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RECOVERING BIBLICAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT
MT. HEBRON BAPTIST CHURCH, CONNELLY
SPRINGS, NORTH CAROLINA

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Presented to
the Faculty of
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Doctor of Ministry

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Eric Byron James
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APPROVAL SHEET

RECOVERING BIBLICAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT
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To Lori, my faithful companion, greatest cheerleader, and crown from Proverbs 12:4.

To Erin and Ben, the arrows in my quiver and my heritage from the Lord.

To Jon, Brooklynn, and Kaylee, unspeakable additions to my joy.

To Mt. Hebron Baptist Church, God's people and my purpose.

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PREFACE

The local church has been a constant in my life since the beginning. The church has been and continues to be the priority of my immediate family. This project, through the Doctor of Ministry program, allowed me to examine and discover the biblical basis for my love of the church. Throughout this process, the support and influence of many people have both inspired and motivated my project.

I would like to borrow the apostle John's ambiguity found in his second letter to thank four "elect ladies." First, I would like to thank Calvary Baptist Church of Lenoir, North Carolina. In her care, I learned as a child to believe the Bible and love the Savior. Your initial investment in my theological education provided the means to arrive at this accomplishment. You will always be my home church. Second, I would like to thank the body of Southpoint Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida, for allowing a young Bible college student to bumble his way through the beginning of his ministry. You continue to occupy a very special place in my heart. Third, I would like to thank the people of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church in Connelly Springs, North Carolina. God has allowed us to be together for twenty-seven years. If everyone loved the church the way I love you, there would be no need for this project. Thank you as well for allowing me the freedom, time, and resources to complete this work. My main motivation has been to see you strengthened through the teaching and actions described in these pages.

The final lady I must thank is my wife, Lori James. Without you, my ministry to the church would have accomplished little. You have been a constant encourager, a faithful partner, and the finest pastor's wife I have ever seen. Thank you for your patience in the completion of this project, for I know it has occupied so much of my mind and time. You are the lady closest to my heart. You are God's gift to me and I love you.

I would also like to thank Dr. John Hammett. This project was born in my heart and mind during your lecture on ecclesiology many years ago. Your writing on this subject has been an invaluable resource. You occupy a special place among Baptist scholars who have written about the church of Jesus Christ. You have influenced me in that regard and I am grateful.

I would also like to thank two professors at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary who are especially important to me. Dr. Donald Whitney has been my advisor in this endeavor. Your writing and commitment to the church's spirituality prove that you love the church. You have strengthened my prayer life and my commitment to the family of God. Thank you for providing accountability and guidance throughout my project. Dr. Joseph Harrod provided my first shock upon re-entering the world of academic writing, as well as advice on ways to make my writing better. Thanks to both of you for your help and insight into thinking well and expressing those thoughts on the written page.

Most of all I thank my heavenly Father and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, for allowing me to be a member of the body of Christ. I also thank them for allowing me to pastor the most important people in the world: God's people. May God be glorified through these humble efforts.

Eric James

Connelly Springs, North Carolina

May 2019

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The church of Jesus Christ is the most important and influential group of people on the planet. This importance logically makes the definition of who belongs to this group of people essential. Modern belief and practice among churches and denominations often blur the distinctives of church membership that are so clearly delineated in the Bible. This blurring of biblical distinctives always results in powerless churches and shallow members who are often content to remain ineffective in preaching the gospel and carrying out the biblical mandates given to the church.

A recovery of the standards and duties of biblical church membership is necessary for churches to survive and thrive. If the gospel is to be proclaimed effectively, then it must be proclaimed by those who are unwaveringly committed to the body for whom Christ died. Not only must the definition of biblical church membership be recovered, but the practice and fidelity inherent within and demanded by that definition must be restored. Steps must be taken to represent the calling of God upon the lives of His children through faithful participation and commitment to local bodies. This project sought to restore such participation and commitment of the members of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church to the local body of Christ.

Ministry Context

This ministry project took place in the context of a Southern Baptist church located in rural Burke County, North Carolina. Mt. Hebron Baptist Church is the largest church in one of the smallest Southern Baptist associations in the state of North Carolina. Although the church is in a rural area, attendees include families driving in from cities

and towns in surrounding counties. The church is located midway between the towns of Hickory, North Carolina, and Morganton, North Carolina.

Four concerns are related to the context of this ministry project. The first concern is related to the membership of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church being comprised primarily of large family groups. A study of the history of the church revealed that two major families were responsible for the founding of the church. This situation had influenced the life of the church for 135 years. Conflicts of the past had been fought along family lines and allegiances. Any attempt to reshape the membership roll of the church was certain to have implications for family members of existing active members. Actions and policies would need to be implemented in a gracious, deliberate, and clear manner to secure the cooperation of as many of these family members as possible.

The family characteristic of the church's membership was also intertwined with the church cemetery. The church has an existing cemetery policy that only allows members to be buried. Active members may be buried with no cost to their family while the families of inactive members must pay a fee of \$500. Those who are not members may be buried there only if they have a spouse buried already. Sentimental attachment to burial rights runs high in the community. If a singular person is taken off the roll, he or she may have no burial plot among family members. Such attachment is a major factor in why some people prefer to remain on the church membership roll while not participating in any way in the life of the church body. The actions of this project were sure to directly affect the traditional burial plans of many in the community.

A second concern was the nature of a conflict that occurred thirty years ago, leading to disciplinary action involving sixteen people. Those individuals had voting privileges and membership rights revoked for organizing seditious actions against the church body. These persons were not removed from the membership roll. Only four of those disciplined were reconciled with the church. Many of the others remain on the membership roll of the church. The completion of this project necessitated contact with

those disciplined members whose names remain on the roll of the church. In other cases, relatives of those disciplined members remain on the roll as well. Included in the number of those disciplined are several who are prominent members of the community as well as leaders in the county.

Most of these disciplined members and their relatives remain bitter toward the church. This project would possibly open old wounds for many, including some active members of the church. There was a certain amount of risk for leadership in this endeavor. This disciplinary action represents the only kind of accountability ever attempted by the church and to this day colors how the surrounding community views the membership policies of the church. Any attempts to remove names from the roll could have been perceived as evidence of exclusivism and callousness on the part of the church. There was a danger that the church's testimony would be assailed because of remaining bitterness and strife. These views persist among some despite years of ministry and faithful service by the church to the community.

A third concern related to the absence of any meaningful accountability policy apart from the disciplinary actions mentioned. Many of the inactive members contacted during the course of this project should have been disciplined by the church in the past for moral disobedience. This absence of past accountability created false views of church membership. Many of these inactive church members believe church membership to be a permanent right with few or no responsibilities. As a result, these members were not committed to the church family in any meaningful way. This project was the first attempt by the church to hold some of them accountable in any way.

A final concern was the percentage of the church members that were inactive. There were 440 members total on the roll of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church. Of those 440, more than 33 percent could have been considered inactive. The average Sunday morning attendance is 250, but not all of those who attend are church members. While this ratio is not unusual among Baptist churches, it did not reflect the best biblical scenario for a New

Testament church nor did it reflect well on the present membership policies of the church.

Rationale

This project began to answer the concerns related to the context in important ways. First, the family characteristic of the church shifted from priority of the natural family to priority of the spiritual family. In years past, natural family relations overshadowed what was best for the entire congregation, resulting in inordinate influence being given to certain families. As growth occurred in the church, these natural family ties had been neutralized to a degree. Reluctance to hold natural family members accountable in their church membership, however, revealed a need to clarify that brothers and sisters in Christ are to be considered more important than biological brothers and sisters.

This project also began to dispel the widely held idea of cultural Christianity that exists in the community. Inactive members who wished to remain members merely to obtain a burial plot needed to understand this is not an acceptable aspect of biblical church membership. Those living too far away to attend Mt. Hebron needed to be encouraged to find a church home where they can contribute and experience spiritual formation. Those feeling a connection to God or having a false sense of relationship with God only because of the history of their loved ones in the church needed to be lovingly made aware that such history does not account for the salvation of their own soul. It would have been a tremendous spiritual disservice to allow any member to hold such a view because the eternal ramifications are too severe. It is the obligation of the church to graciously lead them to the truth of the gospel. Removing any obstacle erected by cultural Christianity is a necessary act of love, compassion, and faithfulness to the gospel of Christ.

A third reason for this project was to help provide healing for the wounds caused by disciplinary actions of the past resulting in the revoking of rights and privileges of sixteen people for behavior deemed seditious to the church body. While elements of this project may have re-opened the wounds for some, it was necessary to close the chapter

biblically on those events. As those who had been disciplined in the past were graciously contacted and as concern was expressed, it remained the hope of the church that some would return and reconcile with the church.

A final rationale for this project was the bolstering of the church's biblical witness in the community. If there is no accountability for church members, then the testimony of the church is gradually degraded over time. This project put principles and policies in place that will help maintain accountability for every church member in the future and place the church in a position to have a strong biblical witness among future generations.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to identify and teach the basic principles of biblical church membership to the members of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church in Connelly Springs, North Carolina, and to lead them to commit to these ideas in both belief and practice.

Goals

The following goals were designed to accomplish the purpose of identifying and teaching the basic principles of biblical church membership and leading the members of Mt. Hebron Baptist to commit to these ideas in belief and practice:

1. The first goal of this project was to assess the number of inactive members currently on the roll of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church and to categorize inactive members according to the level of their inactivity.
2. The second goal was to formulate a plan of action for revising the membership roll of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church.
3. The third goal was to develop a six-week sermon series on the topic of biblical church membership.
4. The fourth goal was to increase the knowledge of the congregation of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church of biblical church membership by preaching the sermon series.
5. The fifth goal was the development of a new church covenant.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this project included the use of a pre- and post-sermon series survey as well as an evaluation rubric.¹ The effectiveness of this project depended on the successful completion of five goals.

Goal 1

The first goal was to properly assess the number of members on the roll of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church that were inactive and to categorize inactive members according to the length of their inactivity. A team consisting of myself, the active deacons, and church clerk met to categorize inactive members according to the amount of time they had been uninvolved in the life of the church. These categories were determined by the number of years of inactivity. Records indicating the membership status of each member had been kept for approximately ten years. The team's knowledge of life situations for each inactive member were needed to properly assess the reasons for inactivity. The names of these members were placed on a spreadsheet showing the number of years each has been inactive. Master lists containing contact information for each member were created to facilitate the follow up and inquiry needed. Space was provided for notes pertaining to responses from these members. All preceding information and noted responses were placed into a database for future reference.

Goal 2

The second goal was to develop a plan of action for revising the membership roll of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church.² I and the deacons formulated a plan for contacting each individual inactive member to express concern for inactivity and love for them as

¹ All research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in this ministry project.

² See appendix 1.

members of the church. The plan also included a timeframe after which inactive members would be considered for removal. This process was presented to the church body in a regular business meeting for approval. The process was recommended as a yearly occurrence to be conducted in the same manner by the pastor and deacons. Letters were then sent to members who had been inactive for more than two years.³ Depending on their response upon being contacted as well as their circumstances, members who had been inactive for less than two years were ministered to in an attempt to help them become involved in the life of the church. Those who had been inactive for two years or more were considered for removal from the rolls of the church. This goal was considered successfully met when both the leadership and body of the church had agreed upon the scriptural mandate and need for this action and had affirmed the action by a 2/3 majority vote.

Goal 3

The third goal was the development of a six-week sermon series on biblical church membership.⁴ The sermons in the series addressed issues pertaining to the theological foundation of church membership as well as the validity of church discipline. The series was comprised of five expository sermons as well as one topical sermon. Each sermon was founded on biblical texts while using historical and sociological data to bolster the thesis of each sermon. The series was presented to a panel consisting of three fellow pastors and one professor from Southeastern Baptist Seminary for evaluation. The evaluation began two months before the series was preached. This panel used a rubric to evaluate the sermon series for biblical faithfulness, clarity, scope, and practical usefulness.⁵ This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the sufficient level. Where less than 90 percent

³ See appendix 5.

⁴ See appendix 6.

⁵ See appendix 2.

of the evaluation criterion was scored at sufficient or above, the feedback of the panel was used to modify and improve the sermons in the series, after which the sermons were submitted again to the panel. This process continued until at least 90 percent of the indicators were scored at sufficient or above.

Goal 4

The fourth goal was to increase the knowledge of biblical church membership among the members of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church by preaching the sermon series. This goal was measured by administering a pre- and post-survey, which was used to measure the change in their knowledge of the principles of biblical church membership.⁶ The pre- and post-surveys were given to a sample of at least seventy-five active adult church members who were asked to commit to hear each sermon in the series in person or via recording.⁷ The same individuals were surveyed before and after the sermon series. The participants were asked to use a four-digit PIN on both the pre- and post-surveys in order to match the samples for proper evaluation. The survey was comprised of statements designed to assess their level of biblical knowledge and understanding about church membership, their perception of the commitment to and responsibilities of church membership, and their motives for maintaining biblical church membership. The post-series survey consisted of the same statements as the pre-series survey. This goal was considered successful when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-series scores.⁸ A t-test compares the means from each group of scores from the pre- and post- series survey. It is used to

⁶ See appendix 3.

⁷ Adult members are 18 years old and above. Of the 440 church members, 376 are adults over the age of 18. Participants were asked to indicate their age on both the pre- and post-survey.

⁸ See appendix 10.

ensure the difference in score is not due to chance, but that an actual change in knowledge as occurred.⁹

Goal 5

The fifth goal was the development of a new church covenant for Mt. Hebron Baptist Church. An existing church covenant was updated to affirm the accountability and responsibilities involved in church membership.¹⁰ The covenant was supplied to the church one month before a vote to approve it, at which time it was unanimously approved by the church body. The day of the covenant signing was promoted as a time of worship, fellowship, and celebration. This goal was considered successfully met when the covenant was signed by a minimum of one hundred members of the church, affirming their commitment to biblical church membership.¹¹

Definitions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Important terms were used throughout this project. They are defined in this section to aid the reader's understanding of the subject.

Biblical church membership. *Biblical church membership*, as defined by seminary professor Benjamin Merkle, is the “formal commitment to a local church [that] ensures biblical accountability, biblical discipline, the biblical use of spiritual gifts and the advance of God’s kingdom.”¹² Pastor and 9Marks founder Mark Dever further defines a church member as a “baptized believer who regularly attends the Lord’s Table,

⁹ Neil J. Salkind, *Statistics for People Who (Think They) Hate Statistics*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011), 188.

¹⁰ See appendix 4.

¹¹ Current church membership is 440 with an average Sunday morning worship attendance of 250.

¹² Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account a Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 32-33.

hears God Word and obeys it, and regularly fellowships together for mutual edification.”¹³

Church discipline. Church discipline may be defined as a part of the discipleship process in which a Christian is disciplined through instruction and correction. Editorial director for 9Marks, Jonathan Leeman, suggests the process of church discipline is both formative and corrective.¹⁴ Rather than simply being the negative task of removing troublemakers from the church, it is, as noted biblical counselor and author, Jay Adams, “God’s provision for good order in his church that creates conditions for the instruction and growth of the members.”¹⁵

The main limitation of this project was the amount of time given for completion. The spiritual body of work being sought extends beyond the parameters of this project. The steps outlined in this project are only the first steps to what will prayerfully become the conviction and ongoing policy of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church in the years ahead. The full recovery of biblical church membership will take years to accomplish. This project sought to lay the foundation for that occurrence in the future.

Two delimitations were employed for this project. First, the pre- and post-survey to assess the knowledge of members as it relates to the principles of biblical church membership was limited to adult church members. Second, the survey was only given to adult members who are considered active in the life of the church at the time of the survey.¹⁶

¹³ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 158.

¹⁴ Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 27.

¹⁵ Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 17.

¹⁶ Active church members, according to church policy, have attended once per month on average in the last calendar year.

Conclusion

The recovery of the principles of biblical church membership is among the most fruitful exercises imaginable for any congregation. The fellowship of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church has benefited not only from an increased knowledge of the subject, but also through the rewards of simple obedience to God's Word regarding this important matter. Future generations will certainly benefit from those before them having aligned the church with biblical mandates and principles of membership in the local body of Christ.

CHAPTER 2
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SUPPORT
FOR CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Introduction

One of the greatest privileges possessed by a Christian is membership in a local church. The weight of this privilege becomes clear when realizing what the church means to God. The church is the passion of the Father and the one goal of what He has been doing throughout history. The consummation of the church comprises the main impetus for the mission of Jesus Christ in the world. He expresses his intentions to build his church in Matthew 16:18. Paul declares the great love Christ has for the church in Ephesians 5:25-27. Theology professor John Hammett describes the Holy Spirit as the energizing personality in all the church has ever accomplished or ever hopes to accomplish in drawing men and women to the Savior.¹

Such a tremendous privilege as church membership requires equally tremendous responsibility and accountability. This responsibility can never be understood in the context of individuality. Instead one must understand the nature of church membership in a corporate context. The Holy Spirit facilitates understanding of this important concept by employing important metaphors for the church in the New Testament. This chapter explores four of these metaphors in an effort to grasp the nature and breadth of the responsibility of biblical church membership. Passages related to each metaphor will be presented in chronological order as they appear in God's progressive revelation.

¹ John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 13-14.

The Church as the Body of Christ

A Member of the Body (1 Cor 6:15)

Paul's first mention of the body of Christ and membership in it arrives in the context of individual responsibility. He asks the believers in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 6:15, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!" The mention of the believer's body as the temple of the Holy Spirit here is often confused with his earlier statement in 1 Corinthians 3 where he refers to the corporate church in the same way. This truth concerning the believer's body as the temple of the Holy Spirit is founded, however, upon the truth of the believer's membership in the body of Christ.

New Testament scholar Gordon Fee sees Paul's use of the metaphor of a body as different than will be seen in 12:12-26 where the "body" refers to the church, and the concern is with the relationship of the "members" to one another. His concern in 6:15 is with one's relationship to the Lord himself.² His assertion in verse 15 is based on the dynamic in verse 14 of being raised with Christ. The argument is that since believers are members of the body of the Lord they cannot be joined to a prostitute, to become members of her body.³ Commentators Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner declare, "In going to the prostitute, the Corinthians not only renounce the lordship of Christ over their bodies and deny their resurrection life to come, but they act in a way that sullies and even does violence to Christ's body."⁴

Paul is emphasizing the authority of Christ over the bodies of every individual Christian. While the importance of this principle cannot be denied, of equal usefulness is

² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 258.

³ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁴ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Nottingham, England: Eerdmans, 2010), 258.

his introduction of the idea of being a “member” of the body of Christ. The modern use of this word usually pertains to a voluntary association in an organization, such as a club or even a society. This modern usage makes it hard to communicate what Paul had in mind. Ciampa and Rosner conclude, “Paul uses the term as part of the metaphor of the body of Christ. The connection implied by the imagery is living and organic.”⁵ A study of the neuter plural form μελη is emphasized by English theologian Anthony Thiselton. Paul uses it three times in verse 15 for emphasis. This word implies more than a mere association; rather, it signifies the actual limbs, parts, or members of a body.⁶ The believer is portrayed as an integral part of the “body” of Christ. As seminary professor and author David E. Garland rightly asserts, “The emphasis is not on many individuals becoming the one body of Christ but upon an individual’s union with Christ.”⁷ One cannot, however, ignore the intensity of the truth conveyed here, which is that the believer is inextricably tied to Christ in purpose and path. While this first mention of being a “member” conveys the individual’s place in the body of Christ, the importance of being a member means nothing outside of cooperation with other members in that same “body.” Local church membership must be raised to this level of biblical priority,

The Body at the Lord’s Table (1 Cor 10:16-17)

Paul finds a unique opportunity to communicate truth concerning the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 10:16, where he asks, “The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” The church was experiencing disunity and this malfunction had reared its head at the Lord’s Table. When they should have been blessing

⁵ Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 257.

⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 465.

⁷ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 232.

and building each other up, they were instead tearing each other down. Since one of the greatest displays of their problems was occurring at the Lord 's Table, Paul seizes the moment to further illuminate the body of Christ and the Corinthians' place in it.

Paul is in the process of warning the members of this church against idolatry and he emphasizes that the Lord's meal is the communion of the blood and body of Christ. They need only this one reminder concerning the body of Christ being represented in the elements of the meal. He does not stop there, however, as he takes the metaphor a step further.

The body is the church. This passage represents the only interpretation of the bread as such in the New Testament. Fee notes, "The bread does indeed refer to the physical body of Christ. The meaning of the 'body' at the Table is that those who eat of the one loaf are themselves that one body."⁸ Paul is pushing for an understanding of the community itself, as German theologian Hanz Conzelmann believes, by means of the Lord's Supper.⁹ Fee summarizes,

Paul is communicating that their singular existence as the people of God, bound together to their Lord through the benefits of the cross and experienced regularly at his Table, makes all other meals idolatry. Paul's point, therefore, is not the unity of the body that the meal represents (although he probably anticipates that concern as well), but the solidarity of the redeemed community as one body in Christ that forbids all other such unions.¹⁰

Paul's idea is simple. Believers sit at one table and all share a common loaf, which Jesus identified as his own "body." Fee writes, "Paul now asserts that the 'body' in

⁸ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 564.

⁹ Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 172.

¹⁰ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 469.

that identification is to be understood analogically as the church, who even though they 'are many' are 'one body' because there is one loaf on the table."¹¹

No mere observance. Paul uses the idea of participation or fellowship in relation to the blood and body of Christ as well to the way in which adherents participate with either God or demons in religious ritual. Garland surmises, "The word 'fellowship' and its cognates occur four times in 1 Corinthians 10:16-20. Paul is leading his readers to see that they cannot partake of the Lord's Supper as detached observers."¹² This truth would have been evident from other such sacral meals to deities. Ciampa and Rosner propose, "The Corinthians were to live out (better than they had been doing) the unity that was expected of a group of people who had been united by Christ's death on their behalf."¹³ Since they were truly one homogenous loaf as represented by the common element of the Supper, their lives were to reflect who they were: the body Christ.

Discerning the Body (1 Cor 11:27-29)

Paul eventually arrives at the argument for which he has set the groundwork in 10:16. He warns,

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

If the church is the body of Christ and if it is represented by the one loaf at the Lord's Table, any misconduct relating to that body confers tremendous consequences. Paul writes this entire passage to correct the abuses of the church as it is visibly portrayed at the Lord's Supper.¹⁴ The interpretation of the nature of these abuses centers on the word

¹¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 469.

¹² Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 477.

¹³ Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 476.

¹⁴ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 564.

διακρινειν, which is translated “discern.” Paul says that those who fail to discern “the body” are in danger of severe judgment.

Opinions vary on which body Paul was referring to. Thiselton notes the sense of this verse as “being mindful of the uniqueness of Christ, who is separate from others in the sense of giving himself for others in sheer grace.” He does, however, see the Lord’s Supper as “underlining participation in, and identification with, the cruciform Christ and thereby generating social transformation.”¹⁵ Fee, however, believes Paul’s call to be for believers to “examine themselves in terms of their attitudes toward the body, how they are treating others.”¹⁶ Ciampa and Rosner further this thought by considering the call to examine themselves in verse 29 as relating to

one’s compliance with the covenant as reflected in their ways of relating to the members of the community and recognition that those other members of the community represent Christ himself and must be treated as people for whom Christ chose to give up his life and to shed his blood.¹⁷

There are certainly valid reasons for seeing Paul’s argument as extending beyond the fleshly body of Christ represented in the Supper. Paul has already used the metaphor of the “body” in this context to refer to the church. In all probability, Paul means both the body of the Lord and his church.

Viewing the church in this way elevates church membership to a new level of accountability. It could be argued that far more believers are guilty of failing to distinguish the nature and importance of the church of Christ than the actual body of Christ. This lack of discernment, after all, is exactly the sin of which the Corinthian believers were so guilty. Their mistreatment of fellow believers at the Lord’s Supper had brought sickness and death. To mistreat other believers during the observance of the ordinance that speaks

¹⁵ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 893.

¹⁶ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 562.

¹⁷ Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 555.

so eloquently of the unity of the church as the body of Christ was a slap in the face to all Christ had done in bringing them together. Respected biblical scholar F. F. Bruce relates,

For certain members of the church to eat and drink their fill, in unbrotherly disregard of their poorer fellow-Christians, as some were doing at Corinth, was to eat and drink without discerning the body, without any consideration for the most elementary implications of their fellowship in Christ. Such conduct was as serious a profanation of the holy supper as was the table segregation between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Syria Antioch. It is not surprising that those guilty of it should incur divine judgment.¹⁸

One Body Many Members (1 Cor 12:12-26)

Paul returns again to the imagery of the church as the body of Christ. He is now arguing from this imagery as a presupposition, having made his case in the prior passages.¹⁹ Paul is using a common metaphor that would have been familiar to his readers. The body analogy was common in Stoic philosophy where the unity of the cosmos was often likened to a body.²⁰ This imagery of the body and its many parts was often used to stress “the interdependence of the many on one another.” In this way the usage was negative so as to prevent sedition.²¹ Paul is not using the metaphor to articulate doctrine but to address the problem of disunity that is plaguing the church.²²

Baptized into one body (vv. 12-14). Paul says,

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many.

¹⁸ F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, New Century Bible Commentary (London: HarperCollins, 1971), 115.

¹⁹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 602.

²⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 592-94.

²¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 602.

²² Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 588.

Paul is not so concerned with the truth of the body having many members as he is with the truth that the body is one. From this concern flows his statement of how members are placed into the body. Each member is baptized into the body. Paul is not speaking of water baptism as his specific language regarding the spirit's agency precludes it. He would have mentioned water baptism if that was his intent. Instead, as Fee explains, verse 13 is an elaboration of verse 12 in which the

explanation is given in terms of the Spirit in a way that reflects the heart of Pauline theology. Neither is Paul referring to a second experience in conversion. These members were placed into the body when they received the Spirit at conversion. The common experience of the Spirit is what makes the Corinthians one.²³

Paul also strikes what should be a fatal blow against discrimination in the body when he points out that the common distinctions of race/religion and social status were no longer of any significance whatsoever. Fee writes, "Having significance is what gives them value as distinctions. So in effect their common life in the Spirit had eliminated the significance of the old distinctions, hence they had become one body."²⁴ Pastor and author Verlyn D. Verbrugge points out, "If these sorts of people can all come together into one body, then anything that divides human beings, such as social status, economic level, ethnic distinction, should play no role in dividing the church."²⁵

While Paul is indeed concerned that the body is one, he does not ignore the fact that it is comprised of many members. He does not argue for unity despite diversity. Fee explains, "Rather his concern is expressed in v. 14, that even though the body is one, it does not consist of one member but of many, thus arguing for their need for diversity, since they are in fact one body."²⁶

²³ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 603.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 606.

²⁵ Verlyn D. Verbrugge, *1 Corinthians*, in vol. 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 367.

²⁶ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 601.

Diversity in the body (vv. 15-20). Paul now uses personification to emphasize the importance of every member in the body of Christ when he writes,

If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. . . . As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.”

