

GOD'S COVENANTAL PEOPLE: JOINING THE CHURCH AND REMAINING WITH HER

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Introduction:

"We, the Subscribers, Members of the Church of Easton, Mett together the Sixth day of April, A Domini 1747. Apprehending itt our duty, under our present Circumstances, Solemnly & Explicitly to renew our Covenant with god, Do therefore personally present ourselves this day in the holy presence of God to transact with him this important affair of his Kingdom & Glory, and humbling ourselves before the Lord for all our Sins and the Sins of Ours; Earnestly praying for pardoning Mercy & Reconcilliation with God thro the Blood of our Lord Jesus, And for the gracious prescence and assistance of his holy Spirit, Under a deep sense of Our Own Weakness & Unworthyness, and with an Humble Confidence of his favourable Acceptation; Each of us for ourselves, and all of us jointly together, do Renewedly Enter into Covenant with God and One with Another in the terms following..."¹

The Covenant referred to in the above introductory paragraph, with all of its curious early 18th century phonetic spellings, is still used and adhered to at the Evangelical Congregational Church of Easton (TECCOE), MA where I minister. Prospective members first complete a membership class which is used to acquaint participants with the history of the church, our doctrinal position and the details of the church constitution. This leads to a interview by the elders to ascertain a credible confession of faith, as well as a willingness to covenantally commit themselves to the local body of Christ at Easton. They then are presented to the congregation where they have opportunity to publically profess their faith, after which the prospective members and the congregation enter into mutual covenant with one another. This expression of loving identification with God's people is followed by the new member(s) affixing their signature to the copy of the church covenant, thus indicating their agreement and submission to its terms.

There are some who think this covenantal form of membership in a local church is just a relic of the past, a mere quaint tradition. Further, many are quick to point out that one cannot even find a verse in the Bible indicating that believers should covenant with a local church. Interestingly, one also cannot find a verse in the Bible with the word 'Trinity', and yet we affirm that God who is One is also Three. We do this because of what we read and acknowledge in the Savoy that, "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory,

¹ *The Evangelical Congregational Church of Easton Constitution*, rev. 1-28-17, Church Covenant, p. 1 (A contemporary copy of this covenant is in the appendix to this paper)

man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture."² And, "...there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed."³ As such, we can piece together from Scripture God's intention and will regarding His people in that He would have them regularly gather together in a local church. There is abundant evidence for that in Scripture. God would not only have His people come together in local churches, but also to be bound together by covenant in these local assemblies.

The puritan Thomas Goodwin wrote regarding covenantal membership in a local church that, "...if you marry, you make a solemn covenant of it to perform the duties of that relation; if you enter into any new league, even of friendship, you may bind it by a covenant, as did Jonathan and David. Thus, to be admitted into any body or polity civil, men make not only a covenant, but do often add thereto an oath, and such is called the covenant of God, as that of marriage, and the oath of God, as that between prince and people in a commonwealth. Now, if this church fellowship be a body, and that to be entered into by believers agreeing to live in the same body... and such a body as superadds anything of a special relation mutual between each other of that church more than that more common communion and relation of and unto all saints in the church catholic... why, then, should not such a covenant, and the use and benefit of it, be allowed to this body, and special relation of church fellowship, to form up and knit fast the agreement of it, as is common to all bodies and societies and particular relations made up in the world?"⁴

Goodwin went on even further to declare that, "...God hath ordained it ; for, if God hath thus lent in common (as we may so speak) a solemn covenant, as before himself made, unto all other relations and societies of any importance unto mankind, which, when in such civil affairs used, is to be esteemed sacred and an ordinance of God, a covenant with God (as was said) and an oath with God, hath he not with that same breath much more allotted and allowed the practice of such a covenant to have place in the obligation of this divine society and relation, which is itself an ordinance, and so of the two the more proper element for such a holy covenant ? ...such dictates of nature and right reason in things wherein divine ordinances and human do alike partake in common, to be no less than the commands of God..."⁵

In our time, this form of local covenantal church membership is not generally taught by the leadership of many local churches. It's considered to be unnecessary, out-dated, and besides, it just might be a 'turn-off' to new attendees. Some churches even take the view that new attendees should first, at some point, be asked to serve on a committee, or teach a class, hoping that through this involvement they'll eventually be amenable to actually formally join the church. For some professing Christians, covenantal church membership is taken very

² Savoy Declaration, I,VI

³ Ibid

⁴ Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, J. Nichol, 1865, volume 11, p. 537

⁵ Ibid, p. 538

lightly, or not even something to be considered at all. And we so often see that when one becomes dissatisfied, they simply leave and are often welcomed elsewhere, frequently with no questions asked concerning their prior church affiliation. In this way, many professing Christians become bedouins⁶, migrating from church to church in search of the perfect church. Any sense of long term commitment, and submission to local church authority is simply not in their thoughts. In this way, local churches are viewed somewhat like various offerings at a restaurant's food buffet. One reasons that they'll attend one church for a time and perhaps go elsewhere if another church looks more favorable per that person's own criteria. This pattern of behavior occurs regularly in churches in our time.

