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The Biblical Blessing of Covenant Membership in the Local Church (2)

There is a reason why I entitled these two messages, *The Biblical Blessing of Covenant Membership in the Local Church*. The reason is because I do believe covenant membership is a **blessing**, not a curse, and I believe that it is a blessing *precisely because* it is **biblical**.

I've been at Bridgeway for over three years now and if there is anything that you should have figured out about me by now it is that I don't care much for arguments or ideas or practices that are grounded in something other than Scripture. What is or is not traditional matters little to me. What does or does not look like other churches matters little to me. What does or does not make us feel comfortable matters little to me. What you or I may or may not prefer or like matters little to me. What will or will not bring in more people and money simply doesn't factor in to the decision making process at Bridgeway.

Now, I don't say this to suggest that we should be insensitive to people's feelings. I'm not saying that we should totally ignore tradition or what people have or have not experienced in the past. What I'm saying is that, when we make decisions about what to do or what not to do, the final standard and ultimate criterion is the Word of God. And what Scripture calls on us to do may make us feel uncomfortable and may run against the grain of long-standing traditions and may call upon us to make sacrifices that we prefer not to make.

It's not easy to make changes. It's not easy to shift directions in church life. It can be disruptive and disconcerting and confusing. But as someone once said: ***"Just because you've always done it that way doesn't mean it's not incredibly stupid!"***

And I'm not one who believes in change for change's sake. I don't see any value in shifting directions or implementing new practices just for the sake of innovation. If there are changes that are called for, if there are sacrifices that need to be made, let it be because that's what we believe Scripture teaches.

That's not easy for people to do. Our society doesn't think that way. In fact, most churches don't think that way. Thinking and acting biblically means that we take everything that makes us feel comfortable and is consistent with our tradition and our preferences and our experiences and we pile them up on one side of the scales of balance, and then we put what God's Word says on the other side. And if the two sides balance each other and are in harmony, praise God! But if they aren't, guess who wins? Well, I can't speak for other churches, but I think you know who wins here at Bridgeway!

So, if you are still asking yourself, "Why covenant membership?" the answer is, "Because we think it's biblical." That's what last week was all about. Not to spend too much time in review, but allow me to remind us all of what I tried to say.

Last week I appealed to 8 different biblical responsibilities, exhortations, principles, or practices that I believe necessarily entail or require what we are calling covenant membership in the local church.

The first was ***accountability to the leaders (Elders) of the church***. I argued from a number of biblical texts (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 5:17) that covenant membership is implied in the biblical requirement of Christians to be submitted to a group of church leaders, Elders, or Pastors.

The second argument was drawn from ***the biblical requirement that shepherds care for or pastor their flock***. We saw from several texts (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2-3) that Elders and Pastors in a local church have

a responsibility before God to feed and lead and protect a specific group of Christians. No one said it better than the Apostle Peter:

“Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-3).

We then looked, thirdly, at the many texts that describe how church discipline is to be carried out. My point was that it is simply impossible to do this effectively in the absence of some form of covenant membership. Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:12-13; 2 Corinthians 2:6-7; all assume the existence of covenant membership in the church.

Fourth, it’s difficult to imagine the church keeping a list of widows (1 Tim. 5:9-12) but not keeping a list of covenant members. If it didn’t keep the latter list, what group of widows would even be considered for inclusion on the former list?

The fifth group of texts describes the church as a whole involved in making certain decisions on its own behalf. We looked at only one such text, Acts 15:22, where Luke describes “the whole church,” in addition to Elders and Apostles, participating in a decision relating to the Jerusalem Council.

We then looked at a sixth line of evidence, primarily as it is found in Galatians 6:10. There Paul exhorted the church in this way:

“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10).

The local church is here portrayed as a family, spiritual “brothers” and “sisters” whose presence in the house and identity as members of that family are obvious. There had to have been some means by which the household of faith was differentiated from “everyone” else. This is what is meant by “covenant membership” in the family of God’s children.

Seventh, I pointed you to 1 Corinthians 14:23, where Paul describes a situation in which “the whole church comes together.” How would the leaders know if the “whole church” was there if no formal covenant relationship was established? The fact that Paul envisioned a group that could be identified and defined as everyone who belonged to that local body necessarily assumes that some means or mechanism had to be in place by which such people could be known.

