

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to One Covenant Church!

It is a joy to know that you are exploring membership with us. These sessions are designed to help you understand who we are, what we believe, and what it means to belong. They will put you in a better place to decide on membership.

There are two reasons why membership in a local church is important. Firstly, because we need what the church offers: the teaching, the sacraments, the pastoring, the care, and the mutual nurturing of God's people. Secondly, we become better enabled to provide care, support and service to others by identifying, and signifying our commitment to one another.

There is only one requirement for becoming a communing member at One Covenant Church, that is, to accept and profess the gospel of Jesus Christ. You don't have to hold to all of our other beliefs, but, it's important to gain an understanding, as these beliefs do shape the church.

These sessions are designed to address the questions that communing members affirm, namely:

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

We pray that this will be a fruitful journey!

In Him,

Tan Huai Tze
Pastor

SESSION 1

THE GOSPEL

Membership Questions Addressed

1. *Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope except through His sovereign mercy?*
2. *Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Saviour of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?*

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The 'General Household Survey 2015' indicates that between 2010 and 2015, all religions in Singapore registered declines, except for Christianity which registered a marginal increase of 0.5%. The fastest growth was among those that have 'No religion', registering a 1.5% increase. And so, at present, 18.8% of the resident population identifies as 'Christian', while 18.5% identify as having 'No religion'¹. This seems to indicate that Singapore is growing increasingly irreligious, although Christianity is still gaining some ground. In such an environment, you may wonder why we are planting a new church that seeks to be a *"witness to the Gospel"*²?

One of the reasons is because the Gospel, what the Apostle Paul defines as *"Christ died for our sins"* and calls the matter of *"first importance"* (1 Corinthians 15:3) is often misunderstood by both religious, and irreligious people alike. Both religious and irreligious people tend to think that the Gospel is *"I obey God, and therefore I'm accepted"*. And, some Christians might think that the Gospel is *"I'm accepted already, and therefore I don't need to obey God"*. However, the Gospel actually says that there is absolutely nothing we can do to earn God's acceptance: we are *"sinners in the sight of God"*, and need to *"receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation."*³ However, when someone embraces that, it moves and motivates them to obey God! And so, the Gospel actually says, *"I'm accepted by God on the basis of Christ who died for my sins, and therefore I obey God"*. The Gospel is neither religious, nor irreligious, but something altogether different. The Gospel is utterly unique and distinguishes Christianity from every other system of thought, belief or practice. It is at the very heart of the church, and of who we are as Christians. If that is so, then it is very important that we understand clearly both **what the Gospel is**, and **what the Gospel does**.

¹ Zaccheus, Melody, Pang Xue Qiang, and Ng Keng Gene. "Youth in Singapore Shunning Religion." The Straits Times. 2016. Accessed November 23, 2016. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/youth-in-singapore-shunning-religion>.

² From One Covenant Church's Mission Statement.

³ From Membership Questions 1. and 2.

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

The word ‘Gospel’ means ‘good news’, and is translated from the Greek *euangelion*, and the Hebrew *besora*. The word refers to a news report about some life-altering event⁴. It is not something we do, but something that has been done for us. Although the Gospel sounds simple, there is a complexity and richness to the Gospel. Theologian Charles Hodge once said, *“The Gospel is so simple that small children can understand it, and it is so profound that studies by the wisest theologians will never exhaust its riches.”* We need to understand something of this richness in order for us to appropriate more fully what God has done for us in this Gospel.

