

The Church as a Covenanting Together Community of Believers: An Application of the Covenant of Grace

by Robert G. Hall, April 9, 2019

As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?" These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival. (Ps. 42:1-4, ESV).

There is something very particular, intensely personal, but also something very collective about this psalm. The psalmist, probably David, finds himself cut off from God. He is despondent. Wherever he is (maybe fleeing Absalom) he is mocked, "Where is your God?"

He resolves his anguish with fond remembrances of leading the procession to the house of God with shouts of joy. The psalmist undoubtedly knew private communion with God but what gives him hope is the fond remembrance of the exhilaration of the festive throng in procession to the place of worship. His experience of God is incomplete without the mediation of corporate worship. The community was indispensable to his faith.

Whatever the situation of the psalmist, there was still available to him, private worship but he longed for those public ordinances. He was near despair to be cut off from them. To be cut off from the community was to be cut off from God. From the very dawn of creation we were made to live in community. Yet the many biblical passages that define us in terms of the community of God's people, fall deaf on our turn-of-the-twenty-first-century American ears. Man, the image of God, the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:26-28, the "it is not good for man to be alone" of Genesis 2, the judgment at Babel, the gathering of the descendants of Abraham into a holy nation, the church built on the rock that is Christ, presupposes that man was made to live in community.

The call for community is a derivative of the classical philosophical problem of the one and the many. What is the one that defines the many? In the general culture, there is no *one*, that is, there is no unity only polarization: conservative/liberal, left/right, gender, ethnicity, diversity itself, as a means of exclusion, for which there is no unity, etc. It is about freedom by which is meant the autonomy of the individual and unbridled self-expression. The Evangelical church at large is making attempts to address the matter of community, especially in its larger churches, but much of it seems to be on the horizontal level focusing its efforts on making the

institution less impersonal as opposed to the accountability that is mediated by, “*you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.*” (Galatians 6:1b)

Add to this the phenomenon of the development of the church in America in the nineteenth century challenging the existing order in the spirit of Jeffersonian individualism. It became out with the old in with the new, no creed but the Bible. We lost the collective side of our faith because we unwittingly allowed the tares of individual liberty derived from the rationalism of the French Enlightenment to be sown together with the seeds of Gospel proclamation. The contemporary Evangelical nomenclature of one who is a believer in Christ is expressed in very individualistic parlance as *a personal relationship with Jesus Christ*. Being part of a church, so it is thought by many, might be beneficial but it is certainly not required. In many instances when the question is asked, can I be a Christian without going to church? the qualified answer is yes but it’s not a good idea. This is the “out” that many are seeking to justify their removal from the church. One might just as well ask, can I be married without living with my spouse? Whereas it is the empirical observation of humanity to live in community of one sort or another, that very phenomenon might force believers into a less than normative isolation, at least for a time, because they are not a part of the dominant community which is hostile to Christianity. Granted the circumstances of extreme persecution or the paucity of believers in a large geographical area, which might prevent believers from gathering together, the normative state for the follower of Christ is to be in community with other believers.

This study will endeavor to show that our calling in Christ is every bit as collective as well as individual. The collective side of our faith is joined to the Biblical notion of covenant whereby,

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their creator, yet they could never have attained the reward of life but by some **voluntary condescension of God’s part**, which He has been pleased to express by way of covenant.¹

God, who is otherwise unknowable, condescends to His creation by way of covenant. A covenant is a particular kind of relationship with a particular structure: (1) promise/commitment, (2) obligations, (3) visible, tangible, that is, sacramental signs and seals. Additionally, there are blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. All covenants basically have this structure. All formal relationships with the exception of parent/child, master/slave, jailor/prisoner have this

¹ *The Savoy Declaration of Faith*, VII.1 “Of God’s Covenant with Man”

structure. Indeed, it is part of God's fingerprint on creation in general. "*Thus says the LORD: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, . . .*" (Jeremiah 33:20)

Marriage is a covenant. Many business contracts are called covenants. Inasmuch as the idea of the covenant finds application beyond soteriology, we will discuss below the Covenant of Grace as the foundation and application of the covenanting together of the people of God in a particular congregation. We would be quick to add, at this point, the differences between the Covenant of Grace and covenants made between men. In the Covenant of Grace: (1) God is the initiator of the relationship; (2) He alone sets the terms of the relationship and no one can change it; (3) God binds Himself to His people by way of promise that is guaranteed by His eternal, unchangeable character; (4) God is the One who holds the relationship together; (5) The foundation of the relationship is the person and work of Christ.