Eighth, and finally, we looked at numerous biblical metaphors or images used to describe the local church, such as “body,” “flock,” “building,” “house,” “bride,” and “temple.” Each of these in its own way seems to require an organic spiritual unity and visible commitment on the part of those who comprise it.

Enough of review. Today I want to do three things. First, I want to explain what is entailed in covenant membership. In other words, who, precisely, is committing to whom? And what, precisely, are they committing to do? What is the nature of the covenant into which believers in a local assembly are entering? Then, secondly, I want to briefly address some of the practical benefits and blessings that come with covenant membership. Finally, I want to say something about the concerns and fears and objections that people typically have to the idea of covenant membership.

(1) What is entailed in covenant membership?

In covenant membership there are three expressions of commitment: the commitment of all Christians in a local church one to another; the commitment of all Christians in a local church to the Elders whom God has raised up to lead them and shepherd them; and the commitment of the Elders or Shepherds to the people whom they are to lead and feed and protect. So let me briefly say something about each of these.

First of all, there is the commitment or covenant that exists among all the Christians in a local church. You may be asking yourself: “Why does Sam believe this sort of covenant commitment even exists? And what does it look like? What does it call on me to do?” Here’s how I want to answer that question.

If I were to take a poll today and asked the question, “*Why should you always speak the truth one to another?*” what would be your answer? I suspect people would respond in a variety of ways:

- “We should speak the truth to one another because God himself is truth and we are to be like him.” That’s true.
- “We should speak the truth to one another because the Bible clearly condemns lying.” Right again.
- “We should speak the truth to one another because falsehood and deception are destructive.” Yes, they are.
- “We should speak the truth to one another because not to do so sets a bad example for our children to follow.” Yes, it does.
- “We should not lie to one another because otherwise society will deteriorate.” Correct.

All these are good answers. They are correct answers. But when the Apostle Paul commands Christians in the church at Ephesus to “put away falsehood” and to “speak the truth to his neighbor”, the reason he gives is, and I quote: because “*we are members one of another*” (Eph. 4:25).

Now, I know what it means to be a *companion* with another or a *teammate* or the *friend* of another. I know what it means to be *affiliated with* someone in an endeavor or even in an organization. But what does it mean for you and me as Christians to be “*members one of another*”?

Clearly Paul has in mind something that goes beyond mere casual acquaintance. Christians in a local church are not just neighbors. Paul has in view a *solidarity* and *mutual inter-dependence* one with another that flows from a *spiritual unity* created by God and willingly embraced by each believer. We are no longer alienated or independent beings but people who belong together in covenant commitment as one body in Christ.

So what does this mean in terms of how you and I are to relate to each other? In other words, what would covenant membership, one with another, require of us all? I’ll answer this by pointing us to the many so-called “*one-anothering*” texts in the NT.

A new commandment I give to you, that you *love one another*: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another (John 13:34).

So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually *members one of another* (Romans 12:5).

Outdo one another in *showing honor* (Romans 12:10).

Live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16).

Therefore *let us not pass judgment on one another* any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother (Romans 14:13).

So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding [lit., “*build up one another*”] (Romans 14:19).

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to *live in such harmony with one another*, in accord with Christ Jesus (Romans 15:5).

Therefore *welcome one another* as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Romans 15:7).

I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to *instruct one another* (Romans 15:14).

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you (Romans 16:16).

. . . that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may *have the same care* for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25).

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love *serve one another* (Galatians 5:13).

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

. . . with all humility and gentleness, with patience, *bearing with one another in love* (Ephesians 4:2; Col. 3:13).

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving one another*, as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32; Col. 3:13).

. . . *submitting to one another* out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21).

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves [lit., “*count or regard one another as more significant than yourselves*”] (Philippians 2:3).

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices (Colossians 3:9).

Therefore *encourage one another* with these words (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

Therefore *encourage one another and build one another up*, just as you are doing (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always *seek to do good to one another* and to everyone (1 Thessalonians 5:15).

And let us consider how to *stir up one another to love and good works* (Hebrews 10:24).

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers (James 4:11).

Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door (James 5:9).

Therefore, *confess your sins to one another and pray* for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working (James 5:16).

Show hospitality to one another without grumbling (1 Peter 4:9).

Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. *Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another*, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:5).

Some would have us believe you can fulfill these imperatives at Starbucks with a group of loosely related friends, but we must remember that *each of these commands was given to local churches*, to be fulfilled and pursued in the context of relationships among those who constituted its membership.

