brother (Matt 12:49-50), and church members are brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers (1 Tim 5:1-2).²⁷ Other images point to nature where Jesus is the vine, and the church members are the branches (John 15:5). The variety of images is useful and helpful and needs to be considered if one is to grasp a full understanding of the nature of the church. Wayne A. Grudem explains, "The wide range of metaphors used for the church in the New Testament should remind us not to focus exclusively on anyone. An undue emphasis on one metaphor to the exclusion of others will likely result in an unbalanced perspective on the church."²⁸ However, because God is triune where he eternally exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three images are especially helpful in understanding the nature of the church as flowing out of the nature of God. These images are the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. According to Allison,

All that exists has been created by and has its being from the triune God. So it is with the church: it is the creation—or, better, the re-creation—of the God who is three-in-one. Men and women, redeemed through the gospel from "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9), gather in churches and compose the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit throughout the world. These biblical pictures help us imagine the church as a Trinitarian re-creation.²⁹

Flowing out of the Old Testament, the New Testament writers call the church the people of God. In giving the historical development of the word *ekklêsia* in the New

²⁷ Wayne A. Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*, ed. Jeff Purswell (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 366.

²⁸ Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 367.

²⁹ Gregg R. Allison, *The Church: An Introduction*, Short Studies in Systematic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 15.

Testament, Gary Badcock writes, “Underlying the New Testament word *ekklêsia* (or ‘church’), then, is a more ancient and foundational conception: the idea of the ‘people of God,’ which stands accordingly among the central themes of New Testament theology.”³⁰ Badcock goes on to argue that the calling of New Testament believers as the people of God comes from God’s election of Abram in the Old Testament (Gen 12:1–3) and God’s promise to bless the whole world through his lineage. He writes, “There can be no doubt that New Testament writers do take the view that the church is indeed the people of God, a people, moreover, who stand in continuity with the people of God of the Hebrew Scripture.”³¹ How much continuity exists between the people of God in the Old Testament and New Testament believers is a matter of debate, but on both sides of the issue there is agreement that the church was born out of God’s plan of redemption, a plan that began long before Abraham in the garden of Eden (Gen 3:15). Allison affirms this point at the beginning of his definition of the church, “The church is the people of God who have been saved through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and have been incorporated into his body through baptism with the Holy Spirit.”³² Van Gelder, even though he argues that the nature of the church comes from its purpose acknowledges that, as a starting point, the church is the people of God. He contends, “When we encounter the church, we move into spiritual territory that occupies earthly terrain. We encounter the living God amid our humanity. We encounter the Spirit of God dwelling amid a people who are created and formed into a unique community.”³³

The place to find New Testament support for the church as the people of God is in Peter’s first epistle. As he is writing to New Testament Gentile believers who were

³⁰ Gary D. Badcock, *The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 30.

³¹ Badcock, *The House Where God Lives*, 32.

³² Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 29.

³³ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 14.

being persecuted for their faith, he offers them encouragement and support by reminding them of who they are. “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:9–10).

Here is distinct Old Testament imagery that is being applied to the New Testament church. Because of their faith in Jesus Christ, they are now included in the long line of the elect who are called the people of God. Allison highlights this passage and explains, “Accordingly, the people of God are those who have tasted the goodness of the Lord and have come to Christ, trusting in him for redemption. Drawing on the rich Old Testament imagery of the old covenant people of God—a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession—Peter presents the new covenant people of God.”³⁴ Edmund P. Clowney also points to this passage and argues, “By God’s grace, those who were ‘no people,’ whether covenant-breaking Jews of Gentiles outside the covenant, are made the people of God and receive mercy.”³⁵

The second metaphor is the body of Christ. Badcock argues, “the idea that the church is the body of Christ is among the most familiar of all ecclesiological claims. It is found repeatedly in Scripture, is regularly liturgized, and tends to be a favorite theme in catechetical settings with young people and adults alike.”³⁶ The body of Christ metaphor is used by the apostle Paul as a consistent motif through his letters in the New Testament. “So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom 12:5). “For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the

³⁴ Allison, *The Church: An Introduction*, 17.

³⁵ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 29.

³⁶ Badcock, *The House Where God Lives*, 66.

church, his body, and is himself its Savior” (Eph 5:23). “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body that is, the church” (Col 1:24).

The application of this metaphor comes to light in another passage where Paul declares in Colossians, “And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent” (Col 1:18). Jesus Christ is the head of the church, and the church is the representative of Christ, called to extend his ministry and purposes to the earth. Because it is the body, the church is wholly dependent on Christ for its existence, its purpose, and its sustenance. Bill Leonard, discussing the nature of the church, concludes,

The church looks to Jesus for its life, its teaching, and as its model for ministry. Thus . . . Jesus Christ is the head of the church. The church is Christ’s body, and he is the head of that body. The church draws its entire life from him. In every age, the church seeks to conform to his image. Apart from Christ, there is no church. He is not only the source of the church’s authority; he is the source of its very life.³⁷

The third metaphor, or image, that is instrumental in helping understand the nature of the church is the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul proclaims in Ephesians that Gentile believers are no longer alienated from the covenant promises of God through the work of Jesus Christ, who is the cornerstone, “in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph 2:21–22). Peter draws on temple imagery in his discussion of the church and its identity in the world. Each individual is a living stone being built together by God into a spiritual house. This house is a holy priesthood where spiritual sacrifices are made that are pleasing to God (1 Pet 2:5). These images point back to the functions of the Old Testament temple that are now being applied to the New Testament church. The church is a corporate entity

³⁷ Bill Leonard, *Nature of the Church*, Layman’s Library of Christian Doctrine 12 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986), 35.

because the Holy Spirit works to gather believers and transform them into a living organism. Clowney writes, “The abiding presence of the Spirit joins the church together into one. There is but one holy temple of the Lord, one body of Christ where the spirit dwells. The Spirit binds the church together in the unity of common life.”³⁸

The application of this metaphor for the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises that God would one day, again, dwell with his people. Allison points out the exchange between Jesus and his critics after he cleansed the temple in Jerusalem. “So the Jews said to him, ‘What sign do you show us for doing these things?’” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking about the temple of his body” (John 2:18–21). Here Allison concludes, “This interchange pointed to the ultimate reason for which the Son became incarnate and emplaced: to offer himself as an atoning sacrifice for sinful people, accomplishing the work required so that God could once again dwell among his people.”³⁹ The church as the temple of the Holy Spirit becomes the place, just like the Old Testament temple, where God meets his people in a particular way. The presence of God is made manifest to the world through Christ’s people loving one another, serving one another, and bearing one another’s burdens as part of the church.

Summary

These three images help us understand the ontological nature of the church. Before any purpose or function can be determined, it is important to apprehend the nature and character of the church. The New Testament church is the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. This means that the church is from God and for

³⁸ Clowney, *The Church*, 53.

³⁹ Allison, *The Church: An Introduction*, 24.

God, and it derives its existence from God's triune nature. This sets the stage for covenant church membership because as the church flows from the nature of a God who relates to his people through covenant, those who make up the church should relate to one another in a covenant relationship.

Christians Express Their Faith in Covenant Church Membership

Covenant church membership finds its roots in the fact that God is a covenanting God. Because God establishes the nature of his relationship with his people through covenant, people with saving faith in Jesus become the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. This necessarily means that Christians have a relationship with one another built on a covenantal foundation. Allison brings this principle to light, "This covenantal characteristic goes beyond the gracious relationship of the church with its Lord by means of the new covenant. It also includes the covenantal relationship that is established between Christians and the church."⁴⁰ Covenant membership, in the same way that God establishes structure and defines obligations with his people, defines the relationship believers have with one another in the church. Covenant membership is the vehicle believers use to determine and define their relationship with the church. Mark Dever and Paul Alexander write in *The Deliberate Church*, "A church covenant answers the question, How do we commit to living together?"⁴¹ Charles Deweese defines a church covenant as, "a series of written pledges based on the Bible which church members voluntarily make to God and to one another regarding their basic moral and spiritual commitments and the practice of their faith."⁴²

⁴⁰ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 124.

⁴¹ Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel*, 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 62.

⁴² Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), viii.

When a church does not explicitly spell out or define the duties and responsibilities of a church member, membership loses its meaning altogether. Dever and Alexander write,

Church covenants make membership meaningful because they clarify the spiritual and relational commitments that membership signifies. Clarifying the commitments of membership promotes the health of the local church because it keeps nominalism at bay and keeps us accountable to growing in real Christian piety. And the more we grow in true Christian holiness and love, the more evidence we have that we are indeed his disciples (John 13:34–35; 15:8).⁴³

John Hammett, writing in *Baptist Foundations*, affirms the principle of covenant membership writing:

Church members must accept the responsibilities that come with a covenantal type of commitment to one another. As the New Testament portrays it, church membership is an active role. In Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32, believers instinctively began to accept responsibility for one another’s welfare and to gravitate toward spending time with one another. Time together was necessary to fulfill all the responsibilities placed on the church members in the New Testament epistles.⁴⁴

Hammett goes on to argue, “The failure of churches to require such a commitment from their members today is painfully evident. As noted above, a majority of Southern Baptist church members do not even attend the main worship services of the church.”⁴⁵

Elements of a Church Covenant

Each church will have to determine for itself the nature and content of its church covenant. Deweese points out that even though church covenants have been part of Baptist life from the beginning, there has never been a consistent pattern or uniform content. He writes that the examples from the past demonstrated variations in length with some only having one sentence and others being much longer.⁴⁶ These examples also

⁴³ Dever and Alexander, *The Deliberate Church*, 62.

⁴⁴ John Hammett, “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 Academic, 2015), 177–78.

⁴⁵ Hammett, “The Why and Who of Church Membership,” 178.

⁴⁶ Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 30.

revealed that “the earlier covenants were comprised of generalized promises and statements of agreement, the later ones presented in greater detail the actual practices and patterns of conduct expected of church members.”⁴⁷ However, he goes on to argue, “the contents of the covenants, including the obligations to which early English Baptists committed themselves, fell into at least four distinct categories: church fellowship, church discipline, public worship and personal devotion, and pastoral and lay care.”⁴⁸ That being said, with the diversity among the covenants of the early Baptist churches, Deweese maintains that from early on, there was a prevailing “belief that [churches] should draft, adopt, and use personalized covenants, not prefabricated ones.”⁴⁹

Even though there was a movement in the early nineteenth century to develop a uniform covenant for all Baptist churches based on the New Hampshire tradition,⁵⁰ “more recently, several Southern Baptist writers have sought to move beyond covenants in the New Hampshire tradition and to add momentum to covenantal renewal in local church life by preparing their own innovative covenantal statements.”⁵¹ These recent covenantal statements did include certain key characteristics that included “the nurturing aspects of Christian relationships,” “the need for church members to become involved in ministry,” moving beyond the moral issue of “abstaining from the sale and use of alcoholic beverages” and focus on a “broader application of the principles of Christian ethics.”⁵² Regardless of the diversity in the content and length of Baptist covenants, there have been guiding ideals that the churches continually exhibit:

⁴⁷ Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 30.

⁴⁸ Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 30.

⁴⁹ Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 34.

⁵⁰ Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 61.

⁵¹ Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 79.

⁵² Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 79–80.

Typical discussions of covenants have focused on four aspects of the Baptist covenantal vision: (1) the nature of a covenant, (2) the role of a covenant in defining and constituting a church, (3) the relationship between a covenant and church discipline, and (4) special church covenant meetings. An assessment of these four areas offers useful insights into the theology, ecclesiology, and practicality of the Baptist covenantal experience.⁵³

The primary ideal, however, is that the “Baptist covenantal ideal has insisted that a responsible covenant does not try to add to the Bible; instead, it reflects Scripture.”⁵⁴

Summary

When believers begin to understand and value covenantal church membership, the church becomes healthier, each individual becomes healthier, and the gospel witness to the world becomes brighter. The opposite is true as well. When believers will not commit to consistent participation and commitment to their local church, it fails to be the family that we see described in the New Testament where people care for one another, encourage one another, spur one another on to good works, and it fails to exemplify the counter-cultural community that demonstrates to the world the beauty of the gospel. Christian community is one of the primary gifts God has given to help believers in this world. In his classic work *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “So between the death of Christ and the Last Day it is only by a gracious anticipation of the last things that Christians are privileged to live in a visible fellowship with other Christians.”⁵⁵

However, this type of covenantal community does not happen naturally or is easy to maintain. Bonhoeffer also argues that we often bring our expectations and demands to the community, and in doing so, can do damage to the community as God intends it to be. He explains, “Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must

⁵³ Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 82.

⁵⁴ Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 82.

⁵⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: HarperOne, 1954), 18.

realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it.”⁵⁶ In other words, as believers surrender to Christ in trustful submission, community becomes indispensable in one’s Christian journey. “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.”⁵⁷ The people of God in the new covenant are the people who commune together in the local church under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

As part of developing a covenantal culture, churches will also need to consider extenuating circumstances in how they enforce their church covenant. For example, as church members age, it may become necessary for some to move into an assisted living or nursing home type facility. This obviously would make regular attendance very difficult, but this does not, necessarily, diminish their commitment to God and the church or tarnish their witness to the watching world. Churches in cities with military bases must decide how to handle church members who might be out of the country on deployment for an extended amount of time. The issue of regular giving could be affected by layoffs or economic downturn. It is for these reasons that church covenants cannot be static but must be living documents that reflect the context where the church exists. Churches need prayerful and wise leaders to understand the needs of the congregation and the myriad of situations that will require discernment and compassion. However, churches cannot lose sight of the goal and purpose of covenant membership. Thomas White contends, “We

⁵⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 30.

⁵⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 18.

must remember that when we water down our membership, we weaken our testimony and our faithfulness to Christ.”⁵⁸

Conclusion

Finally, the history of the Bible is the history of God working with a people. Mankind is God’s image bearers to the world, and God’s design is that these image bearers would represent his glory to the whole creation as they relate well to him and each other. God established covenants with his people outlining the way these relationships should function. There are benefits when the covenant provisions are upheld, and there are consequences when the covenant provisions are ignored or rejected. Through the new covenant obtained by the blood of Jesus Christ, those united to Christ by faith, are now included in the people of God.

By its nature, then, the church calls for its people to be connected in a close communal relationship. Even though the language of joining a church is not in Scripture, church membership is the best way to apply the teachings of these biblical images. Membership offers a way to let people know who is in and who is out. It shows individuals to whom they are accountable in a mutual expression of ministering the “one anothers” of the Bible. It tells the pastors and leaders to whom they are responsible in their shepherding duties.

It is often said that membership needs to be loosened up and tightened up at the same time. It needs to be loosened where churches are not too quick in encouraging, or even demanding, people to join. Some people might need some time to investigate the doctrinal convictions of the church, determine if the church is a place where they can exercise their spiritual gifts, and, maybe even, clarify their salvation. People should be able to attend and serve in appropriate ways, such as benevolence ministries, the

⁵⁸ Thomas White, “The Why, How, and When of Church Discipline,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2015), 225.

maintenance team, coffee service, or other types of non-leadership activities, as they come to a firm conviction about becoming a member. Membership should also be tightened so that when a believer joins the church, he or she understands the fullness of the commitment believers are called to make. Every Christian should understand they are giving the church permission to watch their Christian walk and hold them accountable to the ethical demands of the Bible. This is why a membership covenant is so important.

Covenant church membership is a vital tool in accomplishing the greater purpose of the church. The glory of God is made more fully known to the world when the church is orthodox, loving, and purposeful. A church covenant spells out precisely the mutual obligations and duties particular church members have to one another. Church members can know exactly what is expected of them and what are the consequences of not remaining faithful to fruitful church membership. With a church covenant, church discipline becomes more appropriate as there is clarity regarding a member's commitments and obligations. Without a covenant, discipline is still possible, especially for those things that are egregiously unbiblical, but it would be difficult to hold people accountable for things that may seem to be no big deal, such as regular giving, attendance, or service in the church. An operative church covenant can be a tremendous help in the mission and function of the church; therefore, churches would do well to practice covenant church membership.

CHAPTER 3

PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF COVENANT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Having argued that church members should relate to one another through covenant church membership, I will now establish the practical benefits of covenantal church membership. First, Christians will experience greater and more holistic spiritual growth when they are committed to other Christians in a mutually accountable relationship. Second, covenant church membership provides the foundation for restorative church discipline. Third, members in a covenantal relationship become better witnesses to the unbelieving world about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Covenant Church Membership Facilitates Spiritual Growth

Covenant church membership is one of the primary ways God works in the lives of his people to facilitate spiritual growth and maturity.

