A GOSPEL PEOPLE

An Introduction for New Members
To the Beliefs and Convictions of
Calvary Baptist Church
Rapid City, South Dakota

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Introduction: The Assembly of the Gospel

An Introduction to Local Church Membership

The Bible calls the people of God a "peculiar people" (1 Peter 2:9, KJV). If you've spent much time around a local church you might think you know what that verse is talking about! If you've spent *any* time around our local church you may think you know *exactly* what that verse is talking about!

We admit it. We are a strange hodge-podge of people: men and women; young and old; different backgrounds; different ethnicities; different interests; different dreams; different struggles; different pasts; different fears; and yet we have gathered into one place for a single purpose. We have been bound together by something far bigger than any of us by ourselves. That may be what makes us so peculiar. The strange thing about our local church isn't how different we are, but rather how all these different people can still be brought together as one. That is strange.

As strange as it may be, we believe it is the work of a powerful God, by a glorious Savior, and through a beautiful message – the gospel that erupts in our lives by God's Spirit. We are a people who are breathed into existence by a good-news declaration, a proclamation of what the Creator of the universe has done definitively in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We are his creation. We are his workmanship. We are his people, and we exist for his purposes and his praise.

We are the church.

And if you're reading this introduction you have probably either taken the step to commit to join and identify with this assembly of people or you're prayerfully considering whether or not you should commit to joining this assembly of people. That makes us excited. We're glad you're here, and as you begin this journey of being introduced to our local church we want to begin by asking two questions that really set the stage for the rest of this book, two questions we'll be coming back to as we go through the next few sessions: 1) What is the church? and 2) What is a church member?

Before you join a church it's usually a good idea to know exactly what it is you're joining. So what do we mean when we use the word "church?"

The Bible uses the term *church*, from the Greek word *ekklesia,* in a variety of ways. In the Roman world it was a common designation for any type of public civic assembly. Yet when the New Testament uses the word it has something very different in mind. Sometimes it refers to what may be called the **Universal Church**, a name that refers to every believer in every place in every time. Most of the time, however, the New Testament is referring to a **Local Church**, a specific group of Christians who live in a specific time, in a specific place, and who have intentionally bound themselves together

as a particular community of faith. That's how we'll be using the term in this study. We are a local church, and we believe followers of Jesus Christ are to be joined together with local churches.

That brings us to the other question we're introducing this series with. What is a church member? There are lots of answers people might give to that question. The simplest one may be, "someone who goes to church." But that answer is dangerously broad and vague. Surely there is more to church membership than that. Maybe it's someone who regularly attends a specific church, or maybe someone who gets involved in a local church's programs and ministries.

Is that what makes a church member?

We don't think so, and we think the Bible says something different too. We believe a church member is a person who has believed the gospel (so a believer, someone who is saved, someone who is regenerate) and who has publicly committed themselves to being joined with a local church in a covenant bond of fellowship. This public covenant commitment tells other church members and the surrounding community that the believer has committed to serving within the church, holding other members accountable, being held accountable by the rest of the church, submitting to the church leadership of pastors and deacons, and working together to proclaim the gospel and make disciples in their own community and around the world.

In other words being a church member is a public proclamation and commitment to being a part of a gospel people. *That's what we're going to be studying over the course of the next few weeks.*

We'll begin with two chapters that cover our basic beliefs. Although none of us will be exact copies of one another, and while there is much room for differences of opinion or interpretation on some matters, it is vitally important that church members are united around the essential and fundamental truths they believe. Our adopted statement of faith is **The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000**, which you've been given in your new member packet. During our first two sessions we will highlight the core and bedrock beliefs found in this confession of faith and upon which our fellowship unites.

In chapter three we'll pause and discuss what it means to be a Baptist. When you join a local church you are joining a *local church*, not a *denomination*. You are committing to *this* group of people, not a denominational structure. Still, our church is voluntarily affiliated with the Black Hills Area Baptist Association, the Dakota Baptist Convention, and the Southern Baptist Convention. Our name is Calvary *Baptist* Church after all. So we think it's important that you understand exactly what we mean when we use the term Baptist, where we came from, what it means to be a Baptist, and what exactly the Southern Baptist Convention is.

Chapter four really unpacks what it means to be a church member. We'll try and understand what the Bible says about church membership, fellowship, discipline, and the basic responsibilities of church membership, and why it's important we have a church covenant that new church members voluntarily affirm. In your new member packet you've been given a separate copy of our church covenant and there is also a copy in this book. In session four we'll be spending more time explaining this document and what it means to join a local church, particularly *our* local church.

Chapters five and six flow out of our understanding of what it means to be a covenant church member. Chapter five is all about the Bible. We want everything we say and do to flow out of our love for and commitment to the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. To be a growing Christian and a faithful church member you also must love and commit to the Bible. So session five is all about how to read, study, know, and love the Bible individually and together.

Chapter six will complete our study by spending more time examining some of the key disciplines (or practices) of healthy churches and church members. As you join our fellowship we want you to flourish. We want you to flourish in your faith. We want you to flourish in your families. We want you to flourish in your relationship with God. We want you to grow strong in the gospel. You've embarked on an amazing journey. Like all worthwhile journeys, the trip may not be easy. Some of your fellow travelers may be difficult! Some of the things we'll face together may be hard. But we're in this together. We're here for one another, for the gospel of Christ, and for the glory of God!

Chapter One

Truths We Confess (1)

Key Terms

Doctrine	Trinity	Jesus Christ
Theology	Humanity	Incarnation
The Bible	Imago Dei	Penal Substituionary Atonement
Verbal Plenary Inspiration	Sin	Inerrancy
God's Attributes	Hell	

What We Believe

Ideas have consequences. Beliefs have even greater consequences. What we believe matters a great deal. What you believe about the things that matter most matter more than anything else, and we believe they matter eternally. The things that Christians believe are called **doctrines**, statements of belief that we believe are taught in the Bible and have been accepted throughout the history of Christianity. The study of what the Bible teaches and what Christians believe is called **theology**.

You might think discussions of doctrine and theology are topics reserved for a classroom. But we don't think so. In fact, we believe every person (whether they know it or not) is a theologian (someone who studies theology) because every person believes something about God (including those who don't believe he even exists!). It is absolutely essential that believers are clear on what they believe, and it is absolutely essential that churches stand united on what they believe the Bible teaches. Over the course of this session and the next we'll be introducing the foundational beliefs we believe our fellowship must be united around and upon.

At the beginning of each major section we'll be including the text of the summary statement from *The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000*. What follows these statements are further introductions to what we believe about these major doctrines.

What We Believe About the Bible

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (Article I)

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges

us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.

Exodus 24:4; Deuteronomy 4:1-2; 17:19; Joshua 8:34; Psalms 19:7-10; 119:11,89,105,140; Isaiah 34:16; 40:8; Jeremiah 15:16; 36:1-32; Matthew 5:17-18; 22:29; Luke 21:33; 24:44-46; John 5:39; 16:13-15; 17:17; Acts 2:16ff.; 17:11; Romans 15:4; 16:25-26; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Hebrews 1:1-2; 4:12; 1 Peter 1:25; 2 Peter 1:19-21.

This One Unique Book

At first glance the **Bible** may seem like a strange book. It's certainly not like any other book in the world! It's actually a collection, an anthology of sixty-six books. These books are divided into two testaments, thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament. They were originally written in two primary languages, Hebrew and Greek, with just a smidgen of Aramaic thrown in at a few places. The Bible was written over the course of about fifteen-hundred years, on three continents, and by more than forty authors ranging from fishermen to kings. To complicate things a bit more, this collection of books contains a wide variety of genres that include narrative histories, poetry, parables, proverbs, legal codes, letters, genealogies, and more.

Yet all these things aren't what make the Bible so unusual. What makes the Bible so unusual is that when you take all these books, with all these genres, in all these different languages, written by all these different authors, and you put them together you get one united story; you get one book and not just a collection of sixty-six books!

The Bible tells us the story of who we are and where we came from. It tells us what has happened to the world that has made everything go bad, but more importantly it tells us the only way that problem is overcome. It tells us about God. It tells us about what he is like, and it tells us what he has done to make things right again, to rescue a people for himself, and to restore the whole universe to the way it was always created to be. Therefore, the entire story is focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ, God himself who entered our world to make all things new through his death and resurrection.

What the Bible Is

The Bible certainly is different than any other book in the world. Because this is true it may seem pretty normal that we would describe it differently than we do any other book. We believe there are six fundamental characteristics that describe the Bible:

1. **The Bible is inspired**. We believe in something called **verbal plenary inspiration**. This simply means the Bible is fundamentally and foundationally a book that is authored by God. He is the primary Author. The human authors are important. Yet they are instruments in the hands of God. Every word is at the same time the word the human author chose to use for a specific purpose and the word God himself breathed out to be written. The Bible is the Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16).

2. **The Bible is infallible**. The Bible is powerful. It is always unfailing. It is perfect. It accomplishes all God intends for it to accomplish.

3. **The Bible is inerrant.** In some circles it's controversial to say you believe in **biblical inerrancy**. Many people believe the Bible contains lots of mistakes, numerous errors, and countless contradictions. We believe such opinions are not only unfounded but are absolutely ridiculous. We believe in the end the Bible will always be found to have contained "truth without any mixture of error." Everything the Bible affirms is completely true. God is the God of truth, and he is the primary Author of every word of the Bible. Therefore, we can and should trust what the Bible says.

4. **The Bible is authoritative.** The Bible must be the foundation for all of life. It alone is the basis for everything we should believe and do. We must always live in humble submission to everything the Bible teaches.

5. **The Bible is understandable.** This one may seem like a stretch! All of us have read portions of the Bible and come away scratching our heads, wondering what on earth it's talking about. While we agree there are challenging portions of the Bible (something even the Bible admits in 2 Peter 3:15-16), we also believe if we prayerfully come to the Bible in faith and trust his Spirit to show us his truth, God will make it clear to us what he would have us know. The Bible is a great ocean that's deep enough for a person to never get to the bottom of, yet clear enough that even a child can wade into its waters and know how to have a relationship with God.

6. **The Bible is Christ Centered.** As we mentioned above, the Bible is made up of sixty-six books that unite to tell one story and become one book. We believe the Bible is united around one Person. Everything in the Bible points to and reveals to us the person and work of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:13-27). He is the supreme subject of Scripture!

How Should We Respond to the Bible?

With all the above descriptions of the Bible being true it is crystal clear that the Bible is different from any other book in the world. That demands that it be given a different

response than any other book in the world! We can't just set it on our bookshelves as a decoration or conversation piece. We can't just add it to a list of the world's great literature. This isn't *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*. So how should believers respond to the Bible? We believe there are four appropriate responses:

1. **We should read the Bible.** First, this is a book to live in. As Charles Spurgeon once said, we must "visit other books but live in the Bible." There is no growth as a Christian apart from the continual reading and intake of the Bible. There is no Christian life that comes apart from reading the Bible. If the Bible is God's self-revelation to us (and it is), and if in the Bible God reveals his will for our lives (and he does), then reading it is one of the most important things we can do.

2. **We should believe the Bible.** The Bible contains truth. The Bible contains the most important truths in the world. So we should believe what it says. Sometimes that may be hard. The Bible hits us in unexpected ways. It tells us things that are uncomfortable. It tells us things that at first glance we don't like to hear. This is almost always because it tells us the truth, and it doesn't sugarcoat it. The Bible tells us things that are counter to our intuition and counter to everything our culture and society would have us believe and accept. Because of this it's difficult and costly to take a stand and agree with the Bible. It's not what the world wants us to believe, but it is what God says, so we are called to trust it.

3. **We should study the Bible.** Remember when we said earlier that there were things that were hard to understand in the Bible? Remember when we said the Bible is a vast ocean we can dive into but never reach the bottom of? That's true, and because it's true we are called not only to read it and believe it, but also to study it to know it better. This requires digging; this requires effort; but it's worth it. Diamonds have to be dug for. Jewels must be mined. There is great value in not settling for a superficial reading of the Bible, but jumping in and studying it for all it has to offer, and because its Author is of infinite worth. A little later in this book we're going to look at ways we can all read and study the Bible better in our own lives.

4. **We should obey the Bible.** This is where the rubber meets the road. James 1:19-25 tells us to be doers of the Word and not hearers only! In other words, it's absolutely essential that we believe the Bible, but this belief must lead us to obey the words we claim to believe. If we don't obey the Bible then we are showing the world and ourselves that we don't really believe the Bible. There are few things God desires more from his people than their obedience. Jesus himself told us in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Authentic belief always leads to genuine obedience.

What We Believe About God

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (Article II)

There is one and only one living and true God. He is an intelligent, spiritual, and personal Being, the Creator, Redeemer, Preserver, and Ruler of the universe. God is infinite in holiness and all other perfections. God is all-powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures. To Him we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience. The eternal triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being.

A. God the Father

God as Father reigns with providential care over His universe, His creatures, and the flow of the stream of human history according to the purposes of His grace. He is all powerful, all knowing, all loving, and all wise. God is Father in truth to those who become children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. He is fatherly in His attitude toward all men.

Genesis 1:1; 2:7; Exodus 3:14; 6:2-3; 15:11ff.; 20:1ff.; Leviticus 22:2; Deuteronomy 6:4; 32:6; 1 Chronicles 29:10; Psalm 19:1-3; Isaiah 43:3,15; 64:8; Jeremiah 10:10; 17:13; Matthew 6:9ff.; 7:11; 23:9; 28:19; Mark 1:9-11; John 4:24; 5:26; 14:6-13; 17:1-8; Acts 1:7; Romans 8:14-15; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 4:6; Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17; Hebrews 11:6; 12:9; 1 Peter 1:17; 1 John 5:7.

B. God the Son

Christ is the eternal Son of God. In His incarnation as Jesus Christ He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature with its demands and necessities and identifying Himself completely with mankind yet without sin. He honored the divine law by His personal obedience, and in His substitutionary death on the cross He made provision for the redemption of men from sin. He was raised from the dead with a glorified body and appeared to His disciples as the person who was with them before His crucifixion. He ascended into heaven and is now exalted at the right hand of God where He is the One Mediator, fully God, fully man, in whose Person is effected the reconciliation between God and man. He will return in power and glory to judge the world and to consummate His redemptive mission. He now dwells in all believers as the living and ever present Lord.

Genesis 18:1ff.; Psalms 2:7ff.; 110:1ff.; Isaiah 7:14; 53; Matthew 1:18-23; 3:17; 8:29; 11:27; 14:33; 16:16,27; 17:5; 27; 28:1-6,19; Mark 1:1; 3:11; Luke 1:35; 4:41; 22:70; 24:46; John 1:1-18,29; 10:30,38; 11:25-27; 12:44-50; 14:7-11; 16:15-16,28; 17:1-5, 21-22; 20:1-20,28; Acts 1:9; 2:22-24; 7:55-56; 9:4-5,20; Romans 1:3-4; 3:23-26; 5:6-21; 8:1-3,34; 10:4; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2:2; 8:6; 15:1-8,24-28; 2 Corinthians 5:19-21; 8:9; Galatians 4:4-5; Ephesians 1:20; 3:11; 4:7-10;

Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:13-22; 2:9; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; 3:16; Titus 2:13-14; Hebrews 1:1-3; 4:14-15; 7:14-28; 9:12-15,24-28; 12:2; 13:8; 1 Peter 2:21-25; 3:22; 1 John 1:7-9; 3:2; 4:14-15; 5:9; 2 John 7-9; Revelation 1:13-16; 5:9-14; 12:10-11; 13:8; 19:16.

C. God the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God, fully divine. He inspired holy men of old to write the Scriptures. Through illumination He enables men to understand truth. He exalts Christ. He convicts men of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. He calls men to the Saviour, and effects regeneration. At the moment of regeneration He baptizes every believer into the Body of Christ. He cultivates Christian character, comforts believers, and bestows the spiritual gifts by which they serve God through His church. He seals the believer unto the day of final redemption. His presence in the Christian is the guarantee that God will bring the believer into the fullness of the stature of Christ. He enlightens and empowers the believer and the church in worship, evangelism, and service.

Genesis 1:2; Judges 14:6; Job 26:13; Psalms 51:11; 139:7ff.; Isaiah 61:1-3; Joel 2:28-32; Matthew 1:18; 3:16; 4:1; 12:28-32; 28:19; Mark 1:10,12; Luke 1:35; 4:1,18-19; 11:13; 12:12; 24:49; John 4:24; 14:16-17,26; 15:26; 16:7-14; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4,38; 4:31; 5:3; 6:3; 7:55; 8:17,39; 10:44; 13:2; 15:28; 16:6; 19:1-6; Romans 8:9-11,14-16,26-27; 1 Corinthians 2:10-14; 3:16; 12:3-11,13; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 1:13-14; 4:30; 5:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:19; 1 Timothy 3:16; 4:1; 2 Timothy 1:14; 3:16; Hebrews 9:8,14; 2 Peter 1:21; 1 John 4:13; 5:6-7; Revelation 1:10; 22:17.

The Attributes of God

An **attribute** is an essential quality that makes a thing what it is (or makes a person what they are). It's more than a characteristic or a description. It's deeper than that. For example, I have short hair. That's a true characteristic of me. It's a description. But I would still be Josh if for some reason I grew a mullet or a mohawk. The length of my hair is a description, but it isn't an essential quality that makes me who I am. The essential qualities that make us who we are are called attributes, and when we come to describe what we believe about God we find a host of attributes that make God who he is, attributes of greatness and goodness.

First, we believe in what are called God's **attributes of greatness**. God is infinite in all of his attributes and these attributes reveal God to be unequaled specifically in his power and glory:

1. **God is.** That's it. He is. He is existence in itself. He has no beginning or end. He is uncreated. He cannot not exist.

2. **God is one**. There is only one God, and this one God is completely unified in himself. He is not conflicted within himself. He is not divided in his affections, loyalties, or will.

3. **God is a spirit**. God is not bound by created matter. He is completely unrestrained. He is transcendent. He is above and beyond the entirety of the created universe.

4. **God is personal**. Amazingly, this God is relational. He is above and beyond the entirety of the created universe but he has entered into and is intimately involved with his creation. He reveals himself. He speaks. He can be known and can know. He can love and be loved in return.

5. **God is a trinity**. There is only one God, and this one God eternally exists as three Persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

6. **God is the source of true beauty and joy.** There is no beauty or joy outside of his presence (Psalm 16:11).

7. **God is the creator of all that exists other than himself.** Nothing exists that was not made by God. He spoke the universe into existence. He did not have to create, but he did. God did not need the creation to fulfill any lack in himself, but he created and it was good.

8. **God is sovereign.** He is in control of the world he has created. He rules. He is the King. He is ultimately in charge and nothing occurs apart from his will.

9. **God is free.** God cannot be controlled or contained by anything outside of himself. He can do that which he wills to do. He cannot be coerced or manipulated by his creation.

10. **God is omnipresent.** He exists fully in all places at all times. He cannot be contained by any restraint of space, time, or matter.

11. **God is omniscient.** All knowledge is conscious to the mind of God at all times. There is nothing that has happened, is happening, or will happen, that God himself is not fully aware of and fully conscious of.

12. **God is omnipotent.** He is all-powerful. God is not weak. God can do all things he wills to do.

These attributes of greatness certainly reveal him to be a God who is strong and mighty, but if these were the only attributes the Bible revealed to us about God, then we still wouldn't know much about him. We wouldn't know what he was really like. If God was only great in power, he might still be evil, malevolent, or uncaring toward his creation. That's not how the Bible reveals God, however. The Bible doesn't just say that he is great, but that he is also good. God's attributes of greatness are astounding. Likewise, his **attributes of goodness** are just as amazing:

1. **God is holy.** He is completely separate from anything else. He is in a class by himself. There is nothing else you can compare him to. In his holiness God is wholly committed to his own character and his own delight in himself as he reflects his glory. In other words, God is God-centered.

2. **God is righteous.** God is unstained by any sin or moral failure. His character is spotless and blameless. All that he is and does is pure, good, and right. His character cannot be tainted by the presence of sin.

3. **God is just.** God is absolutely committed to the justice that his holiness and righteousness demand. Sin is a dishonoring of he who is infinitely honorable, and as such it deserves an infinite punishment. God is absolutely committed to himself, and therefore he must punish sin. To fail to punish sin completely would be to neglect his own holy and righteous standard, which is himself.

