

**FORMAL MEMBERSHIP IN THE CHURCH IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY  
FOR A LOCAL CHURCH TO FULFILL THE COMMITMENTS  
GIVEN IN SCRIPTURE TOWARDS ONE ANOTHER  
AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP**

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**A Dissertation  
Presented to the Faculty of  
Western Seminary  
Portland, Oregon**

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

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**October, 2023**



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It seems almost surreal to come to the conclusion of such a long and fruitful season of personal growth in the Doctorate of Ministry program at Western Seminary. I will be forever grateful for all the professors who poured into my life and challenged me in profound ways during my studies. I am also thankful for the students who learned alongside me, many of whom became close friends and colleagues in ministry.

However, several people deserve specific thanks because, without their help and support, this endeavor would have been impossible. First, I want to thank Dr. Todd Miles and Dr. John Branner, who helped me edit this dissertation and whose questions and comments made this dissertation better in its final form.

I also want to thank the wonderful members and staff at Grace Bible Church of Bend. These people are some of the dearest to me, and they have been incredibly patient as I have grown and matured in my role as their pastor and shepherd. Their encouragement and support have been invaluable.

I would also like to thank the current and former elders of Grace Bible Church (Neal, Curt, John, Calvin, Tim, Scott, and Ryan) who allowed me to pursue this endeavor and helped shepherd the church with me. These men have been some of my closest friends, and I am forever grateful for the Lord bringing them into my life.

This project would never have happened without the help of Amy Stafford. Amy, thank you for spending countless hours correcting my grammar and helping me think

through the concepts of church membership. Many sentences sound a lot better because of your help.

Finally, I want to thank my family. My beloved children (Elizabeth, Rachel, and Benjamin), you sacrificed a great deal of your father's time and attention so that I could pursue this endeavor. Hopefully, the sacrifice has been worth it, and you are getting a better father in the end. Thank you for your unconditional love and support. Thank you to my parents for all your love and support and for raising me in such a healthy home that kept Christ at the center. And to my beloved wife, Heidi, there are no words to express my gratefulness to the Lord for bringing you into my life. This dissertation work would have been impossible without your constant encouragement and support. You are the primary reason I was able to cross the finish line. I hope that, in the end, all the sacrifices made me a better pastor, father, and husband.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation will defend the idea that the most effective way for a local church body to fulfill the commitments given in Scripture toward one another and church leadership is through a formal process of identifying the members who make up that church and who represent Christ and his church to the surrounding culture. It will attempt to impress how significant this is, especially in a radically individualistic culture where opposition to formal membership can be most intense. Through an exegetical model and historical analysis, this work will endeavor to show that the principles of church membership are foundational to the nature of the church itself and the responsibilities God has given to the local church and its leadership. It will show that there has always been a clear distinction between God's people and the world and that this is especially essential for the purpose of the church in the New Testament. This work will demonstrate that instruction to the church in the New Testament regarding its authority is directly related to the authority given by Jesus to identify who his disciples are (i.e., his church).

This dissertation will also seek to convince the reader that the instructions given to the church regarding their responsibilities to particular leaders in a local church are best fulfilled in a structure where there is clear identification and mutual commitment by both the leaders and the members of the church. This is also true of the responsibilities of members toward one another. Finally, it will provide a possible approach to implementing church membership in a church where the concept may be foreign or even met with hostility.



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Why would someone choose to write a paper on church membership? For many in churches where there is formal church membership, it has little value. Their membership often does not mean anything except the opportunity to vote on some things, and no one in the church knows who are members and who are not.<sup>1</sup> Some see the value in a formal membership process but feel the issue is way too divisive and receives too much opposition to ever advocate for or attempt to implement church membership in their church. In a culture like the Pacific Northwest, the issue is even more challenging as there is a genuine possibility that people will feel strongly enough in opposition to membership that they will fight the leadership's attempt to implement membership or even leave the church over the issue.<sup>2</sup>

Thabiti Anyabwile summarizes five negative responses to church membership as indifferent, ignorant, indecisive, independent (types), and inverted (affections).<sup>3</sup> I have encountered each of these responses and more as I have dialogued with numerous people on the benefits of church membership and provided arguments from the Bible to defend that position. In our region, there is both a radically independent nature that is part of the

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<sup>1</sup> This was my experience in multiple churches I have been a part of and is the story I have heard from many others.

<sup>2</sup> We had multiple people leave our church in Oregon when we began to teach through the principles of membership and introduced a formal membership process.

<sup>3</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*, (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2008), 64.

culture of the Pacific Northwest<sup>4</sup> and a prevalent teaching in churches that membership is “unbiblical.” These have proved to be two herculean forces we have had to fight against in advocating for church membership. I know we are not alone in this.

In addition to these significant challenges, many people have had horrible and painful experiences with membership in their past. These experiences vary from person to person, but the dominant theme or story is that membership was used to exert control over people or to make them compliant with authority in the church. This submission to authority was not to the corporate church body but rather to a select group of leaders who ruled the church through fear and intimidation. Unsurprisingly, those subjected to harmful forms of membership would be hesitant to see church membership as helpful or beneficial to their spiritual growth and the growth of the local church.

With all these reasons for opposition to church membership, those who decide to implement membership in an individualistic culture like the Pacific Northwest are bound to encounter resistance. They will need to be well-equipped to answer the questions that are bound to come regarding why membership is important and where it is seen in Scripture. They must first be convinced that identified church membership is the most effective way to shepherd the church, or they will never survive the attacks they will face.

### **Our Story**

The need for this research came from our own frustration as church leaders in trying to identify who we were responsible for as elders of Grace Bible Church. Who actually made up the local church for which we would give an account? Our church

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Silk, *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, ed. Patricia O’Connell Killen (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004).

started with a desire for membership but no real plan to make that a reality. I felt there was value to membership, but I was utterly unprepared to answer the questions and attacks that came or to show from the Scriptures why I believed this was best for our church.

It seemed that in the church's early years, there was always something more important for us to focus on than membership, especially knowing the resistance that would arise in conversations around church membership. I kept putting off the move to church membership, deciding that other battles were more critical. The problem we soon faced was that the larger we grew as a church, the more complicated it became to identify who we were responsible for. Like many churches in the Northwest, we had people constantly going in and out of the church, and trying to keep up with all of them was an almost impossible task.

If a church is simply focused on growth and is not concerned with answering who they will give an account for and are responsible for, then membership will make absolutely no sense. Membership is guaranteed to turn many potential church attenders away from that church. If a church is not concerned with who they are responsible for in relation to church discipline, or if they do not practice church discipline at all, then the practice of church membership will seem optional and will only be implemented if it serves a pragmatic purpose.

However, for a church that believes they will be held accountable to God for the shepherding and care of the flock that God has entrusted them with, there is no more important question than “Who am I responsible for?” This is not only true of leaders who

will give an account,<sup>5</sup> but as we will see in later chapters, it is essential for each person who makes up a local church to be able to answer that question, as they are held accountable by God for one another.

At what point does a church assume responsibility for a person who starts attending the church? This was the question we were wrestling with. Was it based on time at the church? What was the right amount of time? Was it a matter of weeks, months, years? Was it based on involvement or service in the church? Was it only after someone was serving in the church that we would identify them as “a part of the church”? What about those who cannot serve in a specific way because of time or other limitations? It seemed that no matter what we came up with, all of the criteria would be arbitrary, and there would always be exceptions that would not apply. To say that we were confused and frustrated in identifying who we were responsible for as church leaders is a gross understatement.

One example that exemplifies our confusion came early in the life of our church before we had established official membership. One day, we received a Facebook message from a woman stating that a “member of our church” was having an affair with her husband. In the message, she named the individual, and while that individual had visited our Sunday morning worship service a handful of times, we would have never considered her a member of our church. I had a few conversations with her but had never talked about her conversion or baptism, and from my conversations with her, I knew that she was in a very different place, theologically from our church. We were very confused

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<sup>5</sup> Heb. 13:17 makes it clear that leaders will give an account before God.

about how we were to respond. She had been attending our church in the past few months, but we had not seen her for quite some time when we received this message.

What was our responsibility in this situation? Should we pursue her in church discipline? She claimed to be a Christian. She had only attended our church a handful of times and obviously was telling others she was going to our church. Whose accountability was she under? Who was responsible for her care, shepherding, discipleship, and discipline? In this situation, I responded to the person who left the Facebook message and communicated that this woman was not a part of our church but had visited a few times. I assured her that if this woman was living in the sinful lifestyle that she had been accused of, we would address the issue if we saw her again. The woman never returned to our church, but the question still loomed: who was responsible?

This was not the first time we encountered the question of who we are responsible for, and it would not be the last. There would be many other cases where we prayed and thought long and hard about how we should respond to situations involving people who were not really a part of our church but who attended on a sporadic basis. The weight and confusion of this case and so many others led us as an elder team to begin to search the Scriptures for answers. It would eventually lead us to move toward a more formalized membership following a Sunday sermon series attempting to teach why we believed this was important.

This was not an easy journey. We encountered a great deal of resistance and, in some ways, still do to this day. We have had people leave our church over this issue, which has caused many others not to choose our church as they look for a church home in our city. But despite all this resistance and the pain it has caused, I am more convinced

today than ever that moving to a recognized membership was one of the best decisions our church has ever made for the congregation, especially the church leaders. The membership process has given great clarity about who we are responsible for and what that responsibility looks like. It has allowed our elders to hear a clear gospel affirmation from each incoming member and to verify their profession of faith to the best of our ability. It has given a clear understanding to our membership of who they are in covenant relationship with and who it is that actually makes up the church of God at Grace Bible. Membership has not solved all of our problems. There are still many challenging situations we encounter with people who are clearly believers and clearly a part of our church but who have decided not to affirm that through membership for one reason or another. We deal with each of those situations on a case-by-case basis, but for the most part, membership has given us a greater sense of clarity regarding who is the church at Grace.

### **Why Is This Different?**

Haven't others already written on membership? Why is this research needed? While much of the exegesis and overall study of membership in the church is not brand new, this dissertation will attempt to provide a new way to look at the questions and answers the Scriptures provide. While the topic of church membership can be found in several books related to the church, only a handful of works have been written specifically on the subject, and most of them are not trying to answer the fundamental question that this dissertation will attempt to answer.

Most of the works that thoroughly address the issue of church membership have been written in the past ten years. As a survey of the literature shows, most of those

works have been written inside the context of denominations and in areas where membership is more accepted by the surrounding culture. That is not to say that church membership is an easy sell in any culture. Still, specific challenges are faced by those in the Pacific Northwest, where the culture is incredibly hostile to anything that challenges a person's individualism or perceived freedoms. In surveying the literature, I found no books or dissertations written by someone living in the Pacific Northwest. I believe that looking at this topic from this vantage point can bring a unique perspective to this study and the corresponding conclusions.

In addition, most books directed specifically at church membership assume the reader believes this is a biblical principle or the focus is trying to demonstrate that church membership is the only biblical way for a church to function. For example, Dennis E. Bills' excellent work entitled *A Church You Can See* does an incredible job of defending the idea of membership through the Scriptures. Still, it does not leave many options for those who disagree with church membership. He states, "This book will make the case that the doors of the church-you-can-see are only found in particular church... it will also make the case that membership is more than a matter of choice, as though participation were optional."<sup>6</sup> While I agree very much with his desire to persuade pastors and churches to see the benefits of church membership in caring for the church, my goal is not to say that all those who disagree with church membership are wrong or are disobeying God. This work is slightly different in that it will attempt to convince the reader that the principles that lead to church membership are biblical. It will try to demonstrate how this is the most effective way for a church to shepherd its people and for

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<sup>6</sup> Dr Dennis Eldon Bills, *A Church You Can See: Building a Case for Church Membership*, 2 edition. (New Martinsville, WV: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 3.

the people to shepherd one another. Still, it will not go so far as to say it is the only biblical model.

I hope to show those who think membership is unnecessary that, in reality, it is the most helpful and effective thing a church can do if it is serious about caring for and discipling its people. I also desire for this to be an encouragement to those who have come from the perspective of seeing membership from simply an organizational or authoritarian standpoint to see instead that church membership is the most effective way to help the church carry out shepherding care, discipleship, and biblical accountability for one another.

### **The Goal of This Paper**

This dissertation will defend the position that the most effective way for a local church body to fulfill the commitments given in Scripture towards one another and church leadership is through a formal process of identifying the members who make up that church and who represent Christ and his church to their surrounding culture. It will emphasize how significant this is, especially in a radically individualistic culture where opposition to formal membership can be most intense.

This work will show through an exegetical model that the principles of church membership are foundational to the nature of the church itself and the responsibilities God has given to the local church and its leadership. It will show that God's people have always had clarity or boundaries between themselves and the world and that this is especially essential for the purpose of the church in the New Testament. It will show that instruction to the church in the New Testament regarding its authority is directly related to the authority given by Jesus to identify his disciples (i.e., his church).



This paper will also aim to convince the reader that the instruction to the members of the church regarding their responsibility to particular leaders in a local church is best fulfilled in a structure where there is clear identification and mutual commitment by both the leaders and the members. This is also true of the responsibilities of members towards one another in a local church, especially the responsibility of accountability in church discipline. This work will endeavor to convince the reader that church membership is the most effective way for a local church to fulfill these responsibilities, which are fundamental to how God has designed the church. It will also include illustrations and examples from our own journey as a church plant in the Pacific Northwest trying to figure out the best way to care for its people.

### **Key Terms**

Several key terms will be important to understand as we discuss the church. All of these will be described in much greater detail throughout the paper, but a foundational understanding and a simple definition of some standard terms will be helpful as we start. The most important terms to understand for this topic are:

- **Local Church:** A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ's name to officially affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances.<sup>7</sup>
- **Church Membership:** Church membership is a covenant of union between a particular church and a Christian, which consists of the church's affirmation of the Christian's gospel profession, the church's promise to give spiritual oversight

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Leeman and Michael Horton, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*, 1 edition. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2012), 52.

to the Christian, and the Christian's promise to gather with the church and submit to its oversight.<sup>8</sup>

- **Responsibilities:** Responsibilities are the clear commands given in Scripture from the Lord to the church regarding how they are to relate to one another, their leaders, and the world. Responsibilities are what the church and its members will be held accountable for by the Lord in their obedience or disobedience to his commands.
- **Church Leadership:** Church leadership are the individuals to whom the Lord has given the responsibility and spiritual authority to lead a specific group of Christians who gather as a local church. The New Testament describes this role as elder, pastor, and overseer<sup>9</sup> and gives these leaders a specific calling and a unique accountability for which they will answer to the Lord. The church also has been given deacons who assist the elders in their responsibilities.
- **Church Member:** A church member is someone who has entered into a formal, visible, covenant relationship with other members in a local church who affirm the person's faith, and take responsibility and oversight for that person's discipleship and accountability for the time and season that they are covenanted to one another in a local church.<sup>10</sup>
- **Church Discipline:** Church discipline is the church's act of confronting someone's sin and calling them to repentance, which, if the person doesn't repent, will

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Leeman and Mark Dever, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline*, Edition Unstated edition. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2010), 217.

<sup>9</sup> The New Testament uses these three terms as one office (episkopos) for leaders in the church. See: 1 Tim. 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-7, 1 Peter 5:1-2, Acts 20:17-38.

<sup>10</sup> Leeman and Horton, *Church Membership*, 64.

culminate in excluding a professing Christian from membership in the church and participation in the Lord's Supper until there is repentance and restoration.<sup>11</sup>

- Individualism: Individualism is a way of thinking and living that expresses the idea that the primary reason I live is for myself and my own personal happiness. How things impact my needs, goals, and desires take priority over all other ways of evaluating something.

Having a common definition of these terms will help assure that we are meaning the same things as we discuss these topics throughout the paper.

### **Our Starting Point**

While I believe the research and conclusions of this paper will benefit anyone studying the topic of church membership, there are a few assumptions regarding for whom this work is most intended. This paper will take the position that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God and that all direction for the church can be found in its pages. It will assume that the reader is also using the Bible as their starting point for seeking answers to the question of church membership and all other matters related to the church.

This paper will also assume that the reader is open to being persuaded and convinced. It is written primarily to those seeking answers to the question of church membership and looking to the Scriptures to help answer those questions. It is assumed that the reader truly wants to know what the Bible has to say and will allow the Scriptures to direct their thinking.

It is also written for pastors and thoughtful Christians in a local church who have a desire to be faithful and obedient to the Lord's direction for the church more than

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.9marks.org/answer/what-church-discipline/>

simply growth in numbers or size. It assumes that the goal is for the church to better care for, shepherd, and disciple one another as the Lord has commanded. It assumes that the elders of a church are not looking for a defense of their authoritarian control over the church but rather desire to be faithful shepherds of God's people and are looking for the most effective way of doing that. It also assumes that the reader believes in the autonomy of the local church and that the authority to shepherd and care for the church is given primarily to the leaders and members who make up a local church rather than an outside hierarchy.

### **What Makes This So Challenging?**

One of the things that makes the discussion of membership so challenging is that there is not a clear indicative command in Scripture that we can point to, such as "Thou shalt become a member of your local church." There is no chapter and verse we can point someone to that clearly directs them to become a member of a local church. However, there are a multitude of passages that teach principles regarding the local church that are best achieved through church membership. Just because there is no chapter or verse to point someone to does not mean that the concept is somehow "unbiblical." There are several beliefs and concepts taken from the Bible where there is no chapter or verse to direct someone to. One of those is that of the "Trinity". Another is "substitutionary atonement." These are words you will not find in the Scriptures by searching for a chapter or verse, but they are concepts that we see clearly taught in the Scriptures.

Another thing that makes the issue of membership so challenging is the cultural opposition to any form of responsibility or accountability as well as the radical individualism in America that leads many to dislike being told what they can or cannot

do. Hellerman explains this concept of “radical individualism” in the following way: “We in America have been socialized to believe that our own dreams, goals, and personal fulfillment ought to take precedence over the well-being of any group – our church or our family, for example – to which we belong.”<sup>12</sup>

This is not just an American problem; this is a fundamental problem in our sinful nature that rebels against authority of any kind. Rebellion started in the Garden of Eden and will continue until Christ returns and puts all of his enemies under his feet. All one has to do is trace the history of Israel through the Old Testament and the history of the church through the New Testament to see how deep this sinful heart of rebellion lies within each person from birth. It is therefore no surprise that people would do all that they can to avoid anything having to do with the loss of personal authority or autonomy in ruling their own lives, such as in church membership where we submit ourselves to one another.

In addition to these challenges, we have the difficulty of trying to figure out how to apply biblical principles into our current context. This process is not easy, and it comes with incredible challenges and subjective observations and conclusions. There is little disagreement that the method of being added to the church in the first century was through repentance, faith in the gospel message, and baptism.<sup>13</sup> At its core, that is still how people are added to the church.

But a challenge that arises in our complex culture is how we can know someone has responded in repentance and baptism if we are not the ones who led them to the Lord

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville, Tenn: B&H Academic, 2009), 4.

<sup>13</sup> See Acts 2:38-41, 8:12, 38, 9:18, 10:47-48, 16:33, 18:8, 19:5, 22:16

and baptized them. While early church records are sometimes scarce, we know that as early as the second century there was a waiting period between a confession of faith and a person's baptism. This waiting period was for the purpose of confirming one's profession of faith and providing moral instruction as well as being a time for prayer and fasting before entering the church.<sup>14</sup>

A waiting period was the dominant practice of the church until infant baptism became more widespread. Was the early church's method of making disciples an application of the principles in the Bible given by the Lord, or was this adding to God's Word? Because there is such a great separation of time and a number of cultural differences, it makes the specific application of biblical principles into our culture more complex. Add to this the confusion that was brought about by the Roman Catholic Church in removing the authority of the local church and replacing it with an ecclesiastical hierarchy, and you can see a sample of the challenges that the discussion of church membership faces.

### **The Questions We Will Not Be Able to Answer**

While we will attempt to answer the majority of the significant questions surrounding the issue of church membership, the reality is that there are some questions beyond the scope this paper. One of the issues we will not be able to address in this paper is that of all the responsibilities that believers have toward one another in a local church. There will be references to a number of good books that help answer these questions in

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<sup>14</sup> Nathan Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership" in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, eds. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville, Tenn: B&H Academic, 2012), 54.

more detail in the Works Cited<sup>15</sup> section, but this paper will focus on the most important questions related to care, shepherding, discipleship, and the authority of the local church, since that is the center of why church membership is so important.

Another area we will not be able to look at fully is that of the purpose and mission of the church. This is a large topic which whole books have been devoted to trying to understand. We will address these issues, but mainly as they are connected to the authority of the church in its role of receiving and removing members and shepherding and discipling its people. There are many great books on the purpose and mission of the church that will be listed in the Works Cited and will be referred to in the chapters that address the nature of the church.

It should also be noted that this paper will be addressing the discussion of church membership from a historically credobaptist (or believer's baptism) theological perspective. This view sees baptism as an ordinance administered by the church on those who have professed faith in Christ, whereby the church affirms a person's commitment to Christ as they publicly identify themselves with Jesus Christ and his church. This does not mean that the focus of this study will not be beneficial for those who hold a paedobaptist perspective, but it should be understood what is meant by the term "baptism" throughout this paper.

Other areas that this paper will not be able to address are the questions of at what age someone should become a church member, and at what age we should baptize or discipline someone. If baptism is the visible sign of entrance into God's family, and excommunication, church discipline, or restricting communion is the visible sign of

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<sup>15</sup> Some of those are: *Life in the Fathers House*, *What is a Healthy Church Member*, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church*, and *Life in the Body of Christ*.

removal from the church, then at what age should we baptize people into the church or start exercising church discipline on those in disobedience? It seems very few people ask these questions, as most are anxious to baptize anyone who professes faith in Jesus, no matter their age. Few are willing to exercise church discipline in any manner, no matter how grievous the sin. I think these are important questions that should be asked by church members and leaders, but this paper will not be able to address these issues.

### **Why is The Question of Membership So Crucial?**

Some people wonder why this is such a big deal. Why would you spend so much time and energy dealing with this question? Does it really matter that much? The reason the question of church membership is so crucial to me is because of Hebrews 13:17 and passages like it:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (ESV)

This verse should be a sobering reality for all leaders in Christ's church. It should rightly "put the fear of God" into us and cause us to ask, "For whom will I give an account?" This verse will be looked at in much more depth in future chapters, but it stands as a serious warning to all those who have been called to lead the church that Christ purchased with his own blood.<sup>16</sup> F.F. Bruce expresses the weight of this verse when he says,

the leaders carried a weighty responsibility; they were accountable for the spiritual well-being of those placed in their care. No wonder they lost sleep (αγρυπνέω, "keep watch," has the etymological sense of chasing away sleep.) over this responsibility—for the "watching" could well involve this as well as

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<sup>16</sup> Acts 20:28 (ESV) "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.



general vigilance—if some of their flock were in danger of straying beyond their control.<sup>17</sup>

Who is it that I will give an account for? This is the question every pastor/elder in the church must know how to answer. That is what makes this question and topic so vital to the church.

Another reason this issue is so crucial is that we are not only responsible for ourselves before God, but we are actually held responsible by God for the lives of one another in a local church. This principle will be explored in later chapters, but a simple reading of the letters to the churches in Revelation will make this concept abundantly clear. Listen to the words of Jesus, the Lord of the Church:

Revelation 2:1–7 (ESV)

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. “‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’

Notice how the church is treated as a whole. Jesus does not single out individuals for this warning but rather warns the whole church. That is because individuals in a local church are responsible for one another and are accountable to one another. If you look at the letters to the seven churches, you will also notice that each church was held accountable for the sins they committed collectively as a local church, and each rebuke

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<sup>17</sup> F. F. Bruce, (1990). *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Rev. ed., p. 385). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

and exhortation was different for each local church. They were not held accountable for the sins of the other churches, but they were held accountable for the collective sins of their particular church.

This can also be seen in Paul's rebuke of the unrepentant sinner in 1 Cor. 5 and his commending how they dealt with that sin in 2 Cor. 7:12:

So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. (ESV)

Paul's warning was to the entire church, for they collectively would be held responsible for how they dealt with sin in the midst of their body. This principle is all but lost in the modern evangelical church, where people are mainly concerned with their own spirituality and have little to no understanding of collective or corporate responsibility in the local church. This concept and these verses will be examined in much more detail, but for now, they serve as a clear indication of why this issue is so significant.

Another reason this topic is so important to look at is that it is the responsibility of the church to confirm the faith of believers,<sup>18</sup> and when it ignores that responsibility, it leaves false converts thinking they are saved when, in fact, their eternal destiny is at stake. As we will see in future chapters, Jesus gave the authority and responsibility to the church to "bind and loose" on earth, saying that this would also be "bound and loosed" in heaven.<sup>19</sup> As we will see, this responsibility is to help reflect in the visible church what is true of the invisible church. In other words, that responsibility is to affirm the faith of the faithful and to disavow publicly the professed faith of the unrepentant.

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<sup>18</sup> As we will see this is done through the Ordinances of Baptism and Communion.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 16:19 (ESV), "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

When the church has no clear boundaries by which to identify who the faithful are, it can become derelict in this responsibility. The consequences of this are severe, as the church represents Christ to the world as his bride. The stakes are too high to not take this responsibility seriously.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE HISTORY OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Trying to discover the importance of church membership without looking at how the topic has been viewed throughout the history of the church is a careless decision at best. While I would agree wholeheartedly that church history is of secondary importance and the Scriptures should be our primary concern and guide, ignoring the lessons learned from the past would be an unfortunate decision. Therefore, we want to start our examination of the importance of church membership with a survey of how it has been seen in the church's history. There is no way we can thoroughly examine all of church history in the scope of this paper, but by surveying the major periods of the history of the church, we should be able to gain an adequate picture of how church membership has been viewed, and this should prove beneficial for our examination of the topic.

