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The Biblical Blessing of Covenant Membership in the Local Church (1)

Think deeply with me about your answer to this question: “What *should* you want in your local church?” Note well, the question is what you and I “*should*” want in our local church, not necessarily what “*do*” we want. I’m asking you, “What *should* we want in our local church?” What you and I prefer or like or what makes us feel comfortable isn’t of preeminent importance. What’s truly important is what God’s Word tells us we *should* want.

Now, having said that, I sincerely believe that what you and I *should* want we probably *do* want. In other words, once we have worked hard to put aside our personal likes and dislikes and the influence of the tradition in which we were raised, I’m confident that most everyone here will want to have a local church that is consistent with what we read in the NT. I don’t know many Christians who would dare to say: “I don’t care that the Bible says we should have A, B, and C, in our local church. By golly, I want X, Y, and Z!” I’m going to continue on the assumption that such does not describe you!

Of course, there is any number of answers to the question I’ve asked, such as: “I should want my local church to worship God in spirit and truth,” or “I should want my church to be committed to teaching God’s Word,” or “I should want my church to commit itself to the spiritual nurture and protection of my children.” But that’s not primarily the direction I want us to go today. Here’s what I have in mind when I ask the question, “What should you want in your local church?”

I assume, first of all, that you want ***a local church where you can be known and loved and cared for by other Christians.*** There is, after all, no such thing as an “anonymous-lone-ranger-Christian” in the NT. You can certainly remain anonymous if you want to. It’s easier to do in a church of several thousand where you can slip in on a Sunday morning and sit along the wall and never engage anyone in fellowship or conversation or accountability. So, yes, you can do that if you want. But why would you want to? And I trust you would at least agree with me that, even if you still want to, it’s simply not biblically permissible.

Second, I assume you want ***a local church where you can know others and experience the joy of pouring into their lives and loving and encouraging and helping them and ministering to their needs.*** In other words, you want a local church, I assume, where you can be useful and be a blessing to others who are struggling and need your input.

Third, I assume you want ***a local church where you can be spiritually led and biblically fed and lovingly protected by gifted leaders.*** I assume you want leaders who not only know who you are but are joyfully committed to keeping watch over your souls, leaders who take seriously their responsibility to teach you the truth and help you grow in your knowledge of God and your intimacy with him.

I honestly can’t imagine anyone disagreeing with those three points. After all, they are each one very, very biblical.

Over the past three years, the Elders and Pastoral team have studied and prayed and explored this issue and have come to the unanimous conclusion that the best and most biblical way to build a local church that does these things well is by implementing what we are calling ***covenant membership.***

Before I go any further, let me be clear about what we do **not** mean by covenant membership. I realize that many of you have bad and even painful memories of how membership was done poorly in the past. I realize that some of you came to Bridgeway precisely because it has never had a formal membership.

So let me explain what covenant membership is not. Our aim is to avoid thinking of the local church in “religious” terms, such that “membership” is the card you carry that entitles you to show up when you please, consume only what you desire, and live however you wish on any day other than Sunday. The concept of “membership” has too often been associated with power, privilege, and an approach to the Christian life that grants a person all the “perks” of being thought of as a “believer” but with few or no responsibilities.

The last thing in the world that we envision when we think of covenant membership is the idea of a Christian congratulating himself/herself, and taking pride in membership in such a way that others are left feeling judged or excluded or second-rate. Covenant membership is not a badge that one flashes to make known their spiritual maturity.

Our desire, on the other hand, is to call Christian men and women to a more genuine, authentic, heartfelt, and holistic relationship with other Christians that entails commitment and discipleship and provides us with a more effective means to display the glory of Christ.