The purpose of this paper is to present a practical application of the exercise of "Lawful Oaths and Vows" as described in chapter 23 of the Savoy Declaration. In particular, it is a defense of the importance of members of a local church to actually covenant with one another in the name of God. The founders of the early New England Congregational churches recognized the need to covenantally bind themselves to one another in the local church because they were bound in covenant together with God. To be in covenant is to acknowledge that God has given Himself in covenant to the church, and the response to that is for Christians to give themselves in covenant before God with one another because they all make up the very body of Jesus Christ. With that understanding it can be asserted that one of the signs or marks of a healthy local church is to not only have a Biblical understanding of what covenantal church membership is all about, but to actually put it into practice.

The Local Church:

At one point in their conversation, the Samaritan woman who encountered Jesus at Jacob's well said, "Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship."⁷ She was right as regards God's directives to Israel as to the place where they were to regularly engage in corporate worship. Those were the stipulations under the old Mosaic covenant. However, Jesus informed her that things were about to change. He told her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father... But the hour is coming and now is, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth."⁸

Jesus was essentially announcing the end of God's "old covenant" administration of His church which would occur very shortly. All of the outward visible ceremonial activities of that covenant would find their fulfillment in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. No longer would the church be required to assemble in Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Booths. The temple would no longer be needed. Under the old covenant, "the

⁶ Webster dictionary defines Bedouins as Middle Eastern desert tribes, but it also indicates that the term 'bedouin' has a more general definition of "any wanderer."

⁷ John 4.20

⁸ Ibid, vss.21, 23

way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was standing. It was symbolic..."⁹ But with the coming of Christ and the fulfillment of His work of redemption, that which was temporary and external would become spiritual and permanent.

The public and formal inauguration of this change occurred at the time of Pentecost, or Feast of Weeks which the Jews had celebrated for many generations. It was a time of celebration and it was a time of thanksgiving. It was a feast to celebrate the first fruit of the new harvest season. It was a time of great joy because, based on the first fruit, it provided a hopeful expectation of the full harvest to be gathered later. In the book of Acts, Luke recorded for us one very special celebration of Pentecost. It would be the occasion when what happened would be what all the previous celebrations of the Feast of Weeks ultimately pointed to. It would be the reality, the substance of what was foreshadowed; the beginning of another kind of harvest, the harvest of souls. God accomplished this harvest through the instrumentation of Peter's preaching on that occasion.

We read, "how then shall they call on Him in whom they have believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? ...so then faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God."¹⁰ This is essentially a description of what happened at Pentecost. Peter was preaching the Word, he was preaching it expositively and he was presenting the gospel. God through Peter essentially planted the seed into prepared hearts and that seed provoked a response. There was an awakening that took place. Peter had just made clear to them that the One they had murdered was in fact the promised Messiah, "raised up... exalted to the right hand of God...", and that "God has made this Jesus, whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ." And his listeners came under a great weight of conviction for their sin. We read, "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart."¹¹ They became like David who confessed that, "Against You, You only have I sinned, and done this evil in your sight – that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge."¹² Their anguished, "What shall we do?" was a sorrowful acknowledgment that they had offended God. In their distress, it was as if they were seeking to somehow undo what they had done in murdering Christ, or perhaps they were looking for a way to make up for it. Indeed, the gospel demands a response. One is either humbled by it, brought to their knees in confession and repentance and a desire to be saved, crying "God be merciful to me a sinner," or one is driven away and offended with their pride pricked. Some react with, "Who are you to say that I'm a sinner and am in need of salvation." But at this particular moment in redemptive history the cry was, "what shall we do?" We need to remember that these are likely ones who just a few short weeks before were crying out "Crucify Him!" They wanted Jesus put to death. Is not their response on the occasion of Peter's sermon an answer to the Lord's prayer on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do?"¹³

⁹ Hebrews 9.8-9

¹⁰ Romans 10.14

¹¹ Acts 2.33,37

¹² Psalm 51.4

¹³ Luke 23.34

Peter gave them the only possible answer, which was to “repent... and be baptized.”¹⁴ In this way the Holy Spirit graciously pointed them to Christ, and gave them the gifts of faith and repentance such that they would turn to Christ and embrace Him wholly as their Savior and Lord. And baptism was administered to them as a sign of the new covenant in Christ, and as a seal to their faith into that great reality of new life in Jesus Christ. And this is the way the church grows. This is God’s ordinary way of harvesting lost souls into the kingdom.