The Bible presents both a ‘Cosmic’ and a ‘Personal’ perspective on the Gospel. It describes both the *“recreation of a fallen world”*, and the *“redemption of God’s people”*⁵. The first answers the question, *“What hope is there for the world?”* while the second, answers the question, *“What must I do to be saved?”*⁶ So, for example, the Prophet Isaiah says, *“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings **good news**, who publishes peace, who brings **good news** of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.””* (Isaiah 52:7, c.f. Isaiah 40:9, 41:27, 61:1). Here, the Gospel is described as the coming of God’s kingdom reign on earth, supplanting every earthly kingdom, and making right everything that is wrong in this world. Mark 1:15 shows that this is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ: *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the **gospel**.”* This is grand and cosmic. At the same time, Paul says that the Gospel is the *“power of God for salvation for everyone who believes”* (Romans 1:16, c.f. Romans 1:1-4), and, as we saw earlier, it can be defined as *“Christ died for our sins”* (1 Corinthians 15:3-5, c.f. 2 Timothy 2:8). This is personal and individual.

‘Cosmic’ Perspective

We arrive at the ‘cosmic’ perspective, by reading ‘along’ the Bible’s narrative plot line from Genesis to Revelation. With this approach, the ‘Gospel’ can be outlined as **Creation (Genesis 1-2)**, **Fall (Genesis 3)**, **Redemption (Genesis 4-Revelation 20)**, and **Restoration (Revelation 21-22)**. It is a message of both hope, and judgement. As Graeme Goldsworthy puts it, *“the coming of the kingdom”* involves *“both the saving act of God and his judgement on all who oppose his kingdom”*⁷. So, while this perspective presents the grand cosmic plan of God for all of

⁴ Tim Keller Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City (Grand Rapids, M.I.: Zondervan, 2012), 29.

⁵ G. Goldsworthy, “Gospel” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D.A. Carson, Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove, I.L.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 521.

⁶ Keller Centre Church, 32.

⁷ Goldsworthy “Gospel”, 522.

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creation, it does not spell out how individuals actually get right with God, and become part of this cosmic programme⁸. For this we need the ‘personal’ perspective.

‘Personal’ Perspective

As you read ‘across’ the Bible, collecting and summarising what the Bible says about it’s key characters, like God and humanity, you can also summarise the ‘Gospel’ as **God (Genesis 1:26-28), Sin (Genesis 3, Romans 3:23), Christ (John 1:14, Hebrews 7:26, Romans 3:21-26, 5:12-21, Acts 2:24, Romans 4:25), and Response (Acts 17:30, John 1:12, John 3:16, Matthew 16:15-19, Ephesians 2:11-19)**⁹.

A ‘Conversational Pathway’

We need both perspectives to avoid the dangers of seeing the Gospel as merely a **social programme to join** on the one hand, and merely seeing the Gospel as **meeting my own individual spiritual needs** on the other. The truth is both: we are saved from our sins not as a result of works (Ephesians 2:8), but we are saved for good works (Ephesians 2:10). And so, Tim Keller suggests that the two perspectives can be drawn together by following a “*conversational pathway*”, which incidentally is a good guide for sharing the Gospel. The ‘cosmic’ perspective poses the questions in the conversation, while the ‘personal’ perspective offers the answers¹⁰:

‘Cosmic’ Gospel Narrative	‘Personal’ Gospel Truths
Creation: Where did we come from?	From God : the One and the relational
Fall: Why did things go wrong?	Because of the sin of Man : bondage and condemnation
Redemption: What will put things right?	Christ : incarnation, substitution, restoration
Restoration: How can I be put right?	A response of faith: grace and trust

⁸ Keller Center Church, 32.

⁹ Keller Center Church, 32.

¹⁰ Keller Center Church, 33.

QUESTION 1: WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

Answer: God. While there was only one God, within God's being there are three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As a triune being, love, friendship and community are what he is (John 17:20-24) and is hence at the heart of reality. In order to share the joy and love within himself, this God created a good world (Genesis 1, John 1:1-3) and people to share his love and service.

QUESTION 2: WHY DID THINGS GO WRONG?

