

The "Good News" of Church Membership By Preston Graham, Jr.

Introduction:

Eighty-one percent of Americans say "you don't have to go to church to be a good Christian." Are they right? And to be honest, doesn't this sound like "good news?" And whereas over 61% of students in today's universities are actively involved in some form of spirituality, over 77% of students agree that their spirituality "does not depend on being involved in a religious organization."¹ Imagine: no right and wrong dogma, no programs, no spiritual know it alls exercising oversight, no obligatory meetings (did I mention no obligatory meetings?), no "priestly pedophiles, no financial debacles... it's all enough to make one a neo-Buddhist—you know-- the kind that enables me to remain in my modern lifestyle with little to no ethical demands, having private access to the spiritual powers of the universe *while* in the quiet of my bedroom! John Lennon's "imagine no religion" has turned to "imagine no religious organizations." Again, it all sounds like good news doesn't it?

You see, it's not that we are secular but that we are *post-secular*. It isn't so much that we are "post-Christian but that we are "post-ecclesiasticum!" In other words, we are not against spirituality or even religion or even "Christian," but we are at best skeptical and at worst antagonistic toward organized spirituality, religion and especially "church!" You may in fact believe yourself to be a Christian saved by God's grace through faith alone, and yet you find the "church" thing to be very troubling. This skepticism is mostly informal and unorganized, albeit often in some semi-organized context outside of the visible church. We use the term "church," but in a way that speaks comfortably of "Christians throughout history" dismembered of any visible and definable aspect "on earth as it is in heaven." More recently our skepticism has been popularized in more blatant forms such as to even suggest that it would be unbiblical and sinful to participate in a visible church.²

And yet, coupled with all of this there remains a strange yearning for the trans-historical in our communal identity and a sense of the transcendent in our religious experience resulting from a growing awareness of a profound crisis in identity. What else explains the so called "Global Balkanization" into smaller and smaller family cells or ethnic rituals or genealogical studies that, according to *Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, represents "an eruption of a global identity crisis."*³ What else explains our insatiable hunger for consumption where the "self" is more and more defined by what we consume so as to be

¹ September 4, 2002 USA TODAY. 77% of students at Yale University agreed that their spirituality does not depend on being involved in a religious organization. (based upon a study conducted at Yale College in the Spring of 1995 by Michelle Dillon as part of Sociology 165b/506b "Survey Research.")

² Take for example Harold Camping's, *The End of the Church... and After* where he states: "Obedience to the command of Luke 21:20-24 can be accomplished in various ways. If a person or family is a member of a church, they can withdraw their membership and fellowship on Sundays with whomever there may be who are of like mind. If the individual or family are simply attending a church and are not members, they can stop attending that church but continue to fellowship outside of the church with individuals of like mind. If a congregation decides to be obedient to this command, they can reorganize their congregation from a church congregation to become a fellowship of believers. The elders will no longer be elders. The deacons will no longer be deacons. The pastor will no longer be pastor. In other words, no individuals will have spiritual rule over the congregation." (p.259-260)

³ *The Clash of Civilizations* (1998)

labeled the “Culture of Consumption.” And all of this as we are all so eager to experience the “sacred,” even if vicariously in a post-modern pub filled with the relics of church furniture past... such are the strange sorts of things that are happening in a post-secular time.

To say it plainly, we are a product of our times. We are a people that are nurtured by our enlightenment context to be both individualistic (with an emphasis on the *personal* in our relationship with Jesus) and rationalistic (with an emphasis on gaining a Christian worldview, apologetics, etc...) in our approach to religion. But we are also a people that are increasingly dissatisfied with the kind of religion all this has accomplished. As children of the Enlightenment, we are now Post-enlightenment in our quests and appetites. Perhaps also, as those who are “adopted by God,” we find that we still feel and experience Christianity like spiritual orphans. Isn’t it odd, *that 80 percent of Americans agreed that an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church or synagogue.*⁴ And yet, never has there been more spiritual “swip-swapping” as there is today, as for instance where one study has shown that over 60 percent of those spiritually active are in a religious context other than the one they grew up in.⁵ What a strange idea, to view Christian conversion and experience as somehow less authentic when in the context of a church, or is it? It all depends on what century you woke up!

For example, what was Cyprian thinking when he penned his famous pre-enlightened words about the visible church in 251 AD?

She is our mother, plentiful in the results of fruitfulness: from her womb we are born, by her milk we are nourished, by her spirit we are animated... Whoever is separated from the Church is separated from the promises to the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ... He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother. If any one could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside of the Church.

Again, what was Augustine thinking in the 4th century when he noted that “there is no salvation outside of the church,” or Martin Luther in the 17th century in a similar conclusion “outside this Christian church, there is no salvation or forgiveness of sins,” or John Calvin’s bold assertion concerning communion in the visible church, “**God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved**” (Ps. 46:5). *So available is communion with the Church to keep us in the fellowship of God.*

And so our question is this: What do we miss if we miss out on the church? According to these folk, we miss out on nothing less than salvation, forgiveness of sin and communion with God! We are as spiritual orphans without a mother! And I should be clear, not one of these folk believed that the church had the inherent power to save us, forgive us, or be as God to us! Rather, they all understood that there is something about our salvation that assumed a very real, albeit mediated presence of God as through the rights and rituals, community and *one-anothering* of the local and visible church founded upon the apostles teachings, as appointed by Christ himself the cornerstone! (Eph.2:19-22)

To be sure, the temptation is to refute the above statistics in a legalistic way— e.g. to show how it is the case that to be a “good Christian” one *must* go to church. However, my greater

⁴ Gallop Poll taken in 1978.

⁵ See Yale Study noted above.

concern is to challenge the underlying assumption that “church” is something we would do only IF “we have to.” For if the reader of the previous chapter is convinced that the gospel IS “good news” and that we are “children of God,” then the present objective within our “post-ecclesiasticum” context is to recommend the church as an *essential* element of the gospel, much the same way that living in a home and having a family is essential to being a child. It doesn’t make us who we are, but it certainly makes us to experience who we are! Yes, there *are* some good reasons to be skeptical about “organized” religion in general, the Christian church in particular. The church has its problems! All the more reason to rediscover the church as an essential element of the gospel, if per chance we can not only join one, but participate in the work of God in preserving her for her glorious destiny. The following then is an abbreviated rationale for the “good news” of Church membership. And if the reader is convinced that to join a church is a good thing, then some advice is offered as an addendum as to the kinds of things you could look for in deciding which church to join and offer yourself as a “living and holy sacrifice of service” (Rom. 12:1-3).

Our study will be directed by three questions:

- 1) Should I “Believe” in the church as an essential element of the gospel?
- 2) Should I join a church as an authentic expression of Christian conversion and discipleship?
- 3) Should I live in submission to Christ’s authority as mediated in church government?

First Question: Should I “Believe” in the church as an essential element of the gospel?

In my early years of being a Christian, I sometimes found myself in a context where the so called “Apostles Creed” was recited. Inevitably, we came to the part that reads “I believe in the one holy apostolic church” and every time, I would stop reciting. “It’s one thing to believe in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” I thought to myself, “but the church... surely this is a remnant phrase from medieval Christianity.” So why have so many people in every age recited it as their own confession? Eventually, my own spiritual journey within the evangelical context led me to address this question. Having experienced evangelicalism in its fullness as a para-church minister, I was all the more aware that I still lacked something in my Christian experience... so off to seminary I went, not only to be more theologically grounded but especially to think about the “Church Question.” I will not here bore you with my own personal journey, but I will very briefly tell you how I now answer the “Church Question” today when asked.

Again, the question is this: Can I confess as a matter of personal conviction that “I believe in the One Holy Catholic Church?” More specifically, by “one holy catholic church” it is meant the church that is both *invisible* to me as the church consisting of all true believers in Christ of every time and people group (albeit visible only to God) and *visible* to me such as to include the church that is local and definable as by its specific teachings, rituals and government? Can I confess “I believe” in this church? My answer is “yes!” And here is the reasons why, very briefly.