The Gospel of Jesus

“I don’t think we have done it right.” This response recently came from a fellow pastor who has been a mentor and fellow strategist for nearly twenty years. He was discussing his own spiritual struggles alongside his observations of the spiritual health of the churches we know. My friend’s perspective flowed from questions about his progress in the Christian life as well as concerns about friends and acquaintances who claim to follow Christ but show very little fruit of this proclamation in their everyday lives. He was asking if the systems and programs we developed and maintained over the past two decades accomplished what we had hoped they would in the lives of people. His concern was that we may have perpetuated the idea that going to heaven was the only

objective of the Christian life and the rest did not matter. He was asking if we have misunderstood the gospel.

The gospel can be briefly summarized as Jesus Christ came to this world to save sinners (Luke 5:32; 1 Tim 1:15). This reality is established by the fact that God created mankind in his own image to subdue the earth for his glory and goodness (Gen 1:27–28), but the biblical story does not progress very far before the image of God in mankind is corrupted. Genesis 3 recounts the story of mankind’s rebellion when they succumbed to the serpent’s deception and ushered sin into the world (Gen 3:1–7). Sin is now the default category for every child of Adam (Rom 5:12).

Thankfully, God makes a promise as the story moves forward in Genesis. When talking to the serpent, God declares, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen 3:15). After mankind rejected God’s loving reign and rule and ushered in his judgment, God demonstrated his great love for his fallen creation by pointing forward to a time when the consequence of their sin would be absorbed by a promised savior.

The Old Testament then traces the story of how God would fulfill this promise. It begins with a family that becomes a nation, Israel, that is given the mandate to be the people through whom all the peoples of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:1–3). God would use Israel to be the mechanism through which the seed of the woman would come to save the peoples of the earth. Edmund P. Clowney writes, “Israel’s call would be fulfilled by the coming of the true Servant of the Lord. God’s true and only Son must appear: the Son of the woman, the Seed of Abraham, the true Isaac (Son of the promise), the Son of David, called to be God’s Servant and to sit at God’s right hand. He would

fulfill the calling of [Israel].”¹ The gospel is the good news that Jesus came to save sinners.

The Gospel and the Church

In the New Testament, Jesus establishes himself as the long-awaited Savior and calls to himself a group of disciples that become the church that is to become stewards and messengers of this gospel (Matt 28:18–20; Acts 1:8; 1 Tim 1:4). Clowney describes this group of disciples as gatherers. “God accomplishes his saving mission by sending his Son into the world. Jesus is the great Missionary, sent by the Father. As Lord, Jesus comes to gather his people, and to form his disciples as a company of gatherers.”² Gregg Allison defines the church, in part, as missional and explains that the church is, “Identified as the body of divinely called and divinely sent ministers to proclaim the gospel and advance the kingdom of God.”³ These two definitions of the church as gatherers and missionaries is reminiscent of Jesus’s words recorded near the end of John’s Gospel. “Peace be with you as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). The church has been ordained to preach a gospel that saves sinners.

A Truncated Gospel

The question then becomes what it means for sinners to be saved. Or to say it another way, what is the essence of the gospel? At first glance, this should be an easy question to answer for anyone who has spent much time in a Baptist church. If the gospel is the central message of the Bible, there should be little controversy in describing its core elements. Nonetheless, there is as much confusion about the gospel as there is about any

¹ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 35.

² Clowney, *The Church*, 159.

³ Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 31.

other Christian doctrine. The problem for many is that they want to boil the gospel down to its most basic elements, and when this happens, the gospel can be lost altogether.

Scot McKnight argues that many Christians lose the gospel because the contemporary church in North America has oversimplified it: “I believe the word gospel has been hijacked by what we believe about ‘personal salvation,’ and the gospel itself has been reshaped to facilitate making ‘decisions.’ The result of this hijacking is that the word gospel no longer means in our world what it originally meant to either Jesus or the apostles.”⁴ We have taken the fully orbbed, life-encompassing message of the gospel and have reduced it to “believe in Jesus so you can go to heaven when you die,” and by doing this, we have done tremendous damage to the church.⁵

McKnight highlights two possible damages. First, an over-emphasis on personal salvation short-circuits true discipleship. Second, it diminishes the communal aspect of the biblical gospel. Regarding discipleship, he argues that focusing on personal salvation turns the gospel merely into a plan of salvation where the goal is to lead people into making decisions without a focus on turning them into disciples. The result is “a salvation culture in which the obsession is making the right decision so we can cross the threshold from the unsaved to the saved.”⁶ Additionally, it creates a culture that does not focus on the fruit of true gospel discipleship. “Justification [or personal salvation] leads to a declaration by God that we are in the right, that we are in the people of God; it doesn’t lead inexorably to a life of justice or goodness or living-kindness.”⁷

Regarding the communal nature of the biblical gospel, McKnight argues that a personal salvation only gospel overlooks what God is doing throughout all of history in

⁴ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 26.

⁵ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 27.

⁶ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 31.

⁷ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 40.

calling a people to himself. “The plan [of personal salvation] has a way of cutting the story from a story about God and God’s Messiah and God’s people into a story about God and one person—me—and in this the story shifts from Christ and community to individualism. We need the latter without cutting off the former.”⁸ A personal salvation only gospel that focuses merely on an individual’s story before God and how he or she might get to heaven has led the modern church to discount and even, at times, disparage the covenant commitment to the body of Christ called for in the Bible. There may be many reasons why those who claim to follow Jesus and acknowledge a biblical authority for their lives do not faithfully participate in the life of the church, but, at the root, the issue is theological.

We live in a culture that emphasizes and promotes individualism in every sphere, and this notion of individual rights or individual expression has infiltrated the church in ways that have distorted an orthodox understanding of what it means to be a covenant community. Carl Trueman, writing for 9Marks, argues, “If expressive individualism is the typical way in which people think of themselves and their relationship to the world, then Christians must understand that they too are deeply implicated. We can no more abstract ourselves from our social and cultural context, and the intuitions that our context cultivates, than we can leave our bodies and float to the moon.”⁹ This individualistic idea of the self affects both a proper theological understanding of salvation as well as a proper understanding of covenant church community.

When the individual is central, salvation becomes a singular transaction with God with personal benefits for now and eternity instead of what the apostle Paul describes to the Gentiles in Ephesians as being a reconciliation with the people of God

⁸ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 62.

⁹ Carl Trueman, “Expressive Individualism and the Church,” 9Marks, May 18, 2022, <https://www.9marks.org/article/expressive-individualism-and-the-church/>.

(Eph 2:11–13). McKnight argues that this individual idea of salvation comes from Reformation thinkers where contemporary churches overemphasize individual justification by faith over and against the Catholic Church as the dispenser of salvation through the organization of the church. “Our contemporary equation of the word *gospel* with the Plan of Salvation came about because of the developments from and after the Reformation.”¹⁰ This can easily be extrapolated to mean that the purpose of the gospel is to save the individual over and against the Bible’s emphasis on creating a people for God’s own possession (1 Pet 2:9–10).

Therefore, once a person becomes confident in their salvation before God, there is no other purpose for the church other than complimenting and resourcing his/her individual journey. Further, if the gospel is only about my individual spiritual journey, why commit to the church that might infringe upon other parts of my life? Dever writes, “All the statistics seem to point to our age being an age of ‘commitment-phobia.’” Commitment-phobia is the fear that in promising to do something good we will miss out on getting something even better.¹¹ He goes on to argue, “Add to this the problem of lone-rangerism: why depend on someone else if you can do it yourself? We are concerned today with ease and simplicity. Why entangle ourselves with others? We may be a burden to them; they certainly may be a burden to us.”¹²

A Complete Gospel

The thing that the church needs is a complete gospel. It needs a gospel that goes beyond mere personal salvation and includes personal transformation. To make his argument, McKnight recounts the story of Israel, how it is consummated in Jesus, and

¹⁰ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 71.

¹¹ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed., 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 155.

¹² Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 156.

how people are brought into the kingdom of God and transformed. “He chose to let them be people of the kingdom, called the church, and he summoned them to believe in Jesus, to turn from their usurpations, and to so identify with Jesus that they would enter into his death and into his resurrection and through that find new life.”¹³ This new life is enabled when Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to the church, and “this Holy Spirit could transform them into the visible likeness of Jesus himself.”¹⁴ A gospel that includes spiritual transformation along with personal salvation understands the nature and necessity of spiritual growth.

Dallas Willard writes that to grow spiritually “is to be transformed in the internal aspects of life, at the heart level. He contends that “the greatest need you and I have—the greatest need of collective humanity—is *renovation of our hearts*. That spiritual place within us from which outlook, choices, and actions come has been formed by a word away from God. Now it must be transformed.”¹⁵ He argues that no external systems or institutions have the tools or ability to enact transformation in the inner person because true and lasting change only comes from “the inside through ongoing personal relationship to God in Christ and to one another.”¹⁶ Willard goes on to define spiritual growth as, “the spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”¹⁷ Gary Millar argues that all Christians should desire this kind of personal change. It should include, “decisively altered behavior, consistently modified thinking, choices, and decisions and permanently

¹³ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 168.

¹⁴ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 168.

¹⁵ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, 20th anniv. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2021), 6.

¹⁶ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 7.

¹⁷ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 15.

reshaped character.”¹⁸ A church needs a fuller gospel that not only offers hope for a life in heaven but has something to say about the way we live in the present moment. “It is clearly contrary to the New Testament pattern to think that our only goal with people is to bring them to initial saving faith. Our goal as a church must be to present to God every Christian ‘mature in Christ’ (Col 1:28).”¹⁹ We need a gospel that includes personal transformation.

The Church and Spiritual Growth

One of the results of a fuller gospel is the formation of a Christ-centered community. John R. W. Stott writes,

Thus, the very purpose of his self-giving on the cross was not just to save isolated individuals, and so perpetuate their loneliness, but to create a new community whose members would belong to him, love one another and eagerly serve the world. This community of Christ would be nothing less than a renewed and reunited humanity . . . It would incorporate Jews and Gentiles on equal terms. It would include representatives from every nation. Christ died in abject aloneness, rejected by his own nation and deserted by his own disciples, but lifted up on the cross he would draw all people to himself. And from the Day of Pentecost onward it has been clear that conversion to Christ means also conversion to the community of Christ, as people turn from themselves to him, and from “this corrupt generation” to the alternative society which he is gathering around himself.²⁰

And it is the gospel that gives shape and structure to this community and its activities. Jonathan Leeman writes, “The structure of the church’s corporate life together is tightly tied to the content of the gospel, and the content of the gospel is tightly tied to the structure of the church’s corporate life together.”²¹ If the church only understands the gospel as personal salvation, all its emphases and activities will be about getting people

¹⁸ J. G. Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 55 (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos/IVP Academic, 2021), 4.

¹⁹ Wayne A. Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*, ed. Jeff Purswell (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 373.

²⁰ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, centennial ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 249.

²¹ Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline*, 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 16.

saved or helping them make some kind of decision towards Jesus. However, if the church understands a fuller gospel of personal salvation plus life transformation, it will build a culture where people grow and develop and become the type of people that represent and reflect the glory of God. Clowney describes this process as nurture: “Paul’s image of the body of Christ offers profound insights for nurture: all the members are needed; gifts are for the body as a whole, and isolation is tragic; and diversity of function produces not division, but unity (Eph 4:11–16),”²² and for Clowney nurture means, “to grow to maturity in the image of Christ, in whom the divine image in creation is restored.”²³ Participating in the life of the church is the primary vehicle through which people grow in spiritual maturity. James K. A. Smith explains, “The church—the body of Christ—is the place where God invites us to renew our lives, reorient our desires, and retrain our appetites.”²⁴ He goes on to argue, “The church is that household where the Spirit feeds us what we need and where, by his grace, we become a people who desire him above all else.”²⁵

However, J. T. English makes the argument that the contemporary church has not lived up to its calling to be the primary vehicle through which people experience transformation and find gospel flourishing. He writes about speaking at a conference for church leaders where he asked the attendees to raise their hands if the majority of their spiritual formation happened outside of the church. He recounts that over eighty percent raised their hand.²⁶ English goes on to argue, “The church is called to make disciples, and it is time for us to stop delegating our responsibility. Other organizations can come

²² Clowney, *The Church*, 138.

²³ Clowney, *The Church*, 140.

²⁴ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 65.

²⁵ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 65.

²⁶ J. T. English, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus* (Nashville: B & H Books, 2020), 48.

alongside the church, but they can never replace the church I believe with every fiber of my being that the local church is God’s primary means of making holistic disciples of Christ.”²⁷ Richard F. Lovelace agrees that something has changed from the church’s inception. “Unlike most modern congregations the early Christian church was an integrated community centered around the worship of God and the advancement of his kingdom . . . They were devoting everything they were and owned to the strengthening of one another and the cause of Christ.”²⁸ The church needs to recapture a vision of discipleship flowing out of a full understanding of the gospel and build into its culture practices that promote spiritual growth.

Church Practices and Spiritual Growth

These practices, according to Smith, “are also a spiritual workout, inviting us into routines that train our heart muscles, our fundamental desires that govern how we move and act in the world.”²⁹ Michael J. Savigel, writing in *Retro Christianity*, calls this the work of edification. “Edification is best described as ‘building up’ believers in the faith and is synonymous with ‘discipleship’ or ‘growing in Christ.’”³⁰

The practices that build up believers within the context of a local church begin with preaching and teaching the Word of God. Dever writes, “God’s Word is what we need if we are to grow.”³¹ English agrees saying, “The Bible is at the center of the Christian life. It is impossible to be a follower of Christ without being a student of his

²⁷ English, *Deep Discipleship*, 48–49.

²⁸ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*, exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 161.

²⁹ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 65.

³⁰ Michael J. Savigel, *RetroChristianity: Reclaiming the Forgotten Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 207.

³¹ Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 216.

Word.”³² The Bible self-attests to its importance to the Christian life when Paul writes to his young protégé Timothy: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17). Donald Guthrie explains, “The focus of this verse is ‘not so much the inspiration of Scripture as its profitableness.’”³³ As the church needs a gospel of transformation, the church needs to understand its role in helping people know and understand the Scriptures.

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit equips each member with a gift for the building and edification of the church (Rom 12:3–8; 1 Cor 12:12–26), and some of these members will possess the gift of teaching. These teachers are called to teach and preach the Word in such a way that the body grows in spiritual maturity. Without the help of these teachers within the church, many people will struggle to fully grasp the depth and beauty of God’s Word. Svigel contends, “Learning God’s Word was never meant to be an independent study or correspondence course. Rather, God gave teachers to the churches to equip the saints and to build them up toward maturity.”³⁴ He goes on to write, “A major emphasis in a healthy local church must be the unapologetic preaching and teaching of God’s inspired Word by teachers who have trained to handle it faithfully in its historical and theological context.”³⁵ When the church is saturated in the Word, an ethos of worship is established, and Christ-centered corporate worship also leads to spiritual transformation.

While learning and knowing the Scriptures will shape the Christian’s mind, worship will change his/her heart. The Bible teaches, “Keep your heart with all vigilance,

³² English, *Deep Discipleship*, 108.

³³ Donald Guthrie, “2 Timothy,” in *The New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. G. J. Wenham et al., 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1309.

³⁴ Svigel, *RetroChristianity*, 208.

³⁵ Svigel, *RetroChristianity*, 208.

for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov 4:23). Smith writes, “Discipleship, we might say, is a way to curate your heart, to be attentive to and intention about what you love.”³⁶ And he goes on to explain, “If you are what you love, and your ultimate loves are formed and aimed by your immersion in practices and cultural rituals, then such practices fundamentally shape who you are.”³⁷ Even though true worship should be the daily context of every believer’s life, the church has a biblical calling to focus an appropriate amount of time and energy on implementing worship practices during the weekly gathering that center on the truths of the gospel and aid its members in directing their passions and affections towards Jesus.

The New Testament gives us a picture of corporate worship practices that fueled the passion of the early church. Franklin M. Segler asserts, “Although there is no prescribed order for worship in the New Testament, there is evidence of order and planning.”³⁸ The primary issue is that the church’s worship practices focus on the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. These practices included the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, the reading of the Scriptures, corporate prayer, exposition of the Scriptures, exhortations, offerings, doxologies, confession, and the celebration of the ordinances.³⁹ The way that these elements are organized or expressed is not prescribed in a particular way in the New Testament. Svigel argues, “The worship style is not the main issue. The direction of worship is primary. We are to worship God-ward, not man-ward. Means of worship that don’t turn our hearts and minds and whole being to God cannot be properly regarded as biblical exhortation.”⁴⁰ The concern is that Christ-centered worship

³⁶ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 2.

