

New Members Handbook

COVENANT GRACE CHURCH | GREENSBORO, NC

“Christ for us, Christ in us, Christ through us”



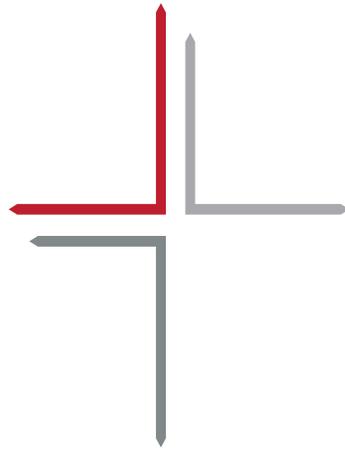
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Table of Contents

Session One	Is Church Membership Important?	1
	Our Reformed Heritage	3
	Our Mission	9
Session Two	Our Philosophy of Ministry	13
	Our Foundational Beliefs	15
	Our Denominational Distinctives (<i>Presbyterian Church In America</i>)	21
Session Three	Our Plan To Help Our Members Grow	25
	Our Expectations For Our Members	27
	Our Promises To Our Members	29
	Your Next Steps...	31

Appendix: *Resources For Your Joy In Christ*

• “One Another” Passages of the New Testament (Article)	39
• How Does God Desire To Be Worshiped? (Article)	41
• Our Worship The View From 10,000 Feet (Article)	43
• Why Do We Sing the Doxology Every Week?(Article)	47
• What Is the Lord’s Supper? (Article)	49
• Who Is To Be Welcomed To the Lord’s Supper?	53
• Our Shepherding Plan	59



COVENANT
GRACE CHURCH

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Session One:

- *Is Church Membership Important?*
- *Our Reformed Heritage*
- *Our Mission*
- *Questions & Answers*

Is Church Membership Important?

For some, the idea of being a formal member of a local church body makes good sense right away. After finding a church they believe to be faithful in upholding the Christian faith, they are eager to join. For others, however, past experiences have instilled some hesitation and suspicion about formal membership. Unfortunately, at times church membership has been wrongly used in ways that were more hurtful than helpful. For this reason, the very practice itself has been significantly called into question and needs some thoughtful explanation to help us see it in the right light.

Is Church Membership Biblical?

We should note, right out of the gate, that there is no explicit command in the New Testament for formal church membership. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume on this basis that the Bible does not heartily endorse it. Before we take a look at what the Bible does say, let's consider a hypothetical scenario that will help us start thinking well about the subject as a whole.

For a person who right now says—*“I believe the Bible and desire to live in submission to every word that God has given us therein, but I do not believe in Church membership”*—I wonder how you would respond to a phone call from a Pastor or Elder at a church in Albania, Estonia, Patagonia or maybe just a different local church down the street, who asked you why you have not been present in their worship gatherings, or tithing in their offering? As the conversation continued, let's imagine that the person also begins to confront you on your lack of care for the fellow members of their church who have been facing significant needs. How would you respond? Is their confrontation biblically justified? If not, why not?

You may be surprised by the question altogether, indeed it seems a little far-fetched. But, nevertheless, it helps us see something very important. After all, doesn't the Bible say that Christians are called to *“Obey [their] leaders and submit to them...”*?¹ What grounds would you have to make any argument against such a confrontation by the church leader? If your original argument is that church membership is not biblical, and that the Bible only speaks of membership in terms of our *universal* place in the Body of Christ, then would not those verses which refer to the role of pastors and elders have to be understood in terms of *universal* application as well? Briefly processing this scenario helps us see the need for thinking more deeply about the subject. With this in mind, let's consider some of the following biblical principles about church membership.

Principle 1: *God always describes his church in terms of distinct membership, & this includes distinct local membership.*

Some of the most common biblical metaphors for the Church depict her as: *Members of a Body*, *Members of a Flock*, and *Members of a Household*.² Each of these pictures describe the local church as a specified group that is clearly recognized and distinguished from non-group members. However, this distinction is often improperly limited to the *universal church* and thereby the argument is made that formal membership at the *local level* is unbiblical. Yet, such a view cannot rightly square with a closer look at the Scriptures. For just one example, when Paul says in his greeting to the Corinthians, *“To the church of God that is in Corinth...”*³—is he suggesting that any person who is not part of the church at Corinth is not part of *“the church of God”*? Of course not! Instead he is simply distinguishing a specific group of *local* believers who have formally identified themselves as members of that particular *local* church.

¹ Hebrews 13:17

² 1 Corinthians 12:12; 1 Peter 5:2; 1 Timothy 3:15

³ 1 Corinthians 1:2

Principle 2: *God’s design for the roles of spiritual leaders & followers require distinct local membership.*

The calling of all spiritual leaders is to “*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight...*”⁴ The calling of all Christians is to “*obey your leaders and submit to them.*”⁵ In both cases, we see a clear teaching that the responsibility of both parties is limited and particularized. Leaders are not responsible for—nor do they have authority over—every person who is a Christian.⁶ Spiritual leaders are, however, responsible for “*the flock of God that is among [them]*”—a distinct, formally recognized body of people.

Likewise, the responsibility of individual Christians is to obey “*your leaders*”—the use of the possessive pronoun “*your*” clearly communicates a formally recognized relationship to the particular spiritual leaders of a particular *local* church. The plain fact is, if you have not placed yourself under their authority as a formally recognized member of the *local* flock which God has called them to “*shepherd*”, they may be men you look up to but they have not become “*your leaders*”. To use the words of Scripture, they are not truly spiritual leaders “*over you*”⁷ because you have never formally placed yourself ‘*under them*’.

Principle 3: *Christians are called to be actively identified with & caring for the needs of a distinct local body of believers.*

In our hypothetical scenario above, one of the things the spiritual leader was confronting you about was your lack of personal care for the struggling believers within *his* local context. After all, the Bible clearly says that we are to “*bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ*”.⁸ So, while we all know and affirm that God’s people have a *universal* debt of love to others,⁹ is it accurate to say that you are sinning by not fulfilling every “*one another*” passage for every other Christian in the world? Of course not. The term “*one another*” is to be understood within the context of a visible and distinct membership within the *local* church, not the global church.¹⁰ This is the meaning Paul had in view when he communicated his desire that, “*members*” within the *local* church at Corinth, may have a deeply authentic “*care for one another.*” So much so that, “*If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.*”¹¹

Church Membership Is For Your Joy In Christ

The three principles identified above are by no means exhaustive of the Biblical teaching on this subject. There are numerous other passages in both the Old and New Testaments which affirm the important place of formal membership within the life of the local church. Exactly *how* membership is to be approached is left open for each church to determine for themselves, but it is clear that a formal commitment by both the spiritual leaders and spiritual followers is part of God’s good design for our progress and joy in Christ. Without this, it is far less likely that leaders will be in a position to provide the depth of spiritual care and accountability that God’s Word clearly teaches every Christian needs. Furthermore, the kind of God-glorifying mutual care that Christians are to be displaying toward “*one another*” will no doubt be hindered if their connection to “*one another*” is loose, ill-defined, and informal.

Based on these convictions, we believe that no matter where God calls your family to worship him long-term—whether at Covenant Grace, or another faithful local church—becoming a committed member will be a catalyst for your continued spiritual maturity in Christ.

For a list of all of the “one another” passages in the New Testament, see the “Resources For Your Joy In Christ” section.

⁴ | Peter 5:2; see also I Thessalonians 5:12

⁵ Hebrews 13:17

⁶ Thus, as noted above, the Christian versus non-Christian argument is untenable.

⁷ See I Thessalonians 5:12-13

⁸ Galatians 6:2

⁹ Matthew 22:37-40

¹⁰ This principle does not negate our calling to sacrificially seek the flourishing of the global church. It merely draws out the point that God has called his people to be primarily engaged at the local level, as a committed member of a particular local church wherein they will both give and receive to the glory of God.

¹¹ | Corinthians 12:25-26

Our Reformed Heritage:

To our great blessing, according to the wise and sovereign hand of God, we now live in a time where the instability and insufficiency of modern man-centered approaches to Christianity are, at last, crumbling before our eyes. As the sandy soil of modern evangelicalism is eroded by the winds and rains of this fallen world, God’s people are once more looking for “*the Rock that is stronger than I,*” the sure foundation which “*cannot be shaken,*” and the one, true, and almighty God whose truth and glory give salvation and ballast to the sinner’s weary soul.¹² The need for an objectively true, gimmick-free, dependable, enduring, suffering-worthy, eternity-focused, and God-centered theology is reemerging as the aching hunger of the souls of God’s chosen people.

What Is A Reformed Church?

We are thankful for our true brothers and sisters in Christ from every Christian tradition. We rejoice in the fact that all God’s true people throughout the world are all ultimately one body in Christ.¹³ Yet, even while treasuring these beautiful realities, we are not embarrassed to winsomely declare our heartfelt conviction. We firmly believe that our Reformed heritage is the most accurate expression of the historic Christian “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”¹⁴ This is our conviction because we believe that no other spiritual heritage more faithfully centers on:

- *The glory of the eternal, sovereign, and almighty God as the chief end of all things.*
- *A desire to faithfully interpret and apply God’s will as set forth in Holy Scripture as the governing rule for all of life.*
- *The gospel of God’s salvation for sinners: offered by grace alone, accomplished by Christ alone, received by faith alone.*

These three truths are the most broad distinctions of our Reformed heritage (*centered on God’s Glory, grounded in God’s Word, & resting in God’s Grace*). Yet, there is a need to be more specific about what we mean. After all, there are many folks who are not Reformed who might agree with those points of emphasis, yet our understanding and practice of the Christian faith are starkly different. So, what exactly accounts for these considerable differences? There are essentially four primary distinctions which broadly define what it means to be *Reformed*. Each of these categories is worthy of its own extensive treatment, but a brief overview will help us begin to begin to answer the question: *What is a Reformed Church?*

1. Our Reformed Heritage Is Distinctly Historical

Reformed churches are a continuing expression of an especially important time in church history which we commonly call *the Reformation*. The Reformation began as far back as the 14th century with faithful men such as John Wycliffe and John Hus. Yet, it was during the 16th and 17th centuries that God, in His kind and holy providence, liberated His true church from the devastating errors and abuses of the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁵

While studying Holy Scripture, a German monk named Martin Luther began to observe the severe disparities between the teaching and practice of the Roman Catholic Church and the authoritative Word of the living God. Wrestling with these errors and their implications for some time, Luther reluctantly decided to raise questions against the legitimacy of the Roman Church’s teaching—especially the sale of

¹² Psalm 61:2; Matthew 7:24-27; Ephesians 2:17-22; Romans 11:33-36

¹³ Ephesians 4:4

¹⁴ Jude 3; see also Hebrews 12:28-29

¹⁵ The common date given for the official start of the Reformation is October 31, 1517, coinciding with Martin Luther’s nailing of his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

indulgences.¹⁶ While this is not the place to discuss those disparities in detail, it is important to note that Luther (and many others)¹⁷ became convinced that the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching was devoid of the true gospel, and therefore damning to the souls of men.¹⁸ Below is a basic chart depicting *five* of the most fundamental differences between a Reformed understanding of the teaching of Holy Scripture and Roman Catholic teaching (which the RCC continues to affirm today). The Reformation encompassed far more than the five doctrinal differences listed below. However, these “*Five Solas*” have come to represent the core body of distinctives which remain foundational to Reformed churches today:

Roman Catholic Teachings:	Reformation Teachings: (The Five Solas)
<i>Scripture and tradition hold equal authority</i> in the government of the church.	SCRIPTURE ALONE is the ultimate authority of the church.
Men are saved by a combination of <i>God’s grace and their own merits</i> .	GOD’S GRACE ALONE is the basis of the salvation of sinners.
Men are saved by a combination of <i>Christ’s work and the works of supererogation by Mary and other saints</i> .	CHRIST ALONE accomplished salvation for sinners.
Faith in Christ does not unite a person to salvation, <i>additional works are necessary to fully earn and maintain salvation</i> .	FAITH ALONE unites us to the full and complete salvation which God has accomplished in Christ.
Prayers, adoration, veneration and <i>glory are to be given to God, but also to Mary and other saints</i> .	ALL GLORY , honor, praise, faith, obedience, adoration, and worship rightly belong TO GOD ALONE .

As a Reformed church, Covenant Grace is a modern expression of this rich and beautiful “*Protestant*” heritage.¹⁹ It is essential to understand, however, that the *Reformation* was not a *revolution*, or the birth of something *new*. Instead, it was a time of repentance and healing in which the true church forsook her wayward ways and returned to the historic faith as it has been set forth in God’s holy and inerrant Word. It is of course true that Reformed churches are historical in terms of their relationship to the *Reformation era*, but they are ultimately *historical* in a far greater sense. They are chiefly historical in that they seek to align themselves with the orthodox “*faith that was once for all delivered to the saints*.”²⁰ (Draw Timeline Chart)

2. Our Reformed Heritage Is Distinctly Confessional

The teaching of Holy Scripture does not change. God has spoken, and His Word is complete.²¹ Therefore, the teaching of Christ’s church does not change either. Our calling is to faithfully interpret and apply the whole counsel of God corporately, filially, and personally. In an effort to do this, the church has historically met in various councils for extended periods of time to prayerfully study and articulate a true sense of the teaching of Holy Scripture.²² This has been done with the intent:

- *To edify and equip the church according to the true doctrines of our faith.*
- *To provide a clear and consistent voice concerning Christian doctrine and thereby unify the church.*
- *To set forth a careful defense against prevalent errors.*
- *To develop a thoroughly and carefully scrutinized expression of the essential doctrines of our most precious faith.*

¹⁶ Indulgences are certificates which the Roman Catholic Church teaches can be purchased for money in order to buy time off of “Purgatory — (which is itself an additional false teaching) — either for oneself or for another. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that they have the authority to dispense such indulgences, and they used this as a means to prey on the guilty consciences of men.

¹⁷ Other Influential Reformers: Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Buber, John Calvin, John Knox, Theodore Beza, William Farel, Heinrich Bullinger, & many more.

¹⁸ To see a confessional expression of the Roman Catholic Church’s essential teaching, read “The sacred canons and decrees of the Ecumenical Council of Trent” (1563).

¹⁹ The Reformation was the birth of what is commonly called the Protestant church today. Protestant simply means protesters, referring to those who protested against the errors and abuses of the Roman Catholic Church.

²⁰ Jude 3; see also Ephesians 2:18-22

²¹ Revelation 22:18-21; II Timothy 3:16-17

²² Examples of the earliest councils include: Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451).

Confessions are never to be considered equal to Scripture, but rather as *faithful expressions of what Scripture teaches*. They are only binding in so much as they truthfully represent God's Word. When and where it can be demonstrated by Scripture that a confession errs, it must needs be amended. However, when and where a confession accurately represents "*the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints*,"²³ it must needs be believed and accepted.

Some will argue against the legitimacy of confessions. To be sure, not all confessions are equal and indeed many are mistaken in the theology they profess. However, it would be foolish to think that confessions are unhelpful, unwise, and something the church would be better off without. In reality, it is impossible not to be confessional; rather, the question is simply: *which confession will you hold to?* What I mean by this is that everyone who claims faith in Christ has a certain understanding of their faith. As soon as you ask them, "*What do you believe?*" you are asking them to give you their *confession of faith*. The problem is, in our modern society we very naively over-celebrate individualism, and we do so to the detriment of our own spiritual growth as well as the great dishonoring of the name of God.

The historic Reformed Confessions²⁴ were originally written by councils of men which were comprised of the most spiritually gifted pastors and theologians God had given to His church at that time. While this alone should give us good reason to take their teaching seriously, the real value extends much more deeply. Take for example the Westminster Standards, (which are the governing doctrinal standards of our denomination, the PCA). These were originally penned over the course of a decade by an international body of over 100 men. What is more, they have since been scrutinized and refined for nearly 400 years by the careful reflection of the global church! Nearly four centuries of meticulous consideration and study—and yet these documents still stand doubly-affirmed as a faithful expression of the system of teaching which God has given to us in His holy Word. To hold up our private personal convictions as a more sure and trustworthy guide without first giving thoughtful consideration to the Westminster Confession (or other historic Reformed confessions) is foolhardy and indefensible.

As a Reformed church, we recognize that Scripture alone is our final rule and authority in all matters of faith and practice. Yet, we humbly endorse the Reformed Confessions as helpful and authoritative guides inasmuch as they further illumine to us the proper interpretation of the Word of the living God. In short, a Reformed church is one which subscribes to one or more of the *historic Reformed Confessions*.