I am now convinced that throughout the history of Redemption as told in the Bible, there was NEVER a time when God’s salvation plan (the gospel) was not mediated through visible rites and rituals, confessions and teachings, pastoral care giving and one-anothering, as visibly organized into a regulated assembly of God’s people (the church). To say it differently, the salvation of God was accomplished not merely by the spreading of information about God, but

by the sometimes *immediate*, but mostly *mediated* presence of God in the midst of the people he was saving. Therefore, to not participate in the assembly as God organized and defined it was to not participate in the mediated presence of God! To speak of salvation history is to necessarily speak of a temple history, albeit a history of the temple that was organized in different ways, in different places under different covenantal terms, but a temple all the same wherein the defining mark of God's people was that God was in their midst. About the Bible as a book of redemption, Lesslie Newbigin has said it this way:

[It is] not the story of ideas about God, but the story of the people of God...the gospel does not come to each of us in isolation. It comes to us through a particular book and through a particular fellowship... it is a false spirituality, divorced from the whole teaching of the Bible, which regards this visible and continuing church as of subordinate importance for the life of Christ... God meets us through his people here and now in the form of an actual invitation into the fellowship of a body of people calling themselves one Church.⁶

Think about it, isn't it true that throughout redemptive history, "salvation" and "divine presence" go hand in hand. Without presence, there is no salvation—even as this is woven into the very fabric of Biblical history from the very beginning to the end! Consider:

The story begins with God coming down from his heavenly temple to create an earthly temple as accomplished and established by his divine presence. Isaiah describes the visible and invisible cosmos using the temple imagery, "thus says Yahweh, heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool" even as the Psalmist affirmed that "God is in his holy temple, his throne is in the heavens" (Ps.11:4). Such descriptions perfectly correspond to the language of Genesis 1:2 "heavens (plural) and earth" such as to refer to the spiritual/invisible and the physical/visible realms respectively.⁷

From the context of a heavenly temple, Genesis one then describes God's creation of "earth below" as the creation of a replica temple after the pattern of the heavenly temple, even as this is a context for salvation. In short, it can be demonstrated how God's *creative* actions in Genesis 1 are very carefully described as God's *saving* actions which then is very carefully identified with God's *presence* manifest by "the spirit of God" (Gen.1:2b). And all of this is carefully told in language that is identified with the temple.⁸ The point is not to raise

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, pp.27,29

⁷ Note, "earth" of vs. 2 will include the whole physical realm of both heaven above and earth below in vs. 6-8... thus "heavens" (plural) are a reference to the invisible dwelling of God who is seated upon his throne. C.f. Jer.32:17, Col.1:16... Other references then to the pre-creation heavenly temple—Is.66:1, Ps93, Is40:21ff, Ps.11:4, 1K.22:19, Is.6:1ff, Rev.4:4)

⁸The language "without form and void" that is used to describe pre-existence is used elsewhere in the Hebrew to describe that which is under a curse needing salvation and restoration cf. Jer.4:23-26 and the words "without form and void" are identified by Jeremiah as resulting from God's curse and therefore needing his salvation! More specifically, the language is used to reference the desert wasteland in Dt. 32:10, as a destroyed city in Is.24:10 and as moral and spiritual emptiness in 1Sam.12:31, Is. 29:21, 41:29, 44:9, 45:19, etc. But notice then how this salvation is accomplished in Genesis 1—most essentially, by "the spirit of God" who is "hovering" over the face of the waters." Again, this is significant in that the description is one in the same as the "glory cloud" that led Israel through the wilderness. According to Deuteronomy 32:10-11, the same word "hovering" is used to describe God's divine presence in leading Israel through a wilderness, even as the wilderness is described using the same terms as above translated "without form and void. E.g. The Exodus event was nothing short of a new creation event, even as the Exodus event would climax in the establishment of the Temple. That the earth was to be the temple of God is further illustrated by God "resting" at the completion of his divine activity, as this word in the Hebrew is explicitly linked to worship in the temple. For instance, after identifying heaven and earth as God's "throne-room"

questions about pre-creation order, but merely to establish that creation is a place that reveals God in his salvation, even as creation was created to be God's holy temple of presence! As the creation before the fall enjoyed God's immediate and saving presence, the temple of Eden is going to be identified with the consummate temple that will be accomplished by God at the end of the story. For instance, Ezekiel 47 describes salvation in both temple and new-creation terms reminiscent of Eden and the Old Covenant temple. This is again repeated in Revelation 21 using language from Leviticus 26.

So then, it will not surprise us that the commission of humanity was none other than a priestly commission. Humanity "made in God's image" is linked to the "Spirit of God" in Genesis 1:26-27, even as the language of commission in 1:27-29 is clearly linked to the role of a priest in guarding the sacred presence of God as mediated in the temple.⁹ Thus, in so far as Eden was a temple sanctuary of God, as humanity was called to the vocation of priestly guardianship, it is not surprising that the curse put upon humanity for failing in its priestly duties is described in terms reminiscent of an excommunication from the temple from out of the presence of God.¹⁰ Similar language is also used in the New Covenant to describe the curse in terms of being cut off from the presence of God as in 2 Th. 1:9 "These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the *presence* of the Lord and from the glory of His power."

So then, what was lost? Was it merely knowledge about God needing a saving message? Hardly! The curse on humanity was banishment or excommunication from the salvific presence of God, which of course raises the question, what should we expect as a "salvation" except the re-entry into God's presence? Surely the curse of God against sin begs for a restoration of God's presence--and this is exactly what God provided in a mediated way to the elect through the institution of the Old and New Covenant church until He provides for it again in an immediate way in the consummation of heaven!

The "gospel" or "good news" is stated by Paul in no uncertain terms as the restoration into God's glorious and consummate presence in 1 Th. 2:19, "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the *presence* of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?" The full gospel is having God in our midst, to be in the presence of the *living* God. It is more, much more, than merely a change in world and life view (although it is this). It is more, much more, than merely having an orthodox faith--it is to have an orthodox communion. It is being restored into God's immediate presence, albeit provisionally mediated through the visible church until that day when our salvation is completed in the heavenly church. So then, redemptive history is put into the context of redemptive book-ends--where all of history is about God's holy temple, one that was perfect in Eden and will be made

this word for "rest" is used in Isaiah 66:1 when God asks-- "what manner of house will you build me and what shall be the place of my "rest." This description of the temple as the "resting place" of God is explicitly linked to God being worshipped in his temple according to Psalms. 132-- "Let us go to his dwelling place, let us worship at his footstool (throne). Arise, Yahweh to your resting place, the ark of your strength!"

⁹ This is nowhere more graphic than when the terms are re-commissioned upon the cherubim and seraphim in Gen.3:24, even as the image of the guarding cherubim and seraphim was carefully woven into the tapestry that guarded the "holy of holies" according to Exodus 26:1.

¹⁰ We are told in Gen. 3:8 how Adam and Eve (together with their posterity) were literally excommunicated "from before God's face" and escorted out from Eden on the East side. The significance of this is that the entrance to the Old Covenant temple was always facing the East just as "presence" was always associated with the temple. Such language is the same language of Leviticus 23 describing excommunication from the Old Testament temple.

perfect again at the end of the age. Everything in between is the story of God's provisional salvation as mediated through the temporal means of grace awaiting the full and completed salvation.

To be pick up then with the fall and the subsequent salvation promised in Genesis 3:15ff, story between the redemptive book-ends goes something like this:

First, there was the "temple" presence of god in the Ark of Noah. For instance, the same language used in Gen. 1:2b is used in Genesis 8:1 to describe the saving presence of God "hovering" over the waters. And the ark was made with three levels that were the same exact height as the tabernacle and the three sections on each deck were the same dimensions as the tabernacle court, even as the same language used in creation is also used in to describe Noah's building of the ark, and is again used to describe the building of the temple".¹¹ In short, the Ark, is the "new Eden" likened unto the tabernacle-- it is the safe house whereby God mediates himself in a special way to the elect remnant of Seth! And, as according to Cyprian, the ark is like the church as the sacred "refuge" unto salvation!

Second, there is the temple of the Patriarch at Bethel. "Bethel" means "house of God" and was the "place" for covenant renewal which anticipated the temple under the Mosaic covenant and even our Lord's Table which today. The "place" was set apart by the sacrificial offering made at an altar. This place was clearly anticipating the tabernacle under the Sinai covenant.¹² E.g. Bethel was place of divine presence as mediated through the entrance rite of circumcision and the renewal rite of sacrifice.