Though it is beyond the scope of this study, we cannot proceed with a discussion of the covenant without mentioning the Covenant of Works, one reason being that it conveys the notion that God's relationship with mankind is universally covenantal before and after the Fall.

Antecedent to the Covenant of Grace is a prelapsarian covenant, made between God and Adam, known as the Covenant of Works. God, who relates to his creatures "covenant-wise," promises life to Adam on condition of perfect obedience. It is true that God does not explicitly use the word covenant with him but its essential features were there in Eden: promise, obligations, and sacramental sign. Adam was obliged to obey under penalty of death. The promise of life was implied in the prohibition to refrain from eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, together with the presence of the Tree of Life. The latter could also be deemed the sacramental sign of the covenant. Thus we have God's common governance of His creation by means of His works of providence and His special governance by means of pre- or postlapsarian covenant, the latter being called the Covenant of Grace.

The essence of God's Covenant of Grace with His people is in the words: *I will be your God; you will be my people*. This is the description of the people of God under the Covenant of Grace. This terminology is found throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Sometimes it is expressed in shorthand where we find "your God" or "my people."²

² See Psalm 50:7; Isaiah 40:1; Hosea 4:6; Joel 2:26-27

The church covenant is an application of the Covenant of Grace, actually the New Covenant as it is called in the New Testament. This was the conviction of the founders of Massachusetts Bay in the seventeenth century. Having done away with the prelacy from the old country and no longer having a national church, what is it that makes a believer a church member? It is the church covenant about which more will be said, subsequently. That it is a covenant is due to its being the universal practice of mankind by which formal relationships between people are established. Though there is no mention of a church covenant per se in the New Testament, it is everywhere implied. The most visible implication would be that of church discipline and excommunication. A formal putting out of the church presupposes a formal entry into it, that is, into a local particular congregation. Thus, we wish to develop the thought in the Savoy Declaration, chapter 27, “Of the Communion of Saints,” paragraph 2,

All saints are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities.

Inasmuch as the word *church* carries with it more than one sense, we need to clarify how we are speaking of it in this study. Biblically, the church is referred to in two ways: the church universal and the church particular. The former is all those, throughout the world, who publicly confess by word and deed that Jesus Christ is Lord. They are the redeemed out of every tribe, language, nation, and tongue. (Revelation 5:9) They live under the banner of one Lord, one faith, one baptism. It is not a national church whereby one’s citizenship is equivalent to his religion. When we speak about the church particular, we are speaking about followers of Jesus Christ who meet together in a particular, local congregation. They meet in the name of Jesus Christ under the rubric of Word, sacrament, fellowship and discipline. It is difficult to think of the one without the other. To be in the church universal is to be in the church particular. To be in the church in a particular location is to be in the church universal.

The church particular can give expression to the church universal in various ways: (a) churches (typically church officers respectively), under common confession, can come together ad hoc, meeting in synod to discuss theological, ecclesiastical and ethical matters of mutual concern; (b) by receiving members transferring from one particular church to another by letter of recommendation from the sending church; (c) by censuring other churches, with whom there is a

formal relationship, who, through heresy or unrepentant immorality, are publicly bringing reproach on the name of Christ.

Structurally, we will present the local church as, a covenanting community by which is meant (1) a *collective* people as opposed to simply an aggregate of people with a common belief, (2) a *connected* people, “I will be your God,” (3) a *committed* people, “You will be my people.” Before proceeding, however, we would do well to provide some historical context in the development of a theology of the covenant.