³⁷ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 22.

³⁸ Franklin M. Segler, *Understanding, Preparing for, and Practicing Christian Worship*, rev. C. Randall Bradley, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 25.

³⁹ Segler, *Understanding, Preparing for, and Practicing Christian Worship*, 25–26.

⁴⁰ Svigel, *RetroChristianity*, 216.

becomes a primary focus for the church as it seeks to create an environment where true spiritual transformation takes place. Segler asserts, “Genuine worship in the church is the secret of renewal. If renewal does not take place in the church, genuine renewal does not take place anywhere. Renewal is not an end in itself but a result of sincere worship.”⁴¹

Summary

The reason that many give for their lack of church participation is that we are saved by grace and not by works, so it does not matter how much one attends church. So, I have argued that a true understanding of the gospel goes beyond initial justification and sees the importance of spiritual transformation. We need more than forgiveness of sin; we need a new heart that loves God and desires to honor his commands. Millar reminds us that true transformation happens in the local church. “The church is the context in which (and a means by which) God transforms us . . . The very purpose of gathering God’s people is to shape and change us so that as individuals and together we more fully display the glory and beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴² From the beginning of the organized church in Acts, community has been central to its function.⁴³ Carl Trueman reminds us that our “identity is shaped by the communities to which we belong,” and he asserts that the “strongest identities I have, forming my strongest intuitions, derive from the strongest communities to which I belong. And that means that the church needs to be the strongest community to which we each belong.”⁴⁴ When members of a church covenant to be together and love each other as prescribed in the Scriptures, the church becomes a place where the gospel does its work of both justification and spiritual transformation.

⁴¹ Segler, *Understanding, Preparing for, and Practicing Christian Worship*, 75.

⁴² Millar, *Changed into His Likeness*, 240.

⁴³ Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 174–75.

⁴⁴ Trueman, *Strange New World*, 175.

Covenant Church Membership Enables Restorative Church Discipline

For the church to become the place where people are formed and matured by the life-changing power of the gospel, the expectations of church membership need to correspond to the teaching of Scripture. As discussed in chapter 2, these expectations form the basis of a church covenant where each member understands the benefits and responsibilities of church membership and the consequence of not fulfilling these responsibilities. Mark Dever and Paul Alexander state, “Implementing a church covenant helps to correct the misperception that members can live in either isolated individualism or unrepented sin and still be members in good standing.”⁴⁵ Thabiti M. Anyabwile offers eight responsibilities church members have to the church body: “attends regularly; seeks peace; edifies others; warns and admonishes others; pursues reconciliation; bears with others; prepares for the ordinances; supports the word of the ministry.”⁴⁶ The consequences for not fulfilling one’s membership responsibilities are called corrective church discipline. Leeman gives an in-depth definition of church discipline.

Corrective church discipline occurs any time sin is corrected within the church body, and it occurs most fully when the church body announces that the covenant between church and member is already broken because the member has proven to be unsubmitive in his or her discipleship to Christ. By this token, the church withdraws its affirmation of the individual’s faith, announces that it will cease giving oversight, and releases the individual back into the world.⁴⁷

The Necessity of Church Discipline

Thomas White, in *Baptist Foundations*, contributes to the topic of meaningful, or covenantal-type membership, by teaching that corrective church discipline is necessary to develop and maintain a healthy and fruitful church. He writes, “Churches cannot

⁴⁵ Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel*, 9 Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 62.

⁴⁶ Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*, Building Healthy Churches (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 68–70.

⁴⁷ Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 220.

maintain meaningful church membership without practicing biblical church discipline, and churches cannot regain biblical church discipline without establishing meaningful church membership.”⁴⁸ Lavonn D. Brown defines church discipline, “In its positive form, *discipline* refers to a process of teaching and training (discipleship). In its negative form, it refers to corrective and reformative measures. The disciple must submit to the discipleship and discipline of the Christian life as the necessary parts of the total salvation experience.”⁴⁹ Leeman asserts, “An undisciplined church membership is an undisciplined church membership. It will be weak and flabby, foolish, and unchaste.”⁵⁰

There may not be any single issue more central to the lack of integrity and fruitfulness of the local church than the lack of corrective discipline in churches. This issue plays a significant role in the reason why churches are losing their credibility in the broader community. Members who are non-committal, nominal, and ungodly send a confusing message to unbelievers as well as setting a terrible example to newer believers just beginning to understand the faith. On his blog, R. Albert Mohler Jr., in a post about the necessity of church discipline, made the point, “Without a recovery of functional church discipline—firmly established upon the principles revealed in the Bible—the church will continue its slide into moral dissolution and relativism.”⁵¹ Svigel agrees, “It has become a common practice among our evangelical churches to neglect this aspect of edification, and the consequences have been disastrous. The individuals or groups who need to be confronted about their continued sin never receive discipline, and the entire

⁴⁸ Thomas White, “The Why, How, and When of Church Discipline,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government in an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2015), 199.

⁴⁹ Lavonn D. Brown, *The Life of the Church*, Layman’s Library of Christian Doctrine 13 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 52.

⁵⁰ Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 220.

⁵¹ R. Albert Mohler Jr., “The Disappearance of Church Discipline—How Can We Recover? Part One,” *Albert Mohler* (blog), February 17, 2021, <https://albertmohler.com/2005/05/13/the-disappearance-of-church-discipline-how-can-we-recover-part-one>.

church suffers from this failure to lead the sinners to repentance.”⁵² Dever concludes, “One of the unintended consequences of a church’s neglect of proper discipline is that it gets much harder to produce disciples.”⁵³

If the members of the church are called to love one another, then there may be nothing more loving than church discipline. Leeman asserts, “Church discipline . . . is a clear implication of God-centered gospel love.”⁵⁴ Unrepentant sin brings destruction both to the individual and the church to which he or she belongs, and allowing a fellow believer to remain in sin may be the most unloving thing believers and do to another. Even though confronting a fellow believer about their sin can be difficult and might damage that relationship, Leeman says, “In radical defiance of the wisdom of this world, it helps to clarify exactly what love is.”⁵⁵

However, each church will need to determine what biblical duties and responsibilities they want to emphasize. With the church living and thriving in an array of cultural settings, the needs and issues of each church can differ dramatically. White contends, “A pastor must use wisdom to determine when and how a church should practice discipline. Scripture never provides a complete list of doctrinal and moral offenses that warrant discipline.”⁵⁶ Each church will have to determine for itself what it means to attend or give or pray regularly along with all the other scriptural responsibilities of its membership. The culture of the church will influence how the church should make these decisions, and leaders will need wisdom and discernment as they determine their ministry context and situation. As mentioned in chapter 2, these leaders will also need to consider extenuating situations where members might be

⁵² Svigel, *RetroChristianity*, 211.

⁵³ Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 221.

⁵⁴ Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 221.

⁵⁵ Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 222.

⁵⁶ White, “The Why, How, and When of Church Discipline,” 218.

homebound, on military assignment, or experiencing economic difficulties. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to church discipline, but biblical, restorative church discipline should be part of the church's culture if it wants to be healthy and effective.

The Process of Church Discipline

The Bible not only commands church discipline but provides clear-cut guidelines to give the best possible opportunity for repentance and restoration. Matthew, recounting the words of Jesus, explains,

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matt 18:15–17)

This passage begins with church discipline being informal and private.⁵⁷ The first step is an informal discussion between fellow members of the church who, presumably, have the type of relationship where this type of conversation is appropriate. In this relationship, the issue can be kept private for both the dignity of the brother and the unity of the church. However, if the informal and private conversations are not fruitful, the process must escalate to a more formal and public setting. Jesus concludes this discussion with the church's responsibility to declare on earth the heavenly realities incurred by a person's unrepentant sin. Allison writes, "At the last stage of the disciplinary process, when the church excommunicates an unrepentant member, that action of "binding" the member in sin and under discipline has already occurred in heaven (v. 18); thus, the church's verdict confirms a preceding divine denunciation."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 318.

⁵⁸ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 183.

Leeman continues the discussion of church discipline by turning to the church at Corinth. “There are some occasions in which the informal and private steps are skipped and the church proceeds immediately to the formal act of excluding a member from its fellowship.”⁵⁹ There is a situation in the Corinthian church so grievous that the apostle Paul calls for immediate and public ex-communication of a man within the church who was found in sexual sin (1 Cor 5:2). The public witness of the church demanded public action. Leeman contends, “At the risk of being vague, I think it’s better to simply say that formal church discipline is for sin of a public, serious, and unrepentant nature.”⁶⁰

The Goal of Church Discipline

The goal of all church discipline is “gaining a brother” (Matt 18:15), and the least desirable outcome is putting the brother out of the church (Matt 18:17). Allison affirms that the goal is reconciliation. “Church discipline is to be undertaken with the goal that the offending Christian will acknowledge sin, confess it, and repent so that reconciliation will be effected.”⁶¹ Because of sin, the member has put themselves in a perilous position that not only harms them, but it also harms everyone around them, and the most loving thing a church can do is attempt to bring them back to right standing before God and others. Leeman reminds, “We must keep in mind that corrective church discipline is a small act of judgment on earth that dimly points to God’s final judgment in heaven. It’s performed with the hope that it will help bring a sinner to repentance before the final judgment comes.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 318.

⁶⁰ Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 319.

⁶¹ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 188.

⁶² Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 322.

Summary

When a church has a covenantal understanding of membership where the expectations and responsibilities are clearly spelled out, the church becomes much more effective in its mission to make whole disciples of Jesus Christ. When the duties and expectations, taken from Scripture, are clearly distilled and outlined, then church members have greater support to hold one another accountable for the purity and reputation of the church. Churches need to create a covenant to ensure their health and gospel fruitfulness. Svigel argues,

Churches must strengthen their approach to church membership. Requiring better training and preparation for membership, maintaining accurate membership rolls, and presenting membership as a “covenant relationship” between the body and its members. Thus, when discipline becomes necessary, the church leadership will have consistent guidelines—made clear to members when they joined—for carrying out this difficult responsibility.⁶³

Without a church covenant, any church discipline would be precarious. Discipline can become arbitrary, inconsistent, and unused when the duties and responsibilities of church membership are undefined or vague. A church covenant spells out precisely the mutual obligations and duties particular church members have to one another. Church members can know exactly what is expected of them and the consequences of not remaining faithful to fruitful church membership. With a church covenant, church discipline becomes more appropriate and fruitful as there is clarity regarding a member’s commitments and obligations. Without a covenant, discipline is still possible, especially for those things that are egregiously unbiblical, but it would be difficult to hold people accountable for things that are less obvious, such as regular giving, attendance, or service in the church. An operative church covenant can be a tremendous help in the mission and function of the church, opening the door for corrective church discipline.

⁶³ Svigel, *RetroChristianity*, 211.

Covenant Church Membership Presents a Better Witness to the World

Mission of God

When the church becomes the place where believers are grown in spiritual maturity aided by restorative church discipline, then it also becomes the place where it fulfills the mission of God. Christopher J. H. Wright opens his substantial work on the mission of God by arguing that in his own experience, he was taught that the mission of the church was separated from the theology of God. Theology taught us about God, and mission was something that people who were serious about the Bible did.⁶⁴ After wrestling with the issue, he writes that he began to see that mission was not separated from the nature and character of God. In fact, he claims, the whole Bible teaches that God is a God of mission. “The writings that now comprise our Bible are themselves the product of and witness to the ultimate mission of God. The Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of the whole of God’s creation.”⁶⁵ So, to see God rightly and to see our place in God’s creation, we need to see ourselves as participants in God’s mission. “Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation.”⁶⁶

According to Wright, the mission of God is about redemption. God created the world for mankind to experience his glory in a harmonious relationship with himself and with one another. However, sin entered the world, and the harmony that once existed with God and with man was destroyed. God initiated a plan, or mission, to bring an end to sin and to reconcile man back to himself. Clowney concludes,

⁶⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 21.

⁶⁵ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 22.

⁶⁶ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 22–23.

In the Bible, salvation is God's mission to a lost world. It is God who seeks Adam and Eve in the garden; God who promises the Son of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent; God who warns Noah, and calls Abraham in Ur and Moses at the burning bush. The book of Judges, the narratives of the books of Kings and the words of the prophets all point to the golden test of the Old Testament: "Salvation comes from the Lord" (Jon. 2:9). God himself must come to bring his salvation. This is the *missio Dei*.⁶⁷

The Bible's message is that this mission of God has been accomplished by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Wright turns to the Gospel of Luke where he recalls the account of Jesus confronting travelers on the road to Emmaus and explaining that the Bible was pointing to himself as the fulfillment of God's mission. Luke "seems to be saying that the whole fulfillment is *both* in the life and death and resurrection of Israel's Messiah, *and* in the mission to all the nations, which flows out from that event."⁶⁸

The Church as Mission

The mission of God begins in the Old Testament as God forms a people into a nation, and in the New Testament, the church becomes the vehicle through which God brings salvation to the world. Gary D. Badcock writes, "There can be no doubt that New Testament writers do take the view that the church is indeed the people of God, a people, moreover, who stand in continuity with the people of God of the Hebrew Scripture."⁶⁹ How much continuity exists between the people of the Old Testament with New Testament believers is a matter of debate, but on both sides of the issue, there is agreement that the church was born out of God's plan of redemption.

We see this demonstrated in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus calls his followers to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18–20). John adds to this theme by recounting Jesus's High Priestly prayer. Jesus asks the Father to leave his disciples in the world but to protect them from the evil one because as the Father sent Jesus into the

⁶⁷ Clowney, *The Church*, 158–59.

⁶⁸ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 30.

⁶⁹ Gary D. Badcock, *The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 32.

world, Jesus is sending his followers into the world to complete the Father's purposes (John 17:15–19).

Alvin L. Reid wrote about the need for the church to engage in evangelism, and his book includes useful encouragements and insights about evangelism. Reid builds his case on the fact that “God’s plan to reach the world is through local congregations,”⁷⁰ and he goes on to define the church as, “a congregation of baptized believers who join together to honor God and to fulfill his mission in the world.”⁷¹ Finally, he notes that many people have a flawed view of the church and “have forgotten that the local church is God’s plan to reach the world.”⁷² Ron Rogers writes, “a body of believers, baptized upon their profession of faith in Jesus Christ, who have joined together voluntarily in the Holy Spirit for the purpose of promoting Christ’s redemptive purposes for humanity.”⁷³ He gives further explanation of the four clauses of this definition and gives shape to the final clause, writing, “the above definition suggests that a New Testament church’s function is the promotion of Christ’s redemptive purposes for all humans.”⁷⁴

Mission through Community

Since the church is the result of God’s mission to the world, one cannot discount the importance of church members committing to one another in a covenant community. Reid argues, “The local church at her best . . . serves as light and salt in the culture. At her worst, a local church given over to institutionalism, legalism, or license,

⁷⁰ Alvin L. Reid, *Evangelism Handbook: Biblical, Spiritual, Intentional, Missional* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2009), 288.

⁷¹ Reid, *Evangelism Handbook*, 288.

⁷² Reid, *Evangelism Handbook*, 288.

⁷³ Ron Rogers, “The Missionary Purpose of God’s People,” in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John Mark Terry, Ebbie C. Smith, and Justice Anderson (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 114.

⁷⁴ Rogers, “The Missionary Purpose of God’s People,” 115.

can actually be the chief enemy of the gospel in a community.”⁷⁵ In other words, if the members are not functioning in a manner prescribed in the Scriptures, their behavior can do tremendous damage to the church’s witness to the gospel in its context. Conversely, when church members are acting in a way that accords with the Bible’s view of a loving community, the gospel message it proclaims becomes more attractive and more authentic. This principle is emphasized in John’s Gospel where he shares the revolutionary act of Jesus stooping to wash his disciple’s feet, and Jesus follows it up with giving them a new commandment “that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–5).

Love is the context that the Bible prescribes for the church. Of all the things that can derail the church and its witness to the culture, a lack of genuine, gospel-oriented love is at the center. The church is created to be the place where the love of God is demonstrated to the world by the way its members treat one another. When that love is the defining characteristic of the Christian community, the church becomes a beacon for the redemptive purposes of God. Robert Garrett points back to the church described at the beginning of Acts and contends,

There was generosity as believers shared their material fortunes as well as spiritual concerns. There were public meetings to proclaim Christ to their own people in the temple and private meetings in which they encouraged and taught one another. There was fellowship as meals and life experiences were shared. Worship naturally occurred in all these settings, and it impressed outsiders favorably. Many were “saved” and joined the early church as a result.⁷⁶

This loving community where everyone loved, served, and supported one another became the spark that changed the known world in just a few hundred years.

