



BEING ONE COVENANT

IDENTITY . BELIEF . BELONGING

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP HANDBOOK

2018

one  covenant
church

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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 position to consider membership in this church.

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 communicant member at One Covenant Church: your understanding and profession of faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You do not have to hold to all of our other beliefs, but it is important to gain an understanding of them, as these beliefs do shape the church. These sessions are designed to address the questions that communicant members are to answer in the affirmative, namely:

1. Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner 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 pursue its purity and peace?

We pray that this will be a fruitful journey!

In Him,

Tan Huai Tze
Pastor

VISION, MISSION, IDENTITY, VALUES & MINISTRY FRONTS

VISION

Our vision is to see people converted, communities united, and society enhanced through the Gospel.

MISSION

Our mission is to be a winsome, humble, and credible witness of the Gospel to the sceptic, seeker, and saint. We strive to clearly and vividly proclaim the Gospel message, engage its implications in all of life, and authenticate its reality through deeds of mercy and justice.

IDENTITY

You may wonder what it is about One Covenant Church that makes us unique. In a sense, there is nothing unique about us. We are a church that is orthodox in doctrine, sitting firmly in the Protestant, Reformed, and Presbyterian stream of the Christian Church. At the same time, we take our culture and context seriously. Hence, we would describe ourselves as a confessional, connectional and commissional church:

- **Confessional:** We believe that the Bible is without error and is the supreme authority in the Church. We subscribe to the ancient Christian creeds (the Apostle's Creed, Nicene Creed, Chalcedon Creed, and Athanasian Creed), and the Westminster Standards (Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms), as subordinate standards that faithfully summarise the Bible's teaching.
- **Connectional:** We hold to and strive toward a Presbyterian polity whereby we will seek mutual accountability and encouragement from like-minded churches, and seek to be on mission with them.
- **Commissional:** We are an outward-facing church, believing that God has commissioned the church to proclaim the Gospel to the nations. Contextualisation, cultural engagement and world missions are important to us.

INTRODUCTION

VALUES

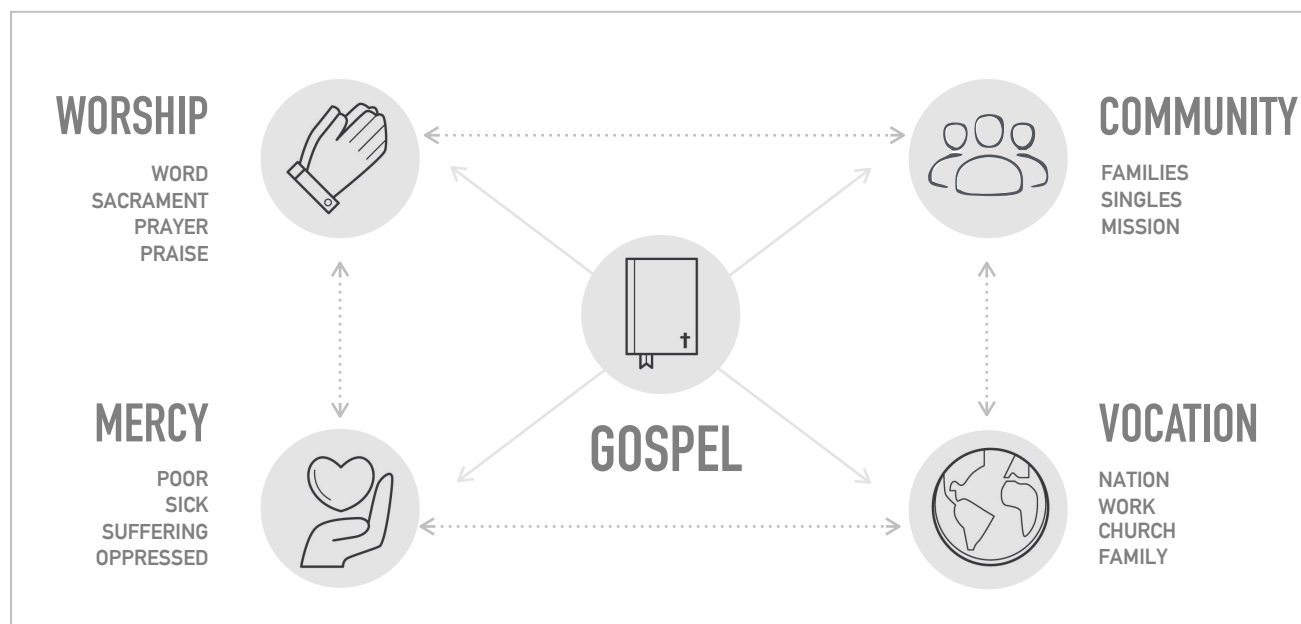
Reflecting on our doctrine and cultural moment, we have distilled the following values that we hold dear in the following points:

- **Gospel Theology:** The Gospel, which is the coming, dying and rising again of Jesus Christ as a substitute for our sin, is the beginning, middle, and end of the Christian life. We seek to be a church centred on the Gospel, always being continually renewed by the Gospel, and serving the Gospel in the world.
- **Godward Devotion:** We value a humble and vital devotion that comes from the heart. It is this kind of devotion that will enable us to be winsome and credible witness to the Gospel.
- **Authentic Community:** We value a transparent and mutually encouraging community that will spur each other towards living out the implications of the Gospel. This community will also effectively welcome skeptics, seekers and saints to grow in their knowledge, understanding of, and faith in God.
- **Church Planting:** We believe that the most effective way to reach this city is through the planting of a large number of Gospel-centred churches. We desire to be a catalyst for church planting in the city.
- **Missionary Endeavour:** We will leverage our talents and resources to engage in world mission, recognising our strategic location and the opportunity to reach the region for Jesus.
- **Cultural Engagement:** We see a great need to study and analyse our culture and to contextualise the Gospel. This will be most clearly expressed in our works of evangelism, disciple-making, preaching and teaching, vocational callings, and works of mercy.

INTRODUCTION

MINISTRY FRONTS

We seek to minister to our culture by focusing on **4 Ministry Fronts** birthed out of the Gospel:



- **Worship:** The Gospel produces worship. We connect people to God through Word and Sacrament, and Prayer and Praise. We speak in the vernacular, and explain as we go along in order that what we speak is accessible to the non-believer and believer alike. We want to see a gathering made up of sceptics, seekers and saints. More than that, we want to build a culture that expects the non-believer to be there.
- **Community:** The Gospel also produces community. As people are reconciled to God, they are reconciled to one another. We are a community of families and singles on mission for Jesus. We want to have authentic and open relationships where everyone can find Jesus even through the difficulties of their lives. We want to keep our communities as open as possible to non-believers.
- **Vocation:** The Gospel produces integrity in our vocations as we seek to no longer live for self, but to live for others through using the gifts and talents God has given us. We endeavour to help each other discover the unique calling that God has given each person in the family, church, workplace and nation. This is best discovered in authentic community.
- **Mercy:** In light of God's mercy, we also become merciful. A merciful heart will be built into our DNA as a church, and we will show mercy by taking care of the oppressed, suffering, sick and poor. We will work with existing organisations bringing mercy and relief to our community.

SESSION 1

THE GOSPEL

Membership Questions Addressed

1. *Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner 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?*

INTRODUCTION

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. Thus 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 the message that *"Christ died for our sins,"* and calls it as 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 message is *"I obey God, and therefore I am accepted."* And some Christians might think that the Gospel is *"I am accepted already, and therefore I do not 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 this, it moves and motivates them to obey God! And so, the Gospel actually says, *"I am 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 Nov 23, 2016. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/youth-in-singapore-shunning-religion>.

² From One Covenant Church Mission Statement.

³ From Membership Questions 1. and 2.

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

The word ‘Gospel’ means ‘good news,’ and it is translated from the Greek *euangelion*, and the Hebrew *besora*. The word “Gospel” therefore refers to a news report about some life-altering event.⁴ It is not something we do, but something that has been done for us. Although the Gospel sounds simple, there is also a complexity and richness to it. The great American 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.*”⁵ We need to understand something of this richness in order that we can 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.*”⁶ The first perspective answers the question, “*What hope is there for the world?*,” while the second answers the question, “*What must I do to be saved?*”⁷ An example of the former is seen in the Prophet Isaiah who 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 which supplants every earthly kingdom, and the making right of 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 shows us the ‘personal perspective’ when he states that the Gospel is the “*power of God for salvation for everyone who believes*” (Romans 1:16, c.f. Romans 1:1-4). This can be defined, as we have seen earlier, as the message that “*Christ died for our sins*” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5, c.f. 2 Timothy 2:8). Thus, this aspect of the Gospel is personal and individual.

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

⁵ Quoted by Burk Parsons, “What is the Gospel?” at <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/what-is-gospel/>. Accessed Oct 13 2017.

⁶ Graeme Goldsworthy, “Gospel,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D.A. Carson, Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 521.

⁷ Keller, 32.

SESSION 1: THE GOSPEL

‘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 the events of **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.”*⁸ While this perspective presents the grand cosmic plan of God for all of creation, it does not spell out how individuals actually get right with God, and become part of this cosmic programme.⁹ For this we need the ‘personal’ perspective.

‘Personal’ Perspective

As you read ‘across’ the Bible, collecting and summarising what the Bible says about its key characters, like God and humanity, you can also summarise the Gospel as comprising the message about **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 the need for our **Response (Acts 17:30, John 1:12, John 3:16, Matthew 16:15-19, Ephesians 2:11-19)**.¹⁰

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 as **meeting my own individual spiritual needs** on the other. The truth includes both perspectives: 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). Thus, Presbyterian pastor Tim Keller suggests that the two perspectives can be drawn together by following a *“conversational pathway,”* which can be used as a good guide for sharing the Gospel. The ‘cosmic’ perspective poses the questions in the conversation, while the ‘personal’ perspective offers the answers:¹¹

⁸ Goldsworthy, “Gospel,” 522.

⁹ Keller, 32

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 33

SESSION 1: THE GOSPEL

'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

QUESTION 1: WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

Answer: God. While there is 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 thus these things are 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, we turn from God, rebelling against his authority. We live lives of self-centredness. Our relationship with God having been broken, all our other relationships are also ruptured, resulting in spiritual, psychological, social, and physical breakdown and decay. 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, yet 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 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.*"

SESSION 1: THE GOSPEL

- *Restoration.* Jesus will eventually restore everything that is wrong in the world. The second time Jesus comes to earth, he will judge the world, and put a final end to all evil, suffering, decay, and death (Romans 8:19-21; 2 Peter 3:13). He will also renew and restore the material world to what it was meant to be. This redemption is both of our souls and of our bodies (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 about trying harder, but in 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 declared to be just before God and then there is “*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 of faith that saves us.* It is not the depth and sincerity of our repentance and faith that saves us. It is whom 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).¹²

WHAT DOES THE GOSPEL DO?

The Gospel saves us from eternal judgment, but it also changes our lives in the present. This Gospel does not 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. Thus, 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 will never get beyond your need for the Gospel! The Gospel is the way we grow (Galatians 3:1-3), and the way we are renewed (Colossians 1:6) and are built up (Acts 20:32). It is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16-17), a salvation which includes our justification, sanctification and glorification (Romans 8:29-30).¹³

¹² *Ibid.*, 32-36

¹³ ‘**Justification**’ is an act whereby a person is declared righteous, ‘**Sanctification**’ is the gradual process whereby a person becomes righteous, and ‘**Glorification**’ is the completion of that process when that person is confirmed in full righteousness.

SESSION 1: THE GOSPEL

In Galatians 2:14, Paul shows us a powerful principle for Christian living. 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 "*continual realignment process*" to the Gospel.¹⁴ These implications are wide ranging. Here are some examples of how the Gospel changes your life:¹⁵

- **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 shows us that sexuality is supposed to reflect the self-giving of Christ. He gave himself completely, without conditions. 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 a totally committed, permanent relationship of marriage between one man and one 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. The Gospel gives us new appetites and affections, and it leads us to a whole-person approach that begins with truth descending into the heart.

¹⁴ Tim Keller, *Galatians For You* (UK: Good Book Company, 2013), 53

¹⁵ The following examples have been selected and adapted from Tim Keller's Essay *The Centrality of the Gospel* (Tim Keller, "The Centrality of the Gospel," 5-9. <http://www.newcityindy.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/centrality-of-gospel.-keller.pdf>. Accessed on Oct 13 2017)

SESSION 1: THE GOSPEL

- **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 likely to become Christians. We are courteous and careful with people. We do not 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 to God (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 sombre 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 towards the poor, without taking a stance of moral superiority, knowing that we were once spiritually bankrupt, and had to be saved by Christ’s free and generous grace. So we do not worry too much about “deserved-ness,” since all of us do not 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: to credibly receive 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!

SESSION 1: THE GOSPEL

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?

SESSION 2

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

Membership Questions Addressed

1. *Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner 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?*

INTRODUCTION

Does the truth matter? In a recent article, political commentator Charles Sykes commented that “we now find ourselves awash in fabulism, fake news and outright lies,” and in this environment, “whether truth matters” is “no longer a theoretical question” but “increasingly an existential question.”¹⁶ Closer to home, recognising that “fake news” is becoming an increasing issue, the Singapore Government is reviewing its current laws because they deem them “limited in tackling the problem.”¹⁷ The current concern over “fake news” shows us that what you know and what you believe does impact your life and the lives of others, and influence the choices that you make, in a profound way. If you believe the wrong things, you will more likely make the wrong choices and stake your lives on falsehood. Conversely, if you believe the right things, you will more likely make the right choices and stake your lives on the truth. Therefore, truth does matter.