4. **God is wise.** God knows and always wills what is truly good and best for his creation.

5. **God is true.** God never lies. God never misrepresents anything. None of his actions or words are tainted by falsehood to any degree.

6. **God is faithful.** God always keeps his word. His promises are certain. He is always dependable. He always does what he says.

7. **God is happy.** God is the source of happiness and joy and he infinitely enjoys happiness and joy in himself and desires that his creatures share in that happiness and joy by finding their satisfaction in him.

8. **God is loving.** God cares for his creation, particularly humanity, who is created in his image. He loves them not because of what they provide him or give him. His love is free and unconditional and reaches even into the depths of our sin. God truly loves us as we are, and because of that great love he has acted to bring us into relationship with himself. He does not love us because we are lovable; we are lovable because he loves us.

9. **God is benevolent.** God gives good gifts to his creation. He provides for its needs. He gives good gifts even to sinners who only deserve his wrath and judgment.

10. **God is merciful.** God is a forgiving God. God is a God who delights in forgiving sinners, in not giving them what they justly deserve.

11. **God is gracious.** God's grace is amazing. He is a giving God. Not only does he delight in not giving sinners what they deserve, he equally delights in giving

sinners what they do not deserve, namely himself. We receive both grace and mercy only because of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done.

The Trinity

As we mentioned earlier, the Bible teaches God has eternally existed as three Persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While the word "**trinity**" is not found in the Bible, Christians have historically used this word to describe what the Bible does clearly teach, that in some mysterious way the God who is completely one is also completely three. God is three in one and one in three. Admittedly this is a great mystery, perhaps the greatest mystery in the Bible apart from the gospel itself. Our tiny little minds cannot fully comprehend the vastness of who God is, yet there are some core truths about the trinity that are important for believers to understand and believe:

1. **There is only one God.** There is no God but God. He exists, creates, and reigns alone and apart from anyone else. There is no one else equal in power or glory.

2. **God is not divided.** There are not three Gods. There is only one God. Nor does God have a multiple-personality disorder. God is completely united in his being, mind, and will.

3. **God eternally exists and reveals himself as one God in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.** Perhaps there is no place where this truth is seen more clearly than in Matthew 28:19. Jesus tells his followers to baptize in the name (not "names") of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

4. **The three Persons of the Trinity, while united are distinct from one another.** The Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Spirit. The Spirit is not the Father. There is still one and only one God.

5. **God has always been fully satisfied and in a loving relationship within himself as the three Persons of the Trinity share in the love and joy between themselves.** The Bible says that God is love (1 John 4:8). Think about that: God is love. He has always been love. That is the fundamental description of his character. Now, the truth is, if God is love (and he has always been love) then there must be someone to love. There must be someone to live in relationship with. Yet you and I (and humanity in general) have not always existed. We aren't eternal. So did God only begin to love when he created? Of course not! God has always existed in a love relationship between the three Persons of the Trinity! The truth of the Trinity is foundational to the character of God and to the love of God!

What We Believe About Humanity

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 on Humanity and the Family (Article 3 and 13)

Man is the special creation of God, made in His own image. He created them male and female as the crowning work of His creation. The gift of gender is thus part of the goodness of God's creation. In the beginning man was innocent of sin and was endowed by his Creator with freedom of choice. By his free choice man sinned against God and brought sin into the human race. Through the temptation of Satan man transgressed the command of God, and fell from his original innocence whereby his posterity inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin. Therefore, as soon as they are capable of moral action, they become transgressors and are under condemnation. Only the grace of God can bring man into His holy fellowship and enable man to fulfill the creative purpose of God. The sacredness of human personality is evident in that God created man in His own image, and in that Christ died for man; therefore, every person of every race possesses full dignity and is worthy of respect and Christian love.

Genesis 1:26-30; 2:5,7,18-22; 3; 9:6; Psalms 1; 8:3-6; 32:1-5; 51:5; Isaiah 6:5; Jeremiah 17:5; Matthew 16:26; Acts 17:26-31; Romans 1:19-32; 3:10-18,23; 5:6,12,19; 6:6; 7:14-25; 8:14-18,29; 1 Corinthians 1:21-31; 15:19,21-22; Ephesians 2:1-22; Colossians 1:21-22; 3:9-11.

God has ordained the family as the foundational institution of human society. It is composed of persons related to one another by marriage, blood, or adoption.

Marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime. It is God's unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and His church and to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel of sexual expression according to biblical standards, and the means for procreation of the human race.

The husband and wife are of equal worth before God, since both are created in God's image. The marriage relationship models the way God relates to His people. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation.

Children, from the moment of conception, are a blessing and heritage from the Lord. Parents are to demonstrate to their children God's pattern for marriage. Parents are to teach their children spiritual and moral values and to lead them, through consistent

lifestyle example and loving discipline, to make choices based on biblical truth. Children are to honor and obey their parents.

Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15-25; 3:1-20; Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Joshua 24:15; 1 Samuel 1:26-28; Psalms 51:5; 78:1-8; 127; 128; 139:13-16; Proverbs 1:8; 5:15-20; 6:20-22; 12:4; 13:24; 14:1; 17:6; 18:22; 22:6,15; 23:13-14; 24:3; 29:15,17; 31:10-31; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; 9:9; Malachi 2:14-16; Matthew 5:31-32; 18:2-5; 19:3-9; Mark 10:6-12; Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 7:1-16; Ephesians 5:21-33; 6:1-4; Colossians 3:18-21; 1 Timothy 5:8,14; 2 Timothy 1:3-5; Titus 2:3-5; Hebrews 13:4; 1 Peter 3:1-7.

Humanity is a Special Creation

The first truth about **humanity**, men and women, is that we are created by God, and we are created for a purpose. The second truth about humanity is that we are a special creation. We are not like the rest of the animal creation. We are not the latest step in an evolutionary process. We are created special by God. Humanity is the crown in God's creation. This is true because unlike everything else in creation, men and women are created in the image of God.

The ***imago dei*** (image of God) is an amazing truth about men and women, but what exactly does it mean? Many theories have been given, but surely the truth is far too complex and beautiful to simply be condensed down to one thing about us. To be created in the image of God means we are created to reflect God's goodness and greatness to the rest of the creation. We are to be the reflective ambassadors of God's presence to the rest of the created world. We are self-aware and creative ourselves. We are moral agents created with free will who are given the choice to obey or disobey God. We are relational. We can love and be loved. We are created to find our joy and delight in God, and to serve God by governing his creation under his good, wise, and mighty authority.

Because humanity is created special in the image of God, both men and women are of equal worth before God. Human sexuality is itself a good creation of God and is created as a vital aspect of who we are. Human sexuality and marriage have been created to model and reflect the joyful relationship that can only be found in God himself as he has made himself known and accessible in the gospel. While men and women are of equal worth, we do believe that men and women are created distinctly and with different roles and purposes. We believe these differences between the sexes are to be both honored and celebrated, but should not be ignored.

The basic unit of human flourishing is the family. We believe families are created to exist in the relational unity between a married man and woman and their children. We believe marriage is a sacred union between one man and one woman and the one God. Any deviation from this created order is itself rebellion against God and is not marriage

as it was created and ordained by God. We believe children are a gift from God and that life begins at the moment of conception (Psalm 139).

Humanity is a Rebellious Creation

Humanity, men and women all around the world, are a special creation. But we are also a sinful creation. We weren't created that way. Adam and Eve (the first humans) were created perfect. They enjoyed a perfect world and a perfect relationship with God. But God gave them a command, and they disobeyed. And humanity and the world around us fell into chaos. From that moment in our ancient past humanity has existed as traitors against the authority and love of our creator God. We have plunged the universe into a battlefield of rebellion against the God who made us. The creation that God created perfectly good has gone horribly bad, and the Bible teaches that what has gone wrong is our fault. We have done this. We have sinned. We are sinners. Humanity unleashed **sin** into the creation.

What is sin? This deadly poison that races through our veins cannot be described in one phrase. It has many shades and many evil faces. A simple summary of sin, however might be described like this:

1. **Sin is a state into which all humanity is born.** We are born sinners. This is called "original sin." We are born sinners. We inherit a sinful nature from all our parents before us.

2. **Sin is active rebellion against God.** Sin is a transgression. It is doing what God says not to do and not doing what God commands us to do.

3. **Sin is an inward perversion of who we were created to be.** Sin is iniquity. It causes us to truly believe that we are better and happier without God. It makes us believe we are sufficient to meet our own needs and the best and rightful rulers of our own lives and future. It creates a kind of "God allergy" among all humans.

4. **Sin is a disease that infects every aspect of who we are.** Sin stains us. While sin does not destroy the image of God in men and women it does mar God's image. It cripples God's image. It twists and taints it, and there is no part of who we are that is immune from sin's devastating impact. Sin has invaded and imprisoned our minds, bodies, emotions, affections, wills, and actions.

Sin is a living state of depravity, and this depravity is total. This doesn't mean we are as bad or as wicked as we could be. It does mean that there is no part of us that is untouched by sin and untwisted by sin's devastating consequences. Those consequences are a living and killing nightmare. They are horrific. What does sin do? Well the Bible tells us:

1. **Sin distorts reality.** It makes the world look different than it actually is. It skews our observations of truth. It causes us to experience false and temporary pleasures that ultimately lead to our destruction while causing us to hate the very things we were created to enjoy for our true joy and pleasure, namely a relationship with God.

2. **Sin twists and perverts what is good.** Sin does not simply create badness or evil. It doesn't create anything actually. It's a spiritual black hole that eats away at everything that has been created. And it does this by twisting and mangling God's good creation and gifts until they are nearly beyond recognition. Human sexuality is a shocking example of how our sin can twist and pervert what God has created to be good.

3. **Sin leads to creation's decay.** It leads to the gradual physical and spiritual rotting of everything good in and about humanity. It turns us into physical and spiritual pieces of fruit that have been left in the sunlight for far too long.

4. **Sin stains us.** It tarnishes and dims the image of God in people.

5. **Sin imprisons us.** It holds us in bondage. It chains us in slavery. It mangles our free will so that we are unable to desire anything other than sin apart from the power and grace of God. It makes us love sin so that we continually choose to sin. In doing this it renders us hopelessly powerless in its presence. We are unable to free ourselves from its chains. Sin has a death grip on each of us.

6. **Sin divides us.** It creates a wall of separation in the relationship between God and people and between people and other people. It makes us hate God and one another too. It is the source of hatred, racism, discrimination, murder, jealousy, and every other evil that exists between people.

7. **Sin kills us.** Because we are sinners we age. Because we are sinners we are susceptible to diseases. Because we are sinners we physically die, either of old age or disease or accidental or violent deaths.

8. **Sin condemns us.** As bad as the last thing is, it shockingly isn't the worst thing sin does. Sin doesn't just lead to physical death. It also leads to spiritual death. Spiritual death is also called **Hell**. We believe Hell is a real place and men and women in their sins are really going there. It is the final destination and consequence of our sin. It is the end point of everything our rebellion brings. Hell is the just punishment, the righteous condemnation, of sinners. It is a place of the infinite and eternal absence of God's good presence and the infinite and eternal presence of God's wrathful presence.

Such truths about ourselves are hard to read. Such truths are terrifying. Who we have become and what we deserve is the nightmare of nightmares. Nothing else compares to this. We are all sinners. We can't fix our problem. We deserve death. God in his justice must condemn sinners. It seems like our condition and our futures are hopeless.

And they are…*without God*.

The amazing truth that the Bible reveals, however, is that God has acted in history. God, because of his great love for sinners, has done what we in our sin could never do. God has executed a rescue operation to save sinners like you and me.

What We Believe About Jesus

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (Article II B)

Christ is the eternal Son of God. In His incarnation as Jesus Christ He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature with its demands and necessities and identifying Himself completely with mankind yet without sin. He honored the divine law by His personal obedience, and in His substitutionary death on the cross He made provision for the redemption of men from sin. He was raised from the dead with a glorified body and appeared to His disciples as the person who was with them before His crucifixion. He ascended into heaven and is now exalted at the right hand of God where He is the One Mediator, fully God, fully man, in whose Person is effected the reconciliation between God and man. He will return in power and glory to judge the world and to consummate His redemptive mission. He now dwells in all believers as the living and ever present Lord.

Genesis 18:1ff.; Psalms 2:7ff.; 110:1ff.; Isaiah 7:14; 53; Matthew 1:18-23; 3:17; 8:29; 11:27; 14:33; 16:16,27; 17:5; 27; 28:1-6,19; Mark 1:1; 3:11; Luke 1:35; 4:41; 22:70; 24:46; John 1:1-18,29; 10:30,38; 11:25-27; 12:44-50; 14:7-11; 16:15-16,28; 17:1-5, 21-22; 20:1-20,28; Acts 1:9; 2:22-24; 7:55-56; 9:4-5,20; Romans 1:3-4; 3:23-26; 5:6-21; 8:1-3,34; 10:4; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2:2; 8:6; 15:1-8,24-28; 2 Corinthians 5:19-21; 8:9; Galatians 4:4-5; Ephesians 1:20; 3:11; 4:7-10; Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:13-22; 2:9; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; 3:16; Titus 2:13-14; Hebrews 1:1-3; 4:14-15; 7:14-28; 9:12-15,24-28; 12:2; 13:8; 1 Peter 2:21-25; 3:22; 1 John 1:7-9; 3:2; 4:14-15; 5:9; 2 John 7-9; Revelation 1:13-16; 5:9-14; 12:10-11; 13:8; 19:16.

The Historical Jesus

We believe God's ultimate response to our sin and the greatest display of his love is Jesus Christ. We believe that God, the eternal uncreated one, stepped into time. He entered his creation. He fashioned onto his boundless glory bone and muscle and skin. He became a man. Christians call this event the **incarnation**. Jesus was born of the

virgin Mary around 4 BC in the small village of Bethlehem during the reign of Caesar Augustus. He lived a perfect life, was completely obedient to God, revealed God to us, and then was crucified on a Roman cross (around 30 AD). Three days later he was resurrected from the dead. His death and resurrection is the focal point of all human history. He is himself the focus of all history and all eternity to come.

Who is Jesus?

So who is this Jesus? Notice the way that question is worded. We do not ask, "who was Jesus?" No, we believe that Jesus is alive today and will one day return to bring history to a climactic conclusion. So our task as believers is to know who he is, who he really is. What does the Bible say?

1. **The Bible tells us that Jesus is fully God.** He has always existed. He was never created. He is the Creator of the universe. He is equal in power and glory with both the Father and the Spirit. When we call Jesus the "Son of God," we do so knowing that this designation the Bible uses is not referring to Jesus somehow being less than God, but is referring instead to his eternal existence as God.

2. **The Bible tells us that Jesus is fully human.** God became a man. God the Son took on flesh. The Second Person of the Trinity is Jesus Christ, the Messiah that was promised in the Old Testament. Jesus was and is fully human, yet without sin. Jesus was perfectly human, and was and is a perfect human. Jesus' humanity then, now, and forever, assures us that we have a Savior who is not unfamiliar with our temptations, struggles, and sorrows. In the person of Jesus Christ God has fully identified with us now and forever.

What has Jesus done?

The truth about who Jesus is must always be joined with what he has done. Jesus is God's active response to human rebellion. In the person of Jesus Christ God triumphantly acted to reverse the curse that our sin had introduced. So what did Jesus do?

1. **Jesus revealed to us what God is like.** Jesus is the full and final revelation of the person and character of God. He shows us God. Do you want to know what God is like? Look and see what Jesus is like.

2. **Jesus provided us with a righteousness what we do not have.** God demands perfect obedience. God demands sinless perfection, and we don't have it. So God has provided it for us. In the person of Jesus Christ God has provided sinners with his own righteousness. Jesus Christ substitutes our sin for his righteousness.

3. **Jesus restores the relationship between sinners and God.** Left to ourselves we have no hope of a relationship with God. Left to ourselves we cannot know God. But Jesus has come, and Jesus restores the relationship that we have broken.

4. **Jesus defeats death.** Our great enemy, the mighty weapon of Satan, is death. Physical and spiritual death are the pillars of sin's consequences. And in Jesus' death and resurrection he has laid and sealed death in his own grave, a grave that is empty because he has been resurrected.

What Did the Cross Achieve?

We believe all the things mentioned above that Jesus has done flow out of what he accomplished on his cross. As he died he screamed, "It is finished," and by his death the fourfold work listed above was definitely accomplished. So how does the Bible describe Jesus' death and what it did? In one phrase, Jesus' death was a **penal substitutionary atonement.** That may seem like a mouthful to read, so what does it mean? Well, it means that Jesus' death accomplished the following:

1. **Atonement:** Jesus' death is God's response to our sin. It provides forgiveness of sins. It is the fountain of grace and mercy. It reverses what sin destroys.

2. **Penal Substitution:** Jesus' death was in the place of sinners. He endured the just wrath and condemnation that we deserve. During the six hours that Jesus hung on the cross God the Son experienced the infinite and eternal outpouring of God's just and holy judgment against sin. What is the only way that God could not give you and I what we deserve? He gave himself what we deserved. As Spurgeon said, "God himself, gave himself, to save us from himself."

3. **Imputation:** In being our perfect substitute he switches places with us. He takes our record of sin and rebellion and gives us his record of perfect obedience, so that he gets what we deserve while those who are his get what he deserves.

4. **Propitiation:** This word is closely related to Penal Substitution. At the cross Jesus voluntarily and willingly received and satisfied the wrath of God that sinners deserved. There is no more wrath, no more condemnation, for those who belong to Jesus. He has taken everything.

5. **Redemption:** Jesus' death, which was of infinite value, purchased sinners for God. It fully paid for and made fully certain their salvation in him.

6. **Justification:** Jesus' death provides sinners with his own righteousness, therefore in him sinners who believe the gospel are declared righteous on the basis of what Jesus and Jesus alone has done. In him we are declared "not guilty." We are declared to be fully innocent in the sight of God.

7. **Triumphant Victory:** Jesus' death defeated sin, Satan, and death because of the cross and Jesus' resurrection. He is the supreme Victor of the universe.

8. **Reconciliation:** Jesus' death brings sinners back into a relationship with God.

9. **Adoption:** Jesus' death, and the subsequent giving of the Spirit, brings believers into the very family of God. We are brought into the presence of God not simply as friends but as *family*. We become children of God, coheirs with Christ. All that Christ has, we have in him.

10. **Life:** Jesus' death assures believers of eternal life, true life. Sin brings only death. Jesus' death brings only life. At the cross the curse is reversed and life begins to build and erupt and will do so eternally!

This is who Christians believe Jesus is and what he has done. In our next session we'll continue to explore the amazing riches of what Jesus has accomplished as we look at what we believe about the powerful gospel and the salvation of believers!

Questions for Reflection

1. How important is the Bible for the Christian's life? What is the most difficult thing about reading and understanding the Bible? Why is it so important for Christians to live in and with the Bible?

2. There were several words that we said describe the Bible. What descriptor stood out to you? Which one do you think is hardest to believe? Why is it so important that we never lose sight of the Bible's inspiration and inerrancy?

3. Which attributes of God stood out to you? Why? Why and how do the attributes of God's greatness and goodness give hope to believers?

4. The Bible's teaching about the Trinity can be hard to comprehend. Why do you think that's so? Why do you believe this doctrine is so crucial to the Christian's life?

5. What does the Bible's teaching about humanity tell us about how we should see one another? How does it impact how we view the world?

6. How does the Bible's teaching on humanity impact what we believe about sexuality, marriage, and other current ethical issues like homosexuality, abortion, and the roles of men and women?

7. Why is it important for us to believe in a literal and historical Adam and Eve? How might this truth impact how we understand things like the Bible, sexuality and the family, and sin?

8. How have you seen sin at work in the world around you? In your own life? What makes sin so horrible?

9. Take a moment to discuss the person of Jesus. Who is he? How do we know Jesus? How do we know what he is like and what he has done? What evidences are there in the Bible that tell us about Jesus' identity?

10. Take a moment to discuss the cross. What did it achieve? What did it accomplish? Are there any aspects of Jesus' work that trouble you? What aspects of the cross are hard to understand? How important should the cross be to the Christian?