Historically, the Biblical notion of covenant developed as a parallel movement to Calvin in the sixteenth century through the writings of Heinrich Bullinger, Zacharius Ursinus, and Caspar Olevianus.³ By the turn of the seventeenth century the two strands had merged such that Reformed theology and Covenant Theology became virtually synonymous, whose culminating document became the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and later *The Savoy Declaration of Faith*.

The Covenant of Grace is a binding relationship that begins unilaterally and proceeds bilaterally. In the words of Tim Keller, it is “a stunning blend of law and love.” It is a particular kind of relationship with a particular structure. It consists of (1) promise or commitment. God is the initiator of the covenant. He binds Himself to His people by way of promise. The signature of that promise is the blood of Christ. (2) There are obligations that proceed from God’s prior initiation of the relationship. He sets the terms of the covenant. He promises love and faithfulness. He requires His people to respond in faith and loving obedience to His commandments. (3) There are visible tangible signs and seals, that is, sacraments of the covenant. Under the New Covenant (the fulfillment of the Covenant of Grace by Christ) they are baptism and The Lord’s Supper. As stated previously, there are blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

The Covenant of Grace reaches back explicitly to the call of Abraham. With him we see the rudiments of the covenant. God is the initiator of the covenant apart from any merit or works on Abraham’s part. He comes to him, calls him and makes a promise to him. “*I will bless those*

³ For a further discussion on the historical development of Covenant Theology, see, Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant Tradition, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991). D. A. Weir, The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990). John von Rohr, The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought, (Atlanta: The American Academy of Religion, 1986).

who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:3) Abraham responds in faith after God reiterates His promise to him, "*And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*" (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:3) Under the covering of God's grace, God sets the terms of the covenant and commands him to "*walk before me and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.*" (Genesis 17:1-2) Abraham then receives the sign and seal of the covenant, circumcision. *This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.* (Genesis 17:10) Thus, with God's Covenant of Grace with Abraham and his posterity, we see the basic structure of the covenant: promise, obligations, visible sign and seal. The Covenant of Grace is fulfilled in Christ which is then referred to as the New Covenant. The paradigm remains the same but the outward administration is different, that is, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper replace circumcision⁴ and the Passover⁵.

The founders of Massachusetts Bay brought with them the covenant theology of the English Reformation. As an extension of the Covenant of Grace, the church covenant would make one a member of this church and not that one. In their minds a collection of visible saints in geographic proximity (a parish) did not a church make--in the New England sense. Indeed, how does one form a church after having banished the prelacy? In the New World environment, the church covenant was the only way. Thus, John Cotton understood the forming of a church to be:

the joyning of faithfull Christians into the fellowship and estate of a church, we finde not in Scripture that God hath done it any other way then by entering all of them together, (as one man) into an holy covenant with himselfe.⁶

By an holy covenant he meant:

To take the Lord (as the head of his church) for their God, and to give up themselves to him, to be his Church and people; which implyeth their submitting of themselves to him, and one to another in his fear; and their walking in professed subjection to all his holy Ordinances: their cleaving to one another, as fellow-members of the same body, in brotherly love and holy watchfulnesse unto mutuall edification in Christ Jesus.⁷

⁴ Colossians 2:11-12

⁵ The Lord's Supper was instituted at a Passover meal. Luke 22:7-23

⁶ John Cotton, *The Way of the Churches of New England*, reprint, *A Library of American Puritan Writings: The Seventeenth Century*, ed., Sacvan Bercovitch, vol. 12, *The New England Way*, New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1983), 2.

⁷ Ibid.

Thomas Hooker explains it in the following manner: "Mutuall covenanting and confoederating of the Saints in the fellowship of the faith according to the order of the Gospel, *is that which gives constitution and being to a visible Church* [emphasis mine]."⁸ *The Cambridge Platform* describes it by likening a loose collection of saints to stones and timber, hewn and squared, but still lying on the ground until they are given form in the actual building of the house.

This **form** is the **Visible Covenant**, Agreement, or consent wherby they give up themselves unto the Lord, to the observing of the ordinances of Christ together in the same society, which is usually called the **Church-Covenant**. For wee see not otherwise how members can have **Church-power** one over another mutually.⁹

Indeed, how can they have this church power? If the local church has divine-given authority to excommunicate, it must also lie within its power to grant or deny admission to worthy or unworthy persons. The issue of a church covenant was not a matter of novelty or innovation, but rather, the purity of the church.