If we start combing the pages of Scripture and early church history documents for the words "church membership," we will likely be quickly disappointed. There is no passage we can turn to that says, "Thou shalt be a member of a church, and this is how..." While that is the case, that does not mean that the concept of church membership cannot be found in the pages of the New Testament or in the documents of early church history. I agree with Nathan Finn when he states, "While the phrase 'church membership' never appears in the New Testament, the concept is clearly present."<sup>20</sup> For our historical

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<sup>20</sup>Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership," 57.

examination, we are going to be asking the questions, “How did the church historically add people to the church?” and “Who did the outside world see as the church?”

### **The Early Church: 100-600 A.D.**

There is very little disagreement among Christian scholars and historians that the way a person was added to the church in the New Testament and early church was through the act of baptism.<sup>21</sup> This is what we see throughout the book of Acts,<sup>22</sup> and this is in direct obedience to the Lord’s command to his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20. A longer and more detailed description of the development of the church and the role baptism played will be described in Chapter 3, but for the sake of our survey of church history, we can see in Acts 2:33-41 that those who entered into the visible, gathered church did so through Peter’s instruction to “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). We then see that in response to this act of baptism “...there were added that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). The obvious implication is that these new followers of Jesus, who had believed through repentance and responded visibly in baptism, were added to the church. This pattern continues throughout the New Testament.

It is not long, though, in the history of the church that the immediacy of baptism was replaced with a time of preparation and instruction for those who are seeking to be baptized and enter into the church. We know this from The Didache, an early Christian document from around 90AD. “The Didache, short for ‘Teaching of the Twelve

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<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette and Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, First edition. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), vol. 1, 193.

<sup>22</sup> Examples of this can be seen in Acts 2:37-41; 8:12-13, 38-39; 9:17-18; 10:47-48; 16:15, 31-33; 18:18; 19:1-7; 22:16.

Apostles,’ was an early church ‘Catechetical handbook’ designed for those who were joining the Christian family from among the gentiles.”<sup>23</sup> The instruction in Section 7.2 of the Didache reveals that the length of preparation and instruction was not extensive at this time, but it was present. It says, “And prior to the baptism, [1] let the one baptizing fast; [2] also the one being baptized [3] and if any others are able to do so; And order the one being baptized to fast one or two [days] before.”<sup>24</sup> So here we can see that there was an instructed waiting period of at least one or two days that would allow for fasting and preparation for baptism.

Through the Didache we begin to learn that entry into the early church was more of a process of discipleship that would culminate in baptism. Thomas O’Laughlin, an expert in early church history and the study of the Didache, states, “Becoming a disciple was probably best seen as a process of apprenticeship.”<sup>25</sup> He goes on to explain,

We sometimes think that baptism took place immediately when someone had recognized the power of the gospel. We then point to the story of Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch after he had explained how the Scriptures were fulfilled in Jesus (Acts 8:26-40) or how Paul baptized the jailer in Thyatira, along with his whole family one night ‘without delay’ (Acts 16:25-34). However, the whole point about these stories is that they are the exceptional cases - and so worthy of dramatic note which show that the normal practice was otherwise. Discipleship had to be learned: it was not the passing whim of a moment.<sup>26</sup>

A study of the book of Acts does show that “out of some thirty-four conversational descriptions in Acts, only nine baptismal events are given.”<sup>27</sup> Add to this the fact that there is no clear direction in the New Testament as to the specifics relating to

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<sup>23</sup> William C. (William Clayton) Varner, *The Way of the Didache: The First Christian Handbook* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2007), 3.

<sup>24</sup> *The Way of the Didache*, 72.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas O’Laughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2010), 3.

<sup>26</sup> *The Didache*, 63-64.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Belcastro, *The Relationship of Baptism to Church Membership* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1963), 137.

how baptism is to be carried out, and one can see that there is ample reason to be less dogmatic towards a position of the immediacy of baptism after a profession of faith. Church history has shown us that, within one or two generations of the believers who were taught by the apostles, a waiting and preparation time for baptism was seen as prudent and important. That belief would only increase as the church continued to teach on the subject.

A few years after the writing of the *Didache*, we learn from Ignatius of Antioch in Smyrna, 8.2 that “baptisms are to take place only with the bishop’s approval.”<sup>28</sup> This shows us that the church was starting to set up requirements for Christians to follow regarding baptism. By the time of Justin Martyr (110-165), we see even more preparation and instruction is being given to those who desired to be baptized. In examining the writings of Justin, early church historian Steven McKinion remarks,

The most significant instruction, however, was that the rite was reserved for those who had chosen to live according to the teachings of the community and had been forgiven of their past sins. This point explains why the Christians observed a period of training and instruction before granting admission to the church.<sup>29</sup>

This pattern is seen again in the writings of Tertullian of Carthage (160-212). McKinion notes that, in the writing of Tertullian we see, “The author instructed that the minister should examine carefully those to be baptized, so as to avoid sharing in the sins of one who might fall into grave sin after baptism. Moreover, Tertullian advised the delay of baptism, especially for children.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Murphy Center for Liturgical Research and Murphy Center for Liturgical Research., *Made, Not Born: New Perspectives on Christian Initiation and the Catechumenate, from the Murphy Center for Liturgical Research.*, Liturgical studies (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 40 (Chapter 2 by Robert M. Grant.)

<sup>29</sup> Steven A. McKinion, *Life and Practice in the Early Church: A Documentary Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>30</sup> *Life and Practice in the Early Church*, 10.

This delay for baptism led to the formation of a new category in the church called the “catechumen.” Latourette describes this time in the history of the church by saying, “In the years when Christianity was spreading rapidly and thousands of converts were coming from paganism, baptism was preceded by a period of instruction and probation as a catechumen.”<sup>31</sup> Nathan Finn summarizes the catechumen in this way: “Prospective baptismal candidates were now called catechumens, and though considered likely to be Christians, as in the previous generation, they were not accepted into full membership and invited to participate in Communion until after their baptism.”<sup>32</sup> During this time of instruction and preparation, they were encouraged to participate in the worship services and pray but were not allowed to participate in the Lord’s Supper and did not have all of the privileges that would come to them after baptism.<sup>33</sup>

The length of this preparation and instruction could vary, but by the time we come to Hippolytus in Rome around 220AD, that time of discipleship could last up to three years leading up to baptism. In the writings of Hippolytus, we read, “Let catechumens spend three years as hearers of the word. But if a man is zealous and perseveres well in the work, it is not the time, but his character that is decisive.”<sup>34</sup> This might seem shocking to modern Christians, but this became the normal pattern of the church as they welcomed people into the community and taught them about the Christian faith prior to baptism. It was only after baptism that they would receive the “kiss of peace” and be able to partake in the “Lord’s Supper,” indicating they were now full communicate members.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *A History of Christianity, Vol. 1, 195.*

<sup>32</sup> *A Historical Analysis of Church Membership in “Those who must give an account,” 55.*

<sup>33</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), vol. 2, 256.

<sup>34</sup> Burton Scott Easton, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 43.

<sup>35</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Celebrating Our Faith: Evangelism through Worship*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 93.



We can try to make educated guesses as to why this extended period of preparation and instruction was developed and lengthened in the church, but perhaps the fear of welcoming outsiders in the midst of serious persecution played a significant role because the “standards of membership lessened in many respects” following one of the most significant moments in Christian history, the conversion of Emperor Constantine in 312AD.<sup>36</sup> This moment would not only lead to the termination of Roman-led persecution, but it would also eventually lead to Christianity becoming the official religion of the empire in 380AD through the edict of Theodosius I.<sup>37</sup> This transformation would bring many blessings in general, but would also bring with it a whole new set of challenges when it came to identifying who made up the church. “Prior to Constantine’s conversion, the church consisted of convinced believers. Now many who came were politically ambitious, religiously disinterested, and still half-rooted in paganism .”<sup>38</sup>

The process of catechetical instruction prior to baptism continued throughout the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, but in the fifth century there was a transition from credobaptism being the normative practice in the church to the practice of infant baptism being preferred.<sup>39</sup> This transition would be solidified in the sixth century when Justin I made infant baptism compulsory<sup>40</sup> and would have radical implications on how members of the church would be identified for over the next 1000 years and beyond. As infant

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<sup>36</sup> Jeremy M. Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 40 questions series / Benjamin L. Merkle, series editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2017), 58.

<sup>37</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context*, Second edition. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), vol. 2, 239.

<sup>38</sup> Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, Updated 4th edition. (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 96.

<sup>39</sup> For a more detailed description of how this transition occurred see Steven A McKinion, “Baptism in the Patristic Writings, in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, eds. Thomas R. Schriener and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 163-88.

<sup>40</sup> Ferguson, *Church History*, 162.

baptism increased in popularity and preference, the instruction of adult catechumen dwindled away, and in its place came the practice of baptizing infants and preparing those children through confirmation and into full membership.<sup>41</sup> This practice, along with the papacy and the Christendom model of church-state relations, led to the dark period of the church in the Medieval Era.

### **The Middle Ages: 600-1500**

The Middle Ages (600-1500) have often been referred to as the “Dark Ages,” and this is especially true when used to describe the church. While the institutional church in the West continued to gain incredible power and wealth during these years, it also decayed into something that would have been unrecognizable to the apostles and Christians of the New Testament. These times were truly dark, and especially in regard to being able to identify the true church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Who were the actual followers of Jesus Christ? If the answer was “those who are baptized by the church,” then this would have included every man, woman, and child in the Western and Eastern Empires because by this time in the church’s history, infant baptism “was the gateway to membership both in the church and in society.”<sup>42</sup>

This period in the church’s history is incredibly complex and far too detailed to cover in this short section, but there are a few key transitions that took place in the church that will help us examine the effects on church membership during this time period. Regarding these, Nathan Finn explains, “During the medieval era, the nature of church membership was further altered due to at least five new realities: infant baptism, the

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<sup>41</sup> Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 58-59

<sup>42</sup> Joseph H. Lynch and Phillip C. Adamo, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History*, Second edition. (London ; Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 286.

conversion of the Germanic tribes, the Christendom model of church-state relations, monasticism, and greater emphasis on the church's universality."<sup>43</sup>

The most significant of these new realities that impacted the state of church membership during the Middle Ages were the practice of infant baptism, the Christendom model of church and state, and the theology of the church's universality for salvation. Each of these played a part in dismantling any recognizable distinction of the true ekklesia of the Lord Jesus Christ on earth.

The practice of infant baptism was now universal except out on the mission field to the barbarians, where baptisms could happen in mass or under the threat of the sword.

<sup>44</sup> In addition to the universality of infant baptism, the practice was now thought to actually wash away "original sin" and confer salvation on those who received "the sacrament of baptism" from the church. In describing this, Bernard Hamilton writes, "Baptism was the sacrament of salvation. It freed a child from original sin, and it was believed that if a baptized baby died it would go straight to heaven because it had committed no actual sin, whereas if it died unbaptized it would go to limbo."<sup>45</sup>

In addition to infant baptism, the church also invented the "sacrament of confirmation." This sacrament was performed by anointing an infant's head with oil after baptism and was thought "to impart the Holy Spirit to the candidate, to strengthen or 'confirm' him or her."<sup>46</sup> And to make the understanding of salvation and the church even more distorted, the church would often give the infant "first communion immediately

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<sup>43</sup> Nathan Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 57.

<sup>44</sup> Bernard Hamilton, *Religion in the Medieval West*, 2nd ed. (London: Arnold, 2003), 87.

<sup>45</sup> Hamilton, *Religion in the Medieval West*, 87.

<sup>46</sup> Lynch and Adamo, *The Medieval Church*, 289.

after baptism in the form of a sip of wine.”<sup>47</sup> All of this not only erased the understanding of how someone was to be truly saved according to Scripture, but it also gave the church enormous power and influence, as a person’s salvation was now dependent on the sacraments the church alone could give. It is no wonder, then, that under this system the “Baptism of infants had become universal for the offspring of Christian parents... Children were, accordingly, to be baptized as soon after birth as possible”<sup>48</sup> for their salvation was thought to be at stake.

Infant baptism was not the only distortion that took place during this time period. Perhaps just as damaging for identifying the membership of God’s church was the dissolution of the church being separate and distinct from the state government. The fall of Rome in the late fourth century would not only have a significant impact on the entire world, but it would also have a profound impact on the church, and consequently, the power it would soon yield. In 476 AD, the final Roman emperor would be deposed from power in the west by Germanic invaders, and the Roman Empire would collapse. “In the West, the demise of the empire created a vacuum that the church filled; and thus, ecclesiastical leaders, particularly the pope, also came to wield political power. In the East, the empire continued for another thousand years.”<sup>49</sup>

The demise of the Roman empire caused multiple “independent Germanic kingdoms” to rise and for the people to become increasingly fragmented. The one thing that promised to hold the people together was the common faith that had dominated at the end of the Roman Empire: Christianity. “As western Europe became politically

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<sup>47</sup> Lynch and Adamo, *The Medieval Church*, 288.

<sup>48</sup> Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 1, 528.

<sup>49</sup> Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Rev. and updated, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

fragmented, the church kept alive an awareness of a wider community, that of Christendom, which embraced all its members.”<sup>50</sup>

During this turbulent time in history, multiple rulers had tried to reunite the fragmented West, but it would not occur until “Charlemagne was crowned emperor by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day 800, thereby inaugurating the concept of a Western Christian empire (later to be known as the Holy Roman Empire), which was to linger for a thousand years.”<sup>51</sup> This transformation would lead to the church and state becoming one in power and purpose, and thereby giving baptism a new role of not only entrance into the “holy church” but also “citizenship” into the empire.<sup>52</sup>

Jeremy Kimble does a superb job of summarizing this transformation when he states,

The empire would give recognition to the true church, that is, the Roman Catholic Church, and this relationship of church and state would dominate the ecclesiology of the Middle Ages. As such, infant baptism was a sign tantamount to both church membership and citizenship. This made church membership not a free decision based on conversion, but rather part and parcel of merely living in a certain geographical locale.<sup>53</sup>

This model of Christendom would not get challenged until the Protestant Reformation, and even then, many Reformers and even some early Puritans would be slow to reject this idea of a state church.<sup>54</sup> The effect this would have on church membership leads to the idea that “Membership in one’s local parish was ultimately of

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<sup>50</sup> Hamilton, *Religion in the Medieval West*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Hamilton, *Religion in the Medieval West*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Lynch and Adamo, *The Medieval Church*, 286.

<sup>53</sup> Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 59.

<sup>54</sup> Nathan Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership" in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 59.

secondary importance compared to membership in the Church of Rome because salvation was in part mediated through faithful participation in the Church's seven sacraments."<sup>55</sup>

The third thing we must note about this period of the church's history was the eventual formation of the doctrine of the universality of the church. This doctrine essentially espouses that salvation can only be found through the "seven sacraments," and those can only be administered by the Roman Catholic Church. This doctrine was finally canonized in the council of Trent (1547) in a response to the Protestant teaching against the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>56</sup>

In explaining the development of this doctrine, Nathan Finn writes,

During the patristic era, a number of prominent thinkers, especially Cyprian of Carthage and Augustine of Hippo, responded to schismatic movements by asserting the universality or catholicity of the church and limiting salvation to members of the visible church...After the Great Schism of 1054, which finalized the growing division between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism, both sides maintained that salvation was contingent upon being rightly related to their respective movements.<sup>57</sup>

Both the Western church in Rome and the Eastern church in Constantinople saw themselves as the final arbiters of salvation and told those under their power that salvation could be found only in *their* church. This not only solidified their power but it also further distorted the idea of what the church and salvation actually were according to the Scriptures. By the end of the Middle Ages, church membership was viewed simply through the lens of which church you were baptized into, which was predominantly dependent on what part of the world you lived in, the East or the West.<sup>58</sup> "Ultimately

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<sup>55</sup> Nathan Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership" in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 60.

<sup>56</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 869.

<sup>57</sup> Nathan Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership" in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 59-60.

<sup>58</sup> Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 59.

one's local church membership was less important than identification with the church universal (whichever version) since a local church's validity was ultimately connected to its identification with the wider church.<sup>59</sup> This would continue until the church underwent a radical transformation in the Protestant Reformation.

In studying the Middle Ages, it is hard to believe that the church had drifted so far from the New Testament's teaching on salvation and the church. Whatever someone's belief regarding the mode of baptism (paedobaptism vs. credobaptism), what developed during this time period was an abomination falsely called "Christianity." The idea that salvation was given through baptism at birth, and in addition, marked one as a member of the church and state, would completely decimate the idea of a regenerate church that would be a light to the nations. It would take an incredible work of God to bring the church back to any semblance of what God had intended. It would take a great reformation.

### **The Reformation Era: 1500-1700**

In the Lord's providence, out of the darkness of the Medieval Church arose a ray of light that would come to be known as the Protestant Reformation. There is a great deal the church can be thankful for in regard to the work of the early Reformers (Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli), but, unfortunately, the focus of the majority of these men was on things other than ecclesiology, and in this aspect, they seemed to be less focused in their reformation. Paul Avis remarks on this by stating,

The first Reformers, particularly Luther, were not concerned with defining the circumference of the Church, but with proclaiming its christological centre. They were engaged in discovering the *essentia ecclesiae*-what makes the Church the

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<sup>59</sup> Nathan Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership" in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 60.

Church-not with drawing up rules and formulas relating to admission or expulsion from the Christian community.<sup>60</sup>

As the Protestant Reformation unfolded, those who took different positions on various doctrines continued to gather and form new groups, which would eventually turn into denominations and branches of the Protestant church. The scope of this paper will not allow us to trace every branch and aspect of the Protestant Reformation but taking a look at the two main groups (who differed in their view of ecclesiology) will help us to see how the areas of "church membership" and "who belonged to the church" was viewed by them.

Scholars have classified the main reform movements into three primary groups: "The Magisterial Protestants, the Free Church Protestants, and the Catholic Reformers."<sup>61</sup> For the sake of our study of church membership, the first two are of the most interest and help.

### **Magisterial Protestants**

The Magisterial Reformers included the Lutherans, the Reformed Churches (Calvin, Zwingli, and others), and the Church of England.<sup>62</sup> Each of these groups and their leaders did not see themselves as revolutionaries but "sought orderly reform through the city magistrates and princes-thus the term 'magisterial.'"<sup>63</sup> This meant that they continued to view the church-state relationship in the same way that had been done during the Christendom of the past, and both Luther and Zwingli "accepted the notion

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<sup>60</sup> Paul Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 3.

<sup>61</sup> Nathan Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership" in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 61.

<sup>62</sup> Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 60.

<sup>63</sup> John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. James, *Church History: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), 187.



that church and state must live side by side, supporting each other, and both refrained from any interpretation of the gospel that would make it a threat to the established social order.”<sup>64</sup>

This also meant that they refused to challenge the practice of infant baptism because, in part, doing so would have undermined the church-state relationship. To challenge the view of infant baptism was no small matter due to the close relationship baptism had to citizenship in a given area. “In Zürich, for example, infant baptism not only signified church membership, but also was identified with citizenship. To reject infant baptism was tantamount to treason.”<sup>65</sup> They did, however, no longer see infant baptism as the means of bringing about salvation as had been taught in the Catholic church, and they returned to the patristic pattern of catechesis for children, training them to come to a decision of faith in Christ. When these children would come to believe for themselves and demonstrate faith, they would then be welcome to take communion and be full communicate members.<sup>66</sup>

Concerning the view of church membership that the Magisterial Reformers took, Nathan Finn summarizes that in regard to children,

Some churches in these traditions hesitate to use the term “member” for children until they are converted and/or confirmed, though many in Free Church traditions would argue that infant baptism at least confers a “membership” like status upon children and reverses the New Testament pattern, even if small children are not yet participating in Communion.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day*, Rev. and updated, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 69.

<sup>65</sup> Woodbridge and James, *Church History*, 2:188.

<sup>66</sup> Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 60.

<sup>67</sup> Nathan Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership" in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 62.

## Free Church Protestants

The second group of Reformers are often referred to as the “Free Church Protestants.” This comes from their view that the church is to be freed from the state and independent to govern itself. This group rejected the idea of “Christendom” that the Magisterial Reformers were still holding and saw themselves as “restorationists who were more concerned with reclaiming New Testament Christianity than reforming the existing church.”<sup>68</sup> These groups agreed on the rejection of a “territorial church” or “state church,”<sup>69</sup> but did not necessarily agree on the purpose or mode of baptism; therefore, how they viewed church membership differed.

### *The English Separatists*

The primary group of “Free Church Protestants” who still saw the need for infant baptism was the Separatists in England. “During the latter part of the reign of Elizabeth I of England, a small number of people took the doctrines of puritanism to their logical conclusion and separated themselves from the impure national church to form small gathered churches.”<sup>70</sup> These churches are known as the Separatists or Brownists, named for Robert Browne, one of their founding pastors who helped formulate their theology of separation.<sup>71</sup>

The Separatists agreed with the English Puritans on a number of theological convictions (including infant baptism and strict church membership and discipline), but

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<sup>68</sup> Nathan Finn, “A Historical Analysis of Church Membership” in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 63.

<sup>69</sup> Eric Geldbach and S. Mark Heim in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity, Volume 2, E-I*, Illustrated edition, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich. : Leiden, Netherlands: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), sec. Free Church.

<sup>70</sup> J. D. (James Dixon) Douglas, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. Co., 1978), 897.

<sup>71</sup> Edmund S. (Edmund Sears) Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 17.

whereas the Puritans sought to reform the Church of England, the Separatists sought to remove themselves from it.

Through Browne's writings we can see the Separatists' strong belief that only regenerate believers should make up the recognized membership of the church. This includes the requirement for a visibly pious life and strict view of church discipline.<sup>72</sup>

The Separatists also held to a strong view of congregational authority, which required that the recognized members of the church be made up of those who had been regenerated in Christ.<sup>73</sup> Browne's view on congregational authority held to three important aspects which B.R. White summarizes by saying,

Three factors seem to have been held in tension in Robert Browne's thought on this subject; his thought cannot be rightly understood when one of them is forgotten. First is the conviction that only in the covenanted community does Christ really rule, and then by means of his Spirit and his word. The second factor is that the duty and privilege of discerning and obeying Christ's will are shared by all church members. The third factor is that the responsibility and authority for guiding the congregation as a whole are shared by the more gifted and mature members.<sup>74</sup>

Although the Separatists continued to practice infant baptism, they also held a strong view of the need for adults who have been truly regenerated to make up the membership of the church. In this they were trying to return to what they and the Puritans before them had seen as the New Testament pattern.

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<sup>72</sup> B. R. (Barrington Raymond) White, *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers*, Oxford theological monographs (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 56.

<sup>73</sup> White, *The English Separatist Tradition*, 62.

<sup>74</sup> White, *The English Separatist Tradition*, 62.

*New England Puritans*

From the Separatists came many “children or stepchildren”<sup>75</sup> who held to their main core beliefs. These could be classified as “Free Church Protestants” who also held to a covenant view of infant baptism. One of these groups was the New England Puritans. While the Puritans are a hard group to define,<sup>76</sup> because they would take so many different iterations on a host of beliefs, the New England Puritans held similar beliefs to the Separatists in their view of the Church of England. Nathan Finn gives a summarized description of the New England Protestants as those who,

brought with them a commitment to paedobaptism, catechesis, and a personal conversion experience as the prerequisites to communicant membership. For the first generation or so, Puritan leaders had little trouble establishing entire communities around Reformed principles, especially a version of covenant theology that applied to families, churches, and even entire nations.<sup>77</sup>

The New England states became a “promised land” for the English Separatists who desired to break away from the Church of England and create their own religious communities free of unwanted interference.<sup>78</sup> Like the Separatists, the Puritans of New England practiced infant baptism and also held to a strong view of regenerate church membership, closed communion, and strict church discipline of its members.<sup>79</sup> In New

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<sup>75</sup> The language of children and step-children come from Leonard Verduin’s book, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, describing the various sects or branches that developed following the reformation.

<sup>76</sup> James Woodbridge explains this in *Church History, Vol. 2*, “The problem of definition is further complicated by the surprising diversity among Puritans. Although all shared a common theological referent, some Puritans approved of the existing church hierarchy with bishops, while others sought to restructure the Anglican Church according to a Presbyterian model. Some Puritans were Presbyterian, but most embraced congregational polity. Some advocated separation from the established church, but others remained. Some were royalist and others were revolutionary, even to the point of regicide. Puritans could differ in church polity, in worship style, even in their expressions of piety, but all wanted the English Church to resemble more closely the Reformed churches on the Continent.”, 264.

<sup>77</sup> Nathan Finn, “A Historical Analysis of Church Membership” in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 64.

<sup>78</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 124.

<sup>79</sup> Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 4.

England, however, “Unlike comprehensive Anglican parishes, congregational churches restricted church membership to those who gave reasonable evidence that they were among the ‘elect.’ Only these visible saints qualified for the sacraments and were subject to church discipline.”<sup>80</sup>

This worked without issue for the first generation who had escaped specifically for their religious convictions, but by the second and especially the third generation of New England Puritans, they were encountering a problem of adult children who were wanting their infants to be baptized but who themselves were not communicant or covenant members of the church.<sup>81</sup> Their covenant view of infant baptism and their strong belief in regenerate membership was causing a host of challenges. Robert Pope explains,

If these children were members, in their infancy, albeit incomplete, what happened to their church status if conversion failed to materialize? Were they still members? If not, when had their membership ceased? More important, what's the status of their own children: could the next generation receive baptism even though its parents were not communicants; did apparently unregenerate parents terminate the covenant relation?<sup>82</sup>

Instead of changing their view of baptism or covenant membership as the Baptists were doing, they instead held a synod of church leaders in 1662 to address this problem. Their solution is known as the Half-Way Covenant. Nathan Finn describes the results of this solution by stating,

According to the Half-Way Covenant, unconverted adults were allowed into a partial membership wherein they agreed to the church's confession of faith, submitted to the church's discipline, and were allowed to have their children baptized. Half-Way members were not, however, allowed to vote in church matters or receive Communion.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England*, 4.

<sup>81</sup> Hill, Phillip Keith (Dmin Dissertation on Church Membership), 20.

<sup>82</sup> Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England*, 6.

<sup>83</sup> Nathan Finn, “A Historical Analysis of Church Membership” in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 65.