⁷⁵ Reid, *Evangelism Handbook*, 286.

⁷⁶ Robert Garrett, “The Gospels and Acts: Jesus the Missionary and His Missionary Followers,” in Terry, Smith and Anderson, *Missiology: An Introduction*, 78.

Leeman argues that one of the problems in the broader culture is that people have a distorted and perverted understanding of love. And arguing that the gospel teaches the world the true meaning of love, he writes, “Insofar as the gospel presents the world with the most vivid picture of God’s love, and insofar as church membership and discipline are an implication of the gospel, local church membership and discipline in fact define God’s love for the world.”⁷⁷ And he goes on to say, “The world will understand who Christ is and what love is *when* the church defines it for them by loving one another in the gospel.”⁷⁸

Summary

A covenant commitment to one another is necessary because this type of loving relationship becomes the means of participating in God’s mission on the earth. God has purposed to redeem his creation and reconcile it back to perfect harmony with himself. The church, when its members are united together by mutual love and submission, becomes a foretaste of the beauty of this new reality. Leeman looks forward and claims,

The love, holiness, and beauty of that end-time body need to be demonstrated now. The forgiving and merciful and righteous *togetherness* of the church needs to be embodied now. Christ and his person need to be displayed now. Christians cannot display the life of this final society, the end-time gathering, this heavenly city, this Christ, all by themselves. They need other Christians. We can’t forgive, forbear, and love sitting all by ourselves on an island, nor can we receive forgiveness and forbearance. It’s as the citizens of this end-time society love one another that the world knows what it means to be Christ’s disciples (John 13:34–35).⁷⁹

Conclusion

The practical benefits of connecting to a church in a covenant relationship cannot be overestimated. Contrary to the modern idea that participating in a church is an

⁷⁷ Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 17.

⁷⁸ Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 34.

⁷⁹ Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 207.

unnecessary obligation, when believers are committed to one another in an active, loving relationship, they experience the grace and mercy of God in ways they would not otherwise. Spiritual transformation and maturity cannot happen in a vacuum, and believers need each other to be shaped and formed into the image of Jesus. Trueman writes, “Expressive individualism in the form in which we find it in contemporary society is problematic for the ways in which it places individuals and their own desires—we might even say their own egos—at the center of the moral universe.”⁸⁰ People need something to move themselves out of the center, and covenant church membership based on the communal ethics of Scripture requires a selfless posture that can only be formed in community.

Further, when the church fosters this culture of covenantal commitment to one another, it makes the process of restorative church discipline possible. Every believer needs the encouragement and accountability that comes from a covenant relationship where the benefits and responsibilities are spelled out in clarifying detail. Allison declares, “Church discipline serves to protect the actualization of the biblical vision for the church.”⁸¹ Most church members hesitate to engage in restorative church discipline because it can seem harsh or judgmental, but the purity of the church and the health of its members depend on biblical accountability.

Finally, when church members are growing in spiritual maturity and the purity of the church is upheld, the church becomes a force that can change the world because its being reflects the reconciling power of the gospel. Covenant membership that promotes a culture of love, service, and sacrifice embodies the gospel to the world in ways that our preaching never will, but when church members will not commit to one another in a biblical relationship, the church’s witness to the world is diminished severely. Dever

⁸⁰ Trueman, *Strange New World*, 180.

⁸¹ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 181.

asserts, “Uninvolved members confuse both real members and non-Christians about what it means to be a Christian.”⁸² Covenant church membership not only benefits the church, but it also benefits the whole world.

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

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

This chapter will detail the implementation of my project. The purpose of the project is to increase the FBCD membership's knowledge and understanding of the responsibilities and privileges of covenant church membership. The overall hope is that the church's membership role will reflect a body of committed, maturing, serving believers who make church involvement a priority in their lives. As mentioned in chapter 1, there are hundreds of names on the church role of people who have not attended worship for many years, and of the members who attend, at least 20 percent are absent on any given Sunday. While most members place a high priority on their individual salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus, they neglect the corresponding relationship with Christ's body that flows from their salvation.

The four goals of this project are to assess the current members' understanding of biblical church membership, develop a curriculum that outlines basic biblical principles of church membership, teach a six-session course, reassess to see if there was any change in the members' understanding of biblical church membership, and use the curriculum to develop a future new members' class. These goals were grouped into three phases executed over a twelve-week period. Phase 1 was the preparation period, phase 2 was the implementation period, and phase 3 was the follow-up period.

Phase 1: Preparation

Phase 1 was the preparation period, which took place during weeks 1 through 6. Weeks 1 and 2 involved the development of the six lesson outlines.¹ Much of the material was taken from chapters 2 and 3 of this project, which developed the biblical/theological foundation for covenant church membership and its practical benefits. These outlines were used as handouts during the teaching sessions.

Weeks 1 and 2

During the first two weeks, I developed the course outlines, and I wrote the church assessment questionnaire.² The questionnaire included fifty questions divided into three sections. The first section included seven questions that asked about personal information such as age, if he/she is a Christian, and if he/she is a member of FBCD. The second section included twenty-five questions to determine each respondent's biblical knowledge of church membership and the covenantal nature of the church. The third section included eighteen questions to determine each respondent's personal practice regarding church membership and participation. The questionnaire was made available to the whole church through both physical and digital options. Paper copies were made available in the church foyer, and a Google form was emailed to every member of the church. Thirty questionnaires were completed online, and four paper copies were returned.

Weeks 3 and 4

Once the curriculum outlines were completed, they were sent to a panel of five experts for evaluation. Each expert has at least a master's degree from a Southern Baptist seminary, and they perform differing ministries within local churches. One was the Director of Missions in a local Baptist association where I served at one time. One is a

¹ See appendix 1.

² See appendix 2.

Minister of Worship who worked with me in the past. One is a lay elder in a sister Baptist church in my community. One is the Family Pastor in the church I currently pastor, and one is the Senior Pastor of another Baptist church in the region. These men were given the six outlines along with an evaluation tool to guide them in their evaluation of the material.³ Weeks 3 and 4 were allotted to receiving and assessing the returned expert evaluations as well as making any suggested edits from the evaluations that were helpful.

Only three of the five experts returned their evaluations. One was returned within a few days, two were returned after a reminder text, and the other two were never returned. I quit reminding them after a few weeks not wanting to be a pest. One of the returned evaluations marked each category as exemplary with no comments or suggestions. The other two returned evaluations offered useful feedback. They both commented that work needed to be done on the question of if the material was sufficient for new members. They commented that adding practical steps along with examples would be helpful. One stated that I never mentioned giving financially as an important part of covenant church membership. I did not make any significant changes to the outlines because I was teaching to our current membership, but as I transition this material for a future new member's class, this feedback will be important to remember.

Weeks 5 and 6

Weeks 5 and 6 were used to edit and finalize the six lesson outlines and to continue promoting the course to the church. In promoting the course to the church, we made weekly announcements from the pulpit, and we sent group texts and emails from our database. I also texted and personally invited many members to come and participate in the course. I chose to teach the six lessons over three weeks during the Sunday night teaching time. We normally meet every other week, and the content generally alternates

³ See appendix 3.

between Bible book studies and more theologically driven topics such as systematic theology or hermeneutics. We are currently working through James, but we will put that on hold for this course. I chose three consecutive weeks primarily because I am asking for a larger commitment than our normal Sunday night attendance. We average twenty to thirty on Sunday nights, and I was hoping for at least fifty people to attend this course. I felt a shorter commitment would encourage greater participation. We only averaged around thirty-five at each session.

Phase 2: Implementation

The project was implemented during weeks 7 through 9. For three consecutive Sunday nights, I taught two sessions per night. I spent forty-five minutes teaching the first session of the night, gave the congregation a ten-minute break, and finished by teaching the second session of the night for forty-five minutes. I believe the plan to hold longer sessions over fewer weeks was well received by those who attended. My teaching style in these environments is conversational where I ask questions and strive for dialogue. The sessions were lively, and many people participated in the conversation adding valuable insight and experience. The only negative may have been the lower than hoped attendance.

Week 7: Sessions 1 and 2

Beginning with week 7, sessions 1 and 2 focused on a theological and practical understanding of what the church is. Session 1, titled “What Is the Church,” centered on the three primary metaphors in the New Testament describing the church. The church flows from the nature of the triune God as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. We began with the church as the people of God reading 1 Peter 2:9–10 where Peter takes Old Testament language and applies it to the New Testament church. We talked about God’s initial covenant with Abram to whom God promised to provide offspring who would bless all the peoples of the earth, and that those who are

united with Christ by faith are now included in the long line of those called the people of God. I spent a moment highlighting the issue of continuity. I taught that there is some disagreement among conservative evangelicals about the level of continuity between Israel and the church. I chose not to give my view, and I encouraged those who might be interested in the topic to read Benjamin L. Merkle's *Discontinuity to Continuity*.⁴

The practical application for the church as the people of God is that just like Israel was set apart and given a law that would make them a distinct people living as a testimony to the holiness of the creator God, the church is to be a distinct people in a dark world. The church follows Jesus's summary that loving God with our whole life and loving our neighbor as ourselves is the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets. The church's primary distinctive is love. We looked to the apostle John who conveys Jesus's words that our love for one another is the way we show the world that we are his disciples (John 13:34–35). We discussed the many one-another commands in Scripture and how they can only be obeyed in close community among other believers. The point of this first session is that God is still calling out a people to be his own possession who love each other in such a way that his glory is made manifest to the world.

The second metaphor I discussed is the church as the body of Christ. I quoted three passages. "So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom 12:5). "For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior" (Eph 5:23). "For 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 Cor 12:12–13). The

⁴ Benjamin L. Merkle, *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

idea is that the church is Christ's body made manifest to the world to extend his ministry and purposes to the earth.

The application is that when we come to Christ in faith, we are joined together in a sacred union with every other believer who is united to Christ. This is not something we decide to do but something that we become in our new creation, and with that union with other believers, we have responsibilities to participate in the mission of the church. Along with those responsibilities, the Holy Spirit supernaturally gifts each believer to support and advance the mission of the church. Again, the commands to the believer to be a functioning member of the body cannot be obeyed in isolation. Only in the community can one be faithful to their new identity.

The third metaphor, the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit, concluded the session. One of the expert evaluators wrote that this might get the most pushback because, in his experience, most people think of the temple of the Holy Spirit in individualistic terms. He argued many overemphasize the individual application of the dwelling of the Holy Spirit over and against the corporate realities. So, I began this point by asking the audience, "What does the Bible mean that the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit," and the few responses emphasized the Holy Spirit's role in comforting, leading, and enlightening the individual. I then explained that the Holy Spirit's role is both individual and corporate and that though 1 Corinthians does teach that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19), the weight of the New Testament teaching is about how the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16–17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21; 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 2:5). Because of sin, God could no longer dwell with his people. However, in his grace, he called Israel to build a temple where his presence would dwell in their midst, but this was a temporary measure as it would be prophesied that there would be a day when God would again dwell openly with his people (Ezek 37:27). Today, that is in the church. The church as the temple of the Holy Spirit becomes the

place, just like the Old Testament temple, where God meets with his people in a particular way.

The application is that when a believer continually forgoes gathering with the church, he/she will miss out on the fullness of the Holy Spirit's work in their lives. There is a measure of the Spirit that will be missing in the believer's life if they have consistently separated themselves from the church. Not only this, but the believer will again be unable to obey the calling of Christians who are indwelt and gifted by the Holy Spirit for the building up of the church (1 Cor 12:7). The Spirit's activity in our lives is often carried out through the ministry and gifts of other believers. Finally, just as God made his presence known to the world with the temple in the Old Testament, the presence of God is now made manifest to the world through Christ's people loving one another, serving one another, and bearing one another's burdens as part of the church (1 Pet 2:9).

Session 2 in week 7 was titled "What Does the Church Do?" The goal of that session was to continue clarifying the nature of the church by describing what the church does. I argued that we often know what something is by what it does. I listed five things the church does admitting that the list is more representative than exhaustive. I began with the two primary makes of a true church defined by the Reformation: preaching the Word and administering the sacraments. I started the discussion by teaching the church's call to administer the sacraments (or ordinances) of baptism and the Lord's Supper (Matt 28:18–19; Luke 22:19–20; 1 Cor 11:24–25). Baptism serves as the initiatory rite of inclusion of the believer into the congregation. Baptism is a symbolic act that identifies the believer with the triune God as they are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:18–9). It declares the believer's union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection as well as his/her union with his body, the church (Rom 6:3–4; 1 Cor 12:13). Baptism signifies that a believer has been cleansed from their sin through faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38), and it becomes an appeal for a good conscience (1 Pet 3:21).

The second sacrament given to the church is the Lord's Supper. Where baptism is the initiatory rite, the Lord's Supper emphasizes covenant renewal. Jesus commanded his church to take the bread and the cup in remembrance of his sacrifice in life and death (1 Cor 11:23–25). As we celebrate the table together, the church identifies as Christ's body in service to the world, and it identifies with his blood that sealed the covenant. The Lord's Supper also proclaims the covenant union believers have with one another (1 Cor 10:17; 11:27).

Preaching the Word of God is the second sign of a true church. The Great Commission instructs the church to make disciples by teaching them to obey all that Christ taught (Matt 28:18–19), after Pentecost, the first church dedicated themselves to the apostle's teaching (Acts 2:42), and God's Word is the foundation of all faith and practice for the church (2 Tim 3:16–17). I underscored the fact that certain believers are gifted as teachers who uphold the doctrinal integrity of the church as well as refute unsound doctrine, and some of these gifted teachers are called to be leaders who possess a certain amount of authority as they mediate God's Word to the congregation (1 Tim 3:2).

The application of these first two functions of the church was to speak to one of the survey questions that asked, "A church is any gathering of Christians in one place."⁵ Two-thirds of the responses were on the agree side. I can understand the ambiguity of this question as many would agree that the church is not a building but a gathering of believers, but my goal was to emphasize that a group of guys meeting at the lake on Sunday morning who have a prayer before they go fishing is not a church, nor is the family who travels every weekend for sports but pauses for a devotional before going to the field. A true New Testament church adopts leaders who preach the Word and

⁵ See appendix 1, question 9.

administer the sacraments. I wanted to address the growing narrative that a person can be obedient to the commands of Scripture by gathering in any way that is convenient.

The next three functions of the church I highlighted may not be listed as defining marks of the New Testament church, but they are indispensable in the life of a healthy covenant body. The first is worship. I spent much of this session focusing on Ephesians 5, which was not on the outline. This is a correction I will make for the next time I teach this course. Paul instructs the church to walk in wisdom, and this is done by walking in the Spirit. He then instructs the church to address one another in songs, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19). He teaches the church that corporate worship is a necessary tool in apprehending the Spirit's gift of wisdom. We tied this back to the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit, and that corporate worship unlocks the Spirit's power in our lives. Corporate worship does not alleviate the need for personal worship throughout the week, but I argued that our individual worship is elevated and invigorated after spending time in meaningful, biblical, Christ-centered worship with our church family each Sunday. The weekly corporate worship times set the stage for the rest of our week.

The next function of the church is the proclamation of the gospel. The church received the commission to take the gospel to the world (Matt 28:18–19; Acts 1:8), and this imperative is illustrated in Acts 2 with the coming of the Holy Spirit enabling the gospel to be spoken in many languages. The church is also commanded to commit to one another fulfilling the many one-another commands of Scripture as a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ (John 13:34–35).

The last function is service. Service motivated by love identifies us with Jesus like nothing else. Jesus tells us that he did not come to be served but to lay down his life in service to the world (Mark 10:45), and the more we know the love of Jesus, the more we are motivated to serve the world (1 John 3:16).

The overarching thesis of sessions 1 and 2 that were taught in week 7 is that the ontological nature of the church and its primary functions in the world necessitate community. Being the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit cannot be accomplished in isolation, and God’s purposes for the church must be accomplished in community. Denying the communal nature of the church is denying its very existence and purpose.