The church is not a club we join in order to reap certain benefits at our leisure, whenever we please, but is rather a complex of relationships of mutual encouragement and spiritual accountability in which *we partner with one another for the advance of the gospel in the earth.*

What, then, do we mean by the words “covenant membership” when it comes to the local church? To be a covenant member simply means that an individual is identified with, is accountable to, and is a contributing participant to this local expression of the body of Christ. With covenant membership there are certain commitments that are made, responsibilities that are embraced, and relationships that are acknowledged. “Covenant Membership” in a local church, therefore, is **the way in which** the individual is **known** to be intentionally committed to every other member of the congregation, and the congregation is **known** to be committed to the individual. Covenant membership means, “I now put myself under the care of the Elders and I invite them to hold me accountable as a constituent member of this body.” That is the meaning of covenant membership.

Covenant membership is simply **the way in which** an individual is **known to be committed** to all others in a local body of believers and how all others are **known to be committed** to that individual. Covenant membership is simply **the way in which an individual makes known his/her covenant commitment to the Elders as spiritual leaders and how the Elders make known and fulfill their responsibility to shepherd and lead and protect the flock.**

As an Elder board and Pastoral staff, here is how we’ve decided to go forward with this. First, today, I’m going to take the remaining time we have to demonstrate that covenant membership is biblical. Second, next Sunday I’m going to talk about the practical benefits of covenant membership and also respond to the most frequently heard objections to it. Then, on Sunday night, October 23rd, here in the auditorium, we are going to host an open forum where you can come and ask any question you want to ask or voice any concerns or objections you have. Our hope is then, at some time early in 2012, we will begin formal implementation of covenant membership. We aren’t sure precisely how we will do this, but I trust that will become clearer to us as we proceed.

Is Covenant Membership Biblical?1

Does the New Testament **explicitly** mention or describe formal church membership?

No, it does not. However, there are numerous truths and responsibilities in the NT which would be minimized or denied if there were no definable local church membership. In other words, the fact that membership is not explicitly mentioned does not mean it didn't exist. Those things which *are* explicitly mentioned **necessarily assume** that covenant membership existed. Therefore, if we conclude that covenant membership is **necessarily entailed** by the Bible's commands for the church and the description of its life, we are morally obligated to pursue it in our churches today. If we conclude that it is not, we are free to regard local church membership as a matter of prudence which we may disregard if we think it not to be helpful in fulfilling our calling as the body of Christ.

As I read the New Testament, I can see several truths or responsibilities that, in my opinion, **necessarily assume** the existence of a definable covenant membership in the local church.

1. Accountability to the Leaders (Elders) of the Church

Church membership is implied in the biblical requirement of Christians to be submitted to a group of church leaders, Elders, or Pastors. The point here is that ***without covenant membership, who is it that the NT is referring to who must submit to a specific group of leaders? And who are those leaders?*** No one would argue that a believer is required to submit to the authority of just anyone who chooses to designate himself an Elder or Pastor, whether in this city or another. Some kind of **expressed willingness or covenant or agreement or commitment (that is, membership)** has to precede a person's submission to a specified group of leaders who themselves are committed to providing spiritual direction to those who have acknowledged their authority.

Consider the way the New Testament talks about the relationship of the church to her leaders.

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” (Hebrews 13:17).

“We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17).

How are this leadership and this submission going to work if there is no covenant among Christians defining who has made the commitment to be led and who has been chosen as leaders? If we downplay the importance of covenant membership, it is difficult to see how we could take these commands to submit and to lead seriously and practically.

2. The Requirement that Shepherds Care for their Flock

¹ What follows is my attempt to put together the best material available on this subject. In addition to my own research, I've drawn heavily on the writings of John Piper, Michael McKinley, Jim Elliff, Mark Dever, and Kevin DeYoung.

Some basic concept of covenant membership is implied in the way the NT requires Elders to care for the flock in their charge. Of course Elders can extend their love to anyone and everyone, and should, within the limits of their ability. But the question is whether the Bible tells Elders that they are to have a special responsibility and care for a certain group, a group of members. Consider **Acts 20:28** where Paul tells the Elders how to care for their flock.

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

This verse does not say Elders cannot visit unbelievers or those who are not yet members. But it does make clear that their first responsibility is to a particular flock. How are they to know who their flock is? Who are we as Elders and Pastors responsible for? For whom will we give an account to God?