Third, there was the Mosaic temple that was instituted at Sinai. What is particularly relevant is how Moses in Ps.90 acknowledges that the Lord is present, as within the temple of creation, He has then been the dwelling place in all generations (v.1).. Moses then returns at the close of the Psalm to his opening theme, praying that the Shekinah Glory the tabernacle of Eden, might continue to appear in its beauty over God's covenant people (vs. 16-17). In short, Moses himself understood that the temple of the Old Covenant was meant to be a provisional temple after the pattern of Eden. The temple is further identifies with a new creation as set apart for salvation by God's divine presence throughout the structure of Exodus itself.¹³ The same spirit that consecrated creation is shown to be filling the

¹¹ The language "did exactly as God commanded him so he did"-- similar formulae recurs rarely in the Pentateuch, except at the erection of the tabernacle (Exod 39:32, 42; 40:16) yard! Note also 2 Peter 3:7-12: As the ark was designed and prepared by God to be able to withstand God's judgment, carrying God's people safely through God's judgment, so our Lord Jesus, the God-man, chosen as the Redeemer of God's elect before the world's foundation, was able to withstand God's judgment, and to carry God's people safely through it. He drank the wine of the cup of God's wrath, The Ark of Salvation under Noah's jurisdiction pre-figured the tabernacle under the jurisdiction of Moses which pre-figures the ark of Salvation under the ultimate jurisdiction of Christ and represents passages through judgment into a new creation and mediated through the new temple.

¹² Cf. Gen.12:8, 31:13, and especially 28:16-17 and then 35:1ff. etc. Note also the entrance rite of circumcision in Gen. 15:1ff

¹³ The Book of Exodus recalls the account of the original creation in Genesis by adopting the same "fiat-fulfillment structure of the day stanzas of Gen. 1 as the format for its account of the building of the tabernacle. E.g. Ex.25-31 presents the divine fiat commands and Ex 35-40 contains the corresponding account of fulfillment.. this pattern repeats within the narrative of the actual setting up of the tabernacle in Exodus 40, the divine directives are given first in vs. 1-5, then the execution in 16-33. Then of course the Sabbath motif that informs Gen.1:1-2:32 is prominent in the account of the tabernacle as echoed in Ex.40:33, 39:43 that echoes the seventh day conclusion of the creation (Gen.2:2) Thus, the spirit who structured the cosmic temple by divine wisdom was also the primary builder of the tabernacle.

tabernacle as enthroned above the cherubim in the holy of holies (cf. Ex.40:34). Heb. 9:23-24 identifies how the Mosaic tabernacle is a replica of heavenly tabernacle, which is a type of the greater tabernacle that is to come (Heb.9:11). Therefore, Mosaic temple was a new creation temple of God, as yet pointing to the future and perfect temple that would be accomplished by God in the last days. To be sure, ask any Israelite under the Old Covenant, there was no salvation outside of the temple context. God met with the covenant people through the means of Old Covenant sacraments. The language of "temple" is used over 300 times. And no one disputes that this was the language of God's meeting or "dwelling" with his people (cf. Lev.26, Ex.29, 40) There was a "place" where it was said that God dwelt among them, of course not immediately, but mediated through the rituals, government and teachings of the temple. So then, according to Deut. 12:5:

"But you shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His **dwelling place**; and there you shall go.

We can't miss it! God was not merely a philosophy or doctrine, God was *living* as his mediated presence was a vital part of the salvific plan. As such, surely David understood that God was in one sense present everywhere, and yet he could say about the temple in Psalm 42:2, "My soul thirsts for God, for the **living God**. When shall I come and appear before God?" (cf. Pss. 84:2) Orthodoxy under the OC was described in terms like "dwelling place", presence, living God, tabernacle and was accomplished by feasts, rituals and social parenting.

Thomas Oden says it this way, his *Beyond Modernity... What?*

Where did we get the twisted notion that orthodoxy is essentially a set of ideas rather than a living tradition of social experience? Our stereotype of orthodoxy is that of frozen dogma, rather than a warm continuity of human experience-- of grandmothers teaching granddaughters, of feasts and stories, of rites and dancing. Orthodoxies are never best judged by their doctrinal ideas, but more so by their social products the quality of their communities... They await being studied sociologically, not just theologically.

Fourth, as we come into the New Covenant era, perhaps some will mistakenly conclude that as the Old Covenant temple was annulled, much like the Bethel temple for it, there is therefore NO new temple. But consider very carefully the language of the apostles. Paul's teaching for us under the New Covenant was no different than the prophetic teaching under the Old Covenant, that salvation is described with the promise "I will dwell with them" (2 Cor. 6:16). Likewise, one thinks of 1Cor.10 where the two, fellowship with God and fellowship with one another in the church is inextricably linked as by our sacred ritual of the Lord's supper. Communion with God and communion of the saints IS related, even as illustrated by the "greatest command" to "love God... and your neighbor..."

Under the New Covenant, this conception of "tabernacle" is mediated through different corporate structures related to the activity of the Holy Spirit for the church. Paul teaches that "we are the temple of God" and immediately applies the promises and exhortations once given to the Old Covenant church to the New Covenant church (2 Cor. 6:16-18, see then Exek. 37:26, Is. 52:11, 2 Sam. 7:14.). In Ephesians, there is no uncertainty as to the fact that the new covenant church is nothing less than the new temple of God. In Ephesians 2 for instance, Paul says it this way:

19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the **household of God**, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a **holy temple** in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are built together the Spirit into a **dwelling place for God**.

What is of particular interest is how Paul describes the gospel as related to temple formation Ephesians, even in a way that cannot be disengaged from a whatever individual benefits that we have in Christ. So for instance, in Ephesians 2:1-10, Paul uses a “once... but now” framework to describe how we were once “dead” in our sins and under God’s wrath but we are now alive in Christ. Most of us would stop at vs. 10 and say “this is the gospel.” But Paul doesn’t stop there, he repeats the same “once.. but now” framework to describe the formation of a community and called it the “temple of God” in vs. 11ff. Paul’s theology concerning the gospel is as much about community formation, albeit regulated and defined by God via the “apostolic foundation” as is about a personal relationship with God! So then, the gospel is defined in ecclesial terms by Paul in 1Tim.3:15-16, as the household of God... the church of the living God... the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” But what exactly does Paul mean by “the church of the living God?” The answer as discovered by even a brief review of 1 Timothy. For indeed, Paul has been describing an authorized form of teaching (1 Timothy 1), government (1 Timothy 3), and worship (1 Timothy 2). It was therefore of no small consequence to Paul that he gave instruction to both Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete to “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). Therefore, would it surprise us to discover that Paul’s “standard of sound teaching” (2 Timothy 1:13) consisted not only of teachings regarding the nature of God and the work of Christ, but also teachings regarding the function and ordering of the visible church.

Finally, the redemptive story ends with the consummation of history described in Revelations 21 so as to be both a “new heaven and earth” *and* a new “temple” of God. The passage references both Leviticus 26:9 and Genesis 1-2 in the same way that the prophet Ezekiel does in Ezekiel 47! That is to say that the climax of the covenant has indeed become real in the living and *immediate* presence of God as anticipated by prior mediated and provisional presences of God in both the Old and New Covenant contexts. In the words of Revelations 21:1-4,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“Behold, the tabernacle of God is among humanity,
and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people,
and God Himself shall be among them,
and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes;
and there shall no longer be any death;
there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain;
the first things have passed away.”

Returning then to our original question, *Is the church an essential element of the gospel?* A theology of salvation as through redemptive history will answer with a resounding “YES!” We therefore notice in Acts that “evangelism was never merely “rationalistic” but also sacramentalistic in the formation of new churches. Again, did Paul consider his work completed when people received the message of the gospel? Not at all! Rather he made it

his business to finish the task by appointing elders in the places where he had seen a harvest (Acts 14:23), even as people were baptized into the community of faith (Acts 2:28, 41, 8:12,36, 9:18, 10:48, etc). The ultimate object of his labors was new churches. And while we clearly see preaching as one of the means used by the apostles in Acts (2:41, 47, 4:4, 5:14, 6:7, 8:4-7), we come to this striking observation in Acts 9:31: "then the *churches* throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified." In other words, as summary to the work of the apostles, what we see is that church planting had been co-extensive with preaching. Numerous churches were the result of the apostles' evangelism.

All of this explains what Christ commanded in Matthew 16:15:19. From the immediate context, we know that Jesus is looking forward to His atoning death and resurrection (vs. 21) followed then by his resurrection and ascension into heaven. How then would the long-awaited messianic kingdom be present if Christ has been raised up into heaven? How would His disciples remain under His kingdom power and authority? Notice that by Christ's own authorization, the church is provided with the power of the "keys" so as to have the authorized responsibility of "binding and loosing," which at the very least must include the authority to determine terms of membership/communion in the authorized covenant community. I say this because the meaning of "keys" is derived from the Old Testament description (1 Chron. 9:17-27, Nehemiah 7:1ff) as applied to the temple "gatekeepers" and their duty of employing keys to open it every morning. The gatekeepers were literally to "guard" (Neh. 7:3ff) the entrance into the Temple. And would it surprise us to know that this is the exact same language that was applied to the priestly role of humanity in the garden (Gen.1:27-28), to the cherubim and seraphim outside of Eden (Ge.3:4) and to the priest in the temple. This image of "keys" is expanded in Isaiah 22:20-22, foreshadowing the ministry of the Messiah. Christ's point in Mt. 16 is to affirm this messianic role albeit mediated through the messianic assembly built upon the foundation of the apostles. In the exercise of the "keys" of the kingdom, the gatekeepers (church officers in succession to the apostolic office) will open and shut the doors of the visible kingdom of heaven. This will keep the people safe from the kingdom of darkness.