Week 8: Sessions 3 and 4

Sessions 3 and 4 were taught in week 8. Session 3 focused on the fact that God established covenants with his people to define the nature and responsibilities of the relationship between himself and his creation. This relationship is founded on God creating mankind in his own image to exist with him in a special relationship with mankind having dominion over the earth (Gen 1:27–28). God demonstrated his commitment to preserving this special relationship with mankind by making covenants. I used Gregg Allison’s definition of covenants. “Covenants (1) are unilateral (established by God and God only); (2) create or formalize a structured relationship between God and his covenant partners; (3) feature binding obligations; and (4) involve covenantal signs or the swearing of oaths.”⁶

I then defined and discussed six biblical covenants based on Tom Schreiner’s *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World*.⁷ The first covenant is the covenant with creation. There is debate about God making a covenant at creation, but the story demonstrates elements of a covenant: it was established by God; it was between two parties, God and mankind; and it included binding obligations. Next is the Noahic covenant. God preserves humanity despite their wickedness (Gen 6:5–8) and covenants

⁶ Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 64.

⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

with Noah to never again destroy the earth by flood. Following the Noahic covenant, the Bible gives us the Abrahamic covenant where God begins his plan of redemption by calling a man named Abraham to start a family through which all the peoples of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:1–3; 15:17–20). After this family is established, God gives Israel (Abraham’s descendants) the law through the Mosaic covenant built on the Ten Commandments which stipulate in specific terms what it means to relate to him and one another. The final Old Testament covenant is the Davidic covenant. “King David and his sons would represent Israel, and the nation would be blessed through their obedience to Yahweh and their reign over the people. Their righteous rule would display to the world what it meant to live in the land under Yahweh.”⁸ However, one of the prevailing truths of the Old Testament is that God’s covenants failed to support a right relationship between God and his people because of mankind’s continued sinfulness. Mankind continued to rebel and failed to uphold the binding obligations that God required. Yet, God remained faithful and merciful.

The promise to Abraham endured in the background as God preserved His people through their sin and rebellion and sent prophets who spoke of the one who would come and restore all that was broken in the garden. Jeremiah declares that God will make a new covenant with his people where he would write the law on their hearts and all people will know him (Jer 31:31–34). Ezekiel announces that God will give his people a new heart by taking out the heart of stone and putting in a heart of flesh, and His spirit will reside in them (Ezek 31:26–27).

This new covenant would be established through the shed blood of Jesus Christ (Luke 22:20; Heb 10:19). The new covenant opens the door for people to be in a right relationship with God from their hearts, and it establishes the way Christians are

⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 37.

supposed to relate to one another. The apostle Paul makes this connection in 1 Corinthians where he corrects abuses of the Lord's Supper qualifying it as a participation in the body and blood of Christ, and "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). Paul carries this discussion forward until we get to chapter 12 and the clarifying description of the church as the body of Christ that has many members (1 Cor 12:12–31). A natural consequence of being reconciled to God through the new covenant in Jesus is to be connected to other believers in a covenant relationship.

Session 4 discussed the elements and expectations of a church covenant. Once we established that Christians should relate to one another in a covenant relationship, we needed to understand how church covenants help, how they are written, and what they should include. I focused on two ways that written covenants can help. First, written covenants help maintain the unity and focus of the church. Unity is one of the most important characteristics of the church and one of the most difficult things to maintain. Written covenants help define those things that are most important and how each member should fit into the mission of the church. This leads to the second way written covenants help, which is eliminating competing visions. There can be a myriad of ideas about how the church should accomplish the mission of God, and a written covenant can help the membership focus on those ways that are most effective in any given context.

Second, written church covenants should be based only on the biblical description and mission of the church. Even though church membership is not explicitly commanded in the Bible, maintaining a committed, organized church membership role is the best way to fulfill the biblical commands for Christians. The point that made the most impact on my congregation is that the Bible does not instruct believers to become members of the church, but that by their union with Christ, they are already members of the body (1 Cor 12:12). This is their new identity. Embracing this new identity is the way

to obey Jesus's command to love one another (John 13:34), which is then further described by the numerous "one another" imperatives in the New Testament.

Third, churches need to discern for themselves which elements should be included in their particular church covenant. Churches have different personalities, gifts, and cultural emphases. Prefabricated covenants can be too broad to be helpful in a particular context. Historically, early Baptist church covenants focused on four general categories that needed to be applied in a specific way in each context: church fellowship; church discipline; public worship and personal devotion; pastoral and lay care.⁹ We closed the session by discussing extenuating circumstances. What happens when members age and become homebound or enter a long-term care facility? How do we think about military personnel who are called to active duty? What should the church do if members' giving decreases or stops because of layoffs or economic downturn? Churches need godly leadership that can apply the church covenant in biblical and responsible ways as many issues are not black and white.

Week 9: Sessions 5 and 6

Sessions 5 and 6 were taught during week 9. Both sessions focused on the practical benefits of a written church covenant, especially at a time when expressive individualism and consumerism have become prevalent worldviews. Christians are increasingly buying into these worldviews and deciding that church attendance is an unnecessary obligation. Absenteeism is increasing, and many believe that the church hinders true spiritual vitality. In session 5, I discussed that a communal understanding of the gospel is the foundation of a church covenant where people commit to consistent participation in the regular rhythms of church life. The session centered on John Stott's argument, "Thus the very purpose of his self-giving on the cross was not just to save

⁹ Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 30.

isolated individuals, and so perpetuate their loneliness, but to create a new community whose members would belong to him, love one another and eagerly serve the world. This community of Christ would be nothing less than a renewed and reunited humanity.”¹⁰

The emphasis of session 5 is that church covenants built on a right understanding of the gospel become a primary vehicle for spiritual growth. I quoted Carl Trueman who argues, “The strongest identities I have, forming my strongest intuitions, derive from the strongest communities to which I belong. And that means the church needs to be the strongest community to which we each belong.”¹¹ I concluded with Gary Millar’s contention, “The church is the context in which (and a means by which) God transforms us . . . The very purpose of gathering God’s people is to shape and change us so that as individuals and together we more fully display the glory and beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹² Any given weekly church gathering may not cause life-changing transformation, but the week-in and week-out commitment to a local church body that commits to the orthodox teaching of God’s Word, Christ-centered fellowship, and biblical worship will accomplish exponentially more for our spiritual growth and maturity than anything we can ever do on our own. A church where people covenant together is a place where people grow.

The sixth and final session continued the theme of the practical benefits of a written church covenant. Not only do church covenants support and encourage regular church attendance that leads to spiritual growth, but they also make corrective church discipline possible. Church discipline is an important part of the whole discipleship process, and church leaders facilitate both discipleship and discipline (2 Tim 4:2).

¹⁰ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, centennial ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 249.

¹¹ Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 175.

¹² J. G. Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 55 (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos/IVP Academic, 2021), 240.

Discipleship is the positive form of spiritual formation that includes teaching, training, and exemplifying godly attitudes and behavior. Discipline is the negative form that includes reproof, correction, and, if necessary, formal consequences. I referred to Jonathan Leeman who makes the connection between church covenants and church discipline. “Corrective church discipline occurs any time sin is corrected within the church body, and it occurs most fully when the church body announces that the covenant between church and member is already broken because the member has proven to be unsubmitive in his or her discipleship to Christ.”¹³

I then turned to the biblical instructions from Jesus found in Matthew 18. First, the goal is always reconciliation (Matt 18:15). This happens in the case when a person’s sin has strained their relationship with God and with the church, and it is the responsibility of the offended party to seek this reconciliation. Second, if a direct conversation does not heal the relationship, the charge needs to be established between two or three witnesses (Matt 18:16), and if this does not achieve repentance and reconciliation, the third step is to put the case before the church (Matt 18:17). Again, the goal is repentance and reconciliation, but if the offender does not repent before the church, he or she is to be put out (Matt 18:17). This entire process is more just and fair-minded when there is a church covenant that clearly defines a particular church’s expectations and responsibilities of its members because it should include those things that are clearly expected from the Bible.

The final benefit I discussed for having a written church covenant is that it causes the church to deal with its members who poorly represent the gospel and tarnish its reputation in the community. I began with the reminder that the church is a missionary body brought together to proclaim the gospel to the whole world (Matt 28:18–20; John

¹³ Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline*, 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 220.

17:15–19; Acts 1:8). When the church is unified and loving, mutually submitted to the covenantal nature of their relationship, it becomes a beacon of the gospel to the whole world (John 13:34–35), and conversely, when a church is caught up in disunity, conflict, and nominal commitment to one another, it can become a hindrance to gospel proclamation. Jesus warned that distracted and contaminated salt is good for nothing but to be thrown on the road and trampled by people’s feet (Matt 5:13), and he warns the seven churches in Revelation about differing issues calling them to repentance and warning them about losing their lampstands, or gospel witness (Rev 2–3).

Covenant membership that promotes a culture of love, service, and sacrifice embodies the gospel to the world in ways that our preaching never will, but when church members will not commit to one another in a biblical relationship, the church’s witness to the world is diminished severely. Mark Dever argues, “Uninvolved members confuse both real members and non-Christians about what it means to be a Christian.”¹⁴ Covenant church membership not only benefits the church, but it also benefits the whole world.

Phase 3: Follow Up

The follow-up phase began in week 10 where I delivered the post-course survey to those who attended the course. I initially wanted to include only those who attended at least three sessions for the post-course survey, but because I did two sessions per night, I decided to include anyone who attended at least two sessions.

Weeks 10–12

Weeks 10 and 11 were set aside for the new surveys to be returned, and during that time, I created a second online survey, which was emailed to all who attended, and physical copies were made available at the church. To help ensure that course attendees

¹⁴ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed., 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 175.

completed a second survey, I gave reminders from the pulpit during Sunday morning announcements, and I sent reminder texts and emails through our group messaging system. My goal was to have at least 50 percent of those who completed a pre-course survey also complete a post-course survey.

Finally, during week 12, I compiled the completed surveys. I entered the data from the physical copies into the Google form, and I began analyzing the data to see if there was any significant change in the answers from the first survey to the second. The results were interesting and will be shared in chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

Introduction

The purpose of chapter 5 is to evaluate this project. I will begin by considering if the project achieved its purpose and goals. Next, I will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the project along with addressing anything I would do differently. Finally, I will present both theological and personal reflections.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

From the beginning, the purpose of this project was to teach covenant church membership at First Baptist Church in Dalhart, Texas, in order to enhance the church's health leading to greater gospel effectiveness. One of the greatest obstacles to gospel effectiveness is a lack of commitment among many of the church's members. Since this project began over two years ago, the church's regular attendance still has not returned to pre-Covid numbers where many members have remained on the periphery of church life or have just stopped participating altogether. Many of the core members and leadership have tried diligently to visit and call irregular church members, but the efforts do not seem to be bearing much fruit. I am beginning to sense a weariness and lethargy within the congregation.

This affirms to me that the purpose of this project was necessary. The congregation needs to be challenged about the covenantal nature of church membership, and even though the people who came to the teaching course are consistent in their attendance and participation, the content will hopefully give them more confidence and better language to talk to our nominal members. Another benefit of this project is for our

leadership who is currently revising our by-laws. One of the articles they want to address is membership. They desire to refine the language to add more accountability to our membership roll. This teaching will help guide this process.

From an objective perspective, the project's purpose was successful as I completed a six-session teaching course about covenant church membership. As mentioned in chapter 4, the sessions were enjoyable with much interaction from those who attended, and I believe there was a growing consensus about the covenantal nature of church membership and the importance of greater accountability among the church's members. However, the larger purpose of greater health leading to gospel effectiveness remains to be seen. My prayer is that this effort will bear much fruit.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

Four goals were established at the beginning of this project to teach covenant church membership to FBCD. These goals concentrated on strengthening the current member's knowledge and understanding of the covenantal nature of church membership. The first goal was to assess the understanding of covenant church membership among current members of FBCD. The second goal was to develop a six-session curriculum that outlined the basic biblical principles governing covenant church membership. The third goal was to teach a three-week Sunday night course to current FBCD members. The fourth goal was to reassess the current membership to determine the growth of their understanding of covenant church membership.

Goal 1: Assess

The first goal was to assess the understanding of covenant church membership among the current members of FBCD. This goal was measured by administering the Biblical Church Membership Survey (BCMS) to each member of FBCD. This survey included three sections. The first section asked for personal information including age, gender, and church member status. The second section determined the biblical knowledge

and viewpoints of the church members about church membership, and the third section addressed the member's personal practices of discipleship and church participation.

Section 1: Personal Information

For the initial assessment, thirty-four people returned a BCMS, and some of those who responded did not complete every question. Nineteen responded as female, and 15 responded as male. Only 4 responders are under forty, 12 are in their forties, 10 are in their fifties, and 8 are over sixty. Twenty-seven responders are married with 3 being single, 3 widowed, and 1 who is divorced. All thirty-four acknowledged to be a Christian. Thirty-two responders are currently members of FBCD, and 2 are not. Twenty claimed to currently serve in some type of leadership position that involves teaching, leading a ministry, or a role that makes decisions affecting the church, and 14 do not have such a role.

Section 2: Biblical Knowledge

In evaluating the responses to the biblical knowledge questions, I learned that writing good questions is more difficult than I first appreciated. After I looked at some of the answers, I realized that some of the responders may not have understood the intention of every question. I will talk about that more below. However, most questions were straightforward and yielded good insight into how our church understands covenant church membership. For simplicity, I divided the responses into two categories—one where the majority of responses lined up with what I believe to be a biblical understanding of covenant membership and one where most responses diverged from biblical teaching.

The key questions regarding biblical covenant membership where the majority of responses aligned with biblical teaching began with question 10, “There is no evidence in the Bible that Christians joined churches.” Twenty-seven percent strongly disagreed, 44 percent disagreed, and 12 percent somewhat disagreed. Question 15 asked, “Church

membership is a covenant relationship between believers in a local church.” Thirty-three percent strongly agreed, 49 percent agreed, and 15 percent agreed somewhat. Question 16 asked, “Church covenants are necessary tools in describing the biblical responsibilities and privileges of church membership.” Fifteen percent strongly agreed, 64 percent agreed, and 12 percent agreed somewhat. This corresponds to question 17, “A person who does not affirm a church covenant should be denied membership in the church,” where 9 percent strongly agreed, 30 percent agreed, and 18 percent somewhat agreed. Question 18, “It is necessary for churches to state a summary of beliefs to which members must adhere,” affirms that 18 percent strongly agreed, 41 percent agreed, and 18 percent somewhat agreed. Also, question 32 asked, “If a person is not actively serving in their local church, they are breaking the covenant that they made with the church.” Twelve percent strongly agreed, 21 percent agreed, and 38 percent somewhat agreed. Based on these six questions, a solid majority of responders understood that church membership is exemplified in the Bible and that it is necessary to have some type of covenantal statement or document that outlines members’ responsibilities, privileges, and core beliefs to which they must adhere.

Other questions that revealed a positive understanding of issues related to biblical covenant membership include number 13, “Local churches should exercise biblical church discipline.” Forty-five percent strongly agreed, 27 percent agreed, and 21 percent somewhat agreed. Question 27 asked, “Churches should remove members who persist in sin without repentance.” Fifteen percent strongly agreed, 35 percent agreed, and 15 percent somewhat agreed. The majority of responders believe there should be some level of consequence or discipline for church members who act in ways that are contrary to the church covenant.

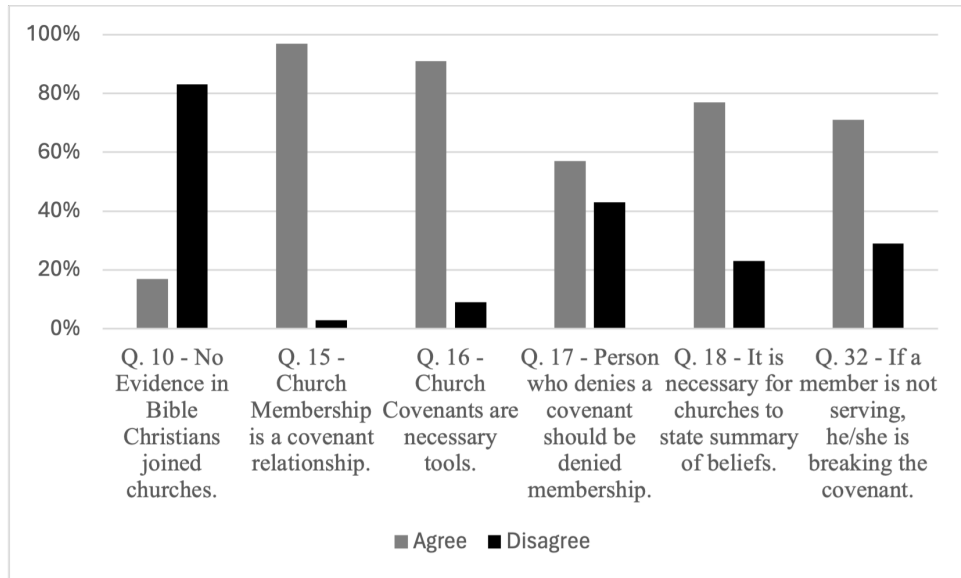


Figure 1. Pre-course positive responses to key questions

Other responses to key questions fell outside of a biblical understanding of covenant membership. Question 8 asked, “Christians can attend and participate in church(es) without needing to formally become a member.” The responses seem to minimize the need for church membership where 6 percent strongly agreed, 18 percent agreed, and 35 percent somewhat agreed. Question 9, “A church is any gathering of Christians in one place,” revealed that 24 percent of responders strongly agreed, 15 percent agreed, and 24 percent somewhat agreed. Here two-thirds of the responders demonstrate that there may be a lack of understanding of the functions of a biblical church. Question 19 asked, “The Bible teaches that churches must distinguish between members and non-members.” Five percent strongly disagree, 40 percent disagree, and 9 percent somewhat disagree. These responses suggest that over half of the responders may not see the importance of church membership altogether.