A Collective People

The covenant speaks to both the particularity of our relationship with God but also to the collective. In fact we really cannot separate them. We are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. Our covenant relationship with God also defines who we are as a community. The same description is used for God's covenant people in both Old and New Testaments, "*I will be your God; you will be my people;*" (Lev. 26:12; II Corinthians 6:16) and "*a kingdom of priests an holy nation*" (Exodus 19:6; I Peter 2:9). We see the covenant throughout the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation.¹⁰ We are individually called but we are also called into covenant community—the church as a particular congregation in a specific location.

The Gospel enterprise, the central message of which is the promised deliverer of Genesis 3:15, visibly begins with the call of Abraham. At Pentecost it is launched into the world as a global enterprise. It culminates with the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, which is Christ with His bride, His people adorned for her bridegroom.

⁸ Thomas Hooker, *A Survey of the Sum of Church Discipline*, part 1, 46.

⁹ Williston Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 207-208

¹⁰ A simple word search will illustrate the point.

From the very beginning of Abraham's call a nation was in view, a nation that would be visible to the rest of the world, a nation with its covenants and laws pointing to the Messiah, through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. Pursuant to that covenant with Abraham, God called out of Egypt a people who would be a holy nation, a royal priesthood. It would be through their common life that they would speak to a watching world: If they would obey God, the surrounding nations would observe them and declare,

Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? (Deuteronomy 4:6-7).

As every nation is defined by its god or gods so this nation would be defined by the one true God. *"I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be my people."* (Leviticus 26:12) This is most profound. Here is no ordinary grouping of people gathered around a common interest in sports, stamps, or muscle cars, much less a *social compact*. It is a people with an identity rooted in the eternal counsels of God. There is something very sacred about this gathering of otherwise very ordinary people. It ought to be treated as something holy in the same way the psalmist likened the unity of God's people to the sacred oil of consecration flowing over the beard and down the robes of Aaron the high priest (Psalm 133) and in Jesus' prayer before He went to the Cross. *"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* (John 17:20-21)

In the Great Commission our Lord included in His command to make disciples of all nations, the command to baptize, by which is meant to bring people into the covenant community of God's people that is the church. The activity of Evangelism is more than compiling a quantitative tally of those who would be included in the "set" saved. The Biblical statistic is those who were being added to the church, which is the nurturing community whom God has brought into covenant with Himself. Some would argue that the covenant idea recedes into the background when we come to the New Testament. It is most certainly there implicitly if we liken it to the infrastructure of a building. Whereas the joists and beams of a building are less visible, it doesn't make them less important. As the foundation structure of a building is adorned with painted walls and decorative fixtures so the life of one in covenant with Christ is adorned with holiness and the fruit of the Spirit and the common life of the church characterized by

sacrificial love. The New Covenant is explicitly stated by our Lord at the Last Supper and we would do well to take His words seriously: “*This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.*” (Luke 22:20) The covenant idea is most certainly in play in the New Testament and is implied where it is not explicitly mentioned.¹¹

Whereas the word itself is less frequently used in the New Testament as opposed to the Old, its structure is most certainly there. In the Great Commission we observe the covenant paradigm: Where do we see the promise of the covenant? It is implied in the command to make disciples whereby the believer apprehends the promises in the Gospel such as, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*” (John 5:24) The command is to make disciples and then to baptize them. Who does the baptizing? the church. What is baptism but a visible, tangible, sacramental sign and seal of the New Covenant. What about the obligations of the covenant? . . . “*teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*” (Matthew 28:20) Thus, in the Great Commission we observe: promise, obligations, sacramental sign. The covenant necessarily draws people into community.

In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians chapter 2 we have the oft-quoted verses 8-9, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*” But later in the same passage he speaks to the Ephesian believers, mostly Gentile, in terms of community:

*Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands--remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off **have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*** (Ephesians 2:11-13, emphasis mine)

The “have been brought near” is an allusion to the nexus of inside or outside the camp under the Mosaic economy, without access to the presence of God represented in the Tabernacle.