Likewise, the language of "binding and loosing" is an ancient near eastern way of describing the authority to exercise government. For instance, the word "bind" is almost always used in describing the exercise of government, bringing someone under justice or a sentence of some sort, to be legally restrained; e.g., Herod's arrest of John is referred to as "binding" (Mt. 14:3) and so too the arrest of Jesus (Mt. 27:2). To "bind" someone is to put them under a sentence, thus restraining them. So also, the term "loose" is used when the sentence is pardoned or when someone is restored in a right relation to the governed community. That this language speaks of the exercise of government is clearly evidenced in Mt. 18:15-18. In this passage, the point is in reference to the use of authorized exercise of government in the Temple (given that Christ is here speaking while still under the "Old Covenant"). His point is that God is present (authorizes) such exercise of government to affect a person's relationship with the covenant community, then the Temple community.

Therefore, as in the meaning of the language in Mt. 16, Calvin said, "But the church binds him whom it excommunicates – not that it casts him into everlasting ruin and despair, but because it condemns his life and morals and already warns him of his condemnation unless he should repent. It looses him whom it receives into communion for it makes him a sharer of the unity which it has in Christ Jesus." Notice also that this is said to be taking place on "earth" while being authorized "in heaven." No clearer language could be used to affirm the biblical propriety, even mandate, for the church acting as the temple of God. Therefore, this

passage asserts that Christ and Christ alone is both the founder and administrator of the church, and that His earthly administration of authority is to be mediated through the form of government built through the apostles as represented here by Peter.

Therefore, the “church” or “ecclesia” of Matthew 16 is clearly a reference to the temple, albeit a temple that is under a new covenant context. In the words of Meredith Kline:

‘The new covenant community is identified with the holy court of the heavenly assembly by its very designation as *ekklesia*. IN its secular application, this term is used for political bodies assembled for deliberative purposes. But most significant is the equivalence of *ekklesia* with *qabal*, which in the OT is preeminently the assembly at Sinai-Zion, the gathering covenant people at the site of the presence of the glory spirit, the king of Glory enthroned in the midst of this angelic retinue (cf. Acts 7:38, Heb.12:18-25). Indeed the total role of the church as an assembly for the adoration of God, the celebration of the sabbatical enthronement of the Creator-Redeemer and the service of the Lord reveals it to be a replication of the glory spirit assembly of the heavenly Zion.”

Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*

In sum, we can believe in the church as an essential element of the gospel, all church “messes” notwithstanding. And the **good news** is this— when a person is saved by grace through faith alone, he/she is not then left without a home as defined by the presence of their heavenly father, but is defined as once a stranger to the household of God being adopted into God’s household in Ephesians 2. We are not alone in this earth, even as Christ is making good his promise to be with us until the end of the age in ways infinitely practical through human mediated shepherding, teaching and sacraments in the context of the Holy Spirit! Do you need to be assured of God’s love for you? Participate in the Lord’s Supper under the authority of the church and in the context of the preaching of God’s grace revealed in Christ on any given Sunday! And if you are not in a church that brings you to Christ and this living gospel in the living presence of God each Sunday, you should consider finding such a church!

Second Question: Should I join a church as an authentic expression of Christian conversion and discipleship?

Of course, there is the very real and sad reality of the church's past failures that undermine church commitment. We all know how the church has either misused or simply not used its God given powers to the hurt of God's people. Membership in the visible church is either forsaken as a non-essential aspect of the Christian life, or simply tolerated as some meaningless antic on the grounds that the church has failed. Yet as tragic as this typical scenario has become, the logic of such a position would defy many of our other commitments if consistently applied. For instance, most Christians don't cease to be committed to the institution of marriage by means of taking vows simply because some marriages have failed. Or who would think of not being committed to our citizenship in America every time a politician lets us down. So perhaps there is something more serious, more prevailing and indeed, more difficult for us to see that undermines a willingness to commit to church membership than simply the church's failures in the past. This is the implication of the now widely acclaimed study of Robert Bellah et. al. under the title *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.

As the above title suggests, this social analysis demonstrates that modern America might be infected with a virus called *individualism*. It is argued that the corollary to individualism is

the demise of "*commitment in American Life*." Bellah, together with his fellow sociologists, conclude that individualism, in its multi-faceted complexity, has resulted in the deterioration of commitment as applied to most of our cultural, political, educational, social, vocational and yes, even our religious institutions. In cases where commitment seemed to be maintained, the study reveals that commitment to institutions is often more for the sake of meeting individual needs than for the sake of the community itself. This has resulted in a more "consumeristic" attitude together with the rise of therapeutic expectations in our commitments to a given community.

In relation to religious institutions, Bellah argues that individualism has resulted in a tragic reversal in how one understands his/her faith in relation to the religious community. This "reversal is summarized by Bellah in the following way:

For Americans, the traditional relationship between the individual and the religious community is to some degree reversed. On the basis of our interviews, we are not surprised to learn that a 1978 Gallop poll found that 80 percent of Americans agreed that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church or synagogue." From the traditional point of view, this is a strange statement-- it is precisely within the church or synagogue that one comes to one's religious beliefs-- but to many Americans it is the Gallup finding that is normal.

Therefore, the question raised by all of this is, How much of our disdain or non-conviction with respect to membership in the church is really our reading of scripture and how much is it our being contextualized within an "anti-membership" culture? One could also ask the question, How much has modern religious institutions accommodated to individualism by its own unwillingness to challenge this assumption? And of course, the most important question is, are we serving the best interest of Christian disciples in not bringing them to the benefits of church membership as an authentic expression of true Christian conversion and discipleship?

Our answer to this second questions is perfectly illustrated by the now famous, albeit often misunderstood, conversion experience of Augustine as told in his *Confessions*--here only briefly reviewed.¹⁴ AS told by Augustine himself, wee notice how:

1. There Was An Intellectual Dynamic To Augustine's Conversion:

Having been raised in a "half" Christian home (his father a pagan and mother a Christian), Augustine in his adolescence drifted away from his mothers Christianity. In his language, he rejected the Catholic "simplicity" and was drawn to the "sophistication of Cicero." His journey back to Christ began intellectually in a journey from the elitism of Manicheism (dualism) to a period of skepticism to Platonism and eventually to Christianity through the preaching of Ambrose, pastor of Milan. He confessed that through Platonism and Ambrose he came to understand and accept the truth. And yet, "it is one thing to see the land of peace... and quite another to hold to the way that leads there." (7:21) "For the law of sin is the fierce force of habit, by which the mind is drawn and held even against its will and yet deservedly because it had fallen willfully into the habit." (8:5) During this time, Augustine remained in his relationship with a concubine.

¹⁴ Paraphrased here from David Well's, *Turning To God*

Christianity was now Augustine's "philosophy"-- he was "intellectually" converted, and yet this was met by a growing in his frustration with his inability to overcome his sin, most especially his sexual lusts.

2. There is A Moral Dynamic To Christian Conversion

One day he was reading and meditating alone in a walled garden... he heard a child's voice saying, "Take and read, take and read." He picked up the Scriptures and read Romans 13:13-14:

Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill its lusts.

Augustine was deeply *effected* by these words such that he later recollected, "By your gift I had come totally not to will what I had willed but to will what you willed." (9.1) Augustine was "morally" converted, or perhaps better converted to what people used to call "experimental" religion in that his dogma "effected" him as by the effectual calling of God as accompanied by the Holy Spirit.

Interestingly, many have referred to this event in Augustine's life as if to complete his journey into conversion. And yet Augustine himself will direct us to yet another event that led to the completion of his personal conversion resulting in assurance and confirmation. For this second "moral" aspect of conversion led him to an asceticism as was common to his day in response to the formalism and nominalism of the church. He was more or less a self-authenticating Christian which led him to an never ending introspection that could never satisfy his yearning for acceptance and peace with God. Augustine felt his conversion was not yet complete... what was he lacking?