He writes two very similar sentences in which he “disallows that some parts can deny their own place in the body.”²⁷ His use of the double negative emphasizes the point that all the different parts of the body should each feel needed for the proper functioning of the body.²⁸

Paul shows a certain amount of sensitivity to those in Corinth who had been made to feel they had not received a special spiritual gift.²⁹ Strong individuals in Corinth were exalting themselves over the weak. While there may have been feelings of inferiority among those who did not possess sensational spiritual gifts, Conzelmann suggests that it may be useful to see Paul’s attack as “directed against the practice of individuals dissociating themselves from the ‘body,’ that is, against enthusiastic individualism.”³⁰

This diversity of gifts derives from God having arranged each member in the body as he chose. Thiselton sees the proper translation in verse 18 as “God placed the members.” He notes that any other translation serves only to weaken “the sense in which divine election or the call to Christian existence is inextricably bound up with his purpose for an individual within the church.”³¹ No member should ever feel inferior to another because of a perceived lesser role. God has purposefully placed every member in the church as he has seen fit. Since God has placed every member, every member has a place and purpose in the body of Christ.

²⁷ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 610.

²⁸ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 367.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 594.

³⁰ Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 212-13.

³¹ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1004.

Unity in the body (vv. 21-27). The disunity within the Corinthian church resulted from some who considered themselves at the top of the hierarchy of persons in the community feeling as though they could get along without others who were not as superior.³² To these members Paul writes,

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. 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.

Paul presents his point allegorically by comparing those who appear to be weaker in the church to the bodily organs that appear to be useless but are, in fact, integral to the proper functioning of the human body. He utilizes both internal organs as well as sexual organs in his allegory. Since Paul is indeed using allegory as opposed to analogy, Fee warns against trying to identify people like this in the church. Paul is saying that appearances are deceiving and each and every part matters.³³

Paul argues for mutual concern on the part of the members of the body of Christ for each other within the fellowship. Verse 24 adds to the principle of verse 18. Paul uses the verb *συνεκερασε*, which denotes an intermingling or mixing of different elements together. If God has “placed” each member according to verse 18 and he has “mixed together” the membership according to verse 24, then no member can question the importance of any other member. Nothing but mutual concern and unity should come from such a powerful truth.

³² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 612.

³³ *Ibid.*, 613.

One Body in Christ (Rom 12:3-5)

Paul's concern in this text appears to be very similar to 1 Corinthians 12. He writes to these Christians in Rome:

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

The diversity of gifts and temptation to comparison and false pride that comes with diversity take the forefront. The three truths of these verses are the unity of the body; diversity of its members with their corresponding diversity in function; and mutuality of the various members.³⁴

Wheaton College professor Douglas Moo suggests it is possible Paul is dealing with “pneumatics” as he was in Corinth. He believes the greater likelihood is that Paul was writing “mainly because it was integral to his understanding of the way in which the gospel was to transform the lives of Christians.”³⁵ Their understanding of the body of Christ was to fundamentally change the way they related to each other.

Paul begins by addressing the attitudes that are to result from such an understanding. He is going to discuss the diversity of gifts in the body in verses 4-8. That discussion necessitates the demand for proper attitudes in verses 1-3. British theologian and author William Sanday surmises that Paul is making it clear that “modesty, sobriety, and good judgment are necessary because of the character of the community; it is an organism or corporate body in which each person has his own duty to perform for the wellbeing of the whole and therefore to himself.”³⁶ The humility of which he speaks is

³⁴ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 186.

³⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 759.

³⁶ William Sanday, *Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1950), 355.

dependent on a proper understanding of the way a believer is related to God. Such an understanding is equally necessary if one is to maintain effective relationships with other people.³⁷ This unity toward which Paul encourages the church is spiritual and only possible because the members were “in Christ” as Paul points out in verse 5. Amazingly since they were all members of one body, it follows that each member belonged to all others.³⁸

Historian and commentator Gerald R. Cragg proposes that in Christ alone “all the diversity, which at first sight promises only disagreement, is gathered up into a unity in which each part supplements the others. Instead of resulting in weakness, our differences contribute to the effective working of the whole.”³⁹ American New Testament scholar Robert H. Mounce also ably asserts,

The Christian faith is essentially a corporate experience. Although each member has come to faith by a separate individual act of faith, the believing community lives out its Christian experience in fellowship with one another. “Lone Ranger Christianity” is a contradiction in terms.⁴⁰

The Body Is One (Eph 4:4-6)

This passage is as close as Paul comes to a full explanation of the universal church. Paul explains in Ephesians 4:4-6, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” The “body” metaphor belongs to him and in this context his focus is on the unified body of Christ. Former Evangelical Theological Society president Clinton E. Arnold believes Paul’s

³⁷ Gerald R. Cragg, *The Epistle to the Romans*, in vol. 9 of *The Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon, 1952), 584.

³⁸ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 27 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 234.

³⁹ Cragg, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 584.

⁴⁰ Mounce, *Romans*, 234.

simple declaration here, however, stops short of those issued by writers like Ignatius in the second century who made reference to a “catholic” or universal church.⁴¹ He has already mentioned the body image in 1:23 as he declared the headship of Christ in relation to all things, including the church which is the body of Christ. He has also told the Ephesian believers that God has created this “new man” from both Jews and Gentiles alike in 2:14-16. This new man is the body of Christ of which Paul now speaks. He aims to focus on certain realities concerning the body. Building upon these statements, as British scholar Andrew T. Lincoln concurs, Paul proceeds to raise his readers’ consciousness of belonging to the body of Christ and of participating in the Spirit.⁴² Paul’s teaching here serves the church in the same way as 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. Here the same truths are applied more generally. F. F. Bruce writes, “It was never meant as applicable to one local church only: wherever the people of Christ were found, there was his body, of which they were individual members.”⁴³

Paul employs the use of the word “one” seven times in these verses to appeal to readers to pursue unity. Australian scholar Peter O’Brien derives that these seven acclamations are intended to “remind the readers of the fundamental unities on which Christian faith and life are based.”⁴⁴ There is no verb in the original text. The action of unity is assumed. Clinton Arnold states, “The repetition of ‘one’ in a context of unity is

⁴¹ Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series on the New Testament, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 232-33.

⁴² Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 238.

⁴³ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 336.

⁴⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 280. Although this commentary has been called into question for plagiarism, the exegetical quality of the content warrants its inclusion.

reminiscent of Jesus' high priestly prayer in John's gospel, where he prays four times that God will make his followers 'one' after his departure."⁴⁵

Paul explains that the church is dependent as "one body" upon "one Spirit." He has just exhorted these believers to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" in verse 3. O'Brien writes, "This hearkens back to 2:16 for its theological basis. Both groups have been granted access to the Father 'in one Spirit' (2:18). Paul now turns to the fact that there is one Spirit."⁴⁶ They are members of the body by virtue of the work of the Holy Spirit. If Paul is making a broad statement about the universal church, as scholar and Bible translator Harold Hoehner concludes, it stands to reason that "there is unity in the universal church and in the Holy Spirit and there also should be unity in the local body of believers."⁴⁷

Next, Paul tells the church that they have "one hope that belongs to your call." This "one hope" of the Ephesians is not something individual and private but corporate and public. Lincoln states that it is a "hope for a cosmos that is unified and reconciled, a world in which everything is brought together in harmony through that which God has done in Christ."⁴⁸ Hope is the sphere in which their calling has taken place. Hoehner writes that this hope presented to them is "the reality that all things will be headed up in Christ (1:9) and though believers are presently seated with Christ, in the future they will be displayed in heaven as trophies of his grace (2:7)."⁴⁹ Paul seeks to create a sense of

⁴⁵ Arnold, *Ephesians*, 232.

⁴⁶ O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 281.

⁴⁷ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 514.

⁴⁸ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 239.

⁴⁹ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 515.

expectancy which should motivate and unify their actions.⁵⁰ He also brings attention to their election by mentioning their κλησις or “call,” which is the summons or invitation by God to which they had responded.⁵¹

Disagreement on the nature of the “one baptism” is beside the point. Water baptism is closely associated with Spirit baptism in the New Testament. It is Christian baptism into the name of the Lord Jesus which is the “one baptism” shared by the entire body. It is Christian baptism that speaks of the believer’s union with Christ in his death and resurrection. It is the believer’s identification with Christ and with his body.⁵² Baptism therefore has immense practical ramifications for church membership. It is the outward sign of identification with both Christ in heaven and his body on earth.

Paul has already mentioned God as the “Father from whom every family on earth is named” (3:14-15). Paul is linking the transcendence of God as Father of all with the wisdom of God being displayed in the unity of the church. O’Brien explains, “The church is the eschatological outpost, the pilot project of God’s purpose, and his people are the expression of this unity that displays to the universe his final goal.”⁵³ The church has the responsibility to display this goal to the world. Proper unity at the local level is absolutely necessary for this to occur.

The Head of the Body (Col 1:18, 24)

Paul declares to the Colossian church, “And He is the head of the body, the church. . . . Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.” Moo

⁵⁰ O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 282.

⁵¹ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 516.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 518.

⁵³ O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 285-86.

sees Paul's use of Christ as the "head of the body" as the fourth step in the evolution of the metaphor of the body. Douglas Moo states, "While there are parallel uses of the metaphor in the Hellenistic world, Paul is using a straightforward elaboration of the metaphor."⁵⁴ As pointed out by New Testament professor David Pao, Paul uses language that places "the head" in the predicative position and is marked by an article (η κεφαλη), which indicates "absolute identification with the subject."⁵⁵ Paul means to leave no doubt in the minds of the Colossians that Christ is the only possible head of the church. Pao continues,

First by identifying the head of the church as the one who is also supreme over all creation, Paul is affirming that the church holds a crucial position in the redemptive plan of God. Second, since Christ is the head of the church, the church takes on a mediatorial role through which one can approach God. Perhaps in reaction to the individualism embedded in a mystical view of salvation and spirituality, Paul points to the importance of this community within which a new reality is to be experienced.⁵⁶

The individualism that is so rampant today is countered by the reality of Christ as the head of the church, under whom all must submit.

If the church is the body of Christ and Christ is the head of that body, then Paul believes that body to be worthy of his own suffering (1:24). O'Brien writes,

Though presently exalted in heaven Christ continues to suffer in his members and not least in Paul himself. This was driven home to him on the Damascus Road when Christ said to him, "Why do you persecute me?" Paul's suffering for Christ was the same as suffering for the Christ's body.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 127-28.

⁵⁵ David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series on the New Testament, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 99.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁷ O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 80.

Moo states, “He undoubtedly felt it worthwhile to be ‘filling up’ the suffering destined for the body of Christ.” Indeed all through the centuries “the members of Christ’s body, his people participate in the suffering of Christ himself.”⁵⁸

The existence of the church as the body of Christ represents one of the greatest acts of God’s creation and stands as one of the greatest commitments a human being can know. God has placed and blended unique individuals into a corporate unity unlike anything else ever seen in the world. The church as a body argues against selfish individualism and identification. It stands as a constant reminder that the Christian’s individual identity is swallowed up in something greater than himself and his individual purpose is only found in the local body where God has placed him.

The Church as the People of God

The apostle Peter is burdened with the task of encouraging persecuted Christians in his first letter. As shown by Wheaton New Testament professor Karen Jobes, Peter frames his correspondence to these oppressed believers in the motif of “the historic Babylonian exile in order to identify his readers with the Old Testament promise of deliverance.”⁵⁹ He begins the letter with the theme of election and returns to it in 2:9. Noted Southern Seminary professor Tom Schreiner points to this theme “as a means of strengthening God’s pilgrim people.”⁶⁰ In 2:9-10 Peter writes,

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.

⁵⁸ Moo, *The Letter to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 152.

⁵⁹ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 158.

⁶⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, The New American Commentary, vol. 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 114.

For these pilgrims to remember where they are going, they must be reminded of who they are. The apostle accomplishes this task in 2:9-10 by connecting the church to the past and revealing its status and future in the rich language of faith.

A Chosen Race

Peter has already introduced the idea of believers being chosen in reference to Christ himself (2:4, 6). “This sense of chosenness pervades the book,” writes Canadian scholar Peter Davids.⁶¹ Peter is drawing a contrast between those who have rejected Christ in the verses preceding and those who have been chosen to follow him. This first phrase, *γενοϋ εκλεκτον* (“elect race”), is drawn from Isaiah 43:20. The term *γενοϋ* refers to people descended from a common lineage. In Isaiah 43, that lineage was from Abraham. In verse 9, that lineage is Christ. Commentator and professor J. Ramsey Michaels adds, “Possibly (although by no means certainly) on the basis of either this passage or Isaiah 43:20 itself the word “race” or “stock” became in the second century a collective designation for Christians throughout the world.”⁶² Peter is indeed saying that God had formed a new race among humanity. Jobes states that this understanding of a new race

was precisely one of the points for which they were criticized and persecuted by first century pagan society. This perception of them alienated them from the people of the Roman Empire. From this conception also came the accusation that Christians were haters of mankind.⁶³

The designation of a new race also presented potential conflicts of loyalties. The charges brought against them were for treason and poor citizenship. Jobes continues, “First century Christians were often persecuted and executed not because they worshipped Jesus—in a polytheistic society, what is one more God?—but because of the higher claim

⁶¹ Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 91.

⁶² J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 49 (Dallas: Word, 1988), 108.

⁶³ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 159.

of the gospel that only in Christ is the one, true God to be worshipped.”⁶⁴ Jobes explains that at the same time “as they lived this idea they also paradoxically won over the masses.”⁶⁵ One must wonder if the modern church in North America has lost its sense of being aliens and thus lost much of its influence as well.

A Royal Priesthood

Both phrases “royal priesthood” and “holy nation” are drawn from Exodus 19:6. Both phrases also apply meaning to the church that formerly have been reserved for Israel. In the ancient world, it was not uncommon for the king to have his own group of priests. That priest had the privilege of serving in the presence of the deity, “coming near where no one else dared.”⁶⁶ The designation communicates the image of spiritual sacrifices and faithful consecration to God. It is God, the King of the universe, who has made the church a priesthood in royal service. Respected New Testament commentator Paul J. Achtemeier recalls that since these Christians were part of a priesthood, they were “members of the Christian community, not as separate individuals, as though each were somehow a priest. The Christian community is a body of priests in the service of God their king to whom they now owe their allegiance.”⁶⁷ The “priesthood of the believer” has often been interpreted to denote a concept of clerical authority. Jobes suggests that, instead, Peter has “obedience and holiness in mind, concepts that were also present in the original context of Exodus 19.”⁶⁸ Peter is telling these scattered believers that they are God’s priesthood scattered throughout the nations who have the task of serving the one true God.

⁶⁴ Jobes, *I Peter*, 162.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶⁶ Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 91-92.

⁶⁷ Paul J. Achtemeier, *I Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 165.

⁶⁸ Jobes, *I Peter*, 160-61.

A Holy Nation

The designation as a “holy nation” is derived from Exodus 19:6. Achtemeier explains that this third couplet points to the faith community as a “group who shared common customs that were derived from the holy God whom they served. It underlines the unity of the Christian community despite the diverse ethnic backgrounds from which they came.”⁶⁹ Jobes comments,

The designation of believers as a holy nation reinforces the concept of obedience and sanctification, with each of the four descriptions mutually interpreting the others. It refers not so much to their moral status but their calling as a people set apart for God, and therefore a calling to moral quality . . . by this Peter suggests that the true social context of his readers was not first-century Greco-Roman culture but the new nation constituted by believers in Christ (centered in the kingdom of God).⁷⁰

Peter is not saying the church replaces Israel; he is emphasizing the church’s new identity as the new holy people of God. The church is a people set apart for the Lord and they enjoy his special presence and favor.⁷¹

A People for His Possession

Peter now uses a phrase that is not a quote from the Old Testament but an allusion to both Exodus 19:5 and Isaiah 43:20-21. Jobes says that in both of those passages, “God refers to holy nation of Israel in the context of the exodus and later in the Babylonian exile, respectively, as the people out of all the peoples of the world that God claims for himself.”⁷² Schreiner explains that *Περιοιτησιν* is used in Malachi 3:17 of people “who have responded to the Lord’s rebuke to live righteously, and so in contrast to the wicked they constitute his possessing his special people.”⁷³

⁶⁹ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 165.

⁷⁰ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 161.

⁷¹ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 115.

⁷² Jobes, *1 Peter*, 162.

⁷³ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 115.

One particularly interesting possibility is a futuristic translation of the word. Michaels believes that of the four titles presented in this passage, λαος ιεζ περιποιησιν is the only one pointed distinctly toward the future:

To Peter, it is already the case that the Christian community belongs to God as a unique possession; what still waits is its final vindication against the unbelieving and disobedient. Three of the other four New Testament occurrences of περιποιησιν use the word similarly as the object of εις and with a futuristic reference. In each instance the word means “attainment” or “acquisition.”⁷⁴

The translation would then become “a people destined for vindication.” God has called his church to be his own special possession. Church membership entails being a part of a people called unto holiness because they are holy in Christ. Membership also entails vitally linking one’s life with God’s unique possession, looking forward to a day of vindication in spite of what it might cost in the present.

Purpose of Their Position

The very reason for their collective position as a people chosen for God’s possession is that they might “announce the glorious deeds” of God. The meaning of αρετη is “excellence of character.” Davids writes, “Christians are to publish abroad the mighty works of God, which include both his activity in creation and his miracle of redemption in the life, death, resurrection, and revelation of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁵ Εξαγγελω is only used here in the New Testament and means “to tell forth” and is used primarily to mean the announcement of God’s praise. Achtemeier states, “The telling forth of God’s acts in 1 Peter is to be done both by act and by word, and the latter is surely the intention here.”⁷⁶

The people of God have been entrusted with the task of praising his wonders through words and actions. The collective accountability of such a responsibility is

⁷⁴ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 109-10.

⁷⁵ Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 92.

⁷⁶ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 166.

enormous. As God chose Israel to praise him, the church has now been chosen to praise his excellent character. Schreiner writes, “This reflects God’s ultimate purpose in everything he does as everything he does is designed to bring him praise.”⁷⁷

Called Out of Darkness

Achtemeier declares, “The result of God’s call from darkness to light is the creation of a people that before did not exist. The Christian community, like creation itself, had been summoned by God’s call out of darkness.”⁷⁸ Peter is referring to their conversion. Schreiner calls attention to Peter’s use of the “language of creation” of Genesis 1. The light is called forth and pushes back the light.⁷⁹ These Christians, like every Christian today, have been called out of the darkness of this world to announce the excellencies of God’s character. Biblical church membership can only pertain to those called out of darkness and in whose life this move from darkness to light is evident. Biblical church membership does not require the absence of a past. It does, however, require being called out of that past into a new relationship with God.

Peter has made it clear that though the community of faith may suffer in their society as exiles and aliens, they are in fact the true people of God.⁸⁰ The discovery is also made once again that the emphasis is on the collective. Peter uses titles for the church that communicate corporate responsibility and blessing. Davids reminds, “The West tends to focus on individuals relating to God, while Peter (and the rest of the New Testament; e.g. Paul’s body of Christ language) was more conscious of peoples’ becoming part of a new corporate entity that is chosen by and that relates to God.”⁸¹

⁷⁷ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 115-16.

⁷⁸ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 167.

⁷⁹ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 116.

⁸⁰ Achtemeir, *1 Peter*, 168.

⁸¹ Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 91.

The Church as the Temple of God

The metaphor of a building used for the church is one of the most picturesque in the Scriptures. One is not hard pressed to find an emphasis on physical structures in religion. At the same time, it has been misunderstood by many throughout church history as the metaphor is usually applied to the individual believer. Careful attention to the building of the corporate church is a different matter. Two passages relate the picture of God's church as a building or temple.

Building the Temple (1 Cor 3:9-17)

This passage is often confused with 1 Corinthians 6:15-20 where Paul chides those who have consorted with prostitutes to abstain based on the fact that their bodies are the “temple of the Holy Spirit.” Paul is addressing individuals in that passage as indicated by the language that addresses each member's body and the fact that he speaks of them being “members” of Christ. In this passage, however, Paul addresses the entire church as a corporate entity by saying in verse 16, “Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?” He uses the second person plural verb εστε with the singular predicate nominative οικοδομη in verse 9. Paul is saying that they all (plural) were the building (singular) of God.

Paul has just used the metaphor of a field to describe them as well. He does not develop the picture any further. His use of both “field” and a “building” calls into focus that these Corinthian believers are God's possession.⁸² A person's identity in the ancient world was often determined by who that person belonged to. Ciampa and Rosner write, “Accordingly, the identity of the Corinthian Christians and their leaders to which Paul draws attention does not concern who they are so much as whose they are: both belong to God.”⁸³

⁸² Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 150.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 149.

In verse 10, Paul refers to himself as the ἀρχιτεκτων or a “building supervisor.” In a very meaningful way, Paul is saying that he and other leaders are responsible for the oversight of the construction of God’s building. He claims to have laid the foundation at Corinth while others continued to build upon that foundation. This passage is certainly about the work of leaders in the church and their responsibility. His implied duties, however, included the equipping of those who would do the work. All who are part of the work of building the building of God are accountable for how they build.

The implications for church membership are striking. In verse 12, Paul gives a list of building materials available to those doing the work of building by supposing, “Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw.” The list includes materials that are valuable and durable alongside materials that are common and easily destroyed. Fee notes, “Paul is saying that the ‘gold, silver, and costly stones’ of the gospel of Jesus Christ will remain while the wisdom of the age in all its human forms will pass away.”⁸⁴ In verses 13-15, Paul warns that the quality of the work will be inspected as the day of God’s judgment will reveal what sort of work each man has done.

Each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

The hues of Paul’s image begin to stand out when one imagines a fire consuming a building and leaving only the most durable materials behind. This imagery would have resonated with the Corinthians whose city was destroyed by the Romans in 46 BC. Its re-founding in 44 BC by Julius Caesar probably meant that some buildings in Paul’s day were a patchwork of new and old materials.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 140.

⁸⁵ Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 155.

This revealing fire is Christ's evaluation and judgment. This is not a judgment to determine salvation; it is a judgment to determine a proper reward for how one has built in the church. The believer's accountability is often limited by some to thoughts and deeds done in secret. Fee rightly laments, "This entire paragraph has suffered much in the church from those would recontextualize it in terms of individual popular piety (i.e., how I build my life on Christ)."⁸⁶ Paul is not dealing with how one builds his life but rather how one builds the church. The major theme of evaluation when one stands before Christ, then, is how one built in the church. There can be no greater motivation for biblical church membership than the fact that each one will give account to Christ for the quality of their work in his church.

The church is a building, but it is no ordinary building. It is a temple (v. 16). Paul calls it God's temple and says God's Spirit dwells in it. The temples of antiquity were the centers of religious activity. The gentile Corinthians could look toward the southwest of Corinth and see what was left of the Temple of Aphrodite on the Acrocorinth. They could also visit the site of the Temple of Apollo. The Jewish Corinthians would immediately think of the Jerusalem temple. In both cases the temple was believed to be the place where the deity dwelled. Neither was the temple a place for congregating. The temple was a place where service was rendered. Since they would have had no physical building, Paul was saying to the Corinthians that their local body was where God was centering his activity. The same remains true of every local body of believers in their respective community. God longs to center his activity there.

Paul leaves the metaphor with an ominous warning in verse 17 by saying, "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple." Anyone who destroyed this temple of God, this local congregation, risked having themselves destroyed by God. His reasoning is that the temple of God is holy. The

⁸⁶ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 136.

need for truly biblical church membership is not only that believers will be held accountable for how they built the temple of God. Biblical church membership called for by the holiness of God with which he has endowed his church. Being a member of church is a holy relationship. Holiness cries out for submission and obedience.

A Spiritual House (1 Pet 2:5)

The apostle Peter is encouraging persecuted believers toward a holy and obedient life. Just before he explains to them they are a new people for God's possession he says to them, "you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Michaels sees this "spiritual house" as a metaphor for the community where the Holy Spirit of God dwells. He believes Peter's intent to be a general identification of the Christian "house" as a community belonging uniquely to God and to Jesus Christ.⁸⁷ The context and language, however, tell a different story. Peter calls these believers "living stones" and "a holy priesthood." These phrases together bring to mind a temple. Davids believes temple imagery is clear in that this is the usual use of the building image in the New Testament as well as from the "easy shift to priesthood and sacrifice in the context."⁸⁸ Each believer is an integral living stone in the building as well as a priest serving God in the same.

Living stones. This passage is the only reference in the New Testament to believers as "living stones." These stones are "being built up into a spiritual house." Michaels also points out,

Even within a metaphor stones cannot be commanded to "be built up" (passive) or to "build themselves up" (middle), for the initiation rests with the builder. This only

⁸⁷ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 100.

⁸⁸ Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 86.

makes sense if Peter is affirming that in fact believers are being built like stones so as to become a certain kind of edifice.⁸⁹

That edifice is a temple built of living stones placed there by the builder who is God. Peter says later (vv. 6-8) that Christ himself is the cornerstone of this building. These believers are not being pictured as “individual stones, lying apart in a field or building site, but collectively as part of God great temple.”⁹⁰

A holy priesthood. These believers are then said to have been built into this spiritual house in order to be a “holy priesthood.” Some may object to a mixing of metaphors in this verse, that believers cannot be both stones and priests in the same building. Schreiner counters that the fulfillment in Christ implied here “transcends the types that anticipate it. They are God’s dwelling place by the Spirit and his new priesthood.”⁹¹ This building is not a literal temple but a spiritual one.

Peter said this was a “holy” priesthood. Its contrast with the heathen priesthood of Asia Minor would have spoken volumes to these believers. They would have known, as noted by Anglican theologian Edward Gordon Selwyn, a priesthood that was “at best idolatrous and therefore false, and at worst immoral.”⁹² Over and over again the New Testament writers refer to the church as holy, set apart, and prized. Church membership requires holiness because the organization to which one has committed loyalty and service is holy.

Spiritual sacrifices. One of the main tasks of any priest is to offer sacrifices. Peter says these believers are priests in order to offer “spiritual sacrifices.” These sacrifices can be any number of things. They can be deeds, praises, or offerings. It should be noted

⁸⁹ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 100.

⁹⁰ Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 86.

⁹¹ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 105-6.

⁹² Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, Thornapple Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 160.

that these are not offered to obtain forgiveness of sin. Peter says the sacrifices must be acceptable through Jesus Christ. Membership within the church of Jesus Christ involves many sacrifices. None of these sacrifices will bring salvation but rather are possible because of the salvation one has in Christ. His atoning sacrifice enables whatever sacrifice the believer might make to be acceptable to God. Membership in the local church and the resulting responsibilities take on a greater significance when viewed as spiritual sacrifices. They become a blessing possessed only by those who have been placed into this “spiritual house” of the church. Drudgery becomes anticipation and duty becomes privilege. It truly is an honor to serve the Lord God in the house he has built.

The Church as the Family of God

The metaphorical use of a family in describing the church adds further intimacy, accountability, and responsibility to church membership. In Jesus’ day the family unit was considered the most important in society. Total allegiance and mutual support were expected from each member. The designation of the church as a family carries this same weight.

Jesus’ True Family (Mark 3:3-35)

The family metaphor is initiated by none other than the Lord himself. Mark describes a scene in which Jesus’ family has come to talk to him. Baptist expositor James A. Brooks understands their intention as being to stop him from embarrassing himself any further by his preaching ministry. Brooks believes their intent is to arrest him in some sort of intervention.⁹³ They were actively rejecting him at this point in his ministry.