Likewise in Peter’s sermon on Pentecost in the call to repent and be baptized, he states, “*For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are **far off**, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.*” (Acts 2:39 emphasis mine) The call is to those who are “far off” to come and enter the community of believers by repentance and baptism.

¹¹ II Corinthians 6:16; Romans 9:26; Hebrews 8:8-13; Revelation 18:4; 21:3.

A Connected People

In order to have true community in the church, there has to be more than reorganization in order to make things more personable. There has to be a big enough reference point for each member of the church in order for them to be drawn together in a manner where the church, properly functioning, is viewed as part of the process of sanctification and facilitating growth “*until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*” (Ephesians 4:13)

Members in the church need to be taught the extraordinary privilege imbedded in the covenantal phrase *I will be your God*. The covenant itself whereby each member participates in the paradigm: promise, obligations, signs and seals, necessarily draws believers together and connects them together by means of an infinite reference point comprehended under *I will be your God*. To revisit the issue of the less frequent use of the term covenant in the New Testament, consider analogies of the church, such as *one body with many members*, or, *temple of the Holy Spirit*. We reiterate that the covenant is implied therein and on that basis we may proceed with describing the church as a covenantally connected people and thus provide the rationale for an explicit church covenant as a means of entry into a particular church.

As was noted earlier, the covenant bespeaks infrastructure, the foundation, the underlying structure of our relationship with Christ that is to be adorned with holiness and the fruit of the Spirit. The latter necessarily involves a connectedness of the believer with other members of the local church. How does one love, exercise patience, kindness, and gentleness in isolation from other believers? It does not work to apply this exercise to the church universal. Thus, we see in Romans 12:4-5, “*For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.*” The analogy of the human body is the device the Apostle Paul uses to illustrate the functioning of the local congregation. Each part of the body is useless by itself apart from its connection to the body. Taken together they form an exquisite whole.

People can be drawn together by means of common interest: sports, quilting, model trains, etc., but the connectedness does not extend beyond the point of common interest. When it comes to the matter of what binds people together in the church, a larger reference point is required. That reference point is, of course, Jesus Christ with whom we are united in mystical union, “*Christ in you the hope of glory,*” (Colossians 1:27b), and through whom, God has a plan

“for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” (Ephesians 1:10) It is this union with Christ that draws us into union with fellow believers, especially with those in a local congregation. That is the context where our bonds together in Christ are given full expression as God’s people in community: (1) by loving one another, *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love;”* (I John 4:7-8), (2) by serving one another, *“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ;”* (Galatians 6:2), (3) by exhorting one another, *“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin;”* (Hebrews 3:13), (4) and by admonishing one another, *“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.”* (I Thessalonians 5:14)

In the normal course of church life, being a people connected by means of covenant membership presupposes that which is intended to be enduring and more or less permanent. This falls hard on modern ears where independence is hard wired into the Evangelical conscience. If we may reiterate what was stated earlier, when the English Reformation came to American shores, they brought with them the desire and the energy to have a more pure church. Having done away with the prelacy, even presbyteries, which were felt to be hindrances to proper church discipline, and thus to the purity of the church, they declared that all the attributes of church would be found in each particular church. Each church would be independent though they did not like the term itself.¹² It was not the desire for independence per se but rather that independence was a means to have a more pure church. It would be easier to exercise church discipline within the local congregation as opposed to having to obtain the approbation of a bishop. It is a sad historical development that the emphasis has been placed on independence as opposed to the purity of the church.

That church membership is to be taken seriously is quite foreign to the modern Evangelical mind where the motivation for moving from church to church can be as lame as, “It’s time to move on,” or more commonly, “Where can I find the best youth program for my kids?” The problem is not new. Cotton Mather, writing at the turn of the eighteenth century complained about the movement from one church to another without formal dismissal:

¹² “The Cambridge Platform,” 2.5

Too many removing without some such *Instrument* [letter of transfer] consigning the Church Watch upon the Remover, from one Church to another; This Omission has been the Occasion of some *Disorders*, and caused some Difficulty in the Execution of their *Discipline*.¹³

Some difficulty indeed! It was a prophetic description of the free-floating, loosely attached, consumer oriented, escape accountability, contemporary Christian! It undermines the unity of the church, subverts accountability, and diminishes its witness to the world.