There exists however a tendency even among some Christians to downplay truth. Some downplay knowledge and think that it is more important just to “live rightly.” But God’s truth is what informs, directs, and shows us what right living is! Truth and knowledge do matter. That is why the Apostle Paul prayed that God will give Christians “a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the **knowledge** of him,” and that they may “**know** what is the hope” to which God has called them (**Ephesians 1:17-18**). If we do not understand our God and his ways, we will stumble in our desire to “live rightly.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Charles Sykes “Does the truth matter? This is no longer a theoretical question.” 2017 America Press Inc. Accessed July 5, 2017. <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/06/05/does-truth-matter-no-longer-theoretical-question>

¹⁷ Lydia Lam “Government to review laws to tackle fake news: Some instances of fake news” 2017 Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Accessed July 5, 2017. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/government-to-review-laws-to-tackle-fake-news-some-instances-of-fake-news>

¹⁸ Summarised from the Membership Class Notes of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, 2016 Edition, 8

SESSION 2: THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

So, what truths do we need to know? During the 16th Century Reformation, the Reformers sought to address corruption and abuses in the Church of their day. They were not seeking to be novel, but rather to recover the original Christianity that had become muddled during the Medieval Era. Riding on developments within medieval theology, and critiques from within the church, they sought to reform the Church according to the truths of Scripture. This meant that they rediscovered truths from the Word of God that had been neglected. These truths did not just change the Church. Through the ages, these truths have filtered down to transform politics, economics and culture. Reformation truth transformed Europe, and from there, the rest of the world.

What did the Reformers believe that gave them such an impact upon the church and the world? The Reformers believed in the historic Christian faith, as formulated into certain **guiding principles** and **essential truths concerning salvation**. The **guiding principles** of the Reformation were known as the **5 Solas**.¹⁹ These are 5 Latin phrases that emerged from their study of Scripture, and which guided their work. The **essential truths concerning salvation** came to be known as the “*Doctrines of Grace*,” and these truths are commonly summarised as the **5 Points of Calvinism**.²⁰ Let us look at the **5 Solas** and the **5 Points** to discover these powerful truths that guided and drove the Reformation, and that we pray would do the same today in our church:²¹

THE 5 SOLAS OF THE REFORMATION

1. **Sola Scriptura** (“Scripture alone”): The Bible alone is our ultimate and trustworthy authority. This does not mean that the Bible is the only place where truth is found, but that everything else we learn about God and this world, together with all other authorities and traditions, should be interpreted in light of Scripture. Every word of the 66 books of the Bible is inspired by God, and therefore without error (e.g. **Psalm 19:7**, “*The law of the LORD is perfect*”; **Matthew 15:6**, “*for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God*”; **2 Timothy 3:16**, “*All Scripture is breathed out by God*”).

¹⁹ ‘Sola’ is Latin for ‘alone’ or ‘only’.

²⁰ These teachings were further crystallised in the form of confessions that sought to faithfully capture the Bible’s teachings. One Covenant Church adopts one of the most well-developed and common confessions in the English-speaking Reformed world for the last 300 years. Crafted in 1646, it is known as the **Westminster Standards**, and consists of the **Westminster Confession of Faith**, the **Larger Catechism**, and the **Shorter Catechism**. These standards have been adopted by orthodox Presbyterian churches around the world. We will learn more of the **Westminster Standards** in our life together as a church moving forward. To be clear, we do not require full subscription to the Westminster Standards for membership at One Covenant Church. However, office holders in the Church, such as pastors, elders and deacons are required to subscribe to the Standards.

²¹ The section on the 5 Solas follows closely, Justin Holcomb “Five Points from the past that should matter to you”, <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/the-five-solas-of-the-protestant-reformation.html>, accessed July 5, 2017. The section on the 5 Points of Calvinism follows closely Ken Golden, *Presbytopia: What it means to be Presbyterian* (UK, Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 63-74

SESSION 2: THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

2. **Sola Gratia** ("Grace alone"): We are saved by the grace of God alone. The basis of our salvation is God's grace, his unmerited favour. It is not something we can earn, but we only receive it by faith, and this faith itself is a gift from God (e.g. **Ephesians 1:7**, *"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace"*; and **Ephesians 2:8-9**, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast"*).
3. **Sola Fide** ("Faith alone"): We are saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ. We are not saved by our own merits, or declared righteous by our good works. Rather, God saves us in spite of our sins and our good works (e.g. **Ephesians 2:8-9**, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast"*; and **Romans 3:22**, *"the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ"*).
4. **Solus Christus** ("Christ alone"): Jesus Christ alone is our Lord, Saviour, and King. God has given the ultimate revelation of himself by sending Jesus Christ. It is only through Christ that we can be saved and transformed. Because we are sinful, neither religious rituals nor good works, nor other men and women, can mediate between God and us. Only Jesus can be the perfect mediator, and his sacrificial death alone can atone for our sin (e.g. **Colossians 1:15**, *"He is the image of the invisible God"*; and **1 Timothy 2:5**, *"there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus"*).
5. **Soli Deo Gloria** ("to the glory of God alone"): We live for the glory of God alone, since glory belongs to Him alone. The goal of all of life is to give glory only to God, and no one else. God is not a means to a goal, but rather the goal of all things is to bring glory to God. (e.g. **Isaiah 43:7**, *"everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory"*; **Psalms 115:1**, *"Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory"*; and **1 Corinthians 10:31**, *"whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"*).

Through **Scripture alone**, we know that we are saved **by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone**.

What implications do these principles have for us in One Covenant Church?

Guided by these principles, we can say *firstly*, that **God's Word is the foundation** of our worship, teaching and witness. *Secondly*, we place **complete trust in the finished work of Christ**, and do not trust in our own merit and works for our salvation. *Thirdly*, we seek to **bring glory to God**, and not ourselves, in all that we do.

THE 5 POINTS OF CALVINISM

The Reformers further distilled the Bible's teaching regarding salvation “*from the standpoint of God*” and “*through the lens of the Trinity*”: God accomplishes the salvation of sinners through all 3 members of the Trinity: the **Father elects**, the **Son redeems**, and the **Spirit calls** sinners to salvation.²² Their developed doctrine became known as the “*Doctrines of Grace*.” Now, since we are considering salvation from the standpoint of our God who is infinite, there are going to be some things about this doctrine that will be mysterious and difficult to grasp. As theologian J I Packer put it, “*A God whom we could understand exhaustively, and whose revelation of Himself confronted us with no mysteries whatsoever, would be a God in man's image, and therefore an imaginary God, not the God of the Bible at all.*”²³

So, why did the Reformers venture there, as we do today? **Deuteronomy 29:29** says, “*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.*” And so indeed there are “*secret things*” about God that we will never fully understand, and should not speculate about. Yet there are things that God has revealed, that he expects us to know, because it is to our benefit. That is why the Reformer John Calvin cautioned us against **speculating** beyond what God has revealed, while also at the same time he cautioned us against **neglecting** what God had revealed.²⁴ His exhortation is to stick closely to Scripture, nothing more and nothing less: ***Sola Scriptura***!²⁵ Hence, we will not neglect what God has revealed, yet we must recognise an element of mystery beyond our human comprehension, and we will not speculate beyond what is revealed. With that said, here are the **5 Points**:

1. **Total Depravity**: This doctrine describes the totality of sin — that it has penetrated every part of our human nature. This doesn't mean that we are as wicked as we possibly can be, but that our whole person is affected by the Fall: our bodies, minds, thinking, will, and spirit have been infected with the power of sin (e.g. **Genesis 6:5**, “*every intention of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually*”; **Genesis 8:21**, “*the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth*”; and **Romans 3:12**, “*No one does good, not even one*”).²⁶

²² Golden, 63, 71-2

²³ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1991), 40

²⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Volume 2, III,21,1-4; 922-926. The edition cited here is: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John McNeil, trans. F. Battles; Louisville, KY: WJKP, 1960)

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, Volume 2, III,21,2; 923-924.

²⁶ R C Sproul, “TULIP and Reformed Theology: Total Depravity,” at <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/tulip-and-reformed-theology-total-depravity/>. Accessed 5 July, 2017

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This renders people naturally incapable of choosing God (e.g. **Romans 8:7**, *"the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed it cannot"*; and **1 Corinthians 2:14**, *"the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him"*).

2. **Unconditional Election:** God's election rests on his sovereign decision to save someone, not on the foreseeable actions or intentions of the person. Romans 8:29-30 gives us what has been called the 'golden chain of salvation,' *"those whom he **foreknew** he also predestined... those whom he **predestined** he also **called**, and those whom he called he also **justified**, and those whom he justified he also **glorified**."*

Foreknowledge does not refer merely to knowing what the person will do, but to knowing the person intimately in advance (e.g. **Jeremiah 1:5**, *"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you"*; and **Romans 8:29**, *"those **whom** he foreknew"*).

Foreknowledge leads to **predestination**, which is the doctrine where God purposefully chose us to be his children before the foundation of the world, according to the purpose of his will, because he loves us (e.g. **Ephesians 1:4-5**, *"he chose us in him before the foundation of the world... in love, he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will"*; and **Romans 9:11-13**, *"though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad - in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls..."*). This means that some are appointed to believe in Christ beforehand, and hence they will believe when the Gospel is preached to them (e.g. **Acts 13:48**, *"as many as were appointed to eternal life believed"*).

The sobering corollary is that others are left in their sins. This is called **reprobation** (e.g. **Romans 9:17-18**, *"he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills"*; **Jude 4**, *"certain people... were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people"*; and **1 Peter 2:8**, *"They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do"*).

Remember, **nobody deserves to be saved!** We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory (**Romans 3:23**). The fact that God would save even one person would be grace. Yet he has gone beyond that and has chosen to save *"a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language"* (**Revelation 7:9**).

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But, how do we know who the elect are? **1 Thessalonians 1:4** says, “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our Gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” The elect are those that will surely respond to the preaching of the Gospel. God has ordained the preaching of the Gospel as the means by which the elect come to him (**Romans 10:14**, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”).

Therefore, if you want to know who the elect are, you preach the Gospel far and wide! And if you want to know if *you* are elect, the solution is not, as John Calvin put it, to speculate upon the “inner recesses of divine wisdom.” Rather, it is to see if you have personally heeded the “call of God” to believe in the Gospel.²⁷ Calvin says that Christ is the “mirror” in which we “contemplate” election — Christ is the reflection of our election.²⁸ Do not try to figure out the “secret things” of God through speculation. Rather, look to Christ, trust in Christ, and if you can say, “I believe in the Gospel” and show evidence in your life that you do, you are one of the elect!

3. **Limited Atonement:** A better way to refer to this doctrine is **definite atonement**. It teaches that “God the Father designed the work of redemption specifically with a view to providing salvation for the elect, and that Christ died for His sheep and laid down His life for those the Father had given to Him.”²⁹ That is, Jesus only redeems the people that God the Father has elected (e.g. **John 6:37**, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out”; **John 10:14-15**, “I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep”; **John 17:9**, “I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours”).

This means that Jesus did not just die to produce the *possibility* of saving people, he died to *definitely* and *particularly* save God’s people (e.g. **Revelation 5:9**, “For you were slain and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation”).

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, Volume 2, III,24,4; 969.

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, Volume 2, III,24,5; 970.

²⁹ R C Sproul, “TULIP and Reformed Theology: Limited Atonement,” <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/tulip-and-reformed-theology-limited-atonement/>. Accessed 5 July, 2017

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4. **Irresistible Grace:** This doctrine teaches that God's grace will accomplish God's will in his time to save the elect from their sins. It is also called **effective grace**, because *"the irresistible grace of God effects what God intends it to effect."*³⁰ The Holy Spirit applies the atoning work of Christ on God's chosen people (e.g. **Romans 8:30**, *"Those whom he predestined he also called"*; and **John 6:44**, *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him"*). And, since no one can resist God's will, the elect will surely come (e.g. **Romans 9:19**, *"who can resist his will?"*).

Now, this does not mean that God's grace is incapable being resisted. We do resist his grace. However, God's grace is so powerful that it can overcome our natural and final resistance. The Holy Spirit changes the inclination and disposition of our wills, to willingly embrace Christ.³¹

In God's plan, God *first* issues a **general call**, through the preaching of the Gospel to all. We know that not everyone will respond to the external preaching of the Gospel (Matthew 22:14, *"Many are called, but few are chosen"*). Therefore, *secondly* for the elect, the Holy Spirit takes what is preached and turns it into an **effectual call**, enabling them to willingly believe the Gospel (e.g. **Acts 16:14**, *"the LORD opened her heart to pay attention to what was said"*; and **1 Thessalonians 1:4**, *"our Gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction"*).

5. **Perseverance of the Saints:** This doctrine teaches that the recipients of the Father's election, the Son's redemption, and the Spirit's effectual calling will not lose their salvation, and will persevere to the end. As Presbyterian theologian R. C. Sproul puts it, *"If you have it—that is, if you have genuine faith and are in a state of saving grace—you will never lose it. If you lose it, you never had it."*³² (e.g. **Romans 8:30**, *"Those whom he justified, he also glorified"*; **Philippians 1:6**, *"He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion"*; **1 John 2:19**, *"Those who went out from us were never really with us"*).

Perseverance therefore comprises both **persistence** and **preservation**. **Persistence**, because the elect will surely press on, and will keep believing until the end (e.g. **Philippians 3:12**, *"Not that I have already obtained it or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own"*). **Preservation**, because it is God who preserves and keeps the believer in him till the end (e.g. **1 Corinthians 1:8**, *"He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."*).

³⁰ R C Sproul, "TULIP and Reformed Theology: Irresistible Grace" 2017 Ligonier Ministries. Accessed 5 July, 2017. <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/tulip-and-reformed-theology-irresistible-grace/>

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² R C Sproul, "TULIP and Reformed Theology: Perseverance of the Saints" 2017 Ligonier Ministries. Accessed 5 July, 2017. <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/tulip-and-reformed-theology-perseverance-saints/>

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What then are the implications for us, in believing the “Doctrines of Grace”?