Chapter Two

Truths We Confess (2)

Key Terms

The Gospel	Born Again	Polity
Salvation	The Universal Church	Congregationalism
Exclusivism	The Local Church	Church Autonomy
Regeneration	Marks of the Church	Elder, Overseer, Pastor
Justification	Ordinance	Deacon
Sanctification	Baptism	Priesthood of the Believer
Glorification	Lord's Supper	Church Member

What We Believe About the Gospel and Salvation

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (Articles IV & V)

Salvation involves the redemption of the whole man, and is offered freely to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, who by His own blood obtained eternal redemption for the believer. In its broadest sense salvation includes regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification. There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

A. Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith are inseparable experiences of grace. Repentance is a genuine turning from sin toward God. Faith is the acceptance of Jesus Christ and commitment of the entire personality to Him as Lord and Savior.

B. Justification is God's gracious and full acquittal upon principles of His righteousness of all sinners who repent and believe in Christ. Justification brings the believer unto a relationship of peace and favor with God.

C. Sanctification is the experience, beginning in regeneration, by which the believer is set apart to God's purposes, and is enabled to progress toward moral and spiritual maturity through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him. Growth in grace should continue throughout the regenerate person's life.

D. Glorification is the culmination of salvation and is the final blessed and abiding state of the redeemed.

Genesis 3:15; Exodus 3:14-17; 6:2-8; Matthew 1:21; 4:17; 16:21-26; 27:22-28:6; Luke 1:68-69; 2:28-32; John 1:11-14,29; 3:3-21,36; 5:24; 10:9,28-29; 15:1-16; 17:17; Acts 2:21; 4:12; 15:11; 16:30-31; 17:30-31; 20:32; Romans 1:16-18; 2:4; 3:23-25; 4:3ff.; 5:8-10; 6:1-23; 8:1-18,29-39; 10:9-10,13; 13:11-14; 1 Corinthians 1:18,30; 6:19-20; 15:10; 2 Corinthians 5:17-20; Galatians 2:20; 3:13; 5:22-25; 6:15; Ephesians 1:7; 2:8-22; 4:11-16; Philippians 2:12-13; Colossians 1:9-22; 3:1ff.; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24; 2 Timothy 1:12; Titus 2:11-14; Hebrews 2:1-3; 5:8-9; 9:24-28; 11:1-12:8,14; James 2:14-26; 1 Peter 1:2-23; 1 John 1:6-2:11; Revelation 3:20; 21:1-22:5.

Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man, and comprehends all the means in connection with the end. It is the glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility.

All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end. Believers may fall into sin through neglect and temptation, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, and bring reproach on the cause of Christ and temporal judgments on themselves; yet they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.

Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 19:5-8; 1 Samuel 8:4-7,19-22; Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 31:31ff.; Matthew 16:18-19; 21:28-45; 24:22,31; 25:34; Luke 1:68-79; 2:29-32; 19:41-44; 24:44-48; John 1:12-14; 3:16; 5:24; 6:44-45,65; 10:27-29; 15:16; 17:6,12,17-18; Acts 20:32; Romans 5:9-10; 8:28-39; 10:12-15; 11:5-7,26-36; 1 Corinthians 1:1-2; 15:24-28; Ephesians 1:4-23; 2:1-10; 3:1-11; Colossians 1:12-14; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; 2 Timothy 1:12; 2:10,19; Hebrews 11:39–12:2; James 1:12; 1 Peter 1:2-5,13; 2:4-10; 1 John 1:7-9; 2:19; 3:2.

Redemption Accomplished AND Applied

In our last session we explained the four foundational beliefs of our local fellowship: The truth and authority of the Bible, the person and nature of God, the truth about humanity, and the person and work of Jesus Christ. We finished that session by exploring the work of Jesus Christ, particularly his work on the cross, and we explained some of the key teachings regarding what Jesus' death and resurrection achieved.

The recognition of exactly what Jesus accomplished on the cross and in his resurrection is of infinite value, and given an eternity of time we will never be able to plumb the depths of its wonders. Yet our brief introduction last week did leave us with one crucial and unanswered question: How does the accomplishment of Jesus on the cross (nearly 2,000 years ago) impact our lives in the here and now of the present? In other words, once we've begun to bask in the wonder of the cross' accomplishment, we're left with the question of how that accomplishment is applied to believers.

That message, the clarion call of the cross' impact on lives today, is the pulsating center of what we mean by the gospel of Jesus Christ which is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16).

The Gospel: Really Good News

Calvary Baptist Church talks about the gospel a lot. We are committed to our core to being a "gospel-centered" church, and to ensure that everything we say and do is caught up in this passionate pursuit. The word **gospel** literally means "good news." It is a joyful broadcast. It is a happy announcement. It is a delightful declaration. It is a pleasurable proclamation.

What makes the gospel so pleasurable, so happy, so joyful, so infinitely good? The gospel is the message of what God has done in the person and work of Jesus Christ and how that once-for-all historical event changes everything for those who believe by turning to God in repentance and faith, and for the whole universe that has been imprisoned under sin's curse. It's the grand story of God who acted in history to save sinners and restore the creation he created so long ago.

If you are going to be a member of our local body we want you to love this message, and we want you to be able to explain this story. You might say to yourself, "I don't know enough to explain the gospel." You might be thinking, "I better leave that to the 'professionals.'" You might think these things, but we want to plead with you not to give in to these fears. Every believer is called to be a *gospel* believer. Every saved saint is called to declare this story. How might you explain the gospel? Well, here's a brief example of how a person might explain the gospel in a few minutes:

The Bible tells us God created everything, and he created it good. He created a good world. He delighted in speaking these beings which were in his mind into existence and he created humans (man and woman) special, in his own image, and he created them for the purpose of governing his creation as his representatives on earth and to live in a never ending love relationship with him.

Tragically the world God had created good was ruined by humanity's rebellion against God, a treasonous act of selfishness, pride, arrogance, and foolishness. The Bible calls this rebellion sin. Because of sin all creation was plunged into a hopeless curse of decay and death. The perfect relationship between people and God was ruined. We willfully became his enemies. We became God-haters, and we fell under his just condemnation as traitors against his own perfect and holy righteousness. We became broken people who were guilty of the worst of crimes. We fell under the sentence of death, both physical death and hell.

And yet, miraculously, God did not abandon his creation or the people who had plunged themselves into rebellion against him. He had planned a grand and beautiful rescue mission that would save sinners and lead to the ultimate renewal of the whole universe. The focus of that

eternal rescue plan was the amazing moment when God came into his own creation in the person of Jesus Christ. All of history had been leading to this. God came to us. God came to those who had rejected him and God did for sinners what we could never do for ourselves. He lived a perfect life, the life we should have lived. He died on a cross, condemned in our place, suffering the infinite punishment that we should have suffered. He took our place completely, giving us what we did not have and suffering what we justly deserved.

And yet that death was not the end of the story. No, the Creator of life triumphantly defeated the enemy named death by conquering his own grave by being resurrected back to life three days after his execution. This resurrection was the ultimate declaration that what Jesus accomplished on the cross was all that was necessary for sinners to be saved.

People are united with Jesus' death and resurrection, this miraculous rescue, by turning to God in faith alone, receiving his free gift of grace, trusting in his power, and finding their ultimate joy and satisfaction in a love relationship with him. All of the believer's life then becomes the growing process of slowly being transformed to look more and more like Jesus, reflecting his goodness and beauty, and knowing that because of what he has done we and the rest of the creation around us, will be resurrected and restored to live with God forever.

That's a simple retelling of the gospel message. At its heart it tells us of God's creation, our sin, Jesus' redemption, and how Jesus saves sinners by grace alone through faith alone. We hope as you grow as a believer and as a member of Calvary that you will become more confident in sharing this gospel story with your family and friends. You might not say it exactly like it's written above, but in your own words we hope you'll be empowered to proclaim the amazing truth of what God has done for people like us.

Salvation: The Gospel Transforming Lives

The gospel is everything for the believer and the church, and it's everything to us because it is called "the power of God unto **salvation**" (Romans 1:16). What exactly does that mean? Well, it means the gospel is the good news that tells us how we are saved, made right with God, forgiven, transformed, and made alive in Jesus.

The first foundational truth about the gospel and salvation is that it is absolutely exclusive. **Exclusivism** simply means we believe and affirm a person can be saved only through faith in Jesus Christ. All religions are not equal. All roads do not lead us to God. If we are to be rescued, if we are to be saved, then we must believe the good news of Jesus Christ. There is no other way (John 14:6).

The second foundational truth about the gospel and salvation is that it's all about what Jesus Christ has done, and not about anything we have done. We are not saved because of our worth, or our family, or what local church we belong to. We are only saved because of who Jesus is and what he has done. Salvation is all about Jesus.

Third, the gospel and salvation is given to us as a free gift of **grace**. We do not work for it. We do not earn it. We do not make ourselves good enough to have it. It is a free gift that we are given when we receive it through **faith alone** in Jesus Christ.

Fourth, the gospel and salvation work in the lives of believers in four stages: regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification.

Regeneration is the work of God the Holy Spirit by which he works in the heart and soul of a person who is dead in their sins to breathe life into them, call them to himself, and draw them to Christ in faith. Regeneration includes six key characteristics:

1. **Regeneration brings a heart and life that is dead in sin to life**. It is the moment of new birth. Believers are said to be "**born again**" (John 3:1-8). This phrase refers to the new birth God's Spirit creates in a sinner in regeneration.

2. **Regeneration convicts our own hearts of the reality of our sin**, our desperate condition, our true guilt, and our only hope in Jesus Christ.

3. **Regeneration frees us from the chains of imprisonment that hold us enslaved to sin**, sparking within us a desire for God and enabling us to willfully turn to God in repentance and faith.

4. **Regeneration opens our blind eyes so we become captivated by the truth of the gospel**, the beauty of Christ, and the overwhelming greatness of his gift of grace.

5. **Regeneration calls and draws sinners** to believe and receive God's free gift of salvation.

6. **Regeneration is accomplished solely and freely by the grace of God**, not on the prior basis of anything in us.

Regeneration is the work of God's Spirit in which the reality of faith is created in the heart of a sinner. Faith itself is a gift from God that we in our sin cannot create on our own (Ephesians 2:8). In other words, regeneration leads to our response to God in faith. The question this leads us to is crucial: What is faith? Is faith simply saying a prayer? It certainly includes calling out to God in prayer, but is that all faith is? Is faith just believing the right things? The book of James tells us even the demons believe the right things (James 2:19). So it has to be more than just believing a set of facts. So what is it? Well, just as regeneration has six key characteristics, the faith that regeneration creates has six key characteristics:

1. **Faith is believing the truth of Jesus Christ**. It is the honest recognition and commitment to who he is and what he has done, specifically his death on the cross for sinners and his physical resurrection three days later.

2. **Faith is recognizing and confessing our great sin and our great need of a Savior**. It is the honest recognition that we cannot save ourselves, that we deserve hell, and that we have no hope apart from Jesus Christ.

3. **Faith is repenting of our sins.** Repentance is the proper response to the recognition of the seriousness of sin. It is asking God to forgive us, then turning from our sin and turning to God in Jesus Christ by faith.

4. **Faith is trusting Jesus.** It is being completely dependent on God's grace, power, and work to save us. It is throwing ourselves completely into his arms, knowing it is him and him alone that saves.

5. **Faith is loving Jesus.** True faith always enlivens our affections for Jesus Christ. It is our reaching out to God in a love relationship. It is finding in him the satisfaction of our heart's deepest desires, and finding in him the source of joy and hope.

6. **Faith is obeying Jesus.** Faith always leads God's people to obedience. As sinners we will always struggle with our sin. We will always fail, follow, and obey imperfectly. But faith is the way in which we come under the authority of Jesus Christ. We give up the right to be in charge of our own lives and recognize Jesus' right to be Lord.

Justification is the act of God in which he declares a sinner to be righteous, not guilty, and fully acquitted on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ alone who has fully provided the believer with his perfect righteousness. We are declared to be right with God on the basis of faith alone. At this moment, the moment the sinner turns to God in faith, his sins are forgiven, forgotten, and he or she is completely righteous in the eyes of God.

Sanctification is the lifelong process through which the believer falls more and more in love with Jesus and is transformed to look and live more and more like Jesus. It is growing in grace and the gospel. It is the lifelong process of growing into Christian maturity, and it has several key characteristics:

1. **Sanctification is the result of the gift of the Holy Spirit.** When the regenerated believer turns to God in faith and is justified in his sight, he or she is brought into God's family by being literally indwelled by the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit takes up residence in the life of the believer, and he

changes our lives and empowers us to live in faithfulness and obedience to God.

2. **Sanctification makes believers different.** We are "new creations" (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are not who we used to be. We are transformed. We are not made immediately perfect. We are not made sinless. We are, however, genuinely changed.

3. **Sanctification is a lifetime of patient growth.** Small children do not reach adulthood overnight. No, it takes years of growing, maturing, and learning before a small child grows into a man or a woman. That's the same way it is with believers. We are born again in regeneration, but we do not instantaneously reach full maturity. The Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint.

4. **Sanctification is growing in obedience**. Believers are called to live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and over the course of our lives as believers God's Spirit transforms and empowers us to obey God.

5. **Sanctification is the guarantee of our perseverance in the faith.** We're told in Ephesians that we are "sealed with the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 1:13-14). This sealing is the guarantee that God will complete what he has begun in the life of the believer all because of his grace (Philippians 1:6). We believe that in Christ all believers triumph in grace. Believers still sin. We still battle our sin, but we battle sin knowing we are guaranteed the promise of our ultimate victory. All true believers are saved forever. We cannot lose or forfeit the salvation that has been given by Christ and guarded by his Spirit. We are kept by God, preserved in perseverance throughout our life of sanctification.

Glorification is the culmination of the believer's lifetime of sanctification. This is the moment when at death or at Christ's final return, believers are brought fully into the presence of God, transformed fully into sinless men and women, freed from all the lingering remnants of sin, and ushered into never ending life with God and all the others whom he has saved.

What We Believe About the Church

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (Articles VI, VII, and VIII)

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel

to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.

The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.

Matthew 16:15-19; 18:15-20; Acts 2:41-42,47; 5:11-14; 6:3-6; 13:1-3; 14:23,27; 15:1-30; 16:5; 20:28; Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 3:16; 5:4-5; 7:17; 9:13-14; 12; Ephesians 1:22-23; 2:19-22; 3:8-11,21; 5:22-32; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:18; 1 Timothy 2:9-14; 3:1-15; 4:14; Hebrews 11:39-40; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Revelation 2-3; 21:2-3.

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.

Matthew 3:13-17; 26:26-30; 28:19-20; Mark 1:9-11; 14:22-26; Luke 3:21-22; 22:19-20; John 3:23; Acts 2:41-42; 8:35-39; 16:30-33; 20:7; Romans 6:3-5; 1 Corinthians 10:16,21; 11:23-29; Colossians 2:12.

The first day of the week is the Lord's Day. It is a Christian institution for regular observance. It commemorates the resurrection of Christ from the dead and should include exercises of worship and spiritual devotion, both public and private. Activities on the Lord's Day should be commensurate with the Christian's conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Exodus 20:8-11; Matthew 12:1-12; 28:1ff.; Mark 2:27-28; 16:1-7; Luke 24:1-3,33-36; John 4:21-24; 20:1,19-28; Acts 20:7; Romans 14:5-10; I Corinthians 16:1-2; Colossians 2:16; 3:16; Revelation 1:10.

The Assembly of Believers

As we saw in the introduction, a church is a called out assembly of believers. Occasionally we may refer to the **Universal Church**, which simply refers to all believers in all places at all times, but most of the time when we use the word "church" we are

referring to a **local church**, or a specific group of people who have covenanted together in a specific place and at a specific time in history.

As a local church we exist to ***glorify God in all things, by proclaiming the gospel of Christ to all people, so their lives are transformed for all time***. This is our mission, and inherent to its three sections is the threefold mission of the church. A local church exists to:

1. **Glorify God**: We exist to live our lives together in such a way that God's greatness, goodness, and glory are seen and savored more and more by our members, our community, and the world.

2. **Proclaim the Gospel**: We exist for the purpose of evangelism and missions. We preach Christ and him crucified, and we do so with a passion to see the gospel believed in our own city, state, and all the nations of the world.

3. **Disciple Believers**: We exist to make disciples of Jesus Christ. The task of our church doesn't end with the proclamation of the gospel, but we continue to equip and grow believers in the gospel. The gospel transforms lives, and churches exist to be the community in which that transformation takes place.

The Ministry of the Church

We believe the church carries out its threefold mission through the active and ongoing ministry of its members. What is the ministry of the church? What is the ministry of Calvary Baptist Church? Well, to answer that question we need to first understand what we believe to be the essential **marks of a church**. In other words, what are the crucial and fundamental characteristics of a biblical local church? There are many marks we could name, but using Mark Dever's book *9 Marks of a Healthy Church* as a guide, we list nine essential characteristics we believe are fundamental to who we are:

1. **Expository Preaching –** Preaching that is centered upon and saturated in the biblical text. Expository preaching is preaching in which the meaning of the text is the message of the sermon. We place primary attention to the preaching of the Word of God and we set aside time each week to sit under the preaching of God's word.

2. **Biblical Theology –** Sometimes biblical theology refers to the overarching storyline of the Bible, or what the Bible teaches on a specific subject. We use the term here to simply speak of believing what the Bible teaches. What we believe matters. We want everything we say and do to flow out of the truth that comes from the Bible.

3. **The Gospel –** As we've mentioned already, everything we do and say is centered on the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

4. **A Biblical Understanding of Conversion –** Conversion is God's work. Our task is not to manipulate or to seek to change hearts in our own power, personality, or methods. We are to be faithful to preach the truth of the Bible as it unfolds the message of the gospel. God saves sinners as we do so.

5. **Evangelism and Missions –** We exist to proclaim the gospel and call sinners to repent and believe the good news of Jesus Christ in our own community and around the world.

6. **Meaningful Membership –** Church membership, as we'll see in Session Four, is far more than just coming to a particular church, or having an attachment to a church. It's a covenanted commitment to attend, love, serve, hold accountable, and submit to a specific congregation of believers.

7. **Accountability and Discipline –** Local churches are made up of believers, and are to be made up of believers who are different from the world around us. The New Testament demands a regenerate church membership that is transformed by the gospel, and one of the means of God transforming his people is through the loving, gracious, and merciful exercise of accountability and discipline that calls us to lives of holiness, ongoing repentance of sins, and ever increasing dependence on the gospel.

8. **Discipleship –** We are to be active in preaching, teaching, modeling, and mentoring believers as they grow into mature and faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

9. **Servant Leadership –** Churches are to be governed congregationally, led by a plurality of pastors (or elders/overseers), and served by a body of faithful deacons.

The Ordinances of the Local Church

As the local church seeks to live out these nine marks that characterize the life of its assembly, we believe there are two ordinances Christ has established to be key and ongoing practices that display and demonstrate the truth and glory of the gospel. These two practices, called ordinances, are **Believer's Baptism** and the **Lord's Supper**. Notice we call them *ordinances*, and not *sacraments*. Our hope is that after studying this chapter you will understand why it is so important that we refer to them properly.

We use the term *ordinance* deliberately. Some refer to these practices as *sacraments*. We believe that's a serious mistake that (perhaps unintentionally) communicates a

dangerous view of these two practices. The word *sacrament* implies an impartation of grace. We do not believe there to be any impartation of grace in Believer's Baptism or the Lord's Supper. They are not a means by which we *receive* grace; they provide a picture that we *have received* grace. So we do not call them sacraments because we do not have a sacramental view. We call them *ordinances*. The word "ordinance" means, "command." They are indeed commands of the Lord Jesus. They are not sacramental in nature, meaning they are not means by which we receive grace; they are pictures of the gospel.

Not only are they *pictures* of the gospel, they are what we would call *preachments* of the gospel. Both Believer's Baptism and the Lord's Supper preach the gospel – what the Lord Jesus has done on our behalf. We believe strongly that grace and mercy only come by being united to Jesus Christ by faith alone. No external act provides grace for the believer. Grace comes by faith alone on the basis of Christ and his righteousness alone. Both of these ordinances paint a visible portrait of the gospel in the life of the believer individually and in the life of the local church corporately. With that said, we want our members to understand some key beliefs about these two ordinances:

Believer's Baptism: This is the first and introductory ordinance a believer observes. It is conducted by the local church, in the presence of the local church, and with an individual who has believed the gospel and is now being brought in to the fellowship and assembly as a member of the local church. This is a one-time ordinance and is to be observed after an individual has made a public profession of faith before the assembly of the local church. It was ordained by Christ in Matthew 28:19.

