



Starting Point

OUR JOURNEY
TOGETHER
AT COVENANT LIFE



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The Beginning of the Journey

The Gospel

It comes as a surprise to many to learn how very different Christianity is from other religions; at its core, it isn't about morality, or philosophy, or self-fulfillment. Rather, it's about news—good news—the greatest news the world has ever heard. In fact, the word “gospel” literally means “good news,” and it is this news that stands at the center of the Christian faith, and should be the informing core of the Christian life. It is what the apostle Paul called a matter “of first importance” (1 Corinthians 15:3). Around this church, we like to refer to it as “the main thing.”

We'll begin our journey as every Christian must—by unpacking the meaning and substance behind this word “gospel”—what it says about God and about us. We'll seek to discover why the gospel is such good news and why it's appropriate to call it “the main thing.”

I. Man's Dilemma Before God

No one can gain an understanding of the gospel without first recognizing his own rebellion against a perfect, holy God, and the severe consequences justly deserved as a result. In short, we must understand some very serious “bad news” before we can adequately appreciate the “good news.” There are two key elements to the dilemma we all face: our sinfulness and God's holiness.

A. Man's sinfulness

“A person must confront his own sinfulness in all its ravaging depths before he can enjoy the comforts of salvation.” —**Martin Luther**

1. *What is sin?* Sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature.¹

a. Not just actions, but attitudes

Matthew 5:27-28: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit

¹This definition is taken from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 490.

adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

b. Not just acting wrongly, but also failing to act

James 4:17: “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”

c. Not just actions and attitudes, but our nature—who we are at the core of our being

Genesis 6:5: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

“A sin consists in doing, saying, thinking, or imagining anything that is not in perfect conformity with the mind and law of God.” —**J.C. Ryle**

2. *Sin’s true nature.* Defining sin in relationship to God reveals its true nature: sin is essentially rebellion against God.

a. Sin is the willful and selfish rejection of God’s rule while choosing to live independently of him.

b. Sin is always fundamentally and primarily against God.

Psalm 51:4: “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.”

3. *Sin’s universality.* All people are sinners and stand guilty before God.

a. Adam’s sin brought sin and death to all men. All people sin because all are by nature sinners.

Romans 5:12: “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...”

b. All people confirm this through their actions: all are sinners.

Romans 3:22-23: “For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”

4. *Sin’s pervasiveness.* Man’s sinfulness extends to every part of his being; nothing in him has been unaffected by sin.

a. Sin’s corrupting effects have touched every part of his being: mind, will, emotions, and body.

Romans 3:10-12: “...as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

b. This means that man in his sinful state apart from God is incapable of pleasing or obeying God. Even seemingly “good” works are tainted by sin.

Romans 8:7-8: "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

- c. Not only are we therefore enslaved to sin, but we are completely responsible before God for our sin.

Romans 14:12: "So then each of us will give an account of himself to God."

B. God's holiness and wrath

The other facet of mankind's grave dilemma is the character of God. Indeed, man's sinful plight can't be fully grasped until it is viewed through the lens of God's infinite purity and holiness.

- 1. The Bible portrays God as holy. This idea has two main components:

- a. God is transcendent: He is infinitely higher than man—separate, different—He is wholly other than us.

Isaiah 46:9: "...for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me!"

- b. God is morally perfect and infinitely pure—untainted by evil desire, motive, thought, word, or deed.

Deuteronomy 32:3-4: "...ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he."

*Isaiah 6:1-5: "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "**Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!**" And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; **for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!**"*

- 2. Because God is holy, he must respond with fierce opposition to sin. This is the meaning of God's wrath.

- a. Wrath is God's holy response to sin: His personal, active antagonism to sin that derives from his settled opposition to every evil thing. It is therefore right—and even necessary—for God to hate sin, to oppose all wickedness, and to judge all who practice it.

Habakkuk 1:13: "You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong."

"The wrath of God is his steady, unrelenting, unremitting, uncompromising antagonism to evil in all its forms and manifestations." —**John Stott**

b. Some think that the idea of wrath is unjust or unbecoming to a God of love. This is largely because we underestimate both the extent and the seriousness of sin and the holiness of God. Not only is God perfectly justified in his wrath, but without it, his very character would be compromised.

3. In light of God's holiness, sin has grave and inevitable consequences:

a. A broken relationship with God

Isaiah 59:2: "but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear."

b. Enslavement to sin and Satan. Sin places us under the dominion of sin and Satan, unable to break free from their control.

Ephesians 2:1-3: "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."

c. Consequences in life. All the sorrow, pain, suffering, sweat, tears, strife, sickness, and death we experience were not part of God's original good creation. They resulted from the entrance of sin into the world.

d. Eternal punishment. The ultimate, final, and irrevocable punishment for all who die in sinful rebellion against God is separation in hell from God's beneficent presence.

2 Thessalonians 1:8-10: "in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed."

II. God's Answer to Man's Dilemma: The Gospel

How can we be saved from our sins and the righteous wrath of God? The answer is the gospel: the "good news" of God's saving work on our behalf through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Motivated by love, God took upon himself the full measure of divine wrath so that we might be the recipients of his infinite mercy.

"The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the only essential message in all of history." —**Jerry Bridges**

A. The person and work of Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is the gospel. It is his holy history, the news of who he is and what he has done for us. The gospel includes Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection,

ascension, and coming return.

1. Jesus' birth

Jesus is fully God, yet he was born into this world as a man, conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin named Mary. Jesus is therefore both fully God and fully man.

John 1:1, 14: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..."

Matthew 1:20-21: "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

See also Hebrews 2:17; Philippians 2:5-8.

2. Jesus' perfect, sinless life

Even though Jesus was subject to all the temptations to which we are all subject, he never once sinned in any way.

Hebrews 4:15: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."

3. Jesus' death on the cross

At the heart of Christ's life and ministry stands the cross. All His life had been preparatory for and led to that moment. At the cross, Christ provided the ground of our salvation—the basis upon which God saves us.

a. Jesus' death was substitutionary in nature. He died on our behalf, receiving the legal penalty for our sins and satisfying God's wrath towards us.

Isaiah 53:4-6: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

2 Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

b. Because Jesus paid the penalty for our sins, God no longer holds us responsible to pay for our sin. All of our sins are forgiven: past, present, and future.

Colossians 2:13-14: "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

c. Not only are our sins forgiven, but we are also “justified”—that is, we are declared righteous by God.

- Righteousness is a legal term: it speaks of a “right standing” before God.
- God considers the righteousness that Christ achieved as belonging to us.
- This declaration is a once-for-all, permanent event in our lives that nothing can change.

4. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead

The resurrection demonstrates that Jesus’ death was an acceptable and effective sacrifice on our behalf. Death is the penalty for sin, and Jesus’ conquest over death in the resurrection shows that sin has also been overcome.

Romans 4:25: “...who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”

1 Corinthians 15:17: “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

5. Jesus’ ascension and return

The ascension marks the beginning of Jesus’ reign. He now has all rule and authority, and he reigns in heaven with the Father, building his church, defeating its enemies, and interceding for his people. At the time that God has determined, he will return to consummate his work and initiate a new heaven and a new earth. Then we will reign with him for eternity, worshipping God and experiencing the full fruits of his saving work.

Matthew 24:30-31: “Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

Revelation 21:3-4: “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.’”

B. “The main thing”

It is no mistake that this journey begins with an exploration of the gospel. It does not simply mark the beginning of the Christian life; the gospel is to remain at the center of the Christian life. It is therefore to remain central to the life, ministry, and proclamation of the church.

“We never, therefore, move on from the cross of Christ—only into a more profound understanding of the cross.” —**David Pryor**

It is our goal in this local church to keep the gospel at the heart of all that we do. It will be the substance of our proclamation, the fuel for our adoration, and the source of our motivation. We will do all we can to ensure that our zeal for the gospel is never eclipsed by any other doctrine, teaching, or practice. Our commitment to you is that, with all our might, we will endeavor to “keep the main thing, the main thing.”

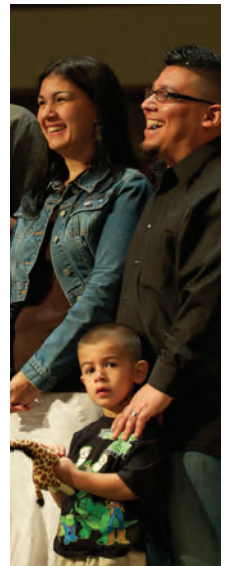
Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

“The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the only essential message in all of history. Yet we allow thousands of professing Christians to live their entire lives without clearly understanding it and experiencing the joy of living by it.” —**Jerry Bridges**

“The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the only essential message in all of history.”
—Jerry Bridges



to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be
Let Thy





“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”
—Ephesians 2:8-9





“The New Testament word for repentance means changing one’s mind so that one’s views, values, goals, and ways are changed, and one’s whole life is lived differently. The change is radical, both inwardly and outwardly... Repentance means starting to live a new life.”

—J.I. Packer



Embarking on the Journey

Our Response to the Gospel

The gospel tells us that God has acted through the person and work of Christ to save us from our sins and remove the barrier that exists between God and ourselves. The gospel is therefore objective; it is a matter of history. It is what Christ did for us; no matter how we feel, the ground of our salvation never changes. We are therefore not to look inward for the reason why God saves us, but upward and outward—to the Savior who died for us.

However, salvation is not somehow “automatic.” The gospel comes to us as news, and it is news to which we must respond. After Christ died, rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit to a group of believers in Jerusalem, thus giving birth to the church. On that day, in response to the preaching of the gospel by Peter, the hearers were pierced to the heart and asked the perceptive question, “What shall we do?” All who come to Christ must face this same question. And our answer to that question will determine whether we truly embark upon the journey of faith in Christ.

I. Our Responsibility

The appropriate response to the gospel has two components, which are often summarized under the term “conversion.”

“Conversion is our willing response to the gospel call, in which we sincerely repent of sins and place our trust in Christ for salvation.” — **Wayne Grudem**

Although repentance and faith are spoken of separately, they always work together in conversion. There is no true repentance without faith, and no genuine faith without repentance.

A. Repentance

The biblical words for repentance have at their core the idea of turning around or changing direction. To sin is to rebel against God and his rule over our lives. To repent is to turn back to God and to embrace him and his rule and authority over our lives.

1. Repentance is a command of God. All people are commanded to repent and believe the gospel.

Acts 17:30: "...now he commands all people everywhere to repent."

This repentance has three primary aspects:

- a. Mind: an awareness of the holiness and majesty of God, of our sin and guilt, and of God's mercy and readiness to forgive
- b. Emotions: a heartfelt sorrow for sin and joy at the prospect of forgiveness
- c. Will: a willingness and steadfast purposing to turn away from all sin and to turn to God in obedience

"The New Testament word for repentance means changing one's mind so that one's views, values, goals, and ways are changed, and one's whole life is lived differently. The change is radical, both inwardly and outwardly...

Repentance means starting to live a new life." —**J.I. Packer**

2. Repentance is a gift from God. It is the grace of God that enables us to repent.

2 Timothy 2:25: "...correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth."

B. Faith

Faith is the instrument through which the saving benefits of the cross come to us. Salvation is "by grace"—grace is its ground, but it is "through faith"—faith must be exercised before salvation is received (Ephesians 2:8). It is both a gift of God and an act of our will. God gives us faith, but we are responsible for exercising it.

1. The New Testament word for faith, when used in the context of salvation, means a true commitment of oneself to God, an unwavering trust in his promises, and a persistent loyalty and obedience.

Saving faith has three elements:

- a. Knowledge: We must have certain information—the gospel—revealed to us.

Romans 10:14,17: "But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."

- b. Assent: We must believe that what is revealed is true.

Hebrews 4:2: "For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened."

- c. Trust: We must place trust in what is revealed, being willing to stake our lives on it. This will find expression in our obedience and commitment.

2. We are saved by faith alone, but true saving faith will be validated by a lifestyle that testifies to the reality of faith. True saving faith will always lead to obedience.

James 2:17, 22: "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works."

C. Observing the Sacraments

1. What is a sacrament? A sacrament is a sign of the covenant (a picture) and a seal (a mark of being set apart) given to believers in order to teach and assure us of our salvation (Romans 4:11). The Lord ordained two sacraments: baptism (Matthew 28:19) and the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23), also known as "communion." Participation in the sacraments does not bring salvation; this comes only by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8-9; Galatians 2:16). These sacraments are visible signs of an invisible grace which has already taken place in the life of the believer.
2. Baptism uniquely depicts initiation into the Christian life, portraying the believer's union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5). It points to the beginning of the Christian life (Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38) and displays one's commitment to turn from sin and trust in Christ for salvation. For this reason, we do not baptize infants. If you were baptized as an infant, we would ask that—in obedience to Scripture and as part of becoming a member of Covenant Life Church—you be baptized as a believer.

A candidate for baptism should be able to:

- a. Communicate the content of the gospel as well as an expression of faith in Jesus Christ for salvation.
 - b. Evidence godly sorrow over sin, followed by repentance which leads to the fruit of the Spirit.
 - c. Examine himself and the condition of his soul (1 Corinthians 11:27-32).
 - d. Demonstrate a willingness to turn away from the world and instead live a life keeping God's commands and loving God's church (1 John 2:15-17; 5:1-5).
 - e. Exhibit fruit which proceeds from regeneration (Galatians 5:22-23).
3. The Lord's Supper uniquely depicts continuing fellowship with God, a repeated act whereby the believer remembers the Lord's death and renews his commitment to Christ and participation in his church (1 Corinthians 11:27-34).

In receiving the Lord's Supper:¹

- a. We symbolize the death of Christ; our actions give a picture of his death for us.
- b. We participate and share in the benefits of Jesus' death.
- c. We picture the spiritual nourishment and refreshment that Christ is giving to our souls.
- d. We mark our unity with other believers.

¹These seven points are adapted from Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1999.

- e. We affirm Christ's love for us.
 - f. We are assured of the blessings of our salvation.
 - g. We proclaim our dependence on and faith in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.
4. How does our practice of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper differ?

"Baptism [is] an ordinance that is only observed once by each person, as a sign of the beginning of his or her Christian life...The Lord's Supper [is] an ordinance that is to be observed repeatedly throughout our Christian lives, as a sign of continuing fellowship with Christ."

—Wayne Grudem

Since baptism is a landmark moment in a believer's life, publicly marking one's identification with Christ and entrance into the church, we regularly set aside times for the baptism of new believers (or those who have yet to be baptized) in our Sunday morning meetings. This enables us to rejoice together as a church family with those being baptized and welcome new believers into the life of the church.

We also make it a regular practice to share in the Lord's Supper together as a congregation at our Sunday morning meetings.

Parents: For help with learning how the sacraments apply to children, see Appendix D, p. 82, The Sacraments - Questions and Answers for Parents

II. God's Initiative

In the previous lesson, we spoke about the pervasive, corrupting effects of sin. Sin is not only what we do, but who we are: apart from God, we are sinners by nature. So if we're truly "dead" in our sins (Ephesians 2:1) and powerless to change, how is it that we are able to respond to the gospel at all? It is here that the gracious nature of salvation becomes even more amazing: God acts, so that we can act.

A. Chosen in eternity past

God's actions began in eternity past when he chose us and determined that he would save us. This is often referred to as "election."

Ephesians 1:4-6: "even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved."