Jesus had only 50 days earlier fulfilled the Feast of Passover. He was the One who fulfilled all that was typified by the slain lamb at Passover. That was exactly how the forerunner to His ministry, John the Baptist, introduced Him; “Behold the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world!”¹⁵ And Luke tells us in his Acts account that right on schedule would come the true Feast of Weeks with the accompanying true spiritual first fruit. But it would not be grain or wheat, but souls coming into the kingdom. 3000 were added to the kingdom at this remarkable time in redemptive history, and these last 2000 years, to put it into those same agricultural terms, have been years of harvesting, the harvesting of souls. The whole course of human history from that time forward can only be properly understood in the light of what Jesus said in response to Peter’s great confession. Jesus proclaimed, “I will build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”¹⁶ And that is the way these last days will be characterized until the coming again of Jesus Christ when there will be the final gathering and assembly of the saints. All of those who have gone before will have their bodies gloriously resurrected and united again to their souls, and for those who are still living on earth at that time, the angels will go to the farthest corners of the planet and gather them to go and be with the Lord forever in the new heavens and the new earth. And so this age will come to an end. That will be the consummate and climactic moment of redemptive history.

Those true believers Luke wrote of, and believers of all ages, are ones who have been reconciled to God and brought into the church that Jesus Christ is building. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul described it this way; “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.”¹⁷ God took those who were dead, spiritually dead in their sins and trespasses, and made them come alive, opening their ears, and opening their eyes, having given them new hearts. What was promised during the days of the old covenant came to pass. We read, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My Statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.”¹⁸ They became new creatures where “old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Acts 2.38

¹⁵ John 1.29

¹⁶ Matthew 16.16,18

¹⁷ Colossians 1.3

¹⁸ Ezekiel 36.26-27

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 5.17

And so now what?

For these new believers there would be no more gathering in Jerusalem for the Mosaic era feasts. The temple, the sacrifices, the priestly system, and all that made up that ceremonial aspect of the old covenant were finished. So, were these new Christians simply to go home? What would be their connection, if any, with the others who were so remarkably changed on that day? Luke tells us in his Acts account that they began to meet regularly. What had happened to them was a spiritual new birth, but not just for sending them off on their individual ways, but that they would come into a visible assembly, or local church.

All believers enter into an invisible spiritual union with Jesus Christ, not just to be in close proximity to Him, but in spiritual union with Him. That's made very clear by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. In describing believers in the first chapter, he uses the phrases "in Him", "in Christ", "in the Beloved", "in Whom" to describe this spiritual union with Christ. Further, Paul wrote the Colossians that Christ "is the head of the body."²⁰ Clearly, the union of all believers with Christ as He is the Head of the body of believers implies that all believers are in spiritual union with one another. And so the church is made up of all believers, both those of the church militant and those of the church triumphant. That is, believers who are presently on earth and all those who have since gone to be with the Lord make up the entirety of the church, the church universal. But for those believers on earth, God would have His people to be visible to the world. The way He has accomplished this is through the means of the local church. The local church is the visible manifestation of the believer's union with Jesus Christ and with one another.

And therefore the first principle in our understanding of covenantal church membership is that believers in union with Christ, and one another become part of a local church. We read on that occasion that these new Christians "were added to them"²¹, meaning that they were added to the church at Jerusalem. That's the place where they would assemble together. Luke further wrote, "Now all who believed were together..."²²

In his letters, Paul doesn't begin them by addressing the universal catholic church. He addressed the Christians in Corinth as "the church of God which is at Corinth." When he wrote his letter to the Galatians, he did not address them broadly as Christians in the region of Galatia in Asia Minor, but "to the churches of Galatia." In this way, he clearly delineated individual local churches. In a similar way, he wrote, "to all the saints who are in Christ Jesus at Philippi..."²³ Although the teachings of his letter are applicable to all Christians, he addressed them to specific local churches. As stated earlier, there is no verse directing Christians to join a local church, but we can piece together God's will and purpose for the governing and administering of His people under the New Covenant. And clearly we can conclude that God intends for His people to be part of a local church. The pattern is that God would have His

²⁰ 1.18

²¹ Acts 2.41

²² v. 44

²³ 1 Corinthians 1.2; Galatians 1.2; Philippians 1.1

people come together in specific places, that each church would have local elders and local deacons and that they would engage in particular activities as a local church, as we'll see below.

Life in the Local Church:

We read in Luke's account, "And they continued."²⁴ They didn't scatter, and there were a number of primary activities practiced in this church in which they continued. We read that, "They continued steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine."²⁵ They not only heard Peter's sermon, but they kept on sitting under the preaching and teaching of the word. They listened to it, took it in, and applied it to their lives as it was presented to them. And they "continued... in fellowship"²⁶ with one another. They regularly came together, not only for fellowship in worship, but to interface with, and enjoy one another as fellow brothers and sisters. They were engaging in body life, and it was because they were desirous of being around their like-minded brothers and sisters who love the Lord, who worship, and who talk about the things of the kingdom.