The responses to three questions were particularly troubling. Question 11 asked, “Christians who refuse to join and submit to a local church are in sin.” Thirty-three percent strongly disagreed, 33 percent disagreed, and 9 percent somewhat

disagreed. Over two-thirds of the responders may not be making the connection that membership is a matter of obedience to the Bible. Similarly, question 12 asked, “The local church has the authority to affirm or deny a person’s profession of faith.” Thirty-five percent strongly disagree, 27 percent disagree, and 9 percent somewhat disagree. Question 14 reveals a possible misunderstanding of baptism asking, “It should be required that a person be baptized after true conversion to join a church.” The majority were in agreement with 15 percent strongly agreeing, 35 percent agreed, and 18 percent somewhat agreeing, but that still leaves nearly one-third of Baptist church responders who disagree on some level that a person should be required to be baptized after true conversion. These questions together demonstrate that these responders may not see the connection between conversion, baptism, and church membership.

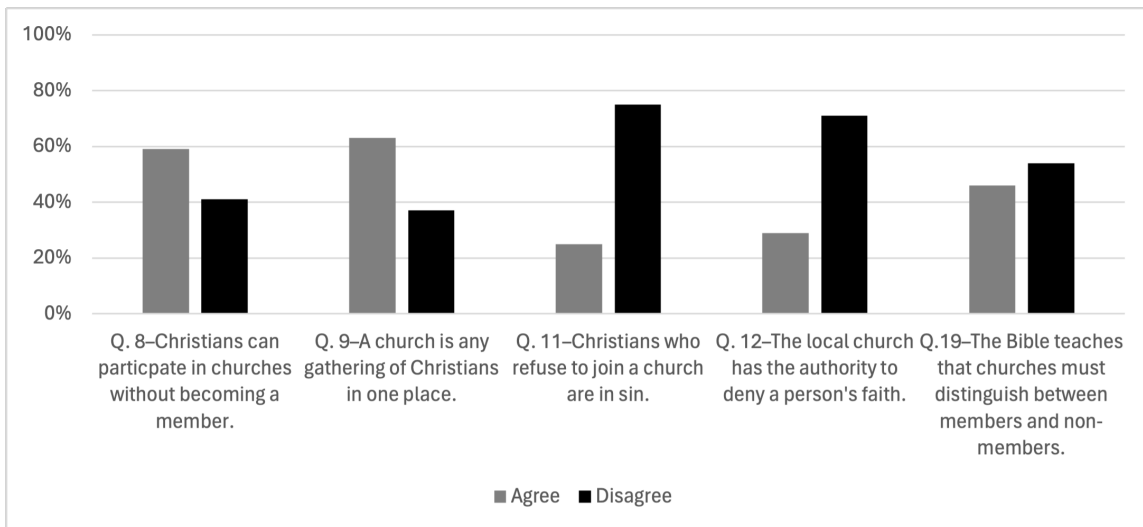


Figure 2. Pre-course negative responses to key questions

The thing that I found most interesting about the initial assessment is that several of the responses to key questions revealed contradictions in the responders’ beliefs. First, the overwhelming majority agreed that the church should exercise biblical

church discipline. However, very few responders agreed that the local church has the authority to affirm or deny a person's profession of faith, and a significant majority disagreed that a member who refuses to attend church regularly should be removed from membership. In the same way, there was strong disagreement that the Bible teaches that churches must distinguish between members and non-members. A second contradiction is that over 80 percent of the responders agree that the Bible affirms that Christians joined churches, but over three-fourths disagree that Christians who refuse to join and submit to a local church are in sin. Another contradiction is that a vast majority agreed that church membership is a covenant relationship between believers in a local church. However, when asked if it is beneficial to move membership to another church if it better suits the responders' desires, nearly 45 percent agreed.

Section 3: Personal Practices

The final section dealt with the personal practices of the responders regarding church membership and participation. Here the answers were more consistently positive. Some of the more encouraging responses came from question 37 where a large majority of responders agreed that they had at least one other church member to whom they were accountable, question 38 showed that nearly three-fourths of the responders intentionally cared for another member within the last week, and question 46 shows that over 90 percent of the responders take personal responsibility for the unity and health of FBCD.

However, two questions raised concern. Question 35 asked, "It is acceptable to practice Baptism and the Lord's Supper outside the main local church gathering," where 9 percent strongly agreed, 36 percent agreed, and 21 percent somewhat agreed. Again, this shows a possible lack of understanding of the biblical teaching that these ordinances are given to the church to administer. Question 36, "I can grow as a Christian without consistent participation in the local church," received a majority of responses that disagreed, but nearly 30 percent agreed. Almost one-third of the responders do not

understand that one of the primary functions of the church is to be the vehicle through which God empowers growth and maturity in a Christian's life.

Goals 2 and 3: Write and Teach

Goals 2 and 3 were successful as I wrote six sessions of curriculum and was able to teach them over three consecutive Sunday nights. The feedback on the curriculum from the panel of experts was helpful and made the presentation stronger. As with any writing or teaching project, I wish I had more time to develop the material and practice the content, but I feel the final result was well received. The attendees were engaged, asked good questions, and openly wrestled with new ideas. Their participation gave depth to the material as it offered the opportunity for questions and answers to clarify the principles I taught.

An indicator that the material may have accomplished its purpose was that several of the church leaders began discussing ways to implement covenant church membership within the congregation. The early consensus is that it will be a delicate process because of the poor views of membership that have persisted for many generations, but these leaders acknowledged the need to strengthen the commitment from our membership according to biblical teaching.

Goal 4: Reassess

The fourth goal was to reassess those members of FBCD who attended at least two sessions of the covenant church membership teaching course, and it was measured by readministering the BCMS. The hope is that there was an objective increase in the member's knowledge of covenant church membership. The number of returned post-test surveys was smaller than I desired, so the data might not be as reliable as I had hoped for. However, several encouraging observations surfaced as I analyzed the post-course responses. Four key questions significantly improved beginning with question 11, which asked, "Christians who refuse to join and submit to a local church are in sin." The pre-

course survey revealed that 33 percent strongly disagreed, and 33 percent agreed with another 10 percent somewhat disagreed. The post-course results demonstrated a significant shift where 21 percent strongly agreed, 14 percent agreed, and 36 percent somewhat agreed. Not everyone was completely convinced, but the results show that the majority of the people are now willing to consider church membership a significant issue in our standing before the Lord. Another question that showed significant improvement was number 12, “The local church has the authority to affirm or deny a person’s profession of faith.” The pre-course survey revealed that nearly three-fourths of responders were on the disagree side with over one-third strongly disagreeing. The post-course results demonstrated that 14 percent now strongly agree, 43 percent agree, and 14 percent somewhat agree. Question 19 showed progress, which asked, “The Bible teaches that churches must distinguish between members and non-members.” Before the course, half of the responders disagreed, and after the course, 21 percent strongly agreed, 50 percent agreed, and 14 percent somewhat agreed. The last key question that showed significant improvement was number 22, “A member who refuses to attend church regularly should be removed from membership.” The pre-course survey discovered that nearly two-thirds of the responses disagreed, whereas the post-course survey improved to 21 percent strongly agreed, 7 percent agreed, and 50 percent somewhat agreed. These four questions spoke about the importance of committed church membership, and the course proved to be successful in raising the attendees’ awareness of its seriousness.

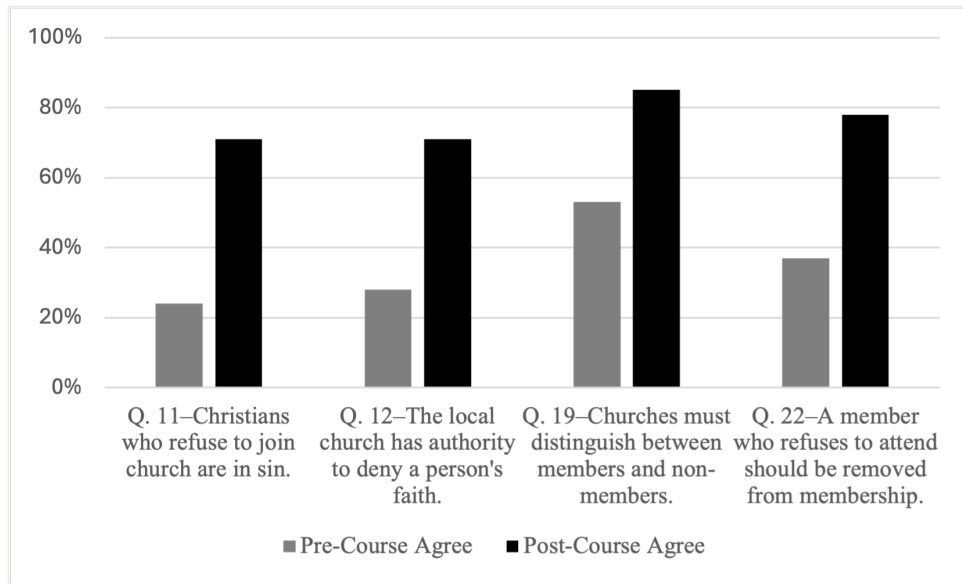


Figure 3. Key responses showing significant improvement

Four other questions showed improvement, even if they did not progress quite as much as the four just mentioned. Question 9 asked, “A church is any gathering of Christians in one place.” Before the course, 60 percent showed agreement at some level with the statement. However, after the course, the reassessment indicated that 21 percent strongly disagreed, 29 percent disagreed, and 7 percent somewhat disagreed. Question 14 asked, “It should be required that a person be baptized after true conversion to join a church.” The pre-course survey resulted in two-thirds agreeing, but I was troubled that one-third of a group of Baptists would not agree about the need to be baptized after conversion. After the course, the number of people who agreed jumped to 84 percent with 0 percent who strongly disagreed whereas before 9 percent strongly disagreed. Question 24, “Missions are more effective through specialized ministries outside the local church.” The pre-course survey revealed that only 7 percent strongly disagreed, 29 percent disagreed, and 27 percent somewhat disagreed. The post-course survey showed that those who strongly disagreed rose to 23 percent and those who disagreed to 46 percent, with another 15 percent somewhat disagreeing. Next, question 25 asked, “It is biblically

acceptable to give your tithes to help other ministries in need rather than giving them to your own local church.” Pre-course, the survey determined that, again, the majority disagreed with 54 percent on that side, but after the course, the survey showed that 14 percent strongly disagreed and 64 percent disagreed. These are another three key questions that showed important improvement.

The original t-test did not provide such favorable results. Analyzing the data as collected without eliminating any surveys, the project did not prove to be statistically successful. The mean did increase from 164.43 to 182.57; nevertheless, the teaching of covenant church membership to FBCD made no statistically significant difference resulting in the increase of their doctrinal knowledge ($t_{(13)} = 1.954, p < .07$).¹

However, there was an outlier in the post-course survey results. One of the responders scored significantly lower on the post-course survey than anyone did on the pre-course survey. The average score for every pre-course survey was 164, with the lowest score being 136. This particular post-course survey scored 117. The next lowest score was 154 on the post-course surveys. I can only assume there was some confusion within the congregation, and someone who did not attend the course completed a post-course survey. If I remove this survey from the results, the t-test is positive. The mean increased from 165.77 to 187.62, and the teaching of covenant church membership to FBCD made a statistically significant difference resulting in the increase of their doctrinal knowledge ($t_{(12)} = 2.344, p < .03$).²

Strengths of the Project

This project demonstrated three strengths. First, it was a necessary corrective. Second, it was clearly practical. Third, it is easy to follow up the practical implications. The purpose of the project as mentioned above is to teach covenant church membership

¹ See appendix 4.

² See appendix 5.

at FBCD in order to enhance the church's health leading to greater gospel effectiveness. I believed from the beginning that teaching and emphasizing covenant church membership was a necessary corrective for our church. I spent some time in chapter 3 discussing expressive individualism and consumerism as problems for the Western church, which I believe to have infiltrated FBCD. This belief was affirmed by church leadership before this project began, and it was affirmed again as I taught the six-week course. Our congregation is beginning to feel the disappointment and frustration that comes from large percentages of our membership being absent on any given Sunday. Not only do these absences take a toll on the congregation emotionally, but the number of volunteers required to fruitfully execute the weekly ministries has decreased. The faithful core is having to take on more and more responsibility. I believe I have chosen the appropriate topic for our church for this time in our history.

Another strength of this project is its practicality. So much of the church's teaching week to week focuses on the spiritual. Our goal is to preach the gospel in such a way that those in attendance understand the corruption and sinfulness of the heart and the need to turn to Jesus for both salvation for the unbeliever and victory over sin for the believer. Much of the time, spiritual growth and maturity are unseen in the immediate and cannot be measured except over time. Calling for the church to commit to a covenant application of membership is something that can be done right away and the results are immediately measurable. Those who attended the teaching sessions hopefully have a better understanding of the covenant nature of membership and better language to use in talking to their friends and neighbors who may no longer be faithful in their church participation. For those who have drifted in their commitment to the church, there is a clear and easily attainable action step—come back to church.

The third strength of this project is that it is easy to follow the practical implications. The church has heard the biblical argument that church membership is a covenantal relationship with clearly defined privileges and responsibilities, and the

church has been challenged to build a culture of accountability with those who are here now and with those who have drifted away. We have already brought in some long-term members to work through our membership rolls to determine the status of each name. They were able to define those who are currently active with the church and those who have moved to another city or another church. Interestingly, this group also found some names of people on the roll who have died. From this effort, we were able to create a list of people who are members of our church still living in our city but not currently attending on any regular basis. Next, the deacons have committed themselves to take this list and create a plan to visit each of the names. They hope to convey our desire that the missing members will return to active participation for their own sake as well as the benefit of the church. We will be able to follow up these efforts and easily quantify if they are producing fruit.

Weaknesses of the Project

There were also weaknesses to the project, three of which were the depth of material, the lack of concrete suggestions for a church covenant that is applicable at FBCD, and the low number of post-course surveys I received. Concerning the depth of material, I feel as though I just scratched the surface on the importance and necessity of covenant church membership, especially in the current cultural moment where expressive individualism is so widespread. I wish I could have spent more time developing the incongruity of what the Bible teaches about being the people of God with our current cultural norms. I do not feel I understand well what it means to truly live an interdependent, communal way of life where there is no such thing as individual flourishing apart from the flourishing of the community. Therefore, I do not think I demonstrated well enough the vast difference between the two mindsets.

Another weakness is that the teaching only talked about the nature of church covenants in broad terms. I taught elements that generally show up in church covenants

across Baptist churches, but I did not take any time to explore with the attendees' input those things that should exist in a church covenant at FBCD in 2024. It could have been a helpful exercise for the course attendees to think through and apply the material that we discussed. This would have also given them more ownership of the process which would lead to greater buy-in when it comes time to implement a church covenant. I believe that there our time spent together will still benefit our leaders when it is time to write a covenant, but having input from the broader church would be extremely beneficial.

The project's reassessment was also a weakness. I write below that one thing I would do differently is teach the course earlier in the year. Because I taught the course up to the Sunday before Thanksgiving, I was not as successful as I needed to be in collecting post-course surveys. The low number of surveys led to the results being less helpful than they could have been, especially allowing one survey to skew the entire analysis. A larger sample of post-course surveys would have improved the project.