Ultimately, this was not a final solution to the problem that existed for them, and eventually some pastors like Solomon Stoddard would even allow these half-way members, who were not seen as regenerate believers, to participate in communion with the hope that this might lead these men and women to come to their own personal faith and conversion.<sup>84</sup> This, of course, was not well received and would cause growing controversy. Pope's reflection on this attempt at a half-way solution gives incredible insight into the lessons we can learn from this:

That the Half-Way Covenant reappeared as a source of controversy should surprise no one. In one way or another the basic issues that underlay the strife are as old as Christianity and as modern as twentieth century fundamentalism. The visibly holy, drawn by the moving of the Spirit to erect pure churches gathered out of the world, rarely sustain their fervor in the succeeding generations... Slowly the churches accommodate their purity to the world and redefine their mission or goal to fit the new standards... Every generation has its half-way covenant.<sup>85</sup>

### *Anabaptists*

The final group of Reformers that fall under the category of "Free Church Protestants" will take us back to the early Reformation in the 1500's. I chose not to order these Reformers by chronology, because I was most focused on showing the progression of thought that occurred, which led some away from the model of Christendom (Church and State side by side) and infant baptism. This last group reformed their thoughts the most from the Roman Catholic Church and, consequently, were also focused on trying to return to a pure New Testament example of the church.<sup>86</sup> The first of this group was labeled the "Radical Reformers" because of how far they wanted to reform the church

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<sup>84</sup> Nathan Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership" in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 65.

<sup>85</sup> Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant; Church Membership in Puritan New England*, 278.

<sup>86</sup> Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*, 55.

away from what it had become. While there are a number of Radical Reformers, our main focus will be on the group known as the Anabaptists, as they are the best representative of this reform movement.

The Anabaptists rose up in the sixteenth century and “represented the left wing of the movement away from Rome.” Many believe they were more focused on “restitution” than they were on “reformation.” They had no desire to reform what currently existed as the church but were focused on ridding the church of all “accumulated practices, traditions, and ceremonies of the medieval Catholic church and instead build a restored church entirely on NT principles.”<sup>87</sup>

They were given the name Anabaptists (or Rebaptizers) by their enemies and opponents because of their radical belief at the time that infant baptism was invalid and that to return to the teaching of the New Testament would require adults to be baptized as regenerate believers. This, they believed, was the only definition of a true church.<sup>88</sup>

William Estep in his book *The Anabaptist Story*, states, “If the most obvious demarcation between the reformers and the Roman Catholics was biblical authority, that between the Reformers and the Anabaptists was believers’ baptism.”<sup>89</sup>

Much like the Separatists in England, the Anabaptists wanted churches to be free from any connection to the state and to rule over themselves as independent churches. In addition to this, however, they went one step further in their reformation of thought in

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<sup>87</sup> Douglas, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 831.

<sup>88</sup> Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*, 56–57.

<sup>89</sup> William Roscoe Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3rd ed., rev.enl. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 1996), 201.

believing that to form a “true” church, according to the New Testament model, required baptism of adults who had made a profession of faith and were truly regenerate.<sup>90</sup>

This, of course, was no small thing in the 1500s. To reject infant baptism was not only a statement on religious beliefs but also a statement on political beliefs. In helping a modern audience understand the significance of such a decision and the resulting persecution that would come, church historian James Woodbridge writes,

How does one explain such a harsh response to these Anabaptists? Part of the explanation lies in the fact that infant baptism not only was a religious rite of entrance into the church, but also was viewed as a civic rite of entrance into citizenship of the canton. There was no separation of church and state, as evinced by Zwingli’s famous assertion: “A Christian city is nothing other than a Christian church.”<sup>91</sup>

Leonard Verduin adds even more light by explaining that rebaptism and the name Anabaptist went all the way back to the fourth century and that the practice had been forbidden from that time on. The Codes of Theodosius called for the severest penalty for its practice, which was capital punishment for any who was found guilty of having rebaptized.<sup>92</sup> Sadly, this punishment was imposed on many Anabaptists who dared to reject the practice of infant baptism. Historian James Woodbridge states, “Scholars estimate that in the century from 1525 to 1625 between one thousand and five thousand Anabaptist radicals were executed.”<sup>93</sup> The preferred method was often drowning to make a point to any who would dare follow the practice of rebaptism. Perhaps surprisingly to many, this did not stop these faithful men and women from following what they believed the Lord commanded for his followers.

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<sup>90</sup> Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 60.

<sup>91</sup> Woodbridge and James, *Church History*, 2:155.

<sup>92</sup> Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 190.

<sup>93</sup> Woodbridge and James, *Church History*, 2:155.



This was certainly true for the first faithful group who gathered in Zurich on January 21, 1525. Historian Justo Gonzales records that event for us:

George Blaurock, a former priest, asked another of the brethren, Conrad Grebel, to baptize him. On January 21, 1525, at the fountain that stood in the city square in Zürich, Grebel baptized Blaurock, who then did the same for several others. At that time they did not baptize by immersion, for their main concern was not the manner in which the rite was administered but rather the need for faith before receiving baptism. Later, as they sought to conform to the New Testament, they began baptizing by immersion... Their enemies soon began calling them anabaptists, which means rebaptizers.<sup>94</sup>

The beliefs of the early Anabaptist church are best seen in the writings and sermons of Balthasar Hubmaier and also through the Schleitheim Confession, which was formed by a group of Anabaptist leaders in 1527.<sup>95</sup> In both the Confession and Hubmaier's writings, the three marks of a church the Anabaptists believed in can be seen. First, Hubmaier believed that a true church must be made up of those who have been "regenerated." In commenting on Hubmaier's teaching on the church, Armour writes,

The doctrine of regeneration also affected the concrete matters of church life and practice. In regard to baptism it meant that the sacrament was to be given only to those in whom the gifts of rebirth were evident. And those who had these gifts had the spiritual wherewithal to covenant themselves to God and His church. Thus the community of the reborn would be brought into life.<sup>96</sup>

In addition to regeneration, Hubmaier saw that a true church must be entered into through believer's baptism and not through infant baptism. Estep summarizes Hubmaier's view when he writes,

Hubmaier's view of baptism as the indispensable act of church membership was no passing fancy. It was part of his carefully thought-out doctrine of baptism. Baptism was not, then, for Hubmaier simply an individual matter by which a

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<sup>94</sup> González, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day*, 67.

<sup>95</sup> A copy of the *Schleitheim Confession* (1527) can be found online at "Baptist Studies Online," n.d., accessed July 27, 2022, <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/the-schleitheim-confession-2.pdf>

<sup>96</sup> Rollin S. (Rollin Stely) Armour, *Anabaptist Baptism: a Representative Study*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite history, no. 11 (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1966), 138.

person declares his faith. It is also a symbol of his submission to the discipline of the congregation to which he adheres and a prerequisite to the Lord's Supper.<sup>97</sup>

This view was also expressed in the Schleithem Confession,<sup>98</sup> as was Hubmaier's third mark of a true church, which was the practice of church discipline or "The Ban." Franklin Littell writes, "By baptism the believer came under the discipline of a Biblical people – a discipline which he himself helped make and enforce. If the door of entrance were closely watched, a strong and true church could be maintained."<sup>99</sup> While there were other articles of agreement in the Schleithem Confession,<sup>100</sup> these were the most significant in Anabaptist theology and Hubmaier's writings.

As part of their commitment that one could not be part of the true church if they were not regenerate, baptized as a believer, and had submitted themselves to the discipline of the church, the Anabaptists restricted communion to only church members who met these requirements. Estep comments that, "Common Anabaptist prerequisites for participation in the Lord's Supper were baptism, right conduct, and fraternal relation

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<sup>97</sup> Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 211.

<sup>98</sup> The *Schleithem Confession* statement on regeneration and baptism reads: "First. Observe concerning baptism: Baptism shall be given to all those who have learned repentance and amendment of life, and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ, and to all those who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and wish to be buried with Him in death, so that they may be resurrected with him and to all those who with this significance request it [baptism] of us and demand it for themselves. This excludes all infant baptism the highest and chief abominations of the pope. In this you have the foundation and testimony of the apostles. Mt. 28, Mk. 16, Acts 2, 8,16,19. This we wish to hold simply, yet firmly and with assurance."

On Church Discipline (or the ban) it reads: Second. We agree as follows on the ban: The ban shall be employed with all those who have given themselves to the Lord, to walk in His commandments, and with all those who have been baptized in the one body of Christ and who are called brethren and sisters, and yet who slip sometimes and fall into error and sin, being inadvertently overtaken. The same shall be admonished twice in secret and the third time openly disciplined or banned according to the command of Christ. Mt. 18. But this shall be done according to the regulation of the Spirit (Mt.5) before the breaking of bread, so that we may break and eat one bread, with one mind and in one love, and may drink of one cup.

<sup>99</sup> Franklin H. (Franklin Hamlin) Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church: A Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism*, Second edition, revised and enlarged. (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), 85.

<sup>100</sup> The full list of articles discussed in the *Schleithem Confession* reads, "The articles which we discussed and on which we were of one mind are these 1. Baptism; 2. The Ban [excommunication]; 3. Breaking of Bread; 4. Separation from the Abomination; 5. Pastors in the Church; 6. The Sword; and 7. The Oath."

with all the brethren of a given congregation.”<sup>101</sup> In commenting on the significance of all of this towards church membership, Nathan Finn writes,

The children of church members were not considered members themselves until they voluntarily embraced Christianity, professed their faith and covenanted with God through adult baptism (the mode varied from group to group), and began to participate in Communion. This approach left no place for a sacramental understanding of baptism and Communion, and unlike the Lutheran and Reformed movements, emphasis was placed not only on the personal nature of faith but also on voluntary church membership.<sup>102</sup>

This was the understanding that the Anabaptists came to by looking back at the New Testament and trying to be faithful to its teaching. This is also the view of church membership that this paper will try to defend in the exegetical examination starting in Chapter 3.

### *Baptists*

The final group we want to examine that came to many of the same conclusions regarding both church and state and the rejection of infant baptism was the “Baptists.” While some credit the development of Baptist theology to the Anabaptists, the Baptists are likely more closely related to the English Separatists, the difference being that whereas the English Separatists still held to infant baptism, the Baptists rejected it and practiced adult baptism by immersion for those who confessed faith in Christ (often referred to as confessor baptism or credobaptism).<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 250.

<sup>102</sup> Nathan Finn, “A Historical Analysis of Church Membership” in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 63.

<sup>103</sup> Nathan Finn, “What Hath Baptists to Do with Wittenberg?” *Thereformedmind*, October 31, 2012, accessed July 26, 2022, <https://thereformedmind.wordpress.com/2012/10/31/what-hath-baptists-to-do-with-wittenberg/>.

While today there seems to be too many “Baptist” groups to count, our focus will be on the Baptist theology of the earliest Christians who were given that name. Jeremy Kimble summarizes these early Baptists’ beliefs by stating,

While differing on points of doctrine such as Calvinism, the extent of the atonement, or the proper day of Christian worship, early Baptists agreed on a number of key points. Aside from a minority among English Baptists adopting an open membership policy (i.e., no requirement of confessor baptism for those who wanted to join in membership and had been baptized as infants), the majority of early Baptists rejected infant baptism, affirmed a voluntary membership, and advocated for a free church in a free state.<sup>104</sup>

The foundation of these beliefs can be found (among others) in one of the first documents that expressed the doctrine of those who were called “Baptists,” The London Confession of 1644.<sup>105</sup> The three beliefs that are core to Baptist theology regarding membership are: 1) They believed in adult-confessor baptism and rejected the practice of infant baptism,<sup>106</sup> 2) they believed in an independent congregational church that was separate from the state and that would govern itself,<sup>107</sup> and 3) they believed in the

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<sup>104</sup> Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 60–61.

<sup>105</sup> A copy of the *London Baptist Confession* (1644) can be found online at “Baptist Studies Online,” n.d., accessed July 27, 2022, <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/1st-london-1644-ed.pdf>

<sup>106</sup> From the *London Baptist Confession* (1644) In regard to Adult Baptism, Article XXXIX. That Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, given by Christ, to be dispensed only upon persons professing faith, or that are Disciples, or taught, who upon a profession of faith, ought to be baptized (Acts 2:37, 38; 8:36-38; 18:8).

Article XL. The way and manner of the (Mat. 3:16; John 3:23; Acts 8:38) dispensing of this ordinance the Scripture holds out to be dipping or plunging the whole body under water: it being a sign, must answer the thing signified, which are these: first, the (Rev. 1:5; 7:14; Heb. 10:22) washing the whole soul in the blood of Christ; secondly, that interest the saints have in (Rom. 6:3-5) death, burial, and resurrection (of Christ); thirdly, together with a (1 Cor. 15:28, 29) confirmation of our faith, that as certainly as the body is buried under water, and rises again, so certainly shall the bodies of the saints be raised by the power of Christ, in the day of the resurrection, to reign with Christ.

<sup>107</sup> From the *London Baptist Confession* (1644) In regards to an independent congregation, Article XLVII. And although the particular congregation be distinct and several bodies, every one a compact and knit city in itself; yet are they all to walk by one and the same Rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help one of another in all needful affairs of the church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their only Head (1 Cor. 4:17; 14:33, 36; 16:1; Mat. 28:20; 1 Tim. 3:15; 6:13-14; Rev. 22:18-19; Col. 2:6, 19; 4:16).

necessity of church discipline.<sup>108</sup> Each of these beliefs had a significant impact on their view of church membership and how they viewed who belonged to the church.

The time of the Reformation brought unprecedented changes to the church and allowed for others to follow in continued reformation as they sought to bring the church back to the purity of the New Testament. Those changes did not come without challenge and conflict, and the separation of the church from the state was a long and bloody battle. One theme that emerges over and over again from this time period is that those who were seeking to bring the church back to the model of the New Testament were concerned with how people were brought into the church and who represented the bride of Christ on earth. Even when they did not agree on other issues, they had this one belief in common. This, sadly, would not last, as the church continued to morph and change in its thoughts and practices as it developed in the New World.

### **The Modern Era: 1700-Present**

To summarize all of the changes that took place in the church from the 1700's to the present would be an impossible task. There is no possible way in the space of a few pages to convey the massive impact that the Enlightenment, rationalism, psychology, liberalism, the Revolutionary War and independence, the Industrial Revolution, Darwinism, modernity, secularism, technology, and a multitude of other significant changes in culture have had on the church. If you can imagine how much your world has

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<sup>108</sup> From the *London Baptist Confession* (1644) In regards to church discipline, Article XLII. Christ has likewise given power to His whole church to receive in and cast out, by way of Excommunication, any member; and this power is given to every particular congregation, and not one particular person, either member or officer, but the whole (Acts 2:47; Rom. 16:2; Mat. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:4; 2 Cor. 2:6-8).

Article XLIII. And every particular member of each Church how excellent, great, or learned soever, ought to be subject to this censor and judgment of Christ; and the church ought with great care and tenderness, with due advise to proceed against her members (Mat. 18:16-18; Acts 11:2, 3; 1 Tim. 5:19-21).

changed from those who fought for the independence of America from Britain, then you can understand how significant the changes have been in that time period. For this reason, we will limit our scope to America, and even more than that, we will focus on two movements that have had a significant impact on how people view their own relationship with God and his church.

### **The Great Awakenings**

It is difficult to overemphasize how significant the “Awakenings” were to the formation of Christianity in America and even how they still impact our thoughts of the church and Christianity today. The effects of the First and Second Great Awakenings created a climate where revival, and eventually revivalism, would be the sought-after pinnacle of the Christian’s experience in America. In trying to summarize some of the impact that the Awakenings had on the church, Nathan Finn writes that The Great Awakening “introduced a new emphasis on a climactic conversion experience that affected church membership requirements in a variety of different ecclesiastical traditions.”<sup>109</sup> This emphasis on a personal conversion experience and a resulting active holy life were central to both Awakenings and would impact how the church and Christianity were viewed by Americans.<sup>110</sup>

#### *The First Great Awakening*

What is known as the “First Great Awakening” took place in New England in the 1730s and 1740s. “The principal revivalists of the American awakening included the

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<sup>109</sup> Nathan Finn, “A Historical Analysis of Church Membership” in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 68.

<sup>110</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys*, A history of evangelicalism v. 1 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 15.

Anglican George Whitefield, the Presbyterian Gilbert Tennent, the Dutch Reformed pastor Theodore Freylinghuysen, and the Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards.”<sup>111</sup> From the beginning of the American experiment, those who had come to America searching for a Christian holy land had been looking for a deeper personal religious experience than what had been felt in the spiritually dark Church of England.<sup>112</sup> While the desire for an emotional experience was not emphasized in Puritan doctrine, the focus on a stronger devotion to the Lord was.

The religious affections in America and England were, however, in steep decline. The Half-Way Covenant had not accomplished its desired outcome of seeing more unconverted become regenerate, however, in letting the unregenerate into membership it had done the opposite, and they were now starting to outnumber the regenerate members in the church.<sup>113</sup> Out of this spiritual deadness and darkness, God raised up a passionate preacher and theologian in Northampton, Massachusetts, named Jonathan Edwards. Through Edward’s convictional preaching about the need for repentance and the glory of Christ, “people began responding to his sermons, some with emotional outbursts, but many with a remarkable change in their lives, and with increased attention to devotional practices.”<sup>114</sup>

The corresponding results were astounding. In December of 1734, the first converts were reported, and many others would follow. “In six months 300 were converted in the town of 1100.” And the conversions did not stop in Northampton. Soon

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<sup>111</sup> Woodbridge and James, *Church History*, 2:789.

<sup>112</sup> González, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day*, 288.

<sup>113</sup> Robert H. Lescelius, “The Great Awakening: A Pattern Revival,” *Reformation and Revival* 4, no. 3 (1995), 26–27.

<sup>114</sup> González, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day*, 288.

“revival began to spill over into other towns, and a wave of awakening moved through the Connecticut Valley in 1735, affecting some 100 communities.”<sup>115</sup> This was the first taste of something called “revival,” a word and concept that would dominate the thoughts of Christians in America from that point on.

The real transformation in the church, though, would come from the Awakenings’ second great preacher, George Whitefield. Where the work and preaching of Edwards was mostly inside the established church, Whitefield was an “itinerant preacher” from England, and his influence would happen outside of the church in the open fields. Much like his friend and contemporary John Wesley, Whitefield would popularize the idea of open-air preaching and mass evangelism in trying to reach the common man and woman.<sup>116</sup>

This approach seemed to be an overwhelming success in reaching people. Both Whitefield and Wesley traveled all over England and the American colonies and saw incredible responses to their preaching. This was the beginning of what would become the modern idea of an “evangelist,”<sup>117</sup> and it was moving Christianity away from the gathered church as it focused on crowds and the personal responses of individuals.

Mark Noll gives us an idea of how expansive Whitefield’s itinerate ministry was by stating that in one preaching tour in September of 1740, Whitefield “would preach in seven of the American colonies, often two or three times a day, and to crowds regularly into the thousands. It is likely that the total number of his hearers in these ten weeks

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<sup>115</sup> Lescelius, “The Great Awakening,” 30.

<sup>116</sup> John H. Gerstner, “The Great Awakening,” ed. Ralph G. Turnbull, *Baker’s Dictionary of Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1967), 151.

<sup>117</sup> Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 346.



(with, of course, some attending several times) equaled at least half the total population of these seven colonies.<sup>118</sup>

Thomas Kidd further explains, “George Whitefield has been described as a ‘pioneer in the commercialization of religion’ and ‘Anglo-America’s first religious celebrity, the symbol for a dawning modern age.’ These characterizations are undoubtedly true.”<sup>119</sup> In addition, Whitefield was also one of the most important figures in the Great Awakening of the 1740’s in Britain and North America. Not only was Whitefield’s impact felt from his powerful preaching and dynamic personality but also “his willingness to work with members of non-Anglican denominations marked a key innovation of the evangelical movement: deemphasizing denominationalism to serve the priority of the new birth.”<sup>120</sup>

The impact of his contemporary John Wesley was just as remarkable and perhaps even more so since he was so active on both sides of the Atlantic. It has been said concerning John Wesley that, “he continued preaching almost to the end of his days. He died in London, 2 March 1791, approaching eighty-eight years of age. When the burning brand finally went out, he left behind 79,000 followers in England and 40,000 in North America. If we judge greatness by influence, he was among the greats of his times.”<sup>121</sup>

One of the culture-changing influences that Wesley brought was the creation of the “Methodist societies.” While Wesley was Anglican and always encouraged his followers to stay in the Anglican church, he created Methodist societies to help continue

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<sup>118</sup> Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 13.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 40.

<sup>120</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 40.

<sup>121</sup> Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 340.

the work of discipleship after conversion. Whether intentional or not, the effect was that his followers did not look for discipleship or discipline inside the church and its membership, but rather “his converts found the center of their Christian experience in the Methodist societies where they confessed their sins to one another, submitted to the discipline of their leader, and joined in prayer and song.”<sup>122</sup> This would become the start of what is seen today as “small group ministries” and would also lead to the later development of “parachurch ministries,” where people would look to outside groups to help with their discipleship and Christian fellowship. Due to this strange phenomenon, the people in the Methodist societies would be seen as “a church within a church.”<sup>123</sup>

To help maintain and lead these Methodist societies, Wesley recruited laymen whom he would label as “assistants.” He was very sure to make a distinction between them and the clergy, but today that distinction would be non-existent. As the work for Wesley’s ministry grew, he used these “laymen from the societies and classes as preachers and personal assistants...He deployed his assistants as a sort of militia, moving them frequently from one assignment to another, but insisting on their common task: evangelism and Christian nurture.”<sup>124</sup> This started a massive departure from the cultural norm of trained and educated clergy, to laymen (and women) who would function as pastors in virtually every way.

This change in the use of lay leaders and a more pragmatic approach to ministry would fuel the growth of both Methodists and Baptists who were prone to follow this approach. This approach would cause a significant shift in the religious landscape in

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<sup>122</sup> Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 339.

<sup>123</sup> Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 339.

<sup>124</sup> Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 339.

America. “The result was indeed that the characteristic American Protestant denominations became not Presbyterian or Episcopal but Methodist and Baptist; for they were the most pragmatic in their approach and the most ready to employ lay agencies.”<sup>125</sup> To give an example of the kind of growth that occurred, “In 1770, Methodists had a paltry 20 churches in America. By 1860, that number had swelled to just under 20,000.”<sup>126</sup> It is also estimated that “by the 1830s there were more than 500,000 Methodists in the United States.”<sup>127</sup>

Following Wesley’s death, the Methodist societies and followers would eventually leave the Anglican church and become the denomination we now know as the Methodists.<sup>128</sup> The impact that John Wesley and the Methodist denomination would have on Christianity today is yet to be measured, but the approach to ministry that many would take would be forever altered. The importance of the church, membership to a church, church discipline inside the church, and the need for trained pastors to lead churches would never be the same again.

### *The Second Great Awakening*

Historians have described the Second Great Awakening as “a diverse series of religious revivals that took place in the U.S., beginning in the latter years of the eighteenth century.”<sup>129</sup> There were a number of different revivals and leaders in the Second Great Awakening, but for our purpose of studying how church membership

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<sup>125</sup> W. R. (William Reginald) Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 354.

<sup>126</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 322.

<sup>127</sup> Woodbridge and James, *Church History*, 2:411.

<sup>128</sup> Daniel G. Reid et al., *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 733.

<sup>129</sup> Reid et al., *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 1067.

morphed through history and what led to those changes, we will focus on two specific aspects of the Second Great Awakening. They are “revivalism” and one of its greatest advocates Charles Finney.

### *Revivalism*

One of the significant differences many see between the First and Second Awakenings was the place of “revival.” The First Awakening, as we have seen, was not something that anyone was looking for or expected. It was a special season of blessing that the Lord poured out on his people in response to the faithful preaching of his word. Solomon Stoddard defined revival as “some special seasons wherein God doth in a remarkable manner revive religion among his people.”<sup>130</sup> This is the definition that most would have had for revival at that time.

“Revivalism,” on the other hand, is something quite different. Iain Murray describes revivalism in this way: “Revivalism contains no real element of mystery: psychological pressure, ‘prayer’ used to create expectancy, predictions of impending results, the personality of the ‘revivalist’ pushed to the fore, the ‘appeal’ - these, and kindred things, are generally enough to account for the extraordinary in success.”<sup>131</sup> In the Second Awakening, revivals were an event that someone could go to; they were planned and produced.

Many point to the origination of “revivals” as first coming from something called a “camp meeting.” Two famous camp meetings that helped spark the revivals of the

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<sup>130</sup> Cited by Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750–1858* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), xvii.

<sup>131</sup> Iain Hamish Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 380.

Second Great Awakening were at Gasper River in 1800 and Cane Ridge in 1801. These camp meetings seemed to be an effective tool for reaching people scattered on the frontier. They were an opportunity for people to come and hear preaching and prayer from a cross-denominational group (Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian).<sup>132</sup> Once again, the church and its importance and primacy were being devalued and decentralized in Christianity in America.

What occurred at Cain Ridge, which has been described as the start of the Second Awakening, was far different than anything that would have been identified as a revival in the First Awakening. While there were some expressions of emotion in the First Awakening, there was nothing like what happened at Cain Ridge. “The meeting saw many falling down in great distress of soul, shrieking, groaning, agonizing, fainting, jerking and showing kindred expressions of extreme emotional stress.”<sup>133</sup> The emotional responses were of great concern to many clergy members and were discouraged in the movements on the East Coast and by mature Baptist and Presbyterian pastors. That was not the case, though, for the Methodists, who had no problem with the extreme emotion and the methods used to elicit them. They would, in fact, build on the ideas of the camp meetings, and soon, revivals would be everywhere on the frontier and beyond.<sup>134</sup> Charles Finney also had no problem with extreme emotions or manipulative methods, and he would instead work at perfecting them in his years in ministry and revivals.

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<sup>132</sup> Robert H. Lescelius, “The Second Great Awakening: The Watershed Revival,” *Reformation and Revival* 6, no. 1 (1997), 20.

<sup>133</sup> Lescelius, “The Second Great Awakening,” 20.

<sup>134</sup> Lescelius, “The Second Great Awakening,” 20.