First, we should be **deeply humbled before a sovereign God**. Sadly, Christians are often characterised as arrogant, because we think we are better than others. But, the truth is we are totally depraved, and did nothing to merit God’s favour! We receive everything, undeservedly, by grace! *Second*, we should have **great confidence in a gracious God**. God has loved you, *in spite* of who you are! He chose you before the foundation of the world. Jesus died particularly for you. The Holy Spirit calls you effectually, and seals you to the end. Nothing can take you out of God’s hand! *Third*, we should have **evangelistic and missionary zeal for a saving God**. Christ’s death has *definitely* saved a multitude from every tribe, people, tongue and nation. Indeed, God has “*many people in this city*” (Acts 18:10), and the next and the next — the elect, who will surely respond to the Gospel! And so, the dangers, toils and snares of our evangelistic and missionary efforts will never be in vain. Thus, whether the numbers of those who respond in faith to the Gospel are small or great, we have a certainty of evangelistic and missionary success!

CONCLUSION

Believing in the *Solas* and the “*Doctrines of Grace*” involves trusting in the perfect wisdom of our God (e.g. **Isaiah 40:28**, **Romans 11:33**). We trust that, even if we do not understand all the details of what he has done, in the eternal scheme of things what he does is indeed good and wise. But how can we be so confident in his goodness and wisdom? We can have such confidence because of the wisdom of the cross! **1 Corinthians 1:18-19** says, “*the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’*” If at the cross God in his infinite wisdom was willing to give up his Son for you, at such infinite cost to himself, then you know that his wisdom is a loving wisdom, and his love is a wise love! Therefore, it is a wisdom you can trust, even if you cannot yet figure out all the details of His plan. It is a wisdom you can glory in, and that brings him all the glory.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How would you summarise the 5 *solas* of the Reformation? Why do they matter to you?
2. Salvation is all of grace, and all of God: the Father elects, the Son redeems, and the Spirit calls. Do you agree, or disagree, with the “Doctrines of Grace”? Why?
3. The “Doctrines of Grace” should produce deep humility, great confidence and evangelistic/missionary zeal? Is this true of you? Why, or why not?

SESSION 3

WORSHIP

Membership Question Addressed

4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?

INTRODUCTION

Although secular people might think that only religious people worship, the truth is that everybody worships something. The word “worship” means to “ascribe worth,” and the late novelist David Foster Wallace once told a college graduating class this:

“Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money, and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough... Worship your body and beauty... and you will always feel ugly... Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid... Worship your intellect.... you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out...”³³

Everybody worships. Everybody “ascribes worth” to something. Everybody “taps real meaning in life” from something, be it money, beauty, power, or intellect. The trouble is: If you worship anything other than God as something of supreme worth, then all those things you “tap meaning” from and “ascribe worth” to will ultimately disappoint you. The biblical term for these pseudo-gods, or counterfeit gods, is “idol” (**Psalm 115:4**, “Their **idols** are silver and gold, the work of human hands”), and these idols “do not speak,” “do not see,” “do not hear,” “do not smell,” “do not feel,” “do not walk,” and “do not make a sound” (**Psalm 115:5-7**); they are impotent! Worse, “those who make them **become like them**, so do all who trust in them” (**Psalm 115:8**). You see, what you worship defines you and evaluates you. If you worship money, you will always feel poor. Worship beauty, and you will always feel ugly. Worship power, and you will always feel weak. Worship intellect, and you will always feel stupid. All of these pseudo-gods, these idols, will finally fail you.

³³ Quoted by Tim Keller in *Center Church*, 34.

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The Bible says that the only one worthy of worship, and indeed whose worship brings his worshippers ultimate good, is God alone (e.g. **Exodus 20:2-3**, “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me*”). He is mighty and sovereign, and so when you worship him, you are greatly humbled and made undone (e.g. **Isaiah 6:5**, “*Woe is me!... for my eyes have seen the King*”). Yet, He is merciful and gracious, demonstrating that through Jesus Christ. Therefore, when you worship him, you become incredibly confident in his love (e.g. **Hebrews 4:16**, “*Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace...*”). Worshipping the God revealed in the Bible makes you both greatly humbled and yet incredibly confident, at the same time!

You see, God does not need our worship (**Psalms 50:8-13**), but he calls and commands us to worship him (e.g. **Luke 4:8**, “*You shall worship the LORD your God and him only shall you serve*”), because we need him! As Edmund Clowney puts it, “*God’s glory attracts worship... worship is the response of the creature to the revealed glory of the Creator*” (**Psalms 19:1**), but “*the glory... that draws our praise becomes a blessing that increasingly transforms our existence*” (**2 Corinthians 3:18**).³⁴ Hence worship, as theologian D. A. Carson puts it, is the “*proper response... to God*.”³⁵ If it is something that God requires of us for our good, then we need to understand worship from God’s perspective, through his Word. Hence, in this session we are going to explore three aspects of Christian worship: the **regulation of worship**, the **elements of worship**, and the **dialogue in worship**.³⁶

THE REGULATION OF WORSHIP

We learned in Session 2 that one of the fundamental principles of the Reformation was **Sola Scriptura**, i.e. Scripture alone is our ultimate and trustworthy authority. Hence, it is through Scripture that God reveals his perfect will to us regarding worship. And it is through Scripture that God regulates our worship of him. That is to say, **we worship God only in the way he has prescribed for us to worship him in Scripture**. This is known as the **Regulative Principle**.³⁷

³⁴ Edmund P. Clowney, “The Church,” in the Gerald Bray, ed., *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995), 118-120.

³⁵ D. A. Carson, “Worship under the Word,” in D. A. Carson, ed., *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 215

³⁶ The Bible also speaks about “all of life” as worship e.g. Romans 12:1-2, Colossians 3:17. In this session, however, we are addressing the narrower theme of when God’s people gather together for worship e.g. 1 Corinthians 14:26-40, 1 Timothy 2:1-15, also known as “Corporate Worship.”

³⁷ The following section follows closely Golden, 82-86.

The *Regulative Principle* states that God commands us to worship only according to his Word, thus only what he commands is permissible. This is in contrast to the *normative principle* that some other Protestant churches hold to, which teaches that whatever is not forbidden is permissible.

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We need the Regulative Principle because *firstly*, we are finite creatures who cannot know the mind of our creator apart from his revelation (e.g. **Romans 11:34**, “*Who has known the mind of the LORD?*”). It is Scripture that reveals to us the mind of our Creator regarding how we are to worship him. (e.g. **2 Timothy 3:16-17**, “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*”). *Secondly*, we need the Regulative Principle because we are sinners thoroughly tainted with sin (e.g. **Ecclesiastes 9:3**, “*the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live....*”). Hence, we cannot trust our own hearts, minds and wills to rightly worship God. Consider how God cautions the people of Israel in **Deuteronomy 4:15-18** concerning worship:

“Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth.”

Yet despite this, Israel chose to worship golden calves (**Exodus 32:4**; **1 Kings 12:28**), and a bronze serpent (**2 Kings 18:4**)! Left to our own devices, we would do exactly the same thing (**Romans 1:22**, “*they... exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images.*”)! That is why God declares, “*Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it*” (**Deuteronomy 12:32**). In the New Testament also, God says in **Hebrews 12:28-29**, “*Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.*”³⁸

It is to our benefit that God has designed worship this way! The **Regulative Principle** protects our **liberty of conscience**. We are bound to worship God only as God reveals to us in the Scriptures. Hence, we do not need to feel obliged to participate in worship rituals and practices that are not commanded in Scripture. For example, in the first Century some were advocating ceremonies, harsh exercises of self-denial, and even circumcision. The Apostle Paul calls these “*self-made religion,*” (**Colossians 2:23**) and exhorts us to ignore them.

³⁸ This “*consuming fire*” may be referencing **Leviticus 10:1-4**: two priests offered “*unauthorised fire*” to God, viz, they tried to worship God in a way that he had not commanded. As a result, fire came out from the Lord and consumed them. This was an extraordinary judgement, but it does emphasise for us the seriousness of worshipping God as He requires and regulates.

Concerning Old Testament worship, we must recognise that with the coming of Christ, temple worship has found its fulfilment in Christ (John 4:21-24). And so, things like liturgical calendars, elaborate ritual, and sacred places are no longer emphasised (Colossians 2:16-17).

THE ELEMENTS OF WORSHIP

So what does God through Scripture require us to do in our worship of him? These acts have been traditionally known as the **elements** of worship. They are:

- Reading of Scripture (**Nehemiah 8:1-8; 1 Timothy 4:13**)
- Preaching (**1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 4:2**)
- Sacrament of Baptism (**Acts 2:41, 1 Corinthians 1:17**)
- Sacrament of the Lord's Supper (**Acts 2:42, 20:7, 1 Corinthians 11:20**);
- Prayer (**Acts 2:42, 1 Timothy 2:1-3**)
- Congregational singing (**Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16**)
- Offerings (**Psalms 96:8, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2**)
- Occasional vows (**Romans 10:9-13, 1 Timothy 6:12**).

These **elements** can be expressed in different **forms**, e.g. version of Scripture used, written or extemporaneous prayer, psalms, hymns or songs, mode of baptism etc. The Bible gives us latitude in terms of the **forms** that these **elements** take. And then, there are also *situations and factors* that facilitate worship. These are influenced by the historical and cultural context that a church finds itself in. They are called the **circumstances** of worship. The Westminster Confession says that **circumstances** "*are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word,*" that is, they are to be guided by human wisdom.³⁹ These include the time and place of worship, whether or not to use amplification, musical instruments, projection, style of dress etc. Hence, two churches with very similar beliefs may have the same **elements** of worship, but express them very differently in terms of **form** and because of **circumstance**.

THE DIALOGUE IN WORSHIP

So what actually happens when God's people gather to worship him? **Hebrews 12:22** tells us that when we assemble for worship, we "*come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.*" We gather spiritually with "*angels... the assembly of the firstborn... the spirits of the righteous made perfect.*" We enter into the presence of God the Father through Jesus "*the mediator of a new covenant,*" by the power of the Holy Spirit! As Clowney puts it, "*we join the saints and angels in the festival of glory!*"⁴⁰ We do not just gather to hear a message, or to sing some songs to make us feel good. As Clowney put it, "*God's assembly stands in his presence; to be the assembly... to be the church, is to worship God together.*"⁴¹

³⁹ Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 1, Section 6.

⁴⁰ Clowney, "The Church," in Bray, e.d, *Contours*, 118.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

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In worship, we actually meet with God. He speaks to us, and we respond to him. The **elements** of worship fit together as a **dialogue between God and his people**.⁴² We see this pattern in **2 Chronicles 5-7**: There was a call to worship (**2 Chronicles 5:2-5**), and in response Israel offered a sin offering that allowed entrance into God's presence (**2 Chronicles 5:6-10**), followed up with singing a hymn of praise (**2 Chronicles 5:11-14**). There was a message (**2 Chronicles 6:1-11**), and in response a prayer of dedication was offered on behalf of the people (**2 Chronicles 6:12-42**). God revealed His acceptance of the sacrifice, with his glory filling the temple (**2 Chronicles 7:1-2**), and in response the congregation sang praises and thanksgiving to God (**2 Chronicles 7:3**). Similarly, in **Revelation 4-5**, there is the call to an assembly of God's people (**Revelation 4:1-7**), and in response hymns are sung to God (**Revelation 4:8-11**). There was a message proclaimed (**Revelation 5:2**), followed by the provision of a sin offering through the Lamb, Jesus who was slain (**Revelation 5:1-6**), and in response the people sang a new song to God (**Revelation 5:9-10**).

That is why in our own order of worship, there is a responsive movement between God's speaking and our response to God. **God calls us** (i.e. the call to assemble and worship), and we respond in our first song of praise. **God cleanses us** (i.e. a reminder of Christ's sacrifice) through proclaiming the Law and the Declaration of Pardon, and we respond with confession of sin, and in a song of thanksgiving for God's forgiveness of our sins. **God communes with us** (i.e. God speaks and meets us in his Word), we sing a song to praise Him in response, and finally **God commissions us** and sends us into the world to do His will.

CONCLUSION

In summary, worship is a meeting of heaven and earth, of God and his people. God is uniquely present in our worship (e.g. **1 Corinthians 14:25**, "*God is really among you*"). Worship is a command, a privilege and a joy. But if you look at it more closely, you will realise that the **elements** of worship come together as a re-enactment of the chief article of the Christian faith, the Gospel.⁴³ Worship beckons us to reckon with the holiness of God, produces in us a sense of our unworthiness, and also evokes a fresh sense of the costliness and graciousness of Christ's sacrifice in our place. Our worship of God is made both possible and beautiful by the sacrifice of Christ! In worship, we get a fresh "*sense on the heart*" of the truth of the Gospel, and *this* conforms us more and more to Christ!⁴⁴ Worship is therefore made possible through the Gospel, and is itself shaped by the Gospel, in order that we might bring glory to God, and joy to our hearts!

⁴² This is known as the "dialogical principle of worship."

⁴³ Timothy J Keller, "Reformed Worship in the Global City" in Carson, ed., *Worship by the Book*, 215.

⁴⁴ Keller, "Reformed Worship," in Carson, ed., *Worship by the Book*, 205

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. God commands and requires us to worship for our good. What is your response to this?
2. Worship re-enacts the Gospel. Have you seen and experienced that in corporate worship? Share your experience.

SESSION 4

PREACHING & SACRAMENTS

Membership Question Addressed

4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?