3. There IS ALSO An Ecclesiastical Dynamic To Christian Conversion

Acts 2:37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" 38 Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." 40 And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." 41 So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Augustine believed he had repented, but something was still lacking. He later wrote, "thus in that depth I recognized the act of your will and I gave praise to your name rejoicing in faith. But this faith would not let me feel safe about my past sins, since your baptism had not yet come to remit them." (9.4) Augustine had not yet been incorporated into the body of Christ through Christian baptism. (Notice especially the connection in the above passage with being baptized and the corporate activity of participating together in covenant renewal rites and fellowship)

The evening before Easter, April 24, 387, Ambrose baptized Augustine and many others. Augustine later reflected... "We were baptized and all anxiety as to our past life fled away." (9.6)

In Augustine's life, having never been baptized as a child, he awaited FULL ASSURANCE in the context of church confirmation via initiation into the body of Christ. No doubt, Augustine would have been asked to give some sort of "vows" before Ambrose would baptize him. These "vows" as related to his being admitted to Christ's covenant table-- the rite of fellowship with God and the body of Christ. Augustine was thus ecclesiastically converted and he received assurance within the context of the believing community-- identifying with Christ even as Christ was mediated to him through his body left on earth in the church!

Augustine understood as documented by his *Confessions* that true conversion has at least these three dynamics-- He wrote his confession in testimony to God's electing and pursuing grace-- a view that was later strengthened in the Pelagian controversy and Donatist controversy as related to church membership as an essential element of true discipleship. Augustine's point about church membership is summarized by the conversation recorded in his *Confessions*, where

Victorinus, Said to Simplicianus, --not openly, but secretly, and as a friend,--'know thou that I am a Christian,' To which he replied, 'I will not believe it, nor will I rank you among the Christians unless I see you in the Church of Christ.' (VIII.ii.4)

Augustine's full conversion illustrates what the Bible clearly teaches as related to authentic Christian conversion and Christian discipleship. There are several ways to defend this, not least of which as pertaining the meaning and proper participation of the Lord's Supper.

A person who would partake of Christ's table is exhorted in 1Cor.11: to "examine" him/herself. The question this raises is "after what standard" since all examination requires some sort of criteria by which to judge. Paul's instructions leading up to his exhortation are extremely revealing.

1Cor.10:15 I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. **16** The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? **17** Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Paul's theology of the covenant renewal at Christ's table is clearly stated as pertinent to both a person's "vertical" relationship with God AND their "horizontal" relationship with God's covenant people. The language used here is "koinonia" (communion, fellowship, participation) as then related to "partaking" of Christ within the context of Christ's body, the church. So then, Paul applies his "vertical" theology by means of exhortations related to the avoidance of idolatry (vs. 7-14) contra partaking in Christ. Paul also applies his "horizontal" theology by means of exhortations related to divisions in the church contra partaking of Christ's body, the church.

1Cor. 11:17 Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. **18** For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. **19** Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. **20** When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. **21** For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. **22** What! Do you not have homes to eat and

drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! **1Cor. 11:23** For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread,

The clear implication is of course that for people to fully experience the grace of the Lord's Supper, one must not only "repent" of their trust in idols in order to find true life, but one must also repent of those sins against the body of Christ, not least of which is the sin of "schism." And what is "schism" if not to avoid joining oneself in a covenantal way--- both as related to the Biblical teaching on "making vows" as per covenant initiation, and "one-anothering" as per covenant keeping.

1. The Significance of vows as related to authentic conversion:

There is a curious teaching in the Bible, to be sure, when it teaches that a person is saved when they "confess with your lips" (Rom.10:9). Evidently, it is not enough that we merely "believe in our hearts" as a private exercise of faith. Our faith is expected to be actualized in a public context wherein there is a "*public* profession of faith." What does this mean exactly? What precedent do we have in the Old Covenant that would perhaps make sense off this New Covenant teaching about what it means to be a Christian?

We should notice first of all that a "public confession" is expressed in the taking of vows, even as these vows were central to both *initiation* and *renewal* within covenant communities. For instance, covenant renewal worship was often referred to in its relation to initiating vows-- as in the language of "make your vows" and then later "fulfill" or "pay" your vows" in the following passages. And notice especially the "congregational" context of these exhortations!

Pss. 22:25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

Pss. 50:14 Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High.

Pss. 56:12 My vows to you I must perform, O God; I will render thank offerings to you.

Pss. my vows; you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.

Pss. 61:8 So I will always sing praises to your name, as I pay my vows day after day.

Pss. 65:1 Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed,

Pss. 66:13 I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will pay you my vows,

Pss. 76:11 Make vows to the LORD your God, and perform them; let all who are around him bring gifts to the one who is awesome,

Pss. 116:14 I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.

Prov. 7:14 "I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows;

Prov. 20:25 It is a snare for one to say rashly, "It is holy," and begin to reflect only after making a vow.

Eccl. 5:4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools.

Fulfill what you vow. 5 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfill it.

In the NT context, there is nothing said that would annul this aspect of authentic covenant renewal, and yet many passages suggest their continuation. So for instance, Christ doesn't annul vows, but rather affirms them in so far as he seeks to reform them against insincerity.

Matt. 5:33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.'... **37** Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Likewise, whatever else is required of authentic Christian conversions, there is the public event as related to Baptism, both applied to converting adults, and in so far as the children of these adults were to be raised within the jurisdiction of the Christian church, so to their children. So then, when a person asked, what must be do to be saved, Paul didn't say, pray this sinners prayer with me and go on your marry way! Rather, he said, turn away or "repent," (presumably as from previous false confidences unto salvation which then assumes "faith" in the positive aspect of putting ones confidence and trust to Christ for the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting) AND be "baptized for the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 2:38ff)! What is baptism except an entrance into the sacramental community of faith, even the sacramental presence of God unto salvation as per the above? This then makes sense of Paul's later teaching:

Rom. 10:9 because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. **10** For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. **11** The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame."

Again, as was discussed earlier, the context of the Lord's table as a renewal rite is clearly related to some initiation whereby a person commits his/herself to the body of Christ. To "break ranks" was shown to be in violation of their covenant renewal itself. A covenant renewal assumes a covenant initiation, presumably by the taking of vows as in other covenants and in this case as related to ones faith in Christ and willingness to put themselves at his mercy as mediated through His church. By "confess with your mouth," what else could it refer to if not as Paul clarified in 1 Cor. 10 and 11 referring to both the vertical and horizontal dynamic of Christian discipleship—communion with God and communion with one another in a covenantal context respectively?

The "**good news**" is this-- public confession/vows brings security to relationships such as to legitimate our needing one another. Even apart from the Bible, can observe how there IS something authenticating about "vows" in so far as relationships in general are concerned-- we all know it if even intuitively. It is the difference, for instance, between a couple who live together but suffer the absence of relationship "security" or "assurance" that is often felt by persons without wedding vows. Not that vows are unbreakable, but they at least effect relationships in a way that says, "I know at least that this is your intention and you have put your public reputation behind it." It's a "coming out" such that all future actions and activities may be judged accordingly-- thus a kind of authenticating quality to relationships as related to vows. Subsequently, in the marriage covenant, a couple will "renew" these vows both by rite of the marriage bed and as related to the meaning of the marriage bed in so far as a couple acts as one for the duration of their life. Now of course we all know that because we are all sinners, there will need to be grace in the relationship as well. But this does not disqualify the value of vows-- it only supports it in so far as people are committed to one another "for better or worse." People will never feel comfortable asking for help to those that have never affirmed a commitment to one another for help. This is what covenant vows do in marriage as well as in churches. By taking "vows" we say-- "you can count on me to the best of my ability... " To never join is to never hear, in so many words, a congregation say this to you as well. Vows are wonderful things in so far as they establish commitment in a way that fosters genuine and sincere practice. They become the basis for our common good in so far as they express our common assumptions about our core values and intentions. As a

pastor, I have seen it many times, people who join the church often express a sense of "I'm home" in a way that before their public vows, they never could.¹⁵

2. The significance of "one-anothering" as the related to membership vows:

Perhaps today people would be more eager to "vow" in church membership if more grace were evidenced in church member's commitments to one another for "better or for worse." Perhaps in some cases our expectations of one another is unrealistic-- we ought not to have expectations that exceed God's working in one another's lives in whatever unique situation or calling a person is called to. Some will for instance flee membership in fear of letting others down. To them we say, bring what you can and we trust God that this is enough. At the very least, we can bring our bodies to worship and our prayers for the worshippers. To others, perhaps some misnomers about "excommunication" are behind the fear as well. The reality is that church excommunication is as narrowly regulated with respect to the church as "divorce" is narrowly regulated with respect to marriage. In each case, the very limited situations are determined only after every gracious attempt has failed to restore the relationship. And of course, this is for another day-- the point here being that membership "vows" make sense if even thought about from a practical standpoint. And yet this is all the more something we should do given that the scriptures teach it. *Authentic* Christianity is always related to the "culture" of "one-anothering" as worked out in authentic ways. To list the "one-anothering" clauses in the NT would literally fill several pages. This in itself ought to tell us something about authentic Christianity. The "one-anothering culture" of authentic Christianity is epitomized by the following examples.

