



Great Plains Reformed Baptist Church

Church Membership and Covenants

In our culture and day it is very common to push back on the concept of church membership and especially a church covenant.

The most common challenge by the person who is against a church covenant or church membership is this;

'show me in the bible where a church covenant is spoken about.'

And they are correct that there is no place in the bible that says that a church is to have a covenant that is agreed upon by its members.

So why do we have one then?

This paper is being written in defense of the century old practice of church membership and church covenants.

To begin with let us all agree that church membership or a church covenant is not mentioned in the Bible, but neither is the Trinity of God.

And neither are wedding vows or a marriage certificate.

Those that are against church covenants and membership by and large are not against wedding vows or marriage certificates. Why? They are willing to submit to the terms of that agreement, even though it is binding, they will be expected to live in community submitted to the person that they have entered into a marriage covenant with. A covenant that is God instituted and Spiritual in nature.

The issue is not a covenant or even membership, the issue is control and submission. They will quote Scripture saying that they have been set free by Christ and where the Spirit is there is freedom. 2 Corinthians 3:17

They will also say that the blood of Christ has removed them from being under the law and its requirements (Romans 8:1) and by entering into a covenant or membership, they are then placing themselves under a man made law.



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For those that are unwilling to bind themselves to a local church, the issue is that they do not desire to live in a community which will place expectations on them, they are free spirits that desire to be 'Spirit led'.

The rise of the Spirit 'led' Christians was championed through the theological minds of the men who developed dispensational theology in the mid nineteenth century. Until the early 1900's the church held that God is a covenant making, covenant keeping God. This has changed as the freedom of people has been championed in society.

The predominant theology today is dispensationalism and the Spirit led christian who is free to be themselves, free to come and go as they wish, free to be a lone ranger Christian.

The early church held that if God was your Father, the church had to be your mother. A thought that the reformers of the fifteenth century used in creating the axiom; outside of the church, there is no salvation.

What they meant by this is that prior to salvation you were not a member of the family of God, and once you were baptised, after regeneration you were baptized into the church of God, which is His body here on earth.

The bible is clear in that God is a covenant making and covenant keeping God. Prior to the advent of Christianity, there were two types of humans, Jews and Gentiles. After the advent of Christ, there was a new institution, the true Israel of God, the church. The entire New Testament is written to the church, not individuals. And since the church, the local body of believers is under His headship, Colossians 1:18 we must submit ourselves to Him.

We will tackle church membership, since without Scriptural support for it, a church covenant is meaningless.

The letter that we know as 1 Corinthians is written to a church, not an individual, 12:14-47 is written to a specific local body of believers.

In this letter God, through Paul speaks of this local body of believers, not as free agents, not as free Spirits, but as a combined, unified and ruled body.



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The interaction and specific unification of the members of this body, being knit together, bound to one another can be found in places such as 1 Corinthians 12:21 which says; *And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."*

and again in verse 25-26; *so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.*

In the letter to the church in Rome, a letter that was written to the church that was in that city, a local body of believers that Paul had never personally met to that date, God through Paul once again highlites the corporate nature of the local body of Christ.

We read in chapter 12:4-8 *For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another, but having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: whether prophecy, in agreement with the faith; or service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with generosity; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.*

One body, with many members, each being given specific functions- called gifts and they are given to each person, not for that persons benefit, but for the betterment of the body.

These 5 verses alone demonstrate the fallacy that you can be a lone ranger Christian. You need to belong to the body as much as a body needs you.

A truth that is again reiterated to us in the letter written to the church in Ephesus.



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In that letter, to that church, God through Paul once again emphasizes the corporate nature of salvation in Him. We are told in Ephesians 4:11-16

And He Himself gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, (God providing for the leadership and wellbeing of the corporate body) for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ,

so that

we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming, but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, that is Christ,

from whom

the whole body, being joined and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the properly measured working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Outside of the local body of Christ having a membership, verses such as the following make no sense:

Acts 20:28 *Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*

Hebrews 13:17 *Obey your leaders and submit to them—for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account—so that they will do this with joy and not with groaning, for this would be unprofitable for you.*

How would an elder know who he was responsible for? Who he would be held accountable for? For an elder/pastor, this should matter since God is very adamant that he will be held accountable for the spiritual wellbeing of those in his flock. Outside of church membership, how does he know?



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And outside of church membership, how does Matthew 18:17, matter?

And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as the Gentile and the tax collector.

Outside of church membership what are we to make of 1 Corinthians 5:12-13?

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Are you not to judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God will judge. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.

There Paul talks about some that he calls outsiders. Who are they? They are those that he has no authority over, that are not under his care. Since there are outsiders, there has to be insiders as well, those that he does have spiritual oversight over.

He knows who both sets of people are, How would this work in the modern evangelical world that we see around us, where a person who calls themselves a Christian, moves from one local body to another, dependent on none of them, being committed to none and none having authority over them?

How can church discipline work in that context? Again, this is one of the three hallmarks that all reformers held as an essential for a true church;
the right preaching of the Word,
the right handling of the sacraments,
and church discipline.

Scripture is clear that church membership is biblical.

But what about a covenant within a local body, is that Scriptural?

The clear teaching of God through His Word, tells us that He is a covenant making and covenant keeping God.

When he inaugurated the new covenant in His blood, through His Son, there was a new institution that was born, the church.



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The entire New Testament is written to the church, not individuals. And since the church, the local body of believers is under His headship, Colossians 1:18 we must submit ourselves to Him.

This is the meaning found in Ephesians 5:22-33

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great, but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.

There are people who have cohabitated with each other, some for decades and have never submitted to a marriage covenant, since it is not found in the bible. Most Christians would understand that thinking is flawed and unbiblical. Marriage is a God ordained institution, that He governs, and one that is entered into through a covenant.

It is because of the covenant that is entered into by a man and woman, that a husband knows who his wife is, and a wife knows who her husband is. They both claim each other in an eternal, God ordained covenant.



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Again this is the thrust of the argument and the symbolism of Ephesians 5. Where the church is compared with the covenant of marriage.

Is the covenant that our church holds as binding found explicitly in Scripture? No, but as I have demonstrated, it is shown implicitly through the Word of God.

The church is the most important institution that God ever created, He died for the church, He lives in and through the church. It is the means that He uses to demonstrate His eternal attributes.

We are confident that those that are truly His, who desire to mortify their flesh, to make no provision for it, will desire to covenant with His body in celebration of the adoption and marriage that they have been graciously afforded.

One day, our eternal reward will present Himself before us... one day we will see our bridegroom face to face, and on that day we will rejoice with joy inexpressible.