*Charles Finney*

Charles Finney was arguably the most influential figure of the Second Great Awakening and has been acknowledged as “the father of modern-day evangelism.”<sup>135</sup> Before Finney was a pastor, he was a lawyer, and he would use the power of persuasion he learned in that trade in his new role in ministry. Finney was converted in 1821 and entered ministry as a Presbyterian minister.<sup>136</sup> He was not suited, however, to the style and theology of the Presbyterian church, and it would not be long before he was introduced to the camp meeting and the “new measures” of the Methodists. Finney would take these new measures and a form of the camp meeting back with him to New York, where he would hold revival meetings and where he experienced great “success.”<sup>137</sup>

The new measures that Finney employed were designed to apply as much pressure as possible to a person so that they would respond from the guilt and “turn to Christ.” These methods included,

a number of issues, such as women praying in public, praying for sinners by name from the pulpit, using coarse language from the pulpit, etc. The chief abiding issue was the practice of inviting sinners to the front of the building to a place set aside, called the “anxious seat” or “mourners bench.” There they were prayed for and exhorted to immediate repentance, faith and confession of Christ and declared to be converts.<sup>138</sup>

Finney was convinced that these methods could cause revival if used properly because he subscribed to an Arminian theology (some might even say Pelagian) and believed that all that was needed were the right conditions for a person to “give their lives

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<sup>135</sup> Lescelius, “The Second Great Awakening,” 22.

<sup>136</sup> F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 615.

<sup>137</sup> Woodbridge and James, *Church History*, 2:791.

<sup>138</sup> Lescelius, “The Second Great Awakening,” 23.

to Jesus” and for revival to occur.<sup>139</sup> We see Finney express this belief in his own words when he wrote in *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*,

Revivals were formerly regarded as miracles....For a long time it was supposed by the church that a revival was a miracle, an interposition of Divine power, with which they had nothing to do, and which they had no more agency in producing than they had in producing thunder, or a storm of hail, or an earthquake. It is only within a few years that ministers generally have supposed that revivals were to be promoted, by the use of means designed and adapted specially to that object<sup>140</sup>

The theology represented by Finney was profoundly different than the Calvinist theology of both Edwards and Whitefield in the First Awakening. It was even a radical departure from what John Wesley had believed, who himself was a committed Arminian. This “man-centered” theology would continue to have ripple effects on the church that can even be felt today, where it is common to hear churches talking about their ministry leading to a “revival in the city” or being part of “a movement of God.” Whether they know it or not, that theology and language is theirs thanks to Charles Finney, the father of modern “revivalism.”

### **Parachurch Influence**

It would be hard to talk about Christianity in the twentieth century, and in particular how Christians view membership in the church, without talking about the effects of parachurch ministry. The modern parachurch ministries in America often replace the church for many Christians, who see no difference between the gathered church and their favorite Christian parachurch ministry. Joel Carpenter, who has written an informative book on the “Reawakening of American Fundamentalism” called *Revive Us Again* makes this comment about the rise and significance of parachurch ministries in

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<sup>139</sup> Lescelius, “The Second Great Awakening,” 24–25.

<sup>140</sup> Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 247.

America: “Large Protestant denominations have been losing members, income, and influence while special-purpose, nondenominational religious agencies have grown, multiplied, and taken on increasing importance in shaping and carrying people’s religious identity.”<sup>141</sup>

This author knows this to be true from personal experience as a pastor, having had many conversations with people who attend a cross-denominational worship gathering hosted by a local parachurch ministry in my area. Often this ministry is referred to as a “church service,” and it is not unusual for people to consider that ministry “their church.” They have fellowship there, they worship together, they hear teaching and sometimes serve together. They wonder, “Why is it any different than a church?”<sup>142</sup>

Sadly, this attitude is not foreign to the minds of many Christians in the twenty-first century. They see no difference between a parachurch gathering and a church. Jeremy Kimble remarks on this phenomenon when he writes about the changes in the church following the Second Great Awakening: “By the mid-twentieth century, many evangelical churches had shifted in viewing themselves preeminently as baptized, covenanted, local assemblies, to functioning primarily as outreach centers and corporate worship services as catalysts for revival.”<sup>143</sup> This perfectly describes the previously mentioned parachurch ministry as it has all of those criteria.

The modern parachurch ministry grew out of the “volunteer societies” that were created after the “awakenings” in Britain and America in the 1700s and 1800s and were

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<sup>141</sup> Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 239.

<sup>142</sup> As we will see in our later chapters, this kind of a gathering is missing the essential elements of a New Testament church, but many Christians in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century see no difference.

<sup>143</sup> Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 61.



formed to help the church meet specific needs such as missions, Bible translation, care for the poor and orphans, and more.<sup>144</sup> Some of the earliest societies included,

The Methodist Missionary Society dates its origin from 1786 and the Baptist Missionary Society from 1792, the Baptist, W. Carey, sailing for India in 1793. They were followed by the founding of the London Missionary Society (LMS, 1795), the Church Missionary Society (CMS, 1799), the British and Foreign Bible Society (1804), and the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews (1809).<sup>145</sup>

These societies “transformed nineteenth-century Christianity.”<sup>146</sup> In a time when denominational groups could be in conflict with one another over theological issues, the societies allowed Christians to work together on things they cared deeply about. It also allowed both lay men and women to become more involved and to have roles of leadership in these organizations.<sup>147</sup>

These groups really began to grow after the “fundamentalist-modernist controversies” in the 1920s and 1930s. As denominations continued to move farther into liberalism, these societies (or parachurch agencies) allowed conservative evangelicals to fulfill their ministry desires outside of those churches and in groups that they specifically agreed with in purpose. As Joel Carpenter notes, “Instead of compelling its followers to choose between fundamentalism and their home denominations, the movement allowed many to maintain membership in the older denominations while shifting their support to independent ministries.”<sup>148</sup> These parachurch ministries often provide the things that people are looking for in a church, without the things they disagree with or for which they have no desire.

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<sup>144</sup> Nathan Finn, “A Historical Analysis of Church Membership” in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 71.

<sup>145</sup> F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1101.

<sup>146</sup> Reid et al., *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 864.

<sup>147</sup> Reid et al., *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 864.

<sup>148</sup> Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 32.

Parachurches grew even more when the “holiness churches,” or charismatic movement, began to grow significantly in the 1960s. “Charismatic leaders added hundreds (perhaps thousands) of additional parachurch groups to the extensive number formed by fundamentalists and evangelicals.”<sup>149</sup> These parachurch groups allowed “entrepreneurial leaders” to move their ministries forward without all of the burden of denominational oversight or the accountability of other leaders or members in a church. Some of these “ministries” grew into what we know now as “televangelism.”<sup>150</sup>

Parachurch groups continue to thrive in America and, while not considered a parachurch, many of the non-denominational “mega-churches” could be described in the same way. They often have no membership, minimal oversight in their leadership structure, and are focused on a specific “vision” to which they are calling people.

While parachurch groups have been beneficial in many ways, such as helping to bring the gospel message to specific demographics, to fund missions, or to help with social causes, they have also been destructive in numerous ways, such as by moving people, money, and service outside of the local church and deemphasizing its importance or significance in a Christian’s life. The parachurch movement has grown in America because it fits perfectly with the American ideals and values of independence and entrepreneurialism. J. Alan Youngren, who was a consultant to several parachurch organizations, has traced their growth, at least in part, to the American frontier spirit.

Four characteristics of the frontier spirit, he said, tend to increase the enthusiasm for parachurch ministries: (1) less respect for tradition and traditional structures; (2) communalism—an attitude favoring the autonomy of one’s own group; (3) self-reliance and independency; and (4) infatuation with almost anything new.

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<sup>149</sup> Reid et al., *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 864.

<sup>150</sup> Reid et al., *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 864.

Steeped in this frontier mentality, many parachurch leaders start their own works rather than join organizations already in existence.<sup>151</sup>

While Youngren is referring to why parachurches are such a great fit in America, these traits could also be used to describe America's infatuation with "megachurches."

Joel Carpenter also sees the parachurch and megachurch being closely related and a product of American values and culture. He writes,

The contemporary fruit of their dynamism is all around us today, to be seen in burgeoning independent megachurches, thriving and ever-diversifying parachurch ministries, an astonishing popular appetite for spine-chilling interpretations of biblical prophecy, and a major upsurge of religiously inspired conservative cultural politics—all of which have been driven by a finely honed instinct for popular appeal and well-practiced skills in communications and marketing.<sup>152</sup>

There is no question that the rise of the parachurch has dramatically impacted the view of American Christians when it comes to ecclesiology and the place of church membership. As Christians started to move their money, energy, and involvement out of the local church and into parachurch ministries that required minimal commitment, many churches felt that they needed to answer by becoming more like the parachurches, which were growing through pragmatism and marketing.<sup>153</sup> Today many churches mimic those ministries in their denunciation of membership, their de-emphasis on doctrine, and their pragmatic approaches to attracting the most people. Much like the parachurches that became pragmatic for the sake of "reaching people," many churches today follow in their footsteps with the same "good intention," but with a faulty ecclesiology.

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<sup>151</sup> J. Alan Youngren quoted in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 864.

<sup>152</sup> Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 233–234.

<sup>153</sup> Nathan Finn, "A Historical Analysis of Church Membership" in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 71

## **Current Influencers on Church Membership**

Thankfully, there has been a recent resurgence in looking at the issue of church membership and ecclesiology. These books and scholars have provided a wealth of resources for the pastors and churches who want to study this issue on their own to decide how vital church membership is in their ecclesiology. Though a partial list, the resources below will help guide the reader to the current and past scholars in this area.

### **9Marks Ministry**

The most influential voices and significant writings about church membership today tend to come from the ministry of Mark Dever and 9Marks.<sup>154</sup> These include books and articles by Mark Dever, Jonathan Leeman (probably the most prolific writer on church membership today), Greg Gilbert, Mike McKinley, Thabiti Anyabwile, and others who are a part of the 9Marks ministry. Church membership and church discipline have become a major focus of attention for 9Marks, and some of the best resources on these subjects are coming from its authors, pastors, and scholars.

### **Baptists**

It should be no surprise from our survey of church history that those of the Baptist tradition are some of the most passionate and prolific writers on church membership and discipline. Some of the most scholarly writings on the topic have come from current Baptist schools such as Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary,<sup>155</sup> Southern Seminary,<sup>156</sup> and Cedarville College.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> The material of 9marks ministries can be found at <https://www.9marks.org/membership-discipline/>

<sup>155</sup> See the works of John S. Hammet in the Works Cited.

<sup>156</sup> See the works of Benjamin Merkle, Albert Mohler, Greg Allison, and Thomas Schreiner in the Works Cited.

<sup>157</sup> See the works of Jeremy Kimble in the Works Cited.

### *Southern Baptist Literature*

Probably the most significant scholarly work in book form on church membership and discipline comes from John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle, who are both a part of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.<sup>158</sup> Their book, written from a compilation of Southern Baptist authors, makes a strong defense for church membership and church discipline and the chapters and footnotes will provide a roadmap for any pastor or theologian wanting to study the topic on his own. In addition to this work, there are other books and journal articles that have been written by Southern Baptists which focus on membership.<sup>159</sup>

### *Reformed Baptist Literature*

The Reformed Baptist writers are very similar to the Southern Baptists. This would include those who make up 9Marks, since some are not Southern Baptist but would put themselves into the category of baptistic-reformed. This would also include men such as John MacArthur,<sup>160</sup> Wayne Mack,<sup>161</sup> and Curtis C. Thomas,<sup>162</sup> who are not a part of the 9Marks ministry.

### **Presbyterians**

The other major group that emphasizes regenerate church membership is in the reformed-Presbyterian camp. This would include an excellent new book by a rather

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<sup>158</sup> Hammett and Merkle, *Those Who Must Give an Account*.

<sup>159</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, "Loving Discipline," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (2000).

<sup>160</sup> John MacArthur, *The Master's Plan for the Church* (Moody Press, 1991), 109.

<sup>161</sup> Wayne A. Mack and Dave Swavely, *Life in the Father's House: A Member's Guide to the Local Church* (P & R Publishing, 2006), chap. 2.

<sup>162</sup> Curtis C. Thomas, *Life in the Body of Christ* (Cape Coral, Fla.: Founders Press, 2006).

unknown author named Dennis E. Bills,<sup>163</sup> and works by more widely-known men in this denomination like Jay Adams.<sup>164</sup> Two smaller works on membership by Presbyterian pastors are *The House That Jesus Built* by Dale Davis<sup>165</sup> and *The Transforming Community* by Mark Lauterbach.<sup>166</sup>

### **Other Works**

In addition to those by Baptists and Presbyterians, there are also a few relevant works by pastors outside of these denominational affiliations. One of these is a book written in 1968 by Eric Lane that is no longer in print called, *Members One of Another*.<sup>167</sup> Lane was a pastor in the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches in England, and his book on church membership is one of the best small books on the subject. Sadly, the church seems to have closed and the book is no longer in print.

### **Dissertations on Membership**

The lack of scholarly dissertations to be found on the subject of church membership was a big reason that I chose to write on the topic. In my research, I could only find a handful of them, and most were less focused on the historical and biblical analysis of church membership and more focused on how membership is applied in their own church or how they can improve their membership classes. There were a few dissertations, though, that have proven to be very helpful in my study and research.

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<sup>163</sup> Dennis Eldon Bills, *A Church You Can See: Building a Case for Church Membership*, 2 edition. (New Martinsville, WV: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

<sup>164</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline: A Right and Privilege of Every Church Member* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1986).

<sup>165</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *The House That Jesus Built* (Christian Focus Publications, 2015).

<sup>166</sup> Mark Lauterbach, *The Transforming Community: The Practise of the Gospel in Church Discipline* (Christian Focus Publications, 2003).

<sup>167</sup> Eric Lane, *Members One of Another: A Study in the Principles of Local Church Membership* (Evangelical Press, 1968).

One such work is *Church Membership: Its History, Theology, Sociology, and Some Models for Making It Meaningful Today*, by Phillip Keith Hill, written for Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 1987.<sup>168</sup> This dissertation has the most thorough evaluation of the history of church membership found in any D.Min dissertation I found, and it proved to be very helpful.

Another dissertation that addressed some of the same issues that I am addressing here is *Enriching Appreciation for, and the Oversight of, Church Membership in the Discipleship of a Local Church*,<sup>169</sup> written by Daniel Miller for Trinity International University in 2011. This dissertation also focuses on the historical and theological overview of church membership. My hope is that this dissertation will build on the work of these two men.

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<sup>168</sup> Hill, Phillip Keith. *Church Membership: Its History, Theology, Sociology, and Some Models for Making It Meaningful Today*. (Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1987).

<sup>169</sup> Miller, Daniel P. *Enriching Appreciation for, and the Oversight of, Church Membership in the Discipleship of a Local Church* (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2011).

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH**

We have seen how church membership has been developed and defended throughout church history, but does it have any biblical justification? This should be the primary question that every believer and every church should be asking when it comes to church membership. If the idea cannot be found in the Scriptures, then even if there are great pragmatic reasons for church membership or examples of it to be found in church history, we are only propagating the ideas of men and not something that the Lord has designed for his church. If, however, the principles of church membership can be shown through careful exegesis of Scripture, then we should not relegate the idea to simple pragmatism but understand it as part of the design that God has for his church body.

The goal of the following chapters will be to give a biblical and exegetical justification for the principle of church membership and to show why it is the most effective way to fulfill the commitments we are called to in the New Testament. Chapter 3 will focus on a brief survey of the promise of the church in Matthew 16 and 18 and Acts 1:8, the birth of the church in Acts 1-2, and the expansion of the church in the rest of the book of Acts. As we look at each of these sections, the focus will be on how these various passages express God's design and order for his church.



### The Promise of the Church

We will examine Matthew 16 and 18 in more depth as we look at the authority of the church in a later chapter, but for now we will survey these passages to see their significance in the promise of the church. Matthew 16:18 is the first time the word ἐκκλησία is used in the New Testament. Here Jesus himself promises to build his church (ἐκκλησία) and that he will build it upon the apostles' teaching and proclamation of Christ as Lord.<sup>170</sup> Then, in Matthew 18:15-20, we see the word *ekklesia* mentioned again; this time connected to how those who are disciples of Jesus are to deal with a brother's sin. In verse 17 they are told to "tell it to the church," but, when Jesus said this to his disciples, the church was only a promise of what was to come. These are the only two times Jesus uses the word ἐκκλησία, making these instances of important significance. We will look at these in greater depth in Chapter 6.

The next sighting of the promise of the church comes in Acts 1:8. Here, Luke is recounting Jesus's final words to his disciples before he ascends and goes back to the Father. He commissions his disciples and explains the immediate ministry of the coming Holy Spirit. Jesus says to them, <sup>8</sup> "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

We see that they are going to receive the Holy Spirit, who will give them power and authority that they did not have previously and that they will be a witness for Jesus starting in Jerusalem and then moving throughout the world. In the rest of the book of

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<sup>170</sup> Matt. 16:18

Acts, we see this promise being fulfilled through the church. This was a commissioning not only for the apostles but for the soon-to-be church.<sup>171</sup>

### **The Birth of the Church**

#### **Acts 1:12-26**

Immediately following the section on the commissioning of the church and the Ascension in the book of Acts comes a narrative that is important to our discussion involving the selection of a new apostle to help lead Christ's church. The reason this section is important is because it helps us to see how the early church was organized, who made up this group, and who was involved in making decisions concerning the church's leadership. The purpose for this occasion was the need of a replacement for Judas, seen in verses 16-22. The verses preceding and following this are significant, as they show us who would be responsible to make this decision.

Luke tells us in verses 13-15 that there were about 120 men and women present in the upper room where this decision was made. This group is referred to as the "brothers" (*ἀδελφός* in Greek). This is a word used in the New Testament to refer "specifically to fellow believers in Christ,"<sup>172</sup> and can be used for both men and women. In addition, Louw and Nida explain that the word is used for "a group of persons having a well-defined membership."<sup>173</sup> As can be seen from this definition, it was a clear and defined

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<sup>171</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 36.

<sup>172</sup> Johannes P. Louw & Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 124.

<sup>173</sup> Louw, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 124.

group of people who were responsible for this decision. This is also the group we will see in Acts 2:1-4 that the Holy Spirit falls upon in fulfillment of Christ's words in Acts 1:8.

Verse 23 reveals that it is this very defined group of "brothers" that are responsible for selecting Judas's replacement. Luke explains, "And *they* put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias (emphasis added)." The "they" who were responsible to choose a replacement from among themselves are the group who will soon be identified as the church throughout the book of Acts. What this narrative shows us is that, while it is God who ultimately selects the replacement for Judas through the casting of lots, the method he uses for the selection of those candidates is through the choice of the "brothers" as a whole. Therefore, who makes up the "brothers" is incredibly significant. This is not a nebulous group of people who gather to worship together on a Sunday but a very defined group of followers of Jesus who know one another and can even be counted to know who is missing.

While it is Peter who leads the selection process, he is not the one who ultimately makes the decision of whom to put forward, but instead the "brethren" make that decision. In his commentary on Acts, I.H. Marshall describes it this way: "The proposal made by the Twelve was put before a church meeting and gained their approval. The choice of the seven candidates was made by the members of the church, and not by the apostles themselves."<sup>174</sup> If this example is a prescriptive way for church leadership to be chosen, then who makes up the church membership is of utmost importance. Future examples of the selection of leaders in the book of Acts will help us to see if this model is

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<sup>174</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2008), 135.

to be prescriptive for us or if this was a one-time event not to be repeated in the church today.

### **Acts 2:1-47**

In Acts 1:5 and 8, the sign that Jesus promises to give his church is that they will be “baptized with the Holy Spirit.” In Acts 2:2-3, we see this promise fulfilled as the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples, and they are given the ability to speak and preach to others in a multitude of languages. Then, in verses 14-41, we see the first sermon given by Peter, who is the representative head of the apostles. The heart of his message is that Jesus is the Christ.<sup>175</sup> The response of some of the people was described this way: “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’”<sup>176</sup> Peter’s response to them shows how someone receives forgiveness and salvation,<sup>177</sup> but it also shows how a person enters into God’s church: “And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”<sup>178</sup>

In commenting on the act of baptism, Jonathan Leeman remarks, “It seems he wants to establish a marked-off people—a publicly identifiable movement.”<sup>179</sup> Then, in verse 41, we see the response of some of the people: “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” Added to what? To the kingdom of God? Yes, but also added to the ἐκκλησία. They were added to

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<sup>175</sup> Acts 2:36

<sup>176</sup> Acts 2:37

<sup>177</sup> Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and baptism is not required for salvation, but is a sign of identification with Christ and his church.

<sup>178</sup> Acts 2:38

<sup>179</sup> Leeman and Horton, *Church Membership*, 37.

the people of God in Jerusalem—added to the church. And how were they added? They were added through faith in Jesus Christ (they received His word), and in response to this faith, they publicly identified themselves as followers of Jesus Christ through baptism.<sup>180</sup> In this way they were added to Christ’s church. We should note that Luke is careful to record the number of those who were added.<sup>181</sup> As Leeman points out again, “The church is counting heads and keeping records. They know who they are.”<sup>182</sup> We will see this reality throughout the growth of the church in Acts.

### **The Expansion of the Church**

The narrative then takes us to the expansion of the church through the book of Acts. This expansion is how Luke closes Chapter 2, after giving a description of what characterized this new group of baptized believers. Acts 42-47 states:

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

Verse 42 begins by identifying the group as “they,” who, as can be seen by verse 41, are those who were added through faith and baptism as well as the original brethren who now make up the church. In verse 47, this section ends by stating, “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” The obvious question is, again,

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<sup>180</sup> We will look at baptism in much more detail in the chapter on the authority of the church.

<sup>181</sup> Acts 2:41 “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”

<sup>182</sup> Leeman and Horton, *Church Membership*, 38.

*added to what?* In his commentary on Acts, F.F. Bruce states, "...and their numbers were constantly increased as he added more and more believers to the faithful remnant."<sup>183</sup> Another way of saying this is that they were added to the church, or those recognized as the ones belonging to the community of faith. Those who were saved were added to this recognized group that made up the church.

This same way of describing the growth of the church is also recorded in Acts 4. In Acts 4:4 we see Luke mention once again the number of people who are being added to the church: "But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand." The church is growing and records are being kept. The number that made up the church is not nebulous but clearly known and understood by those who were responsible for the church and each of its members. This truth is emphasized again in verse 32 when Luke states, "Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul..." Even though the number is growing so large that it must be referred to as a "multitude" or *πληθος*, there is still the idea that this is a known group of people who are being identified by their faith and inclusion in the assembly of believers.

This group is further clarified in Acts 5:1-11, where we see the Lord purify his church and its witness through the first instance of church discipline. As we will see in a later chapter, the purpose of church discipline is to correct the erring Christian in the hope that they will repent of their sin, but it is also to purify the church so that there is a clear witness to the world of who is and is not a follower of Jesus Christ. It is the church that has been given this authority, as can be clearly seen in Matthew 18:15-20.

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<sup>183</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1988), 74–75.

This first instance of church discipline is perhaps the most severe in the Scriptures as Peter deals with the sin of Ananias and his wife Sapphira and removes them permanently from the church through their death. God is saying, in essence, that there are boundaries to those who will be identified as his people. The response to the discipline was that “great fear came upon the whole church.”<sup>184</sup> The correction was meant not only for the world to understand who made up the church but also for those who were inside the church to understand that reality as well. This is the first time in the book of Acts that the word ἐκκλησία is used for the disciples of Jesus Christ. It is the same word Jesus uses in Matthew 16:18 when he promises the building of his church.

In Acts 6 we then see something significant. When there is a problem in the church and new leaders need to be selected to deal with this challenge, it is not the apostles who make this selection, but it is, again, the “full number of disciples.”<sup>185</sup> This is another way of saying the ἐκκλησία, or church. How did they know that the “full number” was there unless they knew exactly who made up this full number? There seems to be no ambiguity as to who the church is in the book of Acts. This group is given the responsibility to choose from among them “seven men of good repute.”<sup>186</sup> In verse 5 we see that “they,” the church, chose the men to serve in this role. This is a similar pattern to what we saw in the beginning of the book of Acts, where it is the full number of the brethren who are given the responsibility to help select new leaders for the group. This pattern is repeated throughout the book of Acts and helps us to see that it is meant to be a prescriptive pattern that God has designed for his church.

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<sup>184</sup> Acts 5:11

<sup>185</sup> Acts 6:2

<sup>186</sup> Acts 6:3

In Acts 10 the Holy Spirit falls upon the Gentiles, and the church begins to move out of Jerusalem. This moment is significant because it is now not only Jews who make up God's church but is anyone who has saving faith in Jesus Christ. In verse 43 we see that entry into God's church comes through believing in Christ.<sup>187</sup> In verses 47-48 we see that the outward sign of someone entering into the community of faith is water baptism.<sup>188</sup> The pattern can be seen repeatedly in the book of Acts.

As the church continues to grow in Acts, new local churches begin to form in Gentile regions, the most significant of which is the church in Antioch. In Acts 13:1-4, it is the local church that commissions missionaries to go and plant more churches. While it could be debated whether the whole church or just the church leaders were involved in this decision, Merkel notes, "There is evidence in the text, however, that the entire congregation was involved in the process."<sup>189</sup> He also adds, "But regardless of whether the entire congregation was present or the leaders were there as representatives of the congregation, the local church was responsible for sending them out."<sup>190</sup>

On their missionary journeys Paul and Barnabas planted a number of churches, and in each of these churches they appointed elders<sup>191</sup> because local churches need to be led by local leaders.<sup>192</sup> Upon their return, Paul and Barnabas gave a report to the church that had sent them out of all that God had done. In the Jewish church, and now here in the Gentile church, the primacy of the local church in the life of the believer can be clearly

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<sup>187</sup> Acts 10:43 "To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

<sup>188</sup> Acts 10:47-48 <sup>47</sup> "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" <sup>48</sup> And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

<sup>189</sup> Hammett and Merkle, *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 48.

<sup>190</sup> Hammett and Merkle, *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 48-49.