1. **The Member and Believer's Baptism:** We believe baptism is to be observed only after an individual has made a deliberate and conscious commitment to Jesus Christ by faith, repented of their sins, and has sought publically to be identified with his people. There are no instances or records of infants or any unconverted persons being baptized in the entirety of the New Testament. Infants are a gift from God. Children are to be raised in the fear and admonition of the Lord, and they are to be taught the gospel in the hope of their salvation. Baptism, however, as the initiatory ordinance of the local church, is to be practiced by believers only.

2. **The Mode of Believer's Baptism:** We believe baptism is to be observed only through the immersion of the believer into water in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We reject as legitimate baptism any understanding that deviates from the immersion of believers in water. While we recognize as believers those who have truly trusted Christ on the basis of faith alone apart from legitimate and biblical baptism, we do not acknowledge that any baptism is legitimate apart from immersion. Other believers from other denominations who "sprinkle" may indeed be true believers but have not been baptized as the New Testament commands. We believe this for two reasons:

A. First, textually the word "baptize," from the Greek *baptizo*, literally means to "plunge under." If the authors of the New Testament had meant to communicate any idea other than immersion they could have used words like *echeo* or *rhantizo*, which specifically refer to sprinkling and pouring. They did not use these words. They literally said believers must be "immersed" or "plunged under" water.
B. Second, the symbolic meaning portrayed in baptism demands immersion. Baptism paints three essential portraits.
    i. First, it shows in action the key teachings of the gospel: Jesus' own death (entrance into the water), burial (submersion under the water), and resurrection (being lifted up out of the water).
    ii. Second, it displays that the believer is publically proclaiming that he or she has been united to and identified with Jesus Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection.
    iii. Third, it presents the reality that our sins have been forgiven, washed, cleansed, and taken away by our union to Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection.

3. **The Meaning of Believer's Baptism:** Baptism is a symbolic proclamation that the believer has been united to Christ, has entered into the membership of a local church, and from that point forward is publicly identifying with Christ and his people. Baptism does not save (salvation is by faith alone) nor does it complete or finalize the believer's salvation. It is however, to be done in obedience to Jesus Christ, and the New Testament knows nothing of a believer who refuses to be baptized. While not providing any saving grace itself, it is absolutely demanded by Christ that believers identify with him and his church through baptism.

4. **The Mandate of Believer's Baptism:** Believer's Baptism is an ordinance of the local church and is to be conducted in and through the assembly and fellowship of a local church. Baptism may never be disconnected or divorced from the life of a local body of believers.

The Lord's Supper: This ordinance, sometimes referred to as Holy Communion, is an ongoing ordinance that is to be celebrated by and with the whole assembly of believers in a local church. It was commanded as an observed ordinance by Christ in Matthew 26:26-29, Luke 22:14-23, and 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. The New Testament does not mandate how often a local church should observe this ordinance, but it does instruct us observe it regularly. Some churches observe the Lord's Supper weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually. At Calvary, we typically observe the Lord's Supper several times periodically throughout the year. As with Believer's Baptism, the Lord's Supper has four foundational characteristics:

1. **The Members of the Supper:** Like baptism, the Lord's Supper is only to be observed by believers who have publically proclaimed their faith in Jesus

Christ and have joined the fellowship of a local church. This means that both salvation and baptism are prerequisites to partaking of the Lord's Supper. We practice what is referred to as *close* communion. We acknowledge the Lord's Supper is intended to be observed by those who are members of the local church celebrating the Supper, but during our observance of this ordinance we will also invite to the Lord's Table any who may be present among us who are professed believers visiting from another local church of like faith and order and who have been biblically baptized.

2. **The Mode of the Supper:** Believers during a worship service of an assembled local church partake of portions of unleavened bread and drink of the "fruit of the vine."

3. **The Meaning of the Supper:** The Lord's Supper is a repeated act of symbolic remembrance. The elements of the Supper do not literally become the body and blood of Christ, but they symbolically portray the gospel in representing Jesus' body that was torn and pierced and his atoning blood that was shed for sinners. When believers partake of the Lord's Supper we do so to showcase the cross-centered nature of the gospel and to remember his sacrifice on our behalf.

4. **The Mandate of the Supper:** Finally, like baptism we believe the Lord's Supper is only to be observed by local churches. This is not an individualized ordinance. It is a church ordinance. This means it is to be observed only in the presence of the assembled believers in a local church. Because this is an ordinance of the local church, the local church itself has the authority to set the regular times and observances of this ordinance and to exclude from participation those whom it deems to be unrepentant and in ongoing sin and thus under the disciplinary care of the local church.

The Polity of the Local Church

The final aspect of our shared belief regarding the church is our understanding of local church polity. **Polity** is a word that simply refers to the way an assembled body is organized and governed. So how should a local church be organized and governed? What are the distinctions of how our local church is organized? Well, we believe there are five key characteristics of local church polity:

1. **First, we believe the local church belongs to Jesus Christ.** He is the head of the church. We are his. We are the sheep and he is our Chief Shepherd. At its heart the local church does not belong to its leaders or its members. It belongs to Jesus Christ who has loved the church and given his life for the church.

2. **Second, we believe each local church is fully autonomous**. The **autonomy** of the local church simply means each local church is fully governed by itself and functions apart from any outside group or hierarchy. A congregation of believers may choose to voluntary enter into an association with other churches (like the SBC which we will discuss in our next session), but the other churches that make up that association or the elected leadership of that association do not control or dictate the ministry or mission of the local church. To put it simply, Calvary Baptist Church governs Calvary Baptist Church.

3. **Third, we believe the local church is to be governed by the congregation**. **Congregationalism** simply means the local church governs the local church. We are a democratically governed assembly of believers who live and function together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. All leadership within the church is democratically elected by its members and holds itself and its leaders accountable under the controlling authority of the Word of God.

4. **Fourth, we believe in the Priesthood of the Believer**. This simply means each professing believer and member of the local church is equal in the sight of God in their worth and salvation, and are equipped by God to serve the local body of believers through the use of gifts that God's Spirit has empowered in them to use. While some members of the assembly may be set aside for specific areas of leadership or service, each member, whether they be men or women, young or old, is equally entitled to the privileges and responsibilities of membership in the local church.

5. **Fifth, we believe the Bible establishes two major offices of leadership in and for the local church: Pastors/Elders and Deacons**
   A. Pastors (or elders/overseers) are servant leaders who are equipped by God to lead his people through the shepherding that comes through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. While there is usually one primary pastor, we believe the New Testament models the need for a plurality (or multitude) of pastors who together fulfill the service of leadership to the congregation (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).
   B. Deacons are servant leaders who are elected by the church to assist the pastors in ministry to and servant leadership within the church (1 Timothy 3:8-13).
   C. The local church may democratically elect other members to lead or serve in various capacities or roles like committees or other concentrated ministries. While this is good and often necessary, the offices of pastor and deacon are the only scripturally mandated leaders within the local church.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is the gospel? What are some ways we can describe the gospel and share it in our own words?

2. Briefly tell us about how you came to faith in Jesus Christ. What is your own story of receiving God's grace by faith?

3. How important is it that we believe we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, who is revealed in the Bible alone, to the glory of God alone?

4. What are some of the hopeful implications of salvation being solely the work of God for our life, evangelism, and ministry in the church?

5. What do we mean by "the perseverance of the saints?" Why is the truth that we cannot lose our salvation both freeing and strengthening? What are some of the dangers of having an unhealthy view of perseverance?

6. Why is it so important for believers to meet together weekly for worship and to hear God's Word preached?

7. Review the list of marks for a local church. Are there any you don't understand? Why are these characteristics crucial to the life of a local church?

8. How important are the ordinances of the local church? Why? What do we lose or miss if we don't observe these ordinances as the Bible commands?

9. Why is it vital that we understand the ordinances to be celebrations and portrayals of the gospel and not what saves the believer?

10. Why should believers care about church polity? Why do you think it's important for new church members to understand how a local church is governed?

Chapter Three

Who Are These Baptists?

An Introduction to Baptists and the SBC

Key Terms

Denomination
Protestant
The Reformation
Puritans and Separatists
Anabaptists
Particular Baptists
The Second London Confession
The Modern Mission Movement
The Triennial Convention
The Southern Baptist Convention
The Cooperative Program
The Baptist Faith and Message
The Conservative Resurgence

An Introduction to Denominations

When you join a local church, you are joining that particular local church. You are covenanting with that specific community of believers. Joining a local church is not joining a denomination. Denominations are not organizations or institutions that a person can join. Believers join local churches.

With that said, you may be wondering why we are dedicating an entire session to explaining who Baptists are and what the Southern Baptist Convention is. The reason we think this is important for new members is because while you are joining our local church, our local church as a congregation has voluntarily identified itself with the Southern Baptist Convention. Our local church is a Southern Baptist church, and that's why you need to know what that means.

The Family Tree of Christianity

Sometimes denominations are characterized as unbiblical human institutions. They are sometimes misrepresented as manmade organizations that are really foreign to the New Testament. While it is true that denominations as we know them are not spoken of in the New Testament, it is also true that their development is a natural consequence of the growth of Christianity around the world and throughout church history.

A **denomination** may be simply defined as a group of like-minded local churches that are joined together at some level of belief, fellowship, structure, and mission. In other words, denominations have developed throughout history as local churches of similar belief have joined together, fellowshipped together, organized themselves, and worked together for a common purpose.

Denominations are important for two major reasons. First, like-minded churches that share common theological convictions, a shared history, and a common purpose are naturally able to work together and join together for fellowship and ministry. Second, churches that work or cooperate together can typically accomplish far more together than if they merely work alone. So denominations are important for these two reasons, but we also believe the core concepts that gave rise to denominations are present in the New Testament text:

1. New Testament churches partnered together for a common mission.
2. New Testament churches fellowshipped together around shared beliefs.
3. New Testament churches structured themselves in an organized manner.

So while it is true you won't find modern denominations in the pages of the Bible, we do find a pattern and model of local church cooperation that set the stage for what grew into what we know as denominations.

Church history has seen the gradual growth and flourishing of a vibrant family tree, and if we are to understand who we are in our denomination we need to try and wrap our heads around how we got all the variety of denominations within Christianity.

Within the first few hundred years of church history the gospel spread slowly but steadily throughout the Roman world as local churches began to spring to life in the major urban centers around the Mediterranean Sea. Local churches existed and proclaimed the gospel in a world that was very different from Christianity, with paganism being the majority religious environment and political factions often at odds with and even hostile to the new religious movement that claimed to follow Jesus Christ.

With the reign of Constantine, beginning around 312 AD, Christianity became a legal religion, then the favored religion, and ultimately the official religion of the Roman Empire. The state government began to pour large amounts of resources into churches and began to see the church as an important and good social structure that provided stability, ministry, leadership, and order within what was an increasingly fractured society.

Around the year 500 AD the Roman Empire collapsed and Europe began to implode as the economic system(s) of Europe failed and various barbarian tribes began taking control of large geographic regions. The empire had fallen, and yet the church, Christianity as it had been built up and strengthened by the empire, still flourished. In the early years of what became known as the "dark ages," Christianity (and especially the organized leadership and traditions flowing out of the ancient center of the empire, Rome) became the glue that held society together. The church as an institution became the dominant pervasive power and social unifier for all of Europe, and what we know as the Roman Catholic Church was born.

All of Europe (for the most part) became identified with the institutional Roman Catholic Church (RCC hereafter), but that didn't stop the continued development of what would become modern denominations. In 1054 the churches in the east separated themselves from the RCC to form the Eastern (or Greek) Orthodox Church. This was the first major split within the organized structure of Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church would see another split beginning around 1517 as a group of church leaders began to bring their local churches together in an attempt to return to what they believed to be a far more biblical gospel and model for local church life. These reformers, and the churches that identified with their teachings became known as Protestants (because they protested against the Roman Catholic Church).

With the birth of Protestant churches Christianity began to exist within **three distinct branches: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism.**

At this point we'll focus exclusively on the third branch, Protestantism. Protestantism at its birth was divided around different regions, beliefs, and traditions. There was no single protestant tradition. From the early sixteenth century there were Lutherans, Anabaptists, Reformed, and Anglican (or "Church of England") traditions with countless local churches identifying themselves around these traditions. Protestantism continued to maintain a variety of separate but similar **traditions** that eventually included (along with the original traditions listed above) Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal (Charismatic) traditions.

A tradition then, is a particular stream or river within the branch of Protestantism, and that's where denominations themselves begin to emerge. Denominations are birthed out of individual traditions as local churches that identify as belonging to a particular tradition further organize themselves more closely together and join together in more specific ways for more specific purposes.

So the Presbyterian tradition includes denominations like the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA, which is fairly liberal) as well as the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), which are both very conservative. Methodism (or the Wesleyan Tradition) includes denominations like the United Methodist Church, Methodist Protestants, Episcopal Methodists, and Nazarenes. The Pentecostal Tradition (a tradition that is very similar to Methodism while being more charismatic) includes denominations like the Church of God, Assemblies of God, and many other smaller denominations around the world (some of which even identify themselves as "nondenominational"). The Baptist tradition is made up of denominations like Missionary Baptists, the American Baptist Convention, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and the Southern Baptist Convention, among dozens of others.

So to summarize, Calvary Baptist Church can be described in four important ways:

1. We are a **Christian Church**. We are a local group of believers in Jesus Christ.

2. We are a **Protestant Church**. We identify with the core beliefs that were birthed out of the Protestant Reformation.

3. We are a **Baptist Church**. Our particular tradition within the branch of Protestantism is Baptist. This specifically relates to what we believe about the local church and what we believe about baptism.

4. Finally, we are a **Southern Baptist Church**. Our specific denomination within the Baptist tradition was founded in 1845 and our local congregation voluntary supports and identifies with this denomination.

A (Very) Short History of Baptists

The Protestant Reformation

As mentioned above, Christianity in Western Europe was, while existing within surprising varieties of faith, fairly uniform in its reliance on and commitment to Roman Catholicism during the years 1000-1500 AD. It would be a mistake to see medieval Catholicism as singular. There were many groups within Christendom, and the Roman Catholic Church existed in the expressions of a variety of traditions. Yet the Roman Church was, as had been true at the fall of the Roman Empire, the single great unifier of all societies and earthly kingdoms.

This unification of Western Europe began to fracture during the high Middle Ages as both the Black Death (leading to mortality rates of up to half the population) and the Italian Renaissance began to erupt across the continent (1300-1400). This fourteenth century, a hundred years of transition, also saw the first slow moves toward a popular religious transformation. In England the early reformer John Wycliffe (1320-1384) began to make the Bible available in the language of the people and began to question the unquestioned authority of the Pope. The papacy itself (thought to be the greatest spiritual and temporal authority in the world) also began to implode toward the end of the fourteenth century as the Western Schism led to multiple men claiming to be the one true Pope.

All of these slow changes in European culture and society set the stage for what is known as the Protestant Reformation. This popular religious revival and social upheaval brought large territories of Europe into conflict with and subsequent separation from the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Luther (1483-1546) is usually considered to be the primary figure of the period, beginning the first wave of reformation in Germany around the year 1517. Luther, however, was not alone in his reformation agenda. In Switzerland, Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531) led his congregation to separate from Rome. In Geneva, the French theologian John Calvin

(1509-1564) became the leading theologian and author that put the thought and spirit of the reformation movements into print. All these different waves of the protestant revolution were united around a firm set of three foundational principles:

1. The supreme, sole, and final authority for the church is the Bible, not church tradition or the papacy.

2. The church is an assembly of believers in Jesus Christ, not an institutionalized hierarchy flowing from a human figure like the Pope.

3. The gospel is the message of salvation, a gift from God that is received by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, revealed in the Scriptures alone, to the glory of God alone.

Puritanism and Separatism

While the Protestant Reformation was theologically united around these three foundational assertions, in reality the way it developed in different environments and kingdoms was sometimes vastly different. One of the strangest developments within the Protestant Reformation is how it transformed England, in what became known as the English Reformation.

Unlike the deep convictional rebellions of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, the English Reformation began not over a difference in theology, but rather over a difference in international politics. Henry VIII, the king of England, was married to Katherine of Aragon, the widow of his late brother Arthur. They had not been able to have a son, however, and Henry had already fallen in love with a much younger mistress named Anne Boleyn. The problem centered on the Pope. Henry needed a dispensation, or permission, from the Pope for his divorce (or annulment) from Katherine to be considered legal. The Pope refused to grant his request, so in 1534, with the Act of Supremacy, Henry VIII removed his kingdom from the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and declared himself the supreme head of the Church of England.

Under the influence of men like Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer, the Church of England began to take a noticeably protestant shift theologically. After Henry's daughter Elizabeth I became queen in 1558, she stabilized her reign and the theological position of the Church of England into what became known as Anglicanism, or a "Middle-Way" between Catholicism and Protestantism. This halfway house between the two religious extremes became the official religion of England.

This bridge, however, did not satisfy some of the more committed protestant believers. They genuinely believed in the three foundational pillars of the Reformation, and they also believed worship in the Church of England had become polluted by its reliance on manmade traditions and rituals that were not biblical, but were instead holdovers from

Catholicism. These passionate Protestants developed into two major groups: **Puritans** and **Separatists**.

Puritans were protestant Christians who sought to reform the beliefs and practices of the Anglican Church. They wanted to purify it. Separatists agreed with the Puritans theologically, but believed that the Church of England was too powerfully corrupt to be transformed from within, so they advocated total separation from the English Church and the formation of independent congregations outside the official hierarchy of the official religion. The Puritans were strong influencers of English society throughout the seventeenth century, and some eventually migrated to the colonies of North America (especially into the Massachusetts Bay Colony). The Separatists also migrated outside England, with some groups moving to the Netherlands and some coming to the colonies of North America (with one group finding passage on a small ship known as the *Mayflower* in 1620).

A People Called Baptists

Out of the communities of Puritans and Separatists, the first Baptists began to emerge in the early seventeenth century in England. A Separatist community that had emigrated from England to the Netherlands under the leadership of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys is usually thought to have established the first explicitly Baptist church in 1609. This community came into some contact with a group known as Anabaptists, an extreme offshoot of the Protestant Reformation that advocated separation from society, pacifism, and believer's baptism. The Anabaptists are the direct ancestors of both the Amish and the Mennonites. While it is true that Smyth later joined a Mennonite congregation, the actual influence the Anabaptists had on the young Baptist community is hard to say. There seems to have been little direct influence, but there were some very real similarities between these religious groups.

Refusing to join the Mennonite church in the Netherlands with his friend John Smyth, Thomas Helwys returned to England and established the first Baptist church in England in 1612. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Baptist congregations would continue to grow in England, developing within two distinct traditions. The General Baptists continued to find their direct link back to Smyth and Helwys and over time came to have deep connections with groups like the Quakers as well as (unfortunately) heretical movements like Unitarianism. The **Particular Baptists**, on the other hand, became the dominant Baptist group in England and shared much in common with their Puritan (and later Presbyterian) cousins, except for their views on baptism and church government. Their theological beliefs became fully expressed in the famous **Second London Confession of Faith of 1689.**

So who were these Baptists? What made a person a convictional Baptist? While there were different strands of belief, and some congregations highlighted certain beliefs

more than others, Baptists generally could be described as local congregations of Christian believers united around these five core values and beliefs:

1. **Biblical Faith in the Biblical Gospel:** Baptists understood the Bible was the supreme revelation of God to man, and the gospel of justification by faith alone (in union with their Reformation ancestors) was the gospel that was fully taught in the pages of the Bible. Many of the British Baptists (especially the Particular Baptists) were rigorous proponents of Reformed Christianity, being united in this respect with the English Puritans.

2. **Local Autonomous Congregations of Separated Believers:** The doctrine of the church was of absolute importance for Baptists. They were a "called out" people, and therefore Baptists were highlighted by a firm commitment to their local autonomous congregations, decentralized authority (with no bishops, councils, etc.), and fervent church discipline governed by the congregations themselves.

3. **Congregational Government:** Baptist churches were committed to the members of their local congregations being the governing authority for their congregations.

4. **Believer's Baptism:** Baptism was to be conducted by immersion in water upon a person's profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord as the entrance ordinance into the fellowship of a local church.

5. **Religious Liberty:** Baptists called for the ideal of a free church in a free state, meaning they called for a distinction between the church and state government, in which no government mandated a religion forced upon the people and no government oversight or control was placed upon the free and autonomous congregations of believers.