3. Our Reformed Heritage Holds To A Distinct Theological Perspective

Growing forth from the two areas of our valuable heritage which we have already considered, we come to the distinct theological perspective of the Reformed faith. The question we are asking here is, "*According to Reformed theology, what is at the very core of Christianity? What sits at the utmost pinnacle of a proper understanding of the Christian faith?*"

Many people believe that Reformed theology simply focuses on God's sovereignty in salvation, or what is often termed "*Calvinism*." As glorious, essential, heartwarming, Bible-saturated, and worship-producing as these doctrines of grace are, they are not the center of Reformed theology. More central, more important, more critical, more beautiful, and more to be desired than all others is the knowledge of God Himself. Reformed theology, and therefore (truly) Reformed churches, heartily endeavor to practice the truth which is set forth in the very first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

²³ Jude 3

²⁴ There are seven primary Reformed Confessions which have been enduring guides for God's people: The Belgic Confession (1561); The Heidelberg Catechism (1563); The Canons of Dort (1618); The Second Helvetic Confession (1566); The Westminster Standards: The Westminster Confession & the Larger and Shorter Catechisms (1646). As a Session, we commend all of these to you for your continued growth in Christ.

Question 1: What is the chief end of man?

Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.²⁵

We believe that everything God has ever done is ultimately about His own glory; and we believe that everything God has ever done for us is about our knowing, glorifying and enjoying Him.²⁶ This is the true essence of eternal life, and the very blessedness of heaven itself. Heaven is not about a *place* but a *person*; it is about man's being brought into a right relationship with God and basking in the glorious pleasures of knowing the "*holy, holy, holy*" One.²⁷ As a Reformed church, we believe the greatest treasure offered to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ is not forgiveness of sins or being spared of eternal wrath—as *glorious as these things are!*—but rather, being given the gift of truly knowing, glorifying, and enjoying God.²⁸

With God's glory as the primary purpose and pinnacle of all things, Reformed theology also distinctly emphasizes a handful of other important theological truths. Some of the uppermost examples are:

- **The Authority of the Word of God**

Reformed theology teaches that the Holy Scriptures, being the very Word of God, are the final and infallible rule for all matters of faith and life. All things in the life of the church and the individual Christian must be submitted to and understood by the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture.

- **The Centrality of the Sovereignty of God**

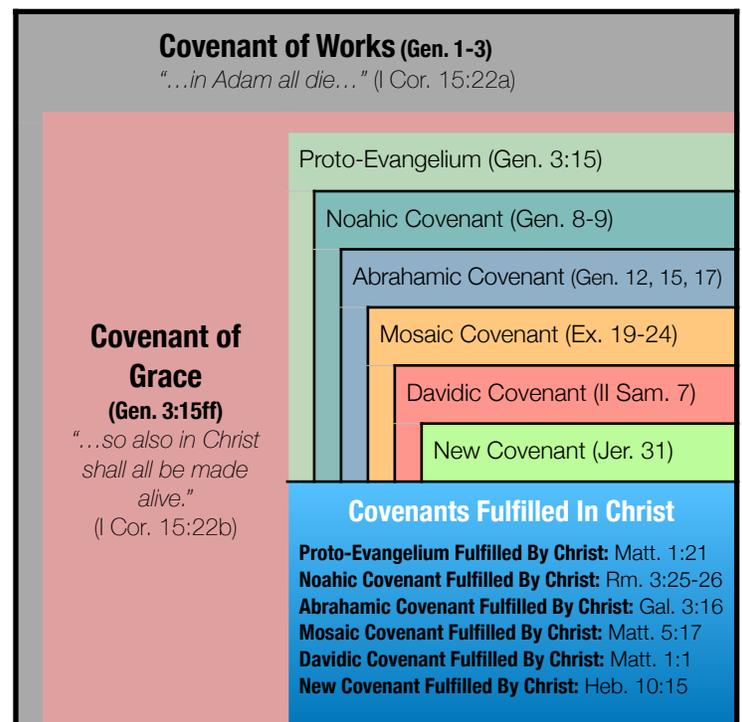
Reformed theology affirms the Bible's clear teaching of the absolute, unhindered, and eternal sovereignty of God over all things. While it is a mystery to us as to how, we affirm the Scripture's plain teaching that God is wholly sovereign over all things even while man is wholly accountable.

- **The Gracious & Redeeming Covenants of God (the Gospel)**

Reformed theology recognizes that God has chosen to relate to men according to covenants throughout redemptive history. These covenants are not disjointed, but rather part of the unfolding of one unified story of God's glorious redemption of sinners. This eternal plan of redemption through Christ was foreordained by God, for his elect only, from before the foundation of the world. As a Reformed church, we interpret the Bible according to the two primary covenants: The Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. We believe and affirm only one way of salvation for all sinners in all times, and this is through the one Mediator between God and man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

- **The Scripturally-Defined Worship of God**

Reformed churches affirm the Regulative Principle of Worship which teaches that, like all other things, our worship of God is to be governed by God's revealed will in his holy Word. This means that we endeavor to worship God in those specific ways and manners which God has expressly set forth in Scripture, not according to our own ideas or desires.



²⁵ I Corinthians 10:31; Psalm 73:25-26

²⁶ See Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14; also v10; Philippians 2:10; I Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16; Romans 11:36

²⁷ John 17:3

²⁸ Jeremiah 9:23-25; Matthew 13:44-46

4. Our Reformed Heritage Holds To A Distinct Hermeneutical Perspective

Finally, Reformed churches hold a distinct understanding of how the Bible is to be studied and interpreted. The word “*hermeneutics*” is just a fancy \$10 word that means *interpretation*. Specifically, in Christianity, hermeneutics refers to the method(s) one uses when seeking to rightly interpret and apply Holy Scripture. There are lots of faulty approaches which are, unfortunately, rampant throughout the church.²⁹ Most Christians take a very subjective approach to the Bible. In other words, they are simply looking for verses that give them inspiring thoughts, personal affirmations, or *feelings* of comfort, courage, etc. In the process, it is all too common for people to take verses out of their Biblical context and apply new meanings to them which God did not intend in what He originally spoke. In short, even when looking to holy Scripture, it is still quite possible to build our faith on an *unbiblical* and *unstable* foundation.

A classic example of this can be observed in the well-known children’s song, “*This is the Day*.” Many of you probably know at least the first line of this song by heart:

“*This is the day (x2), that the Lord has made (x2), I will rejoice (x2), and be glad in it (x2).*”

It is true that we should be thankful and contented in each and every day that the Lord has made; we are certainly not arguing against that. However, this song is based on the words of Psalm 118:24. In its original context, the “*day*” in view was actually the day of atonement—and even more to the point, it was ultimately referring to the day of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion. Psalm 118:24 simply has nothing to do with the notion of maintaining the power of positive thinking throughout the highs and lows of daily life. No, it is about something far more important; it is about the astounding reality that the almighty and holy God would choose to send His only begotten Son to suffer and die in the place of wretched sinners like us. Now that is something worth singing about! That is a “*day*” that if you or I were “*Lord*,” we would never have “*made*.” God’s grace is truly amazing!

When we take verses from the Bible and assign variant meanings which God did not intend—even if what we are saying is ‘true’ in the broad sense—it is still a misinterpretation and misrepresentation of God’s holy Word. As a Reformed church, we approach Holy Scripture with the belief that God’s Word does not change and therefore the meaning of God’s Word does not change. God’s truth is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Of course, it may need to be applied differently within varying situations and contexts, but the essential truth and message is not fluctuating or duplicitous.

The guiding principles of Reformed hermeneutics are comprised in what is aptly called the *Grammatical Historical Method of Interpretation*. Yes, it is a mouthful; but it is the most faithful method for seeking to rightly divide the Word of truth for the people of God. Within this hermeneutical framework we seek to study God’s word according to the following parameters:

- **Harmoniously**

All of Scripture is breathed out by God; every Word has come from the lips of the Holy One. We know that God never stutters or misspeaks; neither does he change His mind. Therefore, everything God has spoken in His Word is harmonious. When holy Scripture is understood correctly, there are no parts of the Bible which are in conflict. We call this principle the “analogy of faith”. By this we mean to say that Scripture is always *analogous* or congruent to Scripture; God’s Word never contradicts itself. Another way the Reformed church has captured this principle is by saying that as the true Word of the holy God, “*Scripture is its own interpreter*.” There are two main principles related to this hermeneutical conviction:

²⁹ This is especially true of Allegorical approaches which assign new meanings to aspects of stories which are not Biblical.

1. *Every part of holy Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the whole.*
2. *The less clear passages of Scripture are to be interpreted in light of the more clear passages, (never the reverse).*

- **Grammatically**

God's Word was given in specific languages using specific words with specific grammatical nuances. All of these factors are essential and definitive in determining the unchanging meaning of the message which God has conveyed for our good. Therefore, as a Reformed church, we base our interpretation of God's Word on a careful study of the original languages of the Bible. We rely on trustworthy, literalistic Bible translations based on the original manuscript text and we and always endeavor to read verses in their historic grammatical and linguistic context.

- **Historically**

God's Word was given to specific people within specific cultures in unique historical settings. These realities are critical governing parameters for our faithful interpretation of the Bible. The historical and cultural context in which certain words are spoken can have a very powerful bearing on the meaning of the message conveyed. If we ignore this context, we are likely to invent meanings based on our own historical and cultural contexts which are, in many cases, very different than those of the people of God of old. The true meaning of the every passage of the Bible is the meaning which God intended when He originally spoke. It is true that as God has continued to unfold His will throughout redemptive history we may be able to see a *fuller* meaning of a given passage than our historical counterparts, but we must never adopt a meaning which would have been unintelligible, irrelevant or contrary to that which was spoken to the original audience in their unique time and place in history.

- **By Faith In the Work of the Holy Spirit**

Finally, in interpreting the Bible we rely on the faithful use of all of the ordinary means described above, but we always do so by faith in God Himself, not in *our* use of the means. We study in utter dependence upon the Holy Spirit to illumine the truth of God's Word to us as only He can.³⁰ Our clarity and conviction of the truth of God's Word is encouraged and fortified by a great many things, but as the Westminster Confession of Faith states so well,

*"We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture...[but] our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts."*³¹

Conclusion

So, at least in seed form, this is our rich, beautiful, and enduring heritage as *Reformed Presbyterians*. We stand on the shoulders of faithful saints whose love for Christ and desire to walk faithfully before Him can be traced all the way back to the Apostles themselves. It is difficult to offer such a brief overview of this important subject because there are so many additional facets to the Reformed faith that are important to the health and flourishing of Christ's church. However, this article provides at least an introductory answer to the important question, "*What is a Reformed Church?*" A Reformed church is a historic, confessional, God-centered, and Scripture-saturated body of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ who joyfully strive to know, enjoy, and glorify the one, true God.

*"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."*³²

³⁰ I Corinthians 2:10-16

³¹ Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 1, Paragraph 5

³² Ephesians 3:20-21

Our Mission



Our mission is to glorify our God and Savior Jesus Christ by being a maturing community of believers who are submitting to the Scriptures, resting in grace, growing in faith, serving in love, and proclaiming the gospel to the world.

Above all else, we desire to be a community of believers who are committed to knowing, enjoying, and worshiping our Savior Jesus Christ, even as we are continually striving to make him known to others in this world. While that sounds like a great goal for a church to have, we humbly recognize how easy it can be to get distracted from our course and end up focused on the wrong things. This is why the Elders of Covenant Grace—working together in unity—have taken time to prayerfully develop a mission statement for our church. We believe having a clearly articulated mission that identifies both our foundational commitments as well as our Scripturally-based calling, will not only unify our congregation in the work we have before us, but also keep us heading in the right direction for the years to come. Let's take the next few minutes to break down the various phrases of our mission statement in order to consider what they mean, why they matter, and how we can live out our mission together.

What We Mean When We Say...

"To glorify our God and Savior Jesus Christ..."³³

At Covenant Grace Church, we believe that our Triune God is worthy of all honor, glory, and praise. As the Scriptures abundantly declare, it is both *through* God and *for* God that all things exist. For this reason, we desire that every aspect of our ministry be done for the worship and exaltation of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.

We believe Christ's Church exists, above all, to worship God.

"By being a maturing community of believers..."³⁴

We believe that the Christian life is not designed to be lived in either stagnancy or isolation. God has graciously chosen and called his children to be united together as one unified and growing body in Christ. We are deeply dedicated to cultivating authentic, Christ-centered, and spiritually nourishing relationships within our spiritual family as we each encourage one another toward Christian maturity.

We believe Christ's Church is called to live out her faith in community.

³³ 1 Corinthians 8:6; Philippians 2:9-11; Ephesians 1:10

³⁴ Hebrews 10:24-25; 1 Corinthians 12:13-20

“who are submitting to the scriptures...”³⁵

We believe that the Bible is the very Word of the one true God. As God’s holy and perfect Word, the Scriptures are our ultimate authority, foundation, and guide. In all matters of faith and life, we endeavor to live in joyful submission to the entire counsel of God.

We believe Christ’s Church is called to be wholly submitted to the Scriptures.

“resting in grace...”³⁶

We acknowledge that we are all broken sinners who deserve only God’s wrath, and yet we find rest for our souls knowing that because of God’s sovereign grace to us in Jesus Christ, we will only ever know his mercy. As blood-bought children of God, saved by grace alone, we undertake all of the activities of the Christian life with the assurance that God’s love for us is not based on our performance and can neither be earned nor lost by our effort.

We believe Christ’s Church is called to be immovably grounded in the gospel.

“growing in faith...”³⁷

We believe that God strengthens and grows his redeemed children by renewing their minds in truth through the faithful understanding of his Word. This is why Christ-centered, expositional teaching and preaching are at the center of all of the ministries of our Church. It is our desire to encourage and fortify the faith of God’s people by providing regular opportunities for discipleship in the faith.

We believe Christ’s Church is called to grow to spiritual maturity in their faith.

“serving in love...”³⁸

We believe that Christian love is sincere faith in action. A true knowledge of God always results in an active and visible love for God and others in our lives. We believe that all Christians have been given unique gifts meant to bless both the body of Christ which they call home, and the local community in which they have been placed. We encourage the members of our body to actively participate in the life of the ministries of our church by sacrificially loving and serving others just as they have been sacrificially loved and served by God.

We believe Christ’s Church is called to live lives of sacrificial service for others.

“and proclaiming the gospel to the world.”³⁹

We believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the one and only true hope for this world. We desire to be a church that is raising up and equipping men, women, and children who are eager to proclaim the good news of God’s saving grace among both their neighbors and the nations—whenever, wherever, and to whomever God calls. While we know that God does not need us to accomplish his purposes, we are humbled and thankful to be a part of God’s glorious and eternal kingdom going forth in this world.

We believe Christ’s Church is called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world.

Simply put, we desire for our lives to continually proclaim:

“Christ for us, Christ in us, Christ through us”

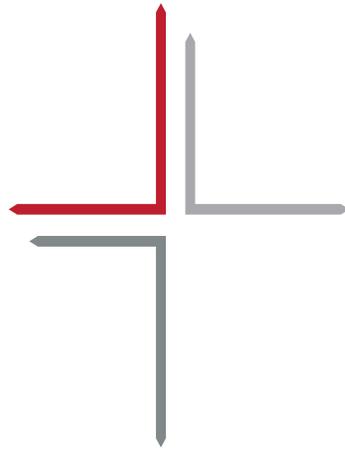
³⁵ II Peter 1:16-20; Ephesians 2:19-22; II Timothy 3:15-17; Romans 12:2

³⁶ Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 2:3-8

³⁷ Ephesians 4:15-16; see also the list of “one another” passages previously referenced.

³⁸ Matthew 5:13-16; I Peter 4:10-11; Romans 12:1-8

³⁹ Matthew 28:18-20; Colossians 1:28-29; Romans 10:14; Ephesians 3:10; Ephesians 5:15-16



COVENANT
GRACE CHURCH

Christ for us, Christ in us, Christ through us

Session Two:

- *Our Philosophy of Ministry*
- *Our Foundational Beliefs*
- *Our Denominational Distinctives*
- *Questions & Answers*

Our Philosophy of Ministry

At Covenant Grace, we believe that God will accomplish *His mission* for *His church* by *His means*. In other words, we recognize that the fulfillment of our mission statement—and far more importantly, the universal mission which God has given to His global church—is not up to us to accomplish in our own strength or by our own ideas. God invites His people to participate with Him in the work He has planned from all eternity, and for us to do so in a posture of complete dependence upon *His grace, His wisdom, and His strength*.