They're also "continued in... the breaking of bread."²⁷ They were probably breaking bread socially, but corporately they were also regularly administering and participating in the Lord's Supper. This participation by a believer in this sacrament is God's way of confirming the truth of the gospel to His people. In this sacrament, God condescends to give us something visible to look at, to touch, and to taste, to be a kind of visible gospel sermon. It is God's way of saying to His people that He really means all of what He has promised in the gospel. As such, it is God's way of strengthening our faith. There is something very mysterious that takes place, and it's not about bread turning into the literal body of Jesus, or the wine literally turning into His blood. It is Christ communing with His blood-bought people, and they communing with Him and with one another as they are the body of Jesus Christ. This is the spiritual presence of the Lord with His people such that they feed on Him, and thereby have their faith nurtured and strengthened.

And what else were they doing? They "continued... in prayers."²⁸ Paul told the Colossians to, "continue earnestly in prayer, being earnest in it with thanksgiving."²⁹ Local church prayer meetings are typically the worst attended corporate church meetings. But when we as God's people are exhorted to gather corporately to pray, there must be something to it. Some people are content to only pray at home, but here we see this early church engaged in corporate prayer. It's strengthening and encouraging to be praying together with like-minded people.

²⁴ Acts 2.42

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ 4.2

In essence, all that we see this church doing is participating in various forms of worship. We're told in Psalm 95, "O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For He is our God and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand."³⁰ But if there's no local church, the question arises, where? Where do God's people do this? Certainly it's not necessarily at Jerusalem anymore. As pointed out above, Jesus made that very clear to the woman at the well. God would now have His people regularly come together somewhere for worship in a local church.

In dealing with spiritual gifts given to the church by Christ, Paul wrote that "He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers..." He then explained the reason for these gifts to the church; "... for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried away with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ – from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."³¹ It's the local church, therefore, which provides the environment where Christians, "joined and knit together," are to grow and mature.

It's the place where one's God given gifts are to be exercised. We read, "as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophesy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness."³² This exhortation is addressed to all Christians everywhere, but these activities find their expression in a local church where we are to "consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."³³ To be a Christian is to enter into a corporate experience, to become part of a living body where individual members exercise their God-given gifts with one another. They're not gathered together by God to become loners, or spectators, or to be just passive. God gives a new heart, and that heart is such that a true believer is inclined to want to serve God, to take up his cross and follow Christ. Paul wrote that true believers are "His workmanship in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."³⁴

³⁰ vss. 6-7

³¹ Ephesians 4.11-16

³² Romans 12.4-8

³³ Hebrews 10.24-25

³⁴ Ephesians 2.10

As such, we see further that one of the responsibilities of members of a local church is to keep an eye on one another, to encourage one another, to stir one another up, to do the things we've been called to do. It is a dangerous thing to be careless about regularly coming before the Lord and being with His people. In this way one quickly becomes ripe and easy picking for the enemy. They lose the benefit of the encouragement of their brothers and sisters in Christ, and they lose the benefit of being fed regularly by the word. There are some who argue that their private reading of God's word is enough. Certainly Christians are to daily read, meditate upon and pray over God' word, but if one ignores God's ordinary way of working faith through the public preaching of the word, they then bring into question God's wisdom in the means of nourishing of His people. To not assemble with God's people regularly in a local church for extended periods of time is to spiritually starve one's self. The TECCOE covenant contains the following paragraph;

*"Whereas we have given up ourselves to the Lord and to one another in the Lord, we purpose and promise that we will live together in holy fellowship and all holy watchfulness over each other, to the prevention of, or recovery from, any scandalous evils that, through the temptations of Satan or corruptions of our own heart, we may at any time be overtaken with: that we will be as speedy as may be in making up any difference that may arise in some orderly way; endeavoring also for the temporal and spiritual good of one another."*³⁵

How else can that "holy watchfulness" take place if not in the context of a local church?

It's a place from which we go out. Even Paul, the great Apostle himself, had a church affiliation. We read concerning him and the church at Antioch, "then having fasted and prayed and laid hands on them, they sent them away."³⁶ So they had that local affiliation and accountability even though they were out in the mission field. Otherwise they would be loose cannons.

Look further at the unity that's so clearly on display in Luke's account. We read that they were, "continuing daily with one accord in the temple..."³⁷ This unity is the very characteristic that Jesus prayed for that would so mark His people. He prayed "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us..."³⁸ It's a beautiful picture of a church. This account of the early church in Jerusalem does not describe a company, a religious club, or some kind of fraternity or sorority, but the living spiritual body of Jesus Christ, the house of God made up of living stones, and the bride of Christ being sanctified and cleansed with the washing of water by the word.