B. Effectively called

God's choosing of us eventually results in his calling us and drawing us to himself through the proclamation of the gospel. This is often referred to as "effective calling."

While God is the one who draws, this does not mean that a person is somehow saved apart from his own willing response to the gospel. Through the grace of

God, the “divine summons” of God brings about the response it requires.

Romans 8:30: “And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

John 6:44: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”

C. Regenerated (“born again”) by the Spirit

When God calls us, he then changes our hearts so that we can freely respond. This change is called “regeneration.”

In regeneration, God acts to change our inner natures and impart spiritual life to us. As a result, we become spiritually alive and are then able to believe the gospel and repent of our sin.

Colossians 2:13: “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him...”

D. The supernatural nature of conversion

Given what Scripture teaches about sin, it is not surprising that God must do a supernatural work in our hearts before we can be truly converted. Such an understanding of our conversion is important for our spiritual health.

“Scripture is clear in teaching that we are not all journeying toward God—some having found him, others still seeking. Instead, Scripture presents us as needing to have our hearts replaced, our minds transformed, our spirits given life. We can do none of this for ourselves. The change each human needs, regardless of how we may outwardly appear, is so radical, so near our roots, that only God can bring it about. We need God to convert us.” —**Mark Dever**

“I believe in the doctrine of election, because I am quite certain that, if God had not chosen me, I should never have chosen him; and I am sure he chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterwards; and he must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why he should have looked upon me with special love.”
—**Charles Spurgeon**

E. We must act, but God gets the glory.

Recognizing God’s grace does not eliminate our responsibility to repent and believe. All people everywhere are commanded to do this (Acts 17:30). However, when we reflect back on our salvation and recognize that it was God’s prior actions that drew us to Himself, we are humbled and exult all the more over God’s amazing, undeserved, and glorious grace. We realize that, in the end, the difference between ourselves and someone who is unsaved is not our own superior goodness, intelligence, spiritual aptitude, or anything within ourselves at all. The only difference between us and them is the mercy and grace of God.

III. “Essentially Reformed”

The biblical truths outlined above are often placed under the heading of “Reformed theology.” Although labels can at times be misunderstood, we use the term “essentially Reformed” as a helpful way to summarize our theological understanding of the gift of salvation.

- The Reformed view of salvation places emphasis on the activity of God and the glory of God in saving sinners.
- In calling ourselves “*essentially* Reformed,” we imply that we do not necessarily hold to all of the doctrines that some Reformed churches do (for example, our view of baptism, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, etc., differ from many who would call themselves Reformed). Our loyalties are not to a system of theology, but to the Scriptures. Our goal is to think biblically in order to know God truthfully, respond to him appropriately, and glorify him most fully.
- We never want to focus on more narrow aspects of Reformed theology at the expense of biblical truths that are central and that we share with many other Christians. The gospel itself is what unites all true believers, and it is the gospel that matters most.



“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him...” —Colossians 2:13



"In reality, holiness is the goal of our redemption. As Christ died in order that we may be justified, so we are justified in order that we may be sanctified and made holy." —J.I. Packer



Continuing the Journey

Sanctification

As we noted in Lesson 2, we embark upon the Christian journey when we respond to God’s offer of salvation in Christ. No change could be more momentous—we are “born again” (John 3:3), we are “made alive” (Ephesians 2:5), we are transferred from the “domain of darkness” into “the kingdom of his beloved son” (Colossians 1:13), we are forgiven our sins (Ephesians 1:7), we are delivered from wrath (Romans 5:9), we are reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:18)—as Jesus put it, we pass “from death to life” (John 5:24).

As dramatic as this change is, this is only the beginning. God’s purposes for us don’t end when we become Christians. Rather, conversion sets us on a glorious path in which God will continue to work out his gracious purposes in our lives. What are those purposes? How are they worked out? In this lesson, we will explore what God has for us as we “continue the journey” of the Christian life.

I. The Goal of Our Salvation: Holiness

Salvation is much more than simply deliverance from the penalty of sin. When God saves us, he makes us his own, and begins a renovation program: the process of making us more and more like our Lord Jesus—the process of making us holy.

“In reality, holiness is the goal of our redemption. As Christ died in order that we may be justified, so we are justified in order that we may be sanctified and made holy.” —**J.I. Packer**

A. The barrier to holiness: sin

Sin not only deserves God’s punishment; it mars God’s good creation and obscures the display of his glory. He therefore desires to eradicate sin and its corrupting effects from his creation. For the believer, salvation is the beginning of the process of removing sin and its effects from our lives.

- At **regeneration**, the power of sin is broken and we are made alive in Christ.

- In **justification**, the penalty of sin is removed as we are declared righteous in Christ.
- In **sanctification**, the pollution of sin is progressively removed as we are made holy in Christ.

To be holy means to be set apart to God. This includes being set apart from all that is sinful and opposed to God. Holiness is God's goal for his people, and the Christian life involves the process of reaching this goal. The New Testament is full of words that describe this process: transforming, renewing, conforming, maturing, and growing. Although we will never reach perfection in this life, we are called to make every effort to live a holy life for the glory of God.

1 Peter 1:15-16: "...but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'"

1 Thessalonians 4:7: "For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness."

B. The model for holiness: Jesus Christ

1. Jesus is our Lord, Savior, and example. We are to follow him in attitude and action. Paul called this being "imitators of God." John used the phrase, "we ought to walk as Jesus walked." Jesus said simply, "Follow me."
2. More remarkably, God himself has committed to making us like Jesus. The ultimate goal in sanctification is conformity to the image of Christ.

Romans 8:29: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."

C. The motive for holiness: love for God

As we grow to know his love and appreciate what he has done for us, we will also grow in our desire to live a life that is pleasing to him—as Paul says, "a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called..." (Ephesians 4:1).

1 John 5:3: "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome."

II. The Battle for Holiness

While holiness is God's will for us, this does not mean that the process of sanctification is easy. Given our own sinfulness and the sinful world in which we live, this process involves a battle—one that will require our energies for the rest of our lives.

A. The power of sin is broken.

As unbelievers we were slaves to sin—we were unwilling and unable to resist sin. When we were regenerated, we were freed from the power of sin—its ruling force in our lives was broken. We became willing and able to resist sin.

Romans 6:2, 6, 11: "How can we who died to sin still live in it?... We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin... So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Why then do we still sin?

B. The presence of sin remains.

Although sin has been deposed as the ruler of our lives, it has not been removed as a factor in our lives. We are free from its dominion, but not its presence and influence—our quest for holiness is not unopposed. The remaining influence of sin is called different things: "the flesh," "the sinful nature," "indwelling sin." The sinful world we live in and the devil who opposes us take advantage of this situation to tempt us into all manner of sin. Here is how Paul describes this battle:

Galatians 5:16-17: "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do."

C. The heart is the battlefield.

"Regeneration makes man's heart a battlefield where 'the flesh' tirelessly disputes the supremacy of 'the Spirit.'" —**John Owen**

1. Growth in holiness always comes through the pathway of the heart. The Holy Spirit doesn't just change us outwardly by "dressing us up" with new behaviors; he transforms us from within.
2. The remaining sin in our hearts is deceptive, wicked, and in active rebellion against God.

Romans 7:8, 21: "But sin...produced in me all kinds of covetousness...when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand."

Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things... who can understand it?"

3. The Bible teaches that our sinful behavior is not caused by other people or our circumstances, but by our own desires, cravings, longings, or lusts. Whatever rules our hearts determines what we do and say in response to people and situations.

James 1:14: "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire."

James 4:1: "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?"

4. We do not sin because our hearts are empty, wounded, broken, or in need of love, self-esteem, or significance. We sin because of sinful desires that have not been recognized and put to death.

Romans 8:5, 8: "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh...Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

5. Indwelling sin inclines our hearts to forget the gospel and to seek happiness, joy, peace, rest, security, and satisfaction outside of Christ. The heart's idolatrous pursuit of "life" outside of Christ leads to sinful behavior.

III. The Process of Holiness: Sanctification

A. Sanctification defined

Sanctification is the continuing work of God in the life of a believer. It is a progressive work in which we become more and more free from sin and like Christ. In short, our actual lives become increasingly conformed with our legal status before God.

1. *It is a lifelong process.* We don't become instantly perfect. Rather, we become progressively more holy as we cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.
2. *There is discernable progress.* We actually do become more and more holy, overcoming various manifestations of sin (lying, pride, selfishness, etc.) and becoming more like Jesus in our attitudes and actions.
3. *It is a work of grace.* Many make the mistake of thinking that we are saved by grace but that we then become holy by our own efforts. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are justified by grace and we are sanctified by grace as well. Grace is necessary in both cases, and it is unmerited in both cases. The key difference is that in justification we are passive but in sanctification we actively cooperate with the Holy Spirit in receiving and responding to God's grace.

This cooperative activity is vividly portrayed by the Apostle Paul:

Philippians 2:12-13: "Therefore, my beloved...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

B. The Holy Spirit works.

The activity of the Holy Spirit precedes any action towards holiness on our part and makes our actions possible. Although we aren't always aware of his activity, if we are becoming more holy it is because he is at work.

2 Corinthians 3:18: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

"The only good we do is what He does in us; it is not that we do nothing ourselves, but that we act only when we have been acted upon, in other words under the direction and influence of the Holy Spirit." — **John Calvin**

C. We work.

Because the Holy Spirit is at work in us, we can therefore work; he makes it possible for us to live holy lives. However, we must never be passive in this process. We are responsible before God to “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).

Colossians 1:29: “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.”

Hebrews 12:14: “Strive...for the holiness.”

“Sanctification...is a thing for which every believer is responsible... Whose fault is it if they are not holy, but their own? On whom can they throw the blame if they are not sanctified, but themselves? God, who has given them grace and a new heart, and a new nature, has deprived them of all excuse if they do not live for his praise.” —**J.C. Ryle**

IV. Weapons for the Battle

God has equipped us with numerous aids for our battle with sin, and we seek to equip every member to maximize the use and effectiveness of these aids.

A. *The Bible* exposes and judges the motives, intents, and desires of the heart. It provides truth—God’s perspective on reality.

Hebrews 4:12: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

B. *Prayer* deepens our fellowship with God, and therefore brings a greater sensitivity to and conviction of sin. In prayer we can confess our sins, cultivate a hatred for sin and a love for godliness, and receive strength for our battle with sin.

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

C. *The Holy Spirit* dwells in us so that we can say “no” to the passions and desires of our sinful nature. God has made us new creatures in Christ, and he is actively at work to transform our hearts.

Galatians 5:16: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

D. *Fellow Christians* are a crucial part of this battle. Therefore, each Christian should be committed to receiving help from others. This includes confessing our sin to each other and exhorting one another.

Hebrews 10:24: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works...”

In this church, the practice of sanctification is woven throughout all the facets

of our church life. Each member is encouraged to practice **the spiritual disciplines**—especially Bible reading and prayer—and through them to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). An essential part of our care groups is the specific and personal application of God’s word to our lives. Our emphasis on relationships provides countless contexts in which we join arms and help each other grow in godliness. The weekly **preaching of God’s word** is a key means to our growth in godliness as a body. Through these avenues and more, we desire to live lives that increasingly reflect God’s character to a lost world.

V. The Heart of Sanctification

The intentional pursuit of godliness is a priority here because the Scriptures command it. In taking sanctification seriously, we are taking God’s holiness seriously and the reality of our own sin seriously. It is not uncommon to find some Christians who downplay the role of sin in their lives—such talk seems negative or counter-productive. However, few endeavors could be more exciting than the glorious pursuit of becoming more like Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Far from making us self-centered or morbidly introspective, our pursuit of holiness intensifies our joy as we become more amazed at God’s forgiveness, more free from the sin in our lives, and more intimately acquainted with our God. Ultimately, our holiness brings God glory as His character is increasingly displayed in our lives. Such mercy and grace provides powerful motivation to cooperate with God’s sanctifying work in our lives and so to “continue the journey” of the Christian life in the context of the local church.



*"No Christian can avoid theology.
Every Christian has a theology.
The issue, then, is not, do we want
to have a theology? That's a given.
The real issue is, do we have a sound
theology? Do we embrace true or
false doctrine?"*

—R.C. Sproul





Understanding the Journey

The Importance of Sound Doctrine

The Christian life is not meant to be an aimless wandering; it is not a journey without meaning. God intends for us to understand who he is, how we are to relate to him, and how we are to understand our lives and the world in which we live. In short, we need God's take on reality. To this end, he has graciously given to us his word, the Bible.

The Scriptures are God's revelation of himself and his purposes. The Bible is, therefore, essential to our lives, our spiritual well-being, our knowledge of God, and our growth in godliness. In this lesson, we will examine this most critical component to the Christian life. How is God's truth to function in our lives? Is it really important to grow in our understanding of doctrine? Isn't simply "loving Jesus" enough? We must answer such questions before we will be prepared to truly "understand the journey" to which God has called us.

I. What Is Doctrine?

Before we look at the importance of doctrine, perhaps it will be helpful to understand what we mean by "doctrine." We can look at this in two distinct ways.

A. *The storyline of the Bible.* The Bible is not simply a mixed bag of books and ideas that bear no particular relationship to each other. The Bible tells a story: the story of God and his relationship to his creation in general, and to humanity in particular. We must understand this story in order to truly understand God, ourselves, history, and the future.

Some of the main facets of the Bible's "plotline" provide for us a general overview of God and his purposes in the world:

1. *Creation.* The Bible tells us that "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). This opening statement of the Bible implies some significant truths.
 - a. The world, and history itself, have meaning. They came about by God's will and proceed in accordance with his will.

Psalm 33:11: "The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations."

- b. As Creator, God has authority over his creation. He rules it according to his purposes, and all creation, including humanity, owes its existence and allegiance to him.

2. *The Fall.* Though created to live in communion with and dependence upon God, mankind rejected God's loving and benevolent rule and sought to live independently from God, doubting his word and spurning his commands (Genesis 3).

- a. This rebellion introduced sin into the world, and with it death (spiritual and physical), a break in fellowship with God, physical hardship and suffering, and turmoil in human relationships.

Romans 5:12: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned..."

- b. The fall brought with it judgment. Because God is holy, he must distance himself from and punish all sin.

3. *The Plan of Redemption.* God is not only holy, but loving and merciful. Despite mankind's alienation from him and the necessity to punish evil, God sets out to redeem man from sin and to restore man to fellowship with himself. The rest of the Bible, from Genesis 3 on, unfolds this history of God's redemptive purposes. Here are some of the "highlights" of this wonderful story:

- a. God chooses Abraham, reveals himself to him, and tells him that he will have a special relationship with Abraham and his descendants. In addition, all the nations of the earth will receive God's blessing through him (Genesis 12:1-3; 18:18).
- b. The story of Israel traces the outworking of this plan, as God gathers from Abraham's descendants a people for himself, who would know him and who would make him known in the world.
- c. Israel's history reaches a climax when, from this chosen people comes a Savior—Jesus Christ—in whom all of God's promises of forgiveness, redemption, and restored communion with God are realized.
- d. The New Testament tells the story of the accomplishment of God's saving purposes through Jesus' life and death, the realization through the church of God's plan to have a people for himself, and the extension of God's saving plan throughout the earth through the preaching of the gospel. It also foretells the consummation of all things when Christ will return to gather his people, to judge the nations, and to restore all things back under the rule of God.