The Ordinary Means of Grace

We believe that God has given us rather simple and straightforward means for going about the work of ministry. Historically, the Reformed church has referred to these as the “*ordinary means of grace*.” According to the holy Scriptures, there are certain ‘tools’ which God has both *called* His people to make full use of, and at the same time, which God has *promised* to bless the use of as the primary way that He will pour out His graces both in and through their lives.

We call these God-appointed tools the “*ordinary*” means for two reasons. First, we do so because this is the way God is *ordinarily* pleased to do His work. He has and can work without or beyond these means as He so chooses; He is not limited. However, His Word makes plain that there is a certain way which is God’s *ordinary way*. These specific means which God has ordained are the tools which God calls his people to employ for both the perfecting of the saints and the reaching of the unconverted elect.

Second, we do so because we live in a world where we face great temptation to believe that the “*ordinary*” ways of God simply aren’t enough. Churches right and left are consulting the best marketing teams of this world in search of “*extraordinary means*”⁴⁰ by which to capture the attention and approval of a lost and dying world. Some have even become quite successful at gathering large crowds and garnering popularity. But what has the real spiritual fruit of these approaches to ministry repeatedly shown us in the end? Has it not shown us that appeals to the flesh through the “*means*” of worldly comforts, entertainments, and man-centered desires does not bring forth a harvest of true righteousness? Worldly means can certainly enliven crowds and fill empty buildings, but they cannot redeem sinful hearts.

Indeed, this problem is not a new one. This has been prevalent from the beginning and will be with us until Kingdom come. The Apostle Paul himself faced these very challenges and wrote a reminder which is needed by so many churches and their leaders in our present day. Considering his own calling before God, he said: “*Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.*”⁴¹

To these Scriptural words, and the many other passages which affirm the same sentiments, we at Covenant Grace say Yes and Amen!⁴² We are a church who strives to trust God’s ordained way of doing things; we trust that His “*ordinary means*” are still the most important and powerful approach we can take to true Spirit-filled, gospel ministry.

⁴⁰ i.e. Professional Rock bands, fog machines, coffee bars, mood lighting, shorter and shallower ‘talks’ (not sermons), less focus on sin or hell or judgment or wrath (all things which Jesus died to save us from, and without which the gospel makes no sense), more focus on man’s feelings and comfort and temporal life, editing God to accommodate cultural ideals/values, etc.

⁴¹ II Corinthians 4:1-2

⁴² For example, read and consider I Corinthians 1:18-2:5; 3:1-17; Colossians 1:24-29

So what exactly are these “*ordinary means of grace*”? There are three essential “*means of grace*” by which God has called His people to minister and through which God has promised to minister to them:

1. The Word

2. The Sacraments

3. Prayer

The ***Word*** of God is both foundational and central to all that we do as God’s people. It is through God’s Word that our souls are given the light of the knowledge of God, nourishing spiritual food to help us grow strong in our faith, encouragement to endure, wisdom to act honorably, training in godliness, clarity concerning righteousness, and much much more. Even the songs that we sing back to God in our worship are ultimately rooted in the truths He has first revealed to us through His Word. The Word of God is the seed which the faithful Sower is called to scatter everywhere he goes, and it is the one and only sure foundation upon which the enduring house is built.⁴³

The ***Sacraments*** of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are a further ministry of God’s Word through which the Lord visibly proclaims the truths of His covenant promises to His people. As these sacraments are administered, God is actively preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to His people to encourage and strengthen their faith through the visible elements which He has assigned to each sacrament. There is real spiritual ministry taking place in the hearts and lives of all who receive the sacraments by faith.

Prayer is our bold and unhindered access to God from whom we can ask, seek, and knock for all that is needful in order to honor, serve, and glorify Him with our lives. In fact, prayer is not merely *suggested* for the Christian, but actually *commanded* as part of our faithful obedience. In other words, God demands that His people rely wholly upon Him to be their Provider by calling out to Him through prayer. He is never burdened by our asking or troubled by the size of our requests. Rather, God delights to reveal His inexhaustible glory, grace, wisdom, and strength by abundantly supplying the needs of His praying people.

Fellowship & the Holy Spirit

In addition to the “*ordinary means of grace*” we believe and affirm two other central necessities:

1. The Fellowship of the Saints

2. The Power of the Holy Spirit

While Christians are undoubtedly called to a private pursuit of God in their personal lives, they are doubly called to live out their faith *together* within the context of membership in the local church body. ***Fellowship*** around the *Word, Sacraments, and Prayer* is undeniably set forth in the Bible a necessary aspect of truly participating in all three. The primary way we do this is by gathering together on the Lord’s Day weekly, as well as other times appointed by the Session of the Church. Thus, in our philosophy of ministry at Covenant Grace we strive to help God’s people “*consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*”⁴⁴

Yet, back of all of these things stands an indispensable reality that undergirds absolutely everything we do as a church. Apart from the powerful working of God the **Holy Spirit**, no efforts of our own will amount to anything.⁴⁵ For unless the breath of God blows upon the valley of dry bones, Ezekiel’s proclamation will impart no life.⁴⁶ Yet, God the Spirit was pleased to work *through* Ezekiel to bring life to the dead, just as He is pleased to continue working *through us* today. Thus, in total dependence upon God, we strive to abide in the True Vine who said to His chosen people, “*Apart from me, you can do nothing*”⁴⁷

⁴³ Matthew 13:18-23; 7:24-27

⁴⁴ Hebrews 10:24-25

⁴⁵ Psalm 127:1; I Corinthians 3:7

⁴⁶ Ezekiel 37:1-10

⁴⁷ John 15:5

Our Foundational Beliefs

Our Savior taught us that a life of wisdom and endurance that will stand firm through the storm, is a life that is founded upon the solid rock of God's perfect and unchanging Word (Matt. 7:24-27). As a local church, it is our desire to help our members grow up to this kind of spiritual maturity in Christ. We believe that God's children are at their best when they are growing in the knowledge of God—not merely in terms of intellectual understanding, but in such a way that is soul-renewing, heart-transforming, and life-defining.

In the following pages, we will take a broad overview look at some of the most fundamental beliefs that we hold as a church. While there are many additional things that we could cover and explore in greater detail, our hope is that this introductory look will help you have confidence that we are a church whose leaders and members are committed to being faithful to God by being submitted to the whole counsel of his Word.

Notes

SCRIPTURE

- ❖ We believe that the Bible, contained exclusively in the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, is the inspired and inerrant Word of God.¹
- ❖ As the very Word of God, the holy Scriptures are, in their original manuscripts, a perfect revelation of God's infallible and authoritative truth, and are therefore to be, without deviation or compromise, the Church's foundation, standard, and guide in all matters of faith and life.²
- ❖ We further affirm that the Bible is to be interpreted and understood in all of its parts according to the measure of Christ; for it is of our glorious Savior and King that all the prophets and apostles spoke.³

1. *II Timothy 3:16; II Peter 1:21; Hebrew 1:1*

2. *Psalm 19:7-11; John 17:17; Matthew 7:24-27; I John 4:6; I Thessalonians 2:13*

3. *John 5:39-40, 46; Luke 24:27; Acts 10:43; Ephesians 2:20-21; Colossians 1:28*

GOD

- ❖ We believe in the one, true, living, holy, sovereign and immutable God,¹ eternally existing in blessed Trinity as three distinct persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.²
- ❖ We believe that our God is the sole Creator of all things, which he made from nothing, by the Word of his power, in the space of six days, and all very good.³
- ❖ We further believe that all things in heaven and on earth chiefly exist for the revealing of God's glory.⁴

1. *Deuteronomy 6:4; Jeremiah 10:10; Daniel 4:34-35; Isaiah 46:8-11 Malachi 3:6*

2. *Psalm 90:2; Matthew 28:19; John 15:26*

3. *I Corinthians 8:6; Hebrews 11:3; Genesis 1*

4. *Romans 11:36; I Corinthians 10:31; Romans 8:18; 9:22-24; II Corinthians 4:16-18*

MANKIND & SIN

- ❖ We believe that God created mankind after his own image, distinctly male or female, with inalienable dignity and equality one to another, and with respective complimentary roles which God has wisely ordered for our good.¹
- ❖ We believe that Adam and Eve were created innocent and pure, dwelling in perfect and blessed communion with God in Eden. Yet, in succumbing to the the temptation of Satan, our first parents turned their hearts away from God in sin by forsaking his Word and seeking their fulfillment outside of their perfect union with God.²
- ❖ By this willful rebellion, Adam's holy nature was corrupted such that our forefather became spiritually dead, depraved in every faculty of his being, alienated from continued communion with God, subject to God's wrath and curse, and without any hope in himself for meriting redemption from the guilt of his sin.³
- ❖ As the federal representative of all humanity, Adam's sin, guilt, and corruption are inherited by all human beings (born by natural generation) such that all men are now spiritually dead and depraved from the womb, without any hope in themselves of reforming their sinful nature or escaping the just wrath of God against their sin except by the merciful intervention of God.⁴

1. *Genesis 1:27; I Timothy 2:12-14*

2. *Genesis 1:31; 2:15-3:8*

3. *Genesis 2:17; 3:14-24*

4. *Romans 5:12; 3:23; Psalm 51:5; Ephesians 2:1-3, 12; 4:17-19; Jeremiah 13:23*

JESUS CHRIST & SALVATION

- ❖ We believe that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God and the only Savior of sinners. At the incarnation, Jesus became man by being conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary and being born of her. He is thus fully God and fully man, two distinct natures in one person, forevermore.¹
- ❖ We believe that Jesus Christ came into the world to save elect sinners by functioning for them as a new federal head and representative who has succeeded where Adam failed. This work of Christ on behalf of sinners who rightly deserve God's wrath is properly called the good news of the Gospel. This Gospel is the unique message of salvation which the Church is privileged to rest in and proclaim to all the world.²
- ❖ Our message is that only Jesus' perfect sinless life and sacrifice of infinite worth upon the Cross (as the priceless Son of God) are able to atone for the infinite guilt and debt of our sin. The atoning sacrifice which was offered by Jesus Christ is effective to absolve every sin of every sinner who trusts in Christ alone for salvation and to bring them back into blessed communion with God.³

- ❖ However, because of man's corrupt and sinful nature, he will not receive this free offer of salvation aside from the merciful intervention of God. Thus, salvation is rightly understood as a sovereign gift of God's electing grace, received by faith alone. Salvation is not the result of any of man's own works or merits; nor are sinners elected by God because of anything foreseen in them. The fountainhead of all salvation is the love of God alone, and is entirely undeserved by all people, because all are dead in their trespasses and sins apart from Christ.⁴
- ❖ It is through the work of God's Spirit and the Church's proclamation of this Gospel, that elect sinners are effectually called from every tribe and tongue to faith and repentance in Jesus Christ. When God calls any person to faith, they are immediately filled with the Holy Spirit, born again, converted, justified, and adopted into the household of God forevermore where they will continue to be sanctified and persevered unto the full and unhindered enjoying of God to all eternity.⁵

1. Acts 4:12; John 6:62; I Tim 2:5; Luke 1:31, 35; John 1:1, 14; Colossians 2:9; Hebrews 7:24

2. Luke 19:10; Romans 5:12-21; I Corinthians 15:45-49; Colossians 1:28; Matthew 24:14, 28:18-20

3. Ephesians 1:7; I Peter 2:22-24; Romans 6:23; I John 1:7; John 3:16, 14:6-7

4. John 6:44, 63-65; Romans 9:14-16; Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:3-6

5. I Peter 1:3; Ephesians 1:3-14; Hebrews 10:14; John 10:27-30

THE CHURCH

- ❖ In this present age, the Church exists in two forms: the *visible* and the *invisible*. The *visible church* defines all those who are in some way visibly connected to the Christian faith on earth. The *invisible church* defines those who are spiritually united to God through a saving faith in Jesus Christ.¹
- ❖ We believe the true Church of Christ is made up of all God's redeemed children from every age who have been called out of the darkness of their sin in Adam, and into the marvelous light of God's grace in Christ.²
- ❖ The Church is a peculiar, spiritual people who exist to love and worship God in purity, to care for one another's needs as we persevere together in our faith, to spur one another on in holiness, and to proclaim the saving message of the Gospel to all nations through the ministry of the Word as it is accompanied by confirming deeds of sacrificial love and personal holiness.³

1. Matthew 3:12, 7:21-23, 13:24-30; Romans 9:6-8; II Timothy 2:19; I John 2:19-20

2. Galatians 3:7, 5:16; Ephesians 2:14, 3:6; Acts 4:12; I Peter 2:9; Colossians 1:13-14

3. I Peter 2:9; Psalm 67:1-3; Romans 11:36; Ephesians 4:15-16; Matthew 28:18-20; I John 3:16-18

THE SACRAMENTS

- ❖ In accord with the teaching of the Reformed tradition of the Christian Faith, we affirm the two sacraments given by our Lord in the New Testament which are Baptism and the Lord's Supper. These sacraments are signs and seals of the New Covenant, which sensibly represent the benefits of Christ's work to believers.¹

- ❖ We believe that the sacrament of Baptism is rightly applied to all who profess faith in Jesus Christ, together with their children, whom God is pleased to count as members of the visible covenant community from birth on account of their parent's faith.²
- ❖ We believe that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a true spiritual feast which nourishes the faith of God's people; it is more than a mere memorial. The Lord's Supper is to be observed frequently, by all who profess faith in Jesus Christ and are of age to undertake spiritual self-examination of their heart in relation to Christ, prior to participation in order to discern if they are resting in the grace of God alone, living in repentance of all known sin, and walking in Christian love toward their brethren.³

1. *Matthew 28:19, 26:26-29*

2. *Genesis 17:9-14; Acts 2:38-39; Acts 16:15, 33*

3. *I Corinthians 10:16; Acts 2:42; I Corinthians 11:23-32*

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

- ❖ We believe that the unmerited grace of God which has saved us in the very midst of our rebellion, brokenness, and sin, is the same grace which is now at work within us to renew our minds and transform our hearts to more and more reflect the image of Christ in our lives. As God's people, we are not called to manufacture our spiritual progress out of our own wisdom or strength; neither do we need to put together a good religious performance in order to attempt to earn our Father's love. By God's grace, every spiritual blessing is already ours in Christ! God's love has already been set upon us from all eternity, and it will never be revoked.¹
- ❖ We believe that God's children are called to live out their faith by walking in submission to their Father's perfect Word, being led by the power of his Spirit who dwells within them, and by abiding in utter dependence upon the True Vine, Jesus Christ, to nourish and sustain their faith. It is our Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who has set his love upon us and promised to provide to us all that we need to walk in a manner worthy of the calling we have received.²
- ❖ We believe that Christians are called to strive, to make every effort, and to work out their salvation with great reverence, yet they are called to do so knowing that it is God who works in them, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Our Savior has promised that he will lose nothing of all that the Father has given him; and we are to walk in the confidence that God will persevere us to the end by *his* grace and strength, not *ours*.³

1. *I Corinthians 15:49; Ephesians 4:23; Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 1:3-5, 5:1;*

2. *Matthew 7:24-27; Galatians 5:16, 25; John 15:1-5; Ephesians 4:1; I Peter 1:5*

3. *I Timothy 4:10; II Timothy 2:19; II Peter 1:5; Philippians 2:13; I Thessalonians 5:23-24*

THE CHRISTIAN'S HOPE (LAST THINGS)

- ❖ We believe that just as our Savior *ascended* to the right hand of the Father on high, so he will *descend* in glory at the last day to judge both the living and the dead, and to bring his Church into the blessedness of his presence in the New Heaven and the New Earth forevermore.¹
- ❖ The return of Christ/final state of all believers is universally referred to as the Christian's hope throughout the Scriptures. We believe we are to eagerly anticipate our Savior's second coming and to be spiritually encouraged and motivated by reminding ourselves of the incomparable joy of our future.²
- ❖ We affirm the following expectations of all believers at the return of Christ:
 - ❖ Resurrection and Reunification of Believers (*I Thess. 4:16-17*)
 - ❖ Full Redemption From Sin (*Heb. 7:25; I Corinthians 15:49*)
 - ❖ Reception of Glorious Eternal Bodies (*Philippians 3:21*)
 - ❖ Eternal Rewards (*I Cor. 4:5*)
 - ❖ Restoration of the World (*Rev. 7:15-17; 21:5*)
 - ❖ Blessed Eternal Communion With God (*Rev. 21:3-4; I Cor. 12:13*)