³⁵ TECCOE Constitution, Appendix C, p. 18

³⁶ Acts 13.3

³⁷ Acts 2.46

³⁸ John 17.21

So Why Covenantal Membership?

What has been presented so far in this paper as regarding the establishment of and life in a local church would find acceptance with most professing Christians. In fact, the perception that many Christians have of church membership is simply this, that the church they attend regularly is the church where they are members. They reason that it is enough to simply regularly attend and participate in the activities of a local church, and so why should one enter into a formal covenant with that local church? These essentially use the same rationale that many couples use in our time who live together, but see no reason for actually getting married, which involves the exchange of vows. "We love each other, who needs a piece of paper?" they say. What they're really saying is that if this relationship becomes tiresome, or unattractive, they want a way out. The taking of a marriage vow would legally commit them to remain together "for better or for worse." Certainly there is Scriptural evidence for divorce under certain extreme conditions, but at the same time, Jesus was not sanctioning some of the frivolous and selfish reasons that many Jewish husbands were using for the putting away of their wives. It all boils down to commitment.

Mark Dever has written, "All the statistics seem to point to our age being an age of 'commitment-phobia.' Commitment-phobia is the fear that in promising to do something good we will miss out on getting something even better. And so, although we see many good things we could be doing, we would rather just 'keep our options open'... Church membership is our opportunity to grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. By identifying ourselves with a particular church, we let pastors and other members of that local church know that we intend to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer and service. We allow fellow believers to have greater expectations of us in these areas, and we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving them, and we call for their commitment to serve and encourage us as well."³⁹

In all of the activities of the church at Jerusalem discussed above, we read that they were "continuing" in them. They were not only coming together, they were committed to one another as shown by their continuing with one another. A church covenant is a means of giving expression to the commitment that local church members make with one another before God. Ultimately, it is an expression of the believer's covenantal relationship with God. During the course of new membership classes, I tell prospective members that covenanting with a local church is very similar to the covenantal vows of marriage. I remind them that many couples on the day of their marriage have no real idea of the "for better or for worse" part of their vows. They often are under the illusion that their marriage will somehow be free of all the difficulties and challenges other married couples encounter. But after a number of years, they eventually discover that marriage has its ups and downs, sometimes some big downs, and takes work, self-sacrifice, forgiving, and being forgiven. In short, it takes long-term commitment, and so too the local church.

³⁹ Mark Dever, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*, Crossway Books, 2004, pp. 147, 157

The idea of comparing local church covenantal membership to the covenantal nature of marriage is the very way God describes His relationship to His people. Ezekiel, in describing God's love for His chosen people Israel, wrote, "'When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into covenant with you, and you became mine' says the Lord God."⁴⁰ God essentially declared that His everlasting jealous love for His people is like the love of a husband for His wife. To enter into covenantal membership with a local church, and to come together as God's people is an outward picture of that relationship. Its an outward picture of why He sent His Son so that there would be a people raised up, called out of this world, who don't behave like they're part of the world anymore. Still in it, not out of it, but not of it anymore. They actually love one another in a self-sacrificing way. There's a unity that one simply cannot find in the world. And that's attractive. When Jesus prayed for the unity of His people, it was so "that the world may believe that You sent Me."⁴¹ The Lord's Supper pictures that for us. In presiding over the first celebration of this supper, Jesus lifted the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood."⁴² That cup vividly represents to us the high and precious cost that was paid in order that we might come together in covenantal love.

As members of the body of Christ, we are to love what God loves. And what God loves is His blood-bought church. That is exactly what John meant when he wrote, "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us."⁴³ And that was because of God's covenantal love for the elect, His church. But John then added, "And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren," and that is demonstrated by entering into the love-based covenantal commitment to our brothers and sisters in a local church environment.

God has also so designed the local church to have a structured authority associated with it. And as Hamlet would likely have put it, "there's the rub!"⁴⁴ For many professing Christians, the issue of submission to authority gets to the real root of resistance to covenantal church membership. Certainly in unbelievers, there is a built-in post-fall resistance to authority. It was this delusion of personal autonomy apart from God that was used to tempt Adam and Eve. It was the deception of self-rule that Satan believed he could have, and it is this resistance to authority that has characterized human history these thousands of years. In responding to God's command to "Let My people go..." as delivered by God's spokesman Moses, Pharaoh essentially spoke on behalf of all of rebellious mankind when he arrogantly responded, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice... I do not know the Lord."⁴⁵

This resistance to authority also characterizes the behavior of many true believers. The "old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no