<sup>191</sup> Acts 14:23

<sup>192</sup> See 1 Peter 5:1-5, Acts 20:17-28



seen. As Merkel states, “The local church was at the center of God’s method of expanding His kingdom. If this is the case, then it is imperative for believers today to be a part of such a body. To remain outside the local church is to remain outside of God’s primary means of maturing His people and saving a lost world.”<sup>193</sup>

One final verse we want to examine before leaving the book of Acts is 15:22. A council of church leaders had gathered in Jerusalem to discuss how and if the Jewish law should apply to Gentile believers. In verse 22 we read how the church selected the leaders who would be responsible to bring the council’s decision back to the church of Antioch and the surrounding Gentile churches. Again, we see the pattern of the recognized church being responsible for the selection of their leaders. Verse 22 states, “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. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers (emphasis added).”

This decision for the selection of leaders was not made by one or a few leaders but by “the whole church.” For this to be possible, there would have to have been a clear and identifiable way to know who made up “the whole church.” How would this be possible without a clear list of those that the church identified as followers of Jesus Christ, who had confessed Christ as Lord, and who had been baptized as an outward sign of their identification with Christ and his church? How is it possible for a church today to follow this example if they do not know who it is that actually makes up the church? If God has entrusted such an important task as the selection of the church’s leaders to the

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<sup>193</sup> Hammett and Merkle, *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 49.

whole church, doesn't it require that the church know who the members are that make up that church body?

As can be seen from this very brief survey of the promise, birth, and expansion of the church in the book of Acts, God has designed his church in a specific way for a specific mission. This design includes the church being his primary means of witness to the world and the discipleship of believers. It means that all believers are called to be part of a local church with local leaders who take responsibility for their care. It means that entrance into God's church takes place through faith in Jesus Christ and is publicly expressed through the New Covenant symbol of baptism. Through faith and baptism someone is added to the church. Their addition to the church is public and known to all. The church as a whole has a special and unique authority which has been given by the Lord to receive and remove people from the church, to select leaders, and to send out missionaries. This pattern will continue to be seen throughout the rest of the New Testament as well.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

We have seen through the book of Acts that God fulfilled the promise he gave in Matthew 16:18 to build his church, and we have seen that the word *church* became the predominate term in English to describe Christ’s disciples on earth. But what exactly is the church? This question is fundamental to a person’s understanding of how they are to relate to or associate themselves with the church. If one believes the church to be a building or simply a location to go to for preaching, worship, and other programs, they are going to have a fundamentally different perspective than someone who understands the biblical teaching of the church as the people of God. With this in mind, we must begin by having a proper understanding of God’s church as he defines it throughout the New Testament.

The English word *church* comes from the Greek ἐκκλησία. The secular meaning of the word can be seen by its use in Acts 19:32, where it is used as “a group of citizens assembled for socio-political activities—assembly, gathering.”<sup>194</sup> But in the New Testament, the word came to have a much more specific meaning related to God’s people, referring to those in a specific location and, in a more general sense, to all believers in Christ. In explaining how the word grew from its secular meaning into its more distinctly Christian definition, Louw and Nida state, “In many contexts ἐκκλησία

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<sup>194</sup> Johannes P. Louw & Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 132.

may be readily rendered as ‘gathering of believers’ or ‘group of those who trust in Christ.’” And “it is important to understand the meaning of ἐκκλησία as ‘an assembly of God’s people.’”<sup>195</sup>

This definition can be seen in many of Paul’s letters as he addresses the church (the body of believers) of a particular location.<sup>196</sup> Helping to define ἐκκλησία, Saucy states:

The use of ἐκκλησία in the New Testament is limited to the senses of the local and universal church. Other connotations which have arisen with the English term *church* are not found with the New Testament word. It is never used for a church building, nor are adjectives ever attached to ἐκκλησία as titles to denote a particular denomination.<sup>197</sup>

The word *church* (or ἐκκλησία) in the New Testament always refers to the people of God alone. That is why theologians like John MacArthur define the church as “the assembly of the redeemed—those who have been called by God the Father to salvation as a gift to his son.”<sup>198</sup> Other theologians such as Millard Erickson, Greg Allison, and John Feinberg express the same thought. Erickson defines the church as “the whole body of those who through Christ’s death have been savingly reconciled to God and have received new life.”<sup>199</sup> Allison and Feinberg define the church as “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.”<sup>200</sup> All of these scholars agree on one very important reality concerning the New Testament teaching on the church, and that is the

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<sup>195</sup> Louw & Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 125.

<sup>196</sup> See Rom. 16:1, 1 Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 1:1, Gal 1:2, Col 1:24, 1 Thes 1:1 (and more)

<sup>197</sup> Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program* (Chicago, Ill: Moody Publishers, 1974), 18.

<sup>198</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*, Illustrated edition. (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2017), 740.

<sup>199</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1st edition. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 1983), 1034.

<sup>200</sup> Gregg R. Allison and John S. Feinberg, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2012), 29.

fact that the church is “the people of God” who are separate and distinct from the world (those still trapped in the domain of darkness).

This definition is quite different from what many would consider to be the church, if asked today. I would assume that most people (even most Christians) in the United States would define the church as a location, a worship gathering, or as some other assortment of programs a church puts on, including those that take place on Sunday mornings. This confused definition then leads to very little distinction between the redeemed that gather in a worship service on Sunday morning and the unredeemed who gather with them. That confused definition is also markedly different from the teaching of the New Testament, where Paul clearly separates those categories as “the church” and “outsiders.” One specific example of this is seen in 1 Corinthians 14:23-24, <sup>23</sup> “If, therefore, the *whole church* comes together and all speak in tongues, and *outsiders* or *unbelievers* enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? <sup>24</sup> But if all prophesy, and an *unbeliever* or *outsider* enters, he is convicted *by all*, he is called to account *by all* (emphasis added).”

Here we can see that, for Paul, there are two categories of people who make up the organized worship gathering, the “church,” and the “unbeliever” or “outsider.” There is a clear distinction between the two categories, and there would seem to be no ambiguity as to which people are which. This same truth can be seen in other passages where the distinction between those who are the church and those who are not the church is obviously clear to Paul’s readers.

One further example is 1 Corinthians 5, which we will look at in more depth later, but for now I would note once again the difference between the church and outsiders.

Speaking of the man who is living in unrepentant sin, Paul's instruction to the church in 5:2 is, "Let him who has done this be removed from among you." He then goes on to explain that their responsibility as the church is to publicly remove him from his identification with them as a Christian. Paul says in verses 4-5: <sup>4</sup> "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup> you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." Then, after warning them of the danger of not removing such a person, Paul gives clarity as to whom they do and do not have this authority over. He states in verses 12-13, <sup>12</sup> "For what have I to do with judging *outsiders*? Is it not those *inside the church* whom you are to judge? <sup>13</sup> God judges *those outside*. Purge the evil person from *among you* (emphasis added)."

Some with a faulty or incomplete definition of ἐκκλησία might think that Paul is stating that they are responsible to perform this responsibility to any who join them on a Sunday, but that is not the way Paul is using the phrase "inside the church." For Paul, this means the totality of the redeemed in that location. And for the New Testament believers, there seemed to be no ambiguity as to who were inside the church and who were outsiders. This is why passages such as Acts 15:22, as well as 1 Corinthians 5:4 and 14:23, can speak about gathering the "whole church" together. Unlike most of our modern "churches," the early New Testament church knew exactly who made up the ἐκκλησία.

What criteria, then, was used to determine who were the ἐκκλησία and who were not? If it was not attendance in the worship gathering (see 1 Cor. 14), what would differentiate the church from the outsiders? As we saw in our look at the birth and

expansion of the church in the book of Acts, the differences were the New Covenant sign of baptism and the ongoing sign of the Lord's table. Hammett and Merkle state it this way: "In the early church the inclusion of new members would have taken place at baptism, which was seen as the final step of becoming a Christian."<sup>201</sup> But how are people in local congregations today to know who are baptized and who are non-believers? Mere attendance on a Sunday morning, or even deeper involvement in a small group in the church, does not speak to one's confession of faith or baptism. Even if a few people close to them know that they have confessed Christ as Lord and have been obedient in baptism in a former church, how is the whole church to know this without some kind of public affirmation by the person and the church body? Mack and Swavely make this astute observation: "How can church leaders and others determine whether someone is in the category of a believer or unbeliever? Biblical theology and practical wisdom indicate that a mere profession of faith is not sufficient in this regard."<sup>202</sup>

This is, in essence, what membership is for churches like ours at Grace Bible Church. It is a person's affirmation of their baptism and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as well as their affirmation to join this local ἐκκλησία and submit to its biblical authority in their life. At the same time, it is the declaration of the ἐκκλησία that they believe this person to be a follower of Christ and assume the responsibilities for one another given in the New Testament.

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<sup>201</sup> Hammett and Merkle, *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 32.

<sup>202</sup> Wayne A. Mack and Dave Swavely, *Life in the Father's House: A Member's Guide to the Local Church* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2006), 44–45.

## **The Invisible and Visible Church**

Theologians have used the language of the “visible” and “invisible” church to describe the two different ways ἐκκλησία is used in the New Testament.<sup>203</sup> While this is language that has been formed by theologians over time and not language from the Bible, it is helpful in showing us the distinction that is found in Scripture between the church that God knows and sees and the church that men know and see.

This distinction is important to our discussion because there are many people who identify themselves as part of the “invisible” or “universal” church, but do not see a need to identify with a “visible” or “local” church. However, does this description exist in the New Testament? Does the New Testament know of a Christian who is part of God’s universal church but not part of a local assembly of believers? If this type of individual cannot be found in the New Testament, should it be a valid belief for Christians today?

### **The Invisible Church**

One way that ἐκκλησία is used in the New Testament is to describe what theologians call the “invisible” church. The invisible church is what Wayne Grudem defines as “The church as God sees it.”<sup>204</sup> To expand on that definition, we can see the invisible church as the church as it exists spiritually, consisting of all souls of the redeemed in all places and in all times.<sup>205</sup> Hebrews 12:23 describes it as “The assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven,” and Ephesians 1:4 identifies it as those who God chose “before the foundation of the world.” In 1 Timothy 2:19 we read, “The Lord

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<sup>203</sup> See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 855-857; Millard Erikson, *Christian Theology*, 1032-1033; John Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1019-1020; MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 746-747.

<sup>204</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England : Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1994), 855.

<sup>205</sup> Dennis Eldon Bills, *A Church You Can See: Building a Case for Church Membership*, 2nd edition. (New Martinsville, WV: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 12–13.



knows those who are his.” Clearly, the Lord is the only one who knows every person that he has redeemed. This assembly of God’s redeemed is the invisible church, whose salvation only God knows with absolute certainty.<sup>206</sup>

This use of ἐκκλησία is seen in passages like Matthew 16:17-18, where God promises to build his church. It is also seen in Colossians 1:18 and Ephesians 1:22-23, where the church is referred to as the body of Christ with Christ as its head. Paul also uses it in this sense in Ephesians 3:3-10, as he describes the church as “the manifold wisdom of God” that is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. This use, however, is not the predominate way ἐκκλησία is used in the New Testament. Of the 109 occurrences of ἐκκλησία in the New Testament, the overwhelming majority refer to the church as a visible and local assembly of believers.<sup>207</sup>

### **The Visible Church**

The visible church is the church that we can see. Grudem again provides us with a simple definition of the visible church, referring to it as “the church as Christians on earth see it.”<sup>208</sup> This includes “all professing Christians who are still alive on planet earth.”<sup>209</sup> The use of the terms visible and invisible is not to say that there are two different churches, but rather it is two different ways of looking at the same church.<sup>210</sup>

The most important differentiation for us to understand is that the invisible church contains only the redeemed. The visible church, however, is made up of both believers

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<sup>206</sup> See Jesus’s teaching in Matthew 7:15-23 and 13:30 where not everyone who claims to be a follower of Christ is truly a follower of Christ.

<sup>207</sup> John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Kregel Publications, 2005), 28.

<sup>208</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 856.

<sup>209</sup> Bills, *A Church You Can See*, 12.

<sup>210</sup> John M. Frame and J. I. Packer, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, Illustrated edition. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2013), 1019.

and unbelievers. We saw this previously in our examination of 1 Corinthians 14:23-24 and 5:12-13, but we also see this principle very clearly in passages like Acts 20:29-30. Here, Paul warns the Ephesian elders that false teachers will arise “from among your own selves,” indicating that these teachers were professing Christians but very clearly were not truly part of the redeemed.

Another passage that issues a similar warning comes from the Apostle John in 1 John 2:19, where he writes, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” These passages and others communicate that the visible church will always include some unbelievers because we cannot see the hearts of men and women as God sees them.<sup>211</sup>

### **The Universal and Local Church**

Another way theologians describe how the New Testament refers to the church is that it is both “universal” and “local.”<sup>212</sup> The definition of the universal church is quite similar to the definition of the “invisible” church. That is, the universal church is “the whole body of those who through Christ’s death have been savingly reconciled to God and have received new life.”<sup>213</sup> Or, as MacArthur and Mayhue describe, it is “all true believers throughout church history—both those alive today and those already in heaven.”<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 856.

<sup>212</sup> See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 857-858; Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1033-1034; John Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1020; MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 747.

<sup>213</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1034.

<sup>214</sup> MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 747.

The universal church is manifested in local churches that are each an assembly of believers who meet in a geographical region.<sup>215</sup> Allison has perhaps the most detailed definition of a local church, which he describes as being:

(1) *Doxological*, or oriented to the glory of God; (2) *logocentric*, or centered on the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, and the inspired Word of God, Scripture; and (3) *pneumadynamic*, or created, gathered, gifted, and empowered by the Holy Spirit; (4) *covenantal*, or gathered as members in new covenant relationship with God and in covenantal relationship with each other; (5) *confessional*, or united by both personal confession of faith in Christ and common confession of the Christian faith; (6) *missional*, or identified as the body of divinely called and divinely sent ministers to proclaim the gospel and advance the kingdom of God; and (7) *spatio-temporal/eschatological*, or assembled as a historical reality (located in space and time) and possessing a certain hope and clear destiny while it lives the strangeness of ecclesial existence in the here-and-now.<sup>216</sup>

In addition, Allison explains that local churches are led by publicly recognized men who are called pastors or elders.<sup>217</sup> Others, such as Hansen and Leeman, offer a similar but more concise definition of the local church, describing it as:

...a group of Christians who assemble as an earthly embassy of Christ's heavenly kingdom to proclaim the good news and commands of Christ the King; to affirm one another as his citizens through the ordinances; and to display God's own holiness and love through a unified and diverse people in all the world, following the teaching and example of elders.<sup>218</sup>

These definitions and others are drawn from the multitude of passages in the New Testament that describe the church's order, mission, and leadership. However one describes the local church, it is clear in the New Testament that the expectation is that every believer in Jesus Christ will be part of a local church and will regularly gather with that church for teaching and worship.<sup>219</sup> The writer of Hebrews emphasizes this fact when

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<sup>215</sup> Frame and Packer, *Systematic Theology*, 1020.

<sup>216</sup> Allison and Feinberg, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 31-32.

<sup>217</sup> Allison and Feinberg, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 32.

<sup>218</sup> Collin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman, *Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ Is Essential* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2021), 26.

<sup>219</sup> See Acts 14:27; 20:28; 1 Cor. 11:18-20; 1 Thess. 1:1 are a few of the passages that show the normative practice of Christians being identified with the church and the expectation of the church to gather.

he writes in 10:24-25, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

God’s design is for every believer to be part of a local church, and the New Testament letters are written in such a way that this is the expectation of every true Christian. As one writer explains, “The Bible does not recognize a category of living, breathing Christians who are not a part of the church-you-can-see. It presumes that if you still have a body...you are part of the visible church.”<sup>220</sup> So how, then, does someone become part of a church? Is it simply through attendance? Are they part of the church the very first time they show up at a worship gathering? If the visible gathering of the church is made up of both believers and non-believers, how is the church to know who is part of the true church? These are the questions that church membership helps to answer.

### **Metaphors for the Church**

In addition to the fundamental nature of the church that we derive from the definition and use of ἐκκλησία in the New Testament, the metaphors used for the church also give us a great deal of clarity into the nature of the church and God’s design for her. There are a number of metaphors that we find in Scripture for the church, including *branches on a vine* (John 15:5), an *olive tree* (Rom. 11:17-24), a *field of crops* (1 Cor. 3:6-9), a *building* (1 Cor. 3:9) and a *harvest* (Matt. 13:1-30; John 4:35).<sup>221</sup> Each of these are helpful in giving some insight into God’s design and purpose for the church, but the

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<sup>220</sup> Bills, *A Church You Can See*, 12.

<sup>221</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 858.

three most significant metaphors that will help us in this study are that of the church as a *family*, a *body*, and a *temple*.

### **The Church as a Household/Family**

The metaphor of the church as a family can be seen in a variety of passages, including Luke 8:21, Galatians 3:26, Ephesians 5:25-33, Hebrews 2:11, 1 John 3:1-3, and others. This metaphor comes primarily from the theological concept of adoption that takes place at the moment of our salvation. In that adoption, God becomes our Father (Gal. 4:6-7) and Jesus becomes our brother (Heb. 2:11-12). We also become brothers and sisters of one another in the church, which is called “the household of God” (1 Tim. 3:15). This metaphor is given in order to stress to us the intimacy of relationship and responsibility for one another that God intends for his church.

This metaphor also stresses to us the clear relationship that is needed inside of the local church. While people may at times not want to admit who their family is, there is no ambiguity when it comes to who is and is not a biological family member. When a family member is missing from the dinner table, it is recognized. When a family member does not come home at night, it does not go unnoticed. It should be this way in God’s family as well. When a family member is missing from the gathering, it should be known and felt. There should be no ambiguity regarding who makes up this family since there is distinct authority and specific accountability that Christ has given only to this family (as we will see in our further study of the church).

### **The Church as a Body**

The other primary metaphor used of the church in the New Testament is that of a body. This metaphor is expounded on by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12. Frame and

Packer state, “This metaphor stresses the unity of the church with Christ, and the unity of each Christian with all the others.”<sup>222</sup> This metaphor is especially significant to our study because it was written to a specific local church and is meant to be applied primarily within that local church.<sup>223</sup> This topic of unity and mutual love and benefit was especially needed for this church, which was experiencing a great deal of division. To this divided church Paul expresses that the church is like a body where each of the individual Christians are “members” of that body. In 1 Corinthians 12:12 he states, “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.” This concept is also stated in Romans 12:5, and the imagery is expanded upon more in Ephesians 5:23 and in Colossians 1:18 and 2:19, where Paul says that Christ is the head of this body.

Paul then explains that entrance into this body comes through being “baptized into one body,” and that they “all were made to drink of one Spirit.”<sup>224</sup> This, of course, is referring to the baptism of the Holy Spirit which takes place at the moment of salvation and regeneration. In essence, Paul is saying that the body is made up of *only* regenerate believers in that local assembly. This is significant because he then outlines specific responsibilities that they have for one another, making it crucial that they actually know who the members of the body are. He emphasizes their interdependency on one another by stating in verse 21, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” And again, in verse 26 he states, “If one

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<sup>222</sup> Frame and Packer, *Systematic Theology*, 1021.

<sup>223</sup> This can be seen by Paul’s introduction to the letter in 1 Cor. 1:1, “to the church of God that is in Corinth,” and throughout the letter instructions that are given to specific challenges facing the Corinthian church and directed specifically to the believers in Corinth.

<sup>224</sup> 1 Cor. 12:13

member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” It therefore seems essential that we would clearly know who makes up the body if we are to have this level of care and responsibility for one another.

Lane examines these two metaphors of the church as a family and a body:

For any of these organisms to function properly order of some kind is required. The same applies to the church. The church is not just a loose collection of individuals, it is a closely knit structure like a human body (Eph. 4:16) and has therefore to be rightly organized. For such ordering it needs to know exactly who belongs to it. A family which sat down to its meal table or locked its doors at night, not knowing who was supposed to be there and who not, would be an extremely strange phenomenon. An army battalion which did not know whom to expect on parade would soon be in chaos. If the church is to be a true family and an effective fighting force it needs to know who exactly belongs to it.<sup>225</sup>

This idea of order and organization seems to not only be built into the metaphors that are chosen for the church but also in Paul’s very instruction on how the church is to be led. In 1 Corinthians 14:33, Paul expresses the guiding principle of why chaos is not acceptable in the church gathering when he states, “For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.” Would it not then make sense for God to desire that every church member know whom they are in covenant relationship with as the ἐκκλησία? Would it not make sense that order would include the elders knowing the names and testimonies of every member of the church who has been called to submit to their leadership and to know for whom they are going to give an account? Such order and knowledge is built into the very fabric of the church as a family and a body.

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<sup>225</sup> Eric Lane, *Members One of Another: A Study in the Principles of Local Church Membership* (London: Evangelical Press, 1968), 19.

## The Church as a Temple

The third metaphor of the church that we want to look at is the metaphor of the church as a temple and each of the members of the church being “living stones” in that temple. This metaphor is found in a few places, such as 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 and Ephesians 2:21-22, but one of the most prominent is 1 Peter 2:4-8. Throughout Peter’s letter, he continually uses Old Testament illustrations and symbols and connects them to the church and the people of the New Covenant. Peter refers to the Christians he is writing to as “living stones”<sup>226</sup> in direct connection to Jesus as the “cornerstone”<sup>227</sup> (prophesied about in Isaiah 28:16) and the “living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious.”<sup>228</sup> Then, as if Peter’s metaphors were not mixed enough, he adds that they are being built up “as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices.”<sup>229</sup> It’s as if Peter is trying to jam together in one place as many Old Testament symbols of holiness as possible to explain to the church that they are carrying on the responsibility that the temple and priests had in the Old Testament, which were to be symbols of holiness to the people and the nations.

In verses 9-10, Peter is even more clear as he ascribes to the church a number of attributes that belonged to Israel alone and now define the church of the New Covenant: “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

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<sup>226</sup> 1 Peter 2:5

<sup>227</sup> 1 Peter 2:6

<sup>228</sup> 1 Peter 2:4

<sup>229</sup> 1 Peter 2:5



people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” In explaining this passage, Schreiner says:

The privilege of belonging to God’s people is conveyed by Peter with a number of Old Testament allusions. Peter drew on Exod. 19:6, using the exact words found there in identifying the church as a “royal priesthood” ... Now God’s kingdom of priests consists of the church of Jesus Christ. It too is to mediate God’s blessings to the nations, as it proclaims the gospel.<sup>230</sup>

He goes on to say that “both Israel as a whole and the church of Jesus Christ are identified as a ‘royal priesthood.’ There is no suggestion that only a portion of Israel served as priests in Exodus 19.”<sup>231</sup> In essence, Schreiner is saying that the church as a collective whole bears the responsibility of being a holy witness to the nations. If this is the case, then would not two things be very important? First, shouldn’t the individual local church know who these “living stones” are who make up this temple? And, second, shouldn’t they be concerned about who it is that is to be a witness to the nations for the name of Jesus? Without church membership this seems nearly impossible or, at best, a lot more confusing and unclear.

As we have seen from our study of the nature of the church, God’s design for his church requires clarity around *who* is the church, because they are a witness of Christ to a watching world, and have specific responsibilities to one another and to those who lead the church. It is true that only God himself knows who are the truly redeemed in any local church, but he has given us the responsibility to do our best in expressing who the visible church actually is by means of the authority of the church, which we will examine next.

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<sup>230</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Nashville, Tenn: Holman Reference, 2003), 114–115.

<sup>231</sup> Schreiner, *The New American Commentary*, 115.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

Does the church have any authority in the life of Christians? Where does this authority come from? And who ultimately holds this authority? These are questions that are significant to the issue of church membership. Jesus only uses the word *church* (ἐκκλησία) twice, and so what he says about the church should be of great importance to those who are wanting to understand the Bible's teaching on the church. The first place Jesus speaks of the church is in Matthew 16:13-19. In studying this passage, we learn some foundational principles concerning the church.

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

The first thing we see in this passage is that Jesus has a fundamental question for his followers: "Who do people say that I am?" But even more significantly, "Who do you say that I am?" The key question being asked is, "Who is Jesus?" This is the primary message and mission of the church—to help people answer this question through the proclamation of the gospel. Peter's response to this question is, "You are the Christ, the

Son of the living God.” Jesus affirms that answer and expresses that God is the one who has revealed this to Peter.

Then Jesus says, “On this rock I will build my church.” Theologians have argued over whether Peter is the rock or whether Peter’s confession is the rock, but it would seem that both are true. Morris says, “The statement that the rock is Peter is true only as we keep in mind what that apostle has just said; it is not Peter simply as Peter but Peter who has confessed Jesus as the Messiah who is the church’s foundation on whom the church is to be built. We must not separate the man from the words he has just spoken.”<sup>232</sup> It is upon this confession, and through Peter who is his disciple, that Jesus promises to build his church. Jesus alone is the one who has the authority to save and to identify those who have been saved and have entered into his kingdom. Then in verse 19, this authority is given to Peter and ultimately to the church. Jesus promises, “I will give you the keys of the Kingdom.” The image of keys implies authority. In examining this passage, Merkel states, “The images of a ‘key’ and ‘binding and loosing’ are both symbols of authority.”<sup>233</sup> Jesus is delegating his authority to his disciples. In defining this word *key* in the Greek, the TDNT says, “Hence handing over the keys implies appointment to full authority. He who has the keys has on the one side control, e.g., over the council chamber or treasury, cf. Mt. 13:52, and on the other the power to allow or to forbid entry.”<sup>234</sup> Here we see the allusion to what this authority is given for (entry into God’s kingdom), but it will not become fully clear until Jesus teaches them again in

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<sup>232</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Leicester, England: Eerdmans, 1992), 423.

<sup>233</sup> Benjamin Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, eds. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville, Tenn: B&H Academic, 2012), 41.

<sup>234</sup> Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids (Mich.): Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), 750.

Matthew 18:15-20. For now, we are left with the understanding that Jesus has full authority; he delegates that authority to his followers, and that authority will be involved in “binding and loosing” something.