The individual members of a church in its local expression must see themselves as a covenanting together, caring-sharing body of believers connected to one another by virtue of their connection to Christ.

A Committed People

Having seen that our relationship with Christ is every bit as collective as it is individual and that we are a people connected to one another by virtue of our mystical union with Christ, we have the rudiments of a people committed to one another in the church. Recalling the covenant paradigm of promise, obligations, and sacramental signs, we cannot escape the fact that we are a committed people. God is committed to His people through the agency of His Son in a particular kind of relationship called a covenant. That it is a covenant relationship, we are reminded of the weightiness of *I will be your God; you will be my people*. To be numbered among the *my people*, makes us a people committed to one another beginning with the local church. “*So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*” (Galatians 6:10)

We are a people committed to God in terms of faith, loyalty, and love. This is the first commandment of the Decalogue. “*You shall have no other gods before me.*” The Decalogue, understood in context is actually the obligations of the Covenant of Grace. God, having brought His people out of bondage in Egypt pursuant to His covenant made with Abraham (Exodus 3:6-10) states in the prologue of the Decalogue, “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*” This is a gracious act. It is an extension of, and pursuant to, the covenant made with Abraham. Whereas it is true that the Decalogue taken by itself is the legal obligation of all mankind insofar as it reflects the character of God, and all of

¹³ Cotton Mather, *Ratio Disciplinae Fratrum*, 1726, 138.

creation as well as humanity exists for the glory of God, it is also, in its historical context, the obligations of the Covenant of Grace.

As a committed people we are called to faith. There is no other god, nothing in creation in which we may ultimately place our trust. “*You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you—*” (Deuteronomy 6:14) This commitment involves loyalty as observed in the fact that God did not forget His covenant with Abraham and, thereby, rescued His people. In the *Benedictus*, Zachariah prophesied that the coming of the Messiah was in fulfillment of “*the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*” (Luke 1:73-75) We observe the same thought in the *Magnificat*, where Mary states, “*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.*” (Luke 1:54-55) This commitment of faith and loyalty is also to be characterized by love for God borne out of His grace. “*And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.*” (Deuteronomy 30:6)

Whereas this covenant relationship is initiated by God and sealed by Him inasmuch as He gave His Son to die for His people, and whereas our Lord calls this relationship a New Covenant, and whereas the internal structure of this covenant remains the same, the obligations of the covenant are marked by love for those who are named by God as *my people*. It is a love that springs from God’s love for them. The Apostle Paul in Romans 9 states that the covenant people of God extends beyond national Israel, a people loved by God,

As indeed he says in Hosea, “Those who were not my people I will call “my people,” and her who was not beloved I will call “beloved.” And in the very place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” there they will be called “sons of the living God.” (Romans 9:24-25)

The *you-will-be-my-people* side of the covenant is a people who are committed to loving one another in the church, a love that flows from God’s covenant love for them. “*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*” (I John 4:10-11)

In order to have true community in the church, we have to understand the nature of this relationship called a covenant that God has with us in Christ and our relationships with one another in the church ought to reflect that covenantal relationship. God holds us responsible to

know this. *“The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.”* (Isaiah 1:3) This relationship is a commitment that is characterized by permanence, that is, not flitting from church to church, sacrificial love, and bringing Christ to our neighbors and our neighbors to the church.

Conclusion

We have attempted to demonstrate that our calling in Christ is not only individual and particular, we are also called collectively to be members of a covenanting together community of believers that we know as the local church. The value of embracing the covenant helps us avoid the extremes of antinomianism on the one hand and legalism on the other. Let it be asserted here that if there was a proper understanding of the Covenant of Grace as the form and structure of one’s relationship to Christ, and the church covenant was seen as an extension of it, there might be a more rigorous activity of church watch in Word, sacrament, fellowship, and discipline. Moreover, if the Decalogue was consciously understood to be a summary of the obligations of the covenant (WSC Q.44), might this have helped to stay the rash of moral failures among Evangelicals such as we have sadly observed over this past generation?