⁴⁰ 16.8

⁴¹ John 17.21

⁴² 1 Corinthians 11.25

⁴³ 1 John 3.16

⁴⁴ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1

⁴⁵ Exodus 5.1,2

longer be slaves of sin."⁴⁶ But the remnants of that old man's sin-filled carcass still remain and influence the new creature in Jesus Christ, sometimes powerfully. The Apostle Paul himself would relate his personal experience by writing, "I find a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members."⁴⁷ Local church overseers should therefore not be surprised when true believers exhibit this original attribute of the old nature, particularly when it comes to church discipline. Over the years, many congregational churches in New England jettisoned the office of elder, which was very much a part of congregational church life in the 17th and 18th century when many of these churches were founded. This occurred at TECCOE, and when the office of elder was reinstated into church life by the minister previous to myself, it was looked upon as simply an advisory role. It was not then recognized by some in the congregation as an office of overall oversight and rule. Titles and offices that were introduced into church life at the time of the incorporation of the church in the 1880's were still in place which created competing bodies of authority; boards, committees, trustees, etc. It has only been in the last number of years, by God' grace, that we were able with unanimous consent of the congregation, to rewrite the constitution so that it reflected a more Biblical form of governance.

John Brown of Edinburgh has written, "In every orderly society there must be rulers; and our Lord Jesus Christ, who is not the author of confusion, but of peace, in all the churches of the saints, among the gifts which He has bestowed on these churches, has included 'governments,' or rulers. The pastors, or bishops, or elders of the primitive Church had no arbitrary power over their brethren... but though they had no arbitrary power, they yet bare rule. Chosen by their brethren, they presided in their assemblies; they declared the will and executed the laws of the supreme and sole King of the church; they reprov'd, they rebuked, they exhorted with all authority... and when any individual was obstinate and impenitent in transgression, they excluded them from the communion of the faithful. In all this they exercised no legislative authority: they had no power to enjoin new laws, to institute new ordinances, to invent new terms of communion. Their authority was entirely subordinate to the authority of Christ. Yet within the limits He prescribed to them, they were rulers; and it was the duty of the brethren, who had chosen their pastors to be over them in the Lord, to obey them, and to submit themselves to them."⁴⁸

Paul counseled Titus to, "Appoint elders in every city."⁴⁹ That's clearly a reference to individual local churches, and that there should be local oversight and ruling authority in every one of those local church assemblies. In Acts chapter 20, we are told that Paul, on his way back to Jerusalem, called for the elders from the local church at Ephesus to come to him. These were the ones who ministered specifically at that particular church at Ephesus. In his first letter, Peter exhorted the elders to "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you... those entrusted

⁴⁶ Romans 6.6

⁴⁷ Ibid, 7.21-23

⁴⁸ John Brown, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Banner of Truth, 1983, p. 686

⁴⁹ Titus 1.5

to you.”⁵⁰ He cautioned them not to lord it over the flock, or use the office for “dishonest gain.” Instead, they were to be “overseers” and examples to the flock in the way in which they lived.

The above are clear references to local churches, each with its corresponding local authority. For professing Christians to feel perfectly free to go from church to church based on some upset, or for seeking “greener grass” on the other side of the fence, is to completely disregard God’s provision for their care, safety and nurturing. God has designed the church to be composed of individual local churches with specific locations, specific congregations, and local overseeing shepherds. We have this very strong exhortation given to us in Hebrews which is to, “Obey those who rule over you and be submissive for they watch out for your souls”⁵¹ Who could that be addressed to if it was not members of a local church?

This office of oversight in a local church is the means by which God protects His people from wolves and false teachers. Jude wrote about certain men who had crept into the congregation unnoticed. He referred to them as spots in their love feasts, grumblers and complainers who walk according to their own lusts and who flatter for personal gain.⁵² Local church overseers are there to be on guard against these wolves and false teachers who slither their way into the church. Paul told the Ephesian elders, “Therefore take heed to yourself and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock,” adding, “Also, from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves.”⁵³

One aspect of watching and oversight is to observe and examine whether individuals in a local congregation are able to provide credible confessions of their faith. After Peter’s remarkable confession, Jesus said to him and the other disciples, “I give you the keys of the kingdom, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”⁵⁴ Overseers by examination of individuals, therefore, are responsible for determining who in the congregation may be admitted to the privileges available to God’s people such as admission to the Lord’s Table. Is there a real confession, is there any observable fruit? Does one have a mindset where they’ve turned around from one direction and are now going in a direction completely opposite to a prior life? That is, is there some measure of evidence that a real conversion has taken place, or is one just mouthing words? This does not involve looking for perfection, but there should be some measure of love for their Savior shown in a love for His people and His word. So too, it must be recognized that no examination is perfect for only God truly knows one’s heart, and wolves will sometimes slip in.