B. *The teachings of the Bible.* In addition to the flow of Scripture's story, the Bible contains all that we need to know about God in order to know him and live a life pleasing to him. All that the Bible teaches about various topics we may call "doctrine."

1. When we endeavor to understand what the Bible teaches about any subject,

we are pursuing doctrine.

2. The study of doctrine and study of the Bible are not opposed; Bible study should result in sound doctrine. When some react negatively to the idea of “sound doctrine,” it would seem they are misunderstanding the concept; the only alternative is “unsound doctrine!”

II. Why Do We Need Doctrine?

Hopefully what we mean when we speak of “doctrine” is clear: what the Bible teaches. But this doesn’t answer the question of whether we need to know doctrine—“Isn’t loving God enough?” “Isn’t having Jesus enough?” Why do we as Christians need to give ourselves to the study of God’s word?

A. The necessity of doctrine

“The conviction that Christian doctrine matters for Christian living is one of the most important growth points of the Christian life.” —**Sinclair Ferguson**

1. We cannot truly love God without having true knowledge about God.

Mark 12:28-30: “And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’”

- a. True love for God involves the whole person. There is an unmistakable inclusion—if not emphasis—on loving God with our minds—with what we think, our values, our opinions, our reasoning, with our view of God and ourselves and the world.
- b. We simply cannot love what we do not know.

2. What we believe determines the way we live.

“However paradoxical it seems to our natural minds, it is one of the facts of spiritual reality that practical Christian living is based on understanding and knowledge.” —**Sinclair Ferguson**

- a. Every Christian is a theologian.

“No Christian can avoid theology. Every Christian has a theology. The issue, then, is not, do we want to have a theology? That’s a given. The real issue is, do we have a sound theology? Do we embrace true or false doctrine?” —**R.C. Sproul**

B. The purpose of sound doctrine

1. Sound doctrine provides a right understanding of God’s person and character.

- The only way for us to know God is for him to reveal himself to us. The

only place he does this in such a way that we can have a relationship with him is in his word.

2. Sound doctrine enables us to live lives worthy of our Savior.

Colossians 1:9-10: "And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."

3. Sound doctrine produces stability in the Christian life.

*Ephesians 4:13-14: "...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, **tossed to and fro by the waves...**"*

4. Sound doctrine protects us against false doctrine.

*Ephesians 4:13-14: "...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and **carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.**"*

5. Sound doctrine produces in us true discernment.

*Philippians 1:9-10: "And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and **all discernment**, so that you may approve what is excellent..."*

6. Sound doctrine strengthens the church.

Ephesians 4:15-16: "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

III. How Is a Commitment to Sound Doctrine Expressed in This Church?

We seek to express our commitment to sound doctrine in a variety of ways.

A. A commitment to the authority of God's word

1. We accept the Bible, including the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament, as the written word of God; that they are the only infallible record of God's self-disclosure to mankind; that Scripture in the original manuscripts is fully inspired by God and free from error in all it teaches.
2. Because we believe the Scriptures are the word of God, they are the final authority for all that we do as individuals and as a church.

B. A commitment to the preaching of God's word

Preaching is the unique means by which God's word is brought effectively to the assembled congregation.

*2 Timothy 4:1-2: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: **preach the word**; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."*

"I continue to believe in preaching and maintain that there is no substitute for it, and no power or sustained vision or close fellowship with God in the church without it. Also, I constantly maintain that if today's quest for renewal is not along with other concerns a quest for true preaching, it will prove shallow and barren. Preaching mediates not only God's authority, but also his presence and his power. Preaching effects an encounter not simply with truth, but with God himself." —**J.I. Packer**

"Nothing is more important for the life and growth, health and depth of the contemporary church than a recovery of serious biblical preaching." —**John Stott**

C. A commitment to the singing of truth from God's word

Ephesians 5:18-20: "...be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

D. A commitment to apply God's word through private reading, study and meditation

The Bible is God's self-revelation to man. In it we learn what God is like and how we are to respond to him. There is no more important activity for the Christian than reading and meditating upon the word of God.

"Meditation is the activity of calling to mind, and thinking over, and dwelling on, and applying to oneself, the various things that one knows about the works and ways and purposes and promises of God. It is an activity of holy thought, consciously performed in the presence of God, under the eye of God, by the help of God, as a means of communion with God. Its purpose is to clear one's mental and spiritual vision of God, and to let His truth make its full and proper impact on one's mind and heart." —**J.I. Packer**

E. A commitment to provide biblical resources

- Bookstore
- Sermon audio and outlines: www.covlife.org/resources
- Covenant Life website: www.covlife.org
- Teaching and worship resources are available from Sovereign Grace Ministries at www.sovereigngraceministries.org.

See Appendix B, p. 78, for our Statement of Faith.



*“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.”*

—Acts 1:8



Strength for the Journey

Empowered by the Spirit

In previous lessons, we've seen over and over our dependence upon the grace of God in the Christian life. The very plan of salvation is the story of God's gracious initiative to send his son to die on the cross for sinners who were as yet in rebellion against God. Having responded to the gospel, Christians then learn that their response was actually rooted in God's gracious choosing and calling of them before the foundation of the earth. In the fight for holiness, we find that all our efforts have their start in the sanctifying work of God, who "works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). The Christian life is truly "all of grace, from first to last."

Because of this, God never intended believers merely to "trudge on" in their own strength. Indeed, one of the great promises of Scripture comes at the very end of the book of Matthew, just after the giving of the Great Commission: "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). In this lesson, we will explore more fully the source of strength for the Christian journey: the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

I. The Holy Spirit: God's Active Presence

A. While God is omnipresent (present at all places at all times with all of his being), he makes his presence known in different ways for different purposes.

- He can be present to bless, to sustain, to punish, or to empower.

B. God manifested his presence in various ways throughout history, but these reached a climax in the person of Jesus Christ.

John 1:1, 14: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

C. In the church age, God’s presence is primarily manifested in the world, and especially in the church, in the person of the Holy Spirit.

John 14:16-18: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”

D. Christians have the great privilege not only of trusting in God’s omnipresence, but of personally experiencing his nearness.

Romans 8:15-16: “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God...”

James 4:8: “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.”

E. God’s active presence among his people accomplishes many things. It is not uncommon to focus narrowly on more dramatic aspects of this, such as miracles, healings, or prophecy. Scripture, however, portrays the Spirit’s work as pervasive and multifaceted—what might be called “the broad work of the Spirit.” To fully appreciate God’s active presence, we need to recognize the countless ways in which the Spirit is at work in and among us.

“...the Spirit’s major role in Paul’s view of things lies with his being the absolutely essential constituent of the whole of Christian life, from beginning to end. The Spirit thus empowers ethical life in all of its dimensions—personal, corporate, and in the world. Believers in Christ, who for Paul are “Spirit people” first and foremost, are variously described as living by the Spirit, walking in the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, and sowing to the Spirit... the Spirit conforms the believer into the likeness of Christ to the glory of God. The Spirit is therefore the empowering presence of God for living the life of God in the present.” —**Gordon Fee**

II. The Holy Spirit: God’s Saving Presence

The greatest miracle one can ever experience is the miracle of regeneration, in which the Holy Spirit changes our natures and imparts spiritual life to us. Nothing can ever compare with this mighty work of the Spirit in our lives.

Titus 3:4-7: “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

III. The Holy Spirit: God's Purifying Presence

A. One of the Spirit's primary activities is to remove sin from our lives and to make us more and more holy, just as God himself is holy.

2 Corinthians 3:18: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

B. As the believer cooperates with the work of the Spirit in his life, the Spirit produces "fruit" in his life, consisting of godly attitudes and behavior. This supernatural work is the opposite of our natural tendencies, and is the reproduction of the life of Christ in the believer.

Galatians 5:16, 22-23: "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh...But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."

IV. The Holy Spirit: God's Empowering Presence

In addition to effecting regeneration and sanctification, the Holy Spirit also empowers believers for Christian witness and service. The inaugural experience of this empowering work is often referred to as being "baptized in (or with) the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5; cf. 1:8; 2:4, 38; 8:14-17).

A. To be baptized in the Spirit is to be immersed in the Holy Spirit by the risen Christ, resulting in an increased awareness of God and empowerment for life and service.

1. This is foretold by John the Baptist in each of the four gospels (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16 and John 1:33) and by Jesus (Acts 1:4-5). It is the "promise of the Father"—God's empowering presence for the new covenant age.

Acts 1:4-5, 8: "And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, 'you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'...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."

2. The purpose of this experience is spiritual empowerment, both to stimulate consistent growth in godliness and to enable the believer to bear witness concerning the gospel and to serve the Lord with spiritual power.

Galatians 5:16: "But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."

Acts 1:8: "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."

3. How may we receive this experience, or know if we have received it?

- a. We receive through faith, asking God, knowing that he loves to give good gifts to his children.

Luke 11:13: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

- b. A powerful effect of this experience is the active presence of God. More than mere belief, the Spirit graciously overwhelms us with a sense of the majesty and truth of God as revealed in Christ.

Acts 1:8: "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."

- c. It would appear from the book of Acts that speaking in tongues is a common evidence of being baptized in the Spirit, but it is not a necessary evidence, and it is not the only evidence. Although speaking in tongues is biblically attested and something that believers should pursue (I Cor. 14:1, 5), being baptized in the Spirit is not primarily about speaking in tongues or even about personal experience. Its main concern is that we receive power from God to effectively accomplish his purposes.

B. Although this is often a significant, identifiable and dramatic event, being baptized in the Spirit is only the beginning of a process of empowerment that God desires for every believer.

1. The New Testament envisions not simply one definitive experience of Spirit *baptism*, but rather a process of repeated, continual *fillings* of God's Spirit. A Christian may have been *indwelt* by the Spirit at conversion, and *baptized* in the Spirit, but yet not be presently *filled* with the Spirit.

Acts 4:8, 31: "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them...And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness."

2. The Holy Spirit desires to fill each believer continually with increased power for Christian life and witness. Our responsibility and privilege is to live a life of dependence upon God, asking for his Spirit to continually fill us, to empower us, and to strengthen us to live lives for his glory.

Ephesians 5:18: "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit..."

"Being continually filled with the Spirit is, in fact, the challenge of a lifetime and the challenge of each new day." — **Anthony Hoekema**

C. There are differing views among Christians as to when a person is baptized in the Holy Spirit. Some believe that it occurs at regeneration, while others hold that it is an experience distinct from regeneration. Transcending these differences are certain, clear truths of Scripture that all Christians can affirm: God promises the Holy Spirit to every Christian and desires every Christian to experience the Spirit's empowering presence for

life and witness.

At Covenant Life, we have found it possible to accommodate Christians who differ on this issue when certain beliefs and values concerning the Spirit's ministry are cherished and applied. These include:

- A belief that Christians are to seek to be continually filled by the Spirit
- A life of constant dependence upon the Holy Spirit
- A faith-filled pursuit of those things that are indicative of being filled with the Spirit: genuine love for God, a hunger for his Word, the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, a love for fellowship, a burden for the lost, and boldness in Christian witness
- A belief in the continuity of the spiritual gifts listed in Scripture, and an earnest desire for whatever gifts the Spirit would graciously give

D. Spiritual Gifts

In addition to giving us increased boldness and effectiveness in witness (Acts 4:31), prompting worship and thanksgiving in our hearts (Ephesians 5:18-20; Acts 10:46), increasing our growth in godliness (2 Corinthians 3:18), and strengthening our relationship with other believers (Ephesians 5:18, 21), the Holy Spirit also imparts supernatural gifts for the edification of the church and for works of ministry in the world.

1. All believers have and receive spiritual gifts.

*1 Corinthians 12:7: "To **each is given** the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."*

2. All of the gifts are supernatural. In Scripture, all of the gifts, from seemingly "natural" ones like mercy and serving to "supernatural" ones like healing, are viewed as being from God and empowered by the Spirit.

*1 Corinthians 12:7: "To each is **given the manifestation of the Spirit** for the common good."*

3. All of the gifts of the Holy Spirit at work in the church of the first century are available today. Scripture suggests that the gifts are given to the church until Christ's return, and there is no indication anywhere in Scripture that any of the gifts were intended to pass away with the early church.

1 Corinthians 1:7-8: "...so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."

4. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are vital for the mission of the church and are to be earnestly desired and practiced.

1 Corinthians 14:1: "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy."

5. The purpose of spiritual gifts is the glory of God and the edification of other

believers.

1 Corinthians 10:31: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

1 Corinthians 12:7: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

V. God's Active Presence: Our Privilege and Need

As believers, we should never be satisfied with anything less than the nearness of God—his active presence. He has promised to draw near to us, and he empowers us by the Holy Spirit to glorify him and serve him more effectively as he accomplishes his purposes through the church. To be a Christian is to be marked by the presence of God, and how gracious he is to give us the Holy Spirit to empower us for our lives, our service to him, and our life together as a church. How desperately we need this. And how wondrous it is that we can pursue this in faith, and do so together.



“For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God...”

—Romans 8:15-16



*"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.*

—1 Peter 2:9-10



Together on the Journey

The Priority of the Local Church

I. Why Is the Church Important?

When it comes to the Christian life, the question of the church's importance is perhaps one that is too often overlooked. How often do we stop and think, "Why is the church so important? What is the purpose of the church?" The answer to such questions will provide us both direction for how churches should build the body of Christ and encouragement to be faithful as we play our part in it.

In this lesson, we will explore the critical role that the local church plays in God's glorious purposes, as well as the overall vision of this particular local church. We will find that our relationships with other believers are a tremendous means of blessing, both for ourselves and others. God never meant for us to live the Christian life alone. Instead, he gives us the marvelous privilege of traveling on this journey *together*.

A. The ultimate purpose of the church is the glory of God.

1. The Bible clearly reveals that mankind stands in rebellion against God.

However, throughout history God has made himself known to people, called them to himself, and gathered them together to worship him and bring glory to his name. Because the church is uniquely God's, we are to be distinctly different from the world.

*Exodus 19:4-6: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, **you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**"*

2. Believers living after Christ came to earth have the even greater privilege of joining together to enjoy and proclaim the pinnacle of God's saving acts: the death of Christ on the cross for our sins.

Ephesians 1:3-8: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us..."

B. The church's role is exclusive.

The church is God's chosen means for carrying out his purposes until he returns. He has ordained no other organization or structure for this purpose.

Matthew 16:18: "...I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

1 Timothy 3:15: "...if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth."

C. Our true nature as the church, and as Christians, is corporate.

Throughout the history of redemption, God has been acting to save a people, not a disconnected group of isolated individuals.

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

There are many aspects of the Christian life that we typically think of as involving our personal relationship with God: our response to the gospel, our growth in godliness, our love for doctrine, and our empowerment by God's Spirit. While all of these things are critical for our personal lives, it is possible to understand them, incorrectly, as involving *only* our personal lives.

It is a key assumption of New Testament teaching that the Christian life is to be lived out in relationship with other believers in the context of the local church. Although we enter into a relationship with God as individuals, we nevertheless enter into something greater than our own individuality: the church—the community of God's people.

II. Why Should I Join a Local Church?

Why go to all this trouble to learn about this church? Does it really matter if I actually join a church? Am I not already a member of "the universal Church"? Isn't my relationship with Jesus all that really matters? Such questions are common, and not altogether surprising given our individualistic culture and natural tendency toward independence.