And before leaving this topic, allow me to point out a number of “one-anothering” commands that are **not** found in Scripture: sanctify one another, humble one another, scrutinize one another, pressure one another, embarrass one another, corner one another, interrupt one another, defeat one another, sacrifice one another, shame one another, judge one another, run one another’s lives, confess one another’s sins, intensify one another’s sufferings, and point out one another’s failings (my thanks to Ray Ortlund for these).

What is covenant membership? It is, among other things, you as a Christian committing yourself by the grace of God to honor and obey these responsibilities in relation to others in your local church. It doesn’t mean you will do it perfectly; no one does. It does mean that you acknowledge this is what God calls upon each of us to do and by the power that he supplies we commit ourselves to the pursuit of it.

Second, there is the commitment of all believers in a local church to the leadership of the Elders whom God has raised up in their midst.

I addressed this point last week, so for the sake of time I’ll simply refer you to two texts that explicitly mention this:

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” (Hebrews 13:17).

“We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

Some people fear covenant membership because they think it means the Elders of their church are given authority to dictate and control their lives. That is totally unbiblical. The responsibility of Elders is to know you, to lead you, to feed you, and to protect you. In covenant membership you embrace this and say to them: “I want to be known. I want you to hold me accountable to what the Bible says concerning my life and my relationship with God. I want you to lead me and this body of believers in a way that is consistent with the NT. I want you to provide spiritual nourishment from the Scriptures. I trust you to protect my spiritual health and that of my family by making certain that no heresy or false teaching is allowed to spread in our midst.”

I suspect that most of the bad experiences people have had with covenant membership comes from overbearing, authoritarian, excessively controlling, self-serving, egomaniacal leaders in the local church. I would simply ask you this: “As you look at the Elders and Pastors of Bridgeway Church, do you see *anything* remotely similar to that in the way that we have been loving you, feeding you, and leading you?” If so, I want to know about it. But I’m persuaded the answer to that question, is No.

The third expression of covenant commitment is on the part of the Elders to the people whom God has called them to lead.

We looked briefly at these texts last week. I mention only three of them:

“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).

“Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-3).

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Hebrews 13:17).

Among other things, this means that the Elders of Bridgeway covenant with you and promise to you that they will:

- appoint pastors and elders and staff according to the criteria assigned to them in the Scriptures (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4);
- prayerfully seek God’s will for our church community and to steward her resources to the best of our ability based on our understanding of the Scriptures and the guidance of the Spirit (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4);
- care for the church and seek her growth in grace, truth and love (Matthew 28:16-20; Ephesians 4:15-16 Colossians 1:28; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-4);
- take steps to ensure that the whole counsel of God is faithfully proclaimed and taught from the whole of Scripture (Acts 20:27-28; 1 Timothy 4:16; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; Titus 2:1);
- equip the members of the church for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11-16);
- be on guard against false teachers and teachings and to protect the sheep from their influence (Matthew 7:15; Acts 20:28-31; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 1 John 4:1);
- lovingly exercise discipline when necessary, for the glory of God, the good of the one disciplined and the health of the church as a whole (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 6:1; James 5:19-20);
- take the lead in setting an example and join all other believers in fulfilling the obligations of covenant membership (Philippians 3:17; 1 Timothy 4:12; Titus 2:7-8; 1 Peter 5:3); in other words, the Elders commit themselves first and foremost to heeding the many “one-anothering” commands we looked at above.

That, in a nutshell, is what covenant membership is all about. It’s about all of us committing ourselves one to another to be and to do for each other all that the NT requires. It’s all about the flock of God

acknowledging that God has raised up shepherds to know, lead, feed, and protect them, and their commitment to follow the spiritual leadership of those who are over them in the Lord. It's all about the commitment of those leaders to joyfully keep watch over your souls and their willingness to sacrifice everything for your sakes and your growth in Christ Jesus.

(2) In addition to the obvious *biblical* reasons for covenant membership, there are some *practical* reasons why membership is important and helpful

First, committing yourself in covenant membership to a local church makes a powerful statement in a “low-commitment” culture. “Many bowling leagues require more of their members than our churches. Where this is true, the church is a sad reflection of its culture. Ours is a consumer culture where everything is tailored to meet our needs and satisfy our preferences. When those needs aren't met, we can always move on to the next product, or job, or spouse. Joining a church in such an environment makes a counter-cultural statement. It says ‘I am committed to this group of people and they are committed to me. I am here to give, more than get’” (Kevin DeYoung).