Rom. 13:8 Owe no one anything except to love **one another**, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Rom. 15:7 Therefore receive **one another**, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.

Rom. 16:16 Greet **one another** with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you.

1Cor. 11:33 Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for **one another**.

1Cor. 12:25 that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for **one another**.

Gal. 5:13 For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve **one another**.

Eph. 4:2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with **one another** in love,

Eph. 4:25 Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of **one another**.

Eph. 4:32 And be kind to **one another**, tenderhearted, forgiving **one another**, just as God in Christ forgave you.

Eph. 5:19 speaking to **one another** in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,

Eph. 5:21 submitting to **one another** in the fear of God.

¹⁵ Are vows important? It would seem that they are to God if Acts 5:1-11 means anything at all. For what else was the meaning of the sin of Ananias and Sapphira if not related to the violation of their vow to God as related to their communion with the body of Christ. (*Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your hearts to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land."*) What is interesting about this account is that the event begs for the context of some public "vow" such that they were judged against it. For no one questioned the justice of God's judgement, their "lie" was evident and self-condemning. Such an event puts a profound context to the words of Paul as related to the examination at the Lord's table, **1Cor. 11:28** *Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. 30 For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.*

One could suggest even from these passages alone, that any practice that would tend to strengthen the culture of "one-anothering" is a good thing. And consequently, one would be hard-pressed to suggest that "receiving" one another in a formal and self-conscious manner could work against this "culture." Quite the contrary, in so far as church membership is an opportunity to "submit one to one another" it will encourage the culture of "one-anothering."

That this "one-anothering culture" is related to our authentication as Christians is clearly in keeping with the whole of Scripture that relates a person's relationship to God with their authenticity in relation to the covenant community-- thus the supposed "two tablets" of God's law as clarified by Christ.

Matt. 22:36

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" 37 He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second *is like it*: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' (Note: Neighbor in OT context would have been those related to the covenant community)

Therefore the "is like it" clause affirms that our vertical relationship with God is authentic when it is practiced in a communal context. Our "covenant" relationship with God is never merely an individual thing. We are related to God in so far as we participate in the "body of Christ." Any practice that could tend to foster this is a good thing. As noted, our covenant *renewal* requires an "examination" relative to our covenant relationships in the church, which of course assumes some definable means of covenant *initiation* into the church. Otherwise, our culture of one-anothering would be without the "submit to one another" aspect of all this. What agreed upon terms do we assume together in order to "one another." In the Christian context, these "terms" should be as gracious and "wide as the gospel is wide," but they are terms all the same that are essential to giving our culture of one anothering its distinctive identity in Christ.

The "**good news**" is this-- in an age when people are deeply suspicious of the hypocrisy of "church--" we are shown that church membership is an attempt to treat the idea of community more seriously, and that "church" OUGHT to in fact mean something in so far as one-anothering is concerned. We are reminded that there are certain privileges to being a Christian, one of which is to be incorporated into the body of Christ whereby we should be able to count on one another, and that these privileges are in view every time we partake of our sacred "ritual." Paul's exhortations in fact mean this-- he is saying that to be a Christian ought to mean something in relation to our brothers and sisters in Christ measured against some standard of covenant initiation. We are authenticated in large measure not as individuals, but as members of the household of God. And of course, we know that Christ gave the world permission to in fact judge our sincerity by this very thing. ¹⁶

¹⁶ It would exhaust this "abbreviated" rationale at this time, but it would not be hard to demonstrate that throughout redemptive history, individuals were authenticated in so far as they were participants in the covenant community. Thus, to be saved from God's judgment of Egypt is referred to as being "baptized into Moses" (1Cor.10:1). Or to be saved from God's judgment against the enemies of Noah is referred to as a baptism"(1P.3:1). The language of election was almost synonymous to the language of "Israel" in the Old Testament even as "church" is in the New Testament. Etc. etc. Our identity as Christians is never independent of our identity within a corporate context-- even as a large share of Apostolic exhortations are related to our "one anothering" in the body of Christ.

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

II. Third Question: Should I live in submission to Christ's authority *as mediated in church government*?

Let's again be honest, perhaps the greatest hindrance to church membership is a fear of authority. Given the history of the church and world even, it could be said that we all have inherited a kind "manipulation radar" gun, even as it is pointed directly at the church. In some ways, this is not so bad, in that all true church government ought to be directed in love and itself UNDER the authority of scripture. And it is to THIS kind of church government, albeit always fallible and imperfect, that we want to talk about under the third question, should I live in submission to church authority as mediated in church government.

First, and in continuity with the Old Covenant,¹⁷ we should establish the clear teaching that Christ has in fact instituted human government in the church in order to mediate his government in our lives. For instance, even as Christ is said to be the "head of the church" it is Christ then speaking through scripture that commands us to:

Heb. 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, *for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account.* Let them do this with joy and not with sighing-- for that would be harmful to you.

Acts 20:28 Keep watch over yourselves *and over all the flock*, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. 29 I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. 31 Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears.

1 Peter 5:1-3, I exhort the elders among you *to shepherd the flock of god that is in your charge*, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it...

These passages raise some important questions: How could the church officers (i.e. Elders and Pastors) practically be faithful to the above commands unless there is some definable "flock... allotted to their charge" (using the language of 1Peter 5)? In other words, how can a conscientious shepherd watch over a flock that he couldn't define in terms of membership? And how can officers know whether or not a person or family desires to be the recipients of this pastoral oversight unless they give some verbal profession to that effect. Call it what you will, membership, verbal commitment, etc., without it, there would be no way to keep the above commands-- thus making God's word nonsensical and absurd.

This point is also affirmed as from looking at shepherding from the other perspective of those who are shepherded. E.g. The responsibilities of the flock to the church-shepherds. Again,

Heb. 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing-- for that would be harmful to you.

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

¹⁷ The existence of a divinely appointed government of elders can be traced as far back as Ex.18:13ff as this clearly anticipates the government instituted in Num.11:16ff and Dt.1:1ff

Clearly, scripture teaches elsewhere that a church leader's authority is limited as to nothing contrary to or beside the teachings of scripture. (Thus the Protestant *sola-scriptura*) This means that the under-shepherd is not responsible to rule over those entrusted to their charge, but to only declare what Christ has ruled and apply these declarations in service to the flock of God. But how would the flock of God practically keep the above commands to "obey" their leaders without some way to define who these leaders are? Certainly these passages are not saying that it is necessary to "obey" and "submit" to every self appointed leader of every Christian organization. In fact, the scripture goes out of its way to distinguish those who God has appointed and those he has not as by issuing qualifications as attached to the "laying on of hands" ritual in the church. And yet there still remains some method by which a person knows what leaders they have been assigned. Therefore, by necessary inference, these passages imply that a person is committed to some definable society with a definable number of leaders *in order to be fully under Christ's authority*. In the words of the greater 17th century reformer John Calvin:

They therefore are insane who, neglecting this means, hope to be perfect in Christ, as is the case with fanatics, who pretend to secret revelations of the Spirit; and the proud who content themselves with the private reading of the Scripture, and imagine they do not need the ministry of the church.

To say it plainly, one cannot speak of Christ's "lordship" and not also speak of how this "lordship" is mediated as through a government, lest we all become a government unto our selves and left to our individual interpretations of scripture for ourselves. This is yet again an argument for church membership. Otherwise, the commands is meaningless with no real practical implications.

It can also be noted how this shepherding activity is clearly related to an authentic participation in the Lord's supper if but demonstrated by any reasonable understand of the use of "keys" (Mt. 16) and what happened in 1 Cor. 5 and especially Paul's teaching that the church ought to in some cases "excommunicate" those who are considered outside the gospel. Eg. Do individual's admit and demit themselves to the Lord's supper, or are they to be admitted and demitted, if needed, by the church as then in relation to the counsel/judgments of the church acting through her "key bearers." In sum, who is the administrator and guardian on behalf of Christ regarding the Lord's supper-- Is it a sacrament entrusted to the church or is it a sacrament entrusted to individuals or families? And if the jurisdiction of the Lord's Supper is with the church, we would assume the "church" which was organized by Christ and structured so as to resemble the "foundation" authorized by the apostles.