The account begins in verses 20-21 but is interrupted by the account of Jesus’ being accused by the scribes of being possessed by Beelzebul and casting out demons using demonic power. Mark uses this episode to highlight the amount of rejection Jesus

⁹³ James A. Brooks, *Mark*, The New American Commentary, vol. 23 (Nashville: Holman, 1991), 74.

was experiencing even among his own biological family. That Jesus' family is put in the same category of the religious leaders of Israel as outsiders who were looking in at the sinners who had become insiders is clarified by commentator Mark L. Strauss.⁹⁴

A very clear statement. Every listener in the crowd that day would have understood what Jesus was saying. Every listener would have been shocked. Pastor and author Joseph H. Hellerman surmises Jesus' words "would have struck those who witnessed this encounter as utterly subversive and counter-cultural."⁹⁵ The Middle Eastern mindset did not allow for such an arrangement. Strauss suggests that in this group-oriented culture "loyalty to one's own family, clan, and nation was among the highest of cultural values."⁹⁶ It is this exact standard of solidarity that Jesus is seeking to transfer to the new family he is describing. Later in 10:28-30, Jesus promises Peter that he would enjoy family-like relationships with others who have made the same sort of sacrifice as he and that he would discover other necessities of life within the context of a new community.⁹⁷ One can only imagine what these accounts would have meant to the followers of Jesus Christ in Mark's day who experienced firsthand rejection from biological family members because of their faith.⁹⁸

Qualified by obedience. Jesus is not rejecting his own family. Most of them would believe in him later. Strauss notes, "He is establishing a new society in which family is defined not by ethnic or national identity but by common allegiance to the

⁹⁴ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 171.

⁹⁵ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B & H, 2009), 65.

⁹⁶ Strauss, *Mark*, 172.

⁹⁷ Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 65.

⁹⁸ Strauss, *Mark*, 172.

kingdom of God and his purpose in the world.”⁹⁹ The family model becomes even more important when compared to contemporary relationship structures. Family relationships are closer than friendships, or at least they should be. Family relationships also demand greater loyalty and responsibility. The family was the most important group in Jesus’ day and it remains so today.

The family relationship proposed by Jesus replaces any ethnic, tribal, or national association. Church membership must reflect this new family relationship. It must preclude racial prejudice and social preference. Even American patriotism must take a “distant second” to allegiance and loyalty to brothers and sisters in Christ wherever they are.¹⁰⁰

The Early Church (Acts 4:32-37)

Jesus’ words to Peter in Mark 10:29-30 foretold at least in part what would happen in Acts 4. The early church finds itself in material need. The cost of discipleship was proving to be high. The only way the daily of needs of each member could be met was through a sharing of resources. Luke specifically mentions Barnabas as one who sold a field he owned to provide for those who needed help within the church family. Hellerman points out that this passage suggests that Jesus’ earliest followers interpreted his saying throughout the Gospels as literal commandments.¹⁰¹

Luke states in 4:32 the believers were of “one heart and soul.” Descriptions of these terms are offered by German author and scholar Eckhard J. Schnabel. He views καρδια as “the vital center” and the ψυχή as the “vital self” of the believer.¹⁰² Schnabel explains, “This combination is found throughout the Old Testament and denotes a

⁹⁹ Strauss, *Mark*, 172.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁰¹ Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 66.

¹⁰² Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 269.

complete allegiance to God.”¹⁰³ The early church held nothing back from each other because they were holding nothing back from God.

Luke’s description indicates characteristics of a family group more than any other social construct. Some have seen this situation as an early commune, possibly modeled after an unsubstantiated Greek ideal. The fact, however, that individuals retained private property rights indicates something else. This community of believers acts more like a family in that they voluntarily put their personal self-interests aside for the good of the group.

Paul’s Use of Family Language

Paul did not hesitate to use words with a family connotation in his letters. It is common for him to employ such family language when speaking to the church in a city. Hellerman points out that Paul uses the word ἀδελφοί or its variants 139 times. He uses some form of “F/father” 65 times, “inherit” or “heir” 19 times, “sons” 17 times, and “child” 39 times.¹⁰⁴

First Corinthians 1:10-11. Paul encounters the need for reaffirming the Christian family in the Corinthian church. Most of Paul’s uses of family language in the Corinthian letters reflect his desire to model the church as a surrogate family.¹⁰⁵ A full 29 percent of Paul’s use of ἀδελφοί “siblings” occurs in 1 Corinthians.¹⁰⁶ Paul is issuing a call to a divided church family to reunite. They were divided to the point of taking sides. Paul calls them to unity by addressing them as “siblings.” Like brothers and sisters who

¹⁰³ Schnabel, *Acts*, 269.

¹⁰⁴ Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 77.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁰⁶ Garland, *I Corinthians*, 41.

are prone to squabbling, they nonetheless have a “compelling basis for getting along.”¹⁰⁷ To Paul, the Corinthian problem was a family issue and deserved a high priority.

First Corinthians 6:1-8. This passage sheds further light on the depth of the Corinthian division. They were taking each other to secular court to resolve issues within the group. In verse 6, Paul uses the term *αδελφοι* again to describe the situation as a family altercation between brothers.¹⁰⁸ The Corinthian conflict stands in stark contrast to the brotherly love in the church seen in Acts. As proposed by theology professor Gregory J. Lockwood, “It is completely antithetical to the meaning of Christian brotherhood that members of the church fight over earthly property and other legal matters.”¹⁰⁹

First Thessalonians 2:1-20. In this passage Paul is recalling the relationship he has had with the church at Thessalonica. His emotional attachment to them is evident as his metaphors, like “infants,” “nursing mother,” and “father,” are all family metaphors. The entire passage contains evidence of the kind of emotional ties typically characterized in Mediterranean sibling relationships.¹¹⁰

In verse 17, he uses an interesting word to describe how he felt about being apart from them for a time. Paul says he was “torn away” from them for a short time. The word he uses is *απορφανισθεντες* along with *αδελφος* to create the picture of being removed from his spiritual family as an orphan. New Testament professor Jeffrey Weima relates emphatically that the verb *απορφανιζω* always refers to children orphaned from their

¹⁰⁷ Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 74.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁰⁹ Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 2000), 193.

¹¹⁰ Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 80-81.

parents.¹¹¹ Paul considers himself and Timothy to be children orphaned from the family of the church at Thessalonica. He longs for them and their fellowship

First Timothy 3:14-16. In Paul's first letter to his young protégé, he effectively uses the imagery of a "household" to communicate responsibilities within the family of God. He uses the idea earlier in 3:3-4 to make a connection to the overseer's house and the church and he repeats it again in 3:12. In verses 14-16, he refers to the church as the "household of God." The Authorized Version's translation of "house" promotes the idea that Paul was providing a "church manual" for how to organize the activities in the "church house." According to expositors Thomas Lea and Hayne Griffin, Jr., it is better to understand that Paul views the "house of God" as a household or family.¹¹²

Paul does indeed refer literally to the church as οἶκω θεου. His use of the images of στύλος και ἐδραῖωμα further the idea of a building. Perhaps he is referring to the imagery of the church as a temple. New Testament Greek scholar William Mounce sees Paul drawing on both possible meanings of "house" in this chapter, suggesting he means both. The church is then God's temple and as such it houses God's family.¹¹³ Both images promote the same ideas of responsibility and accountability.

Paul's reasoning is that this "household of God" is the "church of the living God." This relative clause indicates the proper motivation for right conduct within the Ephesian body. The family to which Paul addresses his commands is none other than God's living church. These Ephesian church members needed to be reminded that the surrounding pagan practices were dead but the church of God was alive. Lea and Griffin

¹¹¹ Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 197.

¹¹² Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, Jr., *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, The New American Commentary, vol. 34 (Nashville: Holman Reference, 1992), 127.

¹¹³ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 220.

write that Paul's admonishment to this part of the family of God is that "Christian behavior must throb with the vitality of divine power."¹¹⁴ This family of faith was to preserve the truth and their godly influence. Their allegiance to this family was to trump every other association they might have.

Conclusion

The metaphors used for the church in the New Testament shed light on this important but neglected subject of biblical church membership. As the body of Christ, the church is under the Savior's full authority and subject to his purpose. Each member of this body is useful and only finds purpose for life within the context of the body. As the people of God, the church is a holy nation called out for God's glory and pleasure. As the temple of God, the church made up of saved individuals is the place where God's presence abides in a lost and fallen world. As the family of God, the church is a haven for the believing individual where he or she may find not only acceptance but the meeting of needs and nourishment of the soul.

Each of these metaphors argues against an overly individualized Christianity. If the Western church model is characterized by rugged individualism, the biblical model is corporate in every aspect. Biblical church membership can never be understood until these New Testament principles are embraced once again. One can never fully serve or worship as God would desire outside the parameters of the church. This great privilege is taken for granted by far too many and the harm done to the kingdom of God is unmistakable. The recovery of biblical church membership must become a high priority. The cost will be great, but the effort will be worth it.

¹¹⁴ Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 123.

CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES RELATED
TO CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Introduction

North American churches desperately need to recover an understanding of biblical church membership. The New Testament's model of the local church differs greatly from what is often seen in most congregations in North America. Seminary professor John Hammett laments this state of affairs found in many local churches

because their pragmatic approach to church life, their concern to be relevant to the culture, and their desire to see their churches grow leave them vulnerable to the danger that their churches will be shaped more by those concerns than by the design of the Lord of the church.¹

The shaping of the membership of the average local church indeed has less to do with biblical directives than it should.

This lack of biblical design for the role of church membership, however, does not prevent leaders from calling for reform and revival. As noble as these desires may be, the calls for such changes ring hollow when biblical church membership is ignored. It is easy to argue that practical Christianity is suffering, yet one of the primary courses of correction is often neglected by leaders who rush headlong into change when they should instead return humbly to God's original design for His church. It is unreasonable to expect positive reform unless biblical orthodoxy is applied once again to the matter of church membership. Evangelical leader Charles Colson and inspirational author Ellen Vaughn note, "Any genuine resurgence of Christianity as history demonstrates, depends

¹ John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 11.

on a reawakening and renewal of that which is the essence of the faith—that is, the people of God, the new society, the body of Christ, which is made manifest in the world—the church.”² What then could be more central to “the people of God, the new society, the body of Christ” than clarity on who is a part of this people, society, and body?

Several characteristics of biblical church membership must be recovered in order to restore the church’s influence in the culture and allow the church to fully represent Christ. What follows is a discussion of these characteristics.

Regenerate Church Membership

The membership of the local church should first and foremost be comprised of true believers. The consequences are disastrous if this condition is ignored or overlooked. Many problems within the average congregation can be traced to unregenerate persons on the rolls.

A Biblical Principle

The idea of an unregenerate church member is never given credence in the New Testament. Rather, the ability of the church to preach the gospel is absolutely dependent on a regenerate membership. Pastor Mark Dever notes,

The images of our human nature that God gives us in the Bible are quite radical—images of being in debt, enslaved, bankrupt, and even dead. This is what the Bible presents as our condition, our situation. It is disastrous, and we had best get out of it. Clearly we need to change.³

The very metaphors used in the New Testament for the church imply a change from the old way of life and a commitment to a new life and way of living. British pastor Peter Masters relates,

² Charles W. Colson and Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *The Body* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 32.

³ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 108.

Temple, body, and family are specifically used to describe a local church. They demonstrate beyond all doubt that believers have an obligation to seek church membership, and membership involves a real pledge and commitment to the church. It involves a humble acceptance and support of the doctrines, discipline and service of a local congregation.⁴

It is difficult to imagine an unconverted person being capable of accepting or supporting in full the requirements implied by these metaphors.

Other specific clues found in the New Testament firmly imply the expectation of church members being regenerate. Paul greets the church in Rome by saying they are “loved of God and called to be saints” (Rom 1:7). He tells the Corinthians they are “sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (1 Cor 1:2). To the Colossians he writes they are “saints and faithful brothers in Christ” (Col 1:2). Each of these greetings shows that he expected members of these churches to be regenerate. Hammett points out that church members “are referred to more than sixty times as saints, or holy ones, or people set aside for devotion to God. They are the ones who believe in Christ and are bound to one another by the Holy Spirit.”⁵

This biblical principle is to be fleshed out practically in the local body of believers. Hammett states definitively why this biblical principle applies to the local congregation as well as the universal body:

First, simply as a matter of logic, if the universal church is composed of all believers, it seems that the goal of local churches should be to come as close to that same standard as possible. . . . Second, it seems as if the New Testament anticipates the possibility that local churches will inadvertently allow false members to creep in, and provides for it. That provision is church discipline. . . . Third, the description of local churches in the New Testament assumes that these local, visible congregations are composed of believers only. . . . Finally, local churches in Acts gathered only those who believed. On the day of Pentecost, the church in Jerusalem was constituted by those who “accepted his [Peter’s] message (Acts 2:41).⁶

⁴ Peter Masters, *Church Membership in the Bible* (London: Wakeman Trust, 2008), 14.

⁵ Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

In these ways the Bible implies repeatedly that the church is such a unique body as to be comprised only of those who have been regenerated and converted by God's grace through the action of the Holy Spirit. Refusal to accept this principle would constitute disobedience to inspired revelation, the consequences of which are too many to note.

A Baptist Priority

A regenerate church membership is also a belief held historically by Baptists. Hammett notes that for the first four hundred years of church history and beyond this was the main view of church membership stating this, "interpretation had been accepted for more than a thousand years by the time of the Reformation."⁷ The advance of the Roman church ushered in relative biblical ignorance. This ignorance hindered the view that church membership should be regenerate. Hammett explains, "Once the Bible became readily available the believers' church interpretation was renewed almost immediately."⁸

A significant difference between Anabaptists and the Reformers was over the nature of the church. The former believed that *sola Scriptura* applied to church polity resulting in a commitment to a regenerate church membership. In fact, regeneration was the first mark of the church for many Anabaptist leaders. Historian William Estep articulates the beliefs of sixteenth century Anabaptists on this subject:

The Anabaptists were not interested in constructing a church through coercion, either by infant baptism or by the power of the magistrate. They viewed a church so constituted as false and not of Christ. They were concerned with gathering a church of believers who had freely responded to the proclamation of the gospel.⁹

On the other hand, Catholics and Reformers were more concerned that the church and state remain unified. Thus, the practice of infant baptism among both Catholics and

⁷ Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 86.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ William Roscoe Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 244-45.

Reformers brought every member of the state into the church whether they had been converted or not.

The acceptance of a mixed church (that is, a church where both regenerate and unregenerate are mixed together in membership) was never a Baptist principle. The irony is that Baptist churches today are almost as likely as paedobaptist congregations to view mixed membership as the norm, for the numbers on Baptist church membership rolls are commonly much higher than the numbers of those in regular attendance.

A Strategic Importance

The fight to regain a regenerate church is met with resistance in every area of modern church life. One reason for this, as Colson and Vaughn lament, is that “Cultural values have so captured the church that we equate success with size. It’s a reflex reaction. If a church is growing, someone is doing something right.”¹⁰ Baptist college professor Warren McWilliams states that the significance of the issue is evidenced “in the light of several trends: the large number of inactive church members on our rolls, the many nonresident members, the baptism of very young children, and the nominal ‘Christian’ behavior of many members.”¹¹ Several steps must be taken to ensure, as much as possible, a regenerate church membership.

Articulate a clear gospel. One major issue today is the lack of clear gospel preaching in many churches. Growth-related pragmatism often ignores the problem that necessitates the gospel, which is the sin nature of all men. Ignoring the sin problem leads to a type of therapeutic gospel. Colson and Vaughn describe this type of gospel: “It works

¹⁰ Colson and Vaughn, *The Body*, 47.

¹¹ Warren McWilliams, *Defining Baptist Convictions*, ed. Charles DeWeese (Franklin, TN: Providence House, 1996), 121.

from the outside to restore self-esteem by enabling us to adjust to our circumstances; carried far enough, it can lead us to feel good about being bad.”¹²

A clear declaration of the sin problem leads to the only solution provided by the true gospel and the only solution needed: the substitutionary atonement of Christ. If sin is not declared and defined, then there is no need to declare what Christ really accomplished on the cross. If sin is not defined and Christ is not declared, there is no need for repentance from sin or a turning toward Christ. Many people have joined churches having never heard the most important elements of the true gospel.

Define the conversion experience. Particularly in revivalist churches,¹³ the conversion experience can become an emotional catharsis rather than a trusting commitment. Often one is cajoled through emotional manipulation to come forward publicly or repeat a formulaic prayer. Many are led to believe that coming forward or praying a “sinner’s prayer”¹⁴ guarantees salvation. Sincerity at the moment of conversion is not really the issue, as Dever explains,

I fear that one of the results of misunderstanding the Bible’s terms of conversion may be that evangelical churches are full of people who have made a sincere commitment as some point in their lives but who have not experienced the radical change that the Bible calls conversion.¹⁵

Conversion must be defined as turning toward God in faith and repentance. It must involve trusting in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross whereby He satisfied the wrath of a holy God. Faith in Christ is trust in both His person and His ability to accomplish that work of salvation apart from human ability. Conversion also must

¹² Colson and Vaughn, *The Body*, 123.

¹³ *Revivalist churches* are those that conduct periodic, specialized evangelistic services and activities for the purpose of effecting a religious awakening.

¹⁴ A sinner’s prayer is a prayer of repentance meant to form a new relationship with God. It may be formulaic and include asking for forgiveness of sin and/or “asking Jesus into one’s heart.”

¹⁵ Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 121.

involve true repentance from sin as one recognizes his fallen nature and inability to save himself. The commitment is serious and life altering. The commitment is all or nothing. The commitment will result in change. While emotions may certainly be involved, they are by no means the catalyst or the guarantee of the validity of one's conversion.

Studies indicate that conversion experiences resulting in committed church membership are more likely to result in biblical fidelity in other areas of life. One such study conducted by Christian sociologist Bradley Wright discovered that those involved regularly in churches have a 38 percent likelihood of suffering divorce while those who claim to be Christians but do not attend regularly have a 60 percent likelihood of divorce.¹⁶ This simple finding reinforces the fact that true conversion resulting in commitment to a local church produces positive change and consistency that nothing else can accomplish.

Guarding the front door. Equally important is the task of insuring that those who join the church are qualified to become members. Dever states both the necessity and purpose of doing so:

What we actually need to do is close the front door and open the back door! If we want to see our churches grow, we need to make it harder to join, and we need to be better about excluding people. We need to be able to show that there is a distinction between the church and the world—that it means something to be a Christian.¹⁷

Those who make a profession of faith must exhibit signs of true conversion. While no one can see into a person's heart, a true salvation experience will bear fruit of a relationship with Christ. 9Marks editor Jonathan Leeman notes prospective members should be asked to sign a statement of faith to confirm their doctrinal beliefs and "churches should tune their ears for a Spirit-given brokenness and humility before

¹⁶ Bradley R. E. Wright, *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites . . . and Other Lies You've Been Told* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2010), 133.

¹⁷ Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 184.

God.”¹⁸ The church has the responsibility and authority to affirm the regenerate membership of every member.

The responsibility to affirm the regenerate condition of every member includes those who might transfer membership from another church. Membership transfers can bring unregenerate members into the church. The great eighteenth century British Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon oversaw an extensive vetting of every person who applied for membership at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. The process included interviews and public testimonies designed to determine the spiritual condition of every member. When it came to transfers from other churches even more effort was expended. Spurgeon expressed some frustration: “Some churches retain a name upon their books for years after the person has ceased to commune; and frequently when he has passed away from all knowledge of or connection with the church, it will nevertheless grant a transfer as if all were satisfactory.”¹⁹ The frustration remains today because sometimes a person joining on the basis of a letter of recommendation from another church is a farce because it is possible that none of the previous churches to which they have belonged made sure they were converted.

Communicate expectations. Churches must clearly communicate what they believe and how they expect a believer to live in relationship with the body. Every church should communicate what it believes in a statement of faith, that is in a written doctrinal statement. The statement should be taught both in new members’ classes as well as to the rest of the church body. Leeman emphasizes that such a treatment will “ensure that everyone having the conversation is saying the same thing.”²⁰ Thus, a statement clearly

¹⁸ Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*, 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 87.

¹⁹ Charles H. Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon’s Works in His Magazine the Sword and the Trowel* (Pasadena, CA: Pilgrim, 2004), 2:149-50.

²⁰ Leeman, *Church Membership*, 86.

defining what a church believes is necessary for creating and maintaining a regenerate church membership.

In addition to a doctrinal statement, a church covenant is also useful to communicate the practical expectations of the life of the body. The expectations of a membership covenant should be biblically based and conducive to guiding a member to best represent his or her relationship with the church and with the Lord Jesus Christ. Toward this end, churches could build a special annual service around the membership covenant by giving opportunity for all members and requiring all leaders and teachers to sign the covenant as a public demonstration to biblical church membership.

Seeking by any of these means to confirm a person's spiritual state presents great difficulty to the minds of some since regeneration is an internal work of the Holy Spirit. How can one's salvation be verified? No one can truly see the heart of another. Baptists have historically held that the Bible teaches that the internal work of the Spirit produces external results that can be plainly seen. Hammett states, "Baptists have never claimed to be able to know infallibly whether an individual is regenerate or not, they have claimed that a church must judge whether or not a person's life supports or contradicts her or his claim to be regenerate."²¹ Since their founding, Baptists have always maintained that church membership is only for those who profess and give some credible evidence of regeneration.

Accountable Church Membership

When a person is granted membership and then later acts in ways that contradict their original claims of conversion, the church is then tasked with the process of biblical church discipline. Church discipline is indispensable to maintaining a biblical, regenerate church membership.

²¹ Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 106.

A Matter of Authority

An improper view of biblical church membership will not adequately acknowledge the authority God has given to his church on earth to hold members accountable. This authority, however, has been given by Jesus to the church in Matthew 18:18 when He said, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” A recognized authority on church discipline, professor and author J. Carl Laney, points out that the terms, *binding* and *loosing*, were used by rabbis to refer to imposing and removing obligation regarding the law: “By these Rabbinic declarations, certain activities were either prohibited or permitted. This terminology was also used by the rabbis in a judicial sense to declare a person free from or liable to punishment.”²² The local church has the right to permit or prohibit actions based upon whether they conform to or violate biblical standards. It also has the right, by the same standards, to remove existing members and exclude prospective members. This comprehensive view of membership does not seem to be widely held in American Christianity. Indeed, it is actively resisted in many churches.

Cultural entitlement. John Hammett traces cultural (as opposed to biblical) Christianity back to the Roman Catholic Church. Since membership in the church often corresponded with citizenship in the state, Christianity and the accompanying membership in the Catholic Church became the cultural heritage of the people. The resulting cultural identification and corresponding lack of any serious persecution had ill effects. Indeed, it was the early persecution of the church, as Hammett notes, that “tended to keep membership in the church limited to those who were genuinely believers and the line between the church and state was clear.”²³ In the same way, and for many of the same reasons, the American church has suffered very little. As a result, membership in

²² J. Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), 74.

²³ Hammett, *Biblical Foundations of Baptist Churches*, 88.

the church is often taken for granted and perceived to be a cultural entitlement. This perception, along with family networks in many churches, has left little room for biblical principles of church membership. Church membership must be defined in such contexts so that people are not confirmed in a false relationship with Christ.

Individual freedom. The concept of the individual liberty of American citizens has led to great misunderstanding regarding the nature of the church's authority. Church historian Gregory Wills states that such a misunderstanding did not exist among antebellum Baptists who disciplined often: "Baptists championed the rights of conscience and private judgment in the interpretation of scripture, but people had these rights they believed as citizens of the state, not as members of the churches."²⁴ Misunderstanding of the Baptist view of church government is also to blame. Speaking of those who redefine Baptist polity for their own purpose, Masters asserts,

They notice that we repudiate human domination, such as church government by centralized councils or hierarchies, and that we shun human priesthood, emphasizing instead the priesthood of all believers, and the direct access to the Savior for all who seek him. However, they carry the liberty of individual believers too far, and come to think that the believer should not subordinate himself in any way to the church.²⁵

Voluntary association. Since church membership is rightly understood as a voluntary, not compulsory, association, some have drawn the mistaken conclusion that church discipline is neither required or appropriate. With such a view comes resistance to the authority of the church. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president Albert Mohler explains the conundrum facing the pastor and its leaders who desire to carry out biblical discipline in the church,

Individuals now claim an enormous zone of personal privacy and moral autonomy. The congregation—redefined as a mere voluntary association—has no right to intrude

²⁴ Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, Religion in America Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 87-88.

²⁵ Masters, *Church Membership in the Bible*, 40.

into this space. . . . Consumed with pragmatic methods of church growth and congregational engineering, most churches leave moral matters to the domain of the individual conscience.²⁶

When the church is viewed as a “mere voluntary association,” it can become diluted into little more than a religiously-oriented social club. Ironically, even many social clubs would readily chastise or even exclude members for infractions of their codes of conduct or for failing to meet expectations for involvement or service. It is a sad commentary on the biblical literacy of some churches when it is easier to belong to a church than to the local Rotary Club. From the perspective of Scripture, membership in a local church is of much greater significance and with much higher standards and responsibilities. Participation in the body of Christ is meant to involve far more than a casual weekly gathering of loosely-connected individuals who do not care about their obligations. Biblical membership requires accountability.

A Matter of Benefit

Membership accountability in the form of biblical church discipline benefits the body of Christ in numerous ways.

Formal membership. The very concept of church membership is implied by the teaching of church discipline in the New Testament. First Corinthians 5:11-13 contains Paul’s directive to discipline a sinning member of the Corinthian church. There, Paul uses designations such as “brother” and “those inside the church” on the one hand, contrasted with “those outside” on the other. Seminary professor Donald S. Whitney observes that these designations clearly imply a distinction between true believers on the inside of the church and those who are unconverted outside the church:

You can’t fire someone who doesn’t work for you. You can’t vote to remove a government official elected by another country. You can’t appeal to a court to

²⁶ Albert Mohler, “Discipline: The Missing Mark,” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 45.

discipline someone who isn't within its jurisdiction. In the same way, you can't formally discipline someone who is in an informal relationship with you; you have no authority to do so.²⁷

Such accountability to a group validates membership by implying one belongs to the group in the first place. Discipline within a family is usually only exercised on those who belong to the family.

Distinctiveness and purity. The accountability implied in biblical church discipline maintains both the distinctiveness of the church as the body of Christ on earth as well as its purity. Wills states that one of the “tectonic shifts” experienced by Baptists after the nineteenth century was “they took guardianship of the social order, which secularized the churches and eroded their commitment to separation from the world.”²⁸ Many churches today are rightly concerned about the decay and corruption of their culture. They may not, however, be as concerned with decay and corruption within their own body of members. This lack of focus causes the church to lose its distinctiveness as the representative of Jesus Christ on earth.

The church must be distinct in its purity. Without purity, any distinctiveness will be lost, and its influence will suffer. A concern for the regenerate membership of the church must coincide with a concern for purity. Albert Mohler articulates,

As the people of God, the church is to see itself as an alien community in the midst of spiritual darkness—strangers to the world who must abstain from the lusts and enticements of the world. The church is to be conspicuous in its purity and holiness and steadfast its confession of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Rather than capitulating to the moral (or immoral) environment, Christians are to be conspicuous by their good behavior.²⁹

²⁷ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 44.