Things I Would Do Differently

If I had the opportunity to do this project over, there are at least three things differently. I would personally invite more people to participate, I would write better questions, and I would teach the curriculum earlier in the fall. I had hoped for greater participation from the congregation, and I feel I could have done more to attract better attendance to the teaching sessions. I announced the course from the pulpit on Sunday mornings for several weeks, and we put an announcement for the course in the Sunday bulletin and other advertising materials. I was pleased with those who committed to the course, and the attendees included many of our core leaders, which will help us in implementing the necessary action steps to add accountability to our culture. However, I was hoping to capture many who are not leaders and exist on the fringe of church life. I felt that group would benefit most from the teaching about covenant church membership. Looking back, I wish I had sent out more personal invitations through texts and phone

calls. A principle we have learned through the years is that individual invitations rather than mass appeals always lead to better attendance.

Secondly, I would have spent more time in writing questions for the BCMS. Several questions turned out to be vague and misleading. Two of the worst were question 8, “Christians can attend and participate in church(es) without needing to formally become a member.” I intended to discuss the attendee who never sees the importance of becoming a member year after year, the perpetual non-member who attends the church. The results showed the majority of the responses agreed with the statement. I learned during the teaching time that many people assumed I was asking about those who attend for a short time without becoming a member as they determine if this is the place for them. We all agree this is appropriate. Another bad question was number 9, “A church is any gathering of Christians in one place.” Nearly three-fourths agreed with this statement. Here I was talking about a group of guys who do not like the church and meet for coffee to talk about the Bible. Many believed I was talking about church activities outside the building. I agree that the church is still the church if it meets at the park or a local pumpkin patch. Still, I wanted them to understand that certain functions have to be part of the corporate life together for a group to become a church, such as celebrating the ordinances and teaching God’s Word.

Thirdly, I would have taught the course earlier in the year. Because of delays on my part in getting the material written and sent to the panel of experts, we did not begin the course until the first week of November. This resulted in our completing the course on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, which led to two consequences. The first was that the attendance in the final session was low because many families had already left for the Thanksgiving holiday since school was dismissed for the week. The second was that this meant I was trying to gather post-course surveys during the Christmas season. Families are incredibly busy in the weeks leading up to Christmas, and I believe this played a part in the low number of surveys I received.

Theological Reflections

The theological reflections of this project closely align with the first strength mentioned earlier. Through my years in ministry, I have come to believe that many Christians have not thought through the theological implications of church membership. For some, becoming a member is likened to joining a country club where you gain certain privileges or access to church resources. I had a woman tell me many years ago that the reason why she was a Baptist was because each member gets one vote to affect the policies and direction of the church. Others believe membership to be some type of status. Recently I received a phone call from an elderly woman who was a member of a sister church in our city. She told me that she wanted to move her membership to our church because she was frustrated with her pastor. She had never attended our church, so I asked her what her intentions were for attending and serving, and she said that she does not sleep well and never attends church. She just did not want her name on the roll of the other church. Still others believe membership to be an affirmation of their salvation. I have asked people about their church home and if they were a Christian, and some tell me about being a member of a certain church that baptized them many years ago even though they do not participate anywhere. After pastoring this church for a year or two, I asked a young man about his salvation, and he told me that he “goes to my church,” even though I had never seen him before that day. We are small enough that I know every person who attends, even if they do not attend regularly.

Regaining a proper theological understanding of covenant church membership is paramount for the church. I argued in chapter 3 that poor or non-existent church participation from Christians harms the Christians themselves, weakens churches, and sends a negative message to unbelievers. Whether it be from a poor presentation of the gospel or poor discipleship in churches, more and more Christians no longer believe that church participation is essential to their spiritual growth and maturity not to mention the

fact that many people have a false sense of assurance of their salvation because their names are on a membership roll somewhere.

I hope that teaching covenant church membership to FBCD will bear fruit in the next season of the life of our church. I hope that children will be nurtured to understand that being part of the local church is essential to their relationship with God so that when they leave to start their own lives, they will quickly connect with a church in their new city. I hope that new converts are taught that the greatest thing they can do to nurture their newfound faith in Jesus is to commit to participating in the church where they connect with a spiritual family who will love them and teach them. I hope that by becoming a committed body living in a covenantal relationship, FBCD will become a beaming light to the larger community demonstrating the nature and character of God's love for the world.

Personal Reflections

Personally, the project has proven to be tremendously helpful. I began this journey not long after becoming a senior pastor which began over eighteen years ago. As a new pastor armed with a seminary education, I poured out my heart into preaching and teaching while watching inconsistent participation from our church members, and I became disillusioned. I might have left the ministry believing I was a bad pastor if I had not grown up as a pastor's kid and spent over four years on pastoral staff as an assistant seeing the problem my entire life. I was convinced that church participation should not be this way, so I began securitizing the way we were teaching the gospel, I questioned mentors and fellow pastors, and I read books on the subject. After all the years later, this is still a problem raising widespread concern.

When the time was right to pursue a Doctor of Ministry (DMin), I knew this was what I wanted to study. My motivation was to spend time interacting on a high level with professors and other students to gain greater confidence in the importance of church

participation. With a growing cultural narrative that says a person can be a good Christian without participating in the church, I knew I needed clear, well-thought-out answers. I wanted to emphasize the need for the church without sounding legalistic or regressive.

My approach to the whole DMin process was to consider covenant church membership at every level. My first seminar was Ecclesiology where my research paper was titled, “Should Churches Practice Covenant Membership?” The second seminar was Historical Theology in the Local Church. I focused the main research paper on how historical theology informs church membership. Next, I took Biblical and Systematic Theology in the Local Church, and the research paper for this seminar traced the theme of the People of God from the Old Testament into the New Testament. Finally, I took Practical Theology where I worked through a case study about members not returning to active church participation after Covid-19. This journey has enabled me to immerse myself in this topic.

The result has been greater confidence in insisting on consistent participation within the local church based on an active covenant established in Jesus Christ. I have gained a greater understanding of God’s covenant nature, who desires that people live in covenant with him and one another. I have better language to describe the theological and practical importance of committing to the local church in a covenant relationship. I trust I can provide better leadership to the church in helping create a culture of commitment and accountability. However, I also realize that I have just begun to scratch the surface and that there is much more to learn about how God interacts with his people and how they are supposed to interact with one another. I am thankful that I have been able to undergo this process and have built a foundation from which I can continue to build and grow.

Conclusion

After evaluating the project’s goals and assessing its strengths and weaknesses, I am pleased with the results and am hopeful that it will bear fruit in the life of FBCD.

Even though the t-test did not show significant change, I believe the responses to the individual questions were extremely encouraging. I realize that several things could have been done better, but I am excited that the effort has already led to action. I am encouraged by many conversations I have had since teaching the sessions, and I have received positive affirmation that this is a necessary step in leading our church into greater health. Some fear that confronting disengaged members might cause hard feelings within the church and possibly damage our reputation in the community. However, the consensus is now that it is the biblical thing to do, and it is for the benefit of those who misunderstand the purpose of consistent participation in the church. The leadership seems motivated by love and an earnest desire for reconciliation and are eager to put this project into action. The next steps will include writing a church covenant that will inform our desire to create a healthy culture of commitment and accountability as well as guide our visits with our disengaged members. They will also include formulating the material into a shortened session that will be used in a new member class. May Jesus be glorified in this project.

APPENDIX 1
COVENANT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP COURSE
OUTLINES

These outlines were used to guide the course. The course was taught over three consecutive Sunday nights, and I taught two sessions each night. The outlines were given to each attendee to help them follow along and take notes. These outlines will also be edited to be used for a future new member's class.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

“It is not surprising that sociologists find the church rather puzzling. Even Christians have extraordinary difficulty in describing the church. Luther claimed that a girl of seven knows what the church is, but that he had to pen thousands of words in order to explain what she understood.”

Edmund Clowney

Introduction: Three New Testament metaphors define the church as flowing out of the Trinitarian nature of God.

I. The Church is the People of God.

A. Primary Scripture:

- i. “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:9-10).

B. Distinct Old Testament language is applied to the New Testament Church.

C. Built on the foundation of the calling of Abram in Genesis 12:1-3.

D. Those who put their faith in Jesus are now included in the long line of people who were called the people of God.

II. The Church is the Body of Christ.

A. Primary Scripture:

- i. “So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:5).
- ii. “For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior” (Ephesians 5:23).
- iii. “For 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. ¹³ 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 Corinthians 12:12-13).

- B. “The church looks to Jesus for its life, its teaching, and as its model for ministry. Thus...Jesus Christ is the head of the church. The church is Christ’s body, and he is the head of that body. The church draws its entire life from him. In every age, the church seeks to conform to his image. Apart from Christ, there is no church. He is not only the source of the church’s authority; he is the source of its very life.” Bill Leonard
- C. The church is the representative of Christ, called to extend his ministry and purposes to the earth.

III. The Church is the Temple of the Holy Spirit

- A. Primary Scripture:
 - i. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19-22).
 - ii. “As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4-5).
- B. The application of this metaphor for the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises that God would one day, again, dwell with his people (Ezekiel 37:27).
- C. The church as the temple of the Holy Spirit becomes the place, just like the Old Testament temple, where God meets his people in a particular way.

D. The presence of God is made manifest to the world through Christ's people loving one another, serving one another, and bearing one another's burdens as part of the church.

Conclusion: These three images help us understand the ontological nature of the church. Before any purpose or function can be determined, it is important to apprehend the nature and character of the church. The New Testament church is the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. This means that the church is from God and for God, and it derives its existence from God's triune nature. This sets the stage for covenant church membership because as the church flows from the nature of a God who relates to his people through covenant, those who make up the church should relate to one another in a covenant relationship.

WHAT DOES THE CHURCH DO?

“God chooses and preserves for himself a community elected for eternal life and united by faith, who love, follow, learn from, and worship God together. God sends out this community to proclaim the gospel and prefigure Christ’s kingdom by the quality of their life together and their love for one another.”

New City Catechism

Introduction: Understanding what the church does helps us understand what the church is and why covenant church membership is important.

I. The church celebrates the sacraments/ordinances.

- A. The sacraments (or ordinances) are tools given by God as a visual reminder of the gospel.
- B. The two sacraments/ordinances are baptism and the Lord’s Supper.
- C. Baptism is the first act of obedience for the believer and an initiatory rite of inclusion into the congregation.
 - i. Baptism declares a believer’s union with Christ and with his body (Romans 6:3-4, 1 Corinthians 12:13).
 - ii. It signifies that a believer has been cleansed from their sin (Acts 2:38, 22:16).
 - iii. It is an appeal for a good conscience (1 Peter 3:21).
 - iv. It identifies believers with the triune God as they are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-19).
- D. The Lord’s Supper is celebrated as a reminder of their covenant relationship with God through the body and blood of Jesus Christ.
 - i. The Lord’s Supper is an act of covenant renewal (Luke 22:19-20, 1 Corinthians 11:24-25).
 - ii. It identifies us with Jesus and his service to the world (1 Corinthians 10:16).

- iii. It proclaims our union with the earthly body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:17, 11:27).

II. The church preaches the Word of God.

- A. God's Word is the foundation of all faith and practice (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
- B. The early church was dedicated to the apostle's teaching (Acts 2:42).
- C. The church is called to refute unsound doctrine (1 Timothy 1:3-7).
- D. Leaders are gifted and called by God to teach sound doctrine (1 Timothy 3:2).

III. The church worships.

- A. "As the church lives, moves, and breathes *coram Deo* (in the presence of God in Christ...), it engages in worship" (Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 425).
- B. Worship centers our life on God's holiness and grace (Romans 1:25, Revelation 4:11).
 - i. "When we worship, we fix our eyes on God. Whenever we worship as a church community, we are reminded that our great God is in full control. While there are certain things that are beyond our control, worshipping together allows us to pull the reality of heaven into our lives and into our current situations." Liz Claudio
- C. Worship leads to inner transformation (Romans 12:1-2, 2 Corinthians 3:18).
- D. Worship fulfills our purpose (Isaiah 43:6-7, 1 Corinthians 10:31).

IV. The church proclaims the gospel.

- A. Evangelism is commanded by Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:8).
- B. The church was formed to proclaim the gospel (Acts 2).
- C. The unified/loving church is the testimony of the gospel (John 13:34-35, Ephesians 2:11-22).

V. The church serves.

- A. The church, as the body of Christ, reflects his proclamation that he did not come to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45).

B. The more we know the love of Jesus, the more we are motivated to lay down our lives for others (1 John 3:16).

Conclusion: We can begin to understand the essence of the church by looking at its functions. By observing its activities, such as observing the ordinances, studying the Word of God, gathering for worship, and participating in acts of service and outreach, we gain insight into the importance of covenant membership. Each of these functions requires cooperation and mutual commitment.

HOW DOES GOD RELATE TO HIS PEOPLE?

“One of the most important ways God re-establishes his kingdom is through the biblical covenants, for they form the backbone of Scripture and are crucial to understanding its overarching story, from creation to new creation.”

Oren Martin

Introduction: God established covenants with his people from the beginning to define the nature and responsibilities of the relationship between himself and his creation.

I. God relates to his people through covenant.

- A. God created mankind to exist with him in a special relationship with a special purpose.
 - i. Mankind is the only part of creation created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27).
 - ii. Mankind was given dominion over the rest of creation and called to subdue and fill it (Genesis 1:28).
- B. God demonstrated his commitment to preserving this special relationship by making covenants.
 - i. “Covenants (1) are unilateral (established by God and God only); (2) create or formalize a structured relationship between God and his covenant partners; (3) feature binding obligations; and (4) involve covenantal signs or the swearing of oaths” (Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 64).

II. Survey of Old Testament Covenants

- A. Creation Covenant
 - i. Often debated because the word covenant wasn’t used.
 - ii. The story demonstrates elements of a covenant: established by God, between two parties (God and mankind), with binding obligations.
- B. Noahic Covenant

- i. God preserves the human race in spite of their wickedness (Genesis 6:5-8) and covenants with Noah to never again destroy the earth by flood.

C. Abrahamic Covenant

- i. God begins his plan of redemption by calling a man named Abraham to start a family through which all the peoples of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:17-20).

D. Mosaic Covenant

- i. God gives Israel (Abraham's descendants) the law, established in the Ten Commandments which stipulates in specific terms what it means to relate to him and one another.
- ii. The covenant stipulations are established in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17).

E. Davidic Covenant

- i. "King David and his sons would represent Israel, and the nation would be blessed through their obedience to Yahweh and their reign over the people. Their righteous rule would display to the world what it meant to live in the land under Yahweh" (Thomas Schreiner, *The King and His Beauty*, 37).

III. The New Covenant

- A. The Old Testament covenants failed to support a right relationship between God and man because of man's continued sinfulness.
- B. The prophets speak of a new covenant that will finally overcome the sinful heart of man (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:26).
- C. The church as the temple of the Holy Spirit becomes the place, just like the Old Testament temple, where God meets his people in a particular way.
- D. The presence of God is made manifest to the world through Christ's people loving one another, serving one another, and bearing one another's burdens as part of the church.

Conclusion: Covenants serve as the basis for how God interacts with his people. These covenants are acts of grace established by God directed toward mankind to make possible the renewal of the relationship between God and man. At each pivotal moment in salvation history, God intervenes and establishes a way forward for man to be redeemed. In God's sovereign providence, he used the Old Testament covenants to move the story forward until the day of Jesus Christ when the final and better covenant was established. The New Covenant is established in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that atoned for sin and brought renewal to the human heart. Mankind now stands in right relationship with God and each other in and through the blood of Jesus Christ.

HOW DOES THE CHURCH RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER?

“The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Introduction: God relates to his people through covenant. Since the church flows out of the nature of the triune God, the church relates to God and one another through covenant.

I. Church Members Covenant Together.

- A. Covenant church membership finds its roots in the fact that God is a covenanting God.
 - i. In the same way God’s covenants outline the spiritual and relational obligations of our relationship with him, church covenants outline the responsibilities and obligations members have to one another.
 - ii. Covenants help maintain the unity and focus of the church.
 - iii. Covenants help eliminate competing visions.
 - iv. “Church members must accept the responsibilities that come with a covenantal type of commitment to one another. As the New Testament portrays it, church membership is an active role. In Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32, believers instinctively began to accept responsibility for one another’s welfare and to gravitate toward spending time with one another. Time together was necessary to fulfill all the responsibilities placed on the church members in the New Testament epistles” (John Hammett, *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, 177-8).
- B. Covenant membership should be based only on the biblical teaching given to the church.
 - i. Even though church membership is not explicitly commanded in the Bible, church membership is the best way to apply the biblical commands for Christians.