1. *Acts 1:11; 10:42; Philippians 1:21; I Thessalonians 4:17; Revelation 21:3-4*

2. *Colossians 3:4; Romans 8:18; II Corinthians 4:17; Titus 2:13; I Peter 1:13*

Confessional Documents We Affirm:

Primary:

- *The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646 A.D.)*
- *The Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms (1647 A.D.)*

Secondary:

- *The Apostles Creed (date unknown)*
- *The Nicene Creed (325 A.D.)*
- *The Symbol of Chalcedon (451 A.D.)*
- *The Heidelberg Catechism (1563 A.D.)*
- *The Canons of Dort (1618 A.D.)*
- *The Chicago Statement On Biblical Inerrancy (1978 A.D.)*

Our Denominational Distinctives

Covenant Grace is also a member of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Our denomination holds to the distinctives associated with the form of church government known as *presbyterianism*. The word “presbyterian” is simply an English transliteration of the Greek word “πρεσβύτερος” which means Elder, and refers to the distinct continuing office which God has appointed for the spiritual shepherds of his people. Being presbyterian means that we believe the Bible teaches that local churches are to be led by biblically qualified, duly elected, and properly ordained Elders who have the responsibility to care for, instruct and lead the church’s members as her Spirit-appointed shepherds.⁴⁸

There are several distinct aspects of presbyterian polity which we affirm:

- ❖ ***The Constitution of the PCA*** consists of the Westminster Standards & the Book of Church Order. We affirm these documents as faithful representations of the Christian Faith and submit to them as governing documents for both our doctrine and polity as a local church.
- ❖ ***The Church Officers of the PCA*** are two: Elders and Deacons. In submission to the wisdom of God set forth in Scripture, we affirm the Complementarian view of church office, which affirms that only qualified men are called by God to serve in this capacity.⁴⁹
 - ❖ ***The Role of the Elders*** is to shepherd the flock of God by providing faithful spiritual instruction and care for God’s people, overseeing and providing godly leadership and administration for the church’s needs, leading the people in godliness by being an example to the flock, and by exercising oversight in the form of loving discipleship and discipline for the good of every individual church member as well as the peace and purity of the church overall.
 - ❖ ***According to presbyterian polity the Elders of the church always serve with:***
 - ❖ Plurality — *The New Testament always refers to Elders (plural), never a solo elder/pastor.*
 - ❖ Equality — *The Elders of the church all hold equal governing authority, no one person is elevated.*
 - ❖ Accountability — *The Elders of the church are all accountable to God, one another, and the church.*
 - ❖ Distinction — *Elders in the PCA are broken into two groups: Teaching & Ruling. Teaching Elders must be ordained by the Presbytery to be permitted to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments.*
 - ❖ ***The Role of the Deacon*** is to provide spiritual and practical care for the members of the church as well as the community, under the oversight of the Session, by focusing on the church’s ministries of administration and mercy. Deacons do not have governing authority over the church, nevertheless, they are essential leaders who are called to set an exemplary standard in godliness for the congregation as we all strive to be faithful to God as his people.
 - ❖ ***The Courts of the PCA*** function on three levels. The first and lowest court of the church is *the Session*, comprised of all Elders of a particular local church. The second court is *the Presbytery*, which is comprised of all local elders within a given region and is intended to provide wisdom, oversight, and support for each of the particular churches within its bounds. The third and highest court is *the General Assembly*, which is comprised all the Presbyteries within the PCA. This assembly provides denominational governance, wisdom, and support for the needs of the whole.

⁴⁸ Hebrews 13:7, 17; I Thessalonians 5:12-13

⁴⁹ I Timothy 2:12; 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9



Session Three:

- *Our Plan To Help Our Members Grow*
- *Our Expectations For Our Members*
- *Our Promises To Our Members*
- *Your Next Steps...*
- *Questions & Answers*

Our Plan To Help Our Members Grow

Every church, as led by the Elders of that body, has the responsibility of determining how they are going to strive to fulfill God's calling to "*shepherd the flock*" which has been entrusted to their authority and care.⁵⁰ The ordained Elders of God's local churches are tasked with the responsibility not only to watch over, protect, and defend God's flock, but also to diligently "*equip the saints for the work of ministry*."⁵¹ This means we are striving to help you grow up to full maturity in Christ. We do so in order that your life may be progressively renewed in every part according to the grace of God which has been promised to all who believe. God's gracious, merciful, and sovereign love for us in the gospel is the ever-flowing fountain from which all true Christian obedience springs forth.⁵²

In our desire as Elders to faithfully care for you according to God's will and design, we have prayerfully determined a general approach to ministry which we believe will encourage the spiritual health of our church. We are not striving to cultivate a church of people who merely show up to a particular building on Sunday mornings, but rather a real Christ-centered community of people living on mission for God in the midst of the ordinary moments of their everyday lives. We want to help you know God truly, and love God fully. We believe that *cultural* or *Sunday-only* Christianity is not only unhealthy, but also unwise, often artificial, and ultimately contrary to God's holy design. With love, understanding, tenderness and patience, and yet also a fervent devotion to the good of your soul, we want to be a church in which our members are joyfully pursuing a full and flourishing walk with God.

As you consider making Covenant Grace Church your home, we want to cast a vision for you of what healthy membership looks like in our eyes. We know that life is full of twists and turns, that we are in different places in our spiritual growth, and that circumstances are not always easy to navigate. Nevertheless, our desire and expectation for our members is that they are doing their best to pursue full participation in the following aspects of the life of our church: *Growing* together, *Gathering* together, and *Going* together. We encourage and expect this for two primary reasons:

1. We believe that your participation in these things is in your best interests as a Christian.
2. We have been entrusted with the care of our member's souls by the almighty God. We will be required to give an account of how we have been faithful in (1) pointing them to Christ and (2) in helping them respond in faithful obedience to the whole counsel of God's Word.⁵³

1. *Growing* Together In Christ

- ***Lord's Day Worship*** (*Sunday*)
- ***Midweek Discipleship*** (*Wednesday*)
- ***Personal Pursuit of Christ Through God's Word & Prayer*** (*Daily*)

Our primary discipleship ministries are Lord's Day Worship and Midweek Discipleship. Through these ministries we are striving to faithfully minister the Word of God to our flock for their progress and joy in Christ. This includes encouragement, instruction, counsel, practical application, and even correction when needed. All of these facets of the ministry of God's Word are given to God's children for their benefit and blessing. To use a helpful metaphor, through each of these times of being together to grow under the ministry of the Word, the Elders of Covenant Grace are prayerfully preparing a rich spiritual meal to serve to our beloved congregation. This spiritual feast is intended by God to nourish,

⁵⁰ | Peter 5:1-4

⁵¹ | Ephesians 4:11-12

⁵² | John 15:9-11; Ephesians 1:3-5; I John 5:3

⁵³ | Hebrews 13:17

satisfy, strengthen, and sustain your soul as you walk by faith through all of life. In addition to our private personal pursuit of Christ, we encourage and expect the members of our church to make these events a priority in their lives, to participate regularly, and even to reorganize their schedules as needed to pursue these opportunities for continued growth together in Christ.

2. Gathering Together In Christ

- ***Pursuing meaningful relationships with “one another”***
- ***Fellowshipping together and encouraging “one another” in Christ***
- ***Praying for, supporting, and bearing “one another’s” burdens in love***

A very significant, (yet often overlooked), aspect of the Christian life is our call to live in authentic and meaningfully-connected relationships with “one another” as children of God. The New Testament is filled with verses which identify the manifold aspects of this calling. As Elders, we desire to both model and cultivate this kind of genuine community life among those who call our church home. We desire our flock to be actively connecting with each other both *inside* and *outside* of our formal gatherings by praying for one another, checking in over the phone, sharing burdens and struggles, hosting times of fellowship with others, and spurring one another on toward faithfulness in Christ. By so doing, much of the burdens and needs which we all face in life, will no longer be faced in isolation, or attempted to be carried alone. Rather, we will be able to link arms with one another, have trusted friends to confide in, find the encouragement and support that we need, and be able to offer the same things to others as they face trials of their own. Living for the glory of God is never easy, but doing it alone is almost impossible.

3. Going Together In Christ

- ***Living evangelistically in the midst of everyday life***
- ***Seeking opportunities to share your faith with others***
- ***Cultivating relationships with those who do not know Christ***
- ***Inviting others into the life of our church***

It is no secret that God intends to call men, women, and children from every neighborhood and every nation to be His chosen possession for all eternity. However, the way that God has designed to do this is through His ordinary people—*like you and me!*—living out their faith in public view, sharing Christ with others, pursuing the lost, and inviting those who are dead in their sins to receive the free gift of salvation in Christ. There are certainly special callings in this regard, such as pastors, missionaries, and evangelists. But God’s primary way is not through special events hosted by the church, but through ordinary saints living on mission for Christ in the midst of their everyday lives. We encourage and expect our members to be prayerfully pursuing relationships with those who are outside of Christ, sharing their faith often, and inviting others into the life of our church. There are innumerable ways that this might look in our lives, but all of us have been called to “*Go and make disciples...*”

A Persistent, Steady, & Faithful Pursuit

While there are other events and opportunities that will come up from time to time, this is the ordinary approach we are encouraging our church body to faithfully pursue each week. There is nothing flashy or glamorous about it, but we believe that these *ordinary means* are what God has appointed for His precious church to flourish for His glory throughout the world. Little by little, through a persistent, steady, and faithful pursuit of Christ, you will not only grow strong, assured, and fruitful in your own faith, but we also believe God will use you to pour into the lives of others. By his strength, God will use his ordinary people to help others come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, receive His free grace, unite to His local church, and to be spent for His everlasting glory.

Our Expectations For Our Members

The God-given calling of every Christian is a truly high calling indeed. In every way and in every category, our Savior and God calls us to live for his glory and to honor him from the depths of our heart. While no one this side of heaven will ever achieve that goal with perfection (other than Christ!), God has given us gracious support for the journey in the form of our brothers and sisters in the Church. As we walk out our faith together, in Spirit-wrought community as members of the local church, we will be more empowered, encouraged, built up, and thoroughly equipped to be all that God has called us to be than we could ever be on our own.

Part of what helps us be stronger together is *accountability*. This accountability is not meant to be an oppressive measuring line that no one can reach, but rather a North Star that keeps us headed in the right direction. This is the goal that we have for the following expectations we will share; not that they will seem daunting and overwhelming, but that they will be like a compass that continually reminds us to stay on the narrow and hard path that leads to life, as opposed to straying into the wide and easy way that leads to destruction, (*Matthew 7:13-14*).

For their progress and joy in Christ we expect our members to be:

❖ *Resting In the Substitutionary Work of Christ For the Elect By Faith*

We desire for our members to live out their faith with the confidence that the substitutionary work of Christ alone is the basis of their standing before God. As our saving-substitute, Jesus' perfect life of obedience and sacrificial death on the cross, have fully atoned for and justified God's elect for all eternity. As the Scripture says: "*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ,*" (*Rom. 8:1*).

❖ *Worshipping God In All of Life*

Especially important among the Christian's comprehensive call to worship, is the particular call for us to guard ourselves against the worldly temptation of forsaking to gather for corporate worship with other believers, (*Hebrews 10:25*). The Devil will always furnish us with ten-thousand plausible excuses of why sporting leagues, personal hobbies, our fatigue from the work week, or fear of illness, etc. are valid excuses for neglecting to assemble with God's people. And while we know that life does indeed happen, and there are legitimate occasions for missing Lord's Day Worship, we expect our members to make it a top priority to put God first, not only for themselves but also as an example for their children who look to them to show them the right priorities for the Christian life.

❖ *Submitting To the Scriptures*

We expect our members to receive the Word of God as the authority over their lives and to endeavor to live in submission to all that God has revealed for our salvation, godliness, and joy therein.

❖ *Growing In Spiritual Maturity*

We expect our members to be "*growing up in every way into Christ,*" just as the Scriptures abundantly call us to do: "*Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity,*" (*II Tim. 2:19*). This means that spiritual maturity is not a goal for the religious over-achiever, but for all who truly call upon the Lord Jesus Christ in faith, (*Ephesians 4:15*).

❖ *Living Out Christ-Honoring Values & Conduct*

As God's people, we are called to "*shine as lights in the world*" by walking in the grace, truth, and holiness of God, (*Philippians 2:15*). We expect our members to endeavor to live lives that accurately reflect their professed faith in Christ. Indeed, the gracious gospel of Jesus Christ "*trains us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,*" (*Titus 2:12*).

❖ ***Confessing Their Sins***

The lifestyle of the Christian is a lifestyle of repentance. We are not people who pretend that we have no sin, nor that we have ceased from sinning. Rather, we admit our faults honestly and look to the promise of God that through the blood of Christ we are forgiven and cleansed, (*1 John 1:5-10*). Biblical repentance always has two components: *Turning from sin, and turning to God in obedience*. One will never be accomplished without the other.

❖ ***Serving According To Their Spiritual Gifts, Talents, Resources***

God has spiritually gifted each and every member of his people “*for the common good*”, (*1 Cor. 12:7*). We expect our members to be actively serving Christ both in and outside of his Church according to their gifts, talents, and resources. We also expect that our members will humbly receive the help and support of others as needed. In this way, God says we will “*build one another up in love,*” (*Ephesians 4:16*).

❖ ***Discipling Other Believers***

By God’s design, Christians are all called to help other Christians continue to grow and flourish in Christ. This means that each of us has the ability to invest in others who are less spiritually mature than ourselves in order to encourage and strengthen their faith through instruction, prayer, and accountability. We expect our members to be prayerfully seeking these opportunities in order to cultivate a culture of discipleship among the members of our congregation.

❖ ***Witnessing To Unbelievers***

The local church, including each of her individual members, is God’s ordained vehicle for communicating the saving message of the Gospel to the world. It is through the everyday public witness of the ordinary saints that the elect will be gathered from the four corners of the world. We expect our members to consciously pray for and take advantage of opportunities to speak of God with others, and to trust the Spirit’s ability to work through their weakness in calling the lost to Christ.

❖ ***Seeking the Peace and Purity of the Church***

Unity in the Church is a very high priority to God. This does not mean that disagreements are wrong or bad, but rather that we must be very thoughtful about how we choose to handle ourselves if and when we find ourselves at odds with other believers or our spiritual leaders. Divisive behavior of gossip, slander, or any other disparaging remarks are hurtful, not helpful to the body of Christ. We expect our members to seek the peace and purity of the church by demonstrating charity, patience, understanding, forgiveness and grace whenever they face conflicts.

❖ ***Trusting the Spiritual Leadership of Their Elders***

The Elders of even the very best local church are sinners whose hope is in the grace of God alone, just like every other Christian. This means that despite their best efforts, they will never make all the right decisions, or be free from personal mistakes and failures. Nevertheless, God has called them to provide spiritual leadership and to be an example for the Flock to both submit to and follow. He has also called those who are under their spiritual authority and care to love them, support them, and pray for them. This too is part of God’s good design for his Church and we expect our members to trust the Elders God has put in place, and to submit to their leadership.

❖ ***Supporting the Ministries of the Church Through Financial Giving***

God calls his people to generously support the work of the Church in several important ways. One is by giving back to God a 10% portion of the financial income that God has provided to them. These resources are used to sustain and further the various ministries of the local church. In this way, the Church is bolstered and supported to fulfill her spiritual calling from God. Therefore, we expect our members to be joyful financial supporters of the ministry of Covenant Grace according to their means as part of their ongoing worship of God.

Our Promises To Our Members

The role of Elders is an honorable calling, but not one to be sought for personal notoriety or selfish gain. It is a role of self-sacrificing service and humility in which the leader is called to do all that they can to faithfully love and shepherd God's precious people after the example of Jesus Christ. While we certainly offer spiritual care to any and all who may call upon us from within our local community, we have a special commitment to our members to give them priority of our time, energy, and care. The following is a brief outline of the commitments which every Elder of Covenant Grace Church promises to uphold toward our members to the best of our ability.

****Important Note:** A fuller explanation of our plan to provide faithful spiritual care to the members of Covenant Grace can be found in the appendix of this book on p. 57 under the title, "**Our Shepherding Plan**".*

As shepherds of God's beloved people, we promise to provide you with:

❖ ***Faithful Instruction In the Word of God***

We vow to teach you God's true Word to the best of our ability.

❖ ***Persistent Prayer & Support For Your Needs***

We vow to commit ourselves to praying for you personally, and to supporting you in your varying needs with whatever means we are able.