⁵⁰ 1 Peter 5.2,3

⁵¹ 13.17

⁵² Jude 12,16

⁵³ Acts 20.28-30

⁵⁴ Matthew 16.19

Paul, as we saw above in his referencing gifts in Romans chapter 12, referred to “he who leads.”⁵⁵ In order for that to happen, there must be a local church where members have agreed or covenanted to place themselves under that authority. When a new member at TECCOE appears before the congregation to enter into covenant with them, the following vows are taken.

To the new member:

“And now having confessed your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, will you enter into covenant with His Church and more especially with this church? Do you, therefore, engage to submit to the government of Christ as here administered⁵⁶; to attend here upon the public worship of God and the ordinances of the Gospel; to live in Christian charity and spiritual communion with your fellow-members; to seek the peace, purity, and edification of the church; and to discharge all those duties by which God may be glorified and the Gospel of Christ made effective to the salvation of men?”

The congregation responds as follows,

“Most affectionately then do we, the members of this church, receive you to our communion. This we solemnly attest by rising. (The members of the church will here rise.) With grateful hearts we now own you as our kindred in Christ. We welcome you to the ordinances and privileges of His church. We ask your aid in turning to our Master the souls of others. And on our part we covenant with you, to offer for you our prayers; to walk with you in sorrow or in joy; seeking advice and strength from you, and giving in return the counsel and aid you may ask. We promise gladly to render our offices of love; and in all ways, so far as in us lies, to seek your growth in knowledge and in grace, and in your perfect meetness for the Heavenly Home.”

On every occasion it has been a joyful, encouraging and very meaningful experience. This outward act engenders a real sense of commitment and responsibility. As stated above, it’s followed by a signing of the copy of the covenant and heartfelt hugs by the other members at the conclusion of the worship service.

Conclusion:

In his commentary on the book of Ezekiel, Iain Duguid observed that the Jewish exiles in Babylon were allowed to maintain their cultural identity. As such, for them, “The Sabbath and the Synagogue became key institutions for the Jewish community as the means by which they maintained their distinctiveness... the exiles focused their lives around the synagogue: It was the heart of their social lives as well as their spiritual lives.” In this way they were a kind of

⁵⁵ v. 8

⁵⁶ Underlining added

enclave of Jerusalem, their home. In a similar way, Duguid sees the present day church to be in exile in this world, a "new community," and a "counterculture" whose member's lives find focus in the local church. Regarding the church at the time of Pentecost, Duguid continued, "In a similar way, the infant church formed an alternative community..."⁵⁷ Christians in the local churches are in the foreign land of the world in anticipation of one day going home. We are, as Duguid put it, an "enclave of heaven," particularly as we come together locally on the Lord's Day. However, if there is no fundamental commitment to one another in the local church, then how are we as God's people to be this counterculture in a world where commitment is of so little value? Similar to a marriage, if we really love God, and love what He loves, His blood-bought church, why not enter into covenant with fellow members of the local church?

In responding to a letter from a ministerial colleague who objected to the use of a church covenant, Thomas Goodwin replied, "Believers, willing and agreeing to live together in the same body with you, afterwards instancing in your own, you do call church fellowship. Well, let them be believers, willing and desirous upon knowledge of each other to be such upon a profession of their faith, and also what this fellowship is, and let them withal but agree, by mutual consent and assent expressed to each other (or how else do they agree to live together in a fellowship and body?), so to live in that relation, and all the duties, and you and I are agreed. And now suppose unto this agreeing of yours we join covenanting and promise, yet still but with those indefinite expressions mentioned, assuredly whatever you and I mutually agree to do, if it be a matter of moment, we may as well and as lawfully promise and covenant to do. And therein what do we more than tie a double knot where you tie a single one?"⁵⁸

Ultimately, as believers, we covenant with one another in a local church because God covenants with us, and we were created to be the image of God. In entering into a covenant with our brother and sisters in a local church, we place on public display our union with one another as we are in union with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. One has written, "As we attend worship, give offerings, pray for one another, and hold each other accountable, we are displaying to the world a counterculture example of grace-motivated, self-sacrificial commitment and fellowship."⁵⁹ For "better or for worse", Christians are bound together to mutually encourage, bear with, forgive, lift up, "teaching and admonishing one another." And "above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection."⁶⁰ Remember, the world is watching!

In the book of Hebrews we read that "when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, 'Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.'" But what's remarkable about this oath is the reason for it. We read further that, "God determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of the promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath..."⁶¹ In this display of striking

⁵⁷ Iain Duguid, *Ezekiel*, The NIV Application Commentary, Zondervan, 1999, pp. 53-54

⁵⁸ Goodwin, p. 536

⁵⁹ Dr. Julius Kim, *Tabletalk*, Ligonier Ministries, September 2016, p. 13

⁶⁰ Colossians 3.14,16

⁶¹ Hebrews 6.13-14,17

condescension, God "tie(d) a double knot" with His people, thus assuring them of His absolute commitment to them. How fitting it is for us, therefore, who are being renewed in His image, to likewise demonstrate our commitment by entering into covenant with the body of His beloved Son, even Jesus Christ, as it is made known publically in the local church.