INTRODUCTION

Faith in Christ is God's gift (**John 3:5; Ephesians 2:8**), and because it is God's gift, we know that God will preserve our faith to the very end (**Romans 8:38-39**). But, why is it sometimes so hard to keep believing? Why do we experience setbacks that make us want to doubt God? The truth is, our faith will not be perfect in this life. We still struggle with the tendencies of our fallen nature. However, in his wisdom and grace, God has provided ways to regularly strengthen our faith, ways which are known as the **"means of grace."** Charles Hodge calls them, *"channels of... the supernatural influences of the Holy Spirit, to the souls of men."*⁴⁵ They are channels that God uses to communicate his grace to us. In other words, the means of grace are the answer to questions like, *"How do I access the grace of the Lord for my many needs? Where do I go, what do I do, to connect with the real help he gives to sinners and sufferers here in this world?"*⁴⁶

The means he has given to us are **preaching, sacraments** and **prayer**. They might not seem very special, but to those with faith, and by the working of the Holy Spirit, God uses these things to confirm our trust in Jesus, and to strengthen our wills to flee sin and rest in Christ.⁴⁷

Preaching and **sacraments** are known as the **primary means of grace**, such that it is common to refer to a Christian minister as a *"minister of Word and Sacrament."* These means are vital resources that God has given the church, and we do well not to neglect them. In this session, we will look at the **proclamation in preaching** and the **picture of the sacraments**, in order that we might understand how these two means of grace function. After all, we want to be able to fully embrace the things that God has given us for our good.

⁴⁵ Quoted in "Means of Grace" at [http://www.reformed.org/definitions/index.html?mainframe=/definitions/means\)of_grace.html](http://www.reformed.org/definitions/index.html?mainframe=/definitions/means)of_grace.html). Accessed 17 July, 2017.

⁴⁶ Ray Ortlund, "The Ordinary Means of Grace" at <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/ordinary-means-of-grace/>. Accessed 21 July, 2017.

⁴⁷ Summarised from "Means of Grace" at <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/means-of-grace/>, accessed 17 July, 2017.

THE PROCLAMATION IN PREACHING

“Preaching” is one of the essential **elements** of Christian worship (e.g. **1 Timothy 4:13**, “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching”; and **2 Timothy 4:2**, “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke and exhort, with complete patience and teaching...”). It is God’s means of speaking to his people. And it is God’s primary means for giving faith to his people.⁴⁸ Faith comes from God (**Ephesians 2:8**, “by grace you have been saved through faith... it is the gift of God”). But how do we receive this faith?

In **Romans 10:14-17**, the Apostle Paul says, “How then will they **call on him** in whom they have not **believed**? And how are they to **believe in him** of whom they have never **heard**? And how are they to hear without someone **preaching**? And how are they to preach unless they are **sent**? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’ But they have not all obeyed the Gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” Paul explains that **calling on God** for salvation requires **believing** the Gospel, which comes from **hearing** the Gospel, that in turn comes from someone **preaching** the Gospel. Some are in turn **sent** to **preach**. So ordinarily, God appoints for people to receive faith through the act of appointing and sending preachers of the Gospel (**Acts 26:12-18**, **2 Timothy 4:5**); faith is ordinarily *received* through the preaching of the Gospel (**Romans 10:17**) by those sent. Moreover, faith is ordinarily *strengthened* through the preaching of this same Gospel (**Romans 16:25**, “to him who is able to strengthen you according to my Gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ”).

So what is preaching? Preaching is a **proclamation** of **Jesus Christ and all his benefits**. It is not merely a lecture or a speech. The Greek word for a preacher, *kerux*, means “herald” i.e. someone who proclaims a royal message. **Romans 10:15** references **Isaiah 52:7**, which reads, “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.’” A preacher proclaims the message of the King, and applies it to the King’s subjects. Since that is the case, what message does the preacher preach?

⁴⁸ The following section follows closely Golden, 93-97

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First, the preacher preaches the **Word of God**, the Bible. He does not preach his own opinions or philosophy or cultural trends (e.g. **2 Timothy 4:2**, “*Preach the Word*”). That is why we emphasise **expository preaching** — preaching that unveils the meaning of a text of Scripture. The great Anglican pastor John Stott says that expository preaching seeks to “*bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view.*”⁴⁹ Tim Keller says, “*Expository preaching grounds the message in the text so that all the sermon's points are the points in the text, and it majors in the texts's major ideas.*”⁵⁰ Hence, the main preaching approach in this church is to systematically work through books of the Bible sequentially.

Second, the preacher preaches **Christ**. He does not just preach the Bible, but the Bible as it reveals Christ (e.g. **1 Corinthians 1:22**, “*we preach Christ crucified...*”; **John 5:39**, “*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me*”; and **Luke 24:27**, “*beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself*”). As Reformed theologian Michael Horton puts it, Christ is the “*central character*” and the “*sum and substance of all of Scripture.*”⁵¹ Therefore he says, the point is “*not to find a place for God in our story but to receive the good news that God has found a place for us in his,*” in the story of the Gospel.⁵² We need to hear the Gospel again and again from different passages in Scripture, because that is what will truly change our lives and make us more like Jesus. We will not be changed by merely learning principles, but only when we encounter Christ through the Scriptures. Preaching involves “*presenting the law in all its threatening power,*” and declaring “*Jesus Christ... as the divine rescuer who saves from divine wrath.*”⁵³ It involves anchoring the *imperatives* of Scripture (i.e. what we must do) in the *indicatives* of Scripture (i.e. what God has done for us in Christ) (**Romans 12:1**, “*Therefore...*”).

⁴⁹ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 125

⁵⁰ Tim Keller, cited at <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/erikraymond/2017/04/18/what-is-expository-preaching/> accessed July 18, 2017.

⁵¹ Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ-Centred Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 82

⁵² *Ibid.*, 78

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 67, 75

THE PICTURE OF THE SACRAMENTS

Besides the **verbal** means of grace that is preaching, God has also given us **visible** means of grace in the **sacraments**.⁵⁴ The sacraments are like a picture, showing us the reality of God's grace. What are the sacraments? The Westminster Shorter Catechism's answer to question 92 says: "A sacrament is an **holy ordinance instituted by Christ**; wherein, by **sensible signs**, Christ, and the **benefits** of the new covenant, are **represented, sealed, and applied to believers**."

These are **baptism**, where water is either sprinkled or poured on a person or the person is immersed in water, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the **Lord's Supper** or **Holy Communion**, where the church eats bread and drinks wine representing Jesus' body and blood respectively. We will look in greater detail at baptism and the Lord's Supper in subsequent sessions. For this session, we want to give an overview of what the sacraments are and how they function:

Firstly, a sacrament is a "holy ordinance." To be "holy" means to be set apart, and an "ordinance" is a ritual or a rite commanded by God. That means that God has set apart common things like water, bread and wine for his special purpose of communicating grace to his people (e.g. **Matthew 28:19**, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, **baptising** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...", **Luke 22:19-21**, "...**he took bread**, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, '**This cup** that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood'").

Secondly, a sacrament is "instituted by Christ." Christ himself gives sacraments to the church, as a picture of his own work on behalf of God's people. He instituted **baptism** (**Matthew 3:13-15**, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptised by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness'"), and the **Lord's Supper** (**Luke 22:19**, "And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'").

Thirdly, a sacrament is "sensible," meaning that it appeals to the senses: sight, smell, touch, feel, and taste. God does not just tell us what he does for us in Christ through preaching, he shows us what he has done in Christ through the sacraments. You can see it, smell it, touch it, feel it, and taste it (e.g. **Matthew 26:26-27**, "Take, eat... Drink of it...").

⁵⁴ The word 'sacrament' comes from a Latin word meaning "mystery" (e.g. 1 Corinthians 4:1, "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God")

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Fourthly, a sacrament is a “*sign*” of God’s promises. A sign is a picture that describes a reality. In the Old Covenant, God gave circumcision as a sacrament to Israel (e.g. **Genesis 17:11**, “*You shall be circumcised... and it shall be a **sign** of the covenant*”). In **Romans 4:11**, the Apostle Paul says, “*Abraham received the **sign** of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.*” Circumcision was a sign of how God saved Abraham by faith, not by works. In the New Covenant, circumcision has been replaced by **baptism** (e.g. **Colossians 2:11-12**, “*you were circumcised... having been buried with him in baptism...*”), and therefore now functions as a similar sign of salvation by faith alone. Now the “*sign*” and the thing “*signified*” are closely bound to each other. In **Genesis 17:10**, God actually refers to “*circumcision*” as “*the covenant*,” and **1 Peter 3:21** states, “*baptism... now saves you.*” Now we know from the rest of the Bible that God’s covenant is not just circumcision, but God pledging himself to his people (e.g. **Genesis 12, 15**), and we also know that it is by grace through faith that we are saved (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). So it cannot be baptism itself that saves, and it cannot be circumcision itself that is the covenant. What the passages are saying therefore is that these sacraments “*represent*” so closely what Christ has done in saving his people such that the sacraments themselves serve as a shorthand for the reality they represent! An imperfect example would be how the Eiffel Tower represents Paris, and the Statue of Liberty represents the USA.

Fifthly, a sacrament is a “*seal*” of God’s promises. More than just a picture, the sacrament actually “*seals*” God’s promises, confirming and guaranteeing the realities of salvation by grace alone through faith alone (e.g. **Ephesians 1:13**, “*In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were **sealed** with the promised Holy Spirit,*” **Ephesians 4:30**, “*And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were **sealed** for the day of redemption,*” and **Romans 4:11**, the Apostle Paul says, “*Abraham received the **sign** of circumcision as a **seal** of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised*”). The great Reformer Martin Luther was often in doubt, depression or near-despair. When he was going through such episodes, he would remind himself, “*I am baptised! I am baptised!*”⁵⁵ It brought real comfort to him that he had been baptised, because baptism functioned as a “*seal*” and guarantee of his salvation.

⁵⁵ Cited at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-86/luther-daily-gift-of-new-life.html>, accessed July 20, 2017.

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Sixthly, the “*benefits of the new covenant*” are “*applied to believers*” through the sacraments. Therefore, the sacraments need to be accompanied with faith in the Gospel. When there is faith, the sacraments become connected to the spiritual realities they picture. In **Romans 4:11-12**, Paul says Abraham “*received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who **believe without being circumcised**..., and to make him the father of the circumcised who are **not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith**....*” Paul addresses non-Jews and Jews here. To the non-Jews who had not been circumcised under the Old Covenant, he exhorts them to believe the Gospel. He does the same to the Jews who had received the sacrament of circumcision under the Old Covenant, by exhorting them to confirm their reception of the sacrament by believing in the Messiah! Faith makes the sacrament a reality for the recipient.

CONCLUSION

Preaching and the sacraments are the two primary means that God uses to communicate his grace, and to strengthen the faith of his people in his promises. As we conclude, it might be worth asking, “*Why does God communicate his grace to us through these means?*”

If you think about it, you and I are on the receiving end of **preaching**, and **baptism** and **the Lord's Supper**. We receive these things in a manner similar to how we receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Someone else has prepared the sermon, someone else has prepared the water for baptism, someone else has prepared the wine and the bread, and you and I receive these things as gifts by faith. Similarly in the Gospel, someone else has lived the life you should have lived, someone else has died the death you should have died, and someone else has risen conquering sin and death on your behalf. You receive the benefits of what Jesus Christ has done by faith, and not by works. How gracious indeed is this Jesus, who knows our weaknesses and our needs, so he institutes and gives to us preaching and the sacraments, in order that He might continually supply us with grace beyond the hour we first believed, until the day when we meet him face to face.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What should we desire preaching to be, and how should we respond to preaching?
2. Have you been baptised? Have you participated in the Lord's Supper? Share what baptism and the Lord's Supper are, and what they mean to you.

SESSION 5

BAPTISM

Membership Question Addressed

4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?

INTRODUCTION

We learned in Session 4 that God has given the sacraments as “*signs*” pointing to how he saves by grace through faith, and as “*seals*” that confirm the reality of salvation in a person. We also learned that when faith in the Gospel accompanies these sacraments, God uses the sacraments to communicate his grace to us, and to strengthen our wills to persevere in faith. The two sacraments he has left the church with are **baptism**, which is an *initiation* into the church, and the **Lord’s Supper**, which represents a *continuation* in the church. This session will explain baptism, and the next session will explain the Lord’s Supper. We will look to answer two broad questions today. *Firstly*, **what is baptism**; and *secondly*, **who is to be baptised**. By answering these questions, we will be able to embrace and utilise one of God’s key means of giving us grace, faith and strength.

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

Baptism, which involves sprinkling, pouring or immersion in water, in the name of the Trinity (**Matthew 28:19**), is a “*sign*” of **union with Christ** in his death, burial and resurrection (**Romans 6:5**, “*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*”). It is a “*sign*” that for those with faith in Christ, that just as Christ has died, been buried, and risen again, so being “*in Christ*,” they too have died, been buried, and have risen to new life, leaving their old life of sin behind. Therefore, baptism signifies two things. *One*, **cleansing from sin**, and *two*, **inclusion among God’s people**.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ The following section follows closely Golden, 99-106

Cleansing from sin

Almost every culture and religion on earth has some kind of cleansing ritual. It is interesting to note that most of these rituals predate our understanding of germ theory. This means that, even before we have understood the dangers of “uncleanness” at a microbial level, instinctively we have had a sense that there was something “unclean” about us. In the Bible, our sinfulness before a holy God is described as “uncleanness” (e.g. **Leviticus 5:2-3, 10:10, 13:3, 15:18, Luke 11:39-41, 2 Corinthians 6:17**). Hence, in the Old Testament God commanded the priests to wash before entering the Tabernacle and Temple (e.g. **Exodus 30:17-21, 2 Chronicles 4:6**), the Levites to be sprinkled with the “water of purification” (**Numbers 8:5-7**), and the use of water to “cleanse” people from diseases (**Leviticus 14-15**).⁵⁷ And in the New Testament, **Hebrews 9:10** refers to these rites as “various washings.” The Greek word there is *baptismois*, from where we get the word “baptism.” These “baptisms” pointed forward to “the blood of Christ” (**Hebrews 9:14**) that truly “cleanses us from all sin” (**1 John 1:7**), since ritual cleansing was insufficient to cleanse us from our sin. Jesus therefore had to shed his blood in our place for true cleansing to take place. Now that he has died and risen again, those who believe in Christ can “draw near” to God “with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from a evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (**Hebrews 10:22**).⁵⁸ Baptism is a picture of how Christ decisively cleanses us from all our sin.