❖ ***Loving Pastoral Care (Shepherding, Counseling)***

We vow to be available to you for pastoral counseling and care when you are facing difficult decisions, seasons of sorrow, marital challenges, parenting struggles, sinful temptations, addictions, etc. We vow to be a safe space for you to be honest and open, and to walk with you in truth and love.

❖ ***Christ-Centered Discipleship***

We vow to help you grow in your faith by walking alongside you, encouraging and equipping you, and checking in from time to time to see how your spiritual walk is going.

❖ ***Grace-Centered Spiritual Accountability & Discipline***

We vow to gently and graciously hold you accountable to walking faithfully in your relationship with Jesus Christ, while being patient and understanding that sanctification is a life-long process.

❖ ***Clear Communication About the Life of the Church***

We vow to provide you with regular communications about the life of the church in order to keep you informed on the various ministry opportunities which are available, as well as other important developments in the life of the ministry.

❖ ***Honesty Concerning Mistakes, Misjudgments, and Conflicts***

We vow to participate in no leadership activities of which we would be embarrassed for the church to know about, nor to hide any of our decisions and activities from the church, nor to manipulate information in such a way as to be misleading to the church. While we will always strive to respect a healthy measure of confidentiality for personal and sensitive information, we vow to always operate in the light and above reproach.

❖ ***Compassionate, Thoughtful, Humble, and Approachable Leadership***

We vow to undertake the responsibilities which God has entrusted to us of the spiritual leadership of the members of Covenant Grace Church with tender compassion, sincerity, thoughtfulness, approachability, and humility in all that we do. While we hold a position of spiritual responsibility and authority, we do so as brothers and sisters in Christ who are equals before the throne of grace.

Your Next Steps...

So, where do we go from here? First of all, thank you for participating in this class and seeking to discover more about Covenant Grace. We hope it has been an edifying time that will help you continue to grow in your own relationship with God. As we have said all along, there is no obligation to join Covenant Grace simply because you attended this class. We do believe that church membership is a healthy and important part of the Christian life, and we encourage you to follow up with us if you have any hesitations or further questions. It would be a joy for us to grab a lunch meeting with you sometime in the coming weeks and spend some time talking in a more personal setting. On the other hand, for those who already know that they would like to join, you are probably wondering...

So, How Do I Become A Member?

The next steps are relatively simple:

1. COMPLETE THE FORM

First, you will need to complete the following form (next pages). We ask that the head of household complete page one, and that each individual household member over the age of 12 complete the second page. Once completed, submit the forms to one of our Elders.

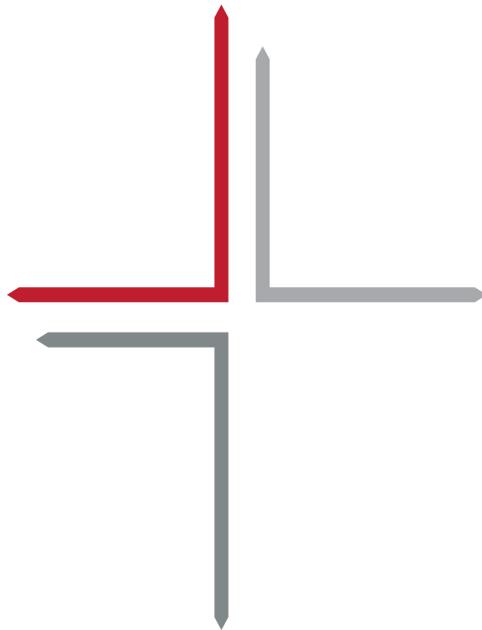
2. MEET WITH THE SESSION

After we receive your form(s), we will schedule a special time to meet with you as a Session to learn a little bit more about your story, to hear your testimony of how God saved you, what drew you to Covenant Grace, etc., and to answer any additional questions that you might have for us as well.

3. TAKE MEMBERSHIP VOWS

After that, we will schedule a particular Lord's Day on which you will be publicly confirmed as members of our church after taking the following membership vows before the congregation:

1. *Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope except in His sovereign mercy?*
2. *Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?*
3. *Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?*
4. *Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?*
5. *Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to earnestly strive for its purity and peace?*



COVENANT
GRACE CHURCH

Christ for us, Christ in us, Christ through us



Covenant Grace Membership Form

Instructions: Please complete these forms and then submit them to one of our Elders. Page one is to be completed by the Head of Household. Page two is to be completed by each individual household member who is over the age of 12.

HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD:

Name _____ Date of Membership Class: ____/____/____

Birthday _____

Previously baptized? Yes___ No___ When _____ Where _____

Marital Status: Single___ Married___ (Anniversary _____) Widowed___ Divorced___

Mailing Address: _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____

Email _____

Occupation _____

Workplace _____

Have you ever been a member of another church? If so, where? _____

SPOUSE: (IF APPLICABLE)

Name _____

Birthday _____

Previously baptized? Yes___ No___ When _____ Where _____

Phone _____

Email _____

Occupation _____

Workplace _____

CHILDREN: (OR OTHER DEPENDENTS)

Name _____ Birthday ____/____/____ Baptized? Yes___ No___

Name _____ Date of Membership Class: ____/____/____

YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Which of the following statements most accurately represents you right now?

___ *I am not certain that I have eternal life and that I am accepted by God because...*

___ *I know that I have eternal life and believe I am accepted by God because...*

In your own words, please explain whichever answer you selected above.

In a few sentences, please tell us why you are interested in joining our church family? How has God been ministering to you and growing your faith through our church?

Please share any information about you or your family (such as church background, spiritual gifts, interests, struggles, etc.) that may help our church more effectively minister to you.

Appendix:
Resources For Your Joy In Christ

“One Another” Passages of the New Testament

The Greek word for “one another” is “ἀλλήλων”. Coincidentally, (which is a bit of a tongue-in-cheek word for a Calvinist to employ), this word is pronounced “*all-a-lone*.” Its phonetic pronunciation provides us with a helpful realization of what the Christian life is like when we try to live out our faith without being a connected member of a local church. Instead of giving and receiving all of the blessings listed below which help us to be encouraged and supported in our spiritual walk, we end up forsaking those blessings because we are attempting to live out our faith “*all alone*,” rather than in the meaningful—*though sometimes messy*—committed spiritual relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ that God has ordained for our good.

Take a few minutes to review the passages below and consider all that God calls us to both give and receive in our Christian relationships. As you read, prayerfully consider where you are doing well at embodying these commands, and where you need God’s grace to help you grow.

- **Love One Another**

John 13:34-35 15:12, 17; Romans 12:10; 13:8; 14:13; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 4:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:8; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 8, 11-12; 2 John 1:5

- **Serve One Another**

Galatians 5:13; Philippians 2:3; 1 Peter 4:10

- **Accept One Another**

Romans 15:7

- **Strengthen One Another**

Romans 14:19

- **Help & Encourage One Another**

Hebrews 3:13; 10:24-25; Romans 14:19; 15:14 Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11

- **Care For One Another**

Galatians 6:2, 10; 1 Corinthians 12:25; 2 Corinthians 13:11

- **Forgive One Another**

Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13

- **Submit To One Another**

Ephesians 5:21; 1 Peter 5:5

- **Commit To One Another & Die To Yourself For One Another**

1 John 3:16

- **Be United & Have Fellowship With One Another**

1 John 1:7

- **Honor One Another**

Romans 12:10

- **Be Patient With One Another**

Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13

- **Have Care For the Needs of One Another**

Philippians 2:4

- **Be Accountable To One Another**

Ephesians 5:21

- **Confess To & Pray For One Another**

James 5:16

- **Live In Harmony With One Another**

Romans 12:16

- ***Do Not Be Conceited Toward One Another***
Romans 13:8; Philippians 2:3
- ***Do Not Pass Judgments On One Another***
Romans 14:13
- ***Do Not Slander One Another***
James 4:11
- ***Instruct One Another***
Romans 15:14
- ***Greet One Another***
Romans 16:16; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Corinthians 16:20
- ***Admonish One Another***
Colossians 3:16
- ***Spur One Another On Toward Love & Good Deeds***
Hebrews 10:24
- ***Worship With One Another***
Hebrews 10:25
- ***Agree With One Another***
Philippians 4:2; 2 Corinthians 13:11
- ***Be Concerned For One Another***
Hebrews 10:24
- ***Be Humble Toward One Another In Love***
Ephesians 4:2; 1 Peter 5:5
- ***Be Compassionate Toward One Another***
Ephesians 4:32
- ***Do Not Hurt One Another***
Galatians 5: 14-15
- ***Do Not Anger One Another***
Galatians 5:26
- ***Do Not Lie To One Another***
Colossians 3:9
- ***Do Not Grumble About One Another***
James 5:9
- ***Do Not Be Partial With One Another***
Romans 12:10; Philippians 2:3-4
- ***Be At Peace With One Another***
Romans 12:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:13
- ***Spiritually Encourage One Another***
Ephesians 5:19
- ***Be of the Same Mind With One Another***
Romans 12:16; 15:5 Phil 2:2; 1 Corinthians 1:10
- ***Be Kind To One Another***
Ephesians 4:32
- ***Carry One Another's Burdens***
Galatians 6:2
- ***Show Hospitality To One Another***
1 Peter 4:9

Pastoral Article:

How Does God Desire To Be Worshiped?

For most people, such a question in and of itself presents something of a paradigm shift in their heart. We are so prone to thinking about life in terms of our own interests, preferences, and desires that we have scarcely noticed that we have brought this same attitude and approach with us to the worship of the Almighty God.

Throughout God's Word, he often expresses how he is to be worshiped, as well as how he is not to be worshiped. Perhaps the most notable example is found in [Leviticus 10:1-3](#) where two sons of Aaron decide to worship God on their own terms. That such an approach to worship is unwelcome in God's eyes is shown forth by the outcome which those two men received.

We would do well to ask ourselves: *If it is God who we are truly worshiping—and not ourselves—shouldn't our concern be to offer God those things which he finds pleasing rather than to order our worship around our own satisfaction?* Sadly, in our modern day, verses like those referenced above have been widely overlooked, explained away, deemed unimportant, or conveniently hidden from view in favor of more 'attractational' approaches. At the same time, however, those few churches who *have* sought to uphold greater purity and faithfulness in their worship of God have often presented themselves in a cold and uncharitable manner. Whatever they may possess in terms of deeper theological understanding they seem to be lacking in joy in the Lord and compassion for others. It seems that as recovering sinners, we are prone to wander into the tangled and briery forests which exist on both sides of the valley of God's resplendent grace. Is there a better way?

The Regulative Principle of Worship

Historically, this subject has been an important discussion within the Church. Whether God is (1) to be worshiped according to the clear teaching which he has set forth in his Word, or if he is (2) to be worshiped in any way man chooses so long as it is not expressly forbidden in his Word, is the essential crux of the discussion. To put it another way, the query is this: *Do we offer to God that worship which he himself has told us he desires or do we offer to God whatever worship we desire to offer him?*

The first view—which we desire to do our best to uphold at Covenant Grace Church—is called the Regulative Principle of Worship. According to this view, the elements and structure of our corporate worship of God are to be governed by the clear commands and examples provided within God's Word. Conversely, this means that the elements and structure of our worship are not ultimately to be defined by our own ideas, preferences, or cultural norms. This can sound too restrictive and confining to some people at first, so it is helpful to provide a clarifying example of both what this means and does not mean.

As one element of worship, the Scriptures clearly teach that God is to be worshiped by making music and singing songs of praise which are comprised of truth and directed to him, ([Psalm 96](#)). According to the Regulative Principle of Worship, this means that musical worship is pleasing to God and should be included in our corporate worship. But, some have wrongly thought that the Regulative Principle also tells us *how we are to play the music and sing*. This is not true.

We can play all kinds of instruments in a variety of styles, and we can sing all kinds of "psalms, hymns,

and spiritual songs", ([Eph. 5:19](#)). The Regulative Principle does not restrict us to a certain invariable *form* of song singing—as in traditional or contemporary—but rather affirms that the singing of truthful and glorifying praises to God by the voices and instruments of his people is a welcome chorus before his heavenly throne, ([Rev. 7:9-12](#)).

Wondering About Worship (Article Series)

Over the coming weeks, I will be taking time to write a handful of short articles explaining the basics of the biblical foundation which stands behind our order of worship at Covenant Grace. In speaking privately with a number of members with widely varied religious backgrounds, I have been encouraged that this investment will be a helpful and fruitful one. I have several prayerful goals for how God might be pleased to use these articles:

1. First, I hope these articles will serve to deepen our congregational joy in our participation in the various elements of our public worship services.
2. Second, I hope the articles will provide greater fervor in our hearts for the God whom we are privileged to know and worship.
3. And third, I hope they will furnish a fresh lens of clarity on the value and importance of the various elements of worship in which we participate when we are gathered corporately on the Lord's Day each and every week.

May God be pleased to use these simple articles to encourage our hearts and to help all of us grow in our love for God and our worship of his holy name!

With great joy in Christ's service,

Pastor Tom

Pastoral Article:

Our Worship | The View From 10,000 Feet

There is a deep hunger in the souls of God's people to not only know in our minds, but to experience in our hearts the reality of the words captured by the psalmist so many centuries ago:

*“For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.”
([Psalm 84:10](#))*

To know, to experience, and to enjoy a right relationship with God is the supreme treasure of the universe, ([Matt. 13:44-46](#)). There is no higher joy, no deeper satisfaction, nor a greater gift that can be given than to be welcomed as redeemed sons and daughters into the presence of the Almighty God.

This perfect and unhindered fellowship with God is the hope that fills our hearts as we look toward eternity where we will know this gift in its fullest measure, ([Rev. 21:3](#)). And while the fullness of this joy is reserved solely for glory, we dare not forget that we have been given a deposit of this priceless treasure even now, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, ([Eph. 1:13-14](#)). It is the Spirit of God within us that stirs our hearts to yearn for God and to cry out to him, “Abba! Father!” ([Rom. 8:15-17](#)). And it is the Spirit of God who works within our hearts to draw us together in corporate worship where we collectively bless God's name and rejoice in his works, as he continues to provide his perfect sovereign care for our souls, ([I Cor. 1:9](#)). There is something beautiful and profound about the public gathering of God's people in worship that simply cannot be duplicated or superseded by any other means.

The Big Picture of Our Lord's Day Worship

In this article, I want us to see the *overall progression* of our worship service as a unified whole. I thought it would be helpful as we dive into this series to explain how our worship services are structured from *the view at 10,000 feet*. In effect, the questions we are asking and answering are: *Is there a big picture to our Lord's Day worship? If so, what is it?*

I am hopeful that taking this approach from the start of this series will help us better understand and appreciate the comprehensive ministry that God provides for his blood-bought children as they gather in his name on the Lord's Day each week. While there are some minor variations or additions to our *Order of Worship* from time to time as is suitable to the occasion (i.e. particular prayers, public testimony, membership reception, baptism, etc.), the following is the *general progression* which we endeavor to abide by. If you have a recent bulletin from one of our worship services, it may be helpful to pull it out so that you can observe the structure and flow that is described below.

The Structure & Flow of Our Lord's Day Worship

1. We Are Called Into God's Presence

This aspect of our worship service is captured by the *[Call To Worship](#)*

The *Call To Worship* marks the formal beginning of our worship service. This *call* is the voice of God speaking through the Scriptures to his beloved people, beckoning them into his glorious presence for worship. Through this *call*, we are implored to re-center our hearts, minds, and lives upon the God for whom we exist. Out of the busyness of life, the struggle of conflict, the anxiety of concern, the distraction of responsibilities, and the demands of deadlines we are called to set all things in their proper

place; and this means that God is to be absolutely first in our hearts and that *everything else must bend the knee to his supremacy*. It is from the very midst of the challenges of living a life of faith in a fallen world that God *calls* his people every Lord's Day to step out of the darkness of worldly concerns and into the light of his glorious presence.

2. We Respond To God's Call Through Prayer

This aspect of our worship service is captured by the ***Prayer of Invocation***.

Having been summoned to worship by God through his Word, we immediately respond to God's *call* through *prayer*. The *Prayer of Invocation* is our corporate response of glad-obedience to God's beckoning voice. Through this opening prayer, we humble our hearts before our great and mighty God, we acknowledge ourselves to be his chosen people who are gathered in his name to give him glory, and we request his special presence to abide with us as we endeavor to worship him in Spirit and truth.

3. We Marvel At God's Majesty

This aspect of our worship service is captured by the ***Opening Doxology*** and ***Songs of Renewal***.