- a. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (John 13:34).
- b. Over 35 times in the New Testament, the church is given an action verb followed by “one another.”
 - ii. Most New Testament letters are written to organized churches.
 - iii. The Bible teaches that it is important to know who is in and who is out (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13).

II. Elements of a Church Covenant.

- A. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to church covenants.
 - i. Churches have different personalities, gifts, and cultural emphases.
 - ii. Prefabricated covenants can be too broad to be helpful in a particular context.
- B. Historically, early Baptist church covenants contained four general categories (Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 30).
 - i. Church fellowship.
 - ii. Church discipline.
 - iii. Public worship and personal devotion.
 - iv. Pastoral and lay care.

III. Extenuating Circumstances.

- A. What happens when members age and become homebound or enter a long-term care facility?
- B. How do we think about military personnel who are called to active duty?
- C. What should the church do if members’ giving decreases or stops because of layoffs or economic downturn?
- D. Churches need godly leadership that can apply the church covenant in biblical and responsible ways as many issues fall into the gray area.

Conclusion: When believers begin to understand and value committed church membership, the church becomes healthier, each individual becomes healthier, and the

gospel witness to the world becomes brighter. The opposite is true as well. When believers will not commit to consistent participation and commitment to their local church, it fails to be the family that we see described in the New Testament where people care for one another, encourage one another, spur one another on to good works, and it fails to exemplify the counter-cultural community that demonstrates to the world the beauty of the gospel.

HOW DOES A CHURCH COVENANT HELP? PART 1

“A church covenant answers the question, how do we commit to living together?”

Mark Dever and Paul Alexander

Introduction: Covenantal church membership facilitates spiritual growth and transformation in ways that can only happen in committed Christ-centered relationships.

I. The problems of expressive individualism and consumerism.

A. Expressive Individualism.

- i. The idea is that our inner feelings and desires determine our truth, and the only way to be authentic is to express our truth.
- ii. You be you. Be true to yourself. Follow your heart. Find yourself.
- iii. Transcendent truths become oppressive and dangerous.
- iv. Expressive individualism has infiltrated the church.
 - a. “If expressive individualism is the typical way in which people think of themselves and their relationship to the world, then Christians must understand that they too are deeply implicated. We can no more abstract ourselves from our social and cultural context, and the intuitions that our context cultivates, than we can leave our bodies and float to the moon” (Carl Truman, “Expressive Individualism and the Church,” 9marks.org, May 18, 2022).
- v. Salvation becomes a singular transaction between a person and God.

B. Consumerism.

- i. When individualism becomes the cultural norm, the church’s purpose is solely to compliment and resourcing a believer's spiritual journey.
 - a. “What church offers my family and me the best programs?”
- ii. Some believe that the church will hinder their spiritual journey.
- iii. Leads to absenteeism.

- a. “Why waste a good weekend when I’m feeling really good about my relationship with God, and those people irritate me anyway.”

II. The gospel and community.

- A. The gospel is not only about personal salvation, it is also a reconciliation with God and one another (1 Peter 2:9-10).
- B. A true commitment to Christ is also a commitment to the church.
 - i. “Thus the very purpose of his self-giving on the cross was not just to save isolated individuals, and so perpetuate their loneliness, but to create a new community whose members would belong to him, love one another and eagerly serve the world. This community of Christ would be nothing less than a renewed and reunited humanity” (John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 249).

III. Covenant church membership leads to spiritual growth.

- A. We are most formed by the people we associate with most (Proverbs 13:20, 14:7, 25:26).
 - i. “The strongest identities I have, forming my strongest intuitions, derive from the strongest communities to which I belong. And that means the church needs to be the strongest community to which we each belong” (Carl Trueman, *Strange New World*, 175).
- B. The church is designed to build up one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11; Romans 14:19, 1 Corinthians 14:26).
- C. The church has been given practices to facilitate spiritual growth in its people.
 - i. Teaching the Word of God is central to spiritual growth. (Ephesians 4:11-12, 2 Timothy 3:16-17).
 - ii. The Holy Spirit gifts members to edify and build up one another (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26).
 - iii. Corporate worship strengthens the body (Ephesians 5:18-20; 1 Corinthians 14:26).

Conclusion: We need more than individual forgiveness of sin; we need a new heart that loves God and desires to honor his commands. Gary Millar reminds us that true transformation happens in the local church. “The church is the context in which (and a means by which) God transforms us... The very purpose of gathering God’s people is to shape and change us so that as individuals and together we more fully display the glory and beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ” (J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness*, 240). Any given weekend church gathering may not cause life changing transformation, but the week-in and week-out commitment to a local church body that commits to the orthodox teaching of God’s Word, Christ-centered fellowship, and biblical worship will accomplish exponentially more than we can ever do on our own.

HOW DOES A CHURCH COVENANT HELP? PART 2

“The church – the body of Christ – is the place where God invites us to renew our lives, reorient our desires, and retrain our appetites.

James K.A. Smith

Introduction: Covenantal church membership facilitates spiritual growth and transformation in ways that can only happen in committed Christ-centered relationships.

I. Covenant membership makes corrective church discipline possible.

A. Definition of corrective church discipline.

- i. “Corrective church discipline occurs any time sin is corrected within the church body, and it occurs most fully when the church body announces that the covenant between church and member is already broken because the member has proven to be unsubmitive in his or her discipleship to Christ. By this token, the church withdraws its affirmation of the individual’s faith, announces that it will cease giving oversight, and releases the individual back into the world” (Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 220).
- ii. Establishing a covenant helps people understand that there are consequences for living in unrepentant sin.

B. Discipleship and discipline go hand in hand in fostering and maintaining spiritual growth.

- i. Discipleship is the positive form of spiritual formation that includes teaching, training, and exemplifying godly attitudes and behavior.
- ii. Discipline is the negative form that includes reproof, correction, and, if necessary, formal consequences.

C. Church leaders are charged with facilitating both discipleship and discipline (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 4:2; Ephesians 4:11-12; Hebrews 13:17).

D. The Bible instructs corrective church discipline (Matthew 18:15-17).

- i. Always for the purpose of reconciliation.
- ii. May need to include spiritual leaders (Galatians 6:1).
- iii. The whole congregation has final authority.

II. Covenant membership presents a better witness of the gospel to the world.

- A. The church is a missionary body.
 - i. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:1-20), Jesus's high priestly prayer before his arrest (John 17:15-19), and Jesus's instructions at his ascension (Acts 1:8).
 - ii. The first act of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was to empower the apostles to preach the gospel to people in their own language (Acts 2).
 - iii. "God's plan to reach the world is through local congregations" (Alvin L. Reid, *Evangelism Handbook: Biblical, Spiritual, Intentional, Missional*, 288).
- B. When the church community is unified and loving, it becomes a beacon to the world for the gospel.
 - i. Jesus teaches his disciples that their love for one another was their witness to the world (John 13:34-35).
 - ii. The early church is described as a community where everyone loved, served, and supported one another, and people were added to their number daily (Acts 2:42-47).
 - iii. Peter encourages the church to keep its behavior excellent so as to point people to Jesus (1 Peter 2:11-12).
 - iv. "The world will understand who Christ is and what love is when the church defines it for them by loving one another in the gospel" (Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 34).
- C. Conversely, a church caught up in disunity and conflict can become a hindrance to the gospel.

- i. Jesus warns his disciples that distracted and contaminated salt is good for nothing but to be thrown on the road and trampled by people's feet (Matthew 5:13).
- ii. Jesus also warns the seven churches in Revelation about differing issues calling them to repentance and warning them about losing their gospel witness (Revelation 2-3).

Conclusion: Covenant membership that promotes a culture of love, service, and sacrifice embodies the gospel to the world in ways that our preaching never will, but when church members will not commit to one another in a biblical relationship, the church's witness to the world is diminished severely. Mark Dever argues, "Uninvolved members confuse both real members and non-Christians about what it means to be a Christian" (Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 175). Covenant church membership not only benefits the church, but it also benefits the whole world.

APPENDIX 2

BIBLICAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP SURVEY

The Biblical Church Membership Survey (BCMS) was used to determine the congregation's biblical knowledge of church membership and their personal membership practices. The survey included three sections with the first focusing on general demographic information, the second on biblical knowledge, and the third on personal practices. The survey utilized the six-point Likert Scale. This survey was made available to the congregation physically and electronically.

BIBLICAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP SURVEY¹

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to assess knowledge and practice of church membership. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. Participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. By your completion of this Biblical Church Membership Survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Section 1:

Please answer the following questions by marking the appropriate space provided.

1. What is your age? _____ gender? _____
2. Check all that currently apply.
____ single ____ married ____ divorced ____ widowed
3. Do you have any children aged 18 or younger living in your home?
____ Yes ____ No How many children do you have? _____
4. Are you a Christian?
____ Yes ____ No If so, how long have you been a Christian? _____
5. Are you currently a member of First Baptist Dalhart?
____ Yes ____ No
6. Have you ever been a member of another local church?
____ Yes ____ No

¹ Adapted from Brandon Ray Scroggins, "Teaching Biblical Church Membership at Reformation Baptist Church in Wetumpka, Alabama" (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 125-33.

7. Do you currently serve in a church leadership role by teaching (children and/or adults), leading a ministry (or as an assistant leader), or helping make decisions that affect the church?

___ Yes ___ No

Using the following scale, circle the answer that best corresponds to your opinion.

SD D DS AS A SA

Strongly disagree disagree disagree somewhat agree somewhat agree strongly agree

Section 2:

Biblical Knowledge: These statements are designed to engage your knowledge and viewpoint.

8. Christians can attend and participate in church(es) without needing to formally become a member.

SD D DS AS A SA

9. A church is any gathering of Christians in one place.

SD D DS AS A SA

10. There is no evidence in the Bible that Christians joined churches.

SD D DS AS A SA

11. Christians who refuse to join and submit to a local church are in sin.

SD D DS AS A SA

12. The local church has the authority to affirm or deny a person's profession of faith.

SD D DS AS A SA

13. Local churches should exercise biblical church discipline.

SD D DS AS A SA

14. It should be required that a person be baptized after true conversion to join a church.

SD D DS AS A SA

15. Church membership is a covenant relationship between believers in a local church.

SD D DS AS A SA

16. Church covenants are necessary tools in describing the biblical responsibilities and privileges of church membership.

SD D DS AS A SA

17. A person who does not affirm a church covenant should be denied membership in the church.

SD D DS AS A SA

18. It is necessary for churches to state a summary of beliefs to which members must adhere.

SD D DS AS A SA

19. The Bible teaches that churches must distinguish between members and non-members.

SD D DS AS A SA

20. The church should allow non-members to get involved and serve in its ministries.

SD D DS AS A SA

21. Christians who are not members of a local church should still be able to partake of the Lord's Supper.

SD D DS AS A SA

22. A member who refuses to attend church regularly should be removed from membership.

SD D DS AS A SA

23. Church members are called to submit to the spiritual authority of their pastors.

SD D DS AS A SA

24. Missions are more effective through specialized ministries outside the local church.

SD D DS AS A SA

25. It is biblically acceptable to give your tithes to help other ministries in need rather than giving them to your own local church.

SD D DS AS A SA

26. Local churches should expect members to attend meetings to discuss church concerns.

SD D DS AS A SA

27. Churches should remove members who persist in sin without repentance.

SD D DS AS A SA

28. Church members should continue Christian fellowship with excommunicated members.

SD D DS AS A SA

29. Active church membership is a foundation for spreading the Gospel.

SD D DS AS A SA

30. Watching a church service on a screen can be as effective as attending in person.

SD D DS AS A SA

31. Children of all ages who continually express a desire to be baptized should be baptized.

SD D DS AS A SA

32. If a person is not actively serving in their local church, they are breaking the covenant that they made with the church.

SD D DS AS A SA

Section 3

Personal Practice: These statements are designed to engage your personal practice.

33. It is beneficial to move my membership to another church if I feel that it better suits my desires.

SD D DS AS A SA

34. I have experienced or witnessed formal church discipline in a church of which I was a member.

SD D DS AS A SA

35. It is acceptable to practice Baptism and The Lord's Supper outside the main local church gathering.

SD D DS AS A SA

36. I can grow as a Christian without consistent participation in the local church.

SD D DS AS A SA

37. I have at least one other church member to whom I am personally and regularly accountable.

SD D DS AS A SA

38. In the past week, I have intentionally cared for other church members.

SD D DS AS A SA

39. I need other church members to know and encourage me outside church gatherings.

SD D DS AS A SA

40. I have been a member of a church that utilized a church covenant.

SD D DS AS A SA

41. I take time to prepare myself (and those in my home) beforehand for worship on Sunday.

SD D DS AS A SA

42. I am committed to give sacrificially to my local church on a regular basis.

SD D DS AS A SA

43. I am committed to give sacrificially to my local church on a regular basis.

SD D DS AS A SA

44. I know my spiritual gifts and regularly practice them under the leadership of my pastors.

SD D DS AS A SA

45. Reading the Bible is the only practice I need to grow in my spiritual life.

SD D DS AS A SA

46. I take personal responsibility for the unity and health of First Baptist Dalhart.

SD D DS AS A SA

47. I regularly pray and personally discuss with other church members how God's Word applies to life.

SD D DS AS A SA

48. I practice family worship in my home or in other families' homes on a regular basis.

SD D DS AS A SA

49. I understand the importance of fulfilling the specific responsibilities of a church covenant.

SD D DS AS A SA

50. Which specific aspects of the church do you need more knowledge or better practices?

APPENDIX 3
COVENANT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP CURRICULUM
EVALUATION TOOL

This evaluation tool, along with the six-session outlines, was sent to a panel of experts to give feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of the material. The experts are all seminary-trained pastors who proved to be exceedingly helpful in the development of the finished curriculum.

Covenantal Church Membership Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
1=insufficient. 2=requires attention. 3=sufficient. 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The learning objectives for each lesson are clear.					
Each lesson remains faithful to biblical teaching.					
The material is relevant.					
The thesis of each lesson is clearly developed.					
The material adequately explains the nature of the church.					
The material adequately explains the importance of church membership.					
The material adequately explains how church members should act.					
The material is sufficient to teach new members what is expected as a member.					

APPENDIX 4

INITIAL T-TEST

A t-test was used to determine if the course on Covenant Church Membership made any statistical impact on the course attendee's biblical and practical knowledge of covenant church membership. The first t-test was run without eliminating any surveys. It did not demonstrate the course to be successful.

T-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>Pre-Test Total</i>	<i>Post-Test Total</i>
Mean	164.4285714	182.571429
Variance	725.4945055	702.571429
Observations	14	14
Pearson Correlation	0.154566908	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	13	
t stat	-1.953668313	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.036300971	
t Critical one-tail	1.770933396	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.072601941	
t Critical two-tail	2.160368656	

APPENDIX 5
REVISED T-TEST

This is the results of a second t-test. The post-course surveys included one that scored particularly low. The score on this one survey was significantly lower than any pre-course survey. Once this survey was removed from the sampled, the t-test results were more favorable.

T-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>Pre-Test Total</i>	<i>Post-Test Total</i>
Mean	165.7692308	187.6153846
Variance	758.6923077	375.2564103
Observations	13	13
Pearson Correlation	0.004973691	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	12	
t stat	-2.344599929	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.018537307	
t Critical one-tail	1.782287556	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.037074614	
t Critical two-tail	2.17881283	

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ABSTRACT

TEACHING COVENANT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH IN DALHART, TEXAS

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024
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The purpose of this project is to teach covenant church membership at First Baptist Church in Dalhart, Texas. Chapter 1 described the context of FBCD and the project's rationale. Four goals were set to guide the project's design and implementation. Chapter 2 established the biblical and theological basis for covenant church membership. Because God relates to his people through covenant, his people should relate to one another in covenant. Chapter 3 examined the practical benefits of covenant church membership. It leads to greater spiritual growth, enables restorative church discipline, and presents a better witness of the gospel to the world. Chapter 4 depicted the project's implementation. Implementation included assessing the church's knowledge of church membership, writing and teaching a six-week curriculum, and reassessing those who attended the course. Chapter 5 evaluated the project. This included evaluating the goals and offering personal reflections about the project's strengths and weaknesses.

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