Inclusion among God’s people

But, more than just cleansing, baptism is also a picture of your **inclusion among God’s people**. In the Old Testament, the sign of inclusion was circumcision (**Genesis 17:10-11**, “*This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a **sign of the covenant** between me and you*”). However, circumcision signified both **blessing** and **curse**. Just as the foreskin was cut off, so if the recipients did not keep their part of the covenant, that they too would be “cut off” (e.g. **Exodus 4:25**). Thus, those who were circumcised in the flesh were exhorted to embrace the reality of their circumcision by *faith*. They were exhorted to have the “circumcision of the heart” (**Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4, 9:25; and Romans 2:28-29**). Despite this command, Israel’s history is littered with her continual failures to keep God’s covenant.

⁵⁷ Additionally, in **Ezekiel 36**, purification is connected to rebirth (**Ezekiel 36:25-26**, “*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh*”). This is a prophecy that God’s cleansing will bring God’s people “new hearts” and “new spirits,” in other words, “new life”.

⁵⁸ Another purpose of “washing” in the Old Testament is to remove “evil” from among God’s people (e.g. **Isaiah 1:16**, “*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil*”) - in other words, washing is also a picture of repentance. That is why in the New Testament, baptism is closely associated with repentance (e.g. **Luke 3:3**, “*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*”; **Acts 2:38**, “*Repent and be baptised every one of you... for the forgiveness of your sins*”; **Acts 3:19**, “*Repent, therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out.*”

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Where Israel failed, Jesus succeeded. Through his perfect life, he was the only one who kept God's covenant perfectly. And yet, he was "*cut off*" in the place of God's people. In **Colossians 2:11**, the Apostle Paul speaks about the "*circumcision of Christ*," which refers to his bloody death on the cross (**Colossians 1:22**). He was "*cut off*," so that all who repent of their sins and have faith in him, may be included among God's people.

That is why in **Colossians 2:11-12**, Paul says, "*In him also **you were circumcised** with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, **by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism**, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*" Here Paul is saying that those who have faith in Christ have been circumcised spiritually because Christ was "*circumcised*," i.e. "*cut off*," on the cross.

And he goes on to say that these also have been "*buried with him in baptism*." Paul shows us here that **circumcision corresponds to baptism**, and that it replaces circumcision as a covenant sign. Bloody circumcision points forward to the death of Christ, while bloodless baptism points back to that same death. We no longer need a bloody sacrament, because Christ has shed his blood once and for all. Consequently, in **Luke 12:50**, Jesus says, "*I have a baptism to be baptised with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished*," equating "*baptism*" with what circumcision pointed to, his death on the cross! With Jesus' coming, circumcision has been done away with, and baptism is now the sign and seal of the covenant (**Matthew 28:19**, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*"). Baptism marks people as belonging to God, but as per circumcision, physical baptism must be accompanied with the inward reality of faith.

WHO IS TO BE BAPTISED?

Who then is to be baptised? All Christians believe that baptism is for those who believe in Christ (**Acts 2:38**, “*Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus*”). However, there is a disagreement among brothers and sisters in Christ about whether or not the **children of believers** should also be baptised alongside their parents (**Acts 2:39**, “*the promise is for you and for your children*”). Our church, and the majority of the Church over the last 2 millennia, believes that baptism is for believers *and* their children.⁵⁹ Here are three reasons why we hold to this belief:⁶⁰

First, God has always saved people by grace through faith. Whether in the Old Testament or the New Testament, God’s plan to save his people from their sins was always by grace through faith, not by works. Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, “*believed the Lord*” (**Genesis 15:6**), and of his faith God “*counted it to him as righteousness*” (c.f. **Romans 4:1-3**). That is why Paul says in **Galatians 3:7**, “*the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the Gospel beforehand to Abraham.*” Whether in the Old or the New Testament, God’s people are saved the same way — through the Gospel “*by grace... through faith... not a result of works*” (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). That is why Paul calls the church “*the Israel of God*” (**Galatians 6:16**, c.f. **1 Peter 2:9-10**), the “*real circumcision*” (**Philippians 3:3**), and “*Abraham’s offspring*” (**Romans 4:16**). We have far more in common with the Old Testament saints than we often think. Paul says that their lives were recorded as “*examples for us*” (**1 Corinthians 10:6,11**) this side of the Cross.

Second, God has always administrated his grace through covenants, whereby **the offspring or children of believers are included**. Basically, a “**covenant**” is God binding himself, by an oath, to keep his promises to his people.⁶¹ In the Bible, there are a series of covenants that are part of what theologians call the one **Covenant of Grace**.⁶²

⁵⁹ You do not need to believe in the baptism of believer’s children in order to join this church. All you need to do is to repent of your sins, believe in Christ and show evidence of your conversion. However, infant baptism is an incredible blessing that God has given his people, and we do hope that you will be able to at least have an appreciation of its beauty, understanding also that this is what this church teaches and practices.

⁶⁰ The following section follows Peter Kemeny, “Why do we baptise infants?” at <http://www.goodnewspress.org/infant-baptism.html> accessed July 25th, 2017.

⁶¹ Mark Jones, “What is a Covenant?” at <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/what-covenant/> accessed July 26th, 2017.

⁶² This is the covenant that God makes with his people to save them from their sins, beginning from **Genesis 3:15**

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All these covenants consistently involved *both* believers and their children:⁶³

Covenant with Noah	Genesis 6:18 , “But I will establish my covenant with you... your sons , your wife, and your sons’ wives with you.”
Covenant with Abraham	Genesis 17:7 , “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant , to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”
Covenant with Moses	Exodus 20:6 , “but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”
Covenant with David	2 Samuel 7:12 , “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.” Ezekiel 37:24-27 , “My servant David shall be king over them... they and their children and their children’s children shall dwell there... it shall be an everlasting covenant .”
New Covenant	Isaiah 59:21 , “...this is my covenant ... my words that I have put in your mouth , shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring” Jeremiah 31:31-34 , “Behold, the days are coming... I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest....” Jeremiah 32:39-40 , “I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant” Luke 1:50, 22:20 “...his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation ... This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

⁶³ With regard to the “New Covenant” in **Jeremiah 31:31-34**, which is quoted in **Hebrews 8:8-12**, some want to exclude believer’s children from the New Covenant by asserting that there is a change in the nature of the Covenant because in the New Covenant, “*they shall all know me (God)*” (**Jeremiah 31:34**). However, it must be noted that this knowledge extends to the “least of them” (**Jeremiah 31:34**). In the parallel passage to **Jeremiah 31:31-34** in **Jeremiah 32:39-40**, the “*everlasting covenant*” is also for “*the good of the children after them*.” Hence, while the nature of the Covenant may have changed, the **genealogical nature** of God’s covenants continues.

Others point out that **Jeremiah 31:34** seems to say that there is no longer a need for mutual instruction in order to “*know the Lord*,” implying that children are no longer in the New Covenant. As mentioned, **Jeremiah 31:31-34** is quoted in **Hebrews 8**. However, this negation needs to be taken together with **Hebrews 5:11-14** and **10:24** that maintain that mutual instruction is still needed in the New Covenant community! Given the broader context of Hebrews in its presentation of Jesus as the greater High Priest, it is better to interpret this lack of mutual instruction in Jeremiah 31:34 in view of the mediatorial role of Jesus. Moses was a “*teacher*” of Israel (**Deuteronomy 4:1,14; 6:1; 5:31; 31:19,22**). The Levites, priests and prophets were also “*teachers*” (**2 Chronicles 17:7-9; Ezra 7:10; Jeremiah 32:33**). In the New Covenant, these mediatory roles are unnecessary because Christ mediates God’s will directly to His people. New Covenant teachers do not mediate a relationship with God, but rather assist believers in realising the direct access to God they already have in Christ (**Ephesians 4:11-14**).

SESSION 5: BAPTISM

In other words, the children of believers have always been part of the covenant community. In the Old Testament, they were present at the gatherings of the covenant people (e.g. **2 Chronicles 20:13**, “...all Judah stood before the LORD, with their **little ones**, their wives, and **their children**”; **Joel 2:16**, “Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather **the children**, even **nursing infants**”). Jesus received children as being part of the “kingdom of God” (e.g. **Luke 18:15-16**, “Jesus called them to him, saying, ‘Let the **children** come to me... for to such belongs the kingdom of God’”). Paul says that even if a child has one believing parent, that child is “holy” (**1 Corinthians 7:14**, “...they are holy”). And in Ephesians and Colossians, he addresses children as members of the church along with their parents (e.g. **Ephesians 6:1**, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord....” and **Colossians 3:20**, “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord”).

Third, the **sign and seal of the Covenant is applied to the whole family**. In the Old Testament, the sign and seal of God's covenant was circumcision (**Romans 4:11**). It was applied to Abraham *after* he believed, but to his children *before* they believed (**Genesis 17:10-13**). In the New Testament, we know baptism replaces circumcision (**Colossians 2:11-12**, “you were circumcised... having been buried with him in baptism...”). And because the New Covenant is “more excellent than the old” (**Hebrews 8:6**), baptism now includes non-Jews, and the rite is applied to females (**Galatians 3:27-28**). On the day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter said, “Repent and **be baptised** every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for **you** and for **your children** and for all who are far off...” (**Acts 2:38-39**). He introduces baptism with the same three categories that God had used to introduce circumcision: **Acts 2:39**, “**you... your children... all who are far off**”, and **Genesis 17:10-12**, “**you... your offspring... any foreigner.**”

In light of this “genealogical principle,” it should not surprise us that there are so many household baptisms recorded for us in the New Testament (e.g. **Acts 16:14-15**, “...she was baptised, and **her household** as well...”, **Acts 16:30-33**, “...he was baptised at once, he and all **his family**”; **Acts 18:8**, “Crispus... believed in the Lord, together with his entire **household**.... and were baptised”; and **1 Corinthians 1:16**, “I did baptise also the **household** of Stephanas...”). Some point out that children are not explicitly mentioned in these household baptisms, but that is besides the point. New Testament “household baptisms” show us that the genealogical principle continues on under the New Covenant, and has not been abrogated with the passing of the Old Covenant (**Acts 16:33-34**, “he was baptised at once, **he** and **all his family**.. he rejoiced along with his entire household that **he** had believed in God”).

Hence, because of the consistency between the Old and New Testaments, the continued inclusion of children in the New Covenant, and the parallels between circumcision and baptism, we believe that baptism is for believers *and* their children.

CONCLUSION

In light of understanding the biblical teaching concerning baptism, we should do these two things:

One, let baptism accompany your faith. If you are from a non-Christian background, and have embraced Christ by faith, then be baptised in obedience to God. Receive his blessing of grace and persevering faith. If you have young children, have them baptised too. When they are older watching other children being baptised, they will ask you, *“What does this ritual mean?”* (e.g. **Exodus 12:26**). You can explain that God is putting his mark on that child, setting him apart. You can go on to remind the child that he himself has been graciously baptised as a child. How then should he respond to God’s grace? By personally believing the Gospel! Baptism points him explicitly to his need for faith in Christ!

Two, let faith accompany your baptism. If you are from a Christian home, and you were baptised as a child, let faith accompany your baptism to make it effectual. In the Old Testament, the Jews were exhorted to not just be circumcised in the flesh, but to also be circumcised in the heart. That is, they were exhorted to believe God, and to let faith accompany their circumcision (**Deuteronomy 10:16**, *“Circumcise... your heart, and be no longer stubborn,”* and **Romans 4:12**, *“...not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith...”*). In a similar way, you are to let faith accompany your baptism. Believe in the Gospel in response to his amazing grace. Make a profession of faith in the church, and become a communicant member of the church. Let faith *continue* to accompany your baptism. This is how your baptism then becomes a channel of God’s blessing. Every time you witness a baptism, let it remind you of your own, and let it cause you to believe afresh in the Gospel. As mentioned in Session 4, the great Reformer Martin Luther was often in doubt, depression or near-despair. During those episodes, he would remind himself, *“I am baptised! I am baptised!”*⁶⁴ He was letting faith accompany his baptism, and in so doing God by the Holy Spirit used the sacrament of baptism to communicate grace, faith and strength to Martin Luther. God can do the same thing for you too.

⁶⁴ Cited by Martin E. Marty, "Luther: The Daily Gift of New Life," at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-86/luther-daily-gift-of-new-life.html>, accessed July 20, 2017.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Have you, and your children (if any) been baptised? Why, or why not?

SESSION 6

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Membership Question Addressed

4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?

INTRODUCTION

In this session, we will look at the **LORD's Supper**, which is the second of the two sacraments that Jesus Christ gave the Church. We saw in sessions 4 and 5 that sacraments are “*signs*” pointing to how God saves by grace through faith, and “*seals*” that confirm the reality of salvation. When faith accompanies the sacraments, God channels grace to us, to strengthen and empower us. **Baptism** is an *initiation* rite, marking the gracious entrance into the church, and it takes place once. The **LORD's Supper** represents *continuing* participation in the church, it is how God solemnly nurtures us, and is repeated over and over again. In this session, we will explore two things concerning the **LORD's Supper**: *Firstly, what is the LORD's Supper*; and *secondly, who is to partake of the LORD's Supper*. By learning these, we will be able to embrace and utilise this sacrament, which is another one of God's key means of giving us grace, faith and strength.

WHAT IS THE LORD'S SUPPER?

The **LORD's Supper** involves eating bread and drinking wine that represent Jesus' body and blood, in obedience to his command (**Luke 22:19-21**, “...**he took bread**, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘**This cup** that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood’”; and **Matthew 26:26-27**, “Take, eat... Drink of it...”⁶⁵).