²⁸ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 180.

²⁹ Mohler, “Discipline: The Missing Mark,” 48.

Accountability not only preserves purity, but it provides a warning to the rest of the body against sin. In this way church discipline becomes a proactive tool given by God to further the sanctification of the members.

Health of the body. If the church is the body of Christ, then one of the measures provided for the healing of wounds caused by sin is church discipline. This characteristic is a reminder that church discipline is uniquely fitted for only the church. The purpose of church discipline is never to harm, but instead to restore. Those who are held accountable are held so as Christians. If they have sinned in such a way that hurts the church or its testimony, then the purpose must be their repentance and restoration. If they are only professing Christians, the act of discipline provides a winnowing mechanism to separate the wheat from the chaff, that is, removing unrepentant, nominal Christians from those who want to live faithfully to Christ and His Word.

Proper discipline is the most positive reaction against unrepentant sin a church can muster. It is a biblical maneuver in the fight against sin and for the spiritual health of the individual member being disciplined. The church cannot stand unified against the world without proper accountability in place. Leeman describes such a healthy atmosphere when he states, “The local church is the primary place where we seek to help others fight against their sin and where we, in turn, should open ourselves up to receive the same help.”³⁰ For this same reason, an individual Christian cannot expect to conquer sin and the world without being a member of a local church that will help him or her in that battle.

Assurance of salvation. Leeman argues that part of the church’s responsibility is to “affirm who belongs to the kingdom and who does not.”³¹ Proper accountability establishes a culture of affirmation for members of the family of God. Wills notes that

³⁰ Leeman, *Church Membership*, 101.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

nineteenth-century Baptists took away family terms like “brother” and “sister” when members were excommunicated.³² Such an action agrees with Hebrews 12:6, which casts God’s discipline as a positive reinforcement of relationship. Church members should find comfort in the fact that someone cares about their spiritual condition. Submission to a local church is submission to a loving family. Accountability helps assure that one belongs to the family of God. In this way, discipline is a benefit of a true relationship with God.

Spiritual preparedness. Revivalist churches place great emphasis on visible manifestations of God’s power, such as those often sought in protracted awakenings and revival meetings. Such moving of God in revival is often prayerfully sought and has become the often elusive but supreme evidence of the blessing of God. Such churches knowingly or unknowingly pattern themselves after the revival movements of the nineteenth century. Yet, as Wills states, “Baptists [in the nineteenth century] saw discipline as a source of spiritual revival. A church with no discipline was no church.”³³ He also recounts that in the early nineteenth century when populist rural camp-meetings had become a staple method of evangelism, the lack of church discipline was decried by many as a detriment to the response they were seeking.³⁴

It is inconsistent for revivalist churches to seek a major move of God in their midst while blatantly disregarding the plain teaching of the Bible regarding church discipline. How can they expect God to answer prayers for revival when such churches refuse to address unrepentant sin in their local congregations? Perhaps it would be better to seek the blessings inherent in simple obedience regarding church discipline. Such obedience would seem to be a prerequisite for the spiritual blessing sought for the church.

³² Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 44-45.

³³ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

Faith in action. Biblical church discipline is seldom utilized for several reasons. Laney summarizes three main hindrances in the experience of most pastors as “(1) fear of consequences or outcomes, (2) ignorance of proper procedures, and (3) preference for avoiding problems.”³⁵ Opponents to the practice will often propose that churches are not to judge, citing Matthew 7:1: “Judge not, that you be not judged.” Dever provides the helpful reminder that while none can judge in the final way that God can and will, all are indeed instructed in Scripture (Matt 7:5, 18:15-18; Gal 6:1; 1 Cor 5:11-13) to both judge themselves and each other in the church.³⁶ Again, the “judging” in church discipline is the church’s judging whether an action violates Scripture and requires removal of the member if there is no repentance.

After all these objections, the remaining question is, will leaders be true to God’s Word regardless of the cost? Will even the threat of a lawsuit keep them from obeying God’s clear directions? Laney forcefully states,

Church discipline is dangerous. In spite of all our precautions, your church and its leaders may still be sued. But if you have followed biblical procedures and administered discipline out of love and with a view to restoration, you can have a clear conscience before God regardless of the outcome of the trial.³⁷

Church discipline goes against much of what the current culture espouses. As such, it is a tremendous opportunity to obey God in an impactful way.

A lack of accountability lies at the heart of the current misappropriation of biblical church membership. The absence of church discipline has weakened the church in its purity and influence. Church membership has lost its meaning as a result. Dever again proposes the seriousness of the matter for church membership: “Consider this: If

³⁵ Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 37.

³⁶ Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 183.

³⁷ Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 139.

there is no way for you to be excluded from the local church you are currently attending, perhaps that's because you have not included yourself in it as the Bible intends.”³⁸

Active Church Membership

The 2017 Annual Church Profile for Southern Baptist Churches shows an overall decline in church membership figures and a slight increase in worship attendance from the previous year. Even with this change, only 5.3 million of the 15 million members of Southern Baptist churches attend worship regularly.³⁹ This report reveals that almost two-thirds of Southern Baptist church members are missing. Where are they and what is being done about them?

The Problem Defined

This problem of non-attendance may be the result of the modern churchgoer never having learned the meaning of joining a church. Masters informs that the verb used in Acts 5:13; 9:26-28 “literally means to glue, stick or cement two things together and it always signifies a very close dependence or bond.”⁴⁰ Whitney interprets the word in context by noting, “It doesn't refer to an informal, merely assumed sort of relationship, but one where you choose to ‘glue’ or ‘join yourself firmly’ to others.”⁴¹ The use of this language indicates that the early church was a tightknit group with which one could be and should be formally united.

These missing members on Southern Baptist church rolls are often referred to as “inactive” members and put on “inactive” lists. They are great burdens on the church.

³⁸ Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 158.

³⁹ Southern Baptist Convention, “Fast Facts About the SBC,” June 26, 2018, accessed September 19, 2018, <http://www.sbc.net/BecomingSouthernBaptist/FastFacts.asp>.

⁴⁰ Masters, *Church Membership in the Bible*, 11-12.

⁴¹ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 46.

For pastors, they become a great burden as they often require more of his time and energy than those who faithfully attend. No pastor enjoys preaching the funeral of an inactive member whose relationship with the church has not honored Christ. People may choose to remain on the membership roll of the church to maintain perks such as burial rights in the church cemetery. They may also grieve the pastor who hears reports of how they speak negatively of the church in the community because they have not received the level of ministerial care from the church staff they think they deserve. It is often the case that the church staff does not know of the needs of inactive members since they do not participate in the life of the church body.

Beyond the draining of emotional and practical resources in the local church, inactivity of church members presents theological and spiritual difficulties for the church's witness and ministry. Allowing inactive persons to remain as members actually distorts several categories of important biblical truth about the church and the Christian life, thereby bringing shame to the church and confusion to the world.

Distortion of the body. The New Testament metaphor of the church as a body is a rich and powerful symbol. The human body contains many interrelated systems that must be connected in harmony for ultimate health. An appendage severed from the body cannot live long. In the same way, the body of Christ is comprised of many kinds of people who nonetheless must be interconnected and dependent on one another. A member who insists on being inactive effectively severs themselves from the body of Christ and both weakens the body and prevents himself from experiencing life as Christ intends.

A person may think they can ignore the local body and still be a part of the universal body of Christ, but this is inconsistent with biblical teaching as membership in the local body is meant to represent membership in the universal body of Christ. It is foolish to say one is a member of the universal body while ignoring membership and involvement in the local manifestation of that body.

Distortion of salvation. Active membership in a local church has never saved anyone. Active involvement in a local body, however, is a primary indicator that one has been regenerated. The writer of Hebrews sought to encourage his readers to stay the course and not turn back to their old way of life in the Jewish religion. Turning back would constitute apostasy. One way he encourages them to avoid apostasy is by keeping themselves involved in the local assembly through regular attendance when the church assembles (Heb 10:25).

Voluntary, prolonged inactivity in a local church, simply put, casts serious doubt upon whether a person is regenerate. Whitney verbalizes this explicitly:

Anyone who, without regret is persistently willing to disobey the Lord's command to meet with the people of God when they gather for public worship (Hebrews 10:25), and who is willing to forsake all privileges and blessings God provides through the local church, may have some "religion," but he or she does not have biblical Christianity.⁴²

Despite claims to the contrary, it is rarely the case that these inactive members are regenerate people who have simply wandered from the faith. John describes those who depart the fellowship and remain so as people who have never truly belonged to begin with (1 John 2:19).

The distortion of salvation manifested by a lack of participation in the life of the church body is most harmful in the life of the inactive member. The person may have a false sense of assurance because his name is attached to a local church and thereby concludes he is in a right relationship with God. These individuals are often more difficult to convince of their need for salvation than those who are not connected to a church at all.

Distortion of holiness. Church members who stay away are not living a holy life as God commands. Dever relates how his own church had taken up a matter of a members' non-attendance, considering it "one of the most sinister sins, because it usually

⁴² Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 27.

veiled other sins.”⁴³ Whitney comments, “Neglect of church attendance is almost always one of the first outward signs of backsliding and one of the initial steps taken by those whose path ends in complete apostasy.”⁴⁴ Regular attendance in a local church is a primary spiritual discipline for those seeking to represent Christ through holy living. Forsaking the obligation to gather with other believers serves as an act of rebellion and effectively destroys all hope of maintaining a positive testimony for the Lord.

The Problem Addressed

Addressing the problem of inactive members is a disciplinary issue. Inactive members must not be viewed as a separate category of members lost in the wind. When they originally joined the church, they entered a covenant relationship with the local body and their absence from regular worship requires an act of discipline. The nature and character of the issue must be communicated to the offending member at every stage of the disciplinary process.

Every aspect of discipline applies to what must be done regarding inactive members. Their discipline has their restoration as its goal. If they exhibit some marks of conversion but are absent because they are discouraged or have been hurt, the process of discipline must begin with candid conversations about what has happened and how the issue can be resolved. True believers can often be reclaimed and restored by heartfelt ministry to them.

If people are inactive because they appear unregenerate, then this must be addressed as well. Perhaps the individual has made a false profession and has a false assurance of their salvation. A loving confrontation and clear presentation of the gospel may go a long way toward helping the person understand the nature of his or her spiritual

⁴³ Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 197-98.

⁴⁴ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 18.

condition. To ignore the spiritual condition of these persons is nothing less than a lack of love and concern for their souls

People also move from the church's community and fail to join another church. Ministry to them will encourage them to find a local body with which to become connected. Churches should not ignore those who move away but should stay in contact with them until they have found a new church home.

After repeated, persistent, and loving efforts have failed to encourage individuals to become active again, it will become necessary to remove them from the roll of the church as an act of discipline. There is too much at stake regarding the integrity of the church and the spiritual state of the absent member to do otherwise. In the last address he ever gave to his pastoral students, Charles Spurgeon warned,

Let us not keep names on our books when they are only names. Certain of the good old people like to keep them there, and cannot bear to have them removed; but when you do not know where individuals are, nor what they are, how can you count them? They are gone to America, or Australia, or to heaven, but as far as your roll is concerned they are with you still. Is this the right thing? It may not be possible to be absolutely accurate, but let us aim at it.⁴⁵

Churches seeking to restore biblical church membership must decide how long a person can remain inactive before they are removed from the roll. Once the church has decided how long a person may remain inactive, the church should include their determination in their official by-laws and communicate these expectations to each new member who joins the church.

Discipled Church Membership

Jesus' command in Matthew 28:19 was to "make disciples of all nations." This disciple-making process includes both seeking unbelievers and teaching those who come to faith in Christ. True evangelism must always be followed by teaching converts for spiritual formation. Spiritual formation will always press the need on the believer to do

⁴⁵ Charles Spurgeon, *The Greatest Fight in the World* (Louisville: GLH Publishing, 2017), 37.

the work of evangelism. Biblical church membership is the best context for true discipleship to occur.

Evangelism

Evangelism is much more than simply inviting someone to visit church, but evangelism is not less than inviting a person to become a member of the body of Christ after they make a profession of faith. Any invitation to join the church must sufficiently communicate the truth of what it means to become a member of the body of Christ. It is a tragic mistake to isolate evangelism from the work of the church. While parachurch organizations are often highly mobilized and organized to efficiently reach the lost, such organizations cannot replace the local church or membership in a local church in God's plan for evangelism. Several characteristics of biblical church membership make it the best context in which evangelism takes place.

A gospel people. Since God's purpose in the world is the calling out of a people—a church—it stands to reason that one must be a member of a local church to have credibility in calling men and women to Christ. It would be supremely hypocritical to engage in evangelism apart from membership in a local church. Part of the gospel is the call to make Jesus Lord. The people of God are those who have submitted to the Lordship of Christ and manifest that relationship by submission and accountability to a local body of Christ. The gospel demands repentance. The gospel's call to repentance is best heralded by those who have forsaken their sin and changed the direction of their lives to follow Christ. Those who have been forgiven and received mercy are those most likely to extend God's forgiveness and mercy. Those who have taken up their cross are best able to preach the cross. Theologian J. I Packer writes,

Evangelism also means summoning men to receive Christ Jesus as all that He is—Lord, as well as Savior—and therefore to serve Him as their King in the fellowship

of His church, the company of those who worship Him, witness to Him and work for Him here on earth.⁴⁶

A representative people. One task of the church is that of representing Christ before the world. Those who attempt to represent Christ apart from his church are inconsistent and unclear representatives at best. Concerning church membership, Leeman states, “It’s how you officially represent Jesus. Membership is the church’s affirmation that you are a citizen of Christ’s kingdom and therefore a passport—carrying Jesus representative before the nations. And you want your representation to be authorized.”⁴⁷

Distinctively attractive. Evangelism is often seen as a special activity for which some extraordinary event must be planned. Special meetings or focused endeavors, however, are not the only means by which evangelism is carried out. The normal life of the local body of Christ is by its very nature evangelistic. Evangelism is implied in the regular gathering of the church to “proclaim the excellencies” of God in 1 Peter 2:9,⁴⁸ as well as in 1 Corinthians 14:24-25.⁴⁹ The normal weekly public reading and preaching of the Bible in a corporate setting is evangelistic. The continual process of sanctification as church members pursue personal piety has an evangelistic effect. This process is described by Dever when he notes, “So the community we live in will be given hope by those of us who live distinctive Christian lives, not by your church or mine, not by how similar we

⁴⁶ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1991), 39-40.

⁴⁷ Leeman, *Church Membership*, 79.

⁴⁸ First Peter 2:9 says, “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.”

⁴⁹ First Corinthians 14:24-25 says, “But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.”

are to those around us (a common mistake Christians make), but by how attractively different we are.”⁵⁰ This distinctiveness is a hallmark of biblical church membership.

Unity and love. Christian author John Powers writes glowingly of the impact the early church had on the world:

The watching world was blown away by the lifestyle of these fully devoted followers of Jesus. They saw how members treated one another. They marveled at their fellowship and hearty service to the Lord. It so impressed them that many of them came to the Savior as a result of these members who simply walked with Jesus in continual revival.⁵¹

The Bible records their unprecedented impact by the explosive growth of the church in the book of Acts. The potential for impact by the love and unity of biblical church membership is no less today, especially in light of the problems of modern society.

Whitney puts it this way,

In a world where everyone has broken relationships, supernatural unity in a church family bears witness to the power of the gospel in a marvelously God-glorifying manner. And as necessary as individual witness is, it can never show unity as a congregational unity can.⁵²

Biblical, accountable, committed church membership is indispensable for demonstrating the love of Christ and the unity it provides.

As denominational leaders increase their calls for churches to strengthen their evangelistic efforts, churches search for the reasons why current evangelistic efforts are ineffective. Churches should recognize that low standards of church membership will hinder all evangelistic efforts. Faulty church membership tends to result in faulty evangelism and faulty evangelism results in faulty church membership. As Dever puts it, one result of unbiblical evangelism is “church memberships markedly larger than the

⁵⁰ Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*, 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 67.

⁵¹ John S. Powers, *Redefining Church Membership: from Myth to Ministry* (Nashville: LifeWay, 2001), 124.

⁵² Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 92.

number of those involved with the church.”⁵³ And this scenario, while all too common, is never good for any church.

Spiritual Formation

In addition to evangelism, the church is commissioned to teach all that Christ commanded to those who believe. This process of growth in following Christ is sometimes termed spiritual formation.⁵⁴ Jim Wilhoit, author of *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, expresses the importance of such formation in the church: “Spiritual formation is at the heart of its whole purpose for existence. The church was formed to form.”⁵⁵ Several characteristics of biblical church membership alone are conducive to the formation commanded by Jesus.

Spiritual relationships. Biblical church membership provides a community where believers can have the most impact on each other. The dynamic provided is more than leaders teaching followers. It is followers transparently admitting faults to one another and drawing encouragement from the successes of others. Members know of the struggles faced by their brothers and sisters in Christ and provide support while dealing with those struggles spiritually. Leeman notes, “The relationships that we share in the local church will ultimately prove more interconnected than a physical body, more safe than a father’s embrace, more collegial than brotherly love, more resilient than a stone house, more holy than a priesthood.”⁵⁶ No other type of association can provide such beneficial relationships.

⁵³ Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*, 111.

⁵⁴ “Spiritual formation” is a term taken from Gal 4:19: “My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!”

⁵⁵ Jim Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 124.

⁵⁶ Leeman, *Church Membership*, 76.

Spiritual gifts. The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to believers for the benefit of the body of Christ. Paul declared this to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 14:12: “So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.” Paul also encourages church members to see themselves in a mutually beneficial relationship with others in Romans 12:4-6: “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them:” He then immediately lists the gifts they were to use in benefiting others. Biblical church membership provides the proper context for using these gifts. Leeman asks,

How do you fulfill Jesus’ command to “love one another” (John 13:34)? How do you fulfill Paul’s command to “carry each other’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2)? How do you obey Peter’s words, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others” (1 Pet. 4:10)?⁵⁷

Each believer active in the life of the body also finds the benefit of receiving ministry from the gifts of others within the relationship of church membership. No one should ever be so proud as to reject the benefit of the spiritual gifts of others. Church membership is the relationship in which this tremendous blessing occurs.

Spiritual disciplines. Biblical church membership is necessary for the believer to experience the greatest benefit from the corporate spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are practices taught or modeled in Scripture that stimulate spiritual growth in the life of the believer. The Bible presents both personal and interpersonal (or corporate) spiritual disciplines, that is, disciplines which are practiced alone and those practiced in the corporate setting of the church. A list of corporate disciplines includes, but is not be limited to, worship, confession, prayer, giving, and participation in the Lord’s Supper. Christians who are faithful to their church will find their hearts bound to other members in a spirit of worship as God is honored through the preached Word and praise. Such

⁵⁷ Leeman, *Church Membership*, 74.

worship might naturally lead to confession of sins as believers are humbled before God and each other. As church members pray together, individual needs are considered and communicated to God together. As church members give, they are cooperating with others in the work of God's kingdom. Participation in the Lord's Table offers a time of personal reflection upon a person's walk with God and the union one has with others in the body of Christ. If one does not participate regularly in the life of the church, then these and other disciplines, along with their benefits, will be forfeited and the member's spiritual life will suffer.

Spiritual stability. Without the ongoing spiritual influence of a local body of believers, any Christian would find it difficult to maintain a consistent spiritual life. Biblical church membership helps avoid extreme, unbalanced models of discipleship. For example, it is not uncommon for believers to seek quick and easy solutions to spiritual difficulties. They may attend conferences, seek emotional catharses, and schedule frequent counseling sessions. While none of these activities are bad in themselves, they are incomplete apart from devoted and consistent involvement in a local church. Believers who do not commit to church membership make themselves vulnerable to unnecessary spiritual struggles. Whitney speaks with candor when he says,

Those who are not an active part of a local church body are much more susceptible to being blown back and forth by spiritual fads. Apart from the care and discernment of a family of believers, they become easier targets for teachers who have no doctrinal accountability.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Churches must make a choice. Either they will conform their standards of membership to the culture in an effort to be as relevant as possible or they will conform their standards to the mandates of Scripture. They cannot do both. If a church places a premium on being relevant, it will forfeit its distinctiveness. If a church desires to

⁵⁸ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 25.

accommodate worldly principles it will not be effective. If a church does not hold its members accountable, both the church as a whole and its individual members will suffer.

God has given His revelation of what church membership must be. It is time for the church to once again take its stand in spite of what it costs. Then and only then will the church be what God intended. Then and only then will God be honored as He deserves.

CHAPTER 4

MINISTRY PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The purpose of this project was to identify and teach the basic principles of biblical church membership to the members of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church in Connelly Springs, North Carolina and to lead them to commit to these ideas in both belief and practice. After addressing the biblical and theoretical bases for biblical church membership, the project turned to helping the church body integrate these membership concepts into the fabric of its nature and practice. The project utilized five goals to accomplish this integration. The first two goals produced changes in the by-laws of the church, which empowered the leadership and congregation to hold inactive members accountable for non-participation. These changes also brought accountability to the leadership for evaluating the number of inactive members on a regular basis and ministering to those not attending. The third and fourth goals brought greater understanding and perception for biblical concepts regarding church membership for both leaders and congregation by the preaching of a sermon series on membership and by measuring the knowledge of the congregation concerning biblical church membership, both before and after the preaching of the series. The fifth goal provided a tangible and meaningful way for the members of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church to express their confidence and commitment to biblical church membership by signing a covenant.

Membership Assessment

The first step in the project was to gather the deacon board along with the church clerk and secretary to ascertain the number of inactive members on the roll and categorize them for evaluation. The initial meeting occurred on August 26, 2018. Our church had utilized software tailored for church recordkeeping for approximately ten

years. I was confident that the names on the inactive list were accurate. Many of the persons on this list had not been a part of the church's life since the list was first compiled. No one on the list had been inactive for less than one year. There were 159 persons who were designated inactive members. The list of inactive church members was printed so every person involved in the assessment process would have a copy from which to work.

We felt it necessary to err on the side of caution since this record was the only source of data from which we could draw conclusions about the true status of these members. No other official records had been kept nor was there a process in place for evaluating the length of inactivity for these members. The date each person was placed on the inactive list was available. Individuals, however, could have been inactive long before the date they were added to the list. We determined our knowledge would provide an accurate assessment due to the moderate size of our church and the closeness of the families in the congregation. We determined as well to develop a plan for assessing the activity of members on a regular basis in the future.

We categorized all inactive members into those we knew to have been inactive for three years or more and those who had been inactive for less than three years. The assessment concluded that 155 members had been inactive for three years or more and four had been inactive for less than three years. We exercised caution when doubt arose about whether anyone had been inactive for three years or more and categorized them as having been uninvolved for less than three years.

We continued to analyze the time individuals had been inactive. Among those determined to have been inactive for three years or more were seventy-six individuals who were believed to have been inactive long before an inactive list was established. This assessment meant they had been uninvolved with the life of the church for over ten years since the inactive list began ten years earlier.

Among those determined to have been inactive for three years or more were also two young adults who had gone to college, graduated, never returned, and never

joined another church. Also, one individual had joined the military, reenlisted for over ten years, and never joined a church in the community in which he was stationed. The individual in the military had also not returned or contacted the church to make us aware he did not have a church available to him. The family of this young man did not participate in the life of the church in any way. This fact further limited the contact that had occurred with him.

An exception was made for one individual who was inactive but was currently experiencing health issues that made it impossible for her to come to church. We did not believe it was the best course of action to consider excluding this person from membership, but rather to increase our efforts to minister to her even though she had ceased being active in the church long before her illness. We also found one person on the list who had died. These exceptions left 153 individuals to consider for exclusion. We determined that future policies mandating a consistent oversight for church membership would enable us to maintain a much more accurate account. Table 1 shows the general evaluation of inactive members.

Table 1. General evaluation of inactive members

Initial Categorization of Inactive Members	Number of Persons
Total number of inactive members	159
Members inactive for less than three years	4
Members inactive for three years or more	155
Exclusion for homebound individual	1
Exclusion of deceased individual	1
Total to be considered for exclusion at end of 2018	153

The process of the initial assessment turned out to be relatively simple. My knowledge of the life situations combined with the similar knowledge of our deacons enabled us to confidently determine the length of inactivity for each member within our determined parameters. Further analysis would be needed, but the fact that we had used

caution in this initial act of evaluating members based on inactivity gave us assurance that we were poised to act biblically and that our motives would remain transparent.

Plan of Action

The leaders and I then turned to the course of action we would ask the church to take based on our assessment of inactive members. I had originally intended to exclude members after three years of inactivity. However, after presenting this idea to the leaders, it became apparent that they were in favor of excluding members after only two years of inactivity. My original goal of three years was in part a compromise to allow the church to accept the process I wanted to propose. I agreed, though, that two years was an adequate time frame after which to exclude inactive members. The fact that we had determined 153 members to have been inactive for three years or more would enable us to exclude these members after a two-year timeframe with confidence.

By-Laws Change

The leaders and I then began formulating the process for addressing both current inactive members and those who may become inactive in the future. We determined to ask the church to adopt a change in by-laws to allow inactive members to be excluded after two years. We drafted a proposed change to the by-laws mandating a yearly evaluation of the church's membership roll by the deacons and pastor.¹ This proposed change was brought to the church on September 16, 2018. The current by-laws require notification one month prior to voting to change any part of the by-laws. The proposed plan was unanimously approved on October 14, 2018, in a regularly scheduled business meeting.

The accomplishment of this goal early in the project, before an attempt to increase knowledge, was necessitated by the time needed for church evaluation of the proposal and contact of inactive members before any action could be taken on their status. I

¹ See appendix 1.

also determined that the early introduction of this plan to the church would allow time for the preaching of the sermon series to bring any wrong motives for the measures into line with biblical truth.

Contacting Inactive Members

Inactive three years or more. Immediately following the church's approval of the new policy, I drafted three letters to be sent to inactive members. The first letter was sent to 136 members who had been inactive for two years or more without any extenuating circumstances of which we were aware and for whom we had contact information.² There were ten people for whom we had no contact information. The letter informed these individuals of our love and concern for them and of our desire to have them be an active part of the church family. We also informed them that we would remove them as members at the end of 2018, if they did not take steps to become active or inform of us extenuating circumstances for their inactivity.

The second letter was sent to two members who had gone to college, graduated from college, but had not returned to the area or become active again in the church.³ Each of these individuals had been inactive for more than two years. I wanted to disqualify their move to college as a reason in their mind for remaining a member while at the same time encouraging them to find a church to join in their area. This letter informed them of our love for them as well as our desire for them to be involved in a local church. The letter also informed them that if they did not become active in our church during the next calendar year or if they did not inform us they had joined another church, we would remove them as members at the end of the 2019 calendar year. I and the leaders determined this extra year would allow the families of these individuals to better see our biblical motives

² See appendix 5. Letter 1 was sent to 136 inactive members.

³ See appendix 5. Letter 2 was sent to two inactive college graduates.

and make way for a more positive outcome by giving these individuals time to find a church home if they were not returning to our area.