As fallen creatures, we are prone to self-obsession. Yet, Christianity is not ultimately about the salvation of mankind, but rather the glory of God, ([Rom. 9:22-23](#)). Our salvation is a *means* through which God both reveals his indescribable majesty to the cosmos and invites us—his redeemed people—into the everlasting enjoyment of his own majestic self, ([Jn. 17:3](#)). For this reason, our worship service does not immediately turn to man or his need, but rather turns needful man to his God. From the dawn of our worship we endeavor to fix our eyes on the One “*from whom and through whom and for whom all things exist*,” declaring together, “*To him be glory forever! Amen.*” ([Rom. 11:36](#)). Our singing of the *Opening Doxology* and *Songs of Renewal* are intended to exalt the infinite perfections and incalculable glories of our holy, Triune God in our hearts and minds.

4. We Acknowledge & Repent of Our Sins

This aspect of our worship service is captured by our ***Confession of Sin***.

It is only in the light of God's holiness that we see the depth of our own need for forgiveness and mercy. Thus, having kept God at the center—and *not ourselves*—we now more soberly and humbly recognize our sin and guilt before him. Guilt is not a feeling, but a violation. Mankind is guilty before God because of his violation of God's holy Law. This is why our *Confession of Sin* is always accompanied by a passage of holy Scripture. As a portion of the perfect Word of God is read and briefly applied to our lives, we are invited to see afresh the precious, yet somber truth that “*all*”—including ourselves—“*have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*,” ([Rom. 3:23](#)).

Our *Confession of Sin* is a simultaneous acknowledgement that we are *supremely unworthy* of God's blessing in our sins, and yet, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the sinner-saving God is nevertheless *supremely willing and able to save the unworthy who come to him through Christ*, ([Heb. 7:25](#)). Through prayer, we admit our guilt and turn from our sins unto God. We confess and repent of all known sins which we have committed with our head, heart, or hands. Acknowledging the truth of the gospel afresh, we refuse to prop ourselves up with the false illusions that our own merits could ever be the basis of salvation. By faith, we turn away from ourselves and wholly rely on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ who willingly offered himself in our place as the only sufficient saving-substitute.

5. We Receive God's Mercy As Offered In Christ

This aspect of our worship service is captured by our ***Assurance of God's Forgiveness***.

The God against whom we have all sinned and from whom we are owed nothing but righteous judgment, has freely and abundantly granted us what we could never earn, which is his saving grace in Christ. We are reminded through the trustworthy testimony of Holy Scripture that God has accomplished all that is necessary to ransom, forgive, cleanse, justify, sanctify, and glorify the guilty people whom he has chosen unto himself forevermore, ([1 Cor. 1:30](#)). Through the authoritative and judicial declaration of his Word, our God reminds us that we who stood *guilty* and *condemned* now stand *righteous* and *redeemed* by the blood of the Lamb, ([Jn. 1:29](#)).

6. We Rest & Rejoice In God's Grace

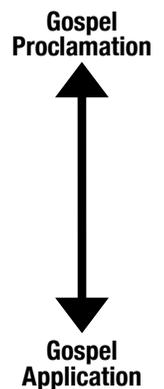
This aspect of our worship service is captured by our ***Song of Redemption***.

Having humbly confessed our sin and received the unchangeable testimony of Holy Scripture concerning our forgiveness, we respond in reverent praise to the God of our salvation, ([Ps. 96:2](#)). In this *Song of Redemption*, we always have a crystal clear gospel-focus. This is because we are praising the name of our great *Deliverer*, even while we are also reminding our own hearts of the depths of love which he has given to us in our *deliverance*.

An Unspoken Transition of Emphasis:

At this point in our worship service, at least three things should be very clear to all who are gathered: (1) *We believe that our Almighty Creator God is worthy of all honor, praise, dominion, majesty, power, devotion, and sacrifice.* (2) *We believe that all have sinned and fallen short of his glory and are justly deserving of his judgment and wrath for their sin.* (3) *And we believe that only those who come to God by faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, are saved from the penalty of their sins and receive the gift of eternal life.*

Having re-established this firm foundation upon which our holy faith is built—the *gospel!*—we now transition to receiving the grace of *God's sanctifying discipleship of our hearts and minds, as well as his Lordship over every aspect of our lives.*



7. We Joyfully Submit To God's Holy Will

This aspect of our worship service is captured by our ***Confession of Faith*** or ***Reading of Holy Scripture*** as well as our ***Receiving of Tithes & Offerings***.

As God's beloved children, we gladly submit our hearts to our Father's Lordship and most willingly receive his Word as truth, ([Jn. 17:17](#)). This is an outward sign of our *justification* and *adoption* into the household of God by grace, ([Eph. 5:1](#)). We demonstrate our joyful submission to God's revealed will by confessing our faith and/or reading portions of God's holy Word. Each of these are biblically-based practices that are associated with the Christian's devotion to God, ([1 Tim. 1:15](#); [3:16](#); [4:13](#)). Likewise, they are also ways that we humbly recognize that our "*foolish hearts were*" formerly "*darkened*" in sin, and must now continue to be "*renewed*" by the Spirit of Truth as we learn to live the Christian life, ([Rom. 1:21](#); [12:1-2](#)). Regardless of what passage is read, or what truths are confessed from the historic Creeds and Reformed Confessions of our faith, as God's children we gladly receive our Father's will as the governing mandate for our lives.

An additional aspect of our trusting-submission to our heavenly Father is the obedience of tithing. You will notice that we do not receive an offering in our service until *after* the foundational truths of the gospel have been carefully relaid. This is very intentional. Our relationship with God is not based on anything we offer to him, but rather what he has freely offered to us in Christ. Yet, as Christians, we learn more and more to live all of life by faith, walking in trusting-obedience to our Father. Giving God at least ten percent of all that he graciously provides to us is a beautiful act of obedience and worship in

which God's children show their thanksgiving for God's generous provision as well as their trust in the Father's unfailing faithfulness.

8. We Prepare Our Hearts To Receive God's Wisdom

This aspect of our worship service is captured by our ***Song of Reflection***.

The preaching of God's Word is the most prominent means by which God has ordained his kingdom to go forth in our hearts and in this world. For this reason, we take time to prayerfully quiet our hearts before the time of the sermon, asking that—despite the deficiencies and weaknesses of both the human listeners and preacher—God the Holy Spirit will work in great power to encourage the souls of the saints as the Word is preached, ([I Cor. 2:10](#)). Like all of the songs of praise that we sing, this song is based on the truths of God's Word. However, this song is typically more reflective in nature. We do this intentionally with the hope that our praises will be mingled with humble prayers, as we ask God to grant us soft and receptive hearts before his holy Word.

9. We Are Spiritually Nourished By God's Word *Verbally* Proclaimed

This aspect of our worship service is captured by the ***Preaching of God's Word***.

The one who preaches God's Word is a fellow sinner saved by grace alone with no special merit or power of his own ([II Pet. 1:1](#)). It is not the unique talents of any person, but rather the promised work of the Holy Spirit that makes the public proclamation of God's Word a highly effective, soul-fortifying ministry for the people of God, ([I Cor. 3:7](#)). Through this most-important ministry of the church, God provides a spiritual feast of rich fare for the spiritually hungry; he causes his beloved people to be nourished and built up to greater maturity in their faith, ([Deut. 8:3](#)). As we humbly receive God's Word each and every Lord's Day, we receive the spiritual *equipping* that we need to walk faithfully before God throughout our everyday lives, ([Eph. 4:12](#)). The chief means by which God provides for the spiritual needs of his beloved people is through the faithful proclamation of his holy Word, ([Isa. 55:10-11](#)).

10. We Are Spiritually Nourished By God's Word *Visually* Proclaimed

This aspect of our worship service is captured by the ***Administration of the Sacraments***.

Likewise, the sacraments of the New Covenant are blessed sermons in themselves. Through the distinct visible elements which God has assigned to each, Christ and his glorious work are proclaimed visibly and powerfully for the people of God to receive by faith. It is a sad reality that the sacraments of the New Covenant are often treated as a mere *memorial*; a powerless picture which is nice enough in itself, but not really effectual for the believer. Such a view is wholly contrary to the teaching of God's Word, ([I Cor. 10:16](#); [Rom. 6:3-4](#)). Just as the Spirit works mightily through the *verbal proclamation* of the Word of God from the pulpit, so too the Spirit works mightily through the *visual proclamation* of Christ which is shown forth wherever the sacraments are rightly administered. The souls of the saints are no less built up by participating in the Lord's Supper than by hearing a faithful sermon. God the Spirit has been pleased to promise to accomplish his gracious and edifying work through each.

11. We Respond In Faith To God's Truth

This aspect of our worship service is captured by our ***Song of Response***.

Having received the teaching of God's Word, as well as all of God's other gracious ministries to us throughout the worship service as a whole, we respond to God in submissive-faith. With voices of praise, we rest in all that has been *accomplished for us and offered to us in Christ*, and we happily receive all that God *requires of us as his beloved children*. We do so knowing that "*his commandments are not burdensome*," but rather for our good and for his own glory, ([I Jn. 5:3](#)).

Our closing song generally has the quality of a rallying cry. We aim for the lyrics to capture the dual truths of God's *promises* to his people as well as God's *calling* for his people. Our intention is that the closing song that we sing as a unified body in Christ will remind us that the Christian life is only lived by complete and total dependence upon our Savior, ([Jn. 15:4](#)). In essence, as we close our service we sing unto God that by faith and through his grace alone, we will endeavor to live as becomes the children of God, ([1 Jn. 3:3](#)).

12. We Are Re-Commissioned With God's Blessing

This aspect of our worship service is captured by the ***Benediction***.

Our worship service begins with a *Call To Worship*, summoning us out of our worldly cares and concerns and into God's presence. It closes, however, with God's *Benediction*—which means his blessing. This blessing from our Father in heaven is meant to encourage and strengthen us as we are re-commissioned to live as his ambassadors and missionaries throughout this world, ([II Cor. 5:20-21](#)). As both precious children and faithful servants of God, our Father sends us forth in *his power* and with *his truth*, to gather a rich spiritual harvest among every neighborhood and every nation of *his world*, ([Matt. 28:18-20](#)). This blessing of God's is far more than kind words which make for a tidy conclusion to our gatherings. Much more, they are spiritual words of truth concerning God's promises to be present with his people as they walk by faith and not by sight as his witnesses in this world, ([II Cor. 4:16-18](#); [Matt. 28:20](#)).

God's Rich Blessings For His Beloved People

From the *Call To Worship* to the *Benediction*, our God is ministering to and richly blessing his beloved people who have assembled to worship him by faith. He knows our needs, and he provides abundantly for all of them as we focus not on ourselves, but on the glory of his name, ([Ps. 37:4](#)). Let us rejoice in the privilege of public worship; let us not forsake it; and let us come with all eagerness into the presence of our matchless King where "*fullness of joy*" and "*pleasures forevermore*" are found, ([Ps. 16:11](#)).

Pastoral Article:

Why Do We Sing the Doxology Every Week?

Sometimes it can be helpful to understand the thoughtfulness and intentionality that stands behind traditions, otherwise they can just seem like empty, repetitive, and outdated rituals that are overdue for a modern upgrade. My hope and aim in this article is that by pointing out *five* of the significant reasons that stand behind our weekly tradition of singing the Doxology, our joy and unity in doing so will be greatly enriched.

1. To Focus On Worship's Essential Simplicity

One of the primary reasons that we begin our worship services each and every week with the Doxology, is because it reminds us that worship is essentially simple in nature. While the trappings of buildings, lighting, seating, and even musical instruments are all welcome blessings; they are, nevertheless, unnecessary ones. Any believer can worship God without any of the above items, and in fact, many of our fellow saints around the world often do, ([Acts 16:25](#)). For this reason, we begin the corporate worship of our majestic God by singing the Doxology *with only our voices raised* so that the sound which reverberates within our sanctuary is not the resonance of electrified expert musicians, but the simple and sincere song of the saints, sweetly praising their Savior. Our individual voices, (even when they are not perfect in pitch), present a beautiful and welcome offering before the throne of our God in heaven. As a church, we never want to lose sight of the truth that *worship is chiefly about offering sincere praise to God from the heart*, not a well-choreographed performance from a stage, ([Jn. 4:23-24](#)).

2. To Focus On God's Tri-Unity

We also begin our service with the Doxology because of its clear recognition of the Tri-unity of our God. We do not worship the Father only, nor the Father and the Son alone. Rather, we “*praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*”—one God existing eternally in three distinct persons. Individually and collectively our Triune God is perfect in power and majesty, worthy of all worship, honor, praise, sacrifice, and obedience, ([Matt. 28:18-20](#)). The Tri-unity of our God is a beautiful mystery of our faith, and an essential doctrine of the Church which must never be forsaken. So much of the confusion and error which has led the Church astray in times past has been ultimately rooted in a failure to rightly acknowledge, revere, and worship the unique divinity and glory of each of the distinct persons of the one Holy Trinity.

3. To Focus On Our Faith's Rich Historicity

The words of the Doxology were first penned in 1674 by Thomas Ken. This makes the song nearly 350 years old, and yet its roots go much deeper still. Not only have these words been sung by God's people since the 17th century, but the truths encapsulated within them have been sung from all eternity by the choirs of heaven, and have been found upon the lips of men since the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ([Lk. 1:67-79](#)). When we open our service in this way, we intentionally unite ourselves to the wider (true) Church—both historic and global—who *have sung* and *do sing* these same truths back to God as they gather in his presence each and every Lord's Day. In this way, we remind ourselves of two very important things: (1) We are standing on the shoulders of faithful men and women who have labored in the Christian faith long before us, reaping the fruits of their faithfulness. (2) Though separated from our

brothers and sisters in the faith by vast geography, we are one in the Spirit of Christ whom God has richly poured out upon all who are his, ([II Tim. 2:19](#)).

4. To Focus On Inclusive Sing-Ability (Especially For Our Kids)

We speak often at Covenant Grace about [the important place of children in the life of the Church](#). Here again, the Doxology is an important part of our desire to help the children of our congregation be included as active participants in the worship our Triune God. The lyrics to the Doxology are very short and simple; simple enough even for young children to learn with ease. It is our hope that parents will be teaching the Doxology to their little ones—*perhaps even developing the habit of singing the Doxology together before dinner each evening as a family at home*. Part of our intention is that through the consistency of beginning our worship service in this way each and every week, our kids will be enabled to stand with the rest of the congregation of the redeemed from the very start of our worship, adding their own individual voices to the chorus of praise to God. We know that before children can read, it can be difficult for them to participate in some aspects of the worship service. However, the Doxology presents a great opportunity to surmount this obstacle right from the genesis of our gathering by inviting even our littlest members to be actively included in the worship of God.

5. To Focus On God’s Immutability (He Never Changes)

Lastly, we sing the Doxology each and every week not so that the lyrics can become a bore, but so that we are reminded that our God never changes. His promises are always yes and amen for us in Christ ([II Cor. 1:20](#)), and he is the same yesterday, today and forever, ([Heb. 13:8](#)). From all eternity past to all eternity future, all “*praise*” is due to the Triune “*God from whom all blessings flow!*” That praise is due from all angels “*above*” and all “*creatures here below.*” This reality will never change. So whether we use the words of the Doxology penned by Thomas Ken, or any other number of theologically rich worship songs, these truths should always be the theme of our praises.

Let us never grow tired of beholding the wondrous glory of our God, nor of singing his praises back to him out of hearts overflowing with adoration and thanksgiving for the grace he has given to us in his Son. And so—come seasons of plenty or of wanting, of peace or of hardship, of new life born or of saints gathered unto heaven—we shall continue to sing sweetly, simply and sincerely to our sovereign Savior...

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise Him all creatures here below
Praise Him above, ye heavenly hosts
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*

Pastoral Article:

What Is the Lord's Supper?

“Signs” & “Seals” of Christ's Saving Work

The Lord's Supper, also called Communion, is one of only two sacraments which God has given to His Church as *signs* and *seals* of their eternal covenant relationship to himself in Christ, ([Rom. 4:11](#)).

As "*signs*", the sacraments—both Baptism and the Lord's Supper—serve as *a visible proclamation of the truths of the gospel*. Just as a sermon is preached through spoken words to build up and edify the souls of God's people, so also the sacraments preach to our hearts through the visible elements and words of institution which God has assigned to each.

As "*seals*", the sacraments represent *the surety of God's promises* and his irrevocable guarantee to provide unto all who receive them by faith every benefit of Christ's work that is represented therein. Just as a signet ring was used in the days of old to represent the stamp of authority which stood behind the contents of a letter or decree, so God almighty has affixed his own seal to the promises shown forth in the sacraments of Christ's Church. Merely receiving the physical sacraments alone is no guarantee that the benefits shown forth are truly yours, rather God's seal of promise is held forth to all who receive the promises offered *by faith in his only Son, Jesus Christ*.