These English Baptists eventually began to emerge in the North American colonies. Roger Williams and John Clarke founded the first Baptist churches in North America in the colony of Rhode Island in 1639. Throughout the latter part of the seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century, Baptist congregations began to gain wide popularity in the colonies, becoming key areas of growth during the Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century, and beginning to draw large segments of the population, particularly along the western frontiers of the colonies and later the young United States of America.

The Modern Missionary Movement

In the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century God began a remarkable work of revival that began what we know as modern missions, and this missionary movement was primarily birthed in and through the work of the gospel in local Baptist churches.

Prior to the eighteenth century missionaries were largely independent individuals who travelled to various ports and nations alongside tradesmen and merchants with the rise of travel and trade in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The group known as the Moravians were fervent supporters of taking the gospel to new lands, and the congregational descendants of the Puritans in New England colonies were passionately committed to taking the gospel to the native peoples of North America, spurred on by the examples of both David Brainerd and Jonathan Edwards.

Yet for the most part, these missionary endeavors were privately funded enterprises that failed to enlist the support of large numbers of congregations to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

That began to change around the year 1800. For the first time in church history, since the time of the New Testament, Christian leaders would marshal the support and cooperation of a network of local churches to fully fund the sending of missionaries from the local churches to different countries all over the world. The father of this movement was a British Baptist shoemaker named William Carey (1761-1834). Carey, along with close friends and Baptist leaders like Andrew Fuller (1754-1815), founded the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792. This society existed for the sole purpose of raising support to send missionaries from England to other countries around the world. Carey, with his family, travelled to India where he would live as a missionary, church planter, and Bible translator until his death in 1834.

In the young United States the call to take the gospel to the ends of the earth also began to flame in the hearts and lives of young men through the great revival known as the Second Great Awakening. Being influenced by this revival, Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) became the first foreign missionary from North America. Judson, along with his wife, and friend Luther Rice, was commissioned as a Congregational missionary to India in 1812. Upon arrival in India, however, both Judson and Rice had come to the firm conclusion that the Bible clearly taught believer's baptism by immersion, and so they were biblically baptized by William Carey and became Baptists.

But there was a problem. The Congregational churches of the United States had sent them, and now they had renounced the basic theological premises of those Congregational churches (that taught infant baptism), and the Baptist churches in the young republic had found themselves unknowingly with a group of missionaries in another country that needed their support. So Judson would stay in India (and later move to Burma, modern day Myanmar), and Luther Rice returned to try and organize and raise funds to support Judson and his family from the Baptist churches in the United States.

Luther Rice returned to the United States and was able to encourage Baptist congregations to join together to form the first Baptist denomination in the United States, the American Baptist Missionary Union, more commonly known as the

Triennial Convention. The Triennial Convention was a network of cooperating churches that voluntarily agreed to join together to support mission work, particularly the Judsons who were beginning their work in Burma. The denomination became known as the Triennial Convention because representatives from the local Baptist churches met every three years. By 1840 this young denomination had become a major financier of missionary and gospel endeavors, with missionaries serving around the world, cooperating churches in every state of the Union, and with numerous colleges and seminaries, a Home Mission Society, the American Bible Society, and the Baptist Publication Society.

The Southern Baptist Convention

From the first beginnings of the missionary movement with the Second Great Awakening, the Baptist churches in the United States had joined together as strong supporters of international missions. But there was a problem. The political, cultural, and religious societies of the United States were beginning to collapse as the United States became more and more divided over the issue of slavery. Slavery was the one moral and social issue that divided churches throughout the United States.

Slavery had been brought to North America during the early years of the English colonies, and after the invention of the Cotton Gin had become the dominant economic workforce for the American South, where it was still legal by state law and under constitutional protection. This one issue, however, began to divide not only the political realms of Washington, but also the mission-focused fellowship of local Baptist congregations.

In 1843, Baptists in the Northern states who identified themselves as abolitionists (those opposed to slavery) formed the Northern Baptist Missionary Society, a missions agency that was in complete opposition to slavery. In 1844 the divide between Baptist congregations continued to widen when the Triennial Convention, being influenced by Northern Baptists, refused to commission James Reeve of Georgia (and a slave owner) as a missionary through the Home Mission Society.

In response, Baptist churches from the southern states (in a denominational form of secession) separated from the Triennial Convention to form the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845 in Augusta, Georgia. The SBC was modeled on the organization of the Triennial Convention, with the exception of annual meetings (instead of every three years) and the explicit endorsement of slave-owners as missionaries.

Slavery was a great sin and a moral failure that stained the history of the early United States. There is no excuse for it, and there is no way to sweep the moral blindness and failures of those who endorsed slavery under the rug. This is especially true of those Christian leaders within local churches who sought to have their churches united around the gospel to the ends of the earth. Slavery was and is antithetical to the gospel,

and it is in the ruins of this social sin that the denomination known as the SBC was born. There is no way to excuse the failure of those Christian leaders. The only thing that can be done is to acknowledge and confess the truth, and this has led the SBC (officially in 1995) to publicly repent of and renounce the support of slavery that had led to its formation. While this early history of the SBC is painful, it is fair to say that the division between Baptists during the mid-nineteenth century lay at the feet of both northern and southern leaders. Both groups were complicit in the failure to deal with slavery biblically and both groups were responsible together for the split within the Triennial Convention.

The SBC began to grow and gain a widening influence in the southern states, and in 1859 the SBC founded its first educational seminary, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) in South Carolina. As the SBC grew, however, the United States was becoming increasingly divided on the issue of slavery, and ultimately this singular issue would lead to the Civil War (1861-1865), the greatest and most violent loss of blood and life in the history of the United States. With the defeat of the southern Confederacy, the states of the American South were left in both defeat and shambles. For a while the survival of the SBC was in question, and the survival of SBTS was in serious doubt. The denomination, along with the southern people themselves, began to recover and by the turn of the twentieth century the SBC had grown and prospered to the point of becoming the dominant Baptist denomination within the United States. The SBC became increasingly stronger as the remnants of the Triennial Convention became increasingly liberal in their understandings of biblical teachings.

The twentieth century was the century of growth and dominance within the SBC as it became the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. 1925 became a key year in the life of the denomination. This year saw both the creation and adoption of the **Cooperative Program** (the primary funding mechanism for the denomination) and the **Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M)**, the official statement of faith from the denomination.

The fifty years following that landmark year of 1925 saw both continuing explosive growth (gaining a membership of over 16,000,000 people) in the SBC as well as a slow shift toward more moderate and liberal interpretations of faith. While most SBC churches maintained a firm commitment to biblical truth (highlighted in a revised BF&M in 1963), many of the SBC seminaries and key SBC leaders were far more accepting and accommodating of divergent interpretations and explicit denials of historic Christian beliefs. As the 1970's began SBC churches maintained a popular and conservative faith while the denomination as a whole was on a trajectory more in line with the larger mainline protestant denominations (like the PCUSA, UMC, and Episcopal Church).

This began to change in the mid-1970's in a decades long transformation of the SBC known as the **Conservative Resurgence**. Beginning around 1975, this reformation

within the SBC (led by leaders like Paige Patterson, Adrian Rogers, Paul Pressler, Jerry Vines, Charles Stanley, and Albert Mohler) began to slowly change the presidential leadership of trustees, agencies, seminaries, and other denominational bodies to leadership that fully affirmed the historic gospel and the conviction of the full and total inerrancy of the Bible. More liberal and/or moderate congregations, along with denominational leadership that began to be removed, withdrew from the SBC to form the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as a more "left of center" alternative to the SBC.

This is a very basic introductory history of Baptists and the SBC up until the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. With this history in mind, it is also helpful to introduce a basic introduction to the Southern Baptist Convention:

An Introduction to the Southern Baptist Convention

Local Churches and Voluntary Cooperation

As we mentioned in Session Two, one of our foundational beliefs about the church is local church autonomy. That means each local church is independent of one another and autonomous from the authority, oversight, or control of any outside denomination, agency, or power, whether it be religious or political. Our local church governs our local church. The members of our local church are themselves the only governing body for our local church. We choose our literature. We choose our pastors and deacons. We choose our ministries, missions focus, and budget. We choose where and how our annual budget will be divided and distributed. The local church governs the local church.

So how do autonomous local churches belong to denominations? How can we say that we are a Southern Baptist church? Well, it's helpful to say up front what we do not mean when we call ourselves Southern Baptists. The Southern Baptist Convention does not own our name, property, or rights to anything we have or do. They do not direct or mandate that we as a congregation do, give, or support anything. The SBC does not have any governing authority over our local body. Other SBC churches do not have governing authority over our local church. So to say we are a part of the SBC does not mean our church is owned and operated by an outside organization or institution.

So what does it mean for a local autonomous church to be a part of the Southern Baptist Convention? The answer to that question is the key concept of **voluntary cooperation**. Local churches may choose to identify with and support the missions causes of the Southern Baptist Convention. We voluntarily choose to support and partner with other SBC churches for the purpose of missions and ministry in the United States and around the world. So what makes our local church a Southern Baptist Church? We do. The membership of our local church has chosen to voluntarily identify with this specific Baptist denomination.

Within SBC life, there are three basic levels of voluntary cooperation between individual local churches: the associational level, the state level, and the national level. Each local church chooses which of these three spheres of cooperation it will cooperate with and contribute to, and most (like ourselves) choose to voluntarily cooperate within all three levels of SBC cooperation, although that is not a mandatory obligation to be a part of the SBC. It's probably helpful to explain a little more about these three levels of cooperation:

1. **The Associational Level:** Local Southern Baptist churches in a specific geographic region cooperate together for the purpose of fellowship, ministry, and missions in their counties and communities. Our local church belongs to the Black Hills Area Baptist Association. This is an association made up of SBC churches in our local region of South Dakota.

2. **The State Level:** Local Southern Baptist churches typically also choose to voluntarily cooperate with all the other SBC churches within their state in what is known as the state convention. Calvary Baptist Church is a cooperating church within the Dakota Baptist Convention (DBC). Our state convention joins SBC churches in North Dakota and South Dakota for missions, ministry, and the mutual equipping of each church to fulfill the mission God has given us.

3. **The National Level:** The national level of cooperation is what most of us think of when we think of the Southern Baptist Convention. That is appropriate because the SBC is the national and largest level of cooperation between Southern Baptist churches. Local churches throughout the United States (and Canada) cooperate together for the purpose of ministry and missions all around the world.

The Core Basics of the Southern Baptist Convention

Now that we're familiar with the various levels of voluntary cooperation between Southern Baptist churches, we can explain the three basics of the SBC. These are the three essential aspects of our denomination:

1. **The Cooperative Program (CP):** This is the missions and ministry fundraising and financial cooperation mechanism of the SBC. Each individual local church operates through the financial tithes and offerings of its members. Southern Baptist churches voluntarily set aside a portion of their yearly budget to be joined with all the other SBC churches through the CP to fund the missions endeavors and agencies of the denomination. The vast majority of a local church's yearly budget goes to the operation and ministry of that local church. SBC churches set aside a self-designated portion of their budget to go to their local association, the state convention, and the national convention. Out of the money that is sent to the state convention, they retain a portion of it, and then combine the rest with all the other money given through the thousands of SBC

churches to support missionaries, seminaries, and all the other agencies of the SBC.

2. **The Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M):** Southern Baptist churches believe the Bible and the Bible alone is the all-sufficient, inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God. No human creed or statement of belief is to be granted equal standing with the inspired words of the Bible. That does not mean, however, that statements of faith are unimportant. In fact historically, Baptists have made a strong commitment to statements of faith as clear summaries of what we believe the Bible teaches and what we believe is necessary to be believed to be included within our fellowship as local churches and as cooperative conventions. Because of that commitment to summarize what we believe the Bible teaches and what we believe are the unifying beliefs of believers within Baptist churches, SBC churches adopted our statement of faith known as the Baptist Faith and Message. This was originally written and adopted in 1925, but was revised and adopted again by the convention of local churches in both 1963 and 2000. The 2000 edition of the BF&M is the official statement of faith for Calvary Baptist Church.

3. **The Annual Meeting:** Technically, the Southern Baptist Convention only exists for a few days each year. The denomination that we know of as the SBC is only in operation during its annual meeting (usually at the beginning of June). Democratically elected members from Southern Baptist churches meet each year for a time of joint worship, preaching, and denominational business sessions. Reports from convention agencies are heard, resolutions and motions are considered and voted upon, and the budget for the upcoming year is presented and approved. When the annual meeting is not in session the SBC only exists through the agencies that operate through its budget and through the state conventions and local Southern Baptist churches around the country.

Southern Baptist Agencies and Entities

While the SBC only exists for the few days of its annual business session, its entities and agencies operate throughout the year conducting the business the convention has approved through the budget it has allocated. So to better know the SBC, apart from attending the annual convention itself, we should familiarize ourselves with the different agencies and entities that are owned by and operate through the SBC:

1. **The Executive Committee:** The SBC is made up of local Southern Baptist churches, and the convention itself is only in session a few days each year. So who oversees the operation of the various agencies and ensures the business the convention has approved and directed is carried out each year? That job is conducted by the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee. The convention elects and hires a full-time executive director (the president of the executive committee) who acts as CEO for the convention. He leads the

executive committee, made up of men and women nominated and elected at the annual convention each year, who oversee the day-to-day operations of the SBC while the convention itself is not in session. Its headquarters and main offices are located in Nashville, Tennessee.

2. **The Southern Baptist Convention Missions Agencies:** The SBC was founded for the purpose of local churches cooperating together to support missionaries around the world. The two largest agencies of the convention, and the heartbeat of everything the SBC is, are the two missions agencies that employ and support thousands of missionaries all around the world.

   A. **The International Mission Board (IMB):** This agency exists to fund and support missionaries serving in countries all around the world. The IMB, through the financial gifts of the Cooperative Program, fully supports around 4,000 missionaries in over 150 nations around the world. Each year SBC churches take a convention-wide offering (The Lottie Moon Christmas Offering) alongside its normal CP giving, of which one hundred percent of the proceeds go directly to the IMB for the support of missionaries. The headquarters of the IMB are in Richmond, Virginia.

   B. **The North American Mission Board (NAMB):** This agency exists to fund missionaries living and working in the United States and Canada alongside our Southern Baptist churches. It supports around 5,000 missionaries who work in church planting, discipleship ministry, evangelism, local church support, disaster relief, and a variety of service ministries. Each year SBC churches take a convention-wide offering (The Annie Armstrong Easter Offering) alongside its normal CP giving, in which one hundred percent of the proceeds go directly to NAMB for the support of missionaries. The headquarters for NAMB is in Alpharetta, Georgia.

3. **The Southern Baptist Seminaries:** The SBC owns and operates six CP supported seminaries in the United States. These educational institutions operate through the gifts that come through the Cooperative Program as well as through private donations and endowments. They provide a wide range of both classroom and online instruction at the undergraduate (B.A., B.S.), graduate (M.Div., M.A., MTS), and postgraduate (ThM, D.Min., EdD, PhD) level. They exist to train ministers of the gospel for service in local churches and to the nations as missionaries. A person from any denomination may attend one of the seminaries, but students who are members of Southern Baptist churches receive a reduced tuition rate due to the funding received through the Cooperative Program.
   A. **The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary:** Located in Louisville, Kentucky, this seminary was the first Southern Baptist seminary, having been founded in 1859. It is considered the flagship seminary of the convention. More information is available at http://www.sbts.edu.

B. **Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary:** Located in Fort Worth, TX, this seminary was founded in 1908. More information is available at http://www.swbts.edu.
C. **New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary:** Located in New Orleans, Louisiana, this seminary was founded in 1916. More information is available at http://www.nobts.edu.
D. **Gateway Seminary**: Located in Ontario, California, this seminary was founded in 1944. More information is available at http://www.gs.edu.
E. **Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary:** Located in Wake Forest, North Carolina, this seminary was founded in 1950. More information is available at http://www.sebts.edu.
F. **Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary:** Located in Kansas City, Missouri, this seminary was founded in 1957. More information is available at http://www.mbts.edu.

4. **LifeWay Christian Resources:** This is the largest Christian publishing house and Christian retailer in the United States. It includes publishing imprints like Broadman & Holman, Bible study materials for local churches, small groups, and personal use, and it operates the LifeWay Christian Stores. LifeWay has its national headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee. It is also the only SBC agency that does not receive any funding through the Cooperative Program, operating solely on its yearly profits.

5. **GuideStone Financial Resources:** This annuity agency offers health insurance, retirement plans, and financial planning services for convention agency employees, pastors, and students at SBC seminaries.

6. **The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission:** This agency is the public voice and face of the SBC. It seeks to engage society, culture, and the government (at local, state, and national levels), with the gospel of Jesus Christ and a solid biblical worldview and convictions regarding issues of ethical and social importance. It also provides Southern Baptist churches with resources for understanding, addressing, and speaking to the important issues and controversies of the day.

7. **Baptist Press:** This is the largest Christian news organization in the United States. It provides daily national news from a Christian viewpoint as well as up-to-date news relating to the SBC and SBC churches.

8. **The Women's Missionary Union:** This is an auxiliary agency of the SBC. This simply means that while aligning with the SBC and functioning through the SBC, it is not owned or funded by the SBC or the Cooperative Program. It provides missions education and training to women, children, and youth, as well as overseeing the two major missions offerings for the IMB and NAMB each year.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are some dangers or weaknesses of denominations? What are some strengths of denominations?

2. What were the key foundations of the Protestant Reformation? Why was this Reformation needed?

3. With your group, discuss the five core values of Baptists. Are these good values? Are they biblical? Why do you think they are so important?

4. What does it say about our denomination that our first ancestors joined together in a convention for the purpose of funding missionary efforts around the world? Why is it important for local churches to work together for missionary causes?

5. The issue of slavery is a stain on the early history of the SBC. How does our early history demonstrate the goodness of God in working in and through sinners, even in the midst of some very bad practices? How has the SBC changed on the issue of race since its founding?

6. The Conservative Resurgence was a major shift in the direction of the SBC. What were the major issues that led to the Conservative Resurgence? How is the SBC different from more mainline denominations like the PCUSA, UMC, and the Episcopal Church?

7. What do we mean when we say the SBC has a bottom-up structure rather than a top-down structure?

8. What does it mean when we say the SBC does not own, operate, or have any outside authority over or above local SBC churches?

9. What is the Cooperative Program? Why is it important? What mission agencies are supported by the CP? What are the other major offerings that support SBC missions? Why are these important?

10. Did anything surprise you about Baptists or the SBC? Which SBC agencies or entities did you learn about that you were unfamiliar with? Is being a Baptist a good thing?

Chapter Four
Living the Gospel Together
The Life of Covenant Church Membership

Key Terms

The Ministries of the Local Church
Church Membership
The Church Covenant
The "One Anothers"
Accountability
Redemptive Discipline

The Church's Ministry

In an earlier session we noted the mission of our church is to *"glorify God in all things, by proclaiming the gospel of Christ to all people, so their lives are transformed for all time."* We also introduced the major "marks" (or characteristics) of a faithful local church and said we sought to fulfill our mission by intentionally remaining faithful to living out these marks of the local church.

Now that we've introduced who we are as a Baptist church, we want to return to our mission as a local church and try to explain why church membership is so important and why we believe specifically that "covenant church membership" is so important to fulfilling our mission. To start, it may be helpful to explain the practical ways we seek to live out our local mission. We seek to do this through six overlapping "spheres" of ministry:

1. **The Preaching Ministry:** We believe this is the foundation for everything we are and do as a church. Nothing can replace the regular preaching of the Word of God. We meet together every week for focused times of preaching from the Bible. The Sunday morning service is the focal point of the entire week. It is the primary meeting of our church fellowship and the service that includes the largest amount of visitors, guests, and unbelievers. On Sunday evenings we also meet, but in various homes rather than the church building, and once again the Word of God is the center of these small group studies. Finally, we meet on Wednesday evenings for a midweek Bible study, AWANA, and Youth Group. These midweek activities are an important time when our church meets together to pray and to hear God's Word proclaimed in between our larger Sunday gatherings.