The same letter with the same stipulations was sent to one member who had joined the military, reenlisted, and been inactive for more than ten years.⁴ The individual to whom this letter was sent had established a military career and had been stationed in one place in the states for a majority of that time. The letter encouraged him to seek a church body where he was stationed since we believed he would not return to our area for some time. Our motives for this allowance were much the same as for those who had graduated from college and never returned.

Four individuals, consisting of two couples, were not contacted by letter even though they had been inactive for three years or more. I reached out to the first couple personally because of a potentially fatal illness experienced by the wife. The couple had moved away over ten years ago, but we determined a letter was not the best means of contacting them. I personally contacted this couple to inform them of the church’s new policy but also to encourage them to seek the ministry and fellowship of a local church during this difficult time in their lives. I contacted the other couple and confirmed they had joined another church. Table 2 shows the attempted contacts for all 153 persons.

Table 2. Contact attempts for 153 persons inactive for three years or longer

Contacts for Persons Inactive for Three Years or Longer	Persons Contacted
Letter #1	136
Letter #2 Graduated college students	2
Letter #2 Career military	1
Planned personal contacts (no letter)	4
No contact information	10

Inactive less than three years. The four individuals who were determined to have been inactive for less than three years had all been inactive for at least one year. Two

⁴ See appendix 5. Letter 2 was sent to one inactive member with a military career.

of these members had attended very sporadically but not enough to meet our church approved mandate of twelve services per year. The fact that these persons had at least been in church a handful of times gave us pause. We made appropriate notations on our records and plan to evaluate them in our ongoing process. We sent a third letter to the other two individuals expressing our love and concern while informing them that if they do not become active within the next calendar year their names will be removed from membership.⁵ Our motivation for this concession was a desire to avoid controversy during this initial application of new church policy in case these individuals claimed to have attended more than we surmised. The newly instituted policy will gradually provide very accurate records enabling the church’s leadership to act with more confidence. Table 3 shows the determination regarding those inactive for less than three years.

Table 3. Contacts and plan for four persons inactive for less than three years

Contacts for Persons Inactive for Less Than Three Years	Persons Contacted
Letter 3 Inactive for one year but less than three	2
Notations made for future evaluation	2

We also determined that the size of our church would not preclude going beyond the newly-passed mandate in our by-laws by assessing membership on a quarterly basis, thereby keeping apprised of members who become inactive during the course of the year. We committed to allowing fewer members to become inactive without ministering to them and assessing their spiritual condition.

Responses and Action

Considering the length of inactivity and lack of contact from some members on the inactive list, it was not surprising that thirty undeliverable letters were returned due to persons having moved from the addresses we had on file. I and the leaders endeavored to

⁵ See spendix 5. Letter 3 was sent to two individuals inactive for at least one year but less than three years.

find as many of these individuals as possible, along with those for whom we had no contact information. We contacted many of them via social media and spoke with family members to acquire contact information. I prioritized personal contacts for all inactive members based on my pastoral concerns for each person. Even without substantial personal contact in every single case, we determined to move ahead with our intended action since these members had not been in contact with the church in over two years.

Through responses to the letters and personal contacts for 153 persons inactive for three years or longer, we determined that eight individuals had joined other churches without notifying us. One person responded by requesting a transfer of membership to another church. Only five inactive members responded by attending again. One of these individuals who attended again passed away in December before the end of our process. One person was experiencing health issues leading to spiritual doubts. He requested further counseling and was granted another year for the counseling to take place. One other person was found to have attended less than the mandated minimum, but enough to give further cause for patience and counseling. To date, only two of those who attended after being contacted are still attending with any frequency.

On December 30, 2018, 139 names were brought to the church and read. The church was notified that these individuals were being removed from the membership of Mt. Hebron Baptist church based on the policy that had been unanimously approved in October. There was no discussion or disagreement from the congregation concerning any of the names read. Table 4 shows the results of all contacts and inquiries made to inactive church members.

Table 4. Results of all contacts and inquiries of 153 inactive members evaluated

Results of Final Evaluation of Inactive Members	Persons Evaluated
Discovered had joined other churches	8
Ask for transfer of membership	1
Began and continued attendance through end of 2018	2
Deceased before end of process	1
Deferred one year for counseling	2
Presented to church to be removed from membership roll	139

Sermon Series

The third goal of this project was the development of a six-week sermon series on biblical church membership. Each sermon came directly from some area of my research and writing in chapters 2 and 3. I began preparing these sermons two months before they were submitted to a committee for evaluation. The initial drafts of the sermons were completed by September 1.⁶

Development of Sermon Series

Sermon 1, titled “The Blessings of Being a Member of the Body of Christ,” and was based on Romans 12:1-8. I supplemented the passage in Romans with passages from 1 Corinthians. In this sermon I emphasized the supernatural union with Christ and the unity with other believers that exists in the church. I also endeavored to encourage each member to find their place of service in the body of Christ. I showed the difference as well between being a member of the church and being a member of other organizations.

Sermon 2, titled “The People of God,” was based on 1 Peter 2:9-10. I explained each description of the church as God’s people found in the passage to encourage our church to understand both who they are in Christ and their responsibilities in representing our Lord Jesus Christ on earth. This message emphasized the cooperate theme of church membership.

Sermon 3, titled “Building the Temple of God,” was based on 1 Corinthians 3:9-17. This sermon has meant more to my personal understanding of my place as a member and a leader of Christ’s church than any other. In the sermon I pressed for an understanding of the tremendous accountability church membership will entail in the final judgement. I also was able to communicate the fact that God is present in His church.

Sermon 4, titled “Blood is Thicker than Water: The Privilege and Practice of the Family of God,” was based on Mark 3:3-35. This sermon encouraged the congregation

⁶ Expanded outlines of the sermons in the series are found in appendix 6.

to see the church as a family. The ideas in this sermon were important for our church to grasp given the familial composition of the congregation.

Sermon 5, titled “A Regenerate Church,” was the only topical sermon of the series. I determined I could not communicate the need for a regenerate church from only one passage. Several passages were used to demonstrate how the church in the New Testament was regenerate and how any church today must be as well. I was also able to focus on important practical factors to ensure our membership be regenerate.

Sermon 6, titled “An Accountable Church,” was based on Matthew 18:15-20. I explained Jesus’ teaching for resolving conflict and holding members of the church accountable. I emphasized the positive nature of church discipline when carried out in a spiritual manner according to biblical mandates. This sermon was especially relevant to our church given its past experience with church discipline. I encouraged the membership to embrace the practice of discipline as an act of love that serves to define church membership as opposed to an act of retribution.

Evaluation of Sermon Series

The sermons were sent to a committee of four evaluators during the first week of September to allow them the time to give feedback and render their evaluation summaries. Each member of the committee gave positive feedback and encouragement along with recommendations for the making the sermons sufficient for the task at hand.

The first evaluator was a pastor widely sought after in the Southeast as a revival and conference speaker. He is a good friend and a gifted preacher, as evidenced by his published sermons in a two-volume work containing sermon outlines.

The second evaluator was a pastor and a popular guest speaker known for his sermons containing sound biblical exegesis and exemplary organization. He has been a pastor for over forty years.

The third evaluator was a friend from seminary who graduated with an M.Div. from a Southern Baptist seminary. He is the former Church Planting Director for a Baptist

state association. He is a very capable preacher having been nominated by the student body of his seminary, to preach in chapel during Student Preaching Week. He was also awarded the Lifeway Pastoral Leadership Award by the seminary. He was extremely helpful with organizational suggestions as well encouraging me to find and utilize the best illustrations possible.

The fourth evaluator was a chaired professor of the theology department in a Southern Baptist seminary. He holds degrees from several distinguished colleges and seminaries, including a Ph.D. from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. This professor's help was especially valuable to me as he has written widely on the subject of my project that is, biblical church membership.

The fourth evaluator had some concern over my use of Mark's Gospel to present church doctrine in my fourth sermon on the church as a family since the doctrine of the church is generally considered to be found in the Epistles. I took his concern seriously but after consideration, concluded that my purpose was to show Jesus' view of those who would follow Him as His family, not to usurp anything found in the Epistles where doctrine of the church is properly found. I considered Mark's passage to be indispensable being the first mention of the followers of Christ as a family in the New Testament. I used Mark's passage but supported it with passages from the Epistles, particularly Paul's use of family language. He also confirmed the necessity of more than one passage to communicate the idea of a regenerate church, thus indicating a topical sermon on that subject.

Using the rubric, the evaluators determined the sermons met 100 percent sufficiency in every category.⁷ The sermons also received ten exemplary evaluations in the four categories.

In addition to the sermons themselves, I developed PowerPoint presentations of each sermon's outline and key statements. I utilized these presentations during the

⁷ See appendix 2.

preaching of the sermons to highlight important truths and to enable listeners to take appropriate notes. I also began promoting the preaching of the series well in advance and found that by the time of my sermons, the congregation was anticipating this series as an important development in the life of our church.

This series began on November 11, 2018, and concluded on December 23, 2018. All sermons were preached during Sunday morning services. A winter storm necessitated missing one week, but I continued the series the following Sunday. Attendance was excellent in every service in which the sermons were preached.

Pre- and Post-Series Survey

To properly measure any gain in knowledge by the congregation from the sermon series I developed a survey to be given both before the series and at its conclusion.⁸ I formulated statements designed to test understanding, perspective, and motive. Through response to these statements I sought to ascertain how well my congregation understood the doctrines of the church; how this understanding shaped their perception of church membership; and finally, their motivations for removing inactive church members based on their understanding and perceptions.

Recruitment for Survey

I sought the participation of at least seventy-five adult members in the congregation above the age of eighteen.⁹ Recruitment was accomplished by utilizing an internet-based calling system to begin promoting the series several weeks before the pre-survey was administered and by promoting the survey in the church bulletin one week in advance.¹⁰

⁸ See appendix 3.

⁹ Of the 440 church members, 376 are adults over the age of 18.

¹⁰ See appendix 7.

Pre-Series Survey and Evaluation

The survey was administered at the beginning of the service a week before the sermon series was to begin. I also made surveys available that night and during the following mid-week prayer service for anyone not able to attend the Sunday morning service. Verbal instructions were given before each of the three opportunities to complete the survey. After these three opportunities, 151 people had taken the pre-series survey.

The survey included two sections. In the first section each participant was asked to use a four-digit PIN which would allow for anonymity and proper correlation of each person's pre- and post-survey. The first section also asked for biographical information to give a clearer picture of the congregation as well as to provide further identification when two or more participants used the same PIN. The second section contained twenty statements for which the participants chose one of the following responses on a six-point Likert scale: strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), disagree somewhat (DS), agree somewhat (AS), agree (A), or strongly agree (SA). Values were assigned to each statement according to the desired response. A value of 1 was assigned to the least desirable response and a value of 6 was assigned to the most desirable response.

The statements in the second section were designed to measure three aspects of the participants concept of biblical church membership. The first aspect was their level of understanding for concepts of the church's identity and church membership. Seven statements in the second section were designed to discover the level of understanding they possessed in these areas.¹¹ These seven statements focused on the descriptions of the church found in the biblical metaphors which would be addressed in four of the six sermons in the upcoming series.

The second aspect was their perception for both being a member of a local church and for accountability as a member of a church. Eleven statements were designed

¹¹ See appendix 3. Statements 5, 6, 7, 10, 11,12, and 14 measured the participants' understanding of the biblical identity of the church and church membership.

to assess their perception of membership in a local church and accountability to it.¹² Any knowledge they gained would hopefully affect their attitudes and commitment to biblical church membership and their accountability to others in the body.

Finally, two statements were designed to assess the possible willingness and motivation of participants for removing inactive members from membership.¹³ I did not anticipate any difficulty in persuading them to exclude inactive members, for I perceived that there already existed a willingness to do so based on issues of fairness. Their motives for removing members, however, needed to be thoroughly biblical.

The analysis of the pre-survey results showed a picture of where the participants were in their levels of understanding and perception of church membership, along with their motivation for recovering biblical church membership. Observations extrapolated from the responses on the Likert scale for each statement are as follows:¹⁴

Concerning an understanding of biblical church membership,

1. Forty-nine percent agreed to being able to explain their role in the body of Christ at Mt. Hebron Baptist Church. An additional 25 percent strongly agreed.
2. Forty-seven percent agreed to understanding what it means to be a “member” of a Baptist church.
3. Thirty-nine percent agreed somewhat to being able to explain what it means to “discern the Lord’s body” as it relates to the Lord’s Supper. Thirty-one percent agreed.
4. Forty-six percent agreed that the designation of the church as God’s “royal priesthood” has much to do with one’s private, individual faith. Twenty-four percent strongly agreed.
5. Thirty-eight percent agreed to being able to explain what it means for the church to be God’s “chosen race.”

¹² See appendix 3. Statements 8, 9, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, and 23 measured the participants’ perception of the nature of church membership and their responsibilities toward it.

¹³ See appendix 3. Statements 19 and 24 measure the possible motives for participants’ willingness and motive for removing inactive church members.

¹⁴ See appendix 8. The pre-survey observations data contains the survey statements corresponding to the observations listed. The survey statements are listed in the order of the observations.

6. Forty-eight percent agreed to having a good grasp on their responsibilities for being part of God's "special possession."
7. Fifty percent agreed to being able to explain the importance and appropriateness of church discipline.

Concerning the perception of rights and responsibilities of church membership,

1. Fifty-six percent agreed, and 34 percent strongly agreed that they viewed the church as the Temple of God and understood the meaning of the designation.
2. Forty percent agreed their work and service in the church are major criteria for which they will give account to God.
3. Seventy percent strongly agreed to viewing their church as a family.
4. Forty-three percent agreed they would support the use of biblical church discipline.
5. Forty-eight percent agreed one's life and actions are the concern of fellow church members.
6. Forty-eight percent strongly agreed they found safety and security in their church family.
7. Sixty-eight percent strongly agreed that faithfulness to church is a necessary factor in one's spiritual walk and growth.
8. Thirty-two percent disagreed that one could feel secure in their relationship with Christ even if they didn't attend church regularly.
9. Thirty-three percent agreed while 17 percent agreed somewhat that one's service to church is optional or voluntary.
10. Twenty-five percent disagreed, and 16 percent strongly disagreed that one's faith in Christ is a private concern. Fifteen percent agreed with this statement.
11. Twenty-nine percent agreed somewhat, while 21 percent disagreed somewhat, that their church family is more important than their biological family.

Concerning motivation and willingness to remove members,

1. Thirty-eight percent disagreed that leaving inactive members on the roll is a good way to show love and support for them.
2. Seventeen percent agreed, and 8 percent strongly agreed that the most important reason for removal of inactive members is they should not have the same rights as active members. An additional 22 percent disagreed with this statement.

The results of the pre-series survey were noted and addressed in the sermons as they were preached. This process was expedited by the fact that the statements themselves and their desired responses were drawn from the information and teaching in the series.

Applications in the sermons were tailored to the observations extrapolated from the pre-survey.

Post-Series Survey

The post-series survey containing the same questions was administered at the end of the service in which the final sermon in the series was delivered. This was not ideal nor was it my plan, but a winter storm the prior Sunday made gathering for worship inadvisable. Time was set aside at the end of the service for participants who had taken the pre-survey to take the post-survey. Completed surveys were collected by ushers waiting at all doors as the participants finished. Surveys were also made available that night as well as for those attending mid-week prayer service who had not taken the survey on Sunday morning but had listened to the sermons via audio. The data from the surveys was evaluated and the goal was completed.

Covenant Revision and Approval

For years, a traditional Baptist church covenant had hung on the wall of the educational building of the church in an inconspicuous location. Later, when the church was incorporated and by-laws were established, a slightly newer version of the same covenant was included in the by-laws. At no time had the church ever sought to use any covenant in a practical way for establishing expectations for church membership. This goal was intended to bring the covenant up to date and to begin integrating it into the process of accepting new members and providing accountability for all members.

I began researching church covenants to discover ways to update the existing covenant of the church. I found that most churches had maintained the order and meaning of the paragraphs in the traditional Baptist covenant while updating older language. I decided against completely refashioning the covenant into something entirely different but also noted areas where additions or changes were necessary.

The main addition I made to the existing covenant was the second paragraph that mandates church attendance and remaining active.¹⁵ While this idea is certainly implied in all the statements in the covenant, I determined the principle, unfortunately, needed to be more plainly stated.

A second major change related to the original language concerning use or sale of alcoholic beverages. The consensus conviction of our church is total abstinence. This conviction, however, cannot be upheld by any plain statement from the Bible as the biblical mandate only prohibits drunkenness or otherwise being controlled. The church's conviction can be based, however, on other biblical principles. I wanted to convey this conviction through a more tenable statement in the covenant. I turned to the covenant of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, for language I determined would convey the conviction of our church in a more biblical manner.¹⁶

The revised covenant was presented to the church body on Sunday morning, November 25, 2018. Copies of the revised covenant were included in bulletins for that day. I explained my goals for revising the existing covenant and noted all changes in the document. Notification was given that a vote to approve the revised covenant and include it the by-laws of the church would be held the following month. On Sunday evening, December 30, 2018, the church approved the revised covenant by a unanimous vote.

The following Sunday morning, January 6, 2019, a special service was held to provide opportunity for all church members to sign the newly approved covenant. My goal was to make this a climactic event with which to end the project on church membership that had been embraced by the church body. I stipulated that all members were invited to

¹⁵ See appendix 4. Paragraph 2 contains language pledging not to forsake assembly and to remain active in life of the church.

¹⁶ See appendix 4. Paragraph 5 contains language pledging to seek God's help to abstain from alcohol and drugs. Language is used by permission of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

sign the covenant and all members in leadership positions were required to sign if they wished to remain in leadership.

I gave the scriptural foundations for the general parameters of the covenant and explained that while the document did not contain legalistic specifics or authoritarian agendas, the parameters contained therein would be used in any future disciplinary action the church might find necessary. Time was allowed for all who wished to sign the covenant to come forward and do so. One hundred eighty-seven members signed the covenant.

The Lord's Supper was observed the same Sunday evening, during which I used a whole loaf of unleavened bread to illustrate the unity that exists among the body of Christ. The observance of this ordinance, while not a stated goal of the project, provided a fitting conclusion for my project on biblical church membership.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

The purpose of this project was to identify and teach the basic principles of biblical church membership to the members of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church in Connelly Springs, North Carolina, and to lead them to commit to these ideas in both belief and practice. The desired outcome was to be accomplished by developing and preaching a six-week sermon series as well as leading the church to make changes to its policies regarding church membership. This chapter serves to discover the effectiveness of the project by evaluating its purpose and goals. The chapter concludes with theological and personal reflections.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

Like many Southern Baptist churches, Mt. Hebron Baptist Church has a long history of receiving members with little emphasis on the accountability that biblical church membership entails. Some members had not been seen inside the walls of the church for well over ten years. This project was an attempt to change not only the members' understanding of membership, but also to change the way the church perceives the responsibilities of being a member of a Baptist church. This change in perception would hopefully result in new convictions that would guide the practice of the church, both in the present and the future.

Scripture describes the church through beautiful and practical metaphors in a way that demands the awe and respect of the church member. These same descriptions make it impossible to arrive at any other conclusion than that the nature of the church deserves commitment and demands accountability. The first aspect of the purpose of this project sought to bring about a heightened understanding, through a faithful declaration

of scriptural truth, of both the nature of the church and the responsibilities required of those who would belong to a local body.

If the beliefs and practices of the church pertaining to membership were to change, it would require unity in responding to the principles of Scripture, resulting in changes in policies concerning those who do not consistently involve themselves in the life of the church. The second aspect of this purpose of the project was designed to evoke an obedient response to those truths in a way that would communicate the nature and distinctiveness of the body of Christ.

This two-fold purpose of communicating and calling for an obedient response stands in perfect alignment with the process for every other command in Scripture. The purpose of this project provided an avenue for a church steeped in revivalist tradition to become a distinctive example of biblical church membership in both belief and practice.

Evaluation of Project's Goals

To accomplish its stated purpose, this project utilized five goals. These five goals were designed to impact the understanding and practice of the church body regarding membership. The first goal was to properly and thoroughly assess the number of inactive members on the roll of Mt. Hebron Baptist and to categorize them according to their length of inactivity. The second goal was to formulate a plan of action for revising the membership roll of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church. The third goal was to develop a six-week sermon series on the topic of biblical church membership. The fourth goal was to increase knowledge of biblical church membership among the congregation by preaching the sermon series. The fifth goal was to lead the congregation to affirm their church membership by signing a church covenant.

Goal 1

The first goal was to assess the number of inactive members on the roll of Mt. Hebron Baptist, Connelly Springs, North Carolina, and to categorize them according to

the length of their inactivity. This goal was measured by the gathering together of myself, the active deacons, and the church clerk to methodically analyze the membership roll of Mt. Hebron Baptist. This goal was considered successfully met when 159 inactive members were identified and categorized as having been inactive for either less than three years or three years or more.

This goal was a necessary first step in identifying the ratio of inactive members among the church body.¹ The number of inactive members revealed a lack of agreement with biblical principles regarding church membership as more than one-third of all members were inactive. The categorizations for various lengths of inactivity reflected my initial plan to ask for members inactive for three years or longer to be considered for exclusion. The successful realization of this goal placed a burden upon the leaders of the church that would be realized in the details of the next goal.

Goal 2

The second goal was to formulate a plan of action for revising the membership roll of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church. This goal was measured by means of a plan developed by me and the active deacons for evaluating yearly the number of members who become inactive, monitoring the length of their inactivity, and contacting them. The plan also included a timeframe for removing members who remain inactive.² The goal was considered successfully met in two stages. First, a plan for evaluating, monitoring, and contacting inactive members was formulated, including a limit of two years after which such members would be removed. Second, the proposal was brought before the church one month before a vote, and it was approved unanimously by the church body.

The accomplishment of this goal represented a major change in the direction of the church for the future. Its significance is seen in the fact that the goal's completion

¹ Total membership at the time of assessment was 440.

² See appendix 1.

required a change in the by-laws of the church. This was a major and permanent decision for the church to make. It also opened the door for criticism and resentment from those who would be excluded, and their families. This decision by the church also revealed a willingness to maintain biblical standards even at a potentially high cost.

Goal 3

The third goal was the development of a six-week sermon series on biblical church membership.³ This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criteria met or exceeded the sufficient level on a rubric provided each evaluator for this purpose.⁴

The material for the sermons was drawn from research in chapters 2 and 3 of this project. The first four sermons focused on the identity of the church as revealed through certain metaphors in the New Testament. It was important for the congregation to have a firm idea of what God has created the church to be so that it could understand the responsibilities the church has both to God and to the world around it. Sermons 5 and 6 focused on the Bible's description of church members as regenerate and accountable. The last two sermons utilized a broader range of Scripture passages than the first four.

Each evaluator of the series gave positive and constructive feedback for each sermon. The resulting organization, applications, and illustrations received several exemplary marks. The goal of developing a six-week sermon series on biblical church membership was successful.

Goal 4

The fourth goal was to increase the knowledge and perception of the congregation of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church on biblical church membership through the

³ See appendix 6.

⁴ See appendix 2.

preaching of this series. This goal was measured by administering pre- and post-surveys, which were used to measure the change in knowledge of the principles of biblical church membership.⁵ The pre- and post-surveys were administered to a minimum of 75 adult church members.⁶ The pre-survey was administered to 151 participants one week before the sermon series was scheduled to begin.

The sermons were preached on successive Sunday mornings beginning November 11, 2018. One week was missed due to inclement weather. The series concluded on December 23, 2018. The sermons appeared to be well-received by those in attendance at each service.

The post-survey was administered at the end of the service on the same Sunday morning during which the last sermon was preached. It was also administered on the evening of the same day and Wednesday night of the same week for those who had listened to the last sermon via audio recording. The post-survey was administered to 122 participants. These surveys were compiled and then matched to the pre-surveys by PIN and biographical data given on both surveys. They were also screened for an acknowledgment of having listened to all six sermons. This process resulted in 103 matching samples for analysis, surpassing the original goal of 75.

The 103 matching samples were compared using a t-test. The t-test was used to determine whether there is a significant difference between the means of the two groups of samples.⁷ The t-test was chosen because it showed the statistical difference between the pre- and post-series surveys. This goal was to be considered successfully met when

⁵ See appendix 3.

⁶ Of the 440 church members, 376 are adults over the age of 18. There are 217 adults considered active.

⁷ Neil J. Salkind, *Statistics for People Who (Think They) Hate Statistics*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011), 188.

the *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positively statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-series survey score.

Upon completion of the data analysis, I was able to determine that the preaching series did help to increase knowledge as well as improve perception of church membership and motivation for removing inactive members among these 103 members of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church.⁸ A *t*-test for dependent samples showed a positive significant increase in knowledge and perception of biblical church membership among these members: ($t_{(103)} = 12.256, p < .0001$).

Goal 5

The fifth goal was the development of a new church covenant for Mt. Hebron Baptist Church.⁹ This goal was to be deemed successful when the new covenant was approved by the church and signed by a minimum of 100 church members. An existing church covenant was updated to affirm the accountability and responsibilities involved in church membership. The existing church covenant was in the by-laws but was not being used in any meaningful way. My purpose for this goal was to bring a revised version of this covenant to the forefront to more clearly define the expectations of biblical church membership.

I worked through the language of the existing covenant and updated language where needed. I added a second paragraph detailing the necessity of remaining active in attendance.¹⁰ I also edited language concerning the use and sale of alcohol to better reflect the position of Scripture.¹¹ The covenant was presented to the church body one

⁸ See appendix 10.

⁹ See appendix 4.

¹⁰ See appendix 4. Paragraph 2 details the pledge to remain active in attendance.

¹¹ See appendix 4. Paragraph 5 contains language pledging to seek God's help to abstain from alcohol and drugs. Language is used by permission of Bethlehem Baptist

month prior to approval. One month later, on December 30, 2018, all members present voted to approve the revised covenant.

The following week, on Sunday morning January 6, 2019, I challenged the church body to see themselves as a covenant people. I then gave every member present the opportunity to come forward and sign the newly revised and adopted covenant. There were 187 that responded and signed the document. The covenant was made available for signing the evening of the same day for members who could not attend Sunday morning. The goal of producing a useful church covenant for Mt. Hebron Baptist Church was successful.

Strengths of the Project

The greatest strength of this project was its scope. The completion of every goal affected the life of the entire body of Mt. Hebron Baptist church in some way. The project also paved the way for the church to remain faithful to biblical principles of membership as long as it exists. Such faithfulness will provide an opportunity to be a distinctive witness for Christ in the community. There is also a process in place to make the church more conscious of the way the lives of its members honor God. For this reason, the church is better positioned to see God working in its midst as pathways of obedience to the Scriptures have been revealed. The life of the body has also been positively affected by their greater understanding of the biblical priority of the family of God over biological families.¹²

A second strength of this project was its provision of tangible ways to respond to scriptural truth. No aspect of the project offered hypothetical suggestions. Instead, the congregation was given opportunities to actively participate in acts of obedience. The removal of inactive church members required a vote to change by-laws. The change in

Church, Minneapolis.