It actually has roots in the Old Testament sacrificial meals, chief of which was the Passover (**Matthew 26:17-29**, **Mark 14:12-25**, and **Luke 22:7-22**). The Passover involved sacrificing and eating a lamb, and spreading the blood on the door frames of a home as a “*sign*” that this family has done what God had commanded, and in so doing judgement would be averted (**Exodus 12**). Other sacrificial meals likewise prefigure the Supper. For example, the peace offerings of the Mosaic Law involved sacrificing an animal, giving a portion to the priest,

⁶⁵ The following section follows closely Golden, 107-113

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and eating the rest (**Leviticus 7:19-21, 28-34**). Through these sacrifices, sin was atoned for, and God's people enjoyed communion with him. The New Testament shows us however that these sacrifices were "*types*" and "*shadows*" of the real sacrifice of Jesus Christ; he is the true Passover lamb that is able to atone for sins (**1 Corinthians 5:7**). He fulfilled the demands of the entire sacrificial system through his death on the Cross (**Hebrews 10:1-7**).

Another picture of the Supper given to us in the Old Testament is of God **feeding his people**. He provided manna from heaven to sustain them in the wilderness (**Exodus 16**). Jesus is also the greater fulfillment of God's provision. After miraculously feeding a large group of people, he refers to himself as the true manna (**John 6:53-56**). These two pictures of blood and bread come together in the LORD's Supper, which Jesus instituted just as he was celebrating a Passover meal with his disciples. He said to them, "*This is my body which is given for you... This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood*" (**Luke 22:19-20**).

Now, does this mean that the bread and the wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus Christ? Roman Catholics believe in "transubstantiation," whereby they believe that the substance of the elements are really transformed into the body and blood of Christ.⁶⁶ Lutherans believe in what can be called "consubstantiation," whereby the substance of Jesus' body and blood accompany the elements and are "in, with and under" the elements.⁶⁷ On the opposite end, many evangelical Christians point out that Jesus said, "*Do this in remembrance of me*" (**Luke 22:19-20**), and conclude that the bread and wine are merely symbolic.⁶⁸ However, to say that it is merely symbolic, and hence that Christ is not present at all, cannot fully account for how Paul describes those partaking of the Supper in an "*unworthy manner*" as those who "eat and drink judgement" on themselves, with the result that some are even falling ill and dying (**1 Corinthians 11:27-30**). The Reformed Church, holding together these truths of the Supper as taught from different passages of Scripture, teach the "spiritual presence" of Christ in the LORD's Supper.⁶⁹ We hold that when believers participate in the LORD's Supper with faith in the Gospel, Christ is present there spiritually to commune with them! So when Christians participate in the LORD's Supper with faith in the Gospel, these two things happen:

One, we remember the death of Christ. Jesus says in **Luke 22:19-20**, "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" God uses the LORD's Supper to constantly remind us of what Jesus did on our behalf, because that is what we need to feed our souls. We are a forgetful people, and God is so gracious to give us "signs" to help us remember. Yet as mentioned above, it is not *just* a remembrance, but Christ is present there with us spiritually as we partake of the Supper with faith.

⁶⁶ See Catechism of the Catholic Church, §1353, 1413, 1366, 1382, and 1331.

⁶⁷ See The Augsburg Confession, Article X.

⁶⁸ See Southern Baptist Convention, 2014, Baptist Faith and Message, Article VII. Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

⁶⁹ See for example the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapters 27 & 29

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Two, we **participate in or commune with Christ and his people**. The Apostle Paul in **1 Corinthians 10:16** says, “*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a **participation** in the blood of Christ. The bread that we break, is it not a **participation** in the body of Christ*”). The word translated “participation” here is *koinonia*, which means “fellowship” or “communion.” It expresses a unity in Christ among His people (**1 John 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:7, 8:4; Philippians 3:10**). There is in the LORD’s Supper both a vertical dimension and a horizontal dimension, of communing with God and communing with one another. When we participate in the LORD’s Supper in a worthy manner, “*examining*” ourselves and “*discerning the body*” (**1 Corinthians 11:28-29**), God by the power of his Holy Spirit really communes with us his people - He is present! That is why Paul explained that the reason why many in the church in Corinth were “*weak and ill*,” and some had even “*died*,” was because they had participated in the LORD’s Supper in an “*unworthy manner*” (**1 Corinthians 11:27**)! The LORD’s Supper also has a future orientation to it, as it is a precursor to the great feast that we will have with Christ when he comes again (**Luke 22:18**).

WHO IS TO PARTAKE OF THE LORD’S SUPPER?

If the LORD’s Supper is a remembrance of Christ, and a communing with Christ and his people, who then should partake of it? It is for those who can and do remember Christ, and are able to commune with Christ in a “*worthy manner*” (**1 Corinthians 11:27**).

First, they are **believers in Christ who have been baptised**. Baptism is the sign of being *included* in the church, while the LORD’s Supper is the sign of *continuing* in the church. You cannot continue a membership when you were never a member in the first place! In the Old Testament, males had to be circumcised before they could eat the Passover (**Exodus 12:44-45**, “*...may eat of it after you have circumcised him*”). We have already noted the parallels between circumcision and baptism in Session 5, and the Passover and the LORD’s Supper earlier in this session. Furthermore, in the New Testament, there was little delay between a person coming to faith in Christ, and him getting baptised together with his household. And so, the normal pattern is for someone to be baptised before he participates in the LORD’s Supper.

SESSION 6: THE LORD'S SUPPER

Second, they are **baptised believers in good standing with their local church**. This good standing in a local church is usually expressed through active membership, whereby a Christian takes vows and commits to a particular local church. We will explore more of this in a later session. Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 10:17** that *“because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread,”* the “body” here referring to the church. In **1 Corinthians 12:12**, Paul goes on to say, *“just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”* When you take the LORD's Supper, you are communing with the LORD and with one another in the church in a spiritual manner. That is why one of the tools of Church discipline that Christ has given the church, which we will talk about in a later session as well, is excommunication (c.f. **Matthew 18:17, 1 Corinthians 5:13**), which literally means to “exclude from communion,” and partly involves withholding the LORD's Supper from a person. This is applied only to a person who is persistent in unrepentant sin, and who refuses the admonishment of fellow believers and of the leaders of the church to repent. Thus, those who are under church discipline will be excluded from the LORD's Supper. This is not just to make them feel bad, but it is a measure enforced to urge them to repent from their sins so that they may return to the table once more. Such a disciplinary measure is meant to induce a sense of the goodness and glory of what they have left behind if they continue to refuse to leave their lives of sin.

Third, they are **baptised believers in good standing with their local church who are able to examine themselves**. In **1 Corinthians 11:27-29**, Paul says, *“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person **examine himself**, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without **discerning the body** eats and drinks judgment on himself.”* It is for those who are able to consciously look at themselves and confess their sins. That is why churches like ours have two types of members in the church: the **communicant members** who are baptised and have made a public profession of faith, and the **non-communicant members** who are children of believers, who have been baptised but who have not yet made a public profession of faith. Non-communicant members do not partake of the LORD's Supper until they come of age and have made a profession of faith of their own, and thus become communicant members in their own right. This is not a new process. In fact, even in the Old Testament when the Jews ate the Passover lamb, Calvin helpfully points out that not every member of the family ate! It says in **Exodus 12:3-4**, *“every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household... according to the number of persons; according to what each **can eat**....”* However, as the church participates in the LORD's Supper, this again is an opportunity for parents to explain to their children what is going on, and help them to anticipate their future participation in the LORD's Supper.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion then, we note the fact that there are sober warnings associated with the LORD's Supper. The one who participates in an *"unworthy manner"* (**1 Corinthians 11:27**), without *"discerning the body"* (**1 Corinthians 11:29**), *"eats and drinks judgement on himself"* (**1 Corinthians 11:29**). That is why some in the Corinthian church were *"weak and ill"* and some had even *"died"* (**1 Corinthians 11:30**)! In light of this, let us draw out some applications for how we are to partake in the LORD's Supper:

Firstly, partake of the LORD's Supper laying hold of grace. To partake in an *"unworthy manner"* is to do so flippantly, without reckoning with sin in our hearts. Yet, we can only truly deal with the sin in our hearts by laying hold of the grace of God in Jesus Christ through repentance and faith. So come soberly to the LORD's Supper, but in such a way that we are laying hold of the grace of Jesus Christ to forgive us. We do need to examine ourselves to recognise and confess our sins to God, but then also through the LORD's Supper look to Christ as our sure redeemer. The Scottish pastor Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1843) famously said, *"For every look at self – take ten looks at Christ!"*⁷⁰

Secondly, partake of the LORD's Supper as one conscious of others who partake. When Paul talks about *"discerning the body"* in **1 Corinthians 11:29**, he is referring to the church, as the Bible uses the metaphor of "Christ's body" to refer to the church. Paul is thus telling us that when we partake of the Supper, we are not only communing with Christ, but with one another. Hence, Paul rebukes the Corinthians for their division into factions within the church (**1 Corinthians 11:18-22**), and exhorts them to *"wait for one another"* (**1 Corinthians 11:33**). When we prepare to come to the LORD's Supper, as much as it is within our power, we should take it as a time to make amends with each another. It is a time to recognise afresh the forgiveness we have in Christ, and to henceforth extend the forgiveness of Christ to one another. In this way, we partake of the Communion together as the one body of Christ.

Thirdly, partake of the LORD's Supper with anticipation. Another aspect of the LORD's Supper is that it is proclaiming a future reality. Paul says in **1 Corinthians 11:26**, *"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the LORD's death until he comes."* Every time you eat the bread and drink the wine, with faith in the Gospel, you are communing with Christ spiritually. But this spiritual communion is a foretaste of the final communion we will all have when we are with Christ, especially when he comes again (**Revelation 21:3**, *"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God"*). The LORD's Supper gives you a foretaste of that final communion and helps you make sense of the present, as you hope in God for the future.

⁷⁰ Quoted by Erik Raymond, "For Every Look at Self - Take Ten Looks at Christ," at <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/erikraymond/2010/09/16/for-every-look-at-self-take-ten-looks-at-christ/> accessed 31st July, 2017.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Have you participated in the LORD's Supper? Why, or why not? What was it like?
2. Did your participation in the LORD's Supper match up with how Scripture presents the LORD's Supper, as both a remembrance of, and a participation in Christ?

SESSION 7

CHURCH GOVERNMENT & DISCIPLINE

Membership Question Addressed

5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to pursue its purity and peace?

INTRODUCTION

How important is the church to you?⁷¹ The church is very important to God. The apostle Paul tells us that God's will is that, *"through the church the manifold wisdom of God"* is *"made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places"* (**Ephesians 3:10**). Jesus himself says in **Matthew 16:18**, *"I will build **my church**, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."* Jesus calls the church 'mine'! He promises to 'build' no other institution on earth!⁷² But, if the church is so important to God, then why is it so messy? Why do we hear of scandals, fights, and divisions? Why do people still get hurt? One reason is that the church is still made up of sinful people like you and me. There are no perfect churches, because there are no perfect people. Another reason, and one that we hope to address today, is that the church has often forgotten how Jesus himself wants to run the church! He has not left us to run the church as we please. Jesus has structures, procedures and processes in place for the church that we neglect at our peril. He shows us how to deal with sin, to resolve disputes, and to keep peace and harmony in the church for our good, and the glory of his name! The church can be what it was meant to be, if only we will heed what Jesus says about the church! So in this session, we want to see, *firstly*, how **Jesus organises the church**; and *secondly*, how **Jesus disciplines the church**.⁷³

⁷¹ Ken Golden defines the "church" as "The assembly of God's people throughout the Bible, expanding from one family, to one nation, to people from every nation" (Golden, 122)

⁷² Terry Johnson, "Jesus and the Church," at <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/jesus-and-church/>, accessed August 10th, 2017.

The early church understood this. Cyprian, the North African bishop said in AD 251, *"He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the church for his mother."* Cited by Dan Graves, "Article #10: On the Unity of the Church," at <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/incontext/article/cyprian/> accessed August 10th, 2017. The Reformers understood this too. John Calvin wrote similarly in the 16th Century, *"for those to whom he (God) is Father the church may also be Mother"* (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.1)

⁷³ The following section follows closely Golden, 75-80

JESUS ORGANISES THE CHURCH

Firstly, Jesus organises the church by giving the church **officers/leaders**. In the Old Testament, God appointed officers in the nation of Israel to govern Israel: Moses the lawgiver, Samuel the judge, David the King, Ezra the priest, and Nehemiah the governor. These Old Testament leaders are “types” and “shadows” of God’s perfect leader, Jesus Christ (**Matthew 28:18**, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*”). The church now functions like Israel as God’s visible kingdom on earth.⁷⁴ Jesus is the head of the church (**Colossians 1:18**), and he governs his church by delegating his authority to **officers** in the church (**Titus 1:5**), of which there are two in the New Testament: **Elders** and **Deacons**.⁷⁵

1. **Elders**: The terms “*elder*” and “*overseer*” refer to the same office in the New Testament (**Titus 1:5-7**, “...appoint **elders** in every town... an **overseer**, as God’s steward”). Elders are responsible for being **exemplary model believers** and **teachers of God’s Word** (**Titus 1:5-9**, **1 Timothy 3:1-7**).⁷⁶ In particular, elders are responsible for safeguarding sound doctrine (**Titus 1:9**, “*give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it*”). They are also expected to govern, care for and manage the church (**1 Timothy 5:17**, **1 Timothy 3:5**), commit themselves to the ministry of God’s Word (**Acts 6:4**, **1 Timothy 5:17**), shepherd God’s people (**1 Peter 5:2**), exercise church discipline (**Matthew 16:19**, **18:18**), and give an account to God for the church’s spiritual state (**Hebrews 13:17**). Elders need to be examined, recognised and ordained to the role (**1 Timothy 4:14**, “*Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the **council of elders laid their hands on you***”).⁷⁷ There are two categories of elders: **Ruling Elders** who are **lay people** ordained to the role who focus on the governance of the church, and **Teaching Elders** who are full-time **pastors** ordained to the role who focus on preaching and teaching (**1 Timothy 5:17**, “*let the elders who **rule well** be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in **preaching and teaching***”).