2. **The Teaching Ministry:** In addition to hearing the Bible preached weekly, we also believe that believers are to be serious and lifelong students of the Bible. That's why we take our teaching ministry so seriously. This is primarily accomplished through small group studies that meet weekly to read, study, and discuss the Bible and how it applies to our lives. In our next session we'll talk about how important

reading and studying the Bible individually and together really is. For the moment let's just note a few reasons our teaching ministry is so vital for our church members. These small group studies allow for a more focused time of studying a specific passage of the Bible. During these times we're free to ask questions, offer input, and really pinpoint the ways the Bible confronts our lives on a daily basis. By studying the Bible together in these small groups we become better equipped to read it for ourselves and are prepared for the weekly preaching times. In addition, these small groups are really "ministry central" for the members of the local church. They allow members to be involved in each other's lives through fellowship, prayer, accountability, mentoring, watch-care, and outreach. This teaching ministry then, is the backbone of our mission to "make disciples" of Jesus Christ. Small group studies are offered at a variety of times and for all ages, and primarily flow from our Sunday School Small Groups that meet prior to our Sunday morning worship service.

3. **The Watch Care Ministry:** We believe all believers are called to love, care for, serve, and minister to one another. So the third ministry of our church is our watch-care ministry. This is just another way of referring to being intentionally involved in each other's lives through the gospel. Led by our pastors and deacons, we all want to care and pray for the sick, visit those who are homebound, meet needs, shoulder burdens, encourage the heavyhearted, cry with the grieving, and serve one another always. While this ministry belongs to the whole church, and while each individual member is called to participate in some aspect of this ministry, our pastors are called to take the lead as our shepherds through their ministry of visitation and biblical counseling.

4. **The Focused Ministry:** This term may seem a bit vague, but all we mean by it are the different ministry opportunities, discipleship, and outreach that are focused on a specific group within our local church. As such, our student ministry (led by one of our pastors) and our children's ministry are all part of these focused-ministries. This sphere of ministry also includes our men's ministry, women's ministry, college ministry, and other ministries like this. This particular area of ministry is closely connected to both our teaching and watch-care ministries.

5. **The Evangelism and Missions Ministry:** We are a people who believe the gospel and want to share and proclaim it to those around us, in our own community, our nation, and the world. We want our members to take the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) seriously. In seeking to do this we want to give all of our members opportunities to be involved in sharing their faith through evangelism and missions. How can you do that? Well, there are lots of ways. We want to be training men and women to share their testimonies and equipping them to regularly invite friends and family members to join them for our worship services as well as explaining the gospel that transforms lives. We want to serve our community through our ongoing Cornerstone Rescue Mission ministry that meets

physical needs and gives us an opportunity to share the good news that meets the greatest need of all. We take part in Operation Christmas Child so that we are involved in meeting the needs of children all around the world and sharing the gospel. We work with church planters, disaster relief, short-term mission trips, and a host of other opportunities to proclaim the gospel to all people.

6. **The Cooperative Ministry:** Finally, as we've mentioned before, we are a Southern Baptist church that voluntarily cooperates with other SBC churches in our local association (BHABA), our state convention (DBC), and the national convention (SBC). So through the Cooperative Program and through participating in our local association we seek to work with and alongside other local churches to proclaim the gospel of Christ and make disciples for Christ.

These are the six major ways that we seek to put our local church's mission and vision into "real-world practice." This is where the rubber meets the road. Saying the right things and committing ourselves to a gospel and global sized mission is of little value if we are not faithfully putting that into practice. And that's where our high view of church membership comes into the picture. We passionately believe that in order to be a faithful and biblical local church that is truly accomplishing the mission God has given it, we must have a biblical understanding of church membership, what it is, why it's important, how it's cultivated, and how it's protected. That's what we'll be introducing in the rest of this session.

The Church's Membership

You're halfway into this new member orientation book, and now we're at a place where we can turn the focus onto what exactly we mean by church membership in the first place. If you remember, in our introduction we said that being a member of a church was far different than joining a club or some other type of organization. Being a member of a local church calls you into a particular community with certain privileges and responsibilities. This privilege-filled and responsible community is an exciting local assembly of believers. But before we can explore what all that means, we need to first answer a crucial question: Is the idea of local church membership even biblical?

A Biblical Theology of Local Church Membership

We'll try and explain the biblical teachings about church membership in three distinct ways. First, we'll see that the Bible consistently portrays the church as being a local assembly of believers. Next, we'll look at a few key passages that seem to argue for a distinct membership within these local churches. Third, we'll explore some of the key teachings about the believer's life in a local church that make church membership necessary.

1. First, the Bible consistently portrays the church as a particular and local assembly of believers.

    A. **Matthew 18:17** – In this verse, which we'll discuss again a little later, Jesus (in the second mention of the church in the entire New Testament) establishes the steps and boundaries for dealing with unrepentant believers. If a brother or sister is continually unrepentant after multiple attempts by the church to seek repentance, Jesus says the church as a whole must be notified, and if the unrepentant believer still does not repent the church is to remove them from their assembly. This command to "notify" the church and to, if necessary, "remove" a person from the church requires us to interpret the church that Jesus refers to as a local assembly of believers. Jesus cannot be referring to the universal church because the steps of accountability would make notifying every believer on earth, which would be impossible.
    B. **Acts 8:1** – This verse tells us about Saul's (later Paul) persecution of the church. And notice that it is specific to say that Saul's persecution was targeted at the "church in Jerusalem," a local assembly of believers. Only later does Saul expand his persecution to include cities like Damascus.
    C. **Acts 11:26** and **Acts 13:1** – These texts refers to the early ministry of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch, and again they demand the reference to the church be understood as a local assembly in a specific place at a specific time.
    D. **Acts 14:23** – On their first missionary journey throughout Asia Minor, we are told that Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders in *each* church." This language demands local church assemblies. This same type of language is found in **Acts 15:41, 16:5; Romans 16:4-5, 16; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 4:17, 11:16; 2 Corinthians 8:1; Galatians 1:22; Philippians 4:15; Colossians 4:15;** etc.

2. After seeing that the New Testament consistently refers to the church as a local assembly of believers, we also see that the New Testament also offers crucial clues in its text that demand a specific membership for these local churches.

    A. **Matthew 18:17** – Again, Jesus' commands of both notification and possible removal demand two things. First, the unrepentant believer has to be understood to be someone who is considered to be a part of that particular local church that is holding him or her accountable. Second, being notified demands that the church leadership know and understand exactly which believers are to be notified.
    B. **Acts 2:41, 47** – After the remarkable events of Pentecost, we're told that "about three thousand" individuals believed the gospel and were baptized. Notice this verse refers to two things, first that accurate numbers and records were being kept, and those who believed were considered to be "added."
    C. **Acts 5:12-13** – This passage, coming immediately after the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira, tells us two other things. First, the believers in Jerusalem were all regularly meeting together in Solomon's Portico (which would have been

able to hold several thousand people), and second, there was a definite distinction made between those who were members of this local church and those who merely respected them or listened to their preaching and observed their worship.

D. **Acts 12:1** – In this verse, which refers to the local church in Jerusalem, we're told that Herod began to persecute "some who belonged to the church." This verse seems to imply a clear recognition of certain people being understood to be members of the church in Jerusalem, and not merely believers from other cities or areas.

E. **Acts 20:28** – In this chapter, Paul, who is on his way to Jerusalem, calls together the elders of the church in Ephesus to give them some final words of instruction, knowing he will never see them again. He tells them to "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church…" This instruction demands several key things. First, the elders of the local church in Ephesus are called to be responsible to *their* flock. Second, they have been given this charge from God himself. Third, they have to know exactly which believers God has given them as part of their flock. It cannot be broadened in such a way that they are responsible for every believer, for Paul doesn't seem to include himself or Luke (who was travelling with him) in that group referred to as their flock, although they were certainly believers. So, the Ephesisan elders had a specific local assembly they were responsible for and to, and the believers who made up that flock were *defined* to the point that they knew who they were and where they were.

3. Finally, there are certain demands the New Testament makes on believers (individually and together) that require a defined membership within the church. (Some of the points in this section come from the influence of *Those Who Must Give An Account*. The full bibliographic information is found in the final section of this book under Recommended Resources.)

   A. First, believers are called to hold one another accountable and to exercise local church discipline as the means to encourage one another in their growth in sanctification. While this is truly something that all believers may do with one another (regardless of which local church they identify with), the passages' specificity (like Galatians 6:1-10) seems to demand that they be understood to be referring to specific believers who are associated with specific local churches.

   B. Second, church membership is necessary for the believer's life within the local church in relation to the local church's leadership. This refers specifically to what we noted in Acts 20:28. From the believer's perspective, we are all told to "obey your leaders and submit to them" (Hebrews 13:7). This requires that believers understand exactly who *their* leaders are. Surely it doesn't mean believers are to obey and submit to all Christian pastors/elders in the same way. A demand is implied that believers be connected with a local church in such a

way that they see certain pastors as their leaders in a way that is unique to every other pastor or church leader. This is also a demand from the view of the pastors and elders. We saw in Acts 20:28 that these elders were to shepherd *their* flock, and the end of Hebrews 13:7 says that these leaders shepherd their flocks "as those who will give an account." Did you catch that solemn charge? Pastors/elders are called to shepherd their flock knowing that they will be held responsible, will be judged, by how they feed, shepherd, and guard the people God has given them. If this is true, then isn't it necessary that these local leaders know exactly which believers they will be held responsible for? Surely they won't be "held accountable" for every believer they know in the same way as those who are joined to their church. Church membership is demanded for the good of the member and for the good of the pastor.

C. Third, membership is demanded because believers, in relation to their local church, are called to exercise and use the gifts they have been given in service to their local church. No believer is called to sit, take-in, be ministered to, or grow apart from being used by God through the gifts God has given them (Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12:4-30, Ephesians 4:11-16). For this to be actually practiced in reality though, local churches must know, recognize, and assume responsibility for the believers in their midst. Local churches cannot allow service, especially in areas of teaching and leadership, indiscriminately. There must be a recognized membership for the gifts believers have to be lived out.

D. Fourth, and finally, membership is demanded for the local church to govern itself as an autonomous congregation. As noted before, the New Testament makes it clear that the local church governed itself and chose its own leadership. We see this clearly in Acts 6:1-7. This requires there to have been some type of voting taking place within the congregation. So the local churches had to have a known, recognized, and functioning record of who the men and women were who were allowed to have a voice in church governmental matters. This is clear in Acts 15:22. There we are told that in the local church of Jerusalem, the elders and the "whole church" decided to "choose" some of their "own men" as representatives to the church in Antioch. Notice what is said. First, the whole church chose together those who would be their messengers. Second, they chose from within "their own men." So two implications are first, there had to have been a defined membership of some kind so that some men (and not others) would be known to be their own, and second there had to be some defined membership so that the "whole" church could actually choose together.

The Rewards of Membership

Now that we see, and hopefully affirm, that far from being a man-made concept, local church membership is actually a biblical mandate that is needed for the local church to live out its calling, we can briefly explain the privileges of membership. What are the good things you receive upon your membership with our local church?

1. You receive a family of believers who will love you.

2. You receive a family of believers who will celebrate your joys, mourn your sorrows, and help to bear your burdens.

3. You receive a community of believers who will help you grow in faithfulness to Christ and his gospel.

4. You receive the opportunity to serve and use the gifts God has given you in his service.

5. You receive the opportunity to govern the local church alongside the other members of the church.

The Restrictions of Membership

There are great privileges that accompany membership in the local church, but there are some important restrictions that are placed on your shoulders as a result of this commitment. As a church member, you belong to a community of believers. That places certain restrictions on your life:

1. As a church member, you are not free to live your life in isolation from the gospel or the local church.

2. As a church member, you are not free to live in isolation from the commitment that you make in joining the church as a member of its fellowship.

The Responsibilities of Church Membership

Alongside the privileges given to and the restrictions guarding church members, all members of local churches have certain basic responsibilities. At least ten major responsibilities may be briefly mentioned here:

1. All church members are responsible to be open and honest about their confession of faith of Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.

2. All church members are to affirm the basic and necessary beliefs of our fellowship found in The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000 and introduced in this new member curriculum.

3. All church members are to value the Bible as the inspired, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God, which is itself the foundation of everything we believe and do, and the final authority for faith and practice.

4. All church members are to commit to pray for themselves and others, and particularly for our church that we may be united in the gospel.

5. All church members are to commit to participating with the local church in the weekly public worship services.

6. All church members are to fervently pray for and seek to reach their family, friends, and world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

7. All church members are to care for, serve, and minister to one another out of the overflow of their love for one another in Christ.

8. All church members will work to hold one another accountable in the gospel for the health of our church, the good of our fellowship, and the glory of God.

9. All church members are to contribute cheerfully out of their means for the ongoing support of the church's ministry and the provision of those shepherds who are paid to lead and care for the local church.

10. All church members are to submit themselves to the loving and gracious accountability of the church exercised out of a zeal for Christ's glory and a passion for their growth in holiness.

The Church's Discipline

Why We Hold One Another Accountable

We hope from our look at the above biblical texts it is clear that local church membership is not an arbitrary or human invention. It is a necessary implication of the teachings of the New Testament. With that in mind, we want to next turn to what is sometimes one of the most painful and most controversial aspects of local church membership: accountability. We believe the New Testament calls us to be responsible to one another, and one of the things this demands is that we help one another grow in godliness. Why do we believe this? We believe this because of three general demands the New Testament (in numerous places) makes on believers:

1. We are to be holy because God is holy.

2. We are to love one another.

3. We are to demonstrate our love by caring about each other's growth as believers in Jesus Christ. That means we're called to encourage one another, correct one another, hold one another accountable, and if necessary join with our other

brothers and sisters in the local church to exercise gospel discipline on an erring brother or sister. **Accountability** is nothing more than the intentional practice of aiding one another in our sanctification.

How We Hold One Another Accountable

So how do we do that? That last demand seems to be a little frightening, doesn't it? We don't naturally (we hope) enjoy confrontation with one another. We'd rather "live and let live," and we'd really like other people to treat us with that same respect of privacy. While we understand those sentiments, the truth is that to allow one another to wallow in their sin shows love neither for them nor for the rest of the church body. Sin is never just a private affair. It always has consequences and it always impacts other people, even if we don't realize it. It is a lethal poison. It is a seductive betrayer. That's why if we're to show one another love, then we have to confess, confront, and correct one another in our sin. We have to hold one another accountable. That is a vivid picture of love itself.

But the question remains, how do we do that? How do we as a local church hold one another accountable in the gospel? What do we even mean by the term "accountability?" Well, to put it simply, when we use this term we mean one of three major spheres or levels of accountability:

1. We are held accountable by being confronted by the Word of God in the regular and ongoing preaching ministry of the church. The Bible confronts and corrects us. It is powerful and competent to do what God ordains it to accomplish. The primary way, and the most common way, that believers are held accountable is by sitting under and submitting to the preaching of the Bible.

2. We are held accountable by being confronted, encouraged, and exhorted by one another in our personal relationships. The second way the local church holds one another accountable is through the weekly conversations and relationships that develop within the church itself. We see one another at our best and at our worst, and because of this we have the opportunity to encourage our growth in godliness and to confront the sometimes hidden idols and rebellions we still fight as believers. So as believers we hold one another accountable as believers.

3. The final form of accountability (outlined in more detail below) is by far the hardest and most painful. If, in cases of public and extraordinary sin or heresy, and if the professing believer and church member refuses to repent, the church itself as a local body is authorized and commanded to exercise discipline. It may do so by issuing a public call to repent, a public reprimand, and if warnings and pleadings are not heeded, ultimately the removal of an individual from the membership of the local church.

Why We Take Accountability So Seriously

You may think this all sounds a bit intense. You may be tempted to think it's going a bit overboard. You may be tempted to think it's just another example of church leadership on a power trip. The question is, "Would those concerns be warranted?" To answer that question we must ask another question: Why do we take the responsibility of accountability so seriously?

1. Accountability and discipline are visible evidences that a local church takes God seriously. The first reason we practice accountability is because God has told us to. That means it's not optional. Not practicing accountability might make for (temporarily) happier people filling our church building. It might seem to work easier. It might seem to avoid sticky issues and uncomfortable situations, but if we fail to hold one another accountable, then we're still being disobedient. Regardless of why we do it. We can no more refuse to obey God's command to hold each other accountable in the gospel than we can refuse to obey God's command to baptize and observe the Lord's Supper.

2. Accountability and discipline are visible evidences that a local church is a local church. Accountability is a distinguishing mark of a true Christian congregation.

3. Accountability and discipline are visible evidences that a local church takes sin seriously. If our biggest problem is ignorance, then we need to make education a top priority. If our biggest problem is poverty, then we need to make social causes a top priority. If our biggest problem is sickness, then we need to make medical care a top priority. But if our biggest problem is sin, then we need to take our individual and corporate calling to fight sin a top priority. That's what accountability does.

4. Accountability and discipline are visible evidences that a local church believes in the means of discipleship. The moment you believe the gospel you are not suddenly zapped into a mature, holy, and sin-conquering saint. Sanctification is the growth in godliness. Accountability announces to the world that we believe God has ordained certain practices to spur us on to growth into being more like Jesus.

5. Accountability and discipline are visible evidences that a local church takes the local church seriously. We believe the local church is a sacred assembly. We believe we are to be a holy people. So we guard our fellowship from wolves who would seek to destroy us from outside and from sin that would seek to destroy us from inside.

6. Accountability and discipline are visible evidences that a local church takes the extravagant grace of the gospel seriously. The gospel is the good news

announcement that in Christ Jesus we are free, alive, and forgiven! It is the good news that Jesus Christ has done everything necessary for you and I to be saved! Accountability, or another good term, "**Redemptive Discipline**," is the intentional practice of calling one another to throw ourselves wholly and daily onto the grace of Jesus Christ that is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

7. To fail to exercise accountability and discipline as Scripture commands is to be guilty of not taking God at his Word, because the Bible so clearly teaches us that God hates sin, and if you think sin is a light thing, ultimately you think the atonement is a light thing. If you think sin is a small thing, then you are saying that God foolishly lavished the life of his Son on a small thing like sin. To diminish sin in the eyes of God is to diminish the atonement and its effect in the eyes of God. If God excuses sin, he makes the death of his Son of little worth and hardly necessary.

The Dangers of Accountability

Accountability and discipline cannot be ignored, but with that conviction in mind, we must also know how to put them into practice through the gospel. That means understanding if we are not careful, loving, and biblical, our attempts at accountability can become deadly and sinful weapons, even as we try to use them to combat sin itself. So how do we avoid the sinful misuse of accountability? There are four major ways:

1. Accountability must always be practiced in love, not in anger or vengeance.

2. Accountability must never be used as an instrument of punishment or condemnation. It is always a practice of hopeful grace in the gospel.

3. Accountability is never to be a disguise for hypocritical and judgmental pride, but of humble love and affection.

4. Accountability must never be thought of as ensuring a perfect church, perfect believers, or a perfect fellowship. Instead, it is practiced in the hope of casting imperfect people into the loving arms of Jesus Christ through the hope of the gospel.

The Practice of Accountability

If we're going to avoid the four dangers listed above and remain obedient to our Lord, then we need to know how we are to go about holding one another accountable

1. Accountability is to be practiced between those who claim to be believers who are bound together in a local church. (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13)

2. Accountability is to overflow from our humble grief over sin. (1 Corinthians 5:2, 6)

3. Accountability is to be practiced in the light of the cross. (1 Corinthians 5:7-8; Galatians 2:14; 1 Timothy 1:12-20)

4. Accountability is to be the means of confessing, confronting, and combating known sin in the body. (1 Corinthians 5:1; Philippians 4:1-3; Hebrews 12:3-17)

5. Accountability is to be practiced through the weekly preaching of the Word and regular interaction between believers in the church. (1 Corinthians 5:4; Colossians 3:16; 2 Timothy 3:16)

6. Accountability is to be a regular and ongoing practice between believers in the local church. (1 Corinthians 5:12; Ephesians 4:25, 5:1-21; Colossians 3:16; 2 Thessalonians 3:13-15; Jude 17-23)

7. Accountability is to be taken to the final and most decisive step/level only as a final necessity when known sin is not confessed and repented of and the pleas of the church are ignored. (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:4, 13)

8. Accountability and discipline are to be lived out of the hope and plea of restoration, forgiveness, love, grace, growth, and glorification. (1 Corinthians 5:3-5; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, 13:11; Galatians 6:1; Colossians 1:28; James 5:19-20)

The Final Level of Accountability: Redemptive Discipline

We've also made reference to the fact that occasionally (and unfortunately) the local church is forced to deal with unrepentant sin in a more severe and public fashion. We all sin daily. We all fail in a multitude of ways. We all battle indwelling sin as believers. When that sin is encountered, we are right to be reprimanded and encouraged to repent and flee to Christ. That's the truth for all of us, every day.