The way Peter speaks to the Elders in 1 Peter 5 is even clearer on this point:

“Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-3).

“Those in your charge” (your portion, your lot) implies that the Elders **knew** those for whom they were responsible. This is just another way of talking about membership. If a person does not want to be held accountable by a group of Elders or be the special focus of the care of a group of Elders, they will resist the idea of membership. And they will resist God’s appointed way for them to live and be sustained in their faith.

3. *Church Discipline*

Although I could divide up this line of evidence into as many parts as there are biblical texts that affirm it, I’ve included all of them here under the one heading of church discipline.

a. *Matthew 18:15-17*

Church membership is implied in Matthew 18:15-17 where “the church” (*ekklesia*) appears to be the final court of appeal in matters of church authority as it relates to membership.

“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” (Matt. 18:15-17).

If there is no church membership, how can you define the group that will take up this sensitive and weighty matter of exhorting the unrepentant person and finally rendering a judgment about his standing in the community? It’s hard to believe that just anyone who showed up claiming to be a Christian could be a part of that gathering. Surely, “the church” must be a definable group to handle such a weighty matter. You know who you mean when you “tell it to the church.” Apart from certain criteria or qualifications that enable you to know who is the “church” and who isn’t, there is simply no way to obey this command.

The final step in this process of discipline is treating the unrepentant person “as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Clearly, again, this makes sense only on the assumption that criteria exist by which one can know who or what constitutes the “church” from which this unrepentant person is now being excluded.

b. *1 Corinthians 5:12-13*

We look next at 1 Corinthians 5 where Paul speaks about the necessity of putting someone out of the church. He says,

“What have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you’” (1 Cor. 5:12-13).

There are several implications here.

First, it is clear from Paul’s language that there is an “*in the church*” group and an “*outside the church*” group. Being in the church is definable. There are recognizable boundaries that make drawing this distinction possible. ***The objective criteria that constitute those boundaries would be the terms of membership in the church.***

Second, it is also clear that a person can be removed from being “in the church.” Such a formal removal would not be possible if there were no such thing as a clear membership. In other words, Paul’s exhortation would be impossible to obey unless there were a way of determining who is an accountable part of a local body and who is not. Simply put, *formal exclusion presupposes formal inclusion.*

Michael McKinley provides this helpful illustration:

“I cannot be removed from the Northern California Left Handed Golfer’s Association because I have never been a member of such an organization. Now according to their website, the NCLHGA *will* remove people from membership for several reasons (like right-handedness, perhaps?). But I am in no danger of being subject to such an action, because you can’t kick a person out who was never a member to begin with.”

Third, the church’s discipline is to occur when “you are assembled” (1 Cor. 5:4). For our purposes, simply note that there was a definite and formal assembly of the church, and they knew who to expect when it gathered. The church would have to have known who constituted its membership.

Fourth, apart from some expression of formal membership, how would it be determined who has the right to speak and to vote in the passing of judgment on the offending party? Surely this right would not extend to just anyone. Otherwise the person being disciplined could bring in extended family members and friends or coworkers or even people off the street who said they believed in Jesus. What about the person who has attended services only at Christmas or Easter, or perhaps someone who hasn’t been present for several years but occasionally sends in a support check? The right to engage in the disciplinary process must be limited to a specific group, one that is limited by the criteria that constitute membership in the body.

Fifth, building upon the previous four points, the “discipline” of which Paul speaks was intended only for those who are in the church (v. 12). Evidently some in Corinth were avoiding contact with immoral unbelievers outside the church. Paul seeks to correct this misunderstanding by reminding them that the church’s judgment was aimed only at those “inside” the church. It seems clear that ***the church knew who was an insider and who was an outsider.*** Those “inside” the church must have been united to one another or committed in some special way beyond just casual acquaintance.