¹² See appendix 9, statement 23 for increase in average score.

by-laws resulted in individuals known by most of the congregation being removed from membership. Some of those removed were relatives of those who voted for the action. The signing of the covenant was a visible act as each member was required to come forward publicly to sign. These concrete measures will have an impact for years to come.

A third strength of this project was the positive reaction of the church body. There was some apprehensiveness about asking active members of the church to remove inactive members who were their friends and family. Apart from a small number of expected negative reactions, the congregation members humbly received every aspect of the project from beginning to end. Every action that required a vote was approved unanimously. Several positive comments were provided on the post-series survey indicating which sermons or actions enlightened them to the serious nature of church membership. In several cases, members asked for audio files of sermons to be sent to friends or family who they wanted to hear a particular aspect of the subject. These developments were encouraging to say the least.

Weaknesses of the Project

While the strengths of the project were great, weaknesses also became apparent. The first weakness of the project was its inability to resolve every issue of improper membership within the time allotted. Not every person who needed to be counseled about their membership responsibilities was contacted personally. There simply was not time. They will hopefully be contacted in coming days. The project was also not able to require the signing of the covenant as a prerequisite for continued church membership. An attempt to do so would have required more time. While the great majority of members signed the covenant, not all did so, and those who did not were allowed to remain as members. Signing the covenant was required, however, for leaders and those with teaching responsibilities in the church. The church has also been made aware that those wishing to join the church in the future will be asked to affirm their commitment to the church by signing the covenant.

A second apparent weakness was the overload of information in the six sermons of the preaching series. During the evaluation phase of the series development, at least one of the evaluators questioned the use of so many Scripture references. In preaching the sermons, it was often necessary to simply read supporting verses without comment in order to have time to finish. The congregation was patient and receptive, however, despite the sermons lasting longer than usual. The subject matter was extremely broad.

A third weakness appeared in responses to three of the initial statements concerning understanding of biblical church membership on the pre-series survey. The high scores revealed an overconfidence regarding the subjects of the statements.¹³ While the post-series survey showed an overall increase in understanding, the statements were worded in a way that allowed for such responses and should have been more specific. The participants could have also been better instructed concerning the process of the survey before completion of the pre-series survey. Participants may have simply been agreeing that the subject represented in each statement was important instead of giving an honest appraisal of their knowledge in the area.

What I Would Do Differently

Taking these weaknesses into consideration along with the experiences during the completion of the project, I would do are several things differently. The first is that I would increase the amount of thought put into the pre- and post-series survey statements. While they were sufficient and provided a framework within which to show an improvement, I would dig deeper in certain areas. I would include more statements to reveal an understanding of the corporate nature of church membership. I would also be more specific in the wording of statements designed to ascertain understanding of church

¹³ See appendix 9, statements, 5, 6, and 14. Average scores for responses were over 5.0 on the pre-series survey.

membership. Further, I would include more statements to probe the motives for removing inactive church members.

The second thing I would do differently is to extend the sermon series to eight weeks. While the six-week period was extremely productive and achieved its purpose, eight weeks would have allowed for shorter sermons with more time devoted to pertinent issues.

Finally, I would allow more time to personally contact members who were removed. I know the process was as fair and transparent as possible, but my pastoral heart would like to have had a personal conversation with each of the 139 persons who were removed from membership. While not all those conversations would have been pleasant or profitable, they would have fulfilled a greater ministry. I prioritized each person's situation and personally contacted many persons, yet my work remains undone in this regard.

Surprisingly only two families responded vocally in a negative way about the church's action. One family removed from membership had a long history of not attending and disagreeing with many stances of the church. Any conversation with them would not have precluded their removal (unless the conversation resulted in their repentance and return), but some of their protests could have been answered. One other family expressed hurt that their adult child, who was given a year to respond by becoming active, was not personally counseled about their inactive membership status even though the person in question has not shown any desire to be active in several years.

Theological Reflections

The project was much more than an academic exercise. It was a series of measured goals that affected the life of a local congregation, hopefully for years to come. There was no way to produce all the change that needed to happen in the weeks that this project entailed. The changes that did occur, however, were substantive and scriptural,

affecting both belief and practice. The church body will never be the same. With these observations in mind, several theological reflections should be made.

First, biblical church membership is inextricably linked to the gospel and a church's ability to declare it. Biblical church membership involves faithfulness to both the body of Christ and the Word of God. It also evidences the tremendous change the gospel has made in the life of the faithful church member. Without these characteristics of faithfulness and change, the individual Christian has a weakened platform from which to proclaim the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ. In the same way, the church that does not hold forth the standards of faithfulness and holiness among its members has a weakened platform from which to declare the gospel to a fallen world.

Second, biblical church membership is an indispensable pillar in the life of the individual Christian. It provides assurance of salvation and encouragement in the face of life's hardships. There is simply no better way to see the activity of the Holy Spirit in a person's life than consistent and faithful service to and interaction with a local church body. Others see this activity in the individual Christian and individual Christians see it in themselves. While being a faithful member of a church is no guarantee of salvation, lack of participation in the body of Christ often reveals a false profession of faith. There is also no other way to partake in the fellowship or the strength-giving life of the body of Christ than to be actively involved in one's church family.

Third, a disregard for the local body of Christ shows a disregard for the One who has purchased it with His own blood. The church of Jesus Christ is beloved of God like nothing else. The sad state of church membership in some American churches speaks loudly of how God and His church are often perceived. A likely parallel to this problem is a forgetfulness of the accountability before God each Christian will have for their degree of love and devotion to the body of Christ. Only a recovery of biblical church membership can restore this sense of accountability.

Finally, biblical church membership is the best path to growth and spiritual soundness for the church. Membership built on biblical principles uniquely positions a local congregation to be distinctive in its practice and policy. While growth of the church may not necessarily be exponential, it will be stable and sound. Biblical church membership does not lend itself to artificial means for church growth. In fact, it is diametrically opposed to the use of artificial or sensational methods. Members who are committed to God's family will be so because of the true nature of their faith and the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Most importantly, biblical church membership brings the most glory to God—which should be the aim of every local body.

Personal Reflections

The church has always been a great priority in my life. My family has served churches for decades in both leadership and commitment. Both of my grandfathers were pastors and their influence remains strong in my life. This project was born out of a love for the church and a desire to honor Christ. The progression and completion of this project, however, has affected me deeply in important ways.

This project has given me a greater desire and commitment to preach the true gospel of Christ. Further, it has freed me in many ways from the pressure to conform to the latest evangelistic or church growth fad. I endeavored to contextualize both my research and goals to answer some of the weaknesses I have come to see in revivalist circles. While most revivalists have a deep love for God and a desire to please Him, there is reason for concern regarding many of the methods now being employed to gain decisions for salvation. These methods are becoming more emotionally manipulative and tend to disregard what should be the high priority of biblical church membership. This project has answered many of the questions these practices have raised, at least in my own mind.

This project humbled me as a pastor. My congregation graciously followed my leadership in every aspect of this process, and for that I am thankful. My research, however, laid on me a fresh burden of the accountability I have for pastoring these precious

people. I am confident I would feel the same sort of burden if the Lord were to relocate me to another congregation. The church is God's temple and I will give account one day for the way I have labored under Christ to build it.

Finally, the project increased my love for God's church. I have seen myself as a member of the body and not just its pastor. My appreciation for the love God has for the church has kindled in me a greater love for His special possession as well. How could it not, knowing what He has done to redeem this people for Himself?

Conclusion

I take a certain satisfaction in the completion of every goal of this project. Anything accomplished by this endeavor is simply a small first step toward a consistent model of biblical church membership. While the actions undertaken have already made our church unique in its surrounding area, the true test will come in days ahead when the plans and procedures are faithfully followed even at great cost. I honestly pray that every aspect of this endeavor has and will continue to bring honor and glory to Christ and that Mt. Hebron Baptist Church will be found faithful in its membership policies when He returns.

APPENDIX 1

PROPOSED CHANGE TO CHURCH BY-LAWS

Proposed Change to Article VI, Section 3 on Inactive Membership

Section 3. Inactive Membership

The Deacons shall annually review the membership records of the church. If a member has not participated in the life of the church, without good cause, averaging once per month, for a period of a year or more, the Deacons shall contact the member to encourage their acceptance of their membership commitments to the church and assess the reasons for their inactivity. If the person cannot be contacted because their residence is now unknown, or the person indicates a desire to be classified as inactive, or the person does not within three months participate in the life of the church by attendance, the deacons may recommend to the church that such persons be placed on an Inactive Roll kept by the Church Clerk. Persons on an inactive roll by majority vote of the church shall not be eligible for election to any office or position in the church, shall not have membership privileges in regard to the church cemetery, nor be eligible to vote in any church matter. Persons on the Inactive Roll may be restored to regular membership by vote of the congregation on their request, or on motion of the Deacons who acknowledge their renewed participation in the church. Any person remaining on the inactive roll for a period of two years shall be removed from the membership roll of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church.

APPENDIX 2

SERMON SERIES EVALUATION RUBRIC

Biblical Church Membership Sermon Series Evaluation Tool					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Biblical Faithfulness					
The content of the series is biblically sound and true to the texts used.					
Clarity					
The content of the series is clearly explained and easily understood.					
Scope					
The content of the series adequately covers the scope of biblical church membership.					
Practicality					
The sermons in the series include adequate practical application.					

APPENDIX 3

PRE- AND POST-SERMON SERIES SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the current understanding and practices of biblical church membership of the participant. This research is being conducted by Eric James for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research, you will answer questions before the project and you will answer the same questions at the conclusion of the project. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. By completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

PIN: ___ ___ ___ ___ (Create a unique identification code consisting of four numbers. You will also use this code for the post-series survey).

Gender: ___ Male ___ Female

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

Part 1

1. Are you a member of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church?
 A. Yes
 B. No
2. Will you listen to all six sermons (at church or via recording) in the series on Biblical Church Membership?
 A. Yes
 B. No
3. Are you 18 or older?
 A. Yes
 B. No
4. What is your age? ___

Continue to next page

Part 2

Directions: Circle your answer to the following questions using this scale:

SD = strongly disagree, **D** = disagree, **DS** = disagree somewhat, **AS** = agree somewhat, **A** = agree, **SA** = strongly agree.

- | | |
|--|-----------------|
| 5. If asked I could explain my role in the body of Christ at Mt. Hebron Baptist. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 6. I have a good understanding of what it means to be a "member" of a Baptist church. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 7. If asked I could explain what it means to "discern the Lord's body" as it pertains to the Lord's Supper. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 8. I view my church as the Temple of God and understand what that means. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 9. My work and service in my church is a major criteria for which I will give account to God. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 10. God's designation of the church as His "royal priesthood" has much to do with my private, individual relationship with Christ. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 11. If asked I could explain what it means for the church to be God's "chosen race." | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 12. I have a good grasp on what my responsibilities are as one of God's "special possession." | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 13. I view my church as a family. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 14. If asked I could explain the importance and appropriateness of church discipline. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 15. I would support the use of biblical church discipline in my church. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 16. I believe my life and actions to be the concern of my fellow church members. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 17. I find safety and security among my church family. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 18. My faithfulness to church is a necessary factor in my spiritual walk and growth. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 19. Leaving inactive members on the church roll is a good way to show love and support to them. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 20. I can feel secure in my relationship with Christ even if I don't attend church regularly. | SD D DS AS A SA |

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- | | |
|--|-----------------|
| 21. My service to my church is an optional or voluntary action. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 22. My faith in Christ is my own private concern. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 23. My church family is more important to me than my biological family. | SD D DS AS A SA |
| 24. The most important reason for removal of inactive members is they should not have the same rights as active members. | SD D DS AS A SA |

APPENDIX 4

REVISED CHURCH COVENANT

Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God and divine grace to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and to submit fully to Him, and on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, in the presence of God, and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully renew our covenant with one another, as one body in Christ.

We pledge to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together on a regular basis. We will witness to our faith by remaining active in attendance and fellowship.

We pledge by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love, to strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness and comfort; to place the welfare of this local body above our individual rights in priority and practice.

We pledge to promote the church's prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines; to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations.

We also pledge to maintain family and secret devotions; to religiously educate our children; to seek the salvation of our family and friends; to walk carefully in the world; to be honest and just in our dealings, denying ungodliness and lusts, knowing our behavior must reflect the holiness of our Savior and the integrity of this local body; to avoid all gossip, backbiting, and excessive anger; to seek God's help in abstaining from all drugs, drink, and practices which harm the body or jeopardize our own or another's faith;¹ to refrain from being controlled by alcohol or drugs of any kind, and to be zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Savior.

We further pledge to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember each other in prayer; to aid each other in sickness and distress; to rejoice in each other's happiness and endeavor with tenderness and sympathy to bear each other's burdens and sorrows; to cultivate Christian compassion and courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation, remembering the command of our Savior to secure it without delay.

We finally pledge that when we remove from this place we will, as soon as possible, unite with some other church, where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.

¹ Language regarding abstaining from "drugs, drink, and practices" used by permission of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

APPENDIX 5

LETTERS SENT TO INACTIVE MEMBERS

Letter 1: Inactive for Three Years or More

Dear Church Member,

Recently our church began reviewing our membership policies, especially those regarding inactive church members. It is our firm belief that nothing is more important or deserving of a higher priority than membership in a local church. The Bible bears this out and we believe it is our responsibility to make sure that our membership reflects the Bible's teachings in this area.

Our church body has voted unanimously to change the membership policies of our church so that any member who has been inactive for two years or longer will be removed from our roll. An inactive member is defined in our by-laws as any member who has not attended any service of Mt. Hebron Baptist church at least twelve times in a calendar year. You are receiving this letter because we have made the determination that you have not attended twelve times in either of the last two calendar years.

We want to hear from you. We love you and are concerned for your spiritual well-being. If you have joined another church, if we can assist you spiritually in order for you to become active again in our church fellowship, or if you feel that you should not be considered for removal because of some extenuating circumstance please let us know.

We believe our church body to be a loving group of Christians. We want you to share in that fellowship if you feel you have committed your life to Christ. Again, we want part of our witness to be the unique bond we share in Christ as faithful members of His body, the church.

Please understand that if we do not hear from you, or you do not become active by December 30, 2018 your name will be removed from the membership of our church. We look forward to your joining us again to worship our Savior and serve Him in our community.

In Christ's Name,

The Leaders and Members of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church

Letter 2: College and Military

Dear Church Member,

Recently our church began reviewing our membership policies, especially those regarding inactive church members. It is our firm belief that nothing is more important or deserving of a higher priority than membership in a local church. The Bible bears this out and we believe it is our responsibility to make sure that our membership reflects the Bible's teachings in this area.

Our church body has voted unanimously to change the membership policies of our church so that any member who has been inactive for two years or longer will be removed from our roll. An inactive member is defined in our by-laws as any member who has not attended any service of Mt. Hebron Baptist church at least twelve times in a calendar year. You are receiving this letter because we have made the determination that you have not been a part of our church due to time away in college, the military or some other circumstance. We also have determined that enough time has elapsed for you to have become active in a church where you live.

We want to hear from you. We love you and are concerned for your spiritual well-being. If you have joined another church, if we can assist you spiritually in order for you to become active again in our church fellowship, or if you are having difficulty finding a church, please let us know so that we can help you make inquiries in your area. If you are planning to move back and become active in our church within the next year please let know.

We believe our church body to be a loving group of Christians. We want you to share in that fellowship if you feel you have committed your life to Christ. Again, we want part of our witness to be the unique bond we share in Christ as faithful members of His body, the church.

If you are not able to become active in our church by January 1, 2020, we will remove your name from our membership. We will be praying for you to become active in a Bible believing church where you are or for you to become active in our fellowship once again.

In Christ's Name,

The Leaders and Members of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church

Letter 3: Inactive for Less than Three Years

Dear Church Member,

Recently our church began reviewing our membership policies, especially those regarding inactive church members. It is our firm belief that nothing is more important or deserving of a higher priority than membership in a local church. The Bible bears this out and we believe it is our responsibility to make sure that our membership reflects the Bible's teachings in this area.

Our church body has voted unanimously to change the membership policies of our church so that any member who has been inactive for two years or longer will be removed from our roll. An inactive member is defined in our by-laws as any member who has not attended any service of Mt. Hebron Baptist church at least twelve times in a calendar year. You are receiving this letter because we have made the determination that you have not attended our church at least twelve times in the past calendar year.

We want to hear from you. We love you and are concerned for your spiritual well-being. If you have joined another church, if we can assist you spiritually in order for you to become active again in our church fellowship, or if there is some extenuating circumstance of which we are not aware please inform us. If you believe yourself to have been here a qualifying twelve times in the past year, please let us know.

We believe our church body to be a loving group of Christians. We want you to share in that fellowship if you feel you have committed your life to Christ. Again, we want part of our witness to be the unique bond we share in Christ as faithful members of His body, the church.

You are currently and officially an inactive member. If you are not able to become active in our church by January 1, 2020 we will remove your name from our membership. We do not want this to happen. We will be praying for you and looking forward to your becoming active again at Mt. Hebron Baptist Church.

In Christ's Name,

The Leaders and Members of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church

APPENDIX 6

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP SERMON SERIES

Week 1: The Blessings of Being a Member of the Body of Christ (Romans 12:1-8)

Introduction:

The Bible uses metaphors often to communicate truth about God or His plan. There are several metaphors we will examine which communicate such truth about the church. Most of the time when we interpret metaphors we must be careful not to take our interpretation too far. The Bible doesn't always imply a point for point comparison in representing a given truth. When it comes to the metaphor of the body, however, the truth represented concerning the church is extended and almost fathomless.

The human body really is perhaps the most beautiful and capable of all God's creations and as such is beautiful representation of the church of Jesus Christ.

Facts:

- The nose can remember 50,000 different smells.
- The surface area of the lungs is roughly 750 square feet. (Larger than our first apartment.)
- It is estimated that there are 60,000 miles of blood vessels in the human body.
- Your feet account for one quarter of the number of bones in your body with 52.
- Every minute, 300 million cells in your body die, but every day 300 billion new ones are created.
- You could remove the stomach, the spleen, one kidney, 80% of the intestines, and 75% of the liver and still be able to survive.

Is it any wonder Paul used the human body to reveal the wonders of God's church?

In this passage before us Paul is encouraging these Roman believers to not think of themselves more highly than they ought to think. **v. 3.**

This is for all believers in Rome and for all of us.... **"Everyone."** Notice he uses the verb **"to think"** more than once. **"Don't think proudly".... "Do think soberly."**

The admonitions in this passage surely relate back to the tremendous truth he has relayed in **vs. 1-2.** There he speaks of "renewing the mind" in such a way as to not be conformed to this world. We do well to tie the admonition against pride to **vs. 1-2.** But it is also apparent that Paul bases this command on what he says in the verses that follow as he reminds them that they do not belong to themselves but rather to a "body." **Verse 4** begins with "for." (He then states why we shouldn't be proud thinkers.)

Paul proceeds then to identify **three important blessings** of being a member of the body of Christ.

I. A SUPERNATURAL UNION WITH CHRIST AND OTHER BELIEVERS v.4a

The word “member” needs to be redefined. For many people being a “member” of a church is not that much different than being a member of a local club or an online shopping channel. With membership rights come certain perks.

Members of churches can certainly see their relationship with a local church in the same way. With membership comes certain perks. (Cemetery, pastoral attention, etc.)

Paul never uses the word member to describe a connection to an institution. Rather he uses the word to describe being a part of a “body.”

Paul’s first use of very same word “member” occurs in **1 Cor. 6:15-20**

This focus of this passage is almost always on **v. 19** where Paul reminds the Corinthians that their bodies were actually the temples of the Holy Spirit. Focusing on this truth alone has spawned long lists of sins which should not be committed by Christians.

A. This is the passage where Paul actually begins defining what it means to be a “member” of the body of Christ and consequently a “member” of a local church.

B. Paul’s use of the word “member” in this context of sexual intimacy says something about what it means to be a “member” of the body of Christ. He uses language here that is living and organic. The relationship that a believer has with his or her church is not unlike the living union a man and wife experience.

Paul’s argument here is that a believer should not become a “member” with a prostitute because that believer is a “member” of Christ. One should not be a “member” of both. **v.15**

C. How different from our modern use of the term “member.” Today we almost always infer a voluntary association in an organization.

D. Instead the believer is portrayed as being in an unbreakable union with Christ. **v. 17** The believer is joined to the body of Christ inextricably in relationship and function.

E. In the same way the members or “parts” of our body are in union with the rest of our body, we as members or “parts” of the body of Christ are in union with both our Head and the other parts of our body.

Illustration: It only takes one pain in any part of your body to affect the rest of your body. One splinter can ruin your day. A hurt toe can make the rest of your body dance with pain. A simple infection puts into motion a complicated series of actions by your immune system to eliminate the threat.

In the same way when one member of the body of Christ is hurting, the rest of the body reacts.

Application:

Our membership in the body of Christ is far beyond any mere earthly association. It is sacred and its meaning is found only in our relationship to Christ. (Do our actions toward church membership reveal that we really understand this?) (Are we members or volunteers?)

How does spiritual membership in the body of Christ mean anything if it is not lived out by faithful membership in the local body of believers?

II. A SUPERNATURAL UNITY IN THE MIDST OF TREMENDOUS DIVERSITY v. 4b-5

A. Tremendous Diversity v. 4b It's not difficult to look around us and admit that the church is comprised of people who differ from one another in many ways.

The issue is often that we use that diversity as a basis for pride as we compare ourselves with one another.

1 Cor. 12:14-20

It appears that some in Corinth were intent on comparing their spiritual gifts with those of others and it was causing pride and conceit. The same things Paul is arguing against in Rom. 12.

He makes it clear in this passage, however, that **all were uniquely fitted for service in the body and none were dispensable in the body. vv. 15-20**

Illustration:

The appendix has long suffered the disrespect of being useless. It is often seen as a relic long ago sidelined by the process of evolution. All it seems to do is occasionally get infected and cause appendicitis. Yet recently it has been discovered that the appendix is very useful to the bacteria that help your digestive system function. They use it to get respite from the strain of the frenzied activity of the gut, somewhere to breed and help keep the gut's bacterial inhabitants topped up.

Or put it this way, if the President of the United States would stop working for three weeks the government would go on basically uninterrupted. If garbage men, however, went on a three-week strike, almost every citizen would suffer the impact. (David Parsons)

B. Supernatural Unity vs. 4-5 Note Paul's use of the term "*one body*." That implies organic unity for the human body, spiritual unity for the body of Christ.

Let's turn back to **1 Cor. 12:12-13** where Paul tells us the secret of this supernatural unity.

1. Accomplished by the Spirit of God v. 13 This is the true baptism of the Holy Spirit. Nothing is said here of ecstatic utterances or emotional experiences. He is the One by Whom we are...

2. Baptized into one body. v.13 This action effectively eliminates all prior distinctions. (race, economic, social)

3. This unity must be discerned. 1 Cor. 11:27-29 I want to point out one more thing about unity to you. It must be discerned. You must not take it for granted. You must not destroy it.

a. The problems surrounding the Lord's Table were so serious that some believers had already died for failing to "discern the Lord's body." WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

b. We only need to use Paul's idea of the body as the church *as well as* the physical body of Christ to understand the seriousness of this requirement.

It really is unfortunate that today we often celebrate the Lord's Supper by using tiny bits of unleavened bread. These tiny, individual pieces of bread are not able to communicate the true meaning of the unity of the body of Christ as one common loaf is meant to do.

c. These believers were suffering because they were in effect mistreating the body of Christ on earth to which they belonged.

Application: We often are called to examine ourselves as we prepare to participate in the Lord's supper. That examination usually centers on sins we have not confessed.

Understanding Paul's use of the "body" in this way, should we not be focusing at least as much on how we have treated the body of Christ to which we belong?

Have we been unfaithful in our attendance? Have I demonstrated a lack of love? Is there someone in my local body that I have wronged? Has my life demonstrated a lack of priority toward Christ's body, the church?

III. A SUPERNATURAL USEFULNESS FOR THE GIFTS WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN Rom. 12:6-8

Paul moves directly to establishing the responsibility of each member of the body. **v.6**

Notice also that everything Paul lists in the next verses is to be used for the body. Nothing for our personal benefit. All for the benefit of others.

Paul is saying, "Since you have all been gifted in different ways, use those gifts for the good of the body."

He says this more broadly in **1 Cor. 12:21-27**

Illustration: You and I both have met very sincere and genuine believers who struggle with what God wants them to do. One thing I have noticed, as often as not, is that those same people struggle identifying with a local church. Sometimes they attend for awhile but then move on. Sometimes they complain about not having an area in which to serve.

Others lament not being able to identify their spiritual gifts, so they take a test or seek an opinion from someone else. Perhaps you wonder what your gifts are. Can I humbly say the only way I know to discover spiritual gifts is to devote oneself faithfully to a local church, and begin to serve? The local church is the context in which, and for which gifts are given.

Application: Look around you for a minute. Do you see those people? They are your spiritual purpose in life.

Can you use your gifts outside of the church? Not like you can inside the church and not like you can by being faithful to the church.

CONCLUSION

The body of Christ cannot exist by human means. The church is not a club or an association to which one volunteers. It is nothing less than the supernatural result of the finished work of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit. Only God could accomplish the unity and diversity that exist simultaneously in the body of Christ.

Illustration: Paul's metaphor is born out in the complexity and ability of the human body. In many ways the human body is much like an orchestra. Each member is gifted in a way that benefits the body as a whole.

At a meeting of the American Psychological Association, Jack Lipton, a psychologist at Union College, and R. Scott Builione, a graduate student at Columbia University, presented their findings on how members of the various sections of 11 major symphony orchestras perceived each other. The **percussionists** were viewed as insensitive, unintelligent, and hard-of-hearing, yet fun-loving. **String players** were seen as arrogant, stuffy, and unathletic. The orchestra members overwhelmingly chose "loud" as the primary adjective to describe the **brass players**. **Woodwind players** seemed to be held in the highest esteem, described as quiet and meticulous, though a bit egotistical. Interesting findings, to say the least!

With such widely divergent personalities and perceptions, how could an orchestra ever come together to make such wonderful music? The answer is simple: regardless of how those musicians view each other, they subordinate their feelings and biases to the leadership of the conductor. Under his guidance, they play beautiful music. (*Today in the Word*, June 22, 1992.)

Going back to our text in Romans. When we submit ourselves to the conductor, or as the Paul put it, "the head of the church" who is Jesus Christ, we should have no problem thinking of ourselves in the right way.

My purpose is not about me. My purpose is about Him and it's about you.....the body of Christ.