### **The Authority of Church Discipline**

The second time Jesus speaks of the church is in Matthew 18:15-20. Here he returns to the same language of “binding and loosing” and the authority given to the church. In this text we get a clearer understanding of just what the church has been given authority to bind and loose. The first thing we want to take notice of is the use of the plural “you” in verse 18, speaking of who now has the authority to bind and loose. It is no longer just Peter who has been given this authority, but now this authority is extended to other followers of Jesus Christ, the church. In commenting on this passage, Leeman and Dever observe, “Whether or not Jesus is giving the keys only to Peter in Chapter 16, which I don’t think he is, most agree that the authority of the keys is extended to all disciples and, ultimately, to the local church in Chapter 18.”<sup>235</sup> What then is this authority that the church has been given? The context of this pericope helps us to answer that question.

In verses 15-17, Jesus is teaching his disciples how they are to deal with a brother who has sinned against them. Jesus’s instruction starts with a simple one-to-one command that calls for one brother to go to another and call him to repentance. If that does not work, then verse 16 instructs the brother to now take along one or two others who can be a witness if the brother caught in sin again fails to respond in repentance. It is here, in verse 17, that we encounter the instructions now given to the church. If this

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<sup>235</sup> Leeman and Dever, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, 180.

brother has refused to listen to the first two attempts to call him to repentance, he is now instructed to “tell it to the church.” Again, one’s definition of ἐκκλησία plays a significant role in how this instruction is to be carried out. Who is the church? It is vital that a church knows who the members are if they are going to faithfully obey this command.

Jesus’s final instruction here regards how the church is to respond if the brother fails to repent even after the “whole church” has beseeched him to do so. At this point, Jesus instructs them to “let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”<sup>236</sup> Blomberg, in his commentary on the book of Matthew, interprets this phrase in the following way: “To treat a person as a ‘pagan or a tax collector’ means to treat him or her as unredeemed and outside the Christian community. Such treatment resembles the Old Testament practice of ‘cutting’ someone ‘off’ from the assembly of Israel.”<sup>237</sup>

This interpretation is the commonly accepted understanding of what Jesus is instructing his followers to do. It is immediately following this instruction that Jesus speaks about the authority of “binding and loosing.” So, whatever the church having the authority to bind and loose means, it cannot mean less than the authority to identify someone as unredeemed based on their behavior no longer being a witness for the Lord.

Leeman summarizes this authority in the following way:

It means that churches can exercise the same authority that Jesus exercised with Peter in Chapter 16, or that the local church exercises in Chapter 18: the authority to stand in front of a gospel confessor, to consider his or her gospel confession and life, and to announce an official judgment on heaven’s behalf:

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<sup>236</sup> Matthew 18:17

<sup>237</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, (Nashville, Tenn: Holman Reference, 1992), 279.

“That is/isn’t a right gospel confession” and “That is/isn’t a true gospel confessor.” Exercising the keys is rendering judgment on a *gospel what* and a *gospel who*, a confession and a confessor.<sup>238</sup>

Notice who has this authority: the church. This is the meaning of the end of this passage,

<sup>19</sup> “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”<sup>239</sup>

This is not a reference to a small group or prayer meeting; this is speaking of the *ἐκκλησία* gathered together to discipline the sinning brother. Jesus is saying that, as you gather as my church, I have delegated to you my authority over my church, and my authority is present with you in your decision. As Blomberg explains,

The word for any “thing” (*pragma*) is a term frequently limited to judicial matters. Here Jesus reiterates that actions of Christian discipline, following God’s guidelines, have his endorsement. This remains true even if they come from a very small fellowship, including but not limited to the “two or three” gathered in vv. 15–16.<sup>240</sup>

Schreiner echoes those thoughts by explaining, “The ‘any matter’ (*pantos pragmatos*) on which two agree relates here to church discipline and should not be applied haphazardly to individual requests that stem from selfish desires.”<sup>241</sup>

This authority belongs to the full, local *ἐκκλησία* alone (even if only two or three make up the membership of a local church) and is not an act of vengeance or punitive in nature but rather is a loving act of obedience that the Lord commands of his church. Its ultimate purposes are to protect the one who is under discipline by warning him of the

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<sup>238</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority* (B&H Books, 2016), 32.

<sup>239</sup> Matthew 18:19-20

<sup>240</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 281.

<sup>241</sup> Thomas Schreiner, “The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account*, eds. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville, Tenn: B&H Academic, 2012), 111.

consequences of his choices, to protect the church from the harm that comes from sin left unconfessed and unrepented of, and to protect the name of Christ. When done correctly, the church can be assured that “when the church disciplines erring members, it can be confident that Jesus is in its midst, doing the will of God.”<sup>242</sup>

If the church carries this kind of responsibility and authority from the Lord Jesus Christ, then is it not crucial that each local church clearly define who “the church” is and what this unrepentant person is to be removed from? As we have seen, it is not simply removal from the worship gathering, which included both saved and unsaved people, but from the ἐκκλησία itself. Without a clear definition of who and what the ἐκκλησία is in the local church, this command is nearly impossible to obey. Perhaps that is why so few churches follow this command of Jesus to his church.

While Matthew 18:15-20 is one of the most helpful passages in understanding the church’s role and responsibility in correction and in addressing sin, there is another passage that provides clarity for the church in this area as well. That teaching comes from the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the church of Corinth.

### **Paul’s Instruction in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13**

<sup>1</sup> It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. <sup>2</sup> And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. <sup>3</sup> For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. <sup>4</sup> When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup> you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. <sup>6</sup> Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? <sup>7</sup> Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. <sup>8</sup> Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and

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<sup>242</sup> Schreiner, “The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline,” 112.

evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.<sup>9</sup> I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—<sup>10</sup> not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.<sup>11</sup> But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.<sup>12</sup> For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?<sup>13</sup> God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:1-13)

As in Matthew 18:15-20, the language in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 is judicial language that presents the church (ἐκκλησία) acting in authority as God’s representatives on earth. Paul begins with a strong rebuke towards the church because they have failed in their responsibility. It seems clear from Paul’s rebuke that the sin of this member is known throughout the church and perhaps even the community, and the church has chosen to ignore this gross, public sin. Speaking to the public nature of this sin, Allison and Feinberg note, “Because of the public nature of this sin, retracing the earlier, private steps of discipline as set forth by Jesus was not possible nor relevant in this case. Rather, the public exposure of this incestuous relationship called for prompt public attention and excommunication.”<sup>243</sup>

Unlike the situation in Matthew 18:15-17, where the sin is private and therefore the confrontation is to be kept private at all costs, the sin here in Corinth is widely known, and therefore must be quickly addressed in a public way for the protection of the church and the sake of the offender. It would seem that the more public the sin, the more the response to that sin must also be public for the sake of Christ’s name and the purity of his church. Speaking to this, Schreiner states: “In Matthew Jesus addresses a situation where the sin is not of public nature and not widely known in the church. Paul responds

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<sup>243</sup> Allison and Feinberg, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 194.



to an instance where the sin was flagrant and evident to all in Corinth. The public and gross character of the sin demanded a public and immediate response by the church.”<sup>244</sup>

Paul’s response was to rebuke the church for its false understanding of what is loving in a circumstance like this. He says to them in verse 2, “And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn...?” The Corinthian church probably thought that they were being incredibly gracious by not confronting this man in his sin, but Paul considers it arrogant and complacent.<sup>245</sup> The idea that we know better than God is the height of arrogance, and when we refuse to address people and sin in the way God has called us to, we reveal that arrogance. Notice how Paul is not directly addressing the sin of the man here, but he is addressing the sin of the church for failing to fulfill their responsibility as the Lord had directed them.

Paul’s instruction to them is clear, “Let him who has done this be removed from among you.” The phrase “among you” used by Paul always refers to the ἐκκλησία, or church. Here the instruction is to remove the man from the official ἐκκλησία or recognized membership of the church, thereby no longer affirming him as part of the people of God. Allison and Feinberg remark on this by commenting, “Excommunication is a radical measure that involves the transfer of an unrepentant person from the church to the realm of satanic destruction.”<sup>246</sup> Paul is calling for this man to be excommunicated for the sake of the church and the name of Christ.

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<sup>244</sup> Schreiner, “The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline,” 114.

<sup>245</sup> See: Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 387. “...six of its seven occurrences in the NT appear in 1 Corinthians, and its meaning *puffed up, inflated*, i.e., with *pride, self-importance, arrogance, complacency, or self-congratulation*. It is possible that this first clause should also take the form of a question: *And can you really show complacency?*”

<sup>246</sup> Allison and Feinberg, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 192.

In verse 3 Paul uses very strong language to express the actions the church should have taken and must now take as well as conveying apostolic approval for these measures. Even though Paul is not physically present with them, that is no excuse for their failure to act. He says, “For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing” (vs.3). Thiselton notes that not only is Paul expressing apostolic authority by saying that his spirit is present with them, but he is likely also expressing the very power and authority of the Holy Spirit by this statement. In his commentary he states: “It is in the power of the Holy Spirit that Paul is present, as one who integrally forms part of the one holy temple at Corinth which is threatened with defilement and destruction but is sanctified by the common bond of the Spirit, who indwells the corporate body.”<sup>247</sup> Verse 4 amplifies this by adding that the “power of the Lord Jesus Christ” is also present in this judgment as they gather as Christ’s church. This reflects the Lord’s teaching from Matthew 18:15-20, that when the church is gathered and in agreement to exercise the keys of authority that they have been given, the Lord states, “there am I among them” (Matthew 18:20).

Paul’s instruction is once again that they are to “deliver this man to Satan,” which is to excommunicate him from the people of God back into the people of the world where Satan has dominion. The motivation of this seemingly harsh act is really love, as Paul expresses, “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” Paul’s hope is that through this act of discipline, God may use the circumstances to bring this man to repentance, and therefore demonstrate that he truly is redeemed and can be brought back into the people of God. This is, of course, the goal of all correction in the church.

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<sup>247</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 391.

Schreiner says, “The purpose of discipline is not ultimately punishment but salvation.”<sup>248</sup>

This is exactly what Paul is hoping for.

After giving his rebuke and clear instruction on how they are to proceed, Paul explains why this act is so important, not only for the man but for the whole church membership. He says to them:

<sup>6</sup> Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? <sup>7</sup> Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. <sup>8</sup> Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5:6-8)

Paul’s concern is for the purity of the church and the church’s witness to the world.

Speaking on this, Schreiner explains, “The primary reason for discipline is the purity of the church and hence the glory of God. If the church tolerates blatant sin in its midst, then sin will spread like an infection, and the church will lose its witness to the world.”<sup>249</sup> That is what Paul is expressing through the metaphor of the leaven. Leaven represents sin, and Paul’s warning expresses the idea that, “Sin is dirty and defiling, and like *yeast* it will work until it permeates the whole. The only remedy is to clean out the evil entirely.”<sup>250</sup>

The church is a new community that will be destroyed if it allows sin to permeate it. They therefore must remove the sin from their midst.

The final verses in this section deal with the confusion the Corinthians seemed to have regarding Paul’s previous instructions to them. Paul had instructed them in a previous letter that they were to “not associate with sexually immoral people” (vs. 9). Paul was referring to those *inside* the church, but the Corinthians mistook his direction to

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<sup>248</sup> Schreiner, “The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline,” 117.

<sup>249</sup> Schreiner, “The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline,” 126.

<sup>250</sup> Leon L. Morris, *1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2008), 90.

isolate themselves from those *outside* the church who lived an immoral lifestyle. Paul here corrects their confusion by explaining that it is the church's responsibility to deal with sin "inside the church" (vv. 9-11), and it is God's responsibility to deal with the sin of those "outside the church" (vv. 12-13). Here he gives clarification as to what he meant earlier by "removed from among you" in verse 2. This means they are to "not associate" with that person and "not even to eat with such a one" (vv. 9-11). There is to be a clear break of fellowship. Schreiner states, "What concerns Paul is that believers do not treat one who stubbornly persists in sin in the same way they did when he was a member in good standing."<sup>251</sup>

Paul concludes with a restatement of this clear command to them. They are to judge those "inside the church" and to "purge the evil person" from among them (vv. 12-13). This comes from the Old Testament commands in places like Deuteronomy and Judges to remove the sinner out of the covenant community (often by capital punishment).<sup>252</sup> Here the church is to remove the sinner from the New Covenant community, but this time not through death but through church discipline. Both have the same intended purposes—to keep the community free from sin and to make clear to the world which people represent God to them.

### **The Authority of Baptism**

If the church has been given the responsibility to remove someone from the identified ἐκκλησία, then does it not make sense that they would also be given the responsibility to bring people into the ἐκκλησία and identify them as God's people? This

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<sup>251</sup> Schreiner, "The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline," 125.

<sup>252</sup> Deut. 13:5; 17:7, 12; 21:21; 22:21, 22, 24; Judg. 20:13

is the responsibility and authority that the church has been given in baptism. Baptism is “the rite of entrance into the visible church.”<sup>253</sup> Contrary to my experience at the Jordan River, watching people baptizing themselves, the Bible instructs believers that they are to “be baptized,” never to baptize themselves.

This instruction is given to the disciples in Matthew 28:18-20:

<sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Here again we see Jesus delegating his authority to his church.<sup>254</sup> The authority he is giving them here is the authority to identify God’s people (the ἐκκλησία) through the New Covenant sign of baptism.

We then see in Acts 2:38, at the birth of the church, that the required response to the message of the gospel was to “repent and be baptized.” Then in verse 41 we see that those who responded in faith “received his word and were baptized.” They are then described as being “added” to the church. As we saw in our earlier survey of the church in Acts, this becomes the normal pattern throughout the book of Acts. The gospel is presented, people respond in faith, and they are baptized by the church (or representatives of the church), and into the church (ἐκκλησία) so that all will now know that they are part of God’s people and disciples of Jesus Christ.<sup>255</sup>

While there are a few possible exceptions, such as the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, the predominate pattern in the New Testament is that those who confess Christ and are

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<sup>253</sup> Frame and Packer, *Systematic Theology*, 1062.

<sup>254</sup> The disciples would be the representatives for the church as can be seen in Acts.

<sup>255</sup> This is the pattern throughout the book of Acts as can be seen in Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12–13, 16, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:37, 47–48; 11:16; 13:24; 16:15, 33; 18:8, 25; 19:3–5; 22:16.

baptized are baptized by and into a local church. Even in Acts 8 we see that Philip, who is a member of the church of Jerusalem, is the one who is doing the baptizing. There are no examples in the New Testament of anyone baptizing themselves. The church alone holds this delegated authority from the Lord Jesus Christ. By baptizing someone, the church is officially recognizing that person as a member of the ἐκκλησία and a representative of Christ. Jamison states it this way: “In baptism a church affirms that someone who professes faith in Christ is in fact united to Christ, and it dramatically depicts that union and all its benefits.”<sup>256</sup> He goes on to say, “Ordinarily, therefore, it is local churches who have the authority to baptize. Since baptism is performed by an individual, the church acts through a representative. But baptism is still a church’s act.”<sup>257</sup>

The church has been given this authority because of all that this New Covenant sign represents. The first thing we see is that baptism declares that we belong to Christ. In Romans 6:3-5 Paul says,

<sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. <sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Paul says here that through the act of water baptism we are identifying with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as the perfect life of righteousness he lived. It is through faith in Christ that we are reckoned the righteousness Christ purchased as our substitute on the cross, but baptism is the outward sign that we are united with Christ through faith.

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<sup>256</sup> Bobby Jamieson, *Understanding Baptism*, ed. Jonathan Leeman (B&H Books, 2016), 9.

<sup>257</sup> Jamieson, *Understanding Baptism*, 8.

Paul is speaking here of the water baptism each of these Christians in Rome would have experienced when they placed their faith in Christ and were received into the church of Rome. Commenting on this, Moo states in his commentary on Romans, “By the date of Romans, ‘baptize’ had become almost a technical expression for the rite of Christian initiation by water, and this is surely the meaning the Roman Christians would have given the word.”<sup>258</sup> By the time Paul wrote to the church of Rome, baptism was the clear rite of entrance into the church and identification with Jesus Christ. This is why baptism should be done by the church as a sign of their welcoming a new believer not only into the universal church of Christ, but into the local church which is baptizing that person.

Another thing the New Testament teaches concerning baptism is that it is a declaration that we have been cleansed from our sin. Paul makes this clear in his own testimony in Acts 22:16 when he recounts the words Ananias spoke to him after his conversion: “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” Again, baptism is not what actually cleanses us from our sin, but water baptism is an outward sign that “represents cleansing, repentance, and union with Christ.”<sup>259</sup> In this narrative we also see that even the Apostle Paul was required to be baptized—not to baptize himself, but to “be baptized.”

A third idea we see in the Scriptures is that baptism declares we have escaped the judgment of God. This is the argument we see the Apostle Peter making in 1 Peter 3:20-21 when he writes,

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<sup>258</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Twelfth Impression edition. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1996), 359.

<sup>259</sup> John Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1062.

<sup>20</sup> because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. <sup>21</sup> Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If we are not careful, we could find ourselves interpreting this, as some have, that baptism is the act by which we are saved.<sup>260</sup> The belief of baptismal regeneration is to be rejected for a number of reasons, but the primary being that Scripture itself teaches that we are saved by grace through faith and apart from any works.<sup>261</sup> Another reason for rejecting this doctrine is Jesus's words to the thief on the cross who was never baptized after expressing faith in Christ: "And he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' And he said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise'" (Luke 23:42-43).

If regeneration through baptism is not what Peter is talking about, how then are we to understand his teaching here? Schreiner offers the following interpretation to help answer this question. He writes,

The survival of Noah and his family in the flood waters functions as a type (antitypon) of baptism. It seems that the waters of baptism are conceived of as a raging flood that destroy and kill. Such a view would fit with the notion that those submerged under water in baptism experience death, so to speak, under the baptismal waters. Just as Noah and his family survived the chaotic waters of death during the flood, so too believers in Jesus Christ have come through the baptismal waters alive.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> This doctrine is known as "baptismal regeneration," and there are a number of denominations and cults that hold this position, including: "Roman Catholicism, Seventh-day Adventism, Mormonism, United Pentecostalism (and other Oneness churches), most Churches of Christ and Eastern Orthodoxy." Wikipedia, "Baptism Regeneration," accessed June 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptismal\\_regeneration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptismal_regeneration)

<sup>261</sup> This is the overwhelmingly consistent teaching of the New Testament and can be seen in passages such as Romans 3:22, 24-26, 28, 30; 4:5; Gal. 2:16; John 3:16; Eph. 2:8-9; Acts 13:38-39; Phil. 3:9 and many others.

<sup>262</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn Wright, eds., *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, Annotated edition. (Nashville, Tenn: B&H Academic, 2007), 69.



Schreiner goes on to explain that the context shows Peter cannot be talking about the water or the act itself bringing about salvation, because in verse 21 Peter states, "...not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God..." It is not the act of baptism that saves a person, but rather the faith that is symbolized in the act of baptism. This can be seen in Peter's statement of making "an appeal to God." This appeal is the expression of faith and what actually saves. In explaining this, Schreiner and Wright say, "...baptism does not save apart from the commitment of the one being baptized."<sup>263</sup> Peter's emphasis here is that when we were baptized, we expressed our faith in Christ, and that faith saved us from the righteous wrath of God that we deserved for our rebellion and sin. The act of baptism is a visual picture of Jesus taking our wrath upon himself as we are united with him through faith.

A final thing the New Testament teaches us about the act of baptism is that it declares we are part of God's church. Paul emphasizes this truth in 1 Corinthians 12:13 when he writes, "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." Whether Paul is referring to Spirit baptism or water baptism is difficult to discern in this text, but regardless, these are not contradictory but rather complementary to one another. Water baptism is an outward sign that someone has been baptized by the Spirit in conversion. Again, Schreiner and Wright comment on this text saying, "Conceptually they may be distinguished but Paul himself was not interested in distinguishing them from one another in this verse since both are associated with the transition from the old life to the new."<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Thomas Schreiner, "Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite for Believers" in *Believer's Baptism*, 70.

<sup>264</sup> Schreiner, "Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite for Believers," 72.

The pattern of the New Testament is, once the baptism by the Spirit takes place in salvation, that is to be followed by a public expression of faith in water baptism. Hence, Paul's statement is true on both accounts. Those who are part of the "body," or church, are identified as members of that body through their profession of faith and the rite of baptism. Again, Schreiner and Wright remark, "Baptism in water and the Spirit is the signature event for Christians, marking them out as members of the people of God."<sup>265</sup> Baptism is the visible sign that someone is a follower of Christ and part of God's church. This is the reason that the church alone has been given this authority and responsibility.

### **The Authority of the Lord's Supper**

The third way we see the authority of the "keys" given to the church is through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. If the church has been delegated the authority to bring people into the church through baptism and if they have been delegated the authority to remove people from the church through church discipline or excommunication, then it would make sense that Jesus would give his church a way to affirm who his representatives are on an ongoing basis as well. This is done through the Lord's Supper.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Schreiner, "Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite for Believers," 72.

<sup>266</sup> Since the supper symbolizes and seals communion with Christ and separation from the world, only those who bear and profess Christ's name have a right to be admitted to it. The cup and the bread signify participation in the blood and body of Christ, and therefore participation in his body, the church (1 Corinthians 10:14-22). The table is reserved for those who are in communion with our one Lord. Those who bear the name of Christ in the world are those who have been baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost (Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 1:13). Because baptism symbolizes ingrafting into Christ, it is the outward sign of membership in His body, the church. Those who bear Christ's name are required to profess His name before the world (Romans 10:9, 10; 1 Peter 3:21). The supper of the Lord, therefore, is for baptized believers who have made a public profession of faith. (From the Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Fencing the Lord's Table [18<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PCA (1990), 18-78, p.170]

Jesus himself initiated this sacrament during his final meal with his disciples. We see this story in all three of the Synoptic Gospel accounts, showing us the significance of this moment.<sup>267</sup> But it is really Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 that gives further indication of how this meal is significant in the life of the church and how it expresses the ongoing fellowship with Christ and his people. If there was any church that needed to be reminded of the fellowship and unity that God desires for his church, it was the divided and factious church of Corinth. To this church Paul gives these instructions in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17: <sup>16</sup> “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? <sup>17</sup> Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” Paul identifies that the cup of blessing, or the cup that is taken during the Lord’s Supper, is “participation (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ.” He then says the same for the bread. Speaking of this word “participation,” MacArthur says, “*Koinonia* means to have in common, to participate with, to have partnership. The same Greek word is used of our being ‘called into *fellowship* with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (1 Corinthians 1:9).”<sup>268</sup> He then goes on to explain, “When we properly share in Communion we spiritually participate in fellowship with Jesus Christ and with other believers. It is much more than a symbol; it is a profound celebration of common spiritual experience.”<sup>269</sup> This seems to be Paul’s point in this admonition to the church of Corinth—that through this sacrament, we are signifying our unity and communion with Christ and with his church. It is therefore only those who are united with Christ and his

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<sup>267</sup> See Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:18–20; and also 1 Cor. 11:23–25

<sup>268</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, New edition. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1984), 237.

<sup>269</sup> MacArthur, *1 Corinthians MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, 237.

church that should participate in the Lord's Supper. This fact is emphasized more fully when Paul continues his instruction concerning the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:17-33, where he states,

<sup>17</sup> But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. <sup>18</sup> For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, <sup>19</sup> for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. <sup>20</sup> When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. <sup>21</sup> For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. <sup>22</sup> What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. <sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." <sup>25</sup> In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." <sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. <sup>27</sup> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup> Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup> For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. <sup>30</sup> That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. <sup>31</sup> But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. <sup>32</sup> But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. <sup>33</sup> So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—

Here there is no question that the Lord's Supper is meant to be taken as the whole church is gathered together and that it is designed for Christians alone. No less than four times does Paul say, "when you come together,"<sup>270</sup> indicating that the Lord's Supper is meant only for the church. Verse 18 makes it even more clear who Paul is referring to as *you* when he states, "When you come together as a church (ἐκκλησία)..." Paul indicates in verses 19 and 27 that the problem is that some "among them" are not in fact "genuine" and therefore have come under the judgment of God for participating in the Lord's

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<sup>270</sup> See: 1 Cor. 11:17, 18, 20, 33.

Supper in an “unworthy manner.”<sup>271</sup> By doing this, they are “guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.”<sup>272</sup> He therefore urges them all to “examine themselves”<sup>273</sup> so that they will not come under this judgment by the Lord.

This sobering passage teaches us clearly that the Lord’s table is for God’s people alone. While it does not express specifically that those who have been removed from the church are not to participate, it clearly warns all those who are not in “partnership” with Christ and his church of God’s judgment for abusing this sacred meal. This, taken together with the warning passages calling for the removal of the unrepentant sinner<sup>274</sup> from the church, seems to make it clear that the Lord’s table must be protected from those who are no longer identified with the church (ἐκκλησία) of Jesus Christ and from the “outsider.”

As can be seen from this survey of the biblical texts, the church has been given an incredible responsibility and authority by the Lord Jesus Christ himself. This authority includes bringing in new believers through the rite of baptism. It includes removing through church discipline those who have by their unrepentance demonstrated that they were never really followers of Jesus Christ. And it includes the ongoing work of publicly affirming the followers of Jesus Christ through the Lord’s table. If this responsibility has been given to Christ’s church, then does it not make sense that those who make up that church should be defined? Should anyone be able to baptize someone? Should anyone be able to remove someone? Who holds this sacred authority? While it is not perfect, church

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<sup>271</sup> 1 Cor. 11:27

<sup>272</sup> 1 Cor. 11:27

<sup>273</sup> 1 Cor. 11:28

<sup>274</sup> See: Matt. 18:17-18; 1 Cor. 5:4-5,11; 1 Cor. 16:22; Gal 1:9

membership attempts to give clarity to the ἐκκλησία who have been granted this sacred responsibility.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE ACCOUNTABILITY OF THE CHURCH

The third truth that we want to examine in order to understand its significance to the issue of church membership is the accountability of the church. As we have seen numerous times so far, those inside the church are accountable not only to the Lord but are also accountable to one another in the church (ἐκκλησία). This unique accountability in a local church is expressed through the accountability that individual members have for one another, that leaders have for members, and that members have for their church leaders.