One author sums it up this way: “You can’t fire someone who doesn’t work for you. You can’t vote in your country to remove a government official elected by another country. You can’t appeal to a court to

discipline someone who isn't within its jurisdiction. In the same way, you can't formally discipline someone who is in an informal relationship with you; you have no authority to do so. These people in Corinth had voluntarily committed themselves to a formal relationship and they knew who were official members of the church and who were 'outside'."

c. 2 Corinthians 2:6

In 2 Corinthians 2:6, Paul refers to the discipline the church inflicted on an individual as the "punishment by the majority." The existence of a "majority" only makes sense if there was a defined set of people from which the majority is constituted. There cannot be a majority of an unspecified group; it must be a majority of *something*.

This brings us back to the point made earlier in conjunction with the disciplinary process in 1 Corinthians 5. Was it the majority of people who happened to be present the day the vote was cast? Could non-Christians then vote? Could *any* Christians who happened to be visiting from another city who didn't know the situation vote? The most natural assumption to make is that Paul meant the majority of an acknowledged membership of the church.

4. *The List of Widows*

In 1 Timothy 5:9-12, Paul gives Timothy a set of instructions for enrolling widows on the list of those receiving support from the church. He writes:

“Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work. But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith” (1 Tim. 5:9-12).

The verb translated "enroll" (*katalageô*) can be either specific ("to put on a list") or general ("to consider as part of a certain group"). The former meaning would make the point more marked in that the church was clearly keeping an accessible list of widowed members. Yet even the latter meaning would imply that the church was distinguishing between people in a way consistent with the practice of church membership.

Why mention the widow's list? It's difficult to imagine the church keeping a list of widows but not keeping a list of covenant members. If it didn't keep the latter list, what group of widows would even be considered for inclusion on the former list? Any widow in the entire city of Ephesus? The widow who showed up three times four years ago? Of course not. The church would have some specified pool that it was drawing from.

5. *Congregational Decision Making*

In Acts 15:22 we read the following:

“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, *with the whole church*, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 15:22).

A decision needed to be made concerning those who would be entrusted with a letter summing up the conclusions of the Jerusalem Council. The decision was made not only by the apostles and the elders but

in conjunction with *“the whole church.”* ***Who constituted the “whole church”? How was it known that one either was or was not part of the “church” in Jerusalem? How was it determined who had a right to speak into this matter?*** Would anyone who happened to be present at the meeting be given a voice? I find it highly unlikely that *any* person, regardless of belief, behavior, or involvement in the life of the body could simply assert himself into this affair. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that certain criteria or standards were in place that served to set apart those believers who were authorized to join with the apostles and elders in making this decision.

6. Responsibility within the family of faith

Consider Paul’s exhortation in Galatians 6:10,

“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

As Christians, we are responsible to display the love of Christ to “everyone,” i.e., to all people regardless of their spiritual convictions. But we have a unique responsibility “to those who are of the household of faith.” The local church is here portrayed as a family, spiritual “brothers” and “sisters” whose presence in the house and identity as members of that family are obvious. We don’t know what the criteria were that identified one as a family member and thus the object of this particular display of “good,” but there had to have been some means by which the household of faith was differentiated from “everyone” else. This is what is meant by “covenant membership” in the family of God’s children.

God evidently desires to make known to the world the existence of this unified family, this body of believers in any given locality. Look at this family of faith, men and women who are bonded spiritually, who believe together, rejoice together, are growing together, and together display the love of God that is found in Christ. That, simply put, is covenant membership.

7. The Gathering of the “whole church”

In 1 Corinthians 14:23, Paul describes a situation in which “the whole church comes together.” How would the leaders know if the “whole church” was there if no formal covenant relationship was established? The fact that Paul envisioned a group that could be identified and defined as everyone who belonged to that local body necessarily assumes that some means or mechanism had to be in place by which such people could be known. I think that means or mechanism or whatever other word you find appropriate is what I am calling “covenant membership.”

8. Biblical Metaphors

Covenant membership is implied in the metaphor of the “body” in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13. The original meaning of the word “member” is member of a body, like hand and foot and eye and ear. That’s the imagery behind the word “member” in the text (vv. 12, 14, 18, 19, 20, 23, 25, 26, 27). Verse 12: “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.”