Week 2: The People of God (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Introductory Illustration: My hometown was known at one time as the furniture capital of the world. Many household brands were established in the shadow of the Appalachian Mountains in Lenoir, NC. My grandfather pastored there for 19 years and tells of a time when local pastors would be invited into the furniture factories to speak to the men while they were on break or at lunch. On one such occasion a man unknown to many of the men took a seat on the back row while a local pastor preached the gospel. He quickly gained the attention of some men around him and one particular man turned to his fellow employee and asked who the man was. Glancing over at the man who was dressed much like everyone else in work clothes and shoes, he turned back to the inquirer and said, “He’s only the man who owns all of this. That’s J.E. Broyhill.” **In the same way it’s quite apparent that the world has no idea who Christians are, both now and in every generation.**

It’s extremely difficult for Christians in the West to comprehend what the readers of Peter’s first epistle were going through. They were persecuted believers who were living north of the Taurus mountains in Asia Minor.

It makes sense that they were Gentiles since Peter characterizes their past as “ignorant” (1:14) and “empty” (1:18). He also says they had been involved in idolatry (4:3). It is possible they first heard the gospel from one of the churches started by Paul in the Galatian province or perhaps someone brought the gospel back home from the day of Pentecost. However they first heard, they had believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and they were suffering because of it.

Peter’s focus is on encouraging them in the midst of persecution. He frames that encouragement in the motif of the Babylonian exile so that his readers can make the connection between the promised deliverance of the church from persecution and the Old Testament promise of deliverance for God’s people in captivity.

Someone in one of those churches may have said, however, “We are not Jews! We are not God’s people!” Peter answers that protest by telling them they were indeed God’s people and the recipients of God’s mercy.

These believers, like all believers, were “sojourners and exiles.” They didn’t fit in. He never tells them they will because, after all, they were heading for another country. But if you want to know where you’re are going you need to know who you are. So in 2:9-10, the apostle connects these churches to the past and reveals their status and future in rich language of faith.

I. How He Describes Them v.9

A. A Chosen Race – a sense of having been chosen pervades this letter.

- Peter is contrasting those who have rejected Christ in the preceding verses with those who have been chosen to follow Him.

1. Being chosen indicated a new lineage.

- The phrase “chosen race” (elect) is drawn from Isaiah 43:20 where it referred to the lineage of Abraham. Here in verse 9 it refers to the lineage of Christ.
- God had formed a new race (genos) among humanity. That new race was and is the church.

- Karen Jobes believes this is one reason early Christians were hated so badly because they were seen as being so different and distinct from the rest of society. They were actually perceived to be “haters of mankind.”

2. Being chosen demanded new loyalties.

- Early Christians were often charged with treason and poor citizenship.
- It was never a problem that they worshipped Jesus. After all, what was one more god? The problem was they worshipped Him only.
- Ironically this exclusivity of worship is what won people to Christ.
- By preaching the message people **needed to hear** and worshipping the Christ people **needed to know** they turned the world upside down.

Illustration: Richard Sears was brilliant. He took the personal relationship that each customer had with local general store keepers and scaled it beyond anyone’s wildest dreams. In 1931, while the USA was in the midst of the Great Depression, Sears made the equivalent of 2.5 billion dollars in profits. Over the next ten years it contributed an astounding one percent of US GDP. Fast forward 87 years and this week Sears filed for bankruptcy protection. What happened?

Management began focusing on existing customers to bolster profits. They developed a “Shop Your Way” program where existing customers could become “members” and these members could let the company know what they wanted. This data determined then what Sears would attempt to sell. Someone has said, however, that providing only what your existing customers, or members, want, while your business is failing, is like offering cabin upgrades, instead of lifeboats, to passengers aboard the Titanic.

Meanwhile **Dollar General** is generating tremendous income and make large inroads into uncharted territory. Their secret? They are willing to put stores where no one else will and provide low cost items to people who want to save money. **They provide what people need in way that makes a trip to a larger store unnecessary.**

Application: Could this be part of the problem in the modern church? Are we so intent on pleasing people and offering what we think they want that we have lost our voice in proclaiming who Jesus is and what He has done to provide forgiveness of sin? Are we ashamed to worship Him in a clear and exclusive fashion? We must be clear in our worship and priority of Christ and Christ alone.

When we gather to worship it is so much more than a time to hear good music. It is so much more than being entertained by a good speaker. It is nothing less than an opportunity to show the world how we love Christ and are committed to Him!

B. A Royal Priesthood

This quote comes from **Exodus 19:6**.

In the ancient world it was not uncommon for rulers to have their group of priests who would serve and could come near them when others could not.

Peter’s designation of a royal priesthood has been ***misunderstood and misapplied***.

1. A Corporate Body – Members of the Christian community, not separate individuals as though somehow each were a priest to believe and do as they pleased.

2. A Compliant Body – Often the emphasis today is on the priestly authority of the believer. Peter’s emphasis rather is on obedience and service.

These scattered believers are God’s priesthood scattered throughout the nations who have the task of serving God.

Application: Isn’t that who we are? All over the world in communities of believers. We are called to serve God and believe God’s word. A priesthood is never free to believe what it wants or live the way it desires. Rather its sole purpose is to bring others before the holiness of deity. It is to draw others to God.

As the People of God we are surrounded both in this community, in your community and work places by people who don’t know Him. We are the only people brought near to Him by the blood of Christ. Part of our task is to bring others into that same relationship. We can never lose sight of this important truth.

C. A Holy Nation – Peter again references **Exodus 19:6**.

1. By describing them as a “nation”, Peter is communicating a notion that is forgotten today. This faith community, though from diverse ethnic backgrounds, is now a *group sharing common beliefs and customs*.

2. The one true gospel had united them like nothing else could and now they were a holy nation constituted to serve God. Every former allegiance paled in comparison to this one. They were citizens of heaven as Paul would say in **Philippians 3:20** *“But our citizenship is in heaven from which we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

The idea of being holy is that we have been set apart for a purpose. Part of that purpose is revealing the character of God to those who don’t know him.

D. A People for His Possession (“Peculiar People” in KJV)

1. Destined for Uniqueness

- Peter uses a word that is found in the LXX in **Malachi 3:17**. It describes people who had responded to God’s charge to live righteously, in contrast to those who hadn’t, thus constituting a special people possessed by Him.
- While we are not saved by our good works, the fact that we have turned to Him in repentance and now seek to live a life consistent with his character designates us as belonging to God.

2. Destined for Vindication

- One intriguing possibility is a futuristic translation of the word Peter uses. Three of the other four New Testament occurrences of the word are future in their reference.
- If used in a similar fashion here, Peter is describing a special people who have been possessed by God and will be vindicated one day future in spite of their difficulties in the present.

Application: Belonging to a church doesn’t guarantee a good name. It doesn’t guarantee good fortune. In fact, as time goes on it may result in more hardship. But one day the world will understand who we really are. Our service and obedience to him now indicates our belief that one day it will be worth it.

Illustration: Every year around Christmas time I begin to think about one of my biggest heroes in the Bible. He only occupies a few paragraphs. We only hear him say a few words. Yet his impact is enormous. God's plan for his life included being misunderstood like no one else, except perhaps his wife. As far as I can tell, Joseph was never vindicated before the world of his day in the matter of Mary's child. Joseph's vindication will come one day in the future. In the same way every true child of God need not expect vindication in this life, but one day it will come.

This sin-cursed, blinded world will never recognize us for who we are. We are God's "**chosen race.**" We are his "**royal priesthood.**" We are his "**holy nation.**" We are a special "**people for his possession.**" That's alright. One day they will know.

II. How He Directs Them v.9b-10

Once you know who you are and where you are going, you must know the responsibilities you have. Peter expresses two responsibilities of the people of God.

A. To Detail the Excellencies of God's Character

1. To "proclaim" is to announce or tell. God's "excellencies" would include all that He is and all that He has done. (Including creation, redemption in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ)

2. Both word and deed are implied. (Responsibility is collective as the people of God.)

B. To Display the Effects of God's Calling "out of darkness into his marvelous light"

1. **Language of creation** reminiscent of **Genesis 1** and applied to the new birth in the New Testament. **2 Corinthians 5:17** "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*"

2. **Language of conversion** as seen in **Colossians 1:13-14** "*He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*"

3. **Language of compassion** revealed in God's mercy. v.10 These scattered believers who were suffering persecution may have felt they didn't belong anywhere or among anyone. Being Gentiles, they may have felt the weight of never having the promises of their Jewish brothers and sisters. They as a people had never known mercy.

Peter gives the wonderful news that they did indeed belong. They belonged to God. They were His people. God's mercy had made them such. They like us did not deserve it. God, however gave them their standing based on grace.

Application: We truly live in a dark world. I need not detail the darkness that surrounds us every single day. You live in it and feel its effects. But as dark as it is, the opportunity to fulfill God's purpose as the people of God has never been afforded any more clearly than today.

- God has given us the responsibility to tell the world who He is! More than just with our mouth but with our life. That really is a simple way of making decisions and doing life. Does this reflect who God is?

- The same could be said of our church. The church is the people of God. We have no business doing anything that does not properly reflect the God who has not only saved us as individuals but the God who has made us his own special possession as His people. He has transferred us from the darkness to the light.

Conclusion:

It seems the modern church tries its best to be anything but the people of God. We want to accommodate “seekers” so we adjust. We want to promote social justice, so we add that to our message. We don’t want to offend so we analyze everything so as to remove every offense.

After all the responsibilities are great. What would happen though if churches all over our land stopped adjusting to the culture, stopped accommodating the latest trend, and focused on being who God says they are and doing what God has said they should do?

More importantly, what if we began to plan and carry out the activity of the local body with a focus on showing the world Who God is and what He is like?

Week 3: Building the Temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:9-17)

Introduction:

The two skyscrapers were built in the time between the late sixties to the early seventies. They were considered at the time to be an engineering marvel. They represented a new approach to skyscrapers in that they were to be very lightweight and involve modular construction methods. That doesn't mean they were poorly constructed. They were built in a way that could be described as a large cantilever vertical column. Some have described the structural process as an egg-crate construction which made the two buildings redundant in their structure. This was considered to be a good thing because if one or two columns were lost, the loads would shift into adjacent columns and the building would remain standing. The buildings were designed to withstand tremendous wind, up to the winds of a 140-mph hurricane.

But the winds of a hurricane are not what brought them down. On September 11, 2001 both the twin towers were brought down before the eyes of a watching nation as terrorists flew planes into the structures. The impact of the aircraft did not and could not have brought the structures down. It was a physical impossibility in that the impacts only brought about 1/3 of the stress the buildings were built to withstand. The energy of the impacts was easily absorbed as every video of the event shows.

The buildings were brought down by the very thing the engineers didn't plan for and shouldn't have planned for. They were, of course, designed with the possibility of fire in mind. Their design should have allowed them to support themselves for three hours in a fire even if the sprinkler system failed to operate. That amount of time should have been long enough to evacuate the occupants. But the WTC towers only lasted for one to two hours. Someone has said *"No designer of the WTC anticipated, nor should have anticipated, a 90,000 L Molotov cocktail on one of the building floors."* They were brought down by temperature of the fire that resulted in the weakening of the structural steel and by the distortion of the same steel in vulnerable places. *The complete collapse occurred because of a perfect type of fire that no one could have anticipated.* (Thomas W. Eagar and Christopher Musso)

It occurs to me that churches have often been built to withstand all kinds of **storms**. (False teaching and down-grade). Perhaps churches are built to withstand **fire**. (Persecution, and inner conflict).

But I'm afraid we have forgotten that there is coming a fire of judgement one day so intense and pure that one cannot imagine its effect. *It is that fire that our work in the church must withstand. And I am afraid it is that fire for which we are least prepared.*

I want to share with you Paul's beautiful description of the church of Jesus Christ as a temple. The building of this temple is our greatest priority. Building this temple to withstand the fire of God's judgement is our greatest concern. Paul reveals our place in the building of the church by revealing **three important aspects** of the church as the temple of God.

I. THE IDENTITY OF THIS BUILDING AS THE TEMPLE OF GOD vs. 9b, 16a

Paul has just used an agricultural metaphor in v. 9a. He has called the church at Corinth "God's field." It is very tempting to develop this statement on our own, to expand the metaphor as we are wont to do. Paul, however, stops and changes metaphors. He very quickly says they were "God's building."

Later in the passage he specifies what kind of building he had in mind. In **v. 16** he tells them that they are “God’s temple.” Both Jewish and Gentile Christians in Corinth would have understood this language. There are two very important truths about the identity of this temple that arise from Paul’s metaphor. These truths speak yet to us today.

A. Their Corporate Identity

1. This passage is often confused with **1 Cor. 6** where Paul uses the idea of a temple to describe the individual’s body as the “temple of the Holy Spirit.” There Paul is arguing for personal holiness. Yet a careful study of that passage reveals that his use of the temple metaphor only has meaning in the context of the corporate body of Christ. Because we are “members” of the body of Christ, we must guard the use of the members of our physical bodies.

2. Here, however, he uses a different pronoun for “you.” He uses the second person plural. (King James is clear in the use of “Ye”) In the South we would say “ya’ll.”

3. In America we want to view our Christianity as a private affair. *Truthfully our faith is the least private aspect of our life.*

Application: Our membership in a local church has very little to do with my rights or my standing. It instead has everything to do with the temple (and the body) as a whole. My actions reflect on the temple/body. My doctrinal beliefs reflect on the temple/body. All of my spiritual gifts are meant for the good of the temple/body.

B. Their Corporate Influence

1. These Corinthian believers could look to the SW of their city and see a gray limestone peak called the Acro-Corinth. On one of those crags stood what was left of the Temple of Aphrodite. Legend says at one time there may have been 1000 prostitutes in the service of the temple. At one time it had been the major religious influence in the region. The simple belief in the mind of every follower of that religion then was “that’s where the god is.”

It is entirely possible that as Paul was writing this letter he was gazing at the ancient beautiful Temple of Artemis (Diana) in Ephesus.

The same principle would have been at work in the mind of any Jewish Christians. The temple had historically been the dwelling place of the Shekinah cloud. That’s where God was.

2. Paul was telling them in words they could understand that rather than being the center of the active worship of **Aphrodite**, they were the center of activity for the God of heaven. Instead of being the dwelling place of the **Shekinah cloud**, they were the dwelling place of God in the new age.

3. Astoundingly Paul says the church at Corinth, of all places, was God’s temple. A Corinthian member could have said, “Surely Paul doesn’t mean us! We are confused, we are disorganized! We are extreme! We are divided and the most imperfect of all?” Yet Paul said to them, “You are God’s temple.”

Application: No one has a perfect church. Do you and I understand the importance God has placed on the local church? Do we consider this place to be the center of God’s activity in our community? In so many ways, this is where God is.

This church has for years been a family hub. It is a fixture in this community for many reasons. Should we not want to make sure that our impact on this community occurs because God is here?

II. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF BUILDING THIS TEMPLE OF GOD vs. 10-11

There are **two categories** of people in the church addressed by Paul's statements in these verses.

A. Every Leader v.10a

1. Paul refers to himself as a "wise" or "skilled" ***master builder*** as the founder of the church.

- The Greek word is **αρχιτεκτων**. "A head or master workman." We might say this is a site superintendent.
- **Illustration.** I have a good friend in Jax Fla who was a superintendent for a large construction company that built houses in a poor area (sarcasm) known as Ponte Vedre Beach. He personally oversaw the building of houses for people like Pat Summerall, Dean Beeman, Hamilton Jordan. ***There are some things about his job that Paul is describing here.*** His responsibility in the light of whom he was building for brought greater accountability than if he were building average houses in a development. In the same way we build the church for God and in His name. There is no greater responsibility!

2. Every pastor's job in the church is to build the church during the time he is there. He is the master builder of which Paul speaks. He oversees the work of building the church. He is not of a different class he is simply in a different position.

B. Every Member v.10b "Let each one take care how he builds upon it."

1. Paul is saying that every member under the guidance of the "site supervisor" in every church is to build the church. Every member is to construct the temple of God, the church through service in that church.

2. Picture a skilled mason or carpenter. Neither of them shows up seeking the building to do something for them. Instead they show to do something for the building.

Line upon line the building blocks of their faith emerge through the years. Faithfully teaching, praying, encouraging. Even as the bricks of a masonry wall are interlaced as they are incorporated into the whole, the life of each member is interlaced with others as the church is built.

Row after row the framework of their faithfulness rises as God blesses their efforts of serving in the church. Young people encouraged, the needy and helpless held up. Perhaps individual effort will never be noticed but the end result will be seen by God as his church is built.

3. It would be a good time to mention that the Apostle Peter uses the very same imagery in **1 Peter 2:5** where he says we "are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Application: Taking all these statements from Scripture together it becomes apparent that God has supernaturally woven our lives into the very fabric of the purpose of His church. Every action I take is to help build the church. Nothing I do is to hurt the church.

Every decision must be weighed for its impact on this group of people into which God has placed me as a **living stone**.

Outside of this temple my life finds very little meaning as an individual stone. Only when my life is placed with others in God's temple, His church, does my purpose become clear.

III. THE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR BUILDING THIS TEMPLE OF GOD vs. 12-17

A. The Possibility of all kinds of materials v.12 (This is a list of building materials)
There are a lot of ways to build a church but only one that lasts.

B. The Principle that will determine the judgment. vs. 13-15

1. It's not going to matter what other pastors and churches think. Not going to matter what the world thinks. The only thing that will matter is what God thinks.

2. This is the fire of His judgment that will determine the quality of the work.

Illustration: Imagine a masonry building gutted by fire. The block work and steel may indeed be standing while everything else is burned away. The most permanent and durable material remains.

Illustration: Before retirement my father was a trained catastrophe adjuster for a major insurance company. In mid-August of 1992 he was sent to Florida to work settling claims in the aftermath of hurricane Andrew. During the several months he worked, one problem became evident again and again. Contractors had cut corners on many houses by not using ties to hold down the roofing structure in the event of high winds. The problem was widespread, and the national media pounced.

You could have walked by those houses 10 times a day and never have seen the problem beneath their roofs. But then came the storm. The storm revealed what you would never have seen in any other circumstance.

In the same way the storm of God's judgement will reveal everything that is hidden. His analysis by fire will uncover the faults in our efforts to build.

- He will uncover the ways we have substituted frivolity for holiness and reverence.
- He will uncover the ways we have made our churches more about ourselves than about Him.
- He will uncover the ways we have substituted man-made ideas and principles in place of the gospel and His word.

Application: We have missed the meaning of Christ's judgement of our lives. While it is certainly true that all our deeds will be laid bare, the laser focus of His inquiry will be... "How did you build my church?"

C. The Passion with which God protects his church. vs. 16-17

1. This particular warning carries so much weight yet is often ignored by leaders and members alike.

2. The statement is possessive, it is God's temple. It is not our temple. The church is not ours to do with as we please.

Surely this should inform the attempts by anyone who would seek to rule out of order or to have preeminence in a way that hurts the church.

3. I remind you once more. This is Corinth, a church with major problems. But it was still God's church. To harm it would provoke God.

Conclusion: The truths we have uncovered are life-changing for many modern churches and their members.

- 1.** The church is God's temple and God is here. (Not only in exciting worship)
- 2.** Since the church is God's temple, my main responsibility as a leader or a member is to build the church to glorify Christ.
- 3.** The main issue of my future accountability in the coming judgment of my life will be the manner in which I have contributed to the building of God's temple, the church.

These truths inspire **several questions:**

- 1.** Can I help build God's church if I am not totally committed?
- 2.** Can I help build God's church if I only attend occasionally?
- 3.** Can I help build God's church if my expectations are more about me than about the spiritual welfare of others and the glory of Christ?
- 4.** Am I confident that, should the judgment of my life occur tomorrow, God will reveal I have helped build the church?

Week 4: Blood Is Thicker Than Water—The Privilege and Practice of the Family of God (Mark 3:3-35)

Introduction:

We have all used the phrase, “*Blood is thicker than water.*” In its current usage it communicates the belief that the blood of family is more meaningful than other relationships.

We’ve all seen family members who fight each other constantly, yet if one of them is attacked by an outsider, the clan defends ferociously.

The teachers and administrators among us can testify to parents’ propensity to defend the bad behavior of their children instead of helping to correct it.

I have heard mothers defend their child’s right to commit adultery (in spite of being confronted with Scripture) because they wanted their child to be happy.

Finally, and sadly we have all seen or heard of family loyalty in churches providing a catalyst for church division. All of these scenarios and many more are usually justified by the belief that “**blood is thicker than water.**”

What if I told you that the Bible agrees with that statement but **not in the way you think?**

BTW many of you responded defensively on the survey question when I ask if your church family was more important to you than your biological family. Let’s see what the Bible says about the matter.

No one is arguing that family is not important. But what if I were to tell you that God’s emphasis on family not only includes the biological form but extends beyond it? What if I were to show you how God has provided a context for believers to relate to one another that is to include love, support, and nurturing? What if I were to tell you that all these things exist in a spiritual family and that this spiritual family is your church?

We are given the very first glimpse of what God had in mind in the **Mark chapter 3**.

In Jesus’ day the family unit was considered the most important in society. Total allegiance and mutual support were expected from each member. So, what happens on this day is nothing short of astounding.

Jesus’ ministry has begun in earnest. He has been healing and preaching. By this time, he has already called his disciples. His popularity is high. It is so high that great crowds gather wherever He goes. On this occasion he has come back home, and a crowd has gathered in and around the house where he is. In **verse 20** we are told that his family hears he is home and they go to seize him. What follows indicates to them and to us the new meaning Christ has for the family.

The passage presents a contrast between the *oblivion* of His earthly family and the *obedience* of His spiritual family.

I. THE OBLIVION OF HIS EARTHLY FAMILY vs. 20, 31-32

Nothing is more discouraging than not having the support of your family. At the same time, it must have been difficult for Jesus' family to understand him. At this point none of them are true believers. Their actions on this day show that...

A. They Were Oblivious to His Relationship with His Heavenly Father. Had they heard any claims of deity? What was it like growing up with Jesus as your older sibling? Why was Mary among those trying to seize Him? Surely, she should have understood.

The gospel has called every believer to place their relationship with God above every human relationship. That doesn't prevent the pain, however, when one's family does not share the same faith in Christ.

B. They Were Oblivious to the Purpose of His Ministry. Amazingly they had come to arrest Him in some sort of intervention. They were treating him as if he were mad!

C. They Were Oblivious to the Nature of His Relationship to His Followers. Mark is quick to point out they were on the "outside." They were outsiders compared to those who believed on the inside. They would come to believe later but at this point they were outsiders.

Application: You do understand, don't you, that there are many people in this world and specifically in our culture that claim a connection to Christ where there is none. If a biological connection to Jesus was not enough to place one into the family of God, surely a cultural or clinical connection falls short as well. Yet our communities contain people, especially in the South, who believe deeply that their family connection to a church or their family's history of belief is enough to grant them good standing with Christ.

II. THE OBEDIENCE OF HIS SPIRITUAL FAMILY vs. 33-35

Hearing that His family was outside the house and that they wanted to see Him, He looks at those around him who have believed and calls them His true family because they obey the will of his Father.

Make no mistake. Every person in that room would have understood the gravity of His words. Nothing was more important in this culture than family. Jesus effectively issues a statement that there is a new family of greater importance comprised of those who follow Him in faith.

A. His Words Indicate an Irreplaceable Relationship. There are only two ways to become part of a family. One must be *born* into a family or one must be *adopted* into a family. The Bible is clear that both have happened to the true believer.

1. Born John 3:5-7 "Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"

2. Adopted Galatians 4:5-7 "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."

B. His Words Indicate an Undeniable Responsibility. Jesus says His true family is comprised of those who obey the commands of God. John will later indicate that obedience is a necessary sign of being a true believer. **1 John 2:3-4** “And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says, “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

Add these words of Jesus: **Matt. 10:37** “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”

Luke 14:26-27 “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”

How weighty are Jesus’ words on this occasion? What could he be saying in these other passages?

Commentator Mark Strauss has said this about Jesus’ declaration. “The family relationship proposed by Jesus replaces any ethnic, tribal, or national association. Church membership must reflect this new family relationship. It must preclude racial prejudice and social preference. Even American patriotism must take a “distant second” to allegiance and loyalty to brothers and sisters in Christ wherever they are.” (*Mark*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 2)

So there is the origination of the family of God. Jesus declared it. **The rest of the New Testament then confirms it.** Nothing would be more important to the earliest believers in Christ than this family to which they belonged. **Their new family replaced the old.**

Let me show you several principles concerning this Christian family that are born out in the New Testament. Each of these furthers our understanding of what it means to be a member of a New Testament church.

1. The new family relationship best explains what happened in Acts 4:32-37 which is perhaps a direct result of Jesus’ words in **Mark 4**. They seem to have taken Jesus literally. These early believers saw the family of God as the most important thing in their lives as they held absolutely nothing back from each other. This was more than a commune, it was a family.

Like every earthly family, harmony exists when each member shares in the responsibilities of the family of God. God has gifted every single member to have a place in the local family of believers to which they belong.

2. Paul’s use of family language describes the dynamic God desires for the church.

a. Joseph Hellerman points out that Paul uses the word *αδελφοι* or its variants 139 times. He uses some form of “F/father” 65 times, “inherit” or “heir” 19 times, “sons” 17 times, and “child” 39 times. (*When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community*) 29% of these occurrences are in 1 Corinthians alone. Paul is calling a divided church to unity by calling them “siblings.”

3. The family relationship within the local church provides the best environment for proper order and unity. (Members want what is best for the family in spite of disagreement.)

1 Timothy 3:14-16 Paul is advising Timothy on the affairs of the church. Sometimes this passage is seen as a church manual. Paul, however, is not giving direction for the “house of God” (Authorized version). Instead he is speaking of the “household of God.” He is relaying the responsibilities for members of the family of God. Those responsibilities include a deep commitment to the truth and to each other.

Families disintegrate when the members care more about themselves than about the family.

4. The family relationship within a local church provides the only environment for nurturing and maturation.

a. Paul speaks of his concern for the believers in Thessalonica by declaring his love for them is like that of a mother for her children. **1 Thess. 2:7-8** “But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”

b. Again in **Gal. 4:19-20** Paul describes his effort to bring about maturity in the lives of the believers in the Galatian churches as the pains of childbirth. “... my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.”

c. Paul also refers to himself as a spiritual father to those under his care in Corinth. **1 Cor. 4:15-16** “For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me.”

Illustration: Dr. Warren Farrell cites his study of recent mass shooting where 8 or more people were killed. He found that in 26 of the last 28 shootings the perpetrator had no father involved in life. The same pattern has been discovered during interviews of ISIS agents who were bent on killing as many people as possible. All of us would say these individuals were unstable.

The family provides stability in the life of every member. Seminary Professor **Donald Whitney** writes, “Those who are not an active part of a local church body are much more susceptible to being blown back and forth by spiritual fads. Apart from the care and discernment of a family of believers, they become easier targets for teachers who have no doctrinal accountability.” (*Spiritual Disciplines within the Church*, 25)

Application: What a blessing it is when a church family works to bring others into the family and then proceeds to nurture them to growth and maturity.

5. The family relationship in the local church provides for safety in the love of God and others.

There is one other sense where family language is used. In **John 14:18** Jesus promised his disciples that he would not leave them as “orphans”, but would send the Holy Spirit in His place to empower them for service. In **1 Thess. 2:17** Paul uses the same kind of language when he said that he felt as if he had been “torn away” (like an orphan) from his Christian family there.