However, such questions also reveal a misunderstanding about the church and God's purposes in and through the church. The Scriptures make it clear:

God's specific purposes for his people are accomplished as individuals join themselves to and participate in local churches. While all genuine believers are members of the universal body of Christ, they are to express this tangibly through membership in a specific local church.

A. Church membership is biblical.

The primary New Testament metaphors for the church – body (1 Corinthians 12:27), temple (Ephesians 2:21), household (1 Timothy 3:15), and flock (Acts 20:28) – have as a key characteristic the idea of separate individuals joined together into a single entity.

B. Church membership is vital to our spiritual health and growth.

Without being joined together with other believers, we will lack the strength and nourishment that each member—including ourselves—is to supply.

Ephesians 4:15-16: "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

C. Church membership is sharing life together.

Far from so many of our modern misconceptions, the biblical picture of the church can best be described as community: a group of people, joined by a common life, united by common values and a common purpose, devoted to living out this life together within the larger society. This is the type of church life to which God calls us—a life that shines as a testimony to his work in us. His intention for our lives together is more than simply attending the same Sunday meetings and believing the same doctrines.

Acts 2:42-47: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and 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."

"Those first Christians of Acts 2 were not devoting themselves to social activities but to a relationship...They understood that they had entered this relationship by faith in Jesus Christ, not by joining an organization. And they realized that their fellowship with God logically brought them into fellowship with one another. Through their union with Christ they were formed into a spiritually organic community...We must grasp the idea that fellowship means belonging to one another in the Body of Christ, with all the privileges and responsibilities that such a relationship entails." —**Jerry Bridges**

III. Fellowship: The Foundation of Our Relationships

Because the Holy Spirit has joined us together as a community, our relationships are to be marked by this reality. We don't simply attend the same service, or enjoy the same interests—we have been united at the deepest level by the Spirit of God. The New Testament characterizes our relationships with each other by the word *fellowship*.

“We should not think of our fellowship with other Christians as a spiritual luxury, an optional addition to the exercises of private devotions. Fellowship is one of the great words of the New Testament: it denotes something that is vital to a Christian's spiritual health, and central to the Church's true life...The Church will flourish and Christians will be strong only when there is fellowship.”

—J. I. Packer

A. What is fellowship?

The word often translated fellowship in the New Testament (*koinonia*—cf. Acts 2:42) is also rendered participation, partnership, and communion. The word expresses the idea of sharing something in common, or joining a mutual endeavor (often with sacrifice involved).

1. Biblical writers took up this word to describe the relationship believers have with God through Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:9: “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

2. It was also extended to describe the relationship believers have with each other.

1 John 1:3: “...that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

3. Our fellowship with God is what makes our fellowship with other believers unique. The richness Christians experience in their relationships with one another is human relationship at the deepest level possible.

Biblical fellowship is not merely “socializing”—it is sharing our common life in Christ: life that is rich, enduring, and eternal.

B. The biblical example of fellowship

The Bible describes fellowship in concrete terms as actions we do with or for “one another.” Here is a sampling:

1. Worship God together (Ephesians 5:18-20).
2. Pray for one another (Ephesians 6:18).
3. Carry one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2).
4. Encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11).
5. Confess our sins to one another (James 5:16).
6. Correct one another (Galatians 6:1; Matthew 18:15).
7. Serve one another (Galatians 5:13).

We must recognize our responsibilities as members of the body and position ourselves to serve others. In short, we must give ourselves to **purposeful involvement** in each others' lives.

IV. The Fruit of Our Fellowship

Genuine fellowship profoundly enriches our relationships within the church.

A. Growing in godliness. Sanctification is a group project. We simply cannot make the same progress in isolation that we can make in community with other believers.

1. We need the consistent encouragement of others. Consistent, intentional, and specific encouragement is to be a mark of those who serve “the God of encouragement” (Romans 15:5).

1 Thessalonians 5:11: “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”

2. We need others to help us resist sin and to strengthen our resolve for godliness.

Hebrews 3:13: “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

3. We need the input of others to help us see our sin and repent from it. Because we are naturally blind and deaf to our own sin, we desperately need the correction of others. When given and received humbly, correction is a true expression of biblical love.

Galatians 6:1: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”

4. We need to confess our sins to others so as to weaken sin's power and invite accountability. Few things are more effective in cultivating humility and promoting fellowship than confessing our sins and pursuing evaluation from others.

James 5:16: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”

B. Providing mutual care. We live in a fallen world, and the effects of sin—our own and others’—are all around us: pain, sorrow, sickness, death. God has promised to care for us, and much of his care comes to us through other believers. Indeed, Christians are to be distinguished by their sacrificial love for one another.

1 Corinthians 12:24-26: “But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”

C. Benefiting from the diversity of gifts. The Holy Spirit distributes gifts to build the church. But God has also made us dependent upon one another—no one person has all the gifts necessary. To mature as a body, we need

one another and the unique gifts each one brings.

Ephesians 4:16: "...from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

1 Corinthians 12:7: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

D. Presenting a compelling witness. Ultimately, our lives together are intended to show the world a compelling picture of the grace of God. Our unity and love for one another is one of the most powerful testimonies we can give to unbelievers who are lost, isolated, fragmented, and ultimately without hope.

John 13:35: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

V. A Means of Our Fellowship: Care Groups

One of the primary ways we build relationships and cultivate fellowship with each other here is through small groups—what we call “Care Groups.” While we are joined to all believers in the local church, Care Groups allow us to relate more deeply with a small number of people. An integral part of our church’s ministry since its founding, Care Groups provide an important context for accomplishing a number of biblical priorities.

“The value of the small group is that it can become a community of related persons, and in it the benefit of relatedness cannot be missed nor its challenge evaded. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say, therefore, that small groups... are indispensable for our growth into spiritual maturity.”—**John Stott**

A. The purpose of Care Groups

1. *Application of God’s word to our lives.* Merely hearing God’s word is insufficient; we must apply it to our lives for there to be fruit. Care Groups enable us to do this together. We seek to apply the Bible’s teaching, review Sunday messages, discuss Christian books, and use a variety of other resources with the intention of growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.
2. *Pursuit of biblical fellowship.* Genuine fellowship isn’t practical in a large crowd. Care Groups provide a place where we can build intimate relationships, care for one another, and help each other grow in our relationship with God. God has made us dependent on each other, and Care Groups also provide a context where we can minister to each other with the gifts that God has given us. Meetings often include times of prayer for one another and opportunities for individuals to exercise spiritual gifts for the edification of others.

B. Participation in Care Groups

Membership in this church assumes active involvement in a Care Group. Starting Point participants are encouraged to visit Care Groups as well as ask questions about them during class discussions. Each person will be placed in a Care Group after meeting with a pastor and finalizing his or her member-

ship. Each member is important to the group, and should seek to contribute to the group's health and success. We each have the responsibility to:

1. *Attend.* We're much more likely to benefit if we are actually present!
2. *Participate.* Come ready to contribute, serve, share, and open your self to others. When the group has an assignment, diligently complete it. Both you and others will benefit from your participation.

VI. The Church: Dear to God and Dear to Us

Our main concern is not whether you become part of our church, but that you become a part of a church. Ultimately, this is not an issue of our personal preference or convenience, but of the glory of God. We exist for his glory, and Scripture is clear that God desires to make his glory known through the church. This is why the church—the gathering of God's redeemed—is so dear to him. We trust it will become dear to you as well.

“If I had never joined a church till I had found one that was perfect, I should never have joined one at all. And the moment I did join it, if I had found one, I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us.” —**Charles Spurgeon**

As we see in the New Testament, this life is one that is to be shared with others. The church—with all its imperfections—is to be a foretaste of our fellowship with the saints in heaven (Hebrews 12:22-24). May this amazing privilege be our ongoing experience as we “continue the journey together.”

Also see Appendices A, E, F, and G:

A: Membership Agreement, p. 77

E: Commitment to Peacemaking and Reconciliation, p. 86

F: Commitment to Preserving Marriages, p. 88

G: Commitment to Accountability and Church Discipline, p. 89





Participating in the Journey

Servanthood and Stewardship

One of the realities of Christian existence is that we now belong to Another (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). All that we are and all that we have now belong to God. Of course, everything that we are and have—our personality, intellect, gifts, abilities, opportunities, possessions—has been given to us by God anyway (1 Corinthians 4:7)! Conversion simply gives the believer the opportunity to offer all of this back to God for his glory and for our eternal good.

A common metaphor in Jesus' parables is that of the servant—we are not called to be great as our culture defines greatness, but to serve faithfully. The words we long to hear on that final day are “Well done, good and *faithful* servant.” Such is the nature of the Christian life: serving is not something we do on occasion—it is a way of life. The Christian journey is not one of observation, but participation. In this lesson we will explore two of the primary ways we are called to *participate* in this journey: through servanthood and stewardship (the faithful use of our resources) within the context of the local church.

“Fellowship involves sharing what we have with others. One of the most valuable things we can share is ourselves: our time, our talents, and our energies in serving one another in the Body of Christ.” —**Jerry Bridges**

I. Servanthood

A. The Christian's call to serve

There are to be no passive participants in the church. Indeed, one of the express purposes of our salvation is to rescue us from an existence leading to death and to set us free to serve God:

“...how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Hebrews 9:14).

Serving is therefore a God-given expectation of every Christian. But it is much more than merely a duty; what higher privilege is there than to give one's life in

glad service to our gracious, sovereign God who saved us?

Since our service to God is closely connected to our salvation by God, we begin our exploration of servanthood with the greatest servant of all: Jesus Christ.

1. Servanthood is modeled by Jesus' example.

Although Jesus was worthy of the worship and service of all creatures, he humbled himself as a servant, and modeled a lifestyle of servanthood for all who would follow him.

Philippians 2:5-8: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

John 13:14-17: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

2. Servanthood is mandated by Jesus' call.

While we can do nothing to earn our salvation, our salvation nevertheless ushers us into a life of following our Master, relinquishing our prerogatives and rights.

Mark 10:43-45: "But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

3. Servanthood is motivated by Jesus' sacrifice.

At the heart of all of our service to God stands the cross. Because we stand forgiven, we are set free to find joy in knowing and serving God. Because the Spirit indwells us, we find we have fresh affections for God and a new desire to glorify God. We do not serve God in order to be forgiven or to gain God's favor, but because we have been forgiven and have received God's favor as a gift. Gratitude and joy provide the fuel for the believer's service to God and others.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15: "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."

"We should serve God not just because it is a duty, because serving him is much more than that. We should serve God because it glorifies God. He is worthy of everything we can do for him and his church. Wouldn't you agree?"

—Donald Whitney

B. The marks of Christian service

The grace of God expressed through the cross of Christ provides the primary basis for our service to God. When this is the case, our servanthood will be characterized by certain qualities that both provide godly motivation for service and assure that our service is glorifying and pleasing to God.

1. *Christian service is God-centered.* When we serve other people, whether they be fellow Christians in the local church or non-believers in our lives, we are actually rendering service to God himself.

Colossians 3:23-24: "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ."

2. *Christian service is others-focused.* When serving is motivated by grace, it will not be self-serving, but rather characterized by an authentic desire to glorify God and to meet the needs of others.

Galatians 5:13: "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."

3. *Christian service is characterized by humility.* True servanthood adopts a posture that others are more important than self. A servant doesn't demand recognition or dictate how he is to serve, but rather takes simple delight in being used by God to meet the needs of others.

Philippians: 2:3-4 "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

4. *Christian service is empowered by the Spirit of God.* The believer not only labors for God, but by the power God provides. Dependence upon God for motivation, strength, and effectiveness in serving assures that God receives the glory for our service. God gives each believer spiritual gifts that motivate and empower our service for his glory and others' good.

1 Peter 4:10-11: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ."

C. Giving expression to servanthood in our church family

An important aspect of membership here is finding a place to use one's gifts to glorify God and serve others. Involvement in service typically takes one of two forms:

1. **Spontaneous ministry opportunities:** We all have numerous opportunities provided to us by God to serve him and others. These spontaneous occasions encourage us in our dependence upon God and in cultivating the heart of a servant.

2. Structured ministries of the church: These include ongoing commitments made in various aspects of church life, such as Care Groups, Ministry Teams, and Children’s Ministry. These and other ministries of the church provide concrete opportunities for service that meet specific needs and spur us on in building relationships and growing in accountability.

II. Stewardship

Stewardship involves the faithful use of resources that belong to another. An important part of following Christ is the use of our material resources for God’s purposes and to meet the needs of others. In fact, Scripture is clear that an authentic relationship with Christ *will find expression* in the faithful use of our resources for his purposes. For the remainder of this lesson, we will examine a second important means of participation in the Christian journey: the use of our money and possessions for the glory of God, the work of his church, and the well-being of others.

“Christian stewardship is the management of life and all its resources for the glory of God.” —**Murray J. Harris**

A. *The reality of stewardship.* The faithful use of our resources begins with a stark realization: God owns everything! All that we have comes from him, and therefore we don’t really own anything; we are merely stewards—overseers or managers—over things that belong to God.

Psalm 50:10-12: “For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.”

B. *The purpose of stewardship.* In addition to meeting our physical needs, God provides material resources to further the work of his kingdom through the local church.

Throughout salvation history, God has called his people to support his work through giving.

1. In the Old Testament, God’s people were to give a tithe, or the first tenth, of their income to God. This practice predated the giving of the Law (Genesis 14:20; Genesis 28:22), and was later formalized in the Law of Moses for the maintenance of the temple and provision for the priests and Levites who served there (Leviticus 27:30-32; Deuteronomy 14:22-24).
2. In the New Testament, giving to support the work of the church remained an expectation of believers. In fact, the financial support of the New Testament church is likened to the support of the temple in the Old Testament (1 Corinthians 9:13-14).
 - a. Giving to support the needs of individuals:

Acts 4:34-35: “There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

- b. Giving to support the church's leaders so they can devote their time and energies to serving the church:

1 Corinthians 9:13-14: "Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel."

- c. Giving to support the extension of the gospel:

Philippians 4:15-16: "And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again."

- 3. The practice of tithing illustrates important guidelines and provides a helpful starting point for regular giving to the church.

- a. Believers are commanded to financially support the local church where they receive care and training.

1 Timothy 5:17-18: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'"

1 Corinthians 9:13-14: "Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (cf. Matthew 10:10).

- b. In the New Testament, obedience to God's law is intensified due to the transforming work of the Spirit in light of Christ's work on the cross (for example, hatred is likened to murder—Matthew 5:21-22; lust is likened to adultery—Matthew 5:27-28). In the same way, our giving is not merely to be thought of as "paying our dues," but should flow from the giving of our entire selves to God. In light of this, tithing is a reminder of God's ownership of us, and is an appropriate starting point for our giving.

2 Corinthians 8:3-5: "For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us."

- c. We are to give regularly and systematically. This demonstrates a commitment to God and a trust that he will provide for all our needs (see Exodus 23:19).

1 Corinthians 16:2: "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper..."

4. Offerings over and above our regular giving provide for special needs, specific ministries, care for the deserving poor, and the expansion of the gospel.