#### **Accountability of Members to One Another**

If you asked the average person in the church if they were going to be responsible in any way for the deeds of others in their church, they would probably look at you strangely and think that to be an odd question. In our culture of radical individualism, the idea that we would be held corporately responsible for the actions of others seems asinine. But we do not need to look very far in the Scriptures to see this truth being demonstrated in the life of the people of God. One story of corporate accountability comes to us in Chapter 7 of the book of Joshua. There we encounter an Israelite whose name is nearly as infamous as Judas Iscariot's for his failure. His name was Achan.

Achan was a normal Israelite who helped fight in the battle to take the city of Jericho as Israel was coming into the land that God had promised them. Before Israel

entered into battle, God had given instruction to his people that they were to destroy everyone and everything except Rahab and her household, who was preserved because she had hidden the spies.<sup>275</sup> In these instructions, God had warned his people: “But you, keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction and bring trouble upon it.”<sup>276</sup> Then in the beginning of Chapter 7 we read, “But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things. And the anger of the LORD burned against the people of Israel.”<sup>277</sup> Notice that it was Achan who sinned, but God held all of the “people of Israel” accountable for his sin. They experienced the judgment of God when they tried to attack Ai without consulting God first, and they lost the battle and many men.<sup>278</sup> After this incredible loss they sought the Lord, and his response to them was: “Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings.”<sup>279</sup> Notice again that Israel is held accountable before God for the sin of one man among them. It was not until Israel purged this sin from their midst by killing Achan and his family that the Lord “turned from his burning anger.”<sup>280</sup> From this account, one of the things we learn is that God

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<sup>275</sup> Joshua 6:17

<sup>276</sup> Joshua 6:18

<sup>277</sup> Joshua 7:1

<sup>278</sup> Joshua 7:2-5

<sup>279</sup> Joshua 7:11

<sup>280</sup> Joshua 7:26



holds his people accountable for one another. There are many other stories in the Old Testament that illustrate this truth as well.<sup>281</sup>

Some might say that this is true for Israel and the Old Testament, but what does that have to do with the church? Does the New Testament also teach that we have some kind of corporate responsibility for our fellow church members? Two places we might look to see this truth are Jesus's messages to the seven churches in Revelation and Paul's instruction to the church of Corinth in 1 Corinthians 5. I believe both of these passages teach this principle clearly.

In the first chapter of Revelation, John is given a revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. The language that is used here is meant to emphasize that Jesus is the Lord of the church and the judge of the church.<sup>282</sup> In Chapter 2 Jesus begins to speak individually to seven churches. While there are seven examples of this principle demonstrated here, we will look at the first example, the church of Ephesus. Here, the Lord of the church says,

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. <sup>2</sup> "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. <sup>3</sup> I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. <sup>4</sup> But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. <sup>5</sup> Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. <sup>6</sup> Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. <sup>7</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the

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<sup>281</sup> Two examples of this would be the judgment that was brought upon all creation in the flood (Gen. 7:21) and also the judgment that was brought upon all the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24-25). The most common expression of this corporate responsibility is seen through the generational responsibility, where the children are held responsible for the sins of their forefathers (Deut. 23:3-6, Ex. 20:5-6, 1 Sam. 15:2-3, 1 Kings 21:21-22, Jer. 32:18, etc.).

<sup>282</sup> See: G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), commentary on 1:1-20

one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’<sup>283</sup>

Morris notes, “The greeting is to the angel of the church in Ephesus, but there is no doubt that the message is to the church.”<sup>284</sup> The fact that Jesus holds the whole church accountable for the good and the bad can be seen in the use of the singular pronouns (you, as the church) and also the instruction that is given. Jesus begins by affirming what is good about them as a church. They deal with false teachers; they are enduring patiently; they are bearing up for the sake of Christ’s name; and they have not grown weary.<sup>285</sup> But then, in verse 4, Jesus corrects them as a church for areas of failure. He states, “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”<sup>286</sup> He then calls them to repent and warns them of the consequence that would occur if they failed to do so. The consequence is that Christ would come and “remove your lampstand from its place.”<sup>287</sup> Morris, commenting on this passage, states that the meaning of this warning in verse 5 is, “If the church does not heed the injunction Christ will remove its lampstand, which appears to signify the total destruction of the church.”<sup>288</sup> The church will corporately be held accountable for the sin of the members of the church. They will be praised together and they will be disciplined together, for they are one *ἐκκλησία*—one body, one church. This pattern occurs six more times as Jesus speaks to individual churches and praises, rebukes, and warns them for their corporate life as a church.

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<sup>283</sup> Revelation 2:1-7

<sup>284</sup> Canon Leon Morris, *The Book of Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, Revised, Subsequent edition. (Leicester, England : Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans Pub Co, 1987), 64.

<sup>285</sup> Revelation 2:2-3

<sup>286</sup> Revelation 2:4

<sup>287</sup> Revelation 2:5

<sup>288</sup> Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, 65.

The book of Revelation is not the only place in the New Testament where this principle of accountability for one another as a body is clearly laid out. We see another example in 1 Corinthians 5. In that chapter Paul rebukes the church of Corinth for not dealing with the notorious sin of one of its members. His instruction is not given to the man but to the church as whole. In verse 2 he holds them collectively responsible for being arrogant in their response and instructs them collectively to “let him who has done this be removed from among you.”<sup>289</sup> In verse 4 he calls them collectively as a church to exercise discipline on this member of their body so that ultimately he could be saved and the church would be protected. This command is given to the whole church, and they are to act as one body and “deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” in verse 5. As we can see, they are corporately held responsible.

Then, in verse 6, Paul explains the consequences that sin can have on a church body. Using the example of leaven with bread, Paul explains that one man’s sin does not just affect him but has the potential to destroy the whole church! Paul then explains in verses 9-11 that they were misunderstanding his previous teaching if they thought their responsibility was to judge those outside of the church, but that in fact they did have a responsibility and that was to judge those inside the church. He concludes with the clear command in verse 13 for the church to follow as a whole: “Purge the evil person from among you.” This was not one person’s responsibility, but was the responsibility of the whole. The whole church would be held accountable for their disobedience.

Another example of this corporate responsibility and accountability can be seen in Paul’s second letter to the church of Corinth in 2 Corinthians 2:5-8. In this account we

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<sup>289</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:2

find a positive example of the responsibility church members have for one another. While most scholars are not definitive as to whether this is the same person who is referenced in 1 Corinthians 5, this account is clearly regarding someone who the church has corporately removed for sin, and now Paul is calling the church to corporately receive this brother back following his repentance. Paul tells the church:

<sup>5</sup> Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. <sup>6</sup> For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, <sup>7</sup> so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup> So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him (2 Corinthians 2:5–8).

Paul's admonition here contains a great deal of anonymity regarding the one he is referencing and the circumstances of the situation, but the church would no doubt have known exactly whom Paul is speaking about in his request. The sin of this person is not specified by Paul, but it would appear from verse 5 that the church experienced "pain" from this individual's sin. Verse 6 shows that the response of the church was to remove this person from the ἐκκλησία and that his removal from the church was the "punishment by the majority" that was required in response to this sin.

The "punishment" was in obedience to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20, as the church exercised their "keys" of authority towards an unrepentant person. It was also in obedience to Paul's instructions to the church in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, as Paul stated in verse 13 that they were to "purge the evil from among you." The goal of this correction is to bring about repentance from the one who has been removed in hopes that the pain of the loss of fellowship with the church will be a powerful reminder of the pain and suffering their sin is causing both to the church and to the Lord. In this situation it appears that the discipline was successful, because Paul is now urging the church in verse

7 to “forgive and comfort him” so that the punishment does not cause the person being disciplined to be “overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.”

It is important for our discussion that we observe to whom Paul is giving this command in his exhortation. A careful examination of the text reveals that it is to the whole of the church that Paul is making this request, not just the elders or leaders of the church. We can see this in verse 5 when Paul states that the effects of the sin have been felt by “all of you.” We can also see this in verse 6 when we are told the punishment had been given out by “the majority.” Paul’s use of this word “majority” implies that not everyone agreed with the decision that was made. However, it also implies that the church knew who should be included in this decision. This was not a determination for just anyone in the city of Corinth to make, but it was a decision for the ἐκκλησία in Corinth. It appears that Paul and everyone else knew exactly who made up that ἐκκλησία and that not all were in favor of this decision.

The third clue to understanding to whom Paul was giving this responsibly is the use of the plural *you*. While determining if a pronoun like *you* is singular or plural in English can sometimes be challenging, the Greek language does not contain such ambiguity. Paul uses the second-person, accusative, plural pronoun<sup>290</sup> and leaves no doubt that he is giving this command to the whole church. He expects them to obey his desire that they would “reaffirm your love for him.”<sup>291</sup> Paul’s exhortation here is yet another example of how God has given his authority to not just a small, select group of

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<sup>290</sup> ὑμεῖς in Eberhard Nestle et al., *The Greek New Testament*, 27th ed. (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft: Stuttgart, 1993), 2 Co 2:7.

<sup>291</sup> 1 Cor. 2:8

leaders but to the whole ἐκκλησία, thereby showing the significance of being able to identify who it is that makes up the ἐκκλησία.

As we have seen, there is no question in the New Testament that we are accountable for one another in a local church. While the scope of this dissertation does not allow for a full accounting of the ways that we are accountable to one another, consider this list from Dever and Platt in their book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, which enumerates some of the various ways that we are responsible for one another in a local body:<sup>292</sup>

- To love one another (John 13:34-35; 15:12-17; Rom. 12:9-10; 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; 6:10; Eph. 1:15; 1 Pet. 1:22; 2:17; 3:8; 4:8; 1 John 3:16; 4:7-12; cf. Ps. 133).
- To seek peace and unity with one another in the body (Rom. 12:16; 14:19; 1 Cor. 13:7; 2 Cor. 12:20; Eph. 4:3-6; Phil. 2:3; 1 Thess. 5:13; 2 Thess. 3:11; James 3:18; 4:11).
- To care for one another physically and spiritually (Matt. 25:40; John 12:8; Acts 15:36; Rom. 12:13; 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; Gal. 2:10; 6:10; Heb. 13:16; James 1:27; 1 John 3:17; Deut. 15:7-8, 11).
- To watch over one another and hold one another accountable (Rom. 15:14; Gal. 6:1-2; Phil. 2:3-4; 2 Thess. 3:15; Heb. 12:15; cf. Lev. 19:17; Ps. 141:5).
- To work to edify one another (1 Cor. 14:12-26; Eph. 2:21-22; 4:12-29; 1 Thess. 5:11; 1 Pet. 4:10; 2 Pet. 3:18).
- To bear with one another (Matt. 18:21-22; Mark 11:25; Rom. 15:1; Gal. 6:2; Col. 3:12), including not suing one another (1 Cor. 6:1-7).
- To pray for one another (Eph. 6:18; James 5:16).
- To keep away from those who would destroy the church (Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 6:3-5; Titus 3:10; 2 John 10-11).
- To reject evaluating people by worldly standards (Matt. 27; Rom. 12:10-16; James 2:1-13).

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<sup>292</sup> Mark Dever and David Platt, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd edition. (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2013), 160–161.

- To contend together for the gospel (Phil. 1:27; Jude 3).
- To be examples to one another (Phil. 2:1-18).

As can be seen from this list, our accountability to one another in the local church is quite significant and must be taken seriously. Therefore, the vital question of whom the Lord will hold me accountable for in practicing these “one anothers” is one that far too few people ask. The answer from the New Testament seems to be that we will be held accountable for how we practice these one anothers to the true ἐκκλησία, or body, in a specific location in which the Lord has placed us. Therefore, the question of who makes up the true ἐκκλησία that we are a part of is a vital question to answer in order to understand our accountability to one another.

### **Accountability Members Have to Their Leaders**

Not only does the New Testament teach that we will be held accountable for one another as members in a particular body (church), but it also clearly teaches that we will be held accountable for how we as members respond to and treat the leaders that the Lord has placed over us. Said another way, as Christians, we are responsible to submit to specific leaders. Just as all men do not have biblical headship or leadership over all women but only have that privilege and responsibility over the wife they are in covenant marriage with, Christians are not responsible to submit to all Christian leaders. They are to submit to and follow the specific elders/leaders that the Lord has placed over them.

Two places we see this taught in the New Testament are 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 and Hebrews 13:17. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, Paul instructs the church,<sup>12</sup> “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and

admonish you,<sup>13</sup> and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.”

In verse 12 we see, by the use of the term “brothers,” that Paul is speaking to Christians, or the church. He instructs them on how to treat the leaders in the church by giving them the command “to respect those who labor among you.” The verb translated “respect” in this passage means “to acknowledge the high status of a person or event—to honor, to show honor to, to respect.”<sup>293</sup> Who are they to honor in this way? Paul answers that as well in verse 12: “...those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.” As has been shown multiple times previously, the phrase “among you” speaks to the context of those who are in the same ἐκκλησία or local church together. Paul also encourages them “...to esteem them very highly.” This is another way of calling them to honor these local leaders.

The biblical picture, then, is that all Christians are to have specific leaders who “labor among you” and are “over you” and that they have specific responsibilities to those leaders. Here they are to “respect” and “esteem” them. How can Christians be obedient to this instruction if they are not part of a local church? And how can they be obedient to this command if they have not identified in some way that they are under the care of specific leaders? As has been argued previously, church membership helps to accomplish this purpose.

Perhaps an even more convincing verse in regard to this issue is Hebrew 13:17. Here the author of Hebrews instructs the church:<sup>17</sup> “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an

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<sup>293</sup> Johannes P. Louw & Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 734.



account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

We will examine this verse from the perspective of the church leader in our next section, but here we want to see what the instruction to “obey your leaders” is saying to the individual Christian. The expectation is that Christians would be a part of a church, and that that church would be led by biblical elders/pastors/overseers.<sup>294</sup> This might seem like a given to many, but where I live in the Pacific Northwest it is not uncommon to encounter many people who call themselves Christians but are not connected to anything the New Testament would validate as an ἐκκλησία.

The second expectation seen here is that Christians would “obey” and “submit” to these specific church leaders. These terms are similar, as *πειθομαι*, translated “obey” in the ESV, means here “to submit to authority,”<sup>295</sup> and *ὕπείκω*, translated “submit” in the ESV, means “to submit to the orders or directives of someone—to obey, to submit to, obedience, submission.”<sup>296</sup> The author is obviously stressing something, as he uses two words that are virtually synonymous to each other in one verse. He is strongly calling them to see their leaders as a source of spiritual authority that God has placed over their lives and to submit to the teaching and leadership of those leaders as long as they are not in violation of God’s Word.

Again, the expectation is that Christians have specific, identified leaders (“your leaders”) and that they are in a unique relationship with and under the accountability of those leaders. This is, of course, possible without official membership in a church, but is

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<sup>294</sup> The New Testament uses these three terms as one office (episkopos) for leaders in the church. See: 1 Tim. 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-7, 1 Peter 5:1-2, Acts 20:17-38.

<sup>295</sup> Louw, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 466.

<sup>296</sup> Louw, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 467.

that the most effective way for either the church leader or church attender to help foster this unique relationship? Is not church membership the most helpful way to clearly communicate this relationship and accountability?

### **Accountability Leaders Have to Their Members**

Not only do these verses communicate that, in God’s design, those in the church have a clear responsibility to the specific group of leaders that God has placed over them for their spiritual care and growth, but they also communicate that leaders have a specific responsibility to those God has placed in their care. In the Hebrews passage, it is attached to a sober warning of their accountability before God for this responsibility. This is perhaps the most significant reason that church membership is strongly recommended for any church that takes God’s Word seriously and is looking for the most effective way to be obedient to this calling.

Hebrews 13:17 should be a sobering reality for all leaders in Christ’s church. It should rightly “put the fear of God” into us and cause us to ask, “Who will I give an account for?” It stands as a serious warning to all those who have been called to lead the church that Christ purchased with his own blood. F.F. Bruce expresses the weight of this verse when he says,

...the leaders carried a weighty responsibility; they were accountable for the spiritual well-being of those placed in their care. No wonder they lost sleep (αγρυπνέω, “keep watch,” has the etymological sense of chasing away sleep) over this responsibility—for the “watching” could well involve this as well as general vigilance—if some of their flock were in danger of straying beyond their control.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Revised edition. (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 385.

For whom will I have to give an account? This is the question every pastor/elder in the church must know how to answer, but how is this possible without some clear, mutual commitment by both the leaders and the members? For something this significant, is ambiguity really an option?

The author of Hebrews, who was most likely himself a leader in the church, after admonishing the people in the church to “obey” and “submit” to them, says these words: “...for they are keeping watch over your souls.” The verb ἀγρυπνέω means, “to take care of or to look after, with the implication of continuous and wakeful concern for—to look after, to take care of.”<sup>298</sup> The word immediately evokes the idea of the good shepherd who watches over and cares for the flock under his care. This word picture is used frequently throughout the New Testament for a leader in God’s church. 1 Peter 5:2 says to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you...” Here the word is used in a figurative way of the shepherd who is to “guide and to help, and to take care of” his sheep.<sup>299</sup> Peter instructs the elders who are in the churches to whom he is writing that they are to care for the people God has entrusted to their care. They are not responsible for everyone, but they are responsible for those who are “among them.”

Paul also uses the metaphor of a shepherd as he instructs the elders of Ephesus in his final recorded words to them in Acts 20:28: “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.” Here again the soberness of the elders’ responsibility is highlighted as they are reminded that they have been given this responsibility by God himself to care for the people Jesus bought by his own blood. They

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<sup>298</sup> Louw, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 462.

<sup>299</sup> Louw, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 465.

are to be like the good shepherd who “lays down his life for the sheep” and not like the hired hand who “leaves the sheep and flees.”<sup>300</sup>

This metaphor in the New Testament is taken from the references to God himself as Israel’s shepherd. Ezekiel 34:15 states, “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD.” But to fully understand the leader as a shepherd, we must look earlier in the book of Ezekiel to hear God’s warning to the shepherds that had failed God’s people. In Ezekiel 34:2-4, the Lord says to Ezekiel,

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup> You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup> The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

Here is a picture of a shepherd who has failed in his responsibility and in doing so has allowed God’s people to be scattered and wounded. This is the picture of a failed shepherd. But God in his grace will rescue his people and provide for them a Good Shepherd. In verse 23 it becomes clear that the Messiah will be the Good Shepherd. God promises, “And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” This, of course, was the Lord Jesus Christ, who declared himself to be the Good Shepherd.<sup>301</sup> All references to God’s leaders being called to the task of shepherding in the New Testament are reminders that they are God’s chosen instruments to care for and shepherd his own people, and they are to follow in the path of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

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<sup>300</sup> See: John 10:11-12

<sup>301</sup> John 10:11

And this Chief Shepherd is the one to whom they will be held accountable for how they shepherded the people God placed into their care—the one who stands “in the midst of the lampstands.” The “Son of Man” who will judge all of creation. The one who has eyes like a flame of fire and a voice like many waters. The one who holds the seven stars, and out of his mouth comes a “sharp, two-edged sword” to judge his church. The Lord of the church, to whom the Apostle John “fell at his feet as though dead.”<sup>302</sup> This is the one to whom every under-shepherd of God’s church will stand and give an account for how they cared for God’s people—specific people whom God ordained to be under their faithful care.

The question of who these sheep are that I, as a pastor, will give an account to the Lord for is one of the most significant questions I can answer. Hammett and Merkle state it this way after examining the seriousness of this passage in Hebrews 13:17: “If this is the case, then it is absolutely vital for leaders to know whom they are responsible to shepherd... the seriousness of this verse does not allow for any guesswork.”<sup>303</sup> I am in full agreement with this assessment. I want to know exactly for whom I am going to give an account, and I would hope that each person I am to care for would also want to know who is going to give an account for their care.

As we have seen, the New Testament is clear when it speaks to the responsibilities God has given to us inside the local church. It is clear when it comes to the responsibilities that each person has to one another within the church. It is clear when it speaks to the accountability church members will have in “obeying and submitting” to their specific leaders. And it is clear when it expresses the standard that church leaders

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<sup>302</sup> Revelation 1:12-17

<sup>303</sup> Benjamin Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership, 38.

will be held to as they shepherd the people of God. God's Word is clear, but the question is: "Do our churches have the same clarity?" Do our people know whom they are responsible for? Do they know which leaders the Lord will hold them accountable to respond to and follow? Do the leaders know whom they are responsible to shepherd? This is often much less clear than what is required from God's Word, and this is why a tool like church membership is so valuable to the church. The accountability that God has given the church is dependent on this kind of clarity.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Summary of Arguments**

The goal of this project was to help the reader see the need for and importance of recognized church membership as being the most effective way for a local church to help its people fulfill the scriptural commitments that they have toward one another and toward the leadership in the church (and vice versa). That case was made through both an examination of church history, showing where church membership developed from and how it was used in the church, as well as through a careful examination of the Scriptures.

In the first chapter, the goal was to answer the question, “Does church membership really matter?” and to show the cultural resistance to the idea of church membership, especially in a radically individualistic culture like the Pacific Northwest where our church is located. While this is not only a regional issue, the individualistic culture of the Pacific Northwest is hostile to all forms of institutions and authority, which brings the concept of church membership under constant attack and skepticism. If churches, pastors, and Christians in cultures like this want to call their people into membership, they must be prepared for resistance and be ready to defend that decision. The hope in Chapter 1 was to make the case that church membership is worth the trials you will face in establishing official membership in your church.

The focus of Chapter 2 was to show how church membership developed through history and how we got to where we are today. To help clarify what we meant by church membership, the historical survey focused on how people were added to the church, and who the people were that the outside world saw as the church. This process and understanding varied throughout the major periods of the church's history. In the early church (100-600AD), the clear method of adding individuals to the church was through baptism. What is interesting to note in this time period is how quickly a waiting period was developed for those who were wanting to be baptized in order for them to be examined in their faith and how the Lord's Supper and Christian fellowship was restricted to only those who were baptized and had expressed their faith publicly.

Unfortunately, by the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, the practice of baptizing those who had a credible profession of faith devolved into the practice of baptizing all infants and including them in the church. This began early in the Middle Ages (600-1500) of the church, where the church and state were seen as one. This continued until the Reformation (1500-1700). During the Reformation there were many errors and corruptions of the church that were corrected, but ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) was not a major focus of the Magisterial Reformers. Most of the Magisterial Protestants (Luther, Calvin, Zwingli) continued the practice of infant baptism into the church and saw no need for a separation of church and state. Some of the Radical Reformers, such as the Anabaptists and Baptist separatists, however, fought to give a clear definition of who made up the true church. They were persecuted for their belief that the true church needed to be made up of only the regenerate and that a person only



entered the church through believer's baptism as an adult. They were also vigilant in practicing church discipline in an attempt to keep the church pure.

The final section of church history focused on the modern era (1700-Present). The goal of this section was to show how the first and second Great Awakenings, as well as the rise of the parachurch movement, shaped our current view of the church in America. These movements thrived in the American culture of independence and entrepreneurialism and continued to erode the church as an institution. Throughout this time period, the idea of the church began to move away from being identified as local assemblies of baptized believers who had covenanted together and rather functioned "primarily as outreach centers and corporate worship services as catalysts for revival."<sup>304</sup> The focus on pragmatism and personal conversion that marked this time period would often take precedence over a clearly defined church membership, and these continue to be the dominate themes of the church in America today.

Chapter 3 turned from a historical overview and focused on a biblical and exegetical justification for the importance of church membership. This began with the promise of the church in Matthew 16 and 18 and moved to the birth of the church in the book of Acts. Through this analysis of the Scriptures, we saw that entry into the gathered church was clear and defined (through baptism) and that the people who made up the gathered church were known and recognized. Further evidence of this was given through a look at the expansion of the church though the book of Acts and beyond.

Chapter 4 focused in depth on the nature of the church and demonstrated that the essential meaning in the New Testament of *church* is not a building or location but rather

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<sup>304</sup> 40 *Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 61.

is a definition of a people. Specifically, the church was shown to be an assembly of the redeemed people of God, and verses like 1 Corinthians 14:23-24 and 1 Corinthians 5:12-13 expressed that the early church had a clear understanding of who made up the church and who were outsiders in their gatherings. This clarity is also seen through the primary metaphors that are used to describe the church in the New Testament. Whether it is the metaphor of the family, the body, or the temple of God, each metaphor requires clarity around *who* it is that makes up the church, and each metaphor affirms that it can only be the regenerate people of God.

Chapter 5 studied the authority that Christ gave to his church and why it is therefore important to have clarity regarding who makes up the church. Through Matthew 16 and 18 it was shown that Jesus has given to the church alone the authority (or keys) to define who makes up the church. This authority is then exercised through three primary ordinances that have been given to the church. Baptism is the first authority given to the church in which it has been given to be the normal pattern of bringing someone into the church. The Lord's Supper is the next which has been given to the gathered church to be the ongoing remembrance of Christ's death and the believers entrance into the new covenant. Church discipline is the final authority, which is the tool the Lord has given the church to remove those who no longer give a credible witness of being a regenerated follower of Jesus Christ. Each of these show that it is Christ's intention to have clarity regarding who makes up his church.

Chapter 6 wrapped up the exegetical argument by examining what the Scriptures have to say about the accountability of the church. The goal of this section was to show how members in a local church have a unique accountability and responsibly for one

another and therefore must know with whom they have that relationship. Through a look at examples in both the Old and New Testaments, the argument was made that there is a corporate responsibility that God expects from his people. By examining the churches in Revelation and Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 5, we saw that God holds not only individuals accountable for their actions but also the churches of which they are members. The second part of this chapter defended the idea that there is also a unique responsibility that members have toward specific leaders and that leaders have toward specific members. Hebrews 13:17 was one of the passages referenced to demonstrate this truth, and the sobering warning to leaders in this text was also a primary reason for the research of this paper.

Having pragmatic reasons for church membership will not be enough in an age and culture of radical individualism which is hostile to the very idea of church membership. The need for clear biblical convictions will be required, and hopefully this paper has provided just that for the pastor searching for these answers. The road to helping others understand the importance of church membership will not be easy, but as we have seen through this study, it is essential for the church that wants to be faithful in helping their people fulfill the scriptural commitments that believers have toward one another and toward the leadership in the church.