Answer: Sin. Instead of living in the way God created us for, we turn from God, rebelling against his authority. We live lives of self-centeredness. Because our relationship with God has been broken, all other relationships are also ruptured, resulting in spiritual, psychological, social, and physical decay and breakdown. Sin has two terrible consequences:

- *Spiritual bondage (Rom 6:15-18):* We try to maintain control of our lives by living for things other than God. However, the result of this is always a loss of control. Sin enslaves us.
- *Condemnation (Rom 6:23):* We are guilty because of sin. If God created us and we owe him everything, and we do not live for him, then we owe him a debt that must be paid. We deserve his judgement. Sin condemns us.

QUESTION 3 - WHAT WILL PUT THINGS RIGHT?

Answer: Christ. Jesus Christ puts things right in three ways:

- *Incarnation.* The second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, came into the world as a man, Jesus Christ (John 1:14). In doing so, he identifies with a sinful humanity by becoming fully man, while remaining fully God.
- *Substitution.* A just God cannot simply shrug off our sins. On the cross, Jesus received the rejection and condemnation we deserve (1 Peter 3:18), so that we might receive the blessing and acceptance that he deserves. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "*He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*".
- *Restoration.* Jesus will eventually restore everything that is wrong in the world. The second time Jesus comes to earth, he will judge the world, put a final end to all evil, suffering, decay, and death (Romans 8:19-21; 2 Peter 3:13), and renew and restore the material world to what it was meant to be. This redemption is both of our souls and of our bodies

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(1 Corinthians 15, Revelation 21-22).

QUESTION 4 - HOW CAN I BE PUT RIGHT?

Answer: Faith. By faith in Christ, our sins can be forgiven and we can be assured of living forever with God, and being raised from the dead like Christ. Believing in Christ requires:

- *Grasping that saving “faith” is not trying harder, but transferring our trust.* We transfer our trust away from ourselves and rest in him alone. Jesus said, *“my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matthew 11:30). When we believe, we are justified before God, and there is then *“no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Romans 8:1). We are adopted into God’s family and given the eternal right to his fatherly love (John 1:12-13).
- *Remembering that it is not the quality of the faith, but the object faith that saves us.* It is not the depth and sincerity of our repentance and faith that saves us. It is who we trust in, Jesus, that saves us. Saving faith is not a feeling, but an act of the will in which we rest in Jesus alone for our salvation (Mark 8:34; Revelation 3:20)¹¹.

WHAT DOES THE GOSPEL DO?

The Gospel saves us from eternal judgment, but it also changes our lives in the present. This Gospel doesn’t just save you from hell. It continually renews you to become more like Jesus. It is not the minimum required doctrine to enter the kingdom of God, but the way to make all progress in the kingdom. So, for example, in 1 Corinthians 15:1-2, Paul speaks of believers having *“received”* the Gospel in the past, *“standing”* in the Gospel in the present, and *“being saved”* by the Gospel in the future. You never get beyond the your need for the gospel. The gospel is the way we grow (Galatians 3:1-3), and are renewed (Colossians 1:6), and built up (Acts 20:32). It is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16-17), which includes our justification, sanctification and glorification (Romans 8:29-30)¹².

In Galatians 2:14, Paul lays down a powerful principle. He deals with Peter’s racism and cowardice by pointing out that Peter was not living *“in line with the truth of the gospel”*. He was not living out the implications of the Gospel he believed. Here, Paul shows us that the gospel’s implications need to be worked out in every area of life. Our progress in the Christian life is a

¹¹ Keller Center Church, 32-36.

¹² ‘**Justification**’ is being declared righteous as a status, ‘**Sanctification**’ is the gradual process of becoming righteous, and ‘**Glorification**’ is the completion of that process when one is made completely righteous.