Acts 4:34-35: "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

C. The character of stewardship. The faithful use of our resources is not only commanded by God; it is in fact an undeniable indicator of our spiritual health. Moreover, what we actually do with our money reveals where our heart truly is (Matthew 6:21). Materialism, selfishness, greed, hoarding, anxiety over money—all of these reveal that our trust lies not in God but in money. In the same way, generosity and faithfulness reveal that our trust is in God—by such things we confess that God, not our possessions, is the source of our life.

Luke 16:11-13: "If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

Matthew 6:19-21: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Here is a sampling of the motives and attitudes Scripture commands in the area of giving:

1. Giving is to be generous, not stingy.

2 Corinthians 9:6: "The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."

2. Giving is to be enthusiastic, not grudging.

2 Corinthians 9:7: "Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

3. Giving is to be deliberate, not haphazard.

2 Corinthians 9:7: "Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (cf. Acts 11:29).

4. Giving is to be discreet, not showy.

Matthew 6:1-4: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what

your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

5. Giving is to be with faith, not anxiety.

Malachi 3:10: “Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.”

III. The Privilege of Participation

One of the great tragedies in much of western Christianity is the misconception that “church” is an ornate building or a service to be attended, rather than the community of God’s people, saved by his grace. By definition, then, to be a member of the church is to be a participant in the life of God, with the people of God, made possible by the grace of God. Viewed in this light, our participation in the life of the church is not an option, or the prerogative of a privileged few, but the call and responsibility of every person redeemed through the work of Christ on the cross. Having been purchased by God, we have the awesome privilege of offering all that we are and have to him for his glory.



*“And he gave the
apostles, the prophets,
the evangelists, the
pastors and teachers,
to equip the saints
for the work of
ministry...”*

—Ephesians 4:11-12



Care Along the Journey

Pastoral Leadership

We have explored how the journey of the Christian life is not to be merely an individual one, but a journey we undertake with others. We are not self-sufficient, independent creatures, but we need the help and blessing that comes from relationships with other believers in the context of the local church. In addition to the normal relationships with others in the church, God provides another essential means of grace for our lives: the leadership and care that comes from pastoral ministry.

To enable the building of his church and the extension of the gospel, God has appointed leaders within the local church. God's desire is for churches to experience the maturity, stability, and fruitfulness that result when leadership and care are extended by gifted leaders with proven character. In this lesson, we will explore the biblical mandate for, and strategic importance of, pastoral leadership—God's provision for all of us to experience “care along the journey.”

I. The Biblical Basis for Pastoral Ministry

A. Clarifying the terms

The New Testament uses three main terms to speak of what we typically call a “pastor:” elder (*presbyteros*-Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 5:17), overseer/bishop (*episkopos*-1 Timothy 3:1-2; Titus 1:7), and pastor (*poimen*-Ephesians 4:11¹). Scholars have long agreed that these terms, instead of indicating separate offices, actually give us three different facets of the same office:

- *Overseer/bishop* indicates the role of oversight.
- *Pastor* indicates the role of care.
- *Elder* indicates the necessity of spiritual maturity.

¹The verb form of the word “pastor” appears in 1 Peter 5:2.

B. The imperative of a biblical perspective

It is increasingly popular for pastoral ministry to be pragmatically defined or culturally conditioned, rather than scripturally determined. When this occurs, the role of the pastor is distorted, the effectiveness of the pastor is diminished, and the health of the church is weakened.

II. The Characteristics of a Pastor/Elder

The Scriptures give us clear guidelines for viewing pastors and for determining what pastors are to be like. These markers provide for us both perspective (to view this through God's eyes) and protection (from cultural distortion).

A. A gift from God to the church

Unlike gifts such as prophecy, healing, and mercy, some gifts God gives to the church are actually *people*—the leaders God gives to serve the church.

Ephesians 4:7-8, 11-14: "But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.' ...And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."

B. A model for the church

Pastors are to lead lives of integrity, faithfully modeling biblical standards for the Christian life. Indeed, all of the biblical qualifications for an elder except one deal with *character*. Pastors are certainly not sinless, but there should be the consistent display of these characteristics in their lives.

1 Timothy 3:1-7: "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil."

Pastors in this local church take this responsibility to be an example seriously, and they pursue accountability to a group of leaders within the church and to a designated representative of Sovereign Grace Ministries.

C. Consistent with God's design for the church

In addition to the requirement of godly character, Scripture also teaches that

leadership in the church is to be exercised in a primary way by men (1 Timothy 2:11-15). This requirement, far from being an outmoded, culturally-conditioned standard, instead reflects the unique and complementary roles men and women have as part of the created order.

We seek to affirm and apply all that Scripture teaches about manhood and womanhood. Indeed, the biblical vision of manhood and womanhood is a glorious one! Both men and women are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Therefore, men and women are equal in value and dignity. We have equal worth before God, equal access to Christ and the blessings of salvation (Galatians 3:28; Acts 2:17-18), and we are equally valued members of the body of Christ. This Scriptural vision leaves no room for feelings of superiority or inferiority, for pride or discouragement, on the basis of gender.

Scripture is also clear that men and women have different—but equally valuable—roles in the home and in the church. All members of the body of Christ are gifted by God and are essential to the health of the church (1 Corinthians 12:4-26). However, Scripture restricts the primary governing and teaching roles in the church to men (1 Timothy 2:11-15). Because we desire Scripture to govern our practice, the pastors of this church are all men. As pastors, we count it an unspeakable privilege to care for and equip all the members of our church—both men and women—to fulfill their God-given callings and to bear fruit for his glory and for the good of the church.

Also see Appendix C, The 10 Affirmations of the Danvers Statement, p. 81.

D. Recognized by the church

Since God gives leadership to the church, it is the responsibility of the church—and especially the church's leaders—to recognize and acknowledge this leadership. When we use biblical criteria to assess leadership in the church, we can be confident that our leaders are called by God and given to the church to lead us.

“God, who drafts men and fits them for ministry, intends that his work in them be on display so brightly that the church is able to see it, and then able to confirm his call through their appointment to public ministry.” —**David Hegg**

III. The Role of a Pastor/Elder

In the early stages of the church, leaders recognized the importance of maintaining biblical priorities in their labors (see Acts 6:1-4). The Scriptures outline what the job description of a pastor should be.

A. Lead the church.

According to Scripture, elders are called by God and accountable to God to lead the local church. The Bible describes this in various ways:

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

*1 Peter 5:2: “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, **exercising oversight...**”*

1 Timothy 3:4-5: “[An elder] must **manage** his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he **care for** God’s church?”

Romans 12:6, 8: “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them:...the one who **leads**, with zeal.”

B. Nourish the church.

God has ordained his word as the primary instrument for the nourishment and strengthening of his church, and he charges pastors with the task of feeding the church with his word. Indeed, the health and future of the church depends upon its leaders faithfully transmitting sound doctrine and biblical practice to others.

1 Timothy 4:6: “In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following” (NASB).

2 Timothy 4:1-2: “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”

C. Equip the church.

The pastor is to be an equipper, training the church so that each member may be positioned for maximum fruitfulness in his or her life. One sign of effective pastoral ministry is the extent to which people are equipped to then serve others. In a healthy local church, leaders **train**—people **minister**!

Ephesians 4:11-12: “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry...”

D. Protect the church.

As shepherds of God’s people, pastors are called to protect the church from the dangers it faces, such as false teaching, the allurements of the world, and the ravaging effects of sin. Pastors protect the church in a variety of ways:

1. Teaching sound doctrine to strengthen the church in its faith and life

1 Timothy 4:6: “In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following” (NASB).

2. Discerning errors and temptations offered by the culture, to protect the church from erroneous doctrine or practice

Acts 20:28-31: “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. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.”

3. Modeling, encouraging, and protecting biblical standards of godliness. This includes, when necessary, the administering of church discipline in cases of unrepentant believers in a biblical and redemptive manner.

Matthew 18:15-17: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

"A shepherd's oversight of the flock expresses itself broadly in two ways. First, the shepherds provide truthful, positive direction and leadership to the flock. Second, they watch for spiritual dangers such as sin, false teaching, and false teachers, including Satan's assaults against the church."

—**John MacArthur, Jr.**

Also see Appendix G, Commitment to Accountability and Church Discipline, p. 89.

E. Serve the church.

Although pastors are responsible to lead the church, they are to do so as servants. Following the example of Jesus who "came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45), leaders are to posture themselves as servants and expend themselves for the glory of God and the good of others.

Mark 10:43-45: "But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

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

IV. The Biblical Response to Leadership in the Church

A. Actively identify your designated place of involvement.

The New Testament is clear that each Christian is allotted by God to a specific local church and to the eldership of that church. This divine assignment results in numerous benefits:

- It helps to ensure that believers are properly cared for.
- It provides an explicit context in which believers are to serve others.
- It helps leaders to identify those for whom they are accountable before God.
- It creates an accountability arrangement in which unrepentant believers can be cared for biblically and redemptively.

Hebrews 13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

B. Exercise the responsibilities of membership.

At our church, there are certain expectations of members, which are simply expressions of a biblical commitment to a particular local church. It would be natural to expect that any member who is pursuing his or her relationship with God and believes that God has called him or her to this church will fulfill these expectations:

1. Support of the church's Statement of Faith
2. Consistent participation in the Sunday morning meeting
3. Consistent participation in a Care Group
4. Regular involvement in serving
5. Regular financial support of the church
6. Willingness to support and follow the leadership of the church
7. A commitment to living by God's word and to growing in godliness

C. Maintain a biblical attitude toward your leaders.

To our individualistic culture, the Bible's commands concerning leaders might seem antiquated or, perhaps, authoritative. Neither is the case. And, as with all the Bible's commands, proper understanding and faith-filled obedience will result in blessing for ourselves and for the church as a whole. By what should our attitudes be characterized?

1. A faith-filled submission

Hebrews 13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

Submission does not mean passivity or blind obedience. Rather, submission is an expression of faith towards God—that he has appointed leaders for us and he will use them for our good. It recognizes the critical role that leadership plays in bringing about God's purposes in the church and in the lives of believers. Fundamentally, submission is an attitude: *a disposition to affirm and support the leadership of the church, and to increase its effectiveness through joyful and faith-filled participation.*

2. A God-honoring appreciation

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

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13: "We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves."

The appeal to honor leaders can seem self-serving. Biblically, though, honor is an expression of humility and integrity. The biblical concept of honor exhorts us to recognize God's provision through another person, to cultivate

gratitude for this provision, and rightfully to appreciate and acknowledge those who have served and benefited us. In so doing, we are actually giving glory to God for his goodness to us through other people. There exists an unfortunate confusion between exalting leaders and honoring leaders in the body of Christ. Exalting leaders is idolatry and is totally unacceptable. Honoring leaders, however, is biblical and should be the regular attitude and practice of every Christian.

D. Support your leaders in their labors.

The apostle John voiced a sentiment which resonates in the heart of every pastor: *“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth”* (3 John 4). In addition to passionately pursuing God, believers can support the labors of their pastors in many ways. For example:

- Joyfully participating in the life of the church
- Praying for your pastors
- Refusing to listen to slander or accusation against your pastors
(1 Timothy 5:19)

V. The Blessings of Leadership

Biblically, ungodly leadership (or the absence of leadership) is viewed as an expression of God’s judgment, and godly leadership as an expression of blessing (e.g., Isaiah 3:1-5). The same is true in the church: God appoints leaders for the purpose of bringing about his intentions for the church, including health, growth, stability, and maturity.

Ultimately, the church’s leaders are a primary means by which God’s own care for his people is expressed. Pastors are merely under-shepherds, laboring on behalf of the Chief Shepherd—Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:2, 4). As a famous hymn states, the journey of the Christian life is fraught with “many dangers, toils, and snares.” Leadership in the church helps provide “care along the journey,” that we might not only have safe passage, but grow into the fullness of God’s purposes for the church, for his glory.



*"...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."
—Matthew 5:16*



Reaching Others on the Journey

Evangelism and Mission

We've looked at many essential topics that relate to our relationship with God and with other believers in the context of the local church. However, our study wouldn't be complete without giving attention to a critical component of the Christian life: the mandate from our Lord to reach others with the gospel. Our relationship with God was never intended to be merely a private journey concerned only with one's personal beliefs. On the contrary, those who have been reconciled to God through the work of Christ by definition become "ambassadors for God" in sharing the gospel with others (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

One of the songs of Revelation proclaims that Christ's death ransomed people for God "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelations 5:9). As we turn our attention to the church's mission to glorify God through the proclamation of the gospel throughout the earth, we will see that each of us has the great privilege and responsibility of sharing the gospel with others, demonstrating its reality in our lives, and participating in the mission of the local church.

I. Church with a Mission

We want to avoid the mistake of viewing church life as simply a routine to fulfill, or viewing ourselves as a static gathering of believers. From the very beginning, God's people had, at the core of their identity, an element of mission, and the goal of expansion.

A. The plan commenced: God's covenant with Abraham. When God revealed himself to Abraham, he promised not only to bless Abraham, but to in turn make him and his descendants a blessing to all the nations of the earth.

Genesis 22:17-18: "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

B. The plan continued: The Great Commission. After Jesus accomplished his atoning work on the cross, he gave his followers a mandate to proclaim the gospel to all the nations. It is through the proclamation of the gospel that God will gather his people to himself, and thus fulfill his original promise to Abraham to bless “all the nations.”

Matthew 28:18-20: “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”

C. The plan completed: The heavenly throng. We see the ultimate fulfillment of God’s plan and Jesus’ commission in the book of Revelation, which pictures people from all over the earth giving glory to God and to the Lamb of God who died for them. The Bible is clear that God’s intention to bring glory to his name by gathering a people to himself will surely reach its intended goal.

Revelation 7:9-10: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

II. People with a Message: Evangelism

Since every Christian has personally experienced the grace of God through the gospel, each of us has a part to play in this glorious commission as we testify to the salvation God offers through the gospel.

“Evangelism is the verbal proclamation of the good news of salvation with a view of leading people to a right relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.”

—D.S. Lim

A. The participants in evangelism: every Christian!

The work of evangelism is essentially that of bearing witness—each of us is called to testify to what God has done for us through the gospel. Each of us has been empowered by God, and each of us has his or her own story to tell of God’s amazing grace to us through the cross.

Acts 1:8: “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.”

1 Peter 3:15-16: “but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...”

B. The substance of evangelism: the Gospel

We aren’t merely calling others to live a moral life, or asking them simply to “believe in God,” or trying to convince them that Christians are “nice people.”

Salvation comes only through faith in the finished work of Christ on our behalf. As the apostle Peter said, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Romans 1:16: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

The gospel is the “good news” of God’s saving work on our behalf through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Communicating the gospel faithfully will help to preserve its power and protect us from distorting its truth.

C. The method of our evangelism: declaration and demonstration

1. *Declaration*: Telling the good news

Romans 10:14-15: “But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’”

Since the gospel is, by definition, “good news,” evangelism always involves the sharing of this news. Every Christian is called to be an ambassador of the gospel, and we seek to equip each of our members to share the gospel accurately, joyfully, and faithfully.

2. *Demonstration*: Living the good news

Matthew 5:13-16: “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

In addition to proclaiming the gospel, Christians are to testify to the reality of the gospel by the way they live. The Bible describes believers as “...his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). These good works include deeds of kindness and love that express God’s love to people and give credibility to the message we proclaim.