To be sure, in the present context where faith is often understood in largely individualistic terms, more and more seem to hold to the idea that we admit ourselves to the Lord's table, although this would be almost unheard of in church history. But that a person ought to be admitted by some authorized government representing the church is clear if only by inference from the meaning of "binding and loosing" in Matthew 16. But even more so, it is demonstrated by the simple fact that scripture gives the church authority to ex-communicate (*un-admit*) someone from the Lord's Table as representing communion with Christ and His church in certain situations. New Testament professor, T. David Gordon, explains this in the following way:

What is excommunication? It is the church barring someone from the table. How can the church have power to bar from the Table, if it does not have power to admit to the Table? If we come to the Supper solely by our own volition, then how can we be removed by any other means? Admission to and exclusion from the Supper are by the same means; either our own individual volition or the volition of the church. Then, look at 1 Cor.5. Paul does not say the man is to remove himself, but that the church is to remove him. How can the church have the duty to remove from its membership if it does not have the duty of admission?

Therefore, the language of "admission" is often used in the historic creeds when describing a person's relation to the Lord's table.¹⁸ And this IS "good news." Many today will *un*-admit themselves from the Lord's table which is in effect an act of private excommunication. Sadly, the very kind of person that would tend to do this is the kind of person that might likely need the very means of grace that they ought to have in order to encourage them in their struggle against sin. Often times, the very people who would remove themselves from the Lord's table are in need of pastoral care such that for one, they would be reminded of God's grace as the basis of our participation in the Lord's table. People often forget that their relationship with Christ was never secured by their merits or abilities in the first place in so far as personal holiness is concerned. They need to hear, often in very personal ways as related to very personal struggles, that *their* sins are covered by the merits and abilities of Christ for them as received by faith alone--faith being not a work in itself, but a "resting" upon the finished and sufficient work of Christ for them. These people, the ones most prone to *un*-admit themselves, need to confess their sins one to another, especially to those appointed by God to hear such things on behalf of His church, and in an authorized manner to say in return, "Your sins are forgiven simply by faith in Christ." And then, perhaps they need to be prayed with and pastorally cared for as within all the means available in the church context. Clearly, the "keys" were never intended to be entrusted to every private individual, but to the church as acting through her appointed leaders. This is good news, really!

The "good news" is that the church is not the sort of place that we come to "when" we are in shape, like the person who notices that they don't belong in the *body shop* because they are so out of shape. Rather the church is the place for people to come who recognize that they are not in shape and are in need of God's grace and help! It is true, that the church needs to do a better job of communicating this-- that Christ came to save sinners, not the righteous. But we need to be in submission to the church as it will sometimes in the most personal of situations need to remind us that "*while* we were sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5) Perhaps God knew of our tendency to self-condemnation out of, ironically, our pride of thinking that we could ever fully measure up to God's holiness. We need to be humbled to

¹⁸ In the Heidelberg Catechism #82 for instance, the language is "Are those to be *admitted* to the Lord's Supper who show by what they say and do that they are unbelieving and ungodly?" (This confessional statement serves as the ecclesiastical standard for the *Christian Reformed Church* today) In Catechism #85, the relation of church in the admission and exclusion of people from the table is made even more explicit. It states, "Those who, though called Christians, profess unchristian teachings or live unchristian lives... such persons the officers exclude from the Christian fellowship by withholding the sacraments from them." Similar conditions are noted also in the Westminster Larger Catechism #173 which states: "May any who profess the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, be kept from it? Answer: Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction and manifest their reformation. Therefore, in the Presbyterian Church in America Book of Church Order, it is stated that it "must be left to the prudence of the Session, whose office it is to judge, after careful examination, the qualifications of those who apply for admission to sealing ordinances." (BCO 57.2)

hear an elder say to us again and again, that our basis for being included in God's covenant family is NOT our behavior but in our sincerely resting upon the finished work of Christ for our sakes. The church IS a means of grace and it is perhaps time that we begin to experience this as well! Our assurance is in large measure determined in a cooperative manner with the church where "two are better than one" without a doubt! In such a context, we confess our sins one to another that we might be healed." This is good news!

James 5:16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

Conclusion:

We will admit that in a time when "commitment" to any institution is on the down and outs, to even ask the question about church membership sounds almost out of touch with the times-- and maybe it is. It has been suggested that to "join a church" is not only biblical, but also "good news" as should be expected of the requirements of God. To put all this into perspective, perhaps then we should rethink what might otherwise feel out of touch. For perhaps it is as C.S. Lewis once explained, how every period in history contains its own particular "blindness." (See Lewis's introduction to *St. Athanasius: On the Incarnation*) Lewis suggests how in every age and culture there are the carriers of certain "viruses" that can cause us to become spiritually ill. Lewis's point is that those of us who are infected by these viruses are most often blind to them until careful examination is applied by comparing our values with the values revealed from writings of previous ages. (Parenthetically, this is why Lewis advised his readers to read more books from earlier periods, since modern books might carry the "viruses" of modern life.) We have in this essay tried to confront our "anti-organization" bias with the teachings of redemptive history especially as these "teachings" ultimately represented our "only rule of faith and practice." And these historical writings, even the writings of God, lead to the conclusion that membership in a church is a good thing, even an essential thing, in order to experience the full gospel. In the words of a 19th century pastor Stuart Robinson:

Neither a theology without a Church, any more than a Church without a theology, fulfills all the conditions of a pure gospel? Jesus Christ was not merely a teacher, as Socrates, but a legislator, as Solon, and the founder of a commonwealth.

Now, it should be qualified that what we mean by this is NOT that the church in and of itself has the power to save, to forgive sins or to dole out eternal life. Rather, even as God in Christ is alone the author and perfecter of our faith (Romans 12), so too our salvation is ultimately determined by God before even the foundation of the world was made, and accomplished by God through the work of Christ as applied by God by the Holy Spirit. God then, via the Holy Spirit, is the agent of grace, not the church! And yet, we see how it is that the Holy Spirit ordinarily works, as through the instrumentality of the church, defined by her three mediated ministries of Christ as prophet, priest and king—ministry of word, sacrament and government respectively!

As then pertaining to church membership, our conclusion here has been that the "virus" of individualism as perhaps understandably fueled by the church's failures, has resulted in a reluctance to join a church. Our response is to 1) reaffirm the visible church as an essential element of the gospel, 2) reaffirm that church membership is an essential element of authentic Christian conversion and discipleship and 3) reaffirm that church membership is essential to being under the Lordship of Christ as mediated through an appointed government in the church. In sum, we believe that the church is the "mediatorial body of Christ" which

means that as sinners flock to Christ for grace, the church is a place where sinners who seek forgiveness should feel welcomed and served by Christ. The church is "good news" in so far as it is an extension of Christ "with us." Just as we have found grace and forgiveness in the substitutionary merits of Christ on our behalf, the church is a means used by the Holy Spirit to apply this grace in this present age awaiting the return of Christ. To join a church is a good thing to do in every sense of that word "good." Again, in the words of John Calvin, the great promises of God in Psalms 46 are to be fulfilled by Christ acting through her church, as then to mean:

***"God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved" (Ps. 46:5).
So available is communion with the Church to keep us in the fellowship of God.***

Addendum: Finding the Right Church

Determining to Find it

Are you persuaded by the above observations? Then you will agree with the advice offered by John Stott:

In all probability my reader already has links with a local church and indeed is preparing to become a full member of it. If by any chance you are not, however, I would like to urge you to remedy this as soon as possible. It is entirely anomalous, if not actually impossible, to claim membership of the universal, invisible church without belonging to a local, visible manifestation of it. I beg you also not to be an ecclesiastical gypsy, always on the move from church to church, and having no fixed abode! Instead, I hope you will join a church, settle down in it, introduce yourself to others, and always be in your place for Sunday worship...

John Stott, Christian Basics, p.128-9

You now understand that the Lord intends for you to be actively involved in a church! Although home Bible studies and other informal functions can be helpful, they are no substitute for the Church with its corporate worship, ministry of the Word and sacraments, and shepherding care. If the Lord is directing you to live in a certain place, there is a church that is right for you in that area. It might not be all that you would wish for in a church, nor exactly like the ones you have enjoyed in the past, but it will be the right one for you at this time. You will want to remember that while Jesus may look differently in different places, he is present all the same. His "look" will differ in large measure because the incarnation of Christ through his church will always take on the local "vernacular." You will need to be careful not to confuse the "look" with the theology-- the first things from the second things in your choice for a church.