More Than a Memorial; the Lord's Supper Is a True Spiritual Feast

In the case of Communion, the bread and wine are visible representations of the body and blood of our Savior, which he willingly offered to God as a substitutionary sacrifice for the guilt of the sins of all God's people, ([Matt. 26:26-29](#)). Though the bread is just bread, and the wine is just wine, the Holy Spirit works through both the *sign* (visible elements), and *seal* (spiritual promises) which are shown forth in the sacrament, to encourage and strengthen the souls of God's people as they receive them with sincere faith in what the elements have been ordained to represent—which is the complete and finished work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. In other words, there is true spiritual benefit provided to those who participate in faith. While outward and ordinary in the physical sense, the Lord's Supper is a true spiritual feast which nourishes the soul in the spiritual sense, ([I Cor. 10:3-4, 16](#)).

How Is Communion To Be Received? And By Whom?

While baptism is rightly administered to all who profess faith in Jesus Christ together with their children, Communion is administered differently. The Scriptures say that those who participate must do so in a worthy manner, lest they eat and drink judgment upon themselves, ([I Cor. 11:27-32](#)). Paul goes on in this passage to describe strong discipline and judgment from God upon those who treat the sacrament with irreverence. The severity of this warning is not arbitrary in any way. Rather, it is based on the paramount importance of the spiritual message of the Gospel, which God the Holy Spirit proclaims through the visible testimony of the sacrament. In other words, those who participate irreverently, are directly opposing the ministry of the Holy Spirit by tainting and/or disrupting the Spirit's testimony concerning the priceless work of Christ for needy sinners.

This warning is not intended to scare us off from receiving God's promised blessings through this precious sacrament. Rather, it is intended to encourage us to come to the Lord's Table *reverently*, with a sober heart, recognizing and repenting of our sin, and trusting in Christ alone as our saving substitute. All who profess faith in Christ, are trusting in him alone, and are walking in true repentance from all known sin are welcome at the Lord's Table. In this meal, there is a foretaste of the great heavenly feast which will be ours eternally in glory, but also a present spiritual blessing to nourish our souls for the present day. It should be clearly said, however, that this table is only for those who are believers in Jesus Christ, and not for those who are not trusting in Christ.

What About Children?

Children are to be raised up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord from birth, ([Eph. 6:4](#)). This includes baptizing our children into the visible covenant community, ([Gen. 17:1-14](#); [Acts 2:39](#)), as well as discipling our children toward their full participation in the holy sacrament of Communion. Children who are currently:

1. *Not yet spiritually mature enough to fully understand the gospel, or*
2. *Understand the message of the gospel but have not professed personal faith in Christ, or*
3. *Are professing faith in Christ but are simply not yet able to participate with God's prescribed heart-posture of reverence and self-examination ([1 Cor. 11:28](#)),*

are encouraged to carefully observe their parents faithful participation, but not yet participate themselves. Of course, parents are strongly encouraged to take time to help their children understand the spiritual message which stands behind our celebration even while we are participating as a congregation. We believe this is good and right, and a helpful blessing to the child to continue growing in their knowledge of God, and especially the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Before children of our church take their first Communion, we ask that parents set up a time where the child and their parents can meet together with the Elders in a friendly and loving atmosphere to help encourage and confirm the child's faith as they take this important step in their spiritual life. As spiritual shepherds of God's people, we count it a great blessing to help encourage the faith of the whole flock, and that includes your children.

Orderly & Unified As We Participate

The word Communion is comprised of two words which have been combined into one; they are "common" and "union". Thus, another aspect of Communion is that it represents our shared (or common) faith in Christ, and our shared blessing of being his unified people. For this reason, we desire to both distribute and receive the elements in an orderly and unified manner, ([1 Cor. 11:33-34](#)). Doing so not only further communicates the overall message which the Holy Spirit is speaking through the sacrament, but also helps foster an atmosphere of order and reverence which prevents us from falling prey to distractions or confusions. Below is a short description of the practical side of taking the Lord's Supper, explaining how rows will be dismissed and when the elements are to be consumed.

The following description appears in our bulletin on Communion Sundays:

When your row is dismissed, please form two lines using the inside aisles nearest you as you come forward to receive the

Communion elements. After receiving the elements, please return to your seat using the nearest outside aisle. Once all have been served, we will take the elements together in unity, as one body in Christ.

I hope that this email is a blessing to you and helps you prepare your heart as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together this Sunday. May God richly bless you!

-Pastor Tom

P.S. What about those watching online? *For those who are watching our worship services online, we greatly look forward to the time when you are able to return to public worship. Communion is not something which can or should be done in a virtual format, or privately at home. We hope that observing this portion of our service from home will still be a blessing to your soul during this unique time. May the Lord speed the day when all who call Covenant Grace home are gathered together under one roof again. God bless you!*

Who Is To Be Welcomed To the Lord's Supper?

The Lord's Supper: A Soul-Strengthening Feast For God's People

Participating in the Lord's Supper is a wonderful means by which God nourishes the faith of his people, confirms them in the covenant, and comforts them in their salvation by reminding them of the finished work of Jesus Christ in their place. Communion is a gift of God's grace for weary pilgrims on the hard and narrow heavenly road, (Matt. 7:13-14). God's people should cherish this sacred supper and ever-rejoice in the gospel which it visibly proclaims to their souls each time it is properly served.

However, in our present time, where a spirit of *radical individualism* reigns unchecked, there has become much confusion about who is to be welcomed to the Lord's Supper. Strangely, we have forgotten our own covenant history by failing to realize that the Lord's Supper is the New Covenant expression of the Passover meal from the days of old, (I Cor. 5:7). And like that ancient meal which foreshadowed Christ to come, the Lord's Supper is not a meal which is served to all people. Rather, it is a supper which is served only to the members of God's covenant people.

“And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘This is the statute of the Passover:

No foreigner shall eat of it...All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it,” (Ex. 12:43, 47-48).

Notice three critical truths from these verses:

1. There is a distinct “congregation” of God's people, and “all” the members of that covenant community are the only people who are welcome to eat of this sacred meal.
2. While only the members of God's people are welcomed to eat this meal, all kinds of people from all over the world (i.e. “strangers”) are invited to become members, and thereby, join in this meal. This is what the text means when it says, “*If a stranger...would keep the Passover...let all his males be circumcised. Then he may...keep it.*”

We must understand that “circumcision”, like baptism today, was the sign of membership in the covenant community. This truth is taught to us in Genesis 17:11-14 where God says to Abraham as the leader of his Church on earth,

*“You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you...Every male throughout your generations...shall surely be circumcised...**Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.**”*

3. Finally, the text unequivocally teaches us that anyone who is not a member of God's covenant people (i.e. “uncircumcised”), is not welcome to participate in this sacred meal.

Beloved, these truths form the foundation of what it means to faithfully administer the Lord's Supper today. As pastors, we are responsible to God to serve *his* Supper in *his* way to *his* people. Although the culture in which we live may call such practices “*out of touch*”, “*old fashioned*”, “*narrow*”, “*unloving*”, or all the like, “*we must obey God rather than men*,” (Acts 5:29). Out of love for God and our fellow man, we must endeavor to teach and preach only that which accords with the truth, (Jn. 17:17).

Three Important Questions

One of the reasons there is much confusion about the Lord's Supper is because, like many other theological subjects, these truths are not taught to us by *a single chapter and verse*. But there is also no single chapter or verse that teaches us a proper understanding of the holy *Trinity*. Nor is there a single chapter and verse which teaches us all that we need to know concerning the critical relationship between *justification* and *sanctification*. In many things, our infinitely wise God has woven the truth into the whole of the Bible by both precept and principle. And it is the duty of the Church, by the help of the Holy Spirit, to humbly study, interpret, and apply all that God has given to us for our progress and joy in Christ, (Acts 17:11).

In what follows, I do not intend to provide a treatise which will thoroughly delve into all of the important facets of the Lord's Supper. Instead, I seek to raise a simple question, to answer that question, and then to explain the answer more fully and practically as it applies to my own conscience and practice as a pastor. In particular, I seek to help the beloved congregation which God has called me to serve, to better understand why we invite only those who are “***members in good-standing of any evangelical church***” to come forward to receive the body and blood of Christ during holy Communion. We have already seen a few highly important foundational principles in Exodus 12. We need to keep those in mind. But as we continue to probe forward, I want to take a slightly different approach to answering the big question on all of our minds:

1. Who is to be welcomed to the Lord's Supper?

Let every heart boldly answer: *All who have a credible profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ!*

Yes and amen! Let every true believer in all the world come and eat of the Bread of Life and drink of the Well that shall never run dry. As the blessed children of God, all such persons have a divinely-given right unto this heavenly privilege.

2. But we must ask: What is “a credible profession of faith”?

For the Scripture declares that “*there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers*,” (Tit. 1:10). And again in the same paragraph we are told that there are many who *profess one thing* but *practice another*. For the Scripture says, “*They*”—that is the “*many*” spoken of above—“*profess to know God, but they deny him by their works*,” (Tit. 1:16).

Thus, “*a credible profession of faith*” is evidenced not only in *lip* but also in the *life*, (Matt 3:9-10).

3. So what does it mean for a profession of faith to be evidenced in the *life*?

According to Holy Scripture it means at least these four things:

1. By the sovereign grace of the Holy Spirit, you have been led to repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as your only hope of salvation, (Acts 2:37-38; Jn. 1:12-13).
2. As a professing believer, you have obediently received the sacrament of Baptism, and thereby, become a member of the congregation of a local church, (Acts 2:38; Matt. 28:19). For just as circumcision was a sign of membership in the covenant community of old, so baptism (which has replaced circumcision) is the sign of membership in the covenant community today, (I Cor. 12:13; Acts 2:38-39; Matt. 28:19). Anyone who refuses church membership, should not be baptized because the two are inseparable in the sight of God, (Gen. 17:14; I Cor. 12:13; Luke 6:46).
3. As a member of a local church, you are in fellowship with other believers (Heb. 10:24-25), and submitted under the leadership of local shepherds who have been ordained by your Savior to keep watch over your soul, (Heb. 13:17; I Thess. 5:12-13; I Pet. 5:1-4).
4. By the help of the Holy Spirit, you are striving by faith to conform your life to the will of God as revealed in Scripture and walking in repentance wherever your beliefs or behavior are in conflict with God's Word, (Matt. 7:20; Eph. 4:1-6, 17-24; Col. 3; Rom. 12; I Thess. 4:3; II Tim. 2:19).

In other words, to have "a credible profession of faith" in both lip and life, by the definition of God's holy Word, means that you are "a member in good-standing of any evangelical church."

Let's consider the meaning of these words more closely:

- **"A member..."**
Being "a member" means that you have been baptized and received into the congregation of a local church by a credible profession of faith. It also means that since your baptism, *you have maintained that membership* by not leaving the congregation of a local church. For various reasons, you may have transferred your membership, but you have not forsaken your membership.
- **"...in good-standing..."**
Being "in good standing" means that you are presently walking in repentance, pursuing godliness, and not under church discipline.
- **"...of any evangelical church."**
"Of any evangelical church" means that all of the above is taking place within *a true church*, that is to say, a church that preaches the true biblical gospel.

Beloved, to be anything less than this is to profess faith with the lips but not with the life. It is to do exactly what Paul condemns in Titus 1:16 saying: "They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works."

Two Dangers To Avoid

There are two great dangers which we must seek to avoid, as best as we are able, in our participation in the Lord's Supper. One is a danger to be avoided by *those who come forward to receive* this holy supper, (I Cor. 11:27). The other is a danger to be avoided by *those whom God has entrusted to administer* it—and who will have to give an account to God for their handling of it, (Heb. 13:17).

1. A Danger For Those Who Receive the Lord's Supper

First, those who come forward to receive the Lord's Supper must be careful that they are not a living example of Jesus' words in Matthew 7:21, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*" What is the warning here? It is a warning that *a profession of faith* which exists *only in lip* but *not in the life*, is a profession of faith which cannot be considered *credible*. It is a warning that true faith is evidenced not only by *a verbal affirmation of Christ*, but also by *obediently conforming to those actions which King Jesus has decreed for his people*, (Lk. 6:46).

According to the Great Commission and the testimony of the Apostles in Acts 2:37-38, these *actions*, of which true believers partake, include being baptized into the membership of the local church, (I Cor. 12:13). And that membership is to be maintained throughout the whole life of the believer. For various reasons, a time may come when you *transfer your membership* to another local church, but you are never to leave the church of your Lord and Savior. To sever yourself from the membership of the local church is, symbolically, *to sever yourself from Christ*; for the Church is his body, (Eph. 1:23).

Let's consider this from another angle. When a person is "*excommunicated*" due to the necessary process of church discipline, that person is being *removed from the membership of the local church*, (I Cor. 5:12-13). To use the language of Genesis 17:14, they are being "*cut off from [God's] people.*" To use the even harder language of I Corinthians 5:5, such persons are being "*delivered over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that their spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*" Such an action, when carried out properly, is designed by God to lovingly communicate to that person that:

*Just as you are being visibly separated from the membership of the local church,
so, by this judgment, you are considered to be spiritually separated from the salvation that is in Christ Jesus.*

These *visible* and *temporal* actions are God's appointed means of communicating *spiritual* and *eternal* truth. It is a way of showing the souls of the unrepentant that they have no grounds to be assured of their salvation, but rather stand in great need of salvation. The hope of such difficult actions is that they will one day be welcomed *back into the congregation of God's people as members*, and thereby, re-affirmed in their standing before God as one of his beloved and redeemed children.

Perhaps you are wondering why this subject of *excommunication* is of any importance to the topic at hand? Well, strangely, when people *remove themselves from church membership voluntarily*, they somehow do not realize that, in effect, they are *excommunicating themselves*. Like Lot, they are choosing to "*pitch [their] tents toward Sodom*" and separate themselves from the visible body of Christ on earth, (Gen. 13:12). And thereby, though they may not have the wherewithal to recognize it, they have placed themselves into a *questionable position* and are communicating by their actions that *they too may yet stand in need of salvation*. This is exactly what the Scriptures say of those who depart from the membership of the local church:

"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us," (I Jn. 2:19).

These are difficult truths for a time such as ours, when *radical individualism* has wreaked so much havoc upon the people of God. There has never been a time in the history of God's people when so much confusion has prevailed about the importance of being *distinctly* and *sacredly* united to the local body of Christ. But being that the things we have seen from God's Word are true, even if unpopular, they must be properly taught and upheld by those who call themselves servants of the living God. And this leads us to the second danger.

2. A Danger For Those Who Administer the Lord's Supper

Secondly, those who administer the Lord's Supper as servants and representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ, must be careful that they are not *false prophets*. In the days of old, as God's righteous judgment against sinners approached, the *false prophets* were guilty of crying out to the people, "*Peace! Peace! All is well! You have nothing to fear! God is for you and will deliver you!*" Now, surely this is a good message to send to those for whom it is true! As pastors, we cherish the privilege to herald this message for the people of God because of what Jesus has done for us! But to send this message to those who are standing in an *insecure place before God* and remain *liable to his righteous judgment*, would be a great evil, (Jer. 6:14; 14:14; Deut. 18:20; Ezek. 13:9). It would be akin to knowing that someone was in harm's way and facing imminent danger, but refusing to tell them for fear of upsetting them and incurring their disapproval. Such a person is not *a lover of his neighbor* but rather *a lover of himself*; (Lk. 6:26). He is more concerned with being approved of by men than in doing what is in the true best interest of others.

We must understand that the Lord's Supper is *a confirming ordinance*. It is a sacrament for the Christian which is meant to give them *assurance of their standing with the Lord*; to remind them that what Jesus Christ did in his life, death, and resurrection, was done for *them*. Therefore, when a pastor is issuing an invitation to the Lord's Supper, he is telling those whom he invites, that, according to the Word of God, if they meet the description of his invitation, they have every reason to be confident in their personal salvation. And, therefore, if he is an *honest, God-fearing, neighbor-loving man*, he knows in his soul that he cannot offer a *loose invitation* to such a sacred meal. Why? Because he is not a *false prophet*; he knows that he cannot cry, "*Peace! Peace!*" to every person who happened to show up to church that Sunday. He cannot cry, "*All is well! You are forgiven!*" merely because someone showed up to church and professed with their *lips* that they are a Christian. Consider the Word of God's warning which was given to Ezekiel:

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul," (Ezek. 3:17-19).