This demonstration of the gospel takes place in countless, daily ways through the lives of individuals and families as they live in our community. We are also seeking to facilitate this demonstration through various organized ministries now and in the days to come, through which our members can use their gifts to care for others and testify to the gospel.

D. The context of our evangelism

1. *Personal*. We encourage each of our members to bear witness to Jesus Christ and share the gospel in the *network of relationships* He provides to us. These “fields of harvest” (see Matthew 9:38) include our family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, classmates—anyone whom God has sovereignly

placed in our lives.

2. *Corporate.* We believe that God has a plentiful harvest for us to reap in our region. We therefore seek to reach those in the area in which God has placed us, and to provide contexts our members can utilize to reach out to those in their relational networks.

III. Our Broader Mission: Church Planting

While we have a specific mission as a church, we are also part of a family of churches under the name of Sovereign Grace Ministries. Sovereign Grace Ministries is a church-planting ministry with a growing family of churches in the U.S., Mexico, Canada, Bolivia, Ethiopia, and the U.K., joined together by relationship and common doctrine. Our broader mission includes participation with other churches in the planting of new churches through Sovereign Grace.

- *Purpose:* The primary purpose of Sovereign Grace Ministries is to establish and nurture local churches to God's glory.
- *Structure:* Sovereign Grace is led by C.J. Mahaney and a team of men committed to planting and supporting churches as well as caring for and training pastors.
- *Function:* Individual churches participate in church planting by helping to raise up leaders and sending teams of people to new cities for new church plants.
- *Other Ministries:* As part of its effort to equip and strengthen local churches, Sovereign Grace also serves churches in numerous other ways designed to care for pastors, strengthen believers, and help grow strong churches. Its other activities include a Pastors College, conferences, and an online store featuring books, music, and audio/video resources.



"...therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." —Matthew 9:38

NEXT
STEPS



Next Steps

What Happens After Starting Point

We are so grateful that you have joined us for this “journey” of exploring Covenant Life Church. We trust that the past weeks have been encouraging and informative as you seek to determine God’s will for your life, especially with regard to your involvement in a specific church. What we have said before bears repeating: although we do hope that you will find in Covenant Life a church home where you can thrive, *our main burden is not that you become a part of this church, but that you become a part of some church.* It is our desire that you develop a biblical, enthusiastic conviction about the importance of active involvement in the local church, and with this conviction find a church home where you can worship God, grow in your relationship with him, and serve in ways that glorify him.

If you’ve completed the Starting Point class and would like to become a member of Covenant Life Church, the process is a simple one with a few straightforward requirements:

1. A clear testimony of personal faith in Jesus Christ
2. Successful completion of Starting Point class
3. Support of the church’s Statement of Faith (see Appendix B, p. 78)
4. Signing the Membership Agreement (see Appendix A, p. 77)
5. A meeting with a pastor to discuss church membership
6. Baptism as a believer

Upon completion of these requirements, you will be welcomed into membership with other new members during a Sunday morning meeting. We welcome new members into the church on a regular basis and consider these special Sundays significant days in the life of our church.

If there are any remaining questions, please do not hesitate to ask. We want to do all we can to serve you as you consider the very important decision of church involvement. Whatever decision you make, we hope your time here has increased your love for the Lord, and has strengthened you to “continue the journey” as you seek to glorify God, cherish the Savior, and serve his purposes in the context of the local church. May God’s richest blessings be upon you!

Appendix A: Membership Agreement

Our Commitments to One Another in the Sight of God

Having believed in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, having been baptized¹, and being in agreement with Covenant Life Church's Statement of Faith, I now desire to become a member of Covenant Life Church. In doing so, I pledge to honor the Savior, love my fellow members, and live in a manner that is consistent with the commitments below.

The three commitments are based on Mark 12:28-31:

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Through grace...

1. I will seek to LOVE GOD...

- By reading his Word and praying (*2 Tim. 3:16-17, Col. 4:2*)
- By obeying his commandments in Scripture (*John 14:15*)
- By keeping the gospel central in my life (*1 Cor. 15:1-5*)
- By growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ (*2 Pet. 3:18*)

2. I will seek to LOVE THE CHURCH...

- By attending the Sunday meeting (*Heb. 10:24-25*)
- By participating in a Care Group (*Eph. 4:15-16*)
- By serving in the church and community (*1 Pet. 4:10-11*)
- By resolving personal conflicts and refusing to gossip (*Eph. 4:17-5:2*)
- By supporting church discipline as necessary² (*Matt. 18:15-17*)

3. I will seek to LOVE THE WORLD...

- By living in a manner worthy of the gospel (*Matt. 5:13-16, 1 Pet. 2:9-12*)
- By sharing the gospel with unbelievers in my life (*Rom. 1:16, Eph. 6:15*)
- By praying for the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth (*Luke 10:2*)
- By giving financially to the mission of the gospel in Covenant Life Church (*2 Cor. 9:6-8*)

¹ or if I have not been baptized, having scheduled with my pastor to be baptized soon

² as detailed in Appendix G, Commitment to Accountability and Church Discipline, p. 89

Appendix B:

Statement of Faith

THE SCRIPTURES

We accept the Bible, including the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament, as the written Word of God. The Bible is the only essential and infallible record of God's self-disclosure to mankind. It leads us to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Being given by God, the Scriptures are both fully and verbally inspired by God. Therefore, as originally given, the Bible is free of error in all it teaches. Each book is to be interpreted according to its context and purpose and in reverent obedience to the Lord, who speaks through it in living power. All believers are exhorted to study the Scriptures and diligently apply them to their lives. The Scriptures are the authoritative and normative rule and guide of all Christian life, practice, and doctrine. They are totally sufficient and must not be added to, superseded, or changed by later tradition, extra-biblical revelation, or worldly wisdom. Every doctrinal formulation, whether of creed, confession, or theology must be put to the test of the full counsel of God in Holy Scripture.

GOD IS TRIUNE

There is one God: infinite, eternal, almighty, and perfect in holiness, truth, and love. In the unity of the godhead there are three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, co-existent, co-equal, co-eternal. The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Holy Spirit, yet each is truly Deity. One God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is the foundation of Christian faith and life.

GOD THE FATHER

God the Father is the Creator of heaven and earth. By his word and for his glory, he freely and supernaturally created the world out of nothing. Through the same Word, he daily sustains all his creatures. He rules over all and is the only Sovereign. His plans and purposes cannot be thwarted. He is faithful to every promise, works all things together for good to those who love him, and in his unfathomable grace gave his Son, Jesus Christ, for mankind's redemption. He made man for fellowship with himself, and intended that all creation should live to the praise of his glory.

JESUS CHRIST

Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, was the eternal Word made flesh, supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. He was perfect in nature, teaching and obedience. He is fully God and fully man. He was always with God and is God. Through him all things came into being and were created. He was before all things and in him all things hold together by the word of his power. He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation and in him dwells the fullness of the godhead bodily. He is the only Savior for the sins of the world, having shed his blood and died a vicarious death on Calvary's cross. By his death in our place, he revealed the divine love and upheld divine justice, removing our guilt and reconciling us to God. Having redeemed us from sin, the third day he rose bodily from the grave, victorious over death and the powers of darkness and for a period of forty days appeared to over five hundred witnesses performing many convincing proofs of his resurrection. He ascended into heaven where, at God's right hand, he intercedes for his people and rules as Lord over all. He is the Head of his body the Church and should be adored, loved, served, and obeyed by all.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. Through the proclamation of the gospel, he persuades men to repent of their sins and confess Jesus as Lord. By the same Spirit, a person is led to trust in divine mercy. The Holy Spirit unites believers to Jesus Christ in faith, brings about the new birth, and dwells within the regenerate. The Holy Spirit has come to glorify the Son who in turn came to glorify the Father. He will lead the Church into a right understanding and rich application of the truth of God's Word. He is to be respected, honored, and worshipped as God the Third Person of the Trinity.

MAN

God made man—male and female—in his own image, as the crown of creation, that man might have fellowship with him. Tempted by Satan, man rebelled against God. Being estranged from his Maker, yet responsible to him, he became subject to divine wrath, inwardly depraved and apart from a special work of grace, utterly incapable of returning to God. This depravity is radical and pervasive. It extends to his mind, will and affections. Unregenerate man lives under the dominion of sin and Satan. He is at enmity with God, hostile toward God, and hateful of God. Fallen, sinful people, whatever their character or attainments, are lost and without hope apart from salvation in Christ.

THE GOSPEL

Jesus Christ is the gospel. The good news is revealed in his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension. Christ's crucifixion is the heart of the gospel, his resurrection is the power of the gospel and his ascension is the glory of the gospel. Christ's death is a substitutionary and propitiatory sacrifice to God for our sins. It satisfies the demands of God's holy justice and appeases his holy wrath. It also demonstrates his mysterious love and reveals his amazing grace. Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man. There is no other name by which men must be saved. At the heart of all sound doctrine is the Cross of Jesus Christ and the infinite privilege that redeemed sinners have of glorifying God because of what he has accomplished. Therefore, we want all that takes place in our hearts, churches and ministries to proceed from and be related to the Cross.

MAN'S RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL

Man's response to the gospel is rooted and grounded in the free and unconditional election of God for his own pleasure and glory. It is also true that the message of the gospel is only effectual to those who genuinely repent of their sins and, by God's grace, put saving faith in Christ. This gospel of grace is to be sincerely preached to all men in all nations. Biblical repentance is characterized by a changed life, and saving faith is evidenced by kingdom service or works. While neither repentance nor works save, unless a person is willing to deny himself, pick up his cross, and follow Christ, he cannot become his disciple.

MAN'S INHERITANCE THROUGH THE GOSPEL

Salvation, the free gift of God, is provided by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone, for the glory of God alone. Anyone turning from sin in repentance and looking to Christ and his substitutionary death receives the gift of eternal life and is declared righteous by God as a free gift. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to him. He is justified and fully accepted by God. Through Christ's atonement for sin an individual is reconciled to God as Father and becomes his child. The believer is forgiven the debt of his sin and via the miracle of regeneration, liberated from the law of sin and death into the freedom of God's Spirit.

SANCTIFICATION

The Holy Spirit is the active agent in our sanctification and seeks to produce his fruit in us as our minds are renewed and we are conformed to the image of Christ. Though indwelling sin remains a reality, as we are led by the Spirit, we grow in the knowledge of the Lord, freely keeping his commandments and endeavoring to so live in the world that all people may see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven. All believers are exhorted to persevere in the faith, knowing they will have to give an account to God for their every thought, word and deed. The spiritual disciplines, especially Bible study, prayer, worship and confession, are a vital means of grace in this regard. Nevertheless, the believer's ultimate confidence to persevere is based in the sure promise of God to preserve his people until the end which is most certain.

EMPOWERED BY THE SPIRIT

In addition to effecting regeneration and sanctification, the Holy Spirit also empowers believers for Christian witness and service. While all genuine believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit at conversion, the New Testament indicates the importance of an ongoing, empowering work of the Spirit subsequent to conversion as well. Being indwelt by the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit are theologically distinct experiences. The Holy Spirit desires to fill each believer continually with increased power for Christian life and witness, and imparts his supernatural gifts for the edification of the Body and for

various works of ministry in the world. All the gifts of the Holy Spirit at work in the church of the first-century are available today, are vital for the mission of the church, and are to be earnestly desired and practiced.

THE CHURCH

God by his Word and Spirit creates the Church, calling sinful men out of the whole human race into the fellowship of Christ's Body. By the same Word and Spirit, he guides and preserves that new redeemed humanity. The Church is not a religious institution or denomination. Rather, the Church universal is made up of those who have become genuine followers of Jesus Christ and have personally appropriated the gospel. The Church exists to worship and glorify God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It also exists to serve him by faithfully doing his will in the earth. This involves a commitment to see the gospel preached and churches planted in all the world for a testimony. The ultimate mission of the Church is the making of disciples through the preaching of the gospel. When God transforms human nature, this then becomes the chief means of society's transformation. Upon conversion, newly redeemed men and women are added to a local church in which they devote themselves to teaching, fellowship, the Lord's Supper and prayer.

All members of the Church universal are to be a vital and committed part of a local church. In this context they are called to walk out the New Covenant as the people of God and demonstrate the reality of the kingdom of God. The ascended Christ has given gift ministries to the church (including apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) for the equipping of Christ's body, that it might mature and grow. Through the gift ministries, all members of the Church are to be nurtured and equipped for the work of ministry. Women play a vital role in the life of the church, but in keeping with God's created design, they are not permitted "to teach or to have authority over a man" (1 Tim. 2:11). Leadership in the church is male. In the context of the local church, God's people receive pastoral care and leadership and the opportunity to employ their God-given gifts in his service in relation to one another and to the world.

SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH

Baptism is only intended for the individual who has received the saving benefits of Christ's atoning work and become his disciple. Therefore, in obedience to Christ's command and as a testimony to God, the Church, oneself and the world, a believer should be immersed in water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism is a visual demonstration of a person's union with Christ in the likeness of his death and resurrection. It signifies that his former way of life has been put to death and vividly depicts a person's release from the mastery of sin.

As with baptism, the Lord's Supper is to be observed only by those who have become genuine followers of Christ. This ordinance symbolizes the breaking of Christ's body and the shedding of his blood on our behalf, and is to be observed repeatedly throughout the Christian life as a sign of continued participation in the atoning benefits of Christ's death. As we partake of the Lord's Supper with an attitude of faith and self-examination, we remember and proclaim the death of Christ, receive spiritual nourishment for our souls, and signify our unity with other members of Christ's body.

THE CONSUMMATION

The Consummation of all things includes the visible, personal and glorious return of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the translation of those alive in Christ, the judgment of the just and the unjust, and the fulfillment of Christ's kingdom in the new heavens and the new earth. In the Consummation, Satan with his hosts and all those outside Christ are finally separated from the benevolent presence of God, enduring eternal punishment, but the righteous, in glorious bodies, shall live and reign with him forever. Married to Christ as his Bride, the Church will be in the presence of God forever, serving him and giving him unending praise and glory. Then shall the eager expectation of creation be fulfilled and the whole earth shall proclaim the glory of God, who makes all things new.

Appendix C:

The 10 Affirmations of the Danvers Statement

In December 1987, the newly formed Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW)¹ met in Danvers, Mass., to compose the Danvers Statement on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. As a church we agree with the following statement.