Tragically, however, there are times when the church must deal with sin in a more severe fashion. While all sin is equally condemning, not all sin is equal in its severity, consequences, public nature, or the scandal it incurs on the name of Christ, his church, and his gospel. When more serious sins (like adultery, fornication, division, conflict, or doctrinal heresy) are committed, the church responds to the heartrending rebellion that enters the fellowship. If that sin is not confessed and repented of, the church is forced (out of obedience to Christ) to take drastic measures in an attempt to warn the guilty and call them to the radical grace of the gospel. The mandate for this action is found particularly in Matthew 18:15-19 and 1 Corinthians 5. So what is the process our church leadership and membership takes when we are forced to pursue this level of accountability? There are several key procedural steps:

1. First, we are to seek the repentance of the individual through basic personal accountability. This will usually be done by one or more of the pastors who will approach the person privately (if possible) and call them to confession and repentance. If confession and repentance takes place, then grace is shown and no further steps are pursued.

2. If the person continues to hold stubbornly to their sin after being approached privately, one or more other pastors/elders will be notified. They will commit to pray for the individual for a period of time, and will then approach the person again seeking confession and repentance. If confession and repentance takes place, then grace is shown and no further steps are pursued.

3. If the previous two attempts to invoke repentance fail, then the total body of pastors and deacons will be notified of the sin, and the body of men will commit to pray for the individual for a set period of time (usually a month) in which representatives from the pastors/elders and deacon body will reach out to the individual in love and call them back to the gospel through repentance. If confession and repentance takes place, then grace is shown and no further steps are pursued.

4. If after that set period of time has passed and the individual is still stubbornly living in their public sin, then the pastors/elders and the deacon body are required to present the member to the church during one of its regularly scheduled business sessions. The church will be called to pray for a period of time (usually a month) and encouraged to reach out to the erring member and call them to confession and repentance. If confession and repentance takes place, then grace is shown and no further action is taken.

5. If, however, after all the previous steps have been pursued and the individual claiming to be a believer and a church member still holds fast to their sin and refuses to repent, then after the period of prayer and outreach the pastors/elders and deacons will present the member to the church with a recommendation that they be immediately stripped of their membership in our body, excommunicating them from our fellowship. The parameters of this act will also be reviewed: The person is not barred from attending church worship services, small group studies, or church events, but their public censure by the church is recorded in the official minutes of the church business session and all their privileges of membership are revoked. Additionally, the church will not recommend them to membership in another local church so long as their sin is not confessed and repentance has not occurred. The congregation is called to continue to pray for the individual, reach out to them in love, and continue to call them to repent and turn back to the gospel.

6. If and when through God's Spirit the erring brother or sister is convicted of sin, confesses, and repents, they may request that the church body reinstate their membership. After a period of probationary observation, the pastors/elders and deacons will recommend to the church during a business session that the individual be restored to full membership within the church with all the privileges and responsibilities they enjoyed prior to their exclusion.

These six procedural steps for our final level of accountability, sometimes referred to as "formal church discipline," is both a painful, yet beautiful process by which sinners are confronted not so much with their sin (although that is part of it), but far more with the outrageous goodness of the gospel. This discipline is one of the major ways our membership remains united and growing together in godliness. The other major means by which we are united in our membership is through our shared adherence to the written statement of our convictions regarding living in a gospel community, our church covenant of fellowship.

The Church's Covenant

Membership as Covenant

Already throughout this new member book we've used the phrase "**covenant church membership**." You may have wondered what that was all about. What's with the word "covenant?" What makes it different from regular church membership? Why is it important for us to understand membership as a covenant commitment? Well, for starters we believe that we should see our membership in terms of a covenant because of the nature of the relationship between members in a local church. A "covenant" in the Bible was a sacred and holy relationship that was entered into by two parties. In the same way, we enter into just such a relationship when we seek membership in a local church: Our membership is a covenant because it is a public declaration of commitment to a specific people.

1. Our membership is a covenant because it is a sacred commitment, not an unimportant decision.

2. Our membership is a covenant because it requires the church member to live under the restrictions, privileges, and responsibilities of church membership.

3. Our membership is a covenant because it requires other church members to receive new church members into the relationship of love, service, accountability, and worship.

The Church Covenant: What it is and Why it Matters

A church covenant may be defined as *"a written pledge that summarizes for the believer and church member the Bible's necessary commitments of conduct for life in a local church, a life lived in relationship with God and one another."* These written pledges of church conduct have a long history in Baptist life. From the earliest days of the seventeenth century, local Baptist churches have continually seen the necessity to not only affirm their common beliefs in statements of faith, but also their shared commitments to one another in church covenants. Many local churches still have church covenants as required commitments for their membership. It is only recently, within the last century, that a desire for individuality and practical church growth has made the visibility of these summaries decline in the lives of local churches. We think that's a bad thing. We believe these summary statements are good and helpful tools for a meaningful and biblical membership. Why do we think this? There are several reasons:

1. Church covenants help to make church membership more meaningful. It is a visible reminder that joining a local church is far more than simply walking an aisle and being introduced to the church during a worship service.

2. Church covenants help to provide a clear and written statement about what is expected of church members.

3. Church covenants help to ensure that new members understand who we are as a local church, what we believe, and what our mission is.

4. Church covenants help to ensure that new members understand life in a local church is not an individual life but a life lived in the community of faith. It is a declaration that we are committing and submitting our lives to one another.

5. Church covenants help to keep ourselves publicly and intentionally accountable to one another under the lordship of Christ.

The Church Covenant: A Very Brief Exposition

We've provided you with a typed copy of our church's covenant at the front of this new member book. A copy of the church covenant is also available on our website. Before we finish this session though, we also want to take some time to briefly explain what the church covenant is saying, summarizing, and calling our church membership to be and do. We'll give a short explanation for each of the major summaries of conduct found in this covenant:

> **Having, as we trust, been brought by divine grace to repent and believe in and submit to the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, and upon our profession of faith having been baptized by immersion in the name of the**

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we will join together in common belief; affirming and treasuring together a common faith built upon the only authority for our faith and action – the inerrant and infallible Word of God. We are a historic Baptist congregation holding to and cherishing the faith that has been delivered to us. We make it our duty and delight to guard the deposit of our faith which has been laid out to us in Scripture, the earliest Christian confessions, and the many Baptist statements of faith through the centuries, and as a summary of the faith we profess we gladly hold to and join our hearts in affirming The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000. Relying on the gracious aid of our heavenly Father, in the name of his Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another and commit to:

This introductory statement is the foundation of our membership. We joyfully confess that we have trusted Christ as our Savior and Lord, have been obedient to be baptized, and now make a commitment to enter into this membership relationship in our local church.

1. **Worship – We will work together for the continuation of a faithful gospel ministry in this church as we sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrine. *(Psalm 95; 96; 99; 122; 134; 138; 146-150; Isaiah 55:6-11; Matthew 28:18-20; John 4:24; Romans 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; 1 Timothy 4:16; Revelation 4:8-11; 5:9-14)***

We confess that our shared commitment is to the Bible as the only inerrant Word of God, and we are united around the beliefs summarized in our church's statement of faith, The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000. While we may disagree on some matters of secondary importance, this statement of faith includes all those beliefs necessary for living in fellowship with our local church.

2. **Unity – We will work and pray for the unity of the Holy Spirit among our body in the bond of peace as we walk together in brotherly love as becomes members of a Christian church. *(Psalm 133:1; Romans 12:16; 14:19; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Ephesians 4:1-13; Philippians 1:27; 2:1-11; 1 Peter 3:8)***

We will genuinely seek and steadfastly work for unity among our faith family in matters of action, belief, worship, and mission.

3. **Evangelism – We will seek to bring up all those who at any time may be under our care in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and by a pure and loving example seek the salvation of the lost. *(Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 14:23; Romans 10:14-15; Ephesians 6:4)***

We will be a gospel-passioned people. We will care for our friends and family members, and because of that care we will do all that is within our power to influence, encourage, and reach them with the grace found only in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

4. **Discipleship – We will seek, by divine aid, to live carefully in the world, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, remembering that we have been bought with a price and are not our own. Having been buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life, we will devote ourselves to growing in sanctification and seeking to display God's goodness and glory to the world around us.** ***(Matthew 4:19-20; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; Colossians 2:11-15; 2 Timothy 2:2)***

We will be continually reminded that we are a "called-out" people. We are to be different. We are to be reflections of Christ. We are to be committed to God and to one another, and this demands that we be a people who passionately pursue holiness.

5. **Service – We will contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel to all nations.** ***(Malachi 3:8-10; Matthew 23:23; Luke 12:48; Acts 1:8; 4:32; 1 Corinthians 16:2 James 1:27; 1 Peter 4:10)***

We will be committed to cheerfully giving our tithes and offerings for the ongoing support of the gospel ministry in our own community and around the world. We will be co-laborers together in the gospel. We will seek to serve, to use the gifts God has given us, and to do so for the good of the local church.

6. **Accountability – We will exercise affectionate care and watchfulness over each other and faithfully encourage and admonish one another as occasion may require, seeking to be bound in our union with one another. If and when serious rebellion or insult through sin is brought into this body, we will humbly submit to the loving but necessary discipline of this church enacted and enforced in the hope of repentance leading to the restoration of our fellowship.** ***(Matthew 18:15-17; Acts 20:31-32; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Galatians 6:1; Colossians 3:13-14; Hebrews 13:17)***

We will love one another in spirit and in action. We will guard one another and seek to care for one another through ministry and accountability. We will participate in and submit to the faithful and needed practice of accountability in the hope and prayer of redemptive grace.

7. **Fellowship – We will hold our membership with this body as a sacred union and as such will not forsake the assembling of ourselves together for regular worship and instruction, nor will we neglect prayer for others and ourselves. We will rejoice in each other's happiness and grieve with**

tenderness and sympathy each other's grief as we join together to bear one another's burdens and sorrows. If and when we should move from this place we will, as soon as possible, unite with another local church where we may carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word. ***(Romans 15:7; Galatians 6:2; Ephesians 4:29-32; 1 Timothy 2:1; Hebrews 10:24-25; 1 John 1:1-10)***

We will exhibit genuine care and concern for one another. We will not neglect to meet together for public meetings of worship. This is not a commitment to never miss a church worship service. There are a wide variety of reasons why a church member may have to miss church services, but those instances of absence should be exceptions, not the dominant and continued pattern. If at some point we are led to move from this place and to unite with another local church, we will do so in the hope and intention of continuing to live out the spirit and principles of this covenant.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit bless this covenant and be with us all now and forever. Amen.

We confess that this statement acts as a public and clear statement of all those things which bind us together in the relationship of church membership.

Questions for Reflection

1. How would you define ministry? Why is it important for church members to know ministry is something all believers are called to? Which ministry of the church do you find the most interesting? Which one is the most confusing?

2. What did you think of the biblical case for church membership? Was the argument convincing? Can you think of any reasons, other than the ones listed, why church membership is so important?

3. What are the rewards, restrictions, and responsibilities of church membership?

4. What do you think of when you hear the word "accountability?" What is biblical accountability?

5. Why have many evangelical churches lost the practice of formal church discipline? Why is it so hard to practice? Why is it important for churches to practice accountability and discipline? How could it be abused? How can we avoid abusing church discipline?

6. Why is accountability and discipline called "redemptive?" Why is it important for the whole church to practice accountability with one another?

7. What is a church covenant? Why are they important?

8. Which clauses within our church covenant did you find confusing? Which ones were encouraging or discouraging? Why?

9. How do you think this session on church membership can and will help you as you begin your life as a new member of our local church?

Chapter Five
Christ-Centered Interpretation
Reading the Bible Individually and Together

Key Terms

Interpretation	Christ-Centered Interpretation	Sunday School
Hermeneutics	Genres	Small Groups
Inspiration	Redemptive-Historical Interpretation	Study Tools
Author's Intention	Biblical Theology	
Exegesis/Eisegesis	English Translations	

A People of the Book

We want our local church to have one major designation. We want to be known for something. We want to be known as a "people of the Book." What does that mean? We want everything we say, do, believe, and accomplish to flow out of our complete confidence and belief in the Bible as the Word of God that sits in authority over all of life, for the believer individually and the church corporately.

That's why we want our church members to be both passionate about the Bible, and equipped to read, study, and understand the Bible. And let's be honest, that can be difficult. Some things in the Bible are genuinely hard to understand (2 Peter 3:14-18). So in this session we want to offer our new members an introductory crash-course in reading and studying the Bible. We hope you'll take some of the tools we want to equip you with in your own growth as a follower of Jesus Christ and as a member of our fellowship and use them to grow in your relationship to Christ and your usefulness in his church.

Basic Foundations for Reading the Bible

Before we look at some key tools and practices for reading and studying the Bible, we believe it's important to get a grasp on some of the foundational and basic truths about the Bible's make-up:

The Bible's Origin

We believe the Bible is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16). We believe God is a speaking God (Genesis 1:1-3). We believe God is a self-revealing God. So ultimately the origins of the Bible are found in God and God alone. But this Book, full of all these words that flow from the mouth of God, were spoken into history. Historically speaking then, the Bible's origin dates back several thousand years.

The first books of the Bible (the Law of Moses, Genesis-Deuteronomy, also called the Pentateuch) were written in the years immediately following Israel's rescue from Egypt (around 1446 BC). The last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, was written by the apostle John near the end of the first century AD (around 95 AD).

So the Bible's composition took over 1500 years. It was written by a wide variety of human authors ranging from shepherds and fishermen to prophets, priests, and religious scholars, and a few books were even written by kings in royal palaces. It was written originally in two major languages, Hebrew (the Old Testament) and *Koine* (or "common") Greek (the New Testament), with a few passages in the Old Testament being written in Aramaic (a very close cousin of Hebrew).

The Bible's Organization

The Bible is one book, but it is also an anthology of sixty-six separate books. These sixty-six books are divided into two major sections: The Old Testament (39 books) and the New Testament (27 books). These books are written in a variety of **genres** (or types of literature) such as law, poetry, proverbs, narrative history, prophecies, sermons, and apocalyptic literature (which is a type of literature that presents both a present and future message through a vast use of vivid imagery, symbolism, and prophecy). These sixty-six books have subsequently been collected into one volume and organized into some major divisions or sections. These divisions include the chapter and verse markers (which were not written in the originals) that make reading and referencing the Bible so easy toady, and the way the books themselves are ordered into major sections. These major sections are organized like this:

<u>The Old Testament</u>
The Law of Israel (5 Books)
Genesis – Deuteronomy
The History of Israel (12 Books)
Joshua – Esther
The Wisdom of Israel (5 Books)
Job – Song of Solomon
The Prophets of Israel (17 Books)
Isaiah – Malachi

<u>The New Testament</u>
The Gospels (4 Books)
Matthew – John
The Spread of the Gospel (1 Book)
Acts
The Letters of Paul (13 Books)
Romans – Philemon
The General Letters (9 Books)
Hebrews – Revelation

The Bible's Story

Because of the different genres within the Bible and the organization of the Bible, it's important for us to be able to briefly summarize the one united storyline that flows through both the Old and New Testaments.

The first eleven chapters of the Bible tell us God created everything, and he created it good. He created humans specifically for the purpose of reflecting his image to the creation, governing creation under him, and living in a joyful and loving relationship with him. The first humans (Adam and Eve), however, stepped into the darkness of God's great and evil enemy, a fallen angel named Lucifer (or Satan). They disobeyed God. They fled from God. They committed treason against God, and through that great rebellion (or Fall) sin and all of its terrible consequences were unleashed into creation. Creation began to hemorrhage and humans became captured citizens of Satan's dark kingdom. But God determined to save sinners and defeat Satan, and he promised he would do that through a coming conqueror who would win the ultimate victory. The rest of the Bible tells the story of the lengths God goes to rescue people and restore creation to its former greatness.

The Old Testament, beginning from Genesis 12, tells us more of the specifics of God's unfolding plan of redemption and restoration. God chose and entered into a special relationship with one man (Abraham) and his descendants, the people named for his grandson Jacob who was renamed Israel. The people of Israel were God's special, chosen, relational people, and over the centuries he continued to unfold his greatness, his grace, his promises, and his plans and purposes through this nation. He told them who he was, what he demanded, and more importantly what he was determined to do. He told them he would act triumphantly by sending a king who would rescue his people, defeat Satan, conquer sin and death, bring life, and ultimately restore creation.

The New Testament continues this story by showing how God kept his promises that were first spoken to ancient Israel. In the gospels we see that God sent his promised King, and amazingly this promised king was God himself, stepping into the story in disguise. God entered time. God was born into the people of Abraham. His name is Jesus. Jesus lived, loved, and taught. He demonstrated his power through great miracles. He displayed what God was like. And then he did something amazing. He gave his life as a substitute for sinners. The King was crucified. He was executed as a common criminal, and in that moment God unleashed all of his holy judgment that sinners deserved onto Jesus' shoulders. He was crushed by the weight of our sin, and in being crushed for our sin he crushed Satan, sin, and death itself. This was triumphantly proven three days later when Jesus Christ conquered death itself by rising from the dead forever.

The rest of the New Testament tells us about the new people, the *new Israel*, that the triumphant Christ creates. The followers of the King, called Christians, are the church. The church is commissioned to take the message Christ, the good news, the gospel, to all the earth. The message spreads. Lives are changed, and believers are taught what it

means to live in relationship with God, specifically in the letters that are collected in the New Testament. The Bible also tells us in a glorious way that the story itself isn't over. Jesus Christ will return, this time not in the disguise of a poor peasant, but in the full display of his glory, might, and reign. The creation will be restored and God's image-bearers who believe the gospel and follow Christ will live with him forever.

The Bible's Historical Timeline

The summary above is a short synopsis of the grand sweep and storyline of the Bible. It's a great story, but we must always be grounded in the truth that this story is absolutely true. It's not just a story; it's history; it's the essence of reality. So, in grounding ourselves in the historical truth of this story we want to give you a timeline of this history. One note must be made: This timeline is estimated and while close to the actual years, you will find sources that present alternate dates for the more debated time-points.

The Early History of the World: The Creation and the Curse
Creation – 2150 BC
Genesis 1-11

The Age of the Patriarchs: The Covenant, Promise, and Faithfulness of God
2150 – 1850 BC
Genesis 12-50

The Egyptian Exile and Slavery: The Years of Bondage
1850-1446 BC
Between Genesis & Exodus

The Exodus From Egypt: Moses, Passover, and the Red Sea
1446 BC
Exodus

The Wilderness Wanderings: Life with God in the Desert
1446 – 1406 BC
Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy

The Conquest and Settlement of Canaan: Into the Promised Land
1406-1300 BC
Joshua, Judges 1-2

The Age of the Tribal Confederacy of Judges: The Warlords
1300 – 1050 BC
Judges 2-21, Ruth, 1 Samuel 1-9

Israel's United Kingdom of Saul: A Kingdom Like the Nations
1050-1010 BC
1 Samuel 10-31

Israel's United Kingdom of David: A Kingdom After God's Own Heart
1010 – 970 BC
2 Samuel, 1 Chronicles, Psalms

Israel's United Kingdom of Solomon: Wisdom and Folly
970 – 930 BC
1 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon

The Age of the Divided Kingdom: Israel Implodes
930 – 587 BC
2 Kings, 2 Chronicles
The Northern Kingdom of Israel (930 – 722 BC)
Hosea, Joel, Amos, Jonah
The Southern Kingdom of Judah (930 – 587 BC)
Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

The Babylonian Exile and Captivity: Back to Bondage
608 – 538 BC
Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Obadiah

The End of Exile: A Return to the Promised Land
538 – 440 BC
Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

The Age Between the Testaments: The Years of Silence
440 – 4 BC
Between Malachi & Matthew

The Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ: The King Has Finally Come
4 BC – 30 AD
Jesus' Birth (5 BC)
Jesus' Ministry, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension (27-30 AD)
Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

The Spread of the Gospel: To the Ends of the Earth
30 – 95 AD
The Beginning of the Church & Spread of the Gospel (30-62 AD)
Acts
The Conversion of Paul (32 AD)
The Missionary Journeys of Paul (47 – 57 AD)

Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, James
Paul's 1st Imprisonment (57 – 62 AD)
Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Timothy, Philemon, 1 Peter
Paul's 2nd Imprisonment (65-67 AD)
2 Timothy, Titus, Hebrews, 2 Peter, Jude
Peter and Paul Executed in Rome (67 AD)
Destruction of Jerusalem by Rome (70 AD)
John is Pastor of the Church in Ephesus (70 – 90 AD)
1 John, 2 John, 3 John
John in Exile on Patmos (90-95 AD)
Revelation
John, the Last Apostle and Eyewitness of Jesus Dies in Ephesus (98 AD)

The Bible's Books

**This section is an overview of each book of the Bible. It's a resource we're providing that you can come back to again and again, and none of the discussion questions for the chapter will come from this section, so if you'd like you can go ahead and begin reading the next section, which deals with principles for reading the Bible well.*

Genesis – This is the book of beginnings. It tells us about the creation of the world, the entrance of sin into the world, and the beginnings of God's relationship with and promises to Abraham and his descendants who find themselves living in Egypt at the end of the book.