When the pastor makes the invitation, no matter how hard it may be to be disliked by others, he must offer only the truth. He must offer the invitation to those whose *profession of faith is confirmed as credible according to the teaching of the Word of God*—and not according to the *private feelings* and *opinions* of men. He must offer the invitation only to those whose *profession of faith is evidenced in both lip and life*. And as it turns out, one rather simple and succinct way of articulating this kind of biblically-truthful invitation, is to say that the pastor must only offer the Lord's Supper to those who are:

"Members in good-standing of any evangelical church."

By this *exclusive invitation* he is not aiming in any way to *harshly condemn* those for whom this description is not (yet) true. Nor is he intending to say that he does not believe that those who profess faith but have not yet joined the membership of a local church are *definitely not true Christians*. By no means! Instead, because of his accountability to the Lord, and his desire to love his neighbor in truth, he is simply saying that because of their present standing, he is not able to extend *God's confirmation of their salvation*—even though he longs for the day to come when he can!

“Come, Everyone Who Thirsts, Come To the Waters!”

Let me be very clear that pastors take no pleasure in excluding some persons from participation the body and blood of Jesus Christ. They are pastors precisely because they love the Lord and desire to see all men come to a saving knowledge of the truth, (Ezek. 18:32; I Tim. 2:4). They long for the day when you and your family are coming forward to the Table of the Lord and being assured of your everlasting salvation in Christ! They hold membership classes with regular frequency and talk often about how important it is for those who *profess faith in Christ with their lips* to likewise *profess their faith in Christ with their life* by joining the membership of a local church. They will go out of their way to answer your questions as best as they can and to help you come to understand the things of God more fully, (Acts 18:26).

But when all this is being done for you, and yet, for whatever reasons, you continue to refuse to join the local church as a member, can it truly be said that the Elders of that church have been *narrow* and *harsh* toward you? Can it be accurately portrayed that *they have kept you away* from the Table of the Lord? Or is it, in fact, proper to say that *you yourself have chosen to stand at a distance from the body of Christ into which you have been heartily and warmly invited by them?*

The biggest question here is not, “*Who is to be welcomed to the Lord's Supper?*” But rather: ***Why, O beloved professing Christian, are you refusing the wisdom of your Savior by refusing to unite as a member of his beloved Church?*** Why would you “*cut yourself off*” from the good things God has provided for you? Find a faithful local church and unite yourself to her as soon as possible! For this is right, *and good, and desirable, and biblical, and that which accords with a credible profession of faith in Christ*. As the Scripture says in Exodus 12:48, “***Then*** *he may come near...*” and eat this sacred meal—a holy feast which calls God's people to *remember* the work of *the Greater Lamb* who takes away the sin of the world, (Jn. 1:29).

*“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!*

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?*

Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live.”

Isaiah 55:1-3



Our Shepherding Plan

How We, As Elders of Covenant Grace Church, Will Endeavor To Faithfully Fulfill Our Calling To Shepherd the Flock of God Which Has Entrusted To Us

Our Purpose & Aim:

The purpose of this plan is to provide a clear explanation of how the Elders of Covenant Grace Church will endeavor to faithfully shepherd the flock of God which has been entrusted to their care, (I Peter 5:2). In particular, this plan will focus on the *micro* aspects of shepherding (i.e. the ways in which we each shepherd the flock *personally* rather than *corporately*). Our plan for macro-shepherding (i.e. Lord's Day Worship, discipleship ministries, and fellowship opportunities) is further defined elsewhere. We will begin by outlining a broad and fundamental description of our plan, and then proceed to more narrowly define the specifics of the '*what*' and '*how*' of that plan as we continue.

Shepherds are *generally* called to fulfill the same sort of ministry to the flock of God no matter where they have been called to serve. But that ministry can take on many different forms of application depending on the unique context and needs of the congregation. Our aim in what follows is to define the specific form of shepherding care which we have developed for the blessing and flourishing of our beloved church. Together, the Session of Covenant Grace has spent the last year studying the role of the Elder. From the accumulation of that study, our discussions, and prayers, we have developed the plan which follows. It is our hope that what we have developed will provide a solid foundation for the ministry of Covenant Grace for many years to come.

Jesus Christ: The Perfect Picture & Pattern of Faithful Shepherding

Only the Lord Jesus Christ is the true and perfect shepherd of his own beloved Church. As those who have been duly called and ordained to serve as his undershepherds, we endeavor to model every aspect of our ministry after his own perfect character and according to the pattern of faithfulness which he has set forth in his Word.

As we understand it, the biblical pattern for faithful shepherding includes our responsibility to do four primary things for the members of the local church. Elders are called to ***know, feed, lead,*** and ***protect*** the precious flock of God which he has purchased with his own blood, (Acts 20:28). Each of these four categories is important to the health of both the *individual sheep* and the *wider flock*. Additionally, each of these four categories are to be fulfilled on both the *macro level* (i.e. corporately) and the *micro level* (i.e. by individual or family).

Here we are only describing our plan for providing faithful shepherding care at the *micro* level. In other words, we are defining exactly what each Elder at Covenant Grace Church is responsible for doing on a personal level in the care of God's people. Below, each of the four categories will be generally defined and the specific responsibilities and expectations for our Elders to fulfill will also be described. In addition to these categories, we recognize our calling to pray without ceasing for the varied needs of the body, that their faith may be firmly established and flourishing unto the glory of God. A brief word about our plan and corresponding expectations for prayer will be outlined as well.

Our Aim is Sincere & Genuine Love Unto God & His People

Before we begin the next section where the particulars of our plan are outlined, it is important to note that while we have sought to provide clarity by carefully articulating the aims and expectations of our shepherding plan, we are cognizant of the possibility of unintentionally creating a *'checklist'* that replaces an authentic, heartfelt approach to shepherding care. Let it be clearly said, then, that it is the sincere aim of every Elder of Covenant Grace Church to fulfill our duties to the flock out of *genuine love for God* and *genuine love for his people*. This plan is intended to help us make sure that we are being faithful to shepherd God's people in such a way that faithfully reflects the way that our Savior, Jesus Christ, continues to faithfully shepherd us.

1. KNOWING OUR SHEEP

Faithful shepherding means that we genuinely know our sheep.

Knowing our sheep means (at least) four important things:

- We know who the particular members of our church are.
It is the baptized members of this local church who comprise the flock to which we are responsible. This means that we must be faithful to keep an accurate membership roll.
- We know who the specific members are who have been placed under our particular care.
This means that we know who is in our particular shepherding group, (and also that they know that we are their primary shepherd).
- Knowing also means that we are in connection with our sheep in such a way as to have an accurate awareness of their present spiritual, emotional, and physical needs.
- Knowing also means doing our best to diagnose the present spiritual condition of the sheep.
To do this we have agreed to use (but slightly adapt) the categories provided by Timothy Witmer in "The Shepherd Leader" which include: *Healthy Sheep, Weak Sheep, Stray Sheep, Lost Sheep, Circumstantially Inactive Sheep*. (See Appendix A for a description of each category)

The specific commitment of our Elders is:

- To have at least one meaningful interaction per month with each of our particular sheep.
This is to take place outside of and in addition to the interactions we enjoy at our other regular corporate ministry functions.
- To accurately diagnose and update each individual sheep's "spiritual condition" (with any relevant notes) on the shared Shepherding Spreadsheet.
This is to take place on a monthly basis, prior to the stated Session meeting for that given month.

Examples of how this responsibility might be fulfilled could include:

- A phone call, coffee or lunch meeting
- Having the person/family over to your home
- Writing a friendly and pastoral letter, etc.

2. FEEDING OUR SHEEP

Faithful shepherding means that we regularly feed our sheep.

The main diet of the sheep is provided through the corporate ministries of Lord's Day Worship and our discipleship ministries. However, there remains a responsibility for Elders to supplement that good work by also drawing from the well of their own private walk with God. This can take many forms, some more formal (i.e. catechisms) and some more organic (i.e. personal devotional thoughts). We want to be careful not to box anyone in with regard to exactly *how* this responsibility might be fulfilled. Nevertheless, we do want to recognize that it is part of the faithful care that we are called to provide.

The specific commitment of our Elders is:

- To intentionally share (at least) one Scriptural truth with our particular sheep per month.

Examples of how this responsibility might be fulfilled could include:

- Sending a monthly email to your shepherding group in which you either:
 - A. Share a short devotional thought from your own learning/growth in the Word, or
 - B. Share a short devotional thought from a trusted Reformed pastor or theologian (i.e. a quote from J.C. Ryle, Charles Spurgeon, or a link to an episode/article from *Ligonier*, etc.)
- The same could also be shared over the phone or over a lunch meeting.
- Additionally, it may be that an opportunity to share nourishing truth from God's Word presents itself organically during your conversations.

3. LEADING OUR SHEEP

Faithful shepherding means that we *lovingly lead* our sheep.

Leading our sheep means that, according to the Word of God, we are providing sound counsel, guidance, encouragement, instruction, support, and even loving correction for the sheep as is needful. We endeavor to wisely guide the sheep toward spiritual health and maturity. There are several ways that this may take place. Indeed, the spectrum for exactly how this may occur is too wide to simply define. Nevertheless, we have attempted to capture two particular ways that we believe we have been called to lead our sheep below.

The specific commitment of our Elders is:

- To be a personal example of godliness to the flock.
Leadership begins by being an example to the flock of what it means to faithfully love, trust, obey, and serve the Lord, (I Peter 5:3). Our lives, while far from perfect, should be worthy models to follow, (I Corinthians 11:1). If others were to mimic our pursuit of Jesus Christ, it should lead them to spiritual maturity and health, (Philippians 4:9).
- To pursue the sheep's best interest through loving inquiry and sound counsel.
Leadership also means that we are inquiring about the well-being of our sheep, (Acts 20:28). We are asking thoughtful questions about their spiritual condition and providing sound counsel to help promote their spiritual flourishing. This can be easy to avoid, but it is essential to true leadership. If the sheep did not need to be asked these questions, then God would not have given the role of leadership to the shepherds of his flock. He has given us this calling because it is important to the health and well-being of his beloved people.

Examples of how this responsibility might be fulfilled could include:

During our regular shepherding interactions we may ask the sheep about:

- Their personal pursuit of God through daily Bible reading and prayer
- The spiritual leadership of their family (family worship, prayer times, honoring God)
- Marital life, parental life, work life, time management, priorities, values, etc.
- Checking in when folks are absent from church or more distanced from the congregation.

4. PROTECTING OUR SHEEP

Faithful shepherding means that we *faithfully protect* our sheep.

Protecting the sheep means that we are standing guard over them for their good. We are paying close attention to them and acting, when necessary, to defend them from the many foes which wage war against their souls. The good shepherd of Psalm 23 carries both a rod and a staff; both of these bring comfort to the sheep, (Psalm 23:4). With the rod the shepherd defends the flock from enemies without; he wields a weapon against those who would seek to do the

sheep harm. But with the staff he defends the flock from the enemies within, he defends them from themselves. Sheep are foolish creatures and they are prone to wander away from the wise and loving care of their shepherd. The faithful shepherd knows this and does not hesitate to extend his loving 'crook' and draw the sheep back to himself.

The types of enemies from which our sheep require defense include:

- Sin (*Defense against sins of both omission and commission; of thought, word, and deed*)
- Temptations (*Defense against the pull of the flesh and allure of sin*)
- Worldiness (*Defense against the pull of the world, being conformed to the culture*)
- False Teachings (*Defense against mishandling of God's holy Word*)
- Persecutions (*Defense against the onslaught of the world against the faithful*)
- Abuses (*Defense against those who may view the sheep as prey*)
- Laziness (*Defense against spiritual apathy, antinomianism, and cheap grace*)
- Legalism (*Defense against relying on or looking to our works as a ground of righteousness or spiritual pride*)
- Isolation (*Defense against radical individualism which alienates faith in Jesus from membership in his church*)

The specific commitment of our Elders is:

- To be paying careful attention to the flock which has been entrusted to us by God, (Acts 20:28).
- To be willing to speak up and act when needed, even if the sheep do not desire it.
- To be willing to enact church discipline in love as is necessary for:
 1. The spiritual benefit of the person(s) in sin, (*that they may be granted repentance; Matt. 18:15*)
 2. For the protection of the flock from falling into the same or other sins, (*I Cor. 5:6*)
 3. For the glory of God's name, that it may not be mocked and slandered because of those who persist in walking in a manner unbecoming of his blessed children, (*I Pet. 2:11-12*)

Our Call To Be Unceasing In Prayer

In addition to these four categories, and alongside the execution of each, stands the Elder's calling to be diligent and faithful in praying for the flock which has been entrusted to their care.

The specific commitment of our Elders is:

- To offer up prayers for our whole church and her leaders on a daily basis.
- To offer up prayers for each of the members of our particular shepherding groups on a weekly basis. This prayer time will include two aspects of prayers for the members under your care:
 1. We will be in prayer for our particular members according to their specific needs.

2. We will be in prayer for our particular members *according to the things which we are taught to pray for in God's holy Word*.

This second manner of prayer—*according to God's Word*—means that we will endeavor to take a particular passage of Scripture per month which we will pray for the sheep in our care. An example of this would be using a particular verse of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), such as, "*Hallowed be thy name...*" In this case, Elders would take time to pray for this particular reality to be more and more present in the lives of the sheep whom we have been called to love and serve in the name of Jesus Christ. A new verse (or passage) will be selected by the Session each month.

Reporting & Holding One Another Accountable

Time will be set aside during each stated Session meeting to review the present spiritual condition and needs of the flock. During this time, each Elder will provide a verbal report on any particular sheep for whom special attention is needed.

Elders will also endeavor to lovingly support, strengthen, and hold one another accountable as to whether or not we are being faithful to fulfill the specific aims which have been outlined in this shepherding plan.

In Conclusion:

None of us will be a perfect shepherd; Jesus Christ is the only one who will ever be rightly called by that description. But by God's promised grace, it is our aim to strive to be faithful shepherds of the people of God who are under our care. We believe that being faithful shepherds means *knowing*, *feeding*, *leading*, and *protecting* the flock in our charge. May God help us fulfill this role in such a way that the needs of his chosen people are abundantly met and the glory of his own matchless name is abundantly displayed!

Soli Deo Gloria!

Appendix A:

General Guidelines For Determining the Health of the Sheep

²⁶ *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*

Acts 20:28

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

Hebrews 13:17

As those who have been called by God to “pay careful attention” to his beloved flock, and who will be required “to give an account” for our care of that flock, we have created the following general guidelines as a helpful tool for determining the spiritual health of particular members. We understand that no checklist is sufficient for diagnosing the state of the heart. We also understand that no man can fully know another person’s heart. Nevertheless, these external signs surely provide illuminating and helpful considerations as we endeavor to provide faithful spiritual care to God’s beloved people.

1. Healthy Sheep

- Regularly in Attendance in Lord’s Day Worship
- Regularly Involved in the Discipleship Ministries of the Church
- Personally Walking With God in Private Bible Study and Prayer
- Providing Spiritual Leadership in the Marriage and Family (*if applicable*)
- Regularly Pursuing Gospel-Centered Holiness
- Regularly Serving/Ministering To Others In Some Way

2. Weak Sheep

- Irregularly in Attendance in Lord’s Day Worship
- Irregularly Involved or Uninvolved in the Discipleship Ministries of the Church
- Irregular or Neglectful of Walking With God in Private Bible Study and Prayer
- Inconsistent or Neglectful of Providing Spiritual Leadership in the Marriage and Family (*if applicable*)
- Irregular or Neglectful of the Pursuit of Gospel-Centered Holiness
- Irregularly Involved or Uninvolved in Serving/Ministering To Others In Some Way

3. Stray Sheep

- Sporadically in Attendance in Lord’s Day Worship
- Uninvolved in the Discipleship Ministries of the Church
- Neglectful of Walking With God in Private Bible Study and Prayer
- Neglectful of Providing Spiritual Leadership in the Marriage and Family (*if applicable*)
- Neglectful in the Pursuit of Gospel-Centered Holiness
- Not Actively Serving/Ministering To Others In Some Way

4. Circumstantially Inactive Sheep

- This includes sheep who are providentially hindered from participation due to circumstances beyond their control. Examples of this include members who are in nursing homes or shut-in by other health concerns, those away at college or serving in the military, members who have recently relocated and have not yet transferred their membership to a new local church, etc.

5. Lost Sheep

- One who has essentially forsaken their connection to the local church altogether.

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