Based on our understanding of biblical teachings, we affirm the following:

1. Both Adam and Eve were created in God's image, equal before God as persons distinct in their manhood and womanhood (Gen. 1:26-27, 2:18).
2. Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order, and should find an echo in every human heart (Gen. 2:18, 21-24; 1 Cor. 11:7-9; 1 Tim. 2:12-14).
3. Adam's headship in marriage was established by God before the Fall, and was not a result of sin (Gen. 2:16-18, 21-24, 3:1-13; 1 Cor. 11:7-9).
4. The Fall introduced distortions into the relationships between men and women (Gen. 3:1-7, 12, 16).
 - In the home, the husband's loving, humble headship tends to be replaced by domination or passivity; the wife's intelligent, willing submission tends to be replaced by usurpation or servility.
 - In the church, sin inclines men toward a worldly love of power or an abdication of spiritual responsibility, and inclines women to resist limitations on their roles or to neglect the use of their gifts in appropriate ministries.
5. The Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, manifests the equally high value and dignity, which God attached to the roles of both men and women (Gen. 1:26-27, 2:18; Gal. 3:28). Both the Old and New Testaments also affirm the principle of male headship in the family and in the covenant community (Gen. 2:18; Eph. 5:21-33; Col. 3:18-19; 1 Tim. 2:11-15).
6. Redemption in Christ aims at removing the distortions introduced by the curse.
 - In the family, husbands should forsake harsh or selfish leadership and grow in love and care for their wives; wives should forsake resistance to their husbands' authority and grow in willing, joyful submission to their husbands' leadership (Eph. 5:21-33; Col. 3:18-19; Titus 2:3-5; 1 Pet. 3:1-7).
 - In the church, redemption in Christ gives men and women an equal share in the blessings of salvation; nevertheless, some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men (Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 11:2-16; 1 Tim. 2:11-15).
7. In all of life Christ is the supreme authority and guide for men and women, so that no earthly submission—domestic, religious, or civil—ever implies a mandate to follow a human authority into sin (Dan. 3:10-18; Acts 4:19-20, 5:27-29; 1 Pet. 3:1-2).
8. In both men and women a heartfelt sense of call to ministry should never be used to set aside biblical criteria for particular ministries (1 Tim. 2:11-15, 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). Rather, biblical teaching should remain the authority for testing our subjective discernment of God's will.
9. With half the world's population outside the reach of indigenous evangelism; with countless other lost people in those societies that have heard the gospel; with the stresses and miseries of sickness, malnutrition, homelessness, illiteracy, ignorance, aging, addiction, crime, incarceration, neuroses, and loneliness, no man or woman who feels a passion from God to make his grace known in word and deed need ever live without fulfilling ministry for the glory of Christ and the good of this fallen world (1 Cor. 12:7-21).
10. We are convinced that a denial or neglect of these principles will lead to increasingly destructive consequences in our families, our churches, and the culture at large.

¹ C.J. Mahaney, who now leads Sovereign Grace Ministries, is a board member of CBMW. Our senior pastor, Joshua Harris is a Council member.

Appendix D:

The Sacraments - Questions and Answers for Parents¹

1. What is a sacrament?

A sacrament is a blessing from Christ which is a sign (a picture) and a seal (a mark of being set apart) given to believers in order to teach and assure us of our salvation. The Lord ordained two sacraments: baptism (Matt. 28:19) and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23), also known as communion. Participation in the sacraments does not bring salvation; this comes only by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (Eph. 2:8-9; Gal. 2:16).

2. What is baptism?

Baptism is the sacrament which uniquely depicts initiation into the Christian life, portraying the believer's union with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5). It points to the beginning of the Christian life (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38) and displays one's commitment to Christ, a commitment which will be lived out in the local church.

"Baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church."

—John Calvin

3. When should a child be baptized?

Only when he or she can provide a believable profession of faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41; Gal. 3:27).

4. What is a believable profession of faith?

Anyone professing Jesus Christ as Lord should be able to:

- Communicate the content of the gospel as well as an expression of faith in Jesus Christ for salvation.
- Evidence godly sorrow over sin, followed by repentance which leads to the fruit of the Spirit.
- Have the ability to examine himself and the condition of his soul (1 Cor. 11:27-32).
- Have demonstrated a willingness to turn away from the world and instead live a life keeping God's commands and loving God's church (1 John 2:15-17; 5:1-5).
- Exhibit fruit which proceeds from regeneration (Gal. 5:22-23).

5. Does God save young children?

Yes! God can and does convert young children (Rom. 10:9-13, Acts 2:21). However, we also recognize that the nature of children, their intellectual immaturity, the frequency with which they change their opinions, the ease with which they can be influenced, and for many, their limited exposure to worldly things, makes it exceedingly difficult to discern with certainty whether a child is truly converted. The younger a child is, the more difficult this becomes.

¹Thanks to Mark Mullery and the pastoral staff at Sovereign Grace Church of Fairfax, Va., for their excellent work in preparing this document.

For further study:

- Dennis Gunderson, *Your Child's Profession of Faith*. Amityville, N.Y., Calvary Press, 1994.
- "Childhood Conversion" by Jim Elliff, www.ccwonline.com/conv.html
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. Leicester, England, InterVarsity Press, 1994. On baptism and the Lord's Supper.
- "Why Can't I Have a Snack Like Everyone Else?" by David Michael, www.bbcmpls.org/childministries/snack.htm
- Donald Whitney, *How Can I Be Sure I'm a Christian?* Colorado Springs, NavPress, 1994.
- John T. McNeill, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 4, Chapters 14, 15 & 17. Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1960.

6. What is the role of the parent in evaluating a child's readiness to be baptized?

Parents bear primary responsibility for the condition of their children's souls. They are to:

- Teach their children God's commands (Deut. 6:7).
- Train their children up in the way they should go (Prov. 22:6).
- Bring their children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4).

At the same time, pastors bear primary responsibility for administering the sacraments within the local church and for caring for the souls of those who receive them. For these reasons, parents (and especially fathers) should evaluate the readiness of their children for baptism and should actively seek to involve their pastors in this process. Parents know their children best and are ideally situated to discern the fruit of repentance in their children. (Note: the observations of others—in Care Group, trusted friends, and others in the church—will also be extremely helpful in this process.) A parent who believes his child is ready to be baptized should then meet with a pastor so that the pastor can verify the parent's evaluation. Pastor, parent and child should all be confident in the readiness of the child to move forward with baptism.

7. If my child said a prayer and invited Jesus into his heart, isn't that enough to be baptized?

No. The language of 'inviting Jesus into your heart' is not biblical, ignores critical features of the gospel such as justification by faith, and fails to call forth repentance. Experience reveals that it is relatively easy to persuade young children to invite Jesus into their hearts, but many who have made such a commitment or prayed such a prayer later show no evidence of regeneration.

8. What is the Lord's Supper?

The Lord's Supper is the sacrament which uniquely depicts continuing fellowship with Christ, a repeated act whereby the believer remembers the Lord's death and renews his commitment to participation in the Lord and his church (1 Cor. 11:27-34). In eating and drinking, the believer is nourished and strengthened to grow in grace (1 Cor. 10:16).

9. How do baptism and the Lord's Supper differ?

"Baptism [is] an ordinance that is only observed once by each person, as a sign of the beginning of his or her Christian life...The Lord's Supper [is] an ordinance that is to be observed repeatedly throughout our Christian lives, as a sign of continuing fellowship with Christ." —**Wayne Grudem**

"Baptism is our initial symbolic act of obedience that identifies us as disciples, protecting the regeneracy of church membership as we enter the front door of the church. Participation in the Lord's Supper is a continuing symbolic act of unity and fellowship in Christ that identifies us as those who are continuing members of the church in good standing." —**Mark Dever**

10. When should a child receive the Lord's Supper?

Only after he or she has made a believable profession of faith in Christ and has been baptized.

11. Should unbaptized children take the Lord's Supper?

We do not endorse this practice because it obscures the meaning of the sacraments. First, it confuses the order of the sacraments, placing the rite of initiation after the rite of ongoing participation. Second, it obscures the purpose of the sacraments (to teach and assure believers of their salvation) by admitting a child to one while withholding the other. Third, leading an unregenerate child into receiving the Lord's Supper offers false assurance to the child, potentially creating a dangerous stumbling block to the repentance and faith he or she must demonstrate in order to be saved.

12. What do I say to a child who thinks he is converted if I don't think he is ready for baptism or the Lord's Supper?

Any child professing Christ should be the object of enthusiastic encouragement. Expressions of faith and evidences of repentance are gracious moments which parents would be wise to seize upon with positive words. At the same time, many are the children who have at some moment expressed faith in Christ but who now show no evidence of that faith. Thus we recommend responding with something like this:

"I'm thrilled that you are repenting and trusting in Christ. More than anything we want to know that God has really changed your life. The way we will know is if you continue repenting and trusting and if you act like a true Christian—that is, you have a new heart that loves to obey God. Sometimes we do not know that until we are in a place where it really costs us to be a Christian. Maybe you will not know it until you face the choice between your friends and Christ. Let's see what God does. We'll watch and pray about it. As questions come up, we'll talk."

13. Are there any problems with waiting too long to baptize a truly converted child?

We believe the sacraments, when administered rightly and received by faith, are not only symbols but actual means by which God meets with and confirms his work in his people through the Spirit. Through them, the Holy Spirit instructs and assures the believer of his union with Christ. For this reason, it is unwise to withhold them from a true believer. However, this concern will have to be balanced with the dangers of prematurely allowing participation in the sacraments and potentially giving false assurance to a child who is not regenerate. This calls for parental leadership. The process of discussing these issues provides many opportunities to study Scripture together, trust God together and pray together. The following advice is helpful: "Your child will not be any less saved by your judicious waiting for more substantial evidences, if God has indeed performed a work of grace in the first place."² Your pastors stand ready to provide counsel and support in discussing these issues and caring for your children in the process of arriving at these wise decisions.

14. If I have a child who is unbaptized but receiving the Lord's Supper, how do I go about removing this privilege?

This situation provides wonderful opportunities for humble parental leadership. A parent who has led his unbaptized child into receiving the Lord's Supper should study the subject in order to develop biblical convictions. Then he must humble himself before his child, taking responsibility for any confusion or difficulties this has caused his child. He will then seek to lead his child through a process of understanding the nature of conversion and the sacraments which will result in appropriate practices concerning baptism and the Lord's Supper. Situations like this are ideal opportunities for parents to draw support, encouragement and counsel not just from pastors but also from others in the church community.

15. Why not baptize infants?

Scripture nowhere instructs us to baptize infants, nor does it describe infants being baptized. Baptism in the New Testament is exclusive to believers, to those who have repented from their sins and placed their faith in Jesus Christ. Because infants are not able to do this, they are not believers and should not be baptized.

16. What do I do if my child was baptized as an infant?

The biblical pattern is for those who have come to faith in Christ to then be baptized. Thus we urge all who have turned to Christ to be baptized by immersion, regardless whether they were baptized as infants. We say this with deep respect for our brothers and sisters who practice infant baptism.

²Gundersen, p. 23.

17. What if my child was baptized at an early age, and now I don't think he was really converted until later; should he be baptized again?

If a child was baptized as an unbeliever, his was not a biblical baptism; he should now be baptized as a believer.

18. What is the role of the church in evaluating a child's readiness to be baptized and receive the Lord's Supper?

We believe the administration of the sacraments belongs to local churches and that God places pastors over churches to lead and care for the people as a shepherd would a flock (Heb. 13:17, Acts 20:28). Pastors have a unique charge from God to preserve the purity of the church and maintain the integrity of membership. On the last day, they will give account to God for those given into their charge, whether children or adults. For this reason, pastors must actively and carefully oversee the administration of the sacraments and should be involved in evaluating a child's readiness to be baptized and subsequently receive the Lord's Supper.

Appendix E:

Commitment to Peacemaking and Reconciliation

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Matt. 5:9)

Our church is committed to building a “culture of peace” that reflects God’s peace and the power of the gospel of Christ in our lives. As we stand in the light of the cross, we realize that bitterness, unforgiveness and broken relationships are not appropriate for the people whom God has reconciled to himself through the sacrifice of his only Son (John 13:34-35; Eph. 4:29-32; Col. 3:12-14).

Therefore, we look to the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit for guidance on how we can respond to conflict in a way that will honor God, promote justice, reconcile relationships, and preserve our witness for Christ. As God gives us his wisdom and grace, we are committed to actively teaching and encouraging one another to live out the following principles of peacemaking and reconciliation:

Personal Peacemaking

- Whenever I am faced with conflict, my primary goal will be to glorify God with my thoughts, words and actions (1 Cor. 10:31).
- I will try to get the “log” out of my own eye before focusing on what others may have done wrong (Matt. 7:3-5).
- I will seek to overlook minor offenses (Prov. 19:11).
- I will refrain from all gossip, backbiting and slander (Eph. 4:29). If I have a problem with others, I will talk to them, not about them.
- I will make “charitable judgments” toward others by believing the best about them until I have facts that prove otherwise (1 Cor. 13:7).
- If an offense is too serious to overlook, or if I think someone may have something against me, I will go promptly to seek reconciliation (Matt. 5:23-24; 18:15).
- When I offer a word of correction to others, I will do so graciously and gently, with the goal of serving and restoring them, rather than beating them down (Prov. 12:18; Eph. 4:29; Gal. 6:1).
- When someone tries to correct me, I will ask God to help me resist prideful defensiveness and welcome correction with humility (Ps. 141:5; Prov. 15:32).
- When others repent, I will ask God to give me grace to forgive them as he has forgiven me (Eph. 4:32).
- When I discuss or negotiate substantive issues, I will look out for others’ interests as well as my own (Phil. 2:3-4).

Assisted Peacemaking

- When two of us cannot resolve a conflict privately, we will seek the mediation of wise people in our church and listen humbly to their counsel (Matt. 18:16; Phil. 4:2-3).
- When informal mediation between members does not resolve a dispute, we will seek formal mediation assistance from our pastors (Matt. 18:17-20).
- If any of us disagrees with the counsel of a pastor, or has a personal conflict with a pastor that we cannot resolve individually, we will ask another member of the pastoral team to assist us in being reconciled.
- If the pastoral team is unable to resolve a personal, doctrinal, or disciplinary conflict to the satisfaction of those involved, church members may seek non-binding advice and assistance from the Sovereign Grace Ministries Leadership Team. If even this level of assistance does not resolve the matter, a member may make a final appeal for non-binding advice and assistance to Peacemaker Ministries (see Acts 15:1-32).¹ Our pastoral team is committed to listening carefully to the counsel and correction of these outside advisors, but the final authority for resolving such conflicts will remain with the pastoral team.
- When we have a business or legal dispute with another Christian, we will make every reasonable effort to resolve the conflict within the body of Christ through biblical mediation or arbitration, rather than going to civil court (1 Cor. 6:1-8). If the other party attends another church, our pastors will offer to cooperate with the leaders of that church to resolve the matter.
- If a person coming to our church has an unresolved conflict with someone in his former church, we will require and assist him to make every reasonable effort to be reconciled to the other person before joining our church (Matt. 5:23-24; Rom. 12:18).

¹ The concept of allowing appeals of unresolved conflicts to individuals who do not have a direct interest in a matter is well established in Scripture (see Deut. 1:9-18; Acts 15:1-31).

Above all, we pray that our ministry of peacemaking will bring praise to our Lord Jesus Christ and lead others to know his infinite love and peace.²

² Adapted from *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, by Ken Sande (Baker Books, 3rd Ed. 2004).

Appendix F:

Commitment to Preserving Marriages

“So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Matt. 19:6)

God designed marriage to reflect the beauty and permanence of Christ’s loving relationship with his bride, the church (Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 19:7). Therefore, he established marriage to be a life-long, exclusive relationship between one man and one woman (Matt. 19:4-6). God also designed it to provide mutual companionship through life’s joys and difficulties, to create stability for raising and nurturing children, and to give strength and cohesiveness to society in general.

In our society, marriages fail under a wide range of circumstances. Many people have gone through a divorce before having a relationship with Christ, and others have experienced divorce through no desire or decision of their own. Still others may have divorced because of their own wrongful choices, but have since experienced the repentance and forgiveness offered through our Lord Jesus. We want all of you to know that you are welcome in our church.