⁷⁴ The New Testament church is referred to as the “*Israel of God*” (**Galatians 6:16**), a “*holy nation*” (**Exodus 19:6**, **1 Peter 2:9**), and a visible manifestation of God’s kingdom on earth (**Revelation 1:4-6**). It is now an international and spiritual entity made up of people from all nations (**Ephesians 2:11-22**).

⁷⁵ When Jesus was still on earth, he said to the apostles, that is those who had been with him and were his first disciples, “I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom” (Luke 22:29), and “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19, 18:18). This is legal language. ‘Binding’ involves ‘closing,’ while ‘loosing’ involves ‘opening.’ So, ‘binding’ means discerning and declaring that someone is outside the church through unbelief and unrepentant sin, while ‘loosing’ means discerning and declaring that someone is in the church, through repentance from sin, and faith in the Gospel. The apostles were the foundational leaders of the church (Ephesians 2:20), and are no more. The leadership of the apostles was then passed on to elders in the church. Paul instructs the Ephesian elders to rule the church (Acts 20:17), and said that the Holy Spirit has made them “overseers” of the church (Acts 20:28). The same Paul instructs his disciple Titus to establish “order,” and “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). It is through these elders that Jesus now governs the church.

⁷⁶ As servants of the word, they are called *ministers* (Luke 1:2, Ephesians 6:21), in respect to oversight, they are known as *overseers* (Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:1), as shepherds of the flock, they are considered *pastors* (Ephesians 4:11, 1 Peter 5:2), as instructors of the faith, they are designated *teachers* (1 Corinthians 12:28-29, Ephesians 4:11), and for the respect of the office, they are deemed *presbyters* (Acts 20:17, Titus 1:5-8, 1 Peter 5:1) (Golden, 79)

⁷⁷ The Presbyterian Church of America’s (PCA) Book of Church Order (BCO) defines “ordination” as “the authoritative admission of one duly called to an office in the Church of God, accompanied with prayer and the laying on of hands, to which it is proper to add the giving of the right hand of fellowship.” Ordination acknowledges that the person has the authority and power to exercise the office to which he has been ordained. Cited in Guy Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 107

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2. **Deacons:** There is also the office of **Deacon** (meaning “servant”). Deacons assist the church by attending to the practical needs of the people. The qualifications of deacons are given in **1 Timothy 3:8-13**, and are similar to that of elders, except that they are not required to be “able to teach” (**1 Timothy 3:2**). Deacons are first mentioned in **Acts 6:1-7**, where seven men were appointed to handle practical matters like serving tables, and to do works of mercy like distributing relief fairly to the widows of the church. This is so that the elders can focus on prayer and the Word. By attending to their practical calling, they actually enhance the evangelistic work of the church! **Acts 6:7** says that, “*the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly*” after the appointment of the seven deacons!

By giving us **Elders** and **Deacons**, Jesus is showing us that he intends the church not just to care for the spiritual needs of her members, but also for the practical needs of her members. In the first gathering of the church after the day of Pentecost, it says that the church “*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*” (**Acts 2:42**). But it also goes on to state that “*they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need*” (**Acts 2:45**). There was such a generosity and sharing and love for one another that it says in **Acts 4:34**, “*there was not a needy person among them.*”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Note that this does not imply some kind of a “Christian communism” because in Acts 5:4 it was still perfectly legitimate for Christians to own their own property. Acts 2 and 4 illustrate the *willing* generosity of those that had been touched by the Gospel.

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Secondly, Jesus organises these officers into church **courts**. “Courts” refer to “*the elders gathering together in order to declare the law of God for the benefit of the church.*”⁷⁹ In a fully functioning Presbyterian system, these courts are organised at a **local, regional and denominational** level⁸⁰:

1. **Session:** At the local church level, the Bible shows us that each church is governed by a group of both **Teaching Elders** (i.e. the full time pastors) and **Ruling Elders** (i.e. the lay people ordained as elders), who are **voted in by the members** of the church. They work together and have equal authority in the **Session (Acts 14:23, Philippians 1:1, Titus 1:5)**. The **Teaching Elder**, that is the pastor, is usually the **Moderator**.
2. **Presbytery:** The Bible also presents different churches as being interconnected with each other. All the local churches in a particular city are referred to as “*the church*” (e.g. **1 Corinthians 1:2, Ephesians 1:1**). Likewise, representative **Teaching and Ruling Elders** from different local churches in a region meet together as a **Presbytery**. The presbytery governs the churches in a region, and are responsible for examining and ordaining Teaching Elders. Among them, they elect a **Moderator**.
3. **Synod/General Assembly:** **Acts 15:1-30** describes the Jerusalem Council that ruled on a vital matter of doctrine which affected the whole church. The apostles Paul and Barnabas were commissioned to attend this council as representatives of the churches in Asia Minor. They were welcomed by the churches of Jerusalem (**Acts 15:2-4**), following which the council debated the issue (**Acts 15:7**), came to an agreement (**Acts 15:19-21**), and implemented their ruling through a circular letter (**Acts 15:22-30**). In the current day, representative Teaching and

⁷⁹ Waters, 126

⁸⁰ In the history of the Christian church, there has broadly been three models of church government: episcopalian, congregational and presbyterian:

Episcopalian governance is practiced in the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist traditions. It sees the church as being ruled by bishops (from the Greek word *episkopos*, which means ‘bishop’ or ‘overseer’). This system is hierarchical, with an archbishop or pope possessing the highest authority. While this system has a clearly defined chain of command and historical support, it has little Biblical support. We see this in the Bible where the term for “bishop”/“overseer” (*episkopos*), and the term for “elder” (*presbyteros*), are synonymous (e.g. Titus 1:5-7, “appoint elders in every town... For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach”).

Congregational governance is practiced in the Baptist and Evangelical Free traditions. It sees the church as being ruled by the congregation; the congregation has the highest authority in this form of governance. This system emphasises independence and deemphasises inter-church connections. However, in the Bible the church is described as being interconnected. For example, in Acts 15:1-30 there was a meeting of the churches in the Jerusalem Council to deal with the heresy of the Judaizers who wanted to impose observance of the Mosaic ceremonial laws as a condition for salvation. Even the churches started by the great apostle Paul could not resolve this matter among themselves! Instead, the churches in Asia Minor sent Paul, Barnabas and others to attend the Council as representatives of these churches. There, they were “welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders” (Acts 15:4), and after “much debate” (Acts 15:7), the Council came to an agreement that was binding on all churches (Acts 15:19-21), and implemented it through a circular letter (Acts 15:22-30).

Presbyterian governance, which is what this church subscribes to, seeks to address the deficiencies of both episcopalian and congregational governance. In this system, the church is ruled by elders at the local, regional, and denominational level. “Presbyter” (*presbyteros*) means ‘older’ or ‘elder,’ and a group of elders rule a local church as a session. At the broader level, representative elders from churches in a region form a presbytery, and representatives from presbyteries in different regions form a synod or general assembly, for the purpose of ruling the church at the local, regional, and denominational level.

SESSION 7: CHURCH GOVERNMENT & DISCIPLINE

Ruling Elders from different **Presbyteries** meet together to deliberate issues at the **Synod** or **General Assembly**. Again, they elect a **Moderator** among themselves.

In this model of church governance, authority is distributed at various levels, and no one individual or institution has absolute authority. It is often said, *“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”*⁸¹ Christians know this to be doubly true because we believe in the sinfulness of humanity, and the doctrine of Total Depravity. Many scandals take place because too much power has been concentrated in a single person or institution. Hence, church government has to have checks and balances at various levels, for the safety of God’s people!

JESUS DISCIPLINES THE CHURCH

Not only does Jesus organise the church, he also disciplines the church for her own good. **Hebrews 12:6-7** says that *“the Lord disciplines the one **he loves**, and chastises every son whom he receives... God is treating you as sons.”* God disciplines his church because he loves the church like a father loves his children. **Hebrews 12:11** says, *“For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”* God disciplines us through the care and nurture of the elders of the church. In **1 Thessalonians 2:7**, Paul describes how he and the elders were *“gentle among you, like **a nursing mother** taking care of her own children.”* At the same time, he says, in **1 Thessalonians 2:11-12**, how they were *“like **a father** with his children,”* and have *“exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God.”* Due to the nature of the office, God calls his people to intelligently obey and submit to the elders insofar as they are faithful to God’s Word (**Hebrews 13:17**, *“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you”*).⁸² There are actually two types of discipline in the church:

First, there is **formative discipline**. This is preventive, and takes place week after week. The elders shape the lives of the congregation through the preaching and teaching of God’s Word, and through giving counsel in order to help people align their lives to God’s will. This keeps us from sin, and helps us to obey God’s will.

⁸¹ Cited in "John Dalberg-Acton, 1st Baron Acton," at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dalberg-Acton,_1st_Baron_Acton accessed August 11th, 2017.

⁸² He also recognises that Elders can often be misunderstood and maligned in their their duties, and warns against admitting charges and accusations against Elders too easily (1 Timothy 5:19, “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses”).

Second, there is **corrective discipline**. This is responsive, and has its goal the restoration of the person. In **Matthew 18:15-17**, Jesus shows us how to deal with sin in the church. It says, *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother”* (**Matthew 18:15**). The first step is to approach the person who has sinned against you, and to try to resolve the matter between you. If this fails, there is the second step: *“But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses”* (**Matthew 18:16**), which is to approach the person with one or two others in the church. If that fails, then the matter is escalated to the church courts, who deliberate and decide on the matter: *“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.”* (**Matthew 18:17a**).⁸³ This means that the matter is first brought to the local Session, and if unresolved to the regional Presbytery, and if yet unresolved, the denominational Synod or General Assembly has the final say. If the person is still unrepentant, he or she is to be expelled from the church and treated as an unbeliever (**Matthew 18:17b**, *“And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”*, **1 Corinthians 5:13**, *“Purge the evil person from among you”*). This is not to be done in a vengeful manner, but rather with tears, and as the last resort. It is meant to strongly urge the person to leave his sin, and return to God (**2 Corinthians 2:5-11**).

CONCLUSION

Jesus is so concerned about his church, because it is made up of the precious people that he died for (**Ephesians 5:25**, *“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”*) — you and me. He died to “sanctify” and “cleanse,” and to “present” us to himself “in splendour,” “without spot or wrinkle,” but “holy and without blemish” (**Ephesians 5:27**). You are precious to Jesus, and he has a great purpose for your good! And that is why he is so pedantic about how his church is run! And we should be too! This is why he says to her leaders, *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood”* (**Acts 20:28**).

⁸³ Jesus said to the apostles, not to the entire congregation, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19, 18:18). As we have seen, the authority of the apostles has now passed on to the elders. Hence, when Jesus says, “church” in Matthew 18:17, in our context, he means the assembly of elders in the church courts, not the entire congregation. See Waters, 19. See also Chapter 3 of the book

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What kind of officers should you expect to have in your church (**Titus 1:5-9, 1 Timothy 3:1-13**)?
2. Would you be able to intelligently submit to the leaders in your church (**Hebrews 13:17**)?

SESSION 8

MEMBERSHIP & PARTICIPATION

Membership Questions Addressed

1. *Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner 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 pursue its purity and peace?*

INTRODUCTION

In the previous session on “Church Government & Discipline,” we saw how much Jesus loves his church. Jesus “*gave himself up for her*” (**Ephesians 5:25**) and “*obtained*” the church “*with his own blood*” (**Acts 20:28**). He promises to “*build the church*” and to protect the church (**Matthew 16:18**). We have seen that Jesus builds his church by giving her **elders** to take care of the spiritual needs of the church (**Titus 1:5-9, 1 Timothy 3:1-7**), and **deacons** to take care of the practical needs of the church (**1 Timothy 3:8-13**). Although these **officers** in the church play a crucial role, it does not mean that the role of non-officers is any less crucial. One metaphor of the church is that it is the “*body of Christ*” (**1 Corinthians 12:12-14, Ephesians 4:1-16**)— Christ is the “*head of the church*” (**Colossians 1:18**) and we together are “*members of the body*” (**1 Corinthians 12:12, 27; Romans 12:5; Ephesians 5:30**). The members, though different, work together, each playing an important role (**1 Corinthians 12:12-27**). In fact, in **Ephesians 4:11-12**, the apostle Paul says that God has given the church officers, to “*equip the saints for the work of ministry*.” In a sense, God wants all of his people to be “*ministers*” of the Gospel here on earth. Hence, membership in a local church, where **promises are made** and **vows are taken to commit to a particular church**, is not just a formality. It is a vital component in accomplishing God’s purposes on earth. It is through the **active membership** of his church that God primarily accomplishes his mission on earth! Therefore, in this session, we will look at three points concerning membership: *firstly*, **why membership matters**; *secondly*, **what the church provides for her members**; and *thirdly*, **how to be an active member and participant in God’s church**.

WHY MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

To many Christians, “membership” sounds too formal, and it is deemed optional. Even those who yearn for authentic community and agree that there is no such thing as a “lone ranger” Christianity sometimes bristle at the thought of “officially” joining a church.⁸⁴ Some of them may have legitimate concerns. For example, we must acknowledge that although there is good evidence that there was a formal membership in the early church (**Acts 2:37-47, Acts 6:1-6, Romans 16:1-16, 1 Timothy 5:3-16**), the Bible does not *explicitly* tell us to formally join a local church.⁸⁵ However, without joining a local church, we will not be able to fully obey some other very clear instructions in the Bible:⁸⁶

Firstly, the Bible clearly instructs Christians to **intelligently submit to, honour and obey a specific body of elders (Hebrews 13:17, 1 Timothy 5:17)**. **Hebrews 13:17**, says “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” There are around 700 registered churches in Singapore, which means there are probably more than 1000 Christian pastors and leaders in Singapore. God is not instructing you to obey, submit and honour every single one of them. He is instructing you to submit, honour and obey a specific body of elders in a church, and you signify that through formal membership.