So the question this imagery raises for the local church that Paul is describing in 1 Corinthians 12 is: Who intends to be treated as a hand or foot or eye or ear of this body? There is a unity and organic relationship implied in the imagery of the body. There is something unnatural about a Christian attaching himself to a body of believers and not being a member of the body. Neither Paul nor any other biblical author ever describes a Christian as one who functions or exists in isolation from the whole.

In addition to the metaphor of the “body” the New Testament speaks of the church as a “flock” (Acts 20:28) and a “building” (1 Peter 2:5).

In each of these metaphors, there is an obvious relationship between the individual and the congregation as a whole. The individual Christian is a member of the body and a sheep in the flock. The individual believer is, in Peter’s words, “a living stone” in the spiritual house.

Each of these word pictures, so vital to our understanding of the church, demand more than a casual commitment from the individual. There are no informally connected stones in a building. They are cemented together unambiguously. Sheep do not hop from flock to flock; rather, the shepherd knows exactly how many sheep he has in his care. Body parts do not relate to each other informally; they are intricately connected to each other and are mutually dependent. Surely, we best reflect these metaphors when we formally tie ourselves to a local congregation.

Biblical Texts that describe the Local Church

The church is made up of many different members that comprise the one body of Christ

“For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” (Rom. 12:4-5)

“We who are many are one body” (1 Cor. 10:17).

“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” (1 Cor. 12:12).

“You are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27).

“Equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12).

“Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior” (Eph. 5:23).

“We are members of [Christ’s] body” (Eph. 5:30).

“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 church is the Bride of Christ

“Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb” (Rev. 21:9).

“The marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; It was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure” (Rev. 19:7-8).

“For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:12).

“‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:31-32).

The church is the family of God

“I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty” (2 Cor. 6:18).

“Stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (Matt. 12:49-50).

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19).

“As we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10).

“Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Tim. 5:1).

The church is God’s house

“Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope” (Heb. 3:6).

“I am writing these things to you so that . . . you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:14-15).

“It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God” (1 Pet. 4:17).

The church is the temple of God, built with living stones, with Christ as the foundation and cornerstone, and the Holy Spirit indwelling it

“For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11).

“The household of God [is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being 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. 2:19-22).

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’ . . . ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’” (1 Pet. 2:6-7 [Isa. 28:16; Ps. 118:22]).

“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 Pet. 2:5).

“Do you not know that you [plural] are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own” (1 Cor. 6:19).

Conclusion:

When we talk about covenant membership we are not asking you to join a club. We are not asking that you affiliate with an organization or an institution. We are asking you to join yourself to other Christian men and women. We are asking you to commit yourself to pursue godliness together and to live in relationships of mutual accountability and encouragement. We are asking you to identify yourself as a vital, contributing partner in this community of faith. This isn't about someone's control over you, but your commitment to others. It is less about authority and more about accountability. It isn't about walking through life beneath someone, but next to them.

So, why covenant membership? It isn't because we want to be *like* some other church, or even because we want to be *unlike* someone else. It is because we want to be *biblical*.

Why covenant membership? Because this world wants to sell you a bill of goods and to shape you in its image. The world wants to convince you that:

You should maintain your independence and autonomy;
Spiritual authority, or any kind of authority for that matter, is evil;
You should float around, but never settle down;
And if you don't like what is being offered in your church, there are at least a dozen more down the road that will surely have what you're looking for.

Why covenant membership? So that when your life starts to fall apart (however or whenever that may happen) you can rest assured that others who have pledged and promised themselves to you will be there, to love and support you, to pray for you, to instruct you, to walk with you through the worst of times.

Why covenant membership? So that in the face of rampant relativism and postmodern mush that says truth is whatever each individual wants it to be you can stand arm-in-arm with brothers and sisters in Christ and say: "This, the Word of God, is truth. We are united by covenant in our commitment to what it says. And we're willing to go to the ends of the earth together to make it known, and if necessary to die for it.