In both cases the reader is made to view the family of God as a place of safety and security. An orphaned child wants one thing in life and that is a “home.” God has

provided a home for every one of his children. That “home” is the family of God manifested in the local church.

It is no secret we live in a broken world. Quite frankly more and more people who come into the church have been broken themselves. The family of God has an answer for that. **Dr. Whitney** addresses the issue by saying, “In a world where everyone has broken relationships, supernatural unity in a church family bears witness to the power of the gospel in a marvelously God–glorifying manner. And as necessary as individual witness is, it can never show unity as a congregational unity can.” (*Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church*, 92)

Illustration: Most of you know the story of the two little girls fostered by our daughter and son-in-law. Their past is sordid and sad. They both knew hunger, deprivation, and abandonment. The road to recovery has been long but such wonderful strides have been made.

My daughter recounts the evening the youngest was in her bed crying. The oldest went to her to comfort her. As my daughter stood undetected and weeping outside the door, she heard the oldest Brooklyn say to her sister, “K you don’t have to be afraid, **we are safe here**. These people love us!”

In the same way the family of God is to become something that lost and hurting people have never known. The church is to be a place where love abounds and is expressed on a regular basis. The family of God really ought to be a place where all are safe and secure.

Conclusion:

I told you earlier that I agree with the statement that “blood is thicker than water.” There is no doubt we have the meaning of that statement backwards. The phrase arose from time spent in battle with brothers in arms. Often a soldier was called upon to fight to the death as he watched his brothers fall around him. The necessity of loyalty to a cause brought about the phrase which originally meant this: “***The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb.***”

I don’t know if you see the correlation to the church but brothers and sisters there is a blood that binds us together in ways mere human blood and relationships cannot. The blood of Christ that has brought us into the family of God is thicker than the water of the womb.

If you are born again, this family into which you have been born is to be the most important unit in your life.

Week 5: A Regenerate Church (John 3:1-8; Matthew 7:21-23)

Introduction:

Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 7 should strike fear in the heart of every church member. The religious activity of those who are rejected by Christ is impressive. **(summarize again)** Yet none of their claims evidenced conversion. I would never add to Scripture, but I think it entirely plausible that Jesus could have easily included the idea that belonging to a church was no guarantee of being born again.

Illustration: I remember buying our first home before the installation of floor coverings. We worked out a deal to save some money by doing it ourselves. I was installing ceramic tile in a bathroom on one particularly wet and muddy day. The father of the contractor walked in and instantly began hurling one curse word after another as he lamented how messy the rain had made things. He then asked me what I did. I told him I was the new pastor of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church. Without missing a beat his demeanor changed as he related to me how he was a deacon at a well-known church in Hickory.

I have thought many times since then how ashamed I would have been for anyone to know I was a member of a local church if I had just uttered those words. For many, however, church membership provides no hindrance to worldly living or godless words. I have also often wondered if the problem, in many cases, has nothing to do with their name on a church roll, but instead their name not being in the Lamb's book of life.

I almost guarantee that if you were to go door to door along this road or in this community asking each person if they are a Christian, the vast majority of people will answer in the affirmative and then proceed to defend their position with some connection to a church. Very few would give a true gospel defense, but many would speak glowingly about their family's connection to either this church or another. Some would even speak of a past profession experience even though they haven't participated in the body of Christ for years.

None of us would dare say that church membership is a bad thing. But is it, in and of itself, a sign that one is born again? The irony of that question is that church membership should be much more indicative of true faith than it is. We know that a true believer will want to belong to a church.

On the other hand, one's membership in a church is only part of the picture. Questions must be answered. Are they faithful? Are they actually serving God in the church? Does their life display habitual, unrepented sin as a lifestyle? Do they display genuine love for other Christians?

You don't need to look very far to discover the major problems with church membership in the United States. According to the *2017 SBC Annual Church Profile*, of the 15 million members of SBC churches, only 5.3 million attend worship. The question is not only *where* are they? More importantly *why* are they not in their church?

Additionally, members of Baptist churches all across the South are addicted to alcohol, drugs and pornography. Many have been guilty of adultery. It's not that church members are beyond sin, but rather those sins remain unrepented while said members remain on church rolls.

The rate of divorce among Baptists is about the same as the culture around us. In fact, in most cases a person can live as ungodly as they please and remain a member in good standing of the average Baptist congregation.

Does the Bible carry any expectations counter to the current state of church membership? Are there any clues that perhaps the church member who habitually stays away from the church or lives a life fraught with sinful choices is not a true believer after all? I want to share with you **three characteristics** of the church in the New Testament that demand the membership of the church be regenerate. I then want to suggest steps to help correct the problem.

I. THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH DEMANDS IT.

A. The Metaphors Each metaphor we have seen so far argues for regenerate church membership. Each one argues in its own way that a believer must join a church and be subject to its doctrines and discipline. **(Read briefly)**

1. The Body

a. A Common Composition Rom. 12:5 – One body. Parts of my body are not composed of differing DNA.

b. A Common Possession Eph. 4:5-6 – All believers possess the same thing.

2. The People of God 1 Peter 2:9

a. The Same Race – A new race. How does that mean anything if each member is not born again and indwelt by the same Spirit?

b. A Special Possession – All belong to God. How could the people of God be a special possession with no special connection? (That all are born again)

3. The Temple of God 1 Peter 2:4-5 In these verses just prior to the passage we studied regarding the People of God, Peter points out that each believer is a living stone in the spiritual building which is the church, the temple of God.

How can a member of the church be a “living” stone without a connection to Christ and the Holy Spirit?

4. The Family of God– Jesus made it clear in **Mark 3:31-35** that only those who obey the commands of God are His real family.

a. It is futile to hope to try to keep the commands of God without the Spirit of God. Rom. 8:11.

b. Every true family member shares one of two things. They are *born* into the family or they are *adopted* into the family. Members of God’s family share both.

B. How the Churches Were Gathered – Dr. John Hammett points to these descriptions in the book of Acts to show that local churches were composed of believers only. (Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches, 84)

1. Acts 2:41 – Those added subsequent to Pentecost were those “*who received his word and were baptized.*”

2. **Acts 2:47** – They were *“being saved.”*

3. **Acts 11:21** – The church at Antioch formed *when “a great number believed and turned to the Lord.”*

4. **Acts 14:21-23** – Paul and Barnabas visited churches at the end of their first journey, which had been founded earlier, encouraging them to *“continue in the faith.”*

C. **The Letters** – Dr. Hammett again points to the descriptions of local churches in some of the letters written to them. (Biblical Foundations, 84)

1. Paul wrote a certain way to believers in his preserved letters.

a. **Eph. 1:1** *“to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus.”*

b. **Phil. 1:1** *“to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi.”*

c. **Col. 1:2** *“to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.”*

d. **1 Thess. 1:1-2** – In both letters he addresses them in a relationship of our *“God the Father”* and *“the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

2. In every case Paul is addressing visible local churches, not the universal church as such.

Illustration: I recently saw a parody where a man who didn’t want to exercise claiming to belong to the “universal gym” instead of the local facility. How do you think that worked out for him?

This problem of non-attendance may be the result of the modern churchgoer never having learned the meaning of joining a church. Peter Masters states that the verb used in **Acts 5:13; 9:26-28** “literally means to glue, stick or cement two things together and it always signifies a very close dependence or bond.” Don Whitney interprets the word in context by noting, “It doesn’t refer to an informal, merely assumed sort of relationship, but one where you choose to ‘glue’ or ‘join yourself firmly’ to others.” The use of this language indicates that the early church was a tightknit group with which one could be and should be formally united.

Application: These bits of evidence paint a picture of New Testament church that was comprised of regenerate members. Some may say this principle applies only to the universal church, yet in almost every case in Scripture, the local church is in view. The one opportunity we as a church have to represent Christ is through our local church.

II. THE INTENTION OF THE CHURCH DEMANDS IT. Matt. 28:19-20; Eph. 4:13-15

Ask most people what the intention of the church in the world should be and they will mention evangelism. Another person may mention growth. Still another influence on the culture or helping the poor. None of these are wrong and each should be pursued.

Yet we sometimes forget that the intention of the church is **discipleship** resulting in the *calling out of a people for the name of God*, nurturing and maturing those members to become more like Christ. Somehow, we have lost this intention.

Speaking of how church growth and the accompanying pragmatism have captured our agenda, **Charles Colson** has said, “*Cultural values have so captured the church that we equate success with size. It’s a reflex reaction. If a church is growing, someone is doing something right.*” (The Body, 47)

Warren Williams goes on to highlight several trends in our churches that tell the tale of the presence of lost people on our rolls. He mentions “*the large number of inactive church members on our rolls, the many nonresident members, the baptism of very young children, and the nominal ‘Christian’ behavior of many members.*” (Defining Baptist Convictions, 121)

Application: It seems that the modern church has lost sight of its biblical intention of discipleship. Consequently, *anything goes* as long as it produces the numbers we desire or the results we may seek. In some cases, we have committed to growing ministries rather than growing people. The spiritual condition of many on our membership rolls tells the story.

III. THE INTEGRITY OF THE CHURCH DEMANDS IT. Eph. 5:25-27

A. The very intention of Jesus Christ is to present His bride pure and spotless when all is said and done. Why do we think that His intent for the future should not be our concern in the present?

B. This purity of the church has been the hallmark of historic Baptist confessions and preaching. Early anabaptists believed that *sola Scriptura* applied to church polity and that resulted in a commitment to a regenerate church membership.

C. Where are we now as Baptists? Are we leading the way by the integrity of our message? We speak often of preaching the gospel, of winning people to Christ. But does the message we preach agree with the example in our churches? Does the membership of our churches reflect the life-changing message of the gospel?

D. Pastor Mark Dever states, “The images of our human nature that God gives us in the Bible are quite radical—images of being in debt, enslaved, bankrupt, and even dead. This is what the Bible presents as our condition, our situation. It is disastrous, and we had best get out of it. Clearly we need to change.” (9Marks, 108)

Application: How can the church preach a gospel that demands a change if those who belong to the church exhibit no such change themselves? The evidence of new life is the change that occurs in the one who is professing faith. How can we preach, with integrity, a true gospel if our churches are populated by unregenerate people who give no evidence of spiritual life?

HOW DO WE RETURN TO A CHURCH MEMBERSHIP THAT IS REGENERATE?

A. Articulate a clear gospel.

1. Avoid a therapeutic gospel that bolsters self-esteem.

2. Preach that the problem is sin and the only solution is the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

B. Clearly define the conversion experience.

1. Avoid defining the experience in emotional terms and using sincere formulaic statements.

We tend to think that the sincerity of one's emotional experience hold the key. Rather as **Pastor Mark Dever** has said, "I fear that one of the results of misunderstanding the Bible's terms of conversion may be that evangelical churches are full of people who have made a sincere commitment as some point in their lives but who have not experienced the radical change that the Bible calls conversion." (9Marks, 121)

We even go so far as trying to convince some who are not converted using emotional manipulation which may be one reason the individual's profession of faith is suspect to begin with.

2. Repent and believe are the two actions commanded.

Romans 10:9-10 is so much more than a shallow repeated prayer. *"⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."*

C. Guard the front door. Again, Mark Dever articulates the issue so well. "What we actually need to do is close the front door and open the back door! If we want to see our churches grow, we need to make it harder to join, and we need to be better about excluding people. We need to be able to show that there is a distinction between the church and the world—that it means something to be a Christian."

The aftermath of the Second Great Awakening saw tremendous changes in churches. Those pastors literally complained that many of those brought into the church through the meetings were causing problems. They felt the problem to lie in the fact those men and women were not regenerate.

D. Communicate expectations.

1. Teach the statement of faith.

2. Utilize a church covenant.

Conclusion:

We are not capable of seeing into the heart of another. Yet the Bible is clear that regenerate church membership is the only proper form of church membership.

Ensuring the regenerate nature of our membership goes against almost everything we have ever been taught in revivalist circles. Of course, we are glad to hear when someone realizes they are not converted and then become converted.

But why are so many people on our church rolls obviously not converted to begin with?

Closing Illustration:

As a boy I remember hearing the names of church members who were considered "backslidden." That word must be a Baptist word because everywhere I have gone, I have heard it. Through the years it has occurred to me that most of those people were not simply discouraged believers out of the will of God who had decided to stop coming to

church. It is my opinion that most of them who stayed out of church for decades were unregenerate. I can't see into their heart, but I can see the testimony of their life.

Until the church takes this problem seriously, we cannot expect to have integrity in the world or an impact on the world as God would desire.

Week 6: An Accountable Church (Matthew 18:15-20)

Introduction:

Imagine with me for a moment that you live in a country other than the United States. In this country there are no laws. None at all. Everyone does as they please. Unrest is almost constant.

Imagine with me another scenario. You may have actually seen this one. Imagine a family with several young children. None of the children are ever disciplined...ever. They are allowed to do whatever they please, whenever they please. They fight all the time.

Now imagine sitting in a doctor's exam room. You are waiting on his diagnosis of some pain you have. He walks in and informs you he has identified the very microbe that is causing your problems. The microbe will almost certainly lead to your death. He tells you the microbe can be handled with medicine but the medicine might make you a little sick on your stomach so he doesn't think you should bother with it because he is against causing his patients any discomfort. You sit in stunned silence.

You may think me silly, but do you realize that each of these scenarios perfectly depicts in one aspect or another the church that refuses to make accountability a part of church membership?

In the passage before us Jesus gives His followers a glimpse into the future when they would be gathered into groups. After Pentecost those groups sprang up everywhere the gospel was preached, and people believed. These churches would be comprised of people who had surrendered and submitted to the Lordship of Christ, but they weren't perfect. Some of the members of those churches would even turn out to be fake, that is they never surrendered to the Lordship of Christ and they were never born again. Some members would fail miserably even though they were born again, and they would need to be restored after they had repented. Each of these situations has existed throughout the church age and they still exist today.

Jesus gives His followers instructions on how they should handle sins and conflict among the body of the church. Those instructions describe what we would call church discipline. In His instructions He alludes to **three defining characteristics of church discipline** that would be developed both here in this passage and in the yet to be written letters of the New Testament.

I. THE ACCOUNTABILITY TO THE CHURCH Matt. 18:15-17

A. When we first read these verses it might appear that Jesus is only giving practical advice on working out personal differences.

B. Then we get to **verse 17** where the focus changes. ***“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.”***

C. So things in this scenario have escalated to the point of getting the church involved. Why the church? The only answer must be that Jesus is teaching an accountability of every member of the church to the other members of the church.

D. What is said here in the sparsest of terms is developed in other places as churches relied on instructions from the Apostles.

1. **Gal. 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.”*

2. **1 Cor. 5:1-2; 12-13** *“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you.”*

3. **2 Thess. 3:13-15** *“As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy but warn him as a brother.”*

Each of these verses describes some way in which church members are accountable to the church as a whole.

II. THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH **Matt. 18: 17-20**

A. These verses are often taken out of context and need to be explained properly.

1. **Verse 18** Respected authority on church discipline J. Carl Laney points out that the terms “binding” and “loosing” were used by rabbis in imposing and removing obligations regarding the law. They would prohibit or permit certain activity based on their judgment.

2. **Verse 19** This verse is often used as a proof-text for the possibility of answered prayer. In fact, according to this context, Jesus was speaking of the authority of the church to “agree” on a matter of church discipline.

3. **Verse 20** Another verse used to validate God’s presence in a small meeting of believers. Again, according to context, Jesus is giving authority to the official group (quorum), no matter how small, to execute church discipline upon their agreement.

B. There are many reasons this God-given authority is not well received today.

1. **Cultural Entitlement** - The church in North America has suffered very little persecution. This lack of persecution, not unlike the lack that occurred when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, has resulted in church membership being taken for granted. It is often as perceived as a cultural right without any accountability to the church.

2. **Individual Freedom** - The concept of individual liberty is the foundation of American patriotism. This concept of individual liberty has served, however, to eliminate the idea of accountability to a local church in the minds of many.

Baptists have always championed liberty. **Gregory Wills**, however, has noted that individual liberty has not always equated to lack of accountability in the minds of Baptists. The antebellum Baptists championed the rights of conscience and private judgment in the interpretation of Scripture, but people had these rights they believed as citizens of the state, not as members of the church. (Dem. Rel. 87-88)

3. Voluntary Association - To many, church membership is not a requirement, it's only a voluntary action. **Albert Mohler** laments, "Individuals now claim an enormous zone of personal privacy and moral autonomy. The congregation—redefined as a mere voluntary association—has no right to intrude into this space. . . Consumed with pragmatic methods of church growth and congregational engineering, most churches leave moral matters to the domain of the individual conscience." (Polity, 45)

III. THE ADVANTAGES TO THE CHURCH AND ITS MEMBERS Matt. 18:15

The goal of any form of church discipline is the restoration of the offending party. Elimination from the fellowship is never the goal.

A. Jesus here is bequeathing church discipline as a blessing, in the long run, to the church and its members. Even the hard act of bringing discipline must be conducted under the standards of **Eph. 4:32** ³² *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*"

B. There are several ways church discipline is an advantage for the church.

1. Validates Membership - In **1 Cor. 5:11-13** Paul uses terms that give meaning to the act of belonging to a church. Terms like "brother" and "those on the inside" on one hand, contrasted with "those outside" on the other.

Don Whitney writes, "You can't fire someone who doesn't work for you. You can't vote to remove a government official elected by another country. You can't appeal to a court to discipline someone who isn't within its jurisdiction. In the same way, you can't formally discipline someone who is in an informal relationship with you; you have no authority to do so." (Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church, 44) *To be accountable is to belong!*

2. Maintains Distinctiveness and Purity - **1 Peter 2:11** ¹¹ *Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.*"

a. Distinctiveness - **Gregory Wills** argues that the Baptists after the nineteenth century lost their distinctiveness when "they took guardianship of the social order, which secularized the churches and eroded their commitment to separation from the world." (Democratic Religion)

We are sometimes more worried about the latest political decay and corruption than we are about the decay and corruption in our own churches.

b. Purity – Without purity there is no distinctiveness. How are we different from the world if the same sins exist in the local church as in the world?

3. Maintains the Health of the Body – **Gal. 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.*" The word "restore" carries the idea of putting something back in order, like mending a fence or straightening a frame.

Illustration: Since my father was an insurance adjuster for so long, I picked up much of the lingo during my childhood. One of the things he spoke of often with body repair specialists was whether or not an automobile's frame could be straightened. He would

often point out as we drove behind a vehicle that it didn't track straight because its frame had not been straightened properly.

In the same way many Christians and churches remain bent over and crooked because godly church discipline was never applied after a failure or an offense. The effects can last a lifetime when there is no restoration. **Sin always wounds and corrupts and those who are caught in its grip need to be restored.**

4. Provides Assurance of Salvation – Heb. 12:6 “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives.” Godly discipline is a positive reinforcement of relationship. (I never disciplined the neighbors' kids.)

5. Provides Spiritual Preparedness – Psalms 66:18 “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.” In revivalist circles especially the request seems to always be that, in some way, God would move among us. Is there perhaps a reason that God does not move? Back in the days of the great camp meetings discipline declined drastically. **Gregory Wills** again points out that the lack of discipline was seen by many as a detriment to the response sought in the meetings. In fact in the minds of many, discipline was seen as a source of revival. (Dem. Rel. 33)

How is it that we so freely ask God for revival, for awakening, when most of our Baptist churches have never conducted any form of biblical church discipline?

Conclusion:

The human body's defense mechanisms are incredible. When a threat is detected several systems go into action. **White blood cells** increase and go into action. The **endocrine system** does its part in attacking viruses or other foreign bodies. Even the **stomach** that may violently expel its contents is only doing its part in removing the threat.

There is no greater threat to the local church than sin that is allowed to go unchecked. Church discipline is painful but helpful. It is daunting but worth it. It is frightening but it brings healing. Obedience to God's commands always produces life.

APPENDIX 7

RECRUITMENT ANNOUNCEMENT FOR PRE-SERIES SURVEY

Church Family,

Many of you know that I have been working for some time now to finish my Doctorate at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I endeavored to accomplish this task not for myself, but for this wonderful church God has allowed me to pastor for 27 years.

Beginning on November 11th, I will be preaching a six-week sermon series on Biblical church membership. I can't begin to tell you how excited I am to begin this phase of my project, but I need your help to complete it. There will be two congregational surveys administered as part of my doctoral work. One will be administered before the sermon series and one after. These surveys will be used to measure the results of the series that I will preach.

I would love for all adult members, age 18 and above, to participate in the surveys.

All you need to do is fill out the survey next week and commit to being here for the six Sunday mornings during which the sermons will be preached. If you are not able to be here for each service, you would need to commit to requesting the sermon you missed from our church office via audio file. On the last Sunday of the series there will be a post-series survey administered.

I hope you realize how much it would mean to me if you were to participate. The surveys will be anonymous, so I won't know your personal answers. Your participation, however, is still a needed aspect of this project.

The first survey will be given this coming Sunday in the morning service.

Thank you so much for helping me complete my project which I believe will be a blessing to our church for years to come.

Eric James,
Pastor
Mt. Hebron Baptist

APPENDIX 8

PRE-SERMON SERIES SURVEY OBSERVATIONS DATA

Table A1. Pre-sermon series survey observations data

Survey Question (151 responses)		SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
Concerning an understanding of biblical church membership:							
S5	If asked, I could explain my role in the body of Christ at Mt. Hebron Baptist Church.	--	--	3	35	75	38
S6	I have a good understanding of what it means to be a "member" of a Baptist church.	--	--	--	22	71	58
S7	If asked I could explain what it means to "discern the Lord's body" as it pertains to the Lord's Supper.	--	15	17	59	47	13
S10	God's designation of the church as His "royal priesthood" has much to do with my private, individual relationship with Christ.	2	4	4	36	69	36
S11	If asked, I could explain what it means for the church to be God's "chosen race."	1	7	14	50	57	22
S12	I have a good grasp of what my responsibilities are as one of God's "special possession."	--	--	10	38	73	30
S14	If asked, I could explain the importance and appropriateness of church discipline.	0	0	4	34	75	38
Concerning perception of the nature of church membership and responsibilities to it:							
S8	I view my church as the Temple of God and understand what that means.	--	3	4	8	84	52
S9	My work and service in my church are major criteria for which I will give account to God.	4	13	3	29	60	42
S13	I view my church as a family.	--	--	--	5	40	106
S15	I would support the use of biblical church discipline in my church.	--	--	1	11	65	74
S16	I believe my life and actions to be the concern of my fellow church members.	2	1	3	19	73	53
S17	I find safety and security among my church family.	--	1	--	9	68	73
S18	My faithfulness to church is a necessary factor in my spiritual walk and growth.	--	--	--	3	45	103
S20	I can feel secure in my relationship with Christ even if I don't attend church regularly.	47	48	25	13	13	5
S21	My service to my church is an optional or voluntary action.	13	22	24	25	50	17
S22	My faith in Christ is my own private concern.	24	37	32	28	23	7
S23	My church family is more important to me than my biological family.	6	29	32	44	26	14

Table A1 continued

Concerning motivation and willingness for removing inactive church members:							
S19	Leaving inactive members on the church roll is a good way to show love and support to them.	40	58	23	15	9	6
S24	The most important reason for removal of inactive members is they should not have the same rights as active members.	28	33	26	26	26	12

Note: The values for responses to statements 10, 19, 21, 22, and 24 are reversed for other statements in the survey. The response to these statements with the highest value is “strongly disagree.”

APPENDIX 9

PRE- AND POST-SERIES SURVEY AVERAGES

Table A2. Pre- and post-survey averages

Understanding Statements	Pre-Survey Averages	Post-Series Averages
5. I can explain my role in the body of Christ at Mt. Hebron Baptist.	5.03	5.56
6. I have a good understanding of what it means to be a “member” of a Baptist church.	5.35	5.64
7. I can explain what it means to “discern” the Lord’s body as it pertains to the Lord’s supper.	4.20	5.28
10. God’s designation of the church as His “royal priesthood” has much to do with my private, individual relationship with Christ.	2.24	2.23
11. I can explain what it means for the church to be God’s “chosen race.”	4.47	5.30
12. I have a good grasp of what my responsibilities are as one of God’s “special possession.”	4.85	5.30
14. I can explain the importance and appropriateness of church discipline.	5.07	5.53
Perception Statements	Pre-Survey Averages	Post-Series Averages
8. I view my church as the Temple of God and understand what that means.	5.17	5.47
9. My work and service in my church are major criteria for which I will give account to God.	4.60	5.60
13. I view my church as a family.	5.72	5.85
15. I would support the use of biblical church discipline in my church.	5.47	5.70
16. I believe my life and actions to be the concern of my fellow church members.	5.13	5.68
17. I find safety and security among my church family.	5.42	5.74
18. My faithfulness to church is a necessary factor in my spiritual walk and growth.	5.70	5.86
20. I can feel secure in my relationship with Christ even if I don’t attend church regularly.	4.86	5.34
21. My service to my church is an optional or voluntary action.	3.36	5.37
22. My faith in Christ is my own private concern.	4.28	5.17
23. My church family is more important to me than my biological family.	3.65	4.98

Table A2 continued

Motivation and Willingness Statements	Pre-Survey Averages	Post-Series Averages
19. Leaving active members on the church roll is a good way to show love and support to them.	4.89	5.37
24. The most important reason for removal of inactive members is they should not have the same rights as active members.	4.23	4.72

Note: The statements are listed in the same order as appendix 8

APPENDIX 10

PRE- AND POST-SERIES SURVEY T-TEST

Table A3. T-test: Paired two sample for means for pre- and post-series survey

	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	93.69903	105.9029
Variance	70.66343	91.93166
Observations	103	103
Pearson Correlation	0.375131	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	102	
t Stat	-12.2561	
P(T<=t) one-tail	4.51E-22	
t Critical one-tail	1.65993	
P(T<=t) two-tail	9.01E-22	
t Critical two-tail	1.983495	

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ABSTRACT

RECOVERING BIBLICAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AT MT. HEBRON BAPTIST CHURCH, CONNELLY SPRINGS, NORTH CAROLINA

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019
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The purpose of this project was to lead the body of Mt. Hebron Baptist Church, Connelly Springs, North Carolina, to develop a process of maintaining a biblical church membership as a result of a biblical understanding of church membership and the practice of accountability.

Chapter 1 defines the goals of the project, ministry context, rationale, definitions, limitations, delimitations, and research methodology.

Chapter 2 defines the biblical practice of church membership by exploring 1 Corinthians 6:15, 10:16-17, 11:27-29, 12:12-26; Romans 12:3-5; Ephesians 4:4-6; Colossians 1:18,24; 1 Peter 2:9-10; 1 Corinthians 3:9-17; 1 Peter 2:5; Mark:3-35; Acts 4:32-37; 1 Corinthians 1:10-11, 6:1-8; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-20; 1 Timothy 3:14-16.

Chapter 3 explores the theoretical issues related to biblical church membership and practical ways to implement it in a local context.

Chapter 4 describes the process by which this project was implemented.

Chapter 5 records the results and evaluation of the project that consisted of a six-week sermon series and changes in church by-laws.

VITA

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