Commitment has become something of a cuss word in religious circles. The idea of making a decision and actually sticking with it, even when times are tough, is a foreign concept to many today. All too often, today, “when the going gets tough, the tough simply leave and go to another church!”

DeYoung is right on the mark when he says that “We prefer to date the church – have her around for special events, take her out when life feels lonely, and keep her around for a rainy day. Membership is one way to stop dating churches, and marry one.”

Second, covenant membership in a local church defies the temptation most of us feel to be overly *independent*. Independence, in many respects, is a wonderful thing that we in America and in western culture in general ought to be thankful for. But biblical culture is also communal: it calls on individuals to become “members one with another” and to live in relationships of mutual support, encouragement, and accountability.

Our society is all about self: self-promotion, self-esteem, self-reliance. But the church is all about mutual submission one to another and humbly deferring to the needs and promotion of others rather than ourselves. The church is all about the pursuit not so much of what best serves me but of what best serves others and their growth in Christ.

Third, covenant membership *helps facilitate accountability* in a way that few things can. “When we join a church we are offering ourselves to one another to be encouraged, rebuked, corrected, and served. We are placing ourselves under leaders and submitting to their authority (Heb. 13:7). We are saying, ‘I am here to stay. I want to help you grow in godliness. Will you help me to do the same?’” (DeYoung).

(3) Why do people resist the idea of a formal membership in the local church?

I've identified a number of reasons, all of which share one thing in common. I wonder if you can identify what it is:

- *If we implement a formal membership in our church, people will leave.* [Sadly, this may be true, but nothing about covenant membership would require them to do so. We welcome everyone to BW, regardless of whether or not they embrace covenant

membership. At the same time, we cannot, we *must* not, make our decisions about what we will or will not do based on the fear of how it will affect attendance.]

- *I've had a bad experience in a church because of their practice of membership.* [Yes, and we are profoundly sympathetic towards those who have suffered unjustly and unfairly in this way. But if we were to refuse to obey the Scriptures because someone treated us badly or because someone abused the practice, we would end up with nothing left! We are determined at BW to do it well. We don't claim to be perfect, but we are committed to avoiding those abuses that have caused people pain.]
- *I was offended by the infamous "membership drive."* It felt manipulative, contrived, and reflected an unhealthy obsession with numbers and growth. [Good for you! I agree! That is why we will never implement anything remotely approaching a membership drive!]
- *Membership feels "exclusive."* [It's hard for me to understand this when our appeal is for all believers at BW to become covenant members. We don't exclude anyone. A person can only exclude himself/herself. If by "exclusive" you mean it creates boundaries that identify who's "inside" the church and who's "outside," then I suppose the word "exclusive" fits. But isn't this precisely what Paul does in 1 Cor. 5:12-13?]
- *Membership has been used to prevent some non-members from serving in the church.* [The problem here is in defining what kind of "service" you have in mind. We would never require membership for someone who wants to attend a house church or serve in the café or in the bookstore or participate in our missional outreaches. At the same time, we are responsible to protect the sheep. Certain areas of ministry, such as leading a house church or leading worship or teaching a class call for some measure of qualification. Do we really want someone placed in a position of leadership and spiritual influence who isn't committed to this church, who isn't willing to be accountable and to uphold the values and beliefs that we embrace?]
- *Membership feels too formal and structured. I want a church that is relaxed and organic.* [Again, some degree of "form" and "structure" are necessary, lest you have chaos and confusion. Yes, I want a church that is "relaxed" and "organic" (and I think we've got one!), but not one that is lazy, sloppy, and lacks unity. The issue is: where and in what areas of ministry does the Word call for structure and in what areas does it encourage informality? It would be unwise to embrace formality and structure and apply them across the board in church life, just as it would be unwise to do the same with a relaxed and organic approach.]
- *Membership feels authoritarian and hierarchical.* [It won't in the way we do it! As for the words themselves, there is such a thing as legitimate spiritual "authority," as those many texts regarding the leadership of Elders would indicate. The word "hierarchical" is a bit negative and prejudices the discussion. We believe in the fundamental equality of all believers in Jesus. We are all priests before God. No one is more important than another. But let us not forget that members of a local church are exhorted to respect "those who are over you in the Lord" (1 Thess. 5:12-13).]
- *Membership feels excessively "denominational" and a reversion to older, so-called "fundamentalist" Christianity.* [We are not part of a denomination, and as long as I'm here we never will be. And honestly, I hardly think we are in danger of being thought of as angry, isolated, separatistic fundamentalists!]
- *Someone close to me was hurt deeply by membership.* [Yes, I'm sure that is true in a number of cases. So let's commit ourselves to not letting it happen at BW!]
- *I'm fearful of being controlled.* [Good. If you ever feel as if the Elders or Pastors at BW are controlling you in an unhealthy or unbiblical way, you let me know and we'll deal with it. But our aim isn't to control anyone. Our aim is with God's help for all believers here to be known, loved, fed, led, and protected.]