Secondly, the Bible clearly instructs a **group of elders in a local church to care for and give account to God for a specific group of people (1 Peter 5:1-5, Acts 20:29-30)**. Again, **Hebrews 13:17** says that the elders are “keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” Around 18.8% of the resident population (circa 3.9 million) of Singapore identifies as a Christian. That translates to around 730,000 Christians of various kinds. God is not instructing the elders of this local church to “watch over” and “give an account” for every single Christian in Singapore. That would be impossible! He is instructing the elders to do so for a specific body of believers in their church. But, how would they know who they are responsible for? Again, membership signifies formally who are the members the elders are responsible for.

⁸⁴ Paraphrased from the introduction of Kevin DeYoung, “6 Reasons Why Membership Matters” at <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/kevindeyoung/2015/05/14/6-reasons-why-membership-matters/> accessed August 14th, 2017.

⁸⁵ Cited by Matt Chandler, “Is Church Membership Biblical?” at <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalchurch-membership-biblical/> accessed August 16th, 2017:

Acts 2:37-47 - There is a numerical record of those who had become Christians, and an acknowledgement that the church was tracking this growth (vs 47).

Acts 6:1-6 - We see elections take place, where Deacons are elected from “among you” (vs 3).

Romans 16:1-16 - There seems to be an awareness of who is a church member.

1 Timothy 5:3-16 - There is clear teaching on how to handle widows in the church, who are put on a “roll.” Thus, the church at Ephesus was organised enough to have even have a list of widows in the church. If they even knew who the widows were among them, surely they would have had a good idea of who was and was not a member of their church.

⁸⁶ The following section paraphrases Chandler, “Is Church Membership Biblical?”

SESSION 8: MEMBERSHIP & PARTICIPATION

Thirdly, the Bible clearly instructs the church to **exercise church discipline by putting out those who are in persistent, unrepentant sin (Matthew 18:17-18, 1 Corinthians 5:1-12)**. Church discipline is a grace that God has given us for our good. But you cannot put people “out” who are not officially “in.” When someone is held accountable for sin in a church, the person confronted can very easily say, “*I never committed to this church anyway, so you have no right to hold me accountable.*” Being a formal member of a local church, through the making of promises and the taking of vows, ensures that we can be held accountable, and thus the church can obey God’s instructions to conscientiously exercise church discipline.

Membership in a local church matters because through it, we can more *fully* obey what God instructs us to do. By “*good and necessary consequence*,” we conclude that the Bible does instruct us to become formal members of a local church.⁸⁷

WHAT THE CHURCH PROVIDES FOR HER MEMBERS

But, what benefits exactly do we require and receive as members in a local church? In **Hebrews 10:23-26** the Bible exhorts us, “*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.*” God calls us to “*hold fast the confession*” (**Hebrews 10:24**), and not “*go on sinning deliberately*” (**Hebrews 10:26**). We are not to neglect meeting together (**Hebrews 10:25**), but to “*stir up one another to love and good works*” (**Hebrews 10:24**), in light of “*the Day drawing near*” (**Hebrews 10:25**). Therefore, there are three things that this passage says we require which the church provides for her members:⁸⁸

One, we need the **community of the church**. Holiness (**Hebrews 10:26**) cannot be developed alone. We need to “*meet together*,” and get into each other's lives in order to grow in holiness. Community is where the rubber meets the road. It is the environment where God deals with your sin, and develops his character in you. It is easy to think you are a very tolerant person, when you are all by yourself. It is not so easy when you have to interact with people who are different from you in many ways. After the day of Pentecost, when many people were converted, **Acts 2:42** tells us that the early believers “*devoted themselves*” not just “*to the apostle’s teaching*,” but also to “**fellowship**.”

⁸⁷ **Westminster Confession of Faith 1.4** states, “*The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by **good and necessary consequence** may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.*”

⁸⁸ This next section paraphrases the Membership Booklet of Tenth Presbyterian Church, 25.

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Two, we need the **confession of the church**. We are called to “*hold fast the confession*” (**Hebrews 10:24**), that is, to hold fast to the teaching and beliefs of the church. God has given us a deposit of truth in the Bible, that we are to learn and grow into for our benefit. And, the Bible is not always easy to understand. Even the apostle Peter said about the apostle Paul’s writings that, “*There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures*” (**2 Peter 3:16**). That is why God has given us preachers and teachers in the church to help us understand the Bible properly (**Ephesians 4:11, Acts 6:4, Titus 2:1, 2 Timothy 4:2**). And standing on the shoulder of giants, the church has also over the centuries codified and summarised the Bible’s essential teachings in the form of creeds and confessions.⁸⁹ A historic Christian church will hold to and teach these creeds and confessions, for the growth of her members in the Christian faith.

Three, we need the **constraint of the church**. The goal of “*meeting together*” is so that we are strengthened to fight sin, and encouraged to do good works. In order to fight sin, you need to be held accountable for **what you believe** and **how you behave**. This happens in two ways: Through the oversight of the **elders**, who keep watch over the church on behalf of Christ (**1 Peter 5:1-2, Hebrews 13:17, 2 Timothy 4:2**), and through the accountability of fellow brothers and sisters in the church who strengthen one another in the faith, bear one another’s burdens, and restore those in sin (**Matthew 18:15-20, Acts 16:5, Galatians 6:1-2**).

HOW TO BE AN ACTIVE MEMBER AND PARTICIPANT

Membership matters, membership is needed, and membership needs to be fleshed out practically to be of any use to us. So, here are some practical ways to be an active member in the church:⁹⁰

1. **Walk daily with God:** Read the Bible and pray every day to maintain a lively relationship with God (**Mark 1:35**).⁹¹
2. **Worship weekly with God’s people:** Make it a high priority to actively participate in corporate worship on Sunday. God has set this day apart for us to worship him, and meet him (**Exodus 20:8-11, Acts 20:7**). You need the grace that God gives through the preaching of his Word, the celebration of the sacraments and the prayers with his people.

⁸⁹ See Carl R Trueman, “Why Christians Need Confessions,” at https://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=771, accessed August 18th, 2017.

⁹⁰ Adapted from the Membership Booklet of Citylife Presbyterian Church, 16

⁹¹ If you are new to the faith, and are not sure how to start praying and reading God’s Word, we can take you through a discipleship course that will teach you some of the basics beliefs and practices of the Christian life.

SESSION 8: MEMBERSHIP & PARTICIPATION

3. **Develop deep relationships:** You need other people for your own growth (**Acts 2:42, Hebrews 10:26**). Spend time with others in the church on Sunday, and outside of Sunday. Talk about doctrine, talk about life, and keep each other accountable. Commit to pursuing peace in the church by exercising God's means of dealing with offences (**Matthew 18:15-20**). Also, spend time with those outside the church, and seek to give them the Gospel (**Matthew 28:19-20**). Invite them to church to hear the Gospel, and to be among Gospel-saturated people (**1 Corinthians 14:24-25**).
4. **Give faithfully to the mission:** We give faithfully to God's mission in response to the generous gift of his Son. That is how God has designed the ministries and mission of the church to be supported (**Malachi 3:8-10, Acts 2:24, Acts 4:32-37, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2**). We are participating in God's mission to the world through our giving!
5. **Find and fulfil your calling:** God has called each of us to different vocations in our different spheres of influence. He has a calling for you in your family, your church, your workplace, and in society (**Matthew 5:13-16, Romans 13:1-7, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Colossians 3:17**). In the context of mutually edifying relationships in the church, seek to discover and be what God has called you to be. Use the gifts and talents that God has given you to serve others in the church. Be active and thoughtful in the selection, election and endorsement of office holders in the church. And let us discover together how to live faithfully and fruitfully "*in step with the truth of the Gospel*" (**Galatians 2:14**) in our families, workplaces and in society (**Mark 12:30-31**).⁹²

CONCLUSION

Joining a church is more than a formality, and more than a little personal spiritual exercise. It is about finding your calling and your place in God's great grand plan for the world! Remember that the Church is the only institution on earth that Jesus promises to build (**Matthew 16:18**). God's plan is to declare his glory to the nations through the Church (**Ephesians 3:10**). And the Church is "*the body of Christ*," made up "*individually*" of her *members* (**1 Corinthians 12:27**). If so, then joining the local church is plugging into the very heart of what God is doing in the world!

⁹² Of course, there must be a proper balance of commitment without over-involvement. We want to avoid squandering God's gifts and talents on the one hand, and burnout on the other. These balances can best be worked out through honest and open conversations with fellow believers and leaders in the church.

SESSION 8: MEMBERSHIP & PARTICIPATION

In his first ever sermon as a pastor, Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones said this, *“My one great attempt here... will be to try to prove to you not merely that Christianity is reasonable, but that ultimately, faced as we all are at some time or other with the stupendous fact of life and death, nothing else is reasonable... My thesis will ever be, that, face to face with the deeper questions of life and death, all our knowledge and our culture will fail us, and that our only hope of peace is to be found in the crucified Christ.”* If this message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is true, and you believe it to be so, then the only reasonable response for you to have is to plug into the church and find and fulfil your calling, whatever it may be. It is for you to be used by God, both as an individual and with others, to proclaim this glorious Gospel that transcends knowledge and culture, which transcends even life and death itself!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why is membership important to the health of a Christian?

2. Are you a member of a church? Why, or why not?

PROCESS OF BECOMING A MEMBER

There are 4 steps to becoming a member of One Covenant Church:

Step 1: Learn the Membership Material

Read through and familiarise yourself with the contents of the *Church Membership Handbook*. There are also recorded messages of each of the 8 main sessions that you can listen.

Step 2: Apply for Membership

Fill out the Membership Application Form. In the form, you will be asked to answer some short questions about the material in the Church Membership Handbook. Hand in the completed Application Form to the pastor, and arrange for a membership interview with the pastor. If you are transferring your membership from another church, you should have discussed this with your previous church at this stage.

Step 3: Be Interviewed

Meet with the pastor (around 30 minutes) for your membership interview. Married couples who both profess the Christian faith will be interviewed together, and both spouses need to complete steps 1 and 2 before the interview. If you are transferring your membership from another church, the pastor will write to your previous church indicating that you are having your membership transferred.

Step 4: Be Baptised, Make a Profession of Faith and take Membership Vows

Take your membership vows at a worship service. If you have not been baptised before, you will be baptised at the same service before you take your membership vows. Ideally, households should be baptised together. Hence, if your spouse is also becoming a member and has not been baptised, your baptisms will be arranged together. If you have younger children who have not been baptised, they can also be baptised with you in the same worship service. If you have been baptised as a child, but have yet to make a profession of faith, you will make a profession of faith before taking your Membership Vows.

M E M B E R S H I P A P P L I C A T I O N

PERSONAL DETAILS

SURNAME	
GIVEN NAME	
NRIC / PASSPORT	
DATE OF BIRTH	
GENDER	
RESIDENTIAL ADDRESS	
MOBILE NUMBER	
EMAIL	
HAVE YOU BEEN BAPTISED?	
DATE OF BAPTISM (If, 'YES')	
ARE YOU A MEMBER OF A CHURCH?	
NAME OF CHURCH (If, 'YES')	
MARITAL STATUS	
SPOUSE'S NAME (If applicable)	
ANNIVERSARY DATE	
IS SPOUSE APPLYING FOR MEMBERSHIP AS WELL?	
CHILDREN (If applicable)	
NAME OF CHILD DATE OF BIRTH / AGE BAPTISED? DATE OF BAPTISM (If, 'YES')	
NAME OF CHILD DATE OF BIRTH / AGE BAPTISED? DATE OF BAPTISM (If, 'YES')	
NAME OF CHILD DATE OF BIRTH / AGE BAPTISED? DATE OF BAPTISM (If, 'YES')	
NAME OF CHILD DATE OF BIRTH / AGE BAPTISED? DATE OF BAPTISM (If, 'YES')	

TESTIMONY

Share your story of coming to Christ with us: what was life like before you came to saving faith in Christ? How did you come to faith in Christ? How has your life changed because of your faith?
Please feel free to attach more pages if the space below is not enough.

BEING ONE COVENANT: IDENTITY. BELIEF. BELONGING

QUESTION	RESPONSE
I have familiarised myself with the contents of the <i>Church Membership Handbook</i> , and/or have listened to the messages of the 8 main sessions:	
I have the following questions about One Covenant Church:	

QUESTION	RESPONSE
I am interested in the following ministries and areas of service in One Covenant Church:	
<p>I understand and can affirm the Membership Vows of One Covenant Church:</p> <p><i>Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope except through His sovereign mercy?</i></p> <p><i>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?</i></p> <p><i>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?</i></p> <p><i>Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?</i></p> <p><i>Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to pursue its purity and peace?</i></p>	

By signing this membership application form, you agree that One Covenant Church may collect, use, and disclose your personal data, as provided in this application form, in accordance with the Personal Data Protection Act 2012:

- (a) the processing of this membership application; and*
- (b) the administration of the membership with our organisation.*

*One Covenant Church is registered as a public company limited by guarantee (CLG) under The Companies Act, Chapter 50. As such, each member of the company undertakes to contribute to the assets of the company, in the event of its being wound up while he or she is a member, for payment of the debts and liabilities of the company contracted before he or she ceases to be a member, and the costs, charges, and expenses of winding-up, and for the adjustment of the rights of the contributors among themselves, such amount as may be required not exceeding **Ten (10) Dollars Singapore Currency**.*

Signature:

Date:

one  o v e n a n t
church