The oft repeated refrain, “I don’t have to go to church in order to be a Christian,” is arrogant, short sighted, and bespeaks a truncated view of the Gospel. It displays an attitude that says, I know everything I need to know about Christ and the Gospel by reading my Bible. It is an attitude which has a low view of the preaching of the Word of God and the authority of the church. It has no need for the history of the church in order to learn where it has, in times past, transgressed the boundaries of orthodoxy. Such an independent attitude is the doctrine of “by grace, not by works” gone awry, wherein believing in Jesus is reduced to little more than ascent to truths about Him and any Gospel requirement or church involvement is regarded as “works righteousness” or “legalism.” One person in my hearing defined the Gospel as, “That’s when you ask Jesus into your heart and you get to go to heaven when you die.”

It repudiates or distorts the proper use of the signs and seals that are baptism and the Lord’s Supper which are functions of the church. Baptism might be practiced as a commendable ordinance but certainly, in the minds of many, not for the purpose of being placed within the body of Christ. This attitude contradicts I Corinthians 12:13, *“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and all were made to drink of*

one Spirit.” The context that is the remainder of chapter 12 is about being a member of a body, “*If all were a single member, where would the body be?*” (I Cor. 12:19) Additionally, in the following verse we note, “*As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.*” How can this be a reference to merely the sum of all those in the world who are believers? The plain meaning of I Corinthians 12:12-31 is that the Apostle is speaking about one’s membership and participation in the local church.

This independent attitude unwittingly engages the “self-contained, autonomous” believer in the repudiation of the ministry of the Word insofar as one person is incapable of teaching and proclaiming to oneself the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) which is otherwise an essential part of the church’s ministry of the Word. Indeed, one is likely to end up with a truncated view of the Gospel which might end up being no Gospel at all. Such a person is in a dangerous position, “*Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.*” (Proverbs 18:1) The autonomous believer refuses to be accountable and teachable.

It is vital and indispensable for the church in community to love one another. It is a recurrent theme throughout the letters of all the Apostles. It is not very loving to keep oneself aloof from other believers. It is also not very loving to walk away from a church at the first sign of conflict between members, which is bound to happen. Such attitudes only serve to weaken the church and diminish her witness in the world. “*Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.*” (I John 4:11)

In too many instances the American church has morphed into a corporate structure driven by a business plan, with the pastor being the CEO, as opposed to a caring-sharing covenanting together community. In the latest and greatest version of the mega church, it is not unusual to hear complaints from within the mega church itself, that it is too impersonal. But why do people still cry out for community? It seems to be more a function of our creaturehood and not necessarily a desire to be the church in the Biblical sense. As creatures of God, we don’t like to be alone. Just as our creaturehood manifests its religiousness during times of tragedy and God is brought center stage, so also we want community but each of us want it on our own terms. We sit at the mouths of our individualistic caves, crying out for something more personal but when someone gets too close, we climb back inside. Can’t have it both ways. Either the church is going to continue to look like corporate America or we are going to return to the church being a community, a covenanting together community.

The *I will be your God; you will be my people* is the essence of the covenant. Therefore the church is a community with whom God has made a covenant through Christ who stands at the head of that covenantal community.

It is a relationship that is initiated by God who binds Himself to us by way of promise. The blood¹⁴ of Jesus is the signature of that covenant, indeed the person and work of Christ is its foundation. God chose us *in Him*. There are obligations of the covenant, summarized in the Decalogue and amplified in the New Testament. Then there are the important visible, tangible signs and seals of that covenant.

It is a relationship that is binding, permanent and one that is characterized by love. Our relationships with one another in the church must reflect that relationship called the covenant, that God has with us.

Finally, it is a relationship that takes seriously the “our” in “*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.*”

¹⁴ The “blood of Jesus” is shorthand for the entire enterprise that is the person and work of Christ, Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:20.