### **Implementing Church Membership in Your Church**

The logical questions for a pastor or church leader who has decided that they need to implement church membership are: "How do I do that? What would it look like for me to try to bring membership into my church when it has never been a part of our

organizational structure or DNA?” While there are probably a number of ways someone could go about adding membership to their church, let me suggest a possible roadmap.

### **The First Step of Implementation**

The first thing I would do is to make sure that you as the pastor or church leader are completely and thoroughly biblically convinced that this is the way God has designed his church and that it is the most faithful way to shepherd your people. Hopefully this paper has done some of that work and you have been left with very little doubt and now have a robust biblical defense for the concept of church membership. If, however, you are still feeling that you need more help or evidence to be convinced, I would suggest that you spend more time going over the resources in the works cited and referenced throughout this paper. Two of the major works I would suggest you start with are *Those Who Must Give an Account* and *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*. There are a host of other good books on the subject, but if these two do not convince you, the others probably will not either. You need to spend as much time on this step as is needed, because unless you are thoroughly convinced that this is the most biblical and helpful way to lead your church, you probably will not follow through on implementing church membership when the inevitable opposition arises. Pragmatic reasons for church membership might have been acceptable in the past, but they simply will not be sufficient in the increasingly hostile culture being fueled by expressive individualism and the deterioration of trust in institutions like the church in the culture.

### **The Second Step of Implementation**

The second part of this implementation would be to help your people understand the biblical justification and reasons for church membership. This should start with your

leadership team and staff and flow down to your group leaders and then to others. It is important not to rush this process and to take as much time as is needed to help your people see the beauty of God's design for the church as well as how it runs counter to our cultural beliefs. One way to help your whole church in this process would be to teach through a series on the church.<sup>305</sup> The outline of this paper in the exegetical sections would provide a great framework for such a series and would allow you to show people through the Scriptures why church membership is the most helpful way to fulfill God's design for his church. Another way to help with this process is to talk about membership in your regular weekly sermons when the text emphasizes some aspect of the nature or authority of the church. A third suggestion is to teach through the idea of membership in any of your new believer classes, or make it part of your equipping and discipleship classes. It may take someone an extended amount of time to understand the biblical teaching on this topic, so remember to be patient and long suffering with people and their questions and objections.

### **The Third Step of Implementation**

The third part of this implementation would be to develop a clear membership process that helps people understand the path to becoming a member and to communicate that path from the earliest introduction to the newcomers at your church.<sup>306</sup> The process we have at Grace Bible Church of Bend can be one example to draw from. This process is explained in detail in the next section.

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<sup>305</sup> One example of this can be found on our website at <https://gcbend.org/wearethechurch> and another more detailed example can be found at <https://gcbend.org/thechurch>.

<sup>306</sup> The process for Grace Bible Church of Bend can be found at <https://gracebibleofbend.org/membership> and in the appendix.

### **The Fourth Step of Implementation**

The fourth part of this implementation of church membership should include a commitment to allow only those with a credible profession of faith into your membership. This might come as a shock and an offense to some, but we have actually said no (or not yet) to a few people during the interview process. The reason for this was that after the interview, we were not sure if those people truly understood the gospel based on their responses to the questions. In each of these cases, we asked those individuals if they would be willing to meet with someone for some discipleship before we moved forward with membership. Thankfully, after a few months of discipleship and an affirmation by the one doing the discipleship that these individuals did have faith and did understand the gospel, we were able to move forward with membership. If the purpose of church membership is to present to a watching world who the true church is, then you must be willing to allow only those who have a credible profession of faith into church membership and to say no when necessary. This will be incredibly difficult to do at times, but if membership is to be meaningful in your church, then this difficulty must be accepted. It is important for the leadership to have this commitment set in their minds before they enter into implementing membership so that they are ready when the opposition comes.

### **The Fifth Step of Implementation**

The fifth part of this implementation is another difficult decision that will need to be made by the leadership ahead of time, and that is to only allow church members to participate in the selection of elders and deacons and to only allow church members to serve in certain leadership roles in the church. As has been demonstrated in this paper,

the selection of the leaders (elders and deacons) of a church should be done through the members of the church when there is an established membership to help make those decisions. This is a protection that God has built into his church so that the longevity of faithfulness for a church will not be dependent on one leader or a small group of leaders, but rather through the entire membership of faithful followers of Christ in a local church. This protection, though, will only work if the membership is made up of true followers of Christ and only if the membership has the final authority and ability to affirm and remove leaders. The decision to allow only members to affirm elders and deacons and to allow only members to serve in these roles could be met with strong backlash in many churches because of our radically individualistic culture and how foreign this is to the dominant evangelical culture in America. Therefore, leaders must be ready to answer the objections that they will receive and be prepared to stand firm in their decisions. This commitment will be difficult but will help lead to long-term health and longevity for the church and will also express the importance of membership to the church.

### **The Sixth Step of Implementation**

The sixth part of implementation is to find ways to gather your members regularly in a members-only meeting. At Grace we call these member meetings “family nights,” where we meet together five times a year (every other month except in the summer). During these nights, we share important updates for the church and pray for one another, but one of the most significant things we do during these meetings is to update our members on any new members who have joined as well as any members who have left our church family.<sup>307</sup> This is also the place and time that we do any church discipline that

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<sup>307</sup> A sample agenda of a family meeting at Grace can be found in the appendix.

may be needed. To have meaningful membership in your church, there must be times where only members are invited and where things are done that only members are able to participate in (such as the affirmation of elders). The decision to make such a significant night in our church a time for members only frustrates some people but also helps communicate to them the importance and significance of membership. Some people feel that we are being exclusive and blocking them from coming to a family night, but the truth is that they are doing this to themselves by refusing to become members.

### **The Final Step of Implementation**

The final step of implementation of membership for your church is to be committed to faithfully practicing church discipline and restoration. Hopefully this paper has been able to demonstrate and defend the idea that church discipline outlined in Scripture is not optional for a church that wants to be faithful to the Lord. It is also the case that a church cannot have meaningful membership if faithful church discipline is not a part of that membership. When a church fails to practice church discipline for a member caught in habitual sin, they demonstrate that membership for them is just a matter of pragmatism and not really a way to help define the true church to a watching world. They also demonstrate that they do not really love that person the way God has called them to; for one reason or another they have a greater fear of the world than they do of the Lord of the church. The decision to practice church discipline will inevitably turn many people away from joining your church and will probably bring anger from many others both inside and outside the church when discipline happens. Therefore, leaders must be ready for this resistance and be prepared to biblically defend their decision.



### **The Process for Church Membership at Grace Bible Church of Bend**

The first step for a potential member at Grace is to come under the shepherding care of our church and get to know us. For us, this is done through regular Sunday attendance, coming to a newcomer's lunch to hear our core beliefs and doctrine, and by becoming part of a community group where they can get to know other people at Grace, and others in that group can get to know them and their faith. The purpose of this step is to make sure that any potential members really know who we are and what we believe and that we have had adequate time with them to know who they are, what they believe, and how they live their lives.

The next step for a potential member is to get a better understanding of who we are as a church by listening to our "We Are the Church" sermon series. This series takes them through a biblical understanding of how God has designed his church and why membership is a significant part of that. Hopefully, by the time they are finished with that series they will have a clearer understanding of why we believe membership is the most helpful way to be the church in the way God has designed it. Another way to help accomplish this could be through a membership class that goes through the same material, but our church has decided to let people work through this material at their own pace and then bring their questions to our membership interview with elders.

The third step of our membership process is to fill out an online application that notifies our elders and staff that this person is interested in becoming a member.<sup>308</sup> This application asks them some questions that are helpful for our elders to get to know these individuals better and to help assess where they are in their walk with the Lord. This

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<sup>308</sup> The online application for Grace Bible Church of Bend can be found at <https://gcbend.churchcenter.com/people/forms/6288> and in the appendix.

includes questions such as: “Did you attend a church prior to Grace? If so, which one?” “Were you a member of that church?” “Have you ever been through church discipline by a church?” “Have you been baptized as a believer?” “Are you in agreement with Grace Bible’s statement of faith?” “Are there any areas of the statement of faith you have questions about or see in a different way?” “Write a brief description of how you came to Christ.” “What is the gospel and how has it changed your life?” “Is there any information about your family that you think the elders should know about?” These questions help the elders get to know these individuals better and helps prepare them for the interview they will eventually do with these prospective members.

The fourth step in our membership process is to confirm that this person has been baptized as a believer by a church that proclaims the true gospel of Jesus Christ. For some, this will be a step they will need to take in the process because they have not been baptized before, or they were baptized as infants or in a false church. As we have seen in our study, baptism is the method God gave to his church to help new believers publicly profess their faith and to publicly enter the church. For us, membership is a way for those who have already been baptized to communicate that baptism to those who are already in our church. While church membership does not take the place of baptism, it is, in a sense, a reaffirmation of someone’s baptism to our church body.

The fifth step of our membership process is for someone to read and affirm our membership covenant.<sup>309</sup> The membership covenant for us at Grace consists of two sections. The first section is a list of responsibilities that our pastor/elders have toward the members of the church. We discuss these and ask people to help us know if there are

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<sup>309</sup> The membership covenant for Grace Bible can be found at <https://storage1.snappages.site/rj8llnp46e/assets/files/Membership-Covenant.pdf> and in the appendix.

specific ways that we can better fulfill these responsibilities in their lives. The second part of the membership covenant lists the responsibilities we all have as members toward one another. All of the responsibilities discussed in our membership covenant are taken straight from Scripture, and we have been intentional to not add anything that is a preference or a restriction of an issue of conscience that Christians might have different opinions on.<sup>310</sup>

Once someone has filled out an application for membership, we set up an interview with two elders and the potential members. This interview time is to help our elders get to know these potential members and to allow the potential members to ask any questions that they might have about our church. During this interview, the elders go through the membership covenant with the potential members. One of the most significant responsibilities we want to discuss during this time is the matter of church discipline. We want to make sure that they understand what we believe and teach concerning church discipline and have them affirm that they are putting themselves under the shepherding care of this church, which includes church discipline. This is helpful for legal reasons, but it is also helpful in doing the best we can to make sure that only true, regenerate Christians are members of our church body, because those who are not truly saved will rarely put themselves into a church that actually practices church discipline.

The final step of our membership process is to publicly present these new members as part of our church family on a Sunday morning as well as during a family meeting. During that presentation, we explain membership and its significance to those who are gathered in our worship service, and then we invite new members on stage,

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<sup>310</sup> Issues of conscience might include such things as the use of alcohol or the types of entertainment a Christian consumes.

where we ask them a series of questions and have them publicly respond with an affirmation.<sup>311</sup> In addition to presenting new members on a Sunday morning, we also present them during a family meeting where we give them time to introduce themselves and explain why they wanted to become members at Grace. We do this during a time in our family meetings where we publicly identify members who have left the church since our last family meeting as well as new members who have joined. This way we make sure that at least five times a year we are reminding everyone in the church family who they are in a covenant membership relationship with. In addition to this, we also print out a membership directory for every family meeting that has this same information and a list of all of the current members.

This is just one example of what a process for membership can look like, but hopefully it provides a framework that can be used for other churches to build their own process. Whatever the steps may include, there should be a way that a new member clearly knows who the church is and what they believe, a way that the leaders of the church can get to know the profession of faith of the new members, and a way that the current members publicly affirm and welcome in the new members.

### **Final Thoughts**

Hopefully this paper has helped the reader become more convinced that church membership is the most effective way for a local church to fulfill the commitments given in Scripture that believers have towards one another and towards the leadership in the church. The goal was to demonstrate this truth from both history and Scripture and to further the argument that others have made for church membership who have written on

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<sup>311</sup> The list of questions we ask new members can be found in the appendix.

this topic before me. This, of course, is not the only reason a church would choose to implement membership. There are, in fact, a number of pragmatic reasons a church would choose membership as well. This paper was not able to delve into all of those, but many other books and articles on church membership are available that are more pragmatically focused.<sup>312</sup>

While not pursuing membership for pragmatic reasons, we have, however, found a number of blessings for our church in this move towards meaningful membership. One of those blessings has been a clear understanding for both our members and our leaders of who is actually a part of our church. Like many other churches, we have a constant flow of new faces that come in and out, and it can feel exhausting to keep track of everyone. While we do our best to love and serve whomever is gathered with us regularly on Sunday, our leaders and members know with clarity who is actually a part of our church through membership and can focus their efforts on building meaningful relationships with those that they are in a covenanted relationship with through membership.

Another blessing we have found with our members is a greater joy in being known and loved by the leaders and fellow members. With new people there is sometimes a resistance to membership and they are slow to enter the process, but oftentimes we find that those people express the greatest joy once they have experienced meaningful membership in our church. There have been many people that have come to me or one of the other elders and with tears in their eyes have expressed that they finally feel they have experienced what a church is meant to be after attending a family night.

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<sup>312</sup> Some of these reasons are things such as membership helping a church to be more organized, or membership helping to make people more committed to the church.

They know the Bible talks about the church being a family, but they have rarely ever experienced that reality in the past.

Another blessing that comes from church membership is that it provides a long-term protection for the church. As I described earlier, making sure that the elders and deacons are held accountable by the church members helps to assure that the church will not rise and fall on one leader's success or failure but rather that it will be protected for the long run by a large group of faithful followers of Jesus. There is no guarantee that a church will always remain faithful, but accountability of church leadership to church members will help support that more than putting all of the leadership of the church into one leader's control.

A final blessing that I will mention (although this certainly has not been an exhaustive list) is that church membership helps to filter out people who say they are Christians but who have no evidence of that reality in their lives. There is a danger that comes from the unsaved living their sinful lives in a church body under the guise of calling themselves a Christian. As we saw in Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 5:6-7, "Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." That is one of the primary reasons the instruction for church discipline is given. Church membership will often naturally filter out those who want to unabashedly live in sinful lifestyles and yet still attend church. The unfortunate truth is there are plenty of churches that will not question their lifestyle or call them to account for it, and so it will be much easier for them to go to those churches. We have found that membership causes "casual Christians" to not stay around at our

church. For those who are focused on numbers and building a large church, this would be seen as a negative; but for those who are simply focused on being a faithful church to a watching world, this is a great blessing.

The final thing I want to discuss is how those who come after me might continue this study of church membership. I can imagine twenty years from now another student working on a doctoral dissertation on church membership coming across this paper and wondering how to build upon it. I hope and pray that this paper will have been helpful for those who have taken on that endeavor, but it is by no means exhaustive in its research. I think a way to build upon this work would be to take a longer and more exhaustive look at the cultural influences that are fighting against church membership. As I stated in the introduction, the cultural trends I find myself in today (the year 2023 in the PNW) make church membership seem antiquated and countercultural to most. I can only imagine that those cultural shifts will grow even more dramatic in the coming years. Specifically, the rise of expressive individualism, the influence of technology, the speed and pace of American culture, the deterioration of institutions and suspicion towards authority all fight aggressively against the principles of church membership. For those who come after me, a deep dive into how these are making the call to church membership even more challenging would prove incredibly beneficial to the church. I can only imagine the damaging effect they will have in the years to come. My hope, though, is that no matter how challenging the cultural winds become, faithful churches will never abandon the call to meaningful church membership. The reality is that one day every leader of every church will give an account to the Lord of the church, and it is to him and him alone that we should desire to be faithful.

## APPENDIX A

### WHY CHURCH MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

We believe that membership in a local church is both biblical and historically normative for all believers in Jesus Christ. Membership in a local church is the public declaration that you belong to this body of believers and that we belong to you. It is a mutual commitment made by the individual and the congregation to carry out the commands of the New Testament to love and serve and protect one another. Our prayer is that membership at Grace Bible Church of Bend would display to those around us what God's love looks like.

Reasons that membership is important:

1. It identifies the body that the elders will give an account for and that the members are accountable to.
2. It helps the elders know the members and the members know the elders.
3. It places the choosing of leaders in the church into the hands of committed Christians.
4. It limits the teaching in the church to those who affirm the doctrine of Grace and will not be divisive.
5. It identifies what a brother or sister caught in sin is removed from when church discipline is exercised.
6. It expresses commitment, which is paramount in discipleship and helps give accountability to serving and giving.
7. It guards the church in making sure that no leader or pastor is exempt from biblical oversight and accountability.

Membership helps the elders fulfill their role in three important ways:

1. **Shepherding the church:** It helps identify those who the elders will give an account for and those who the Lord has entrusted to their care.
2. **Administrating the church:** It helps by knowing who it is that is committed to the family at Grace, and therefore who it is that make up the church family.
3. **Guarding the church:** The members of Grace are the ones who vote in the elders and pastors. By making sure that the membership of Grace is made up of committed followers of Christ who are walking with the Lord and committed to the doctrinal teaching of the church, we help guard the church.



The Process of Membership at Grace is:

1. Be under the shepherding care of Grace. This is done primarily through Community Groups.
2. Let your Community Group leader know that you are interested in starting the process.
3. Fill out a membership application, which can be found at [gcbend.org/membership](http://gcbend.org/membership).
4. Take or have taken the step of obedience of being baptized.
5. Listen to the “We Are the Church” (membership) series.
6. Meet with an elder to share your testimony and ask any questions.
7. Read and affirm the Grace Family Membership Commitment.
8. Be presented to the Grace church family.

## APPENDIX B

### QUESTIONS FOR MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

#### **Personal Information**

First name, Last name  
 Email address  
 Phone Number  
 Home Address  
 Birthday  
 Gender

#### **Family Information**

Marital Status  
 Spouse's Name (if applicable)  
 Anniversary Date  
 Do you have children?  
 Is there any information about your family that you think we should know about?

#### **Church Information**

Did you attend a church prior to Grace Bible? If so, which one?  
 Were you a member of that church?  
 Have you ever been through "Church Discipline" by a church?  
 Have you been baptized as a believer?  
 Approximate date of baptism  
 How were you introduced to Grace Bible Church?  
 Approximately when did you begin attending Grace Bible?  
 Have you attended a Newcomers Lunch?  
 Are you a part of a Community Group? If so, which one?  
 Are you currently serving at Grace Bible? If so, where?  
 Are you in agreement with Grace Bible's Statement of Faith?  
[gcbend.org/doctrinalstatement](http://gcbend.org/doctrinalstatement)  
 Are there any areas of the statement of faith you have questions about or see in a different way?  
 Have you watched or listened to the "We Are the Church" sermon series?  
[gcbend.org/wearethechurch](http://gcbend.org/wearethechurch)  
 Write a brief description of how you came to Christ (your testimony).  
 What is the gospel and how has it changed your life?  
 Briefly describe your own assessment of what your spiritual gifts are.  
 Send us a picture so we can put a face to a name!

## APPENDIX C

### GRACE BIBLE CHURCH MEMBERSHIP COVENANT

#### **The Membership Covenant: Responsibilities of the Pastors to the Members**

- Lovingly care for and seek their growth in Christ (Heb. 13:17; I Thes. 5:12).
- Provide teaching and counsel from the Scriptures (Gal. 6:6; I Tim. 5:17-18) that will span the whole counsel of God's Word (Acts 20:27-28).
- Help members in times of need (Acts 2:42-47 & 4:32-35; Jam. 2:14-17).
- Ensure that the elders and deacons will meet the criteria assigned to them in the Scriptures (I Tim. 3:1-13 & 5:17-22; Titus 1:5-9; I Pet. 5:1-4).
- Pray for them regularly, particularly when they are sick (Jam. 5:14).
- Be on guard against false teachers (Acts 20:28-31).
- Lead the membership in the process of church discipline and restoration when necessary (Matt. 18:15-20; I Cor. 5; Gal. 6:1).
- Help members become equipped to serve Christ and use their gifts in the body (Eph. 4:11-13).
- Seek God's will for our church community to the best of our ability as we study the Scriptures and follow the Spirit (Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:1-5).
- Set an example and join them in fulfilling the duties of church members (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17; I Tim. 4:12).

#### The Membership Covenant: Responsibilities of the Members

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- Be a Christian who has been saved from my sins by the grace of Jesus Christ and has been baptized (or soon plans to be) to give testimony of my identification with the body of Christ and obedience to the Scriptures.
- Has read and understood the Grace Bible Church doctrinal statement and agrees to not be divisive to its teaching (Titus 3:10). Also understands the importance of submission to church leadership and will be diligent to preserve unity and peace in the church (Hebrews 13:7, 17; Ephesians 4:1-3).
- Endeavors to maintain a close relationship with the Lord through regular personal Bible reading, prayer, fellowship, and the practice of the other spiritual disciplines. This journey in Christ will be evident through my regular participation in corporate worship services and a weekly community group (Ps. 119:97 & 105:1; Acts 2:42-47; Hebrews 10:23-25).
- Strives to properly manage the resources God has given, including time, body, gifts and talents, attitudes, finances, and possessions (Eph.5:15-18; Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 4:1-16; Gal 5:22-26; Proverbs 3:9-10). This includes regular giving to the

local church first (Grace Bible Church), and to give both sacrificially and cheerfully (2 Corinthians 8 & 9).

- Commits to serving the body by using the spiritual gift(s) God has given for the building up of the church, both at Grace Bible Church and universally (I Pet. 4:10-11; Romans 12:1-8; 1 Corinthians 12:7-31).
- Loves the Grace Bible Church family and agrees to aid in fulfilling its missional purpose to both live out and proclaim the gospel to Bend and its surrounding areas, recognizing that this will be accomplished by pursuing Grace Bible Church's core values and being a witness of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Practices the humility and sacrificial attitude of Christ by considering the needs of others as more important than myself (Philippians 2:1-11).
- Follows the biblical process of church discipline and restoration for those in unrepentant sin and will come under the loving care and direction of the elders if the need should ever arise (Matt. 18:15-17; Gal. 6:1-5). Submits to the authority of the Scriptures as the final arbiter on all issues (Psalm 119; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

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Member Name (Printed)

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Member Signature

Date

## APPENDIX D

### QUESTIONS FOR MEMBERSHIP PRESENTATION

I have a few questions for you that affirms your faith in Jesus Christ and your commitment to this church family. Please answer “we do” if you are in agreement.

- 1) Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God by nature and choice, and without hope apart from His sovereign mercy?
- 2) Have you placed your faith in Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of your sins, understanding that He is the righteous Son of God who died in your place and for your sins?
- 3) Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will walk in a manner worthy of the calling of which you have been called as you represent to the world a disciple of Jesus Christ?
- 4) Do you promise to support this church family in its mission to glorify God to the best of your ability?
- 5) Do you willingly submit yourselves to the leadership and discipline of this church family, and promise to preserve its purity and peace?

I have a brief charge for you from the New Testament book of 1 Timothy 6:11-16...

11 But as for you [...] Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13 I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in His testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, 14 to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 which He will display at the proper time—He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16 who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

## APPENDIX E

### SAMPLE FAMILY MEETING AGENDA

Family Membership Meeting - September 27, 2022

Welcome and Opening prayer

1 Song

Membership Covenant Teaching and Renewal

We are the Family at Grace... (read this)

As members, we will strive to preserve the unity and peace of this body by practicing humility and considering the needs of one another first.

We desire to build one another up and submit to one another in love, including those who God has called to lead the church. We understand that this includes the biblical process of lovingly confronting one another when caught in sin, and quickly restoring and forgiving one another by the grace of God.

Covenant (use this to explain):

Practice the humility and sacrificial attitude of Christ by considering the needs of others as more important than yourself (Phil. 2:1-11)

Update Membership

- Membership Transfer of Care:

*List of members who are transferring their care from Grace*

Prayer for these members

Welcome New Members:

(Introduce yourself and tell us one way you have been blessed by your time at Grace or one reason you desired to become a member)

*List of new members being welcomed into Grace*

Prayer for these members

Ministry Updates

*Ministry updates from our staff or ministry leaders*

Financial update and encouragement

Q&A

- General Budget
- Enduring Faithfulness Project

### Vision Update (Past Phil)

*A time for vision and where we are headed as a church*

- Prayer goals for the new school year
- Enduring Faithfulness Project update
- Preaching Schedule: Habakkuk, Advent, Hebrews

### Body Life

*A time of prayer and sharing led by one of our elders*

Sharing of Celebrations and Sorrows

Celebrations (babies, adoptions, new jobs, major blessings):

1. Are there any new babies, pregnancies, or adoptions that we can be celebrating together as a family?
2. Is there anyone who has recently gained new employment or had a promotion or other work-related blessing?
3. Any other major celebrations we can rejoice and give thanks to the Lord for as a family?

Sorrows to be praying for together (health, jobs, loss):

Sickness/Loss:

1. Sickness/health issues...
2. Loss of work...
3. Are there any other major prayer needs we can be praying for right now in our Body (need for job, major loss, other major sorrows)?

Closing Song

Prayer & final encouragement

## **APPENDIX F**

### **WE ARE THE FAMILY OF GOD AT GRACE**

We are the family of God at Grace Bible Church. We recognize that God desires for each Christian to be a part of a local church where they can be encouraged and challenged, and for this time and in this place, Grace is our church family.

Being a member starts first with being a Christian, and so we publicly recognize ourselves as sinners who have been saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have placed our faith in Christ alone for the forgiveness of our sins and are trusting in the righteousness of Christ alone for our salvation.

As a member of this church family, we recognize our role in one another's lives and the need we have for each other. It is our desire to help one another grow in our love for the Lord and to not forsake assembling together as the Lord has directed us. We also desire to help one another grow through discipleship and community.

As a member, we believe God has gifted us for this local Body and we are choosing to invest the best of our time, talents, and treasures into one another for God's glory and to further His mission.

As a member, we will strive to preserve the unity and peace of this body by practicing humility and considering the needs of one another first. We desire to build one another up and submit to one another in love including those who God has called to lead the church. We understand this includes the biblical process of lovingly confronting one another when caught in sin and quickly restoring and forgiving one another by the grace of God.

We commit to being a faithful witness of the Lord Jesus Christ and helping one another live out and proclaim the gospel to our community.

We joyfully agree to doing all of this together as God's family, on his mission, and for his glory.



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