- *I'm a "member" of the universal Church, so why do I have to be a "member" of a local church?* [Because the Bible says so. Sorry for being so blunt. I'm not trying to be insensitive. But what else can I say?]
- *Membership serves only to divide the body.* [But only when it is done badly and unbiblically. Its primary aim is to unify the body.]
- *I've been in this church for years without a formal membership and we've done fine so far. To pursue membership now suggests that we've done it all wrong before.* [Our move toward covenant membership is not an indictment or criticism of BW in past years. It's simply a recognition of what we see in the Bible and a desire to follow God's pattern for NT church life.]
- *Membership simply isn't in our spiritual DNA. It's not "who we are".* [But the important question isn't whether or not covenant membership *is* or *has been* in our spiritual DNA, but whether or not it *should* be. And it is *going to be* part of our DNA from this point on. It is now and henceforth "who we are."]
- *Membership will make broken and wounded people feel unsafe and unwelcome.* [Nothing could be farther from the truth! Covenant membership, properly and compassionately and biblically implemented, will make them feel safe and loved and protected and cared for.]
- *Membership will restrict my freedom to come and go as I please.* [Well, yes and no. Covenant membership does run counter to the unfettered exercise of personal autonomy that says, 'If I don't like what's here I'll go to one of the two dozen other churches down the road.' On the other hand, no one is forcing you against your will to partner with us at BW. But ask yourself this question: "What do I value more: autonomy or community?"]
- *I don't like boundaries.* [Are you sure? *All* boundaries? What about biblical boundaries? We want nothing to do with artificial, man-made barriers, but we do want to acknowledge and honor the spiritual and moral boundaries called for in Scripture.]

What links all these reasons for resisting membership is that not one of them is biblical! I'm not saying that negative things such as listed above have not or cannot occur when membership is implemented in an unbiblical, unloving, and un-Christlike way. I'm simply saying that none of these reasons is ever found in the Scriptures as a reason why a church should not embrace some expression of formal membership. Virtually all of the above are grounded or based in an individual's negative personal experience. As bad as that experience may have been, it is not a sufficient reason to reject what appears to be present throughout the NT.

Conclusion:

In our pastoral team discussions on this topic, I asked the other guys for their input. Everything they said was helpful. J. J. chose to send me his comments in an e-mail, and I think they are worth citing in full. With this, then, I close.

"This isn't a way to stop people going out the back door. This is wanting to know who's going to stand at your shoulder when you're taking fire instead of throwing down their weapon and running away.

This is a commitment to stay, even if it means sometimes hearing hard words from friends, even when flatterers are waiting outside, ever willing to tell us what we want to hear.

This is a recognition that our self-perception is about as accurate as a carnival mirror, so we dare not cut ourselves out of the pack, or we risk being ridden down by the wolves of our own self-deception and cocky pride.

This is a promise that prepares the way for us to pour our lives out for each other without constantly wondering if a whim or flit of fancy will blow us out of each other's lives into another local expression of the church that we've found to be more convenient, where we can hide more comfortably.

This covenant commitment is a promise between friends. A bond between brothers.

This a commitment to yourself to choose Christian community on the basis of the Holy Spirit's leading instead of your own capricious convenience.

This is a sacred trust that declares "We're not interested in ecclesiological buffet—we're building a family." This is an acknowledgment that Christian community is not something we create—it's given to us by God. We are entrusted into one another's care, and we will not abandon that trust when it becomes inconvenient.

In an age of transience, isolation, and selfishness, we're taking a stand for intentional, humble, sacrificial community with Christ at the center, who bids us come and die—to die to our transient, isolated, proud selves in order to be reborn into a community created to proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his glorious light.”