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“*continual realignment process*” to the Gospel¹³. These implications are wide ranging. Here, but here are some common examples of how the Gospel changes your life¹⁴:

- **Discouragement.** When a person is depressed, religion says, “*You are breaking the rules. Repent.*” On the other hand, irreligion says, “*You just need to love and accept your self.*” The Gospel will lead us to examine ourselves and say, “*Something in my life has become more important than God: a pseudo-saviour, a form of works-righteousness.*” The Gospel leads us to embrace repentance, not to merely set our will against superficialities.
- **Sexuality.** The religious tends to see sex as dirty, or a dangerous impulse. The irreligious sees sex as merely a biological and physical appetite. The Gospel show us that sexuality is supposed to reflect the self-giving of Christ. He gave himself completely, without condition. Consequently, we are not to seek intimacy while holding back the rest of our lives. If we give ourselves sexually, we are also to give ourselves legally, socially, and personally. Sex is to be shared only in totally committed, permanent relationships of marriage between a man and a woman.
- **Family.** Religion can make a person a slave to parental expectation, while irreligion sees no need for family loyalty or keeping promises and covenants if they do not meet one’s needs. The Gospel frees us from making parental approval a form of psychological salvation by pointing to how God is the ultimate Father. Grasping this, we will be neither too dependent nor too hostile toward our parents.
- **Self-control.** Religion tells us to control our passions out of fear of punishment. This is a volition-based approach. Irreligion tells us to express ourselves and find out what is right for us. This is an emotion-based approach. The Gospel tells us that the free, unshakable grace of God “*Teaches us to say ‘No’ to our passions*” (Titus 2:12) if we will only listen to it. It gives us new appetites and affections. The Gospel leads us to a whole-person approach that begins with truth descending into the heart.
- **Witness.** The religious believes in proselytising because “*we are right, and they are wrong.*” Such an approach is almost always offensive. The irreligious denies the legitimacy of evangelism altogether. Yet the Gospel produces a constellation of traits in us. We are compelled to share the Gospel out of generosity and love, not guilt. We are freed from the fear of being ridiculed or hurt by others, since we have already received the favour of God by grace. Our dealings with others reflect humility because we know we are saved only by grace alone, not because of our superior insight or character. We are hopeful about everyone, because we were saved only because of grace, not because we were people

¹³ Tim Keller *Galatians For You* (UK: Good Book Company, 2013), 53.

¹⁴ The following examples have been selected and adapted from Tim Keller’s Essay, *The Centrality of the Gospel*, 5-9.

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likely to become Christians. We are courteous and careful with people. We don't have to push or coerce them, for it is only God's grace that opens hearts, not our eloquence or persistence or even their openness (Exodus 4:10-12). Together these traits create not only an excellent neighbour in a multicultural society but also a winsome evangelist.

- **Worship.** Religion leads to a dour and somber kind of worship that may be huge on dignity but small on joy. Religion gives a shallow understanding of "acceptance" without a full sense of God's holiness, on the other hand, irreligion can lead to a sentimental, casual worship with little substance. The Gospel leads us to see that God is both holy and loving. His love makes his holiness comforting, while his holiness makes his love pure. Hence, the Gospel leads us to both awe and intimacy in worship, for the Holy One is also now our loving Father.
- **The Poor.** We tend to either see the poor as being oppressed and helpless, or as failures and weaklings. But, the Gospel leads us to be humble, without moral superiority, knowing that we were spiritually bankrupt, and had to be saved by Christ's free and generous grace. So, we do not worry too much about "deservingness," since we didn't deserve Christ's grace. We become respectful of the poor, and see them as those whom we can learn from. It is only the Gospel that can bring people into a humble respect for and solidarity with the poor.

CONCLUSION

In some sense, this is the most important session in the membership series. There is only one requirement for becoming a member at One Covenant Church, that is, to credibly accept and profess the Gospel. But, more than that, understanding what the Gospel is, and what it does helps you to see the fullness of what God has done for you in Christ, leads you to the path of deep and wide joy in God (John 15:11, 16:24; 1 John 1:14), and guides you to do what he has prepared for you to do in this world (Ephesians 2:10). He is the God who saves sinners, and gives hope to the world. So, for the first time, or for the thousandth time, embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ today!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How would you explain the Gospel?
2. How did you personally come to faith in Christ?
3. How has the Gospel changed an aspect of your life?