Because our church recognizes both the divine origin of marriage and the devastating effects of divorce, we are deeply committed to preserving marriages and preventing divorce. Toward this end, we will devote a significant portion of our teaching ministry to strengthening marriages and families. We provide thorough premarital counseling to ensure that couples enter into marriage advisedly and are well prepared for its many challenges.

We also encourage couples to nurture their marriages by participating faithfully in fellowship groups in which people can grow together in their love for God and for one another (Heb. 10:24-25). As relationships deepen within these groups, we expect husbands to spur each other on in loving and cherishing their wives, and wives to encourage one another in respecting and loving their husbands (Eph. 5:33).

Our pastors are committed to providing counsel and support to couples who face marital difficulties. We will discourage couples from using divorce as a way to run away from issues that instead can be resolved through Spirit-guided counseling, repentance, forgiveness and ongoing discipleship.

We recognize, however, that there are times when God permits a believer to seek a divorce without sinning against God or a spouse. We believe divorce is permissible when the other spouse has been sexually involved with a person outside the marriage (Matt. 5:31-32), or when an unbelieving spouse abandons a marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-16).

Even though divorce is permissible in these situations, it is not required. God patiently bears with our sins, repeatedly calls us to repentance, and freely forgives us when we turn back to him (Ps. 103:8-12; Isa. 55:7). When divorce becomes an option, an offended spouse can imitate God’s love by offering a straying spouse these same evidences of grace (Eph. 5:1-2). This may involve patiently bearing neglect or humbly confronting serious sin (Col. 3:12-14; Gal. 6:1). In some situations, love may require asking the church to initiate formal discipline to rescue a spouse and a marriage from the devastating effects of unrepentant sin (Matt. 18:12-20).

Separated spouses who have filed for divorce should consider themselves married until a divorce is final as determined by a civil court. Thus they should refrain from dating or any other activity that is inconsistent with being married.

We rejoice that divorce never diminishes God’s free offer of love, grace and forgiveness. He cherishes and loves every person who has been unwillingly divorced, as does our church. God graciously extends this same love to those who have wrongly left their marriages. That love moves him (and us) to call them to repentance, to encourage and aid reconciliation when possible, and to gladly restore those who have done all they can to rebuild broken relationships.

Appendix G:

Commitment to Accountability and Church Discipline

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works...” (Heb. 10:24)

As with the other commitments found in these appendices, the principles and practices described below apply to all the people who attend our church (both members and attenders).

A. Accountability and Discipline Are Signs of God’s Love

God has established the church to reflect his character, wisdom and glory in the midst of a fallen world (Eph. 3:10-11). He loves his church so much that he sent his Son to die for her (Eph. 5:25). His ultimate purpose for his church is to present her as a gift to his Son; thus Scripture refers to the church as the “bride” of Christ (Rev. 19:7). For this reason the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are continually working to purify the church and bring her to maturity (Eph. 5:25-27).

This does not mean that God expects the church to be made up of perfectly pure people. He knows that the best of churches are still communities of sinners who wrestle daily with remaining sin (1 John 1:8; Phil. 3:12). Therefore, it would be unbiblical for us to expect church members to live perfectly. What we can do, however, is confess our common struggle with sin and our mutual need for God’s mercy and grace. We also can spur one another on toward maturity by encouraging and holding each other accountable to love, seek after, and obey God with all of our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31; Heb. 10:24-25).

The Bible sometimes refers to this process of mutual encouragement and accountability as “discipline.” The Bible never presents church discipline as being negative, legalistic or harsh, as modern society does. True discipline originates from God himself and is always presented as a sign of genuine love. “The Lord disciplines those he loves” (Heb. 12:6). “Blessed is the man you discipline, O Lord, the man you teach from your law” (Ps. 94:12). “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline” (Rev. 3:19).

God’s discipline in the church, like the discipline in a good family, is intended to be primarily positive, instructive and encouraging. This process, which is sometimes referred to as “formative discipline,” involves preaching, teaching, prayer, personal Bible study, small group fellowship and countless other enjoyable activities that challenge and encourage us to love and serve God more wholeheartedly.

On rare occasions God’s discipline, like the discipline in a family with growing children, also may have a corrective purpose. When we forget or disobey what God has taught us, he corrects us. One way he does this is to call the church to seek after us and lead us back onto the right track.

This process, which is sometimes called “corrective” or “restorative” discipline, is likened in Scripture to a shepherd seeking after a lost sheep.

If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off (Matt. 18:12-13).

Thus, restorative or corrective discipline is never to be done in a harsh, vengeful or self-righteous manner. It is always to be carried out in humility and love, with the goals of restoring someone to a close walk with Christ (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1), protecting others from harm (1 Cor. 5:6), and showing respect for the honor and glory of God’s name (1 Pet. 2:12).

Biblical discipline is similar to the discipline we value in other aspects of life. We admire parents who consistently teach their children how to behave properly and lovingly discipline them when they disobey.

We value music teachers who bring out the best in their students by teaching them proper technique and consistently pointing out their errors so they can play a piece properly. And we applaud athletic coaches who diligently teach their players to do what is right and correct them when they fumble, so that the team works well together and can compete for the championship.

The same principles apply to the family of God. We, too, need to be taught what is right and to be lovingly corrected when we do something contrary to what God teaches us in his Word. **Therefore, we as a church are committed to help one another obey God’s command to be “self-controlled, upright,**

holy and disciplined” (Titus 1:8).

The pastors of our church recognize that God has called them to an even higher level of accountability regarding their faith and conduct (James 3:1; 1 Tim. 5:19-20). Therefore, they are committed to listening humbly to loving correction from each other or from any member in our church, and, if necessary, to submitting themselves to the corrective discipline of our body.

B. Most Corrective Discipline Is Private, Personal and Informal

God gives every believer grace to be self-disciplined. “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline” (2 Tim. 1:7). Thus discipline always begins as a personal matter and usually remains that way, as each of us studies God’s Word, seeks him in prayer, and draws on his grace to identify and change sinful habits and grow in godliness.

But sometimes we are blind to our sins or so tangled in them that we cannot get free on our own. This is why the Bible says, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Gal. 6:1). In obedience to this command, we are committed to giving and receiving loving correction within our church whenever a sin (whether in word, behavior or doctrine) seems too serious to overlook (Prov. 19:11).

If repeated private conversations do not lead another person to repentance, Jesus commands that we ask other brothers or sisters to get involved. “If he will not listen, take one or two others along” (Matt. 18:16). If informal conversations with these people fail to resolve the matter, then we may seek the involvement of more influential people, such as a small group leader, Sunday school teacher or church leader. If even these efforts fail to bring a brother or sister to repentance, and if the issue is too serious to overlook, we will move into what may be called “formal discipline.”

C. Formal Discipline May Involve the Entire Church

If an individual persistently refuses to listen to personal and informal correction to turn from speech or behavior that the Bible defines as sin, Jesus commands us to “tell it to the church” (Matt. 18:17a). This first involves informing one or more pastors about the situation. If the offense is not likely to cause imminent harm to others, our pastors may approach the individual privately to personally establish the facts and encourage repentance of any sin they discover. The individual will be given every reasonable opportunity to explain and defend his or her actions. If the individual recognizes his sin and repents, the matter usually ends there, unless a confession to additional people is needed.

If an offense is likely to harm others or lead them into sin, or cause division or disruption, our pastors may accelerate the entire disciplinary process and move promptly to protect the church (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:113; Titus 3:10-11).

As the disciplinary process progresses, our pastors may impose a variety of sanctions to encourage repentance, including but not limited to private and public admonition, withholding of the Lord’s Supper, removal from office, withdrawal of normal fellowship, and, as a last resort, removal from membership (Matt. 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Matt. 18:17).

If the straying individual does not repent in response to private appeals from our pastors, they may inform others in the church who may be able to influence that individual or be willing to pray for him or her, or people who might be harmed or affected by that person’s behavior.¹ This step may include close friends, a small group, a Sunday school class, or the entire congregation if our pastors deem it to be appropriate (Matt. 18:17, 1 Tim. 5:20).²

¹ For example, it is not uncommon for a person to attend a church, develop relationships of trust, persuade people to give him money to invest, and then fail to return the money as promised. Senior citizens are particularly vulnerable to these schemes, and many people have lost much of what they had saved for retirement. When such sinful men are discovered, they usually leave a church, but continue to prey on members who have not heard about their schemes. If our pastors found such a man in our church, they would call him to repent and confess his wrongs. If he refused, they would bring him under formal discipline, and also warn the congregation not to trust him with their money.

² If our pastors inform our entire congregation about a disciplinary situation, they have discretion whether to divulge the individual’s name. This decision usually will depend on a variety of factors, such as: how widely known the situation already is; whether there might be people in the congregation who could persuade the individual to repent; or whether the congregation needs to be on guard against potential harm he might cause (see previous footnote). Even if our pastors decide it is not necessary to identify an individual specifically, they may still inform the congregation of the general situation and the disciplinary steps they have followed. This general information can help to enlist wide prayer support, let the congregation know that our pastors are obeying the Lord’s command to seek after those who stray, and warn people who may be flirting with secret sin that they, too, may face discipline if they do not turn back to God.

If, after a reasonable period of time, the individual still refuses to change, then our pastors may formally remove him or her from membership and normal fellowship. They also may inform the church body of their decision and instruct the congregation to treat the individual as an unbeliever. This means that we will no longer treat him as a fellow Christian. Instead of having casual, relaxed fellowship with the individual, we will look for opportunities to lovingly bring the gospel to him, remind him of God's holiness and mercy, and call him to repent and put his faith in Christ (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20).

We realize that our natural human response to correction often is to hide or run away from accountability (Gen. 3:8-10). To avoid falling into this age-old trap and to strengthen our church's ability to rescue us if we are caught in sin, we agree not to run away from this church to avoid corrective discipline. Although we are free to stop attending the church at any time, we agree that a withdrawal while discipline is pending will not be given effect until the church has fulfilled its God-given responsibilities to encourage our repentance and restoration, and to bring the disciplinary process to an orderly conclusion, as described in these Commitments (Matt. 18:12-14; Gal. 6:1; Heb. 13:17).

If an individual leaves the church while discipline is in effect or is being considered, and our pastors learn that he or she is attending another church, they may inform that church of the situation and ask its pastors to encourage the individual to repent and be reconciled to the Lord and to any people he or she has offended. This action is intended both to help the individual find freedom from his sin and to warn the other church about the harm that he or she might do to their members³ (see Matt. 18:12-14; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 3 John 1:9-10).

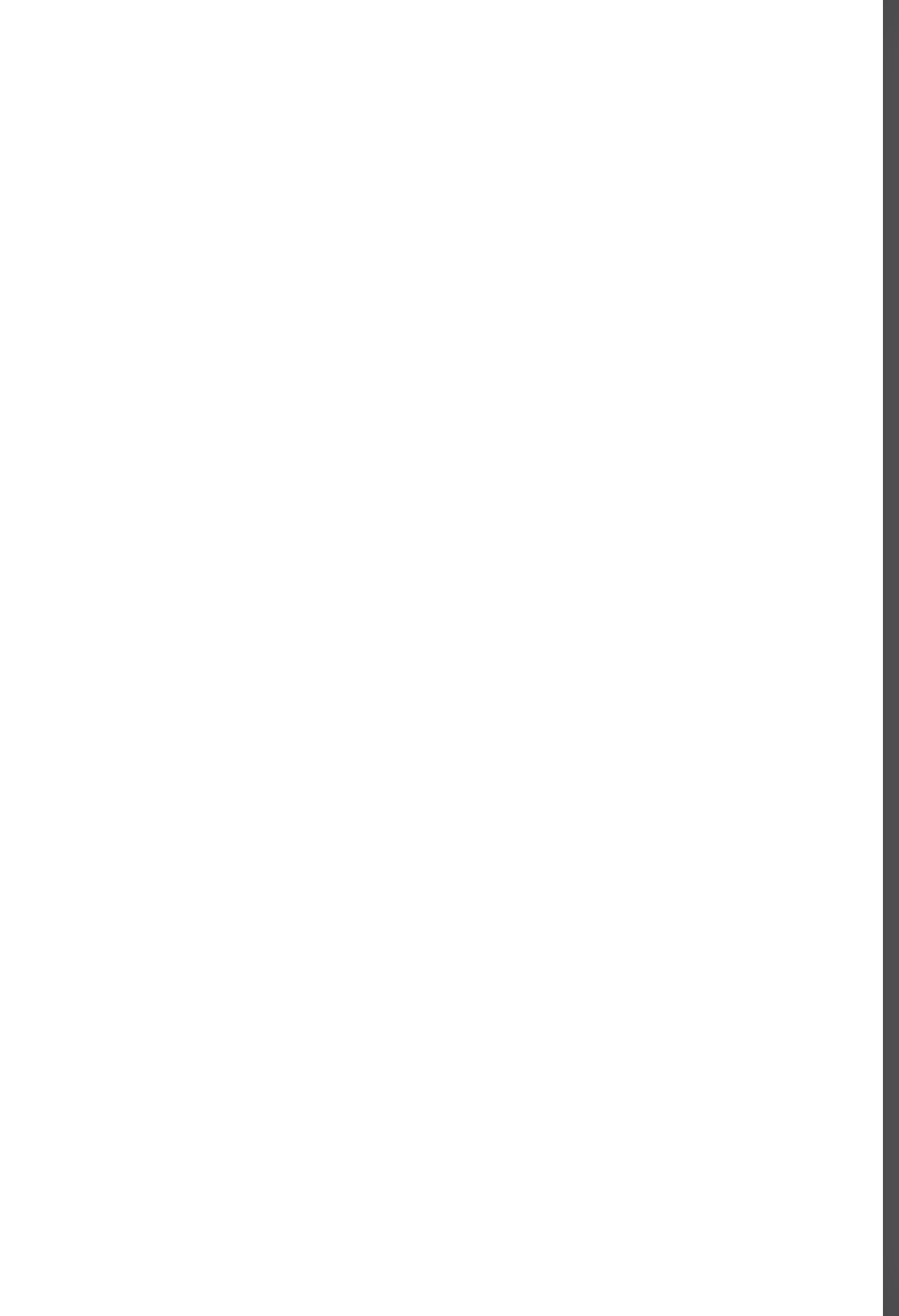
Loving restoration always stands at the heart of the disciplinary process. If an individual repents, and our pastors confirm his or her sincerity, we will rejoice together and gladly imitate God's forgiveness by restoring the person to fellowship within the body (see Matt. 18:13; Luke 15:3-7, 11-32; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Col. 3:12-14).


People who have been excluded from another church will not be allowed to partake of the sacraments in our church, to become members, or to participate in the regular fellowship of our church until they have repented of their sins and made a reasonable effort to be reconciled, or our pastors have determined that the discipline of the former church was not biblically appropriate.

If an individual disagrees with the way discipline has been carried out, he or she may appeal the church's decisions according to the conflict resolution process set forth in the earlier section on our "Commitment to Peacemaking and Reconciliation."

As we pursue the blessings of accountability and church discipline, we will hold fast to the promise of Scripture: "God disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:10-11).

³ For example, if we confronted a man in our church for seducing young women, or for acting inappropriately around little children, or for sowing gossip and division, and he left and started attending another church, we would consider it our duty to urge the pastors of that church to counsel with him and to protect their people from his harmful behavior.



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