APPENDIX. Contemporary edition of the TECCOE Church Covenant

We, the Subscribers, Members of the Church of Christ in Easton, met together the Sixth day of April, A Domini 1747. Apprehending it our duty, under our present circumstances, solemnly and explicitly to renew our Covenant with God, do, therefore, personally present ourselves this day in the holy presence of God to transact with Him this important affair of His Kingdom and glory, and humbling ourselves before the Lord for all our corporate and personal sins; earnestly praying for pardoning mercy and reconciliation with God through the blood of our Lord Jesus, and for the gracious presence and assistance of His Holy Spirit, under a deep sense of our own weakness and unworthiness, and with an humble confidence of His favorable acceptance; each of us for ourselves, and all of us jointly together, do renewedly enter into Covenant with God and one another in the terms following:

First of all, we do solemnly swear the Lord God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) as our portion and chief good, and give up ourselves, body and soul, to Him to be His Servants; promising (by His aid and assistance) to love Him and fear Him, trust in Him, and yield obedience to Him in all things, all the days of our lives.

Secondly, Whereas the Son of God in our nature is exalted as a Prince and a Savior, the only Mediator of the New Covenant and means of coming to God, we do, therefore, through grace, accept Him according to the terms of the Gospel offer,—that is to say, as the Prophet, Priest, and King of our immortal souls,—purposing and promising to attend His teaching by His Word and Spirit, to lean upon his merit and intercession with the Father as the only way to obtain the forgiveness of our sins, the favor of God and continuance therein; and finally, the subduing of all our enemies, and working all His works in us and for us.

Thirdly, whereas there are different apprehensions among those who profess Christianity with respect to the doctrines of religion, we declare our consent and adhere to the Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism, apprehending in our judgment and conscience that it is agreeable to the Word of God.

Fourthly, whereas God has promised to be a God to His people and their children after them, we do therefore dedicate our children to the service of God in Jesus Christ, promising that we well seasonably bring those of them that are unbaptized to Jesus Christ in the ordinance of Baptism; and as they grow into years of understanding, instruct them in the nature, use, and end of that ordinance, and into the principles of the Christian religion (so far as need is). That we will set good examples of righteousness, piety, and sobriety before them; restrain them, as we are able, from being carried away with the temptations of their age and time; endeavoring that they may be prepared for the enjoyment of Christ in all His ordinances; and finally, be much in prayer to god for their conversion and salvation.

Fifthly, we promise that we will (by the help of God) avoid all the superstitions and inventions of men in the worship of God, as derogatory from the sovereignty and wisdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the supreme head of His Church; that we will not scandalously absent ourselves from any part of instituted worship; do what in us lies to prepare ourselves for, uphold, and improve all the ordinances of Christ, to the Scriptural benefit and advantage of our souls, leaning upon the promise that God will meet those that rejoice, work righteousness, and remember Him in his ways.

Sixthly, we promise (by the help of God) that we will, with as much frequency as may be,

read or cause the Word of God to be read, in our houses or families, so that the Word of God may dwell richly in us; seasonably and constantly upholding the worship of God there, and attending the same with sincerity and affection.

Seventhly, whereas we have given up ourselves to the Lord and to one another in the Lord, we purpose and promise that we will live together in holy fellowship and all holy watchfulness over each other, to the prevention of, or recovery from, any scandalous evils that, through the temptations of Satan or corruptions of our own heart, we may at any time be overtaken with: that we will be as speedy as may be in making up any difference that may arise in some orderly way; endeavoring also for the temporal and spiritual good of one another.

Eighthly, we promise that, by the help of God, we will adhere to all the duties enjoined in commandments five through ten of the Ten Commandments as being necessary parts of a right-ordered conversation; particularly to be true and faithful to all our civil contracts and agreements with one another and all men we have to do with, so that no one may have occasion to speak evil of our profession.

Ninthly, and finally, whereas there is a strong propensity in our nature to what is evil and sinful, we purpose and promise that, by the help of God's Spirit, we will guard our hearts and mortify those lusts that dwell in us; avoiding all such temptations as our sinful hearts are apt to be drawn to, and that we may keep this Covenant inviolable forever in all its parts; we desire to deny ourselves, not trusting in our own wisdom or strength, humbly and believingly depending upon God in and through Jesus Christ and the presence of his Holy Spirit with us, and where we come short, there to wait on Him for pardon and healing, for His Name's sake.