What then should you look for? If Christ was present for you through some style of music in your previous church, ought this to be the thing you look for as most important? Perhaps you grew accustomed to a certain style of preaching, a certain kind of congregational participation. Are these the things you should look for? Our point is that you will want to differentiate between preferences and essentials. To use an analogy, if I want to get to such and such a destination, I don't first of all choose the kind of train car I wish to travel in, I choose the route as corresponding to a specific "track." As it concerns the church, what "track" should we look for, notwithstanding our preferences for the kind of church relative to this or that style of a church? --the "tracks" that a given church "train" may be running on and the "train" itself that you travel in. Stated differently, what track will keep you on the "straight and narrow" path to heaven, while the train seat of a given

church may be less than what you would prefer? Here are some suggestions then as to the “first things” of a good church!

Five Marks of a Healthy Church:

✓ **Doxological or “God-Centered in Christ”**

Whatever else the church is, it is people gathered for God’s own glory and dependent on God’s own wisdom and power. Stated a bit differently, worship is our ultimate vocation, both as individuals and corporately as God’s church! It is the purpose that directs all of redemptive history (Ps.86:9). It was the ultimate passion of Christ (John12:28). A church that is God-centered will be evidence in several ways. Her “evangelism” will reflect confidence in the power of the gospel less other things (see below). Her worship will be directed to God and will be about what God has done/is doing, using means or “elements” in worship that is traced to elements that are ordained by God for worship. Her teachings will ultimately be concerned with faithfulness to what God has taught through scripture, even as this will of course involve making it accessible to those a church is called to reach. All things whatsoever that happen in the life of the church and in the world is believed to be ultimately under God’s authority and for some purpose relative to God’s glory, even if we can’t discern that purpose specifically but can be encouraged to trust that God is in control! Most especially, a God-centered church will be a Christ-centered church, in so far as Christ is the ultimate manifestation of God “IN OUR MIDST.” As such, practically everything a church does and teaches will be an “Emmaus road” kind of experience, where all things point to Christ and the salvation accomplished for us by him for God’s own glory!

✓ **Gospel Focused**

A healthy church treats the “gospel” as more than the abc’s directed toward unbelievers, but as the xyz’s directed toward believers as well, even as this determines the whole of a church’s experience and culture! The gospel focused church will be missional, not as a program, but as a culture, even as the transforming power of the gospel is considered to be the ultimate source of healing and restoration in all aspects of life. It is a culture where people are lead to confess sins as never before dared, because they are lead to experience God’s unconditional acceptance in a way never believed possible. A gospel focused church sees everything, all theology, all pastoral care, all counseling, all worship as being a conduit for the power of the gospel, even as Paul said, *I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings (1Cor.9:23)* The gospel focused church shares Christ’s love for “sinners” even then as the church is “for” the world, not “against” it. The gospel focused church is “missional” and not merely “maintenance” oriented, even as it is believed that true “orthodoxy” is by nature missional in so far as it is driven by a zeal for God to be glorified among the nations. The gospel focused church will then be willing to be “multi-cultural” in style and strategy, even as it is mono-cultural in spirituality and theology. A healthy church will be a “Great Commission” church that is eager to both preserve the faith AND take it to new places for the glory of God.

✓ **Biblical**

While believing that God powerfully manifest his infinite glory in a general way through creation, the healthy church understands that our Christian faith and practice is grounded in God’s works of redemption in history as explained to us through the divinely appointed means of inspired Scripture. IT is believed that all things necessary for salvation are sufficiently revealed to us by the Holy Spirit speaking through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. It is also believed that all special revelation has ceased until the next and final redemptive act of God in history when Christ will return to judge the living and the dead. It is, therefore the ambition of a healthy church to teach the whole counsel of God’s word, not adding to, or subtracting from, anything contained within it, recognizing no other source for divine revelation, whether by ecclesiastical traditions or private revelations. And because the healthy church understands that the Holy Scriptures is the only rule of faith and practice,it

also understands that Church unity is predicated upon a consensus about what the Scriptures principally teach. This consensus ought to be reflected in some creed or Confession of Faith as adopted by the church, even as the church is then committed to living under the confession lest any one church or personality be granted an unbridled authority in the lives of its members. The creed or confession itself ought then to affirm that God is no less sovereign in our salvation than He is sovereign in our creation to the praise of God's glorious grace! It should affirm that we are accepted by God, from beginning to end, not by our own works or attempts at being approved by God, but by faith alone in the perfect and all sufficient work of Christ on our behalf, faith itself being the free gift of God! And while people are invited to join a healthy church without knowing or affirming all the teachings contained in its confession necessarily, lest it breed hypocrisy by unstudied confessions of faith, the church, when acting and speaking corporately, would seem to be in accord with its own confession, even as there ought to be a process where the its confession can be changed when it is found to be either contrary to or beside the teaching of scripture.

✓ **Devoted to *One Anothering***

Devotion to God produces a loving, caring fellowship where people support, encourage, and edify one another through personal relationships, small groups, and educational ministries. A good church is not like the gym (body shop) where people feel that they need to be in shape in order to join, it is a place to join because we are out of shape. E.g. A healthy church will talk a lot about the grace of the Gospel as because of the merits of Christ credited to us by faith. There is a "culture of confession" in a healthy church that leads people to greater security in Christ. We CAN take sin seriously because we take grace seriously if its a healthy church. Likewise, the healthy church is committed to caring for one another in both outward and inward ways as an expression of Christ's love for us. True *one anothering* is committed to conversations that are meant to build up rather than to tear down.. there is a general feeling that "people love each other" even if fallibly!

✓ **Sees Life as a Calling**

A healthy church understands and teaches that God has placed into our lives the boundaries of our habitation that reflect his own sovereign design to accomplish his work in the world. His work extends into the spheres of family, church and civil vocations such as to warrant a serious discussion about stewardship of time, training, money and giftedness as pertaining to all three. A healthy church will be committed to helping people find a balance that is unique to their individual callings which reflects a high view of vocation and calling in these three spheres of service. While believing that the Christian Scriptures does *not* address all things pertaining to life in this world, the healthy church will affirm that we should take "every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" and that the Christian worldview is applicable and relevant to all spheres of life. Our ultimate commitment is to the restoration of "calling" that we might more and more glorify God and enjoy Him forever!

In Summary

Again, remember that no church will perfectly exhibit all of these characteristics. Every congregation is at best an "earthen vessel" made up of sinful human beings. And yet, should be cautious about churches whose primary identity as Christians is blurred by undue stress on various secondary things. A church that has lost the "gospel" albeit with a passion for maintaining an otherwise good denominational distinction should send up "red flags" for instance. But of course, a church that does not teach various denominational distinctions as if these things are not important should also raise a "red flag" given that we do believe in the church, even as the church will be defined by some "form" of beliefs, worship and government. Again, be aware of the church that is first of all concerned with culture wars rather than first and foremost being concerned to make disciples of Christ saved by grace through faith alone. In sum you will want to differentiate between the "marks" of a healthy church and your own personal tastes and preferences or political agenda. Such matters as style of worship, leadership personalities, organizational procedures, outreach programs, methods of nurture, types of music, political campaigns and emphasis on certain doctrines, though important considerations, do not

have the same significance as the matters mentioned above. Don't be guilty of a common mistake: "being most insistent about what's least important and least insistent about what's most important."

Getting Involved

Remember that your choice of a church will always involve tradeoffs. You will choose to tolerate certain undesirable features in order to be a part of what seems more crucial. It is completely unrealistic to expect to find a church where you are in agreement with everything. When you find a church to join, commit yourself wholeheartedly. Don't be tentative, thinking that if things don't turn out according to your expectations you will leave. Church membership is like marriage: disagreements and disappointments are to be worked through in the context of the Lord's love. Seek to build strong relationships with the people in general and the church leadership in particular. Take the initiative if necessary. Be patient, as this takes time. Give honest encouragement to church leaders whenever possible. Pray for them and let them know you are doing so. In an age where our gut instinct is to second guess our leaders motives and actions-- we need to work at being gracious about the way we hear our leaders and act toward them. In all likelihood, they get an ear full about what needs to be fixed and where quite frankly they don't measure up. And yet most pastors would do just about anything to see the people of his church grow in the grace and knowledge of God. If they are ever successful in directing you to God and helping you to grow in Christ, nothing will help him work harder than to tell him so. And when you observe something that needs improvement, offer your help to those responsible for that area of church life. In short, join a church as a "team player."