Exodus – The book opens by explaining how the descendants of Abraham gradually found themselves hopelessly enslaved in the land of Egypt. God, however, is faithful to his promises to Abraham, and through Moses he rescues his people and displays his mighty power to the world. The rest of the book describes how the descendants of Abraham (now called the "people of Israel") enter into a relationship with God at Mount Sinai where they receive God's Law (including the Ten Commandments).

Leviticus – This book is a continuation of the Law the people of Israel received at Mount Sinai. It explains the seriousness of sin, the holiness of God, and the way the people are able to have a restored relationship with God through the offering of a sacrifice as a substitute. This sacrifice restores the relationship between God and people through what's called "atonement." This book also explains the construction of the tabernacle (the place where God met with his people) and the jobs of the priests.

Numbers – After receiving the Law at Mount Sinai, the people of Israel rebelled against God by refusing to enter into the land that God was going to give them. Because of that disobedience God made the people wander into the desert wilderness for forty years as

judgment on their sin. This book tells the story of those years of wanderings and the continued faithfulness of God to a people that had been rebellious.

Deuteronomy – This book opens at the end of those forty years of wilderness wanderings that were recounted in Numbers. The people of Israel are about to finally enter the land God will give them (called "The Promised Land" or "Canaan") and in this book Moses reviews the Law God had given them at Sinai and they renew their agreement to be God's special people and abide by his commandments. Moses dies at the end of the book.

Joshua – This book begins the general history of Israel and opens right after the death of Moses. Joshua becomes the new leader of God's people and leads them to cross the Jordan River and enter the land of Canaan. The rest of the book tells about how God gives the people of Israel victory over the inhabitants of the land and keeps his promise to give them the land to be their new home. It ends with the people being settled in their new home and the land being divided into twelve tribes (like states).

Judges – This is a book about Israel's rebellion against God and God's continued faithfulness to his people. Over and over again the people stop worshipping God and begin to worship idols. God punishes the people by sending enemies to conquer them. Once the people cry out for help God sends "judges" (or military leaders) to lead his people to defeat Israel's enemies and restore peace and security.

Ruth – This little book is a bridge between the stories of Joshua and the judges and the period of Israel's history that includes kings. The book tells the story of a foreign woman (from Moab) named Ruth who finds herself living among the people of Israel in the small village of Bethlehem. She is destitute, widowed, and trying to provide for her elderly mother-in-law named Naomi. She falls in love with a godly man named Boaz, marries, is redeemed, and even though she is of foreign descent is adopted into the people of Israel. Most amazingly, she becomes the great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king, David.

1st Samuel – This book tells three stories. First, it tells about the life and ministry of the Judge-Priest-Prophet named Samuel. Second, it tells the story of the rise and fall of Israel's first king named Saul. Finally, it tells the story of the early life and rise to fame of the man who would become Israel's second and greatest king, David.

2nd Samuel – This book tells the story of how David became king of Israel and then recounts the major events of his forty-year reign as king of Israel. It especially centers on David's devotion to God, God's unending faithfulness to David, and the terrible impact of David's sin (murder and adultery) that lead to horrific consequences for his reign and the trajectory of his descendant kings who will follow after him. David's sin begins the slide that will end in exile, yet God's faithfulness to David transcends that judgment by promising that God will send a Deliverer, a Savior, who will be a descendant of David to rescue and rule over God's people forever!

1st Kings – This book tells the story of David's son Solomon and how through his sin and foolishness the kingdom of Israel was split into two separate nations. The northern nation became known as Israel (made up of 10 tribes or states) and the southern half became known as Judah (made up of 2 tribes or states). It then recounts the generally tragic stories of some of the kings of the two nations who came after Solomon and the brave and faithful witness of God's spokesman and prophet, Elijah.

2nd Kings – This book continues the story told in 1st Kings. It tells the continuing tragic story of the various kings of Israel and Judah, the life and ministry of Elijah's successor Elisha, and the events that ultimately doomed Israel and Judah because of their continued rebellion against God by worshipping idols. By the end of the book Israel (The Northern Kingdom) has been decimated by the Assyrians and Judah (The Southern Kingdom) has been defeated and its people taken into exile by Babylon.
1st Chronicles – This book rewinds the story and retells the story of David and his kingdom, offering a different but similar perspective to the events recorded in 1st Samuel.

2nd Chronicles – This book condenses and summarizes the events described in 1st and 2nd Kings, but unlike those books it does not include information regarding the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It focuses instead on the kings who were the physical descendants of David who continued to rule the Southern Kingdom of Judah after the death of Solomon.

Ezra – This book picks up the story that ended in 2nd Kings. The people of Judah have been taken by force from their homes and relocated to live in Babylon. This book tells how the Persians (who defeated the Babylonians) began to allow the people to return to their native home led by men like the priest Ezra who helps bring the people back to their land and renew their commitment to worship God and abide by his Word.

Nehemiah – This book tells the story of a leader named Nehemiah, who lived at the time of Ezra, who returns to his native land with the exiles and helps lead the people to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem that had been destroyed.

Esther – This book tells the story (set about the time of Ezra and Nehemiah) of a Jewish girl named Esther who ends up becoming the queen of Persia (marrying King Xerxes). Because God places her in this position she is able to be used by him to rescue his people from an evil plot to exterminate the Jews.

Job – This book marks a major change in the Old Testament. Many of the books before Job have been narratives that recounted the history of Israel. This book begins a section of wisdom, worship, and poetry. The book of Job tells the story of a very righteous man who loves God and is obedient to him. In spite of his faithfulness, Job becomes the victim of tremendous suffering and spends the book trying to understand why God is letting him go through such pain. The themes of faithfulness, suffering, and the goodness of God are what this book is all about.

Psalms – This is the hymnbook of the Jewish people. It includes 150 poems and prayers that were once set to music and used by Israel during their times of worship. These poems are intended to lead us in our own worship of God today.

Proverbs – This book contains a collection of wisdom teachings intended to guide God's people through the often complex world of daily life. It helps explain what following God in the real world looks like and includes helpful guidance for character, integrity, and faithfulness to God.

Ecclesiastes – This book was probably written by David's son Solomon toward the end of his life. It is the testimony of an old man who had everything in life – education, wealth, power, fame, women, sex, pleasure, and comfort. He realizes at the end of his life, however, how worthless all these things are in comparison to how fleeting life is. All the things he has are passing away. He realizes at the end of his life that a faithful relationship with God is the only lasting thing that matters.

The Song of Solomon – This book is a beautiful love poem that celebrates the goodness of the relationship God intended men and women to have with one another within marriage. Its themes of faithfulness, love, romance, attraction, and sexuality make it unlike any other book in the Bible.

Isaiah – This book begins the last major section of the Old Testament, known as the Prophets. The prophets were men who delivered messages from God to his people, calling them to faithfulness to him and the covenant, warning them God would judge them for their rebellion, and promising them God would ultimately deliver his people and restore a relationship with humans forever through a promised Deliverer (called "The Messiah"). It's helpful to know the prophets were men who lived, worked, preached, and wrote during the time period recorded earlier in the Old Testament in 2nd Kings – Nehemiah. Isaiah preached and wrote a message to the nation of Judah. The major message is that God is the supreme King of the universe who rules in power and glory, therefore the people should repent because God would judge their sin and hope because God would accomplish a glorious rescue and victory in the future through a promised Deliverer.

Jeremiah – In many ways, this book is the flip-side of Isaiah. Jeremiah preached and wrote years after Isaiah and by this time the sin and rebellion of the people had grown so bad that the people of Judah refused to hear God's warnings of judgment and his pleas for them to repent. Where Isaiah's message is powerful and glorious, Jeremiah's is tragically somber. Jeremiah proclaimed the truth of God's impending judgment. He warned Judah that Babylon would come and defeat them, but in the end no one would listen and the events Jeremiah foretold came to pass.

Lamentations – This is an acrostic (in the Hebrew alphabet) poem written as a song of sadness by the prophet Jeremiah. His message had not been believed. No one had

listened. God had punished Judah's sin. Jerusalem had been destroyed and the people taken into exile. This book is Jeremiah's cry of sorrow at the heartbreaking result of a people who refused to listen to and love God. It is his heartbreaking cry of hope that somehow, someway, at some time God would restore his people once again.

Ezekiel – This book opens with the people of Judah in captive exile in the land of Babylon. Ezekiel is a priest who receives a glorious vision of God while he is far away from his native land. The major messages of this book are that God is with his people in the midst of their suffering and will act to restore and renew his people once again.

Daniel – This book is also set during the Babylonian exile and contains more narrative than many of the prophets so it gives us a good picture of life during the exile. It tells the story and details the messages of a godly and faithful man from Judah named Daniel who rises to a position of leadership in Babylon during the exile. The major messages of this book are that God will powerfully preserve his people and will act and rule over the future to accomplish his purposes which will not be defeated.

Hosea – Hosea was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel before they were destroyed by Assyria in 722 BC. It proclaims a message of God's unending and faithful love and commitment to his people even when they are faithless to him and refuse to love him in return.

Joel – Joel proclaims a message of judgment and hope centered on a future "Day of the LORD." On that day Joel said God would pour out on his people and the nations the fierceness of his wrath and the joyous hope of renewal and rescue.

Amos – Amos is all about the justice of God. God will punish sin and he will not let the guilty go unpunished. The nations that refused to worship God would face his judgment, and that included the northern nation of Israel who because it was a part of the people of God would be punished even more severely.

Obadiah – This little book is directed not at Israel or Judah but at the nation of Edom which had been a longtime enemy of God's people. It promises judgment and wrath on Edom for its sin, but the future renewal and restoration of God's people in the kingdom of God.

Jonah – Jonah is unlike any other prophet. He tells the story of a faithful God and his faithless representative, the prophet Jonah. God commands Jonah to go preach to Nineveh. Jonah runs. God catches Jonah and sends him back. Jonah finally preaches to Nineveh, and amazingly Nineveh repents and turns to God. This, however, makes Jonah angry because he wanted God to punish the evil sin of Nineveh and not forgive them. This book showcases the relentless and reckless love and grace of God, even when his servants don't demonstrate those same characteristics.

Micah – Micah was a prophet preacher to Judah at the same time as Isaiah. His message is very similar. Judgment will come because of the people's rebellion, but there is hope because God is a faithful King who will forgive and redeem his people through a future King that will come from God.

Nahum – This book is written to the Assyrian city of Nineveh. This was the same city Jonah had been sent to earlier and at that time the people had repented and turned to God. Obviously over time the people of this great superpower city had turned back once again to rebellion against God. This is God's message that he will enact judgment. Nineveh, despite its present strength and power would be destroyed because of its sin.

Habakkuk – This prophetic book is very similar to the book of Job. Habakkuk is a prophet who is looking around at a world that seems to be spinning out of control. No one is listening to God, no one is trusting God, and the people who are supposed to be the people of God are being judged by God while foreign nations who worship pagan idols seem to be prospering and strong. In the midst of all this Habakkuk questions God's goodness and justice. By the end of the book, however, he has learned to be patient and trust God to do what is best and right.

Zephaniah – Like Joel this book is all about "The Day of the LORD." The message is clear: At a future date God will fully express his hatred and judgment on sin as well as his grace, goodness, and love for his people.

Haggai – This book is set during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and so after the exile in Babylon has ended and the people of God have begun to return to their homeland around Jerusalem. Haggai, in the midst of trying times and hard economic circumstances, calls the people of God to renew their worship and join together to rebuild the temple as a place to worship God and offer sacrifices for sins.

Zechariah – This book, written after the exile, calls the people of God to not give up hope in the promises God had made to them throughout the centuries. Even though God seemed silent and Persia still ruled, God would accomplish his purposes. A future King (Messiah) would come and accomplish everything God had promised.

Malachi – Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament and it points ahead into the New Testament. It calls the people of God who have returned from the exile to revival and true worship of God as they eagerly await the promised redeemer and King God had been promising.

Matthew – This is the first book in the New Testament and the first of the four books called "The Gospels." It recounts the life, ministry, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Its particular emphasis is on Jesus being the promised Messiah, the descendant of David, and the great King and Deliverer God's people had been awaiting who had finally come to usher in the Kingdom of God.

Mark – This is the shortest and simplest of the narratives about Jesus and was probably the first gospel written. It's a simple and straightforward account of the ministry of Jesus emphasizing his role not only as the true King, but as the suffering Savior who redeems and rescues God's people through his death.

Luke – This gospel recounts the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Its particular emphasis is on the truth that Jesus Christ is the great hope and Savior not only of the Jews (the physical descendants of Abraham) but also for the nations, people from every language, tribe, and nation.

John – This last gospel triumphantly organizes the life and teachings of Jesus, culminating with his death and resurrection, around one great message: Jesus Christ is God himself who because of his great love has taken on human flesh to rescue his people and renew creation. Jesus truly is a man, but he is also truly God and he gives life (complete life and eternal life) to all those who believe on him.

Acts – This book of narrative history recounts the first thirty years or so after Jesus' resurrection. It highlights the growth of the church and the spread of the message of Jesus Christ to the world. It especially highlights the travels and message of Peter and Paul.

Romans – The book of Romans is the first in a major section of the New Testament that contains letters written by Paul, whose life and ministry had been told in the book of Acts. This letter (or "epistle") was written to Christians living in Rome. It is an organized explanation of the gospel message and why it is important. It explains the sin of humanity, the judgment of God, his rescue in the person of Jesus Christ, God's authority and rule over history (especially regarding the physical people of Israel), and the way the grace that comes through the cross should impact the way Christians live in the world around them.

1st Corinthians – This book is written to a local church that was in big trouble. The Christians in Corinth were facing lots of problems and so Paul wrote this letter to try and correct their mistakes and provide safety from some very serious dangers. This book, perhaps more than any other, tells us what God desires for his people, the church.

2nd Corinthians – This is a follow-up letter to the first letter to Corinth. It is Paul's most autobiographical book and really highlights once again the ministry of the church and the role suffering plays in the Christian's life.

Galatians – This letter was written to a group of Christians who were facing a problem called legalism. They were beginning to believe that in order to follow Jesus they had to do a certain number of things. Paul tells them in this book that the good news of the gospel is that Jesus and Jesus alone has done what is necessary to be saved, and that the

only way a person can have a relationship with God is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Ephesians – The book of Ephesians is all about the mighty and triumphant work of Jesus Christ. Jesus has solved the problem of sin, is the Rescuer and the One who renews creation, and has united people from every nation into one body, his church. This church is the people of God (the "New Israel") and is created to reflect and magnify the greatness of God.

Philippians – This wonderful little book presents two major messages. First, the gospel of Jesus Christ (who he is and what he has accomplished) is to be the central core of a Christian's life. Secondly, Jesus Christ being the center of a Christian's life gives the believer security, comfort, provision, and joy in the midst of whatever circumstances they may go through in life.

Colossians – This book is a companion to Philippians. It is written to a different group of Christians but the themes stand with those in the book that comes right before it. Jesus Christ, who is God, has accomplished victory, triumph, and rescue for his people through what he did on the cross. Because of that, Christians are to live new lives that reflect the greatness of Jesus.

1st Thessalonians – This book is all about the future. Paul responds to a very serious problem. Jesus had ascended into heaven. His followers had spread his message all over the known world. Now, those people who first believed in Jesus were beginning to die. So where was Jesus? Had he forgotten about his people? Was he really going to return? Did Christians have hope for the future? Paul answers these questions in this book. The future is hopeful for the Christian because Jesus is King and he will return one day for his people, including those who have physically died.

2nd Thessalonians – This book is in many ways, even though it is a separate letter, like a "P.S." that goes with the book of 1st Thessalonians. It again deals with the future return of Jesus Christ ("The Second Coming") but adds a little something different from the earlier letter. The first book focused exclusively on Jesus returning to retrieve his people and usher in the ultimate victory of eternal life. This second book includes that hope of Christians, but also addresses the victory Jesus will win over those who at his return still are in rebellion against him and oppose his rule and authority. The big message is that Jesus wins.

1st Timothy – This is the first of several letters that Paul wrote to individuals instead of to churches. This letter was written to a young friend of Paul's named Timothy. In this book Paul encourages his young friend to be faithful to Jesus, the church, and the work God had called him to do. This book, along with the letters to Corinth, gives us a very specific understanding of what the church should be doing.

2nd Timothy – This is another letter to Paul's young friend Timothy. It was probably written just prior to Paul's death and is probably the last letter Paul wrote. This book is a final word of encouragement from an old man who knows his death is approaching. He passes the baton of ministry to his friend and pleads with him to remain faithful to the gospel and to its service.

Titus – This little book is all about Christian leadership. It especially warns the church about the specific danger of false teaching and why it is so important to guard and defend the truth of the gospel.

Philemon – This book is unlike any other in the New Testament. It is a personal letter written by Paul to a close friend named Philemon. In it Paul is pleading for Philemon to forgive and receive back a runaway Roman slave named Onesimus who had become a Christian after meeting Paul in Rome. The major themes of this little book include what it means to belong to the family of God, forgiveness, and the freedom that only Jesus Christ can provide.

Hebrews – This book is a New Testament reflection on the Old Testament. It was written by an unknown author to a group of Jewish Christians who were beginning to suffer for their faith. It explains how Jesus is the ultimate and final fulfillment of everything the Old Testament had promised and pointed toward. It loudly proclaims that the Old Testament is all about Jesus!

James – How should Christians live? If Christians are saved by grace and faith alone, then is there an incentive for them to live good lives of obedience to God? This letter, written by Jesus' half-brother James, explains exactly what it means to live a life of obedience to Jesus Christ. It boldly proclaims a true understanding of the gospel leads to a radical and ever deepening commitment to follow Jesus in all of life.

1st Peter – This little letter, written by one of Jesus' disciples, is all about the promises and hope of the gospel in the midst of a world where believers will face suffering and pain.

2nd Peter – This letter, written again by Peter, is a companion to the first book. It reminds the church the grace of God is what gives power and hope to believers in a world where they will struggle and suffer.

1st John –This book is all about assurance. How can a person know if they have been redeemed by Jesus Christ? What does the authentic Christian life look like? John (who also wrote the Gospel of John, 2nd John, 3rd John, and Revelation) tells us three big things. First, the Christian can have confident assurance regarding salvation. Second, believing in Jesus Christ and the things the Bible tells us about him is the first foundation of assurance. Third, having deep and genuine love for others (especially fellow Christians) is the second foundational assurance that a person belongs to Jesus Christ.

2nd John – This book reemphasizes the major themes of 1st John and warns against the dangers of false teachers.

3rd John – This book calls Christians to persevere in steadfast faithfulness, living out the message of 1st and 2nd John even in the midst of opposition and false teaching.

Jude – This book, probably written by another one of Jesus' half-brothers calls the church to fight for and defend the truth of God's Word.

Revelation – This is the last book in the Bible, and possibly the most difficult to understand. It is sometimes a book that frightens people or leads to serious confusion and misunderstanding. It must be acknowledged that some of the things in this book are difficult to understand and many Christians have lots of different views as to the precise meaning of its teachings. A few major themes, however, are certain. First, this book is written to encourage believers during troubled times and strengthen them to steadfast and persevering faithfulness and love to Jesus Christ in the middle of present and future uncertainty. The church is called to this faithful love based on the hope it has for the future, a hope grounded in the reality of who Jesus is, what he has done, and what he will do in the ages to come. This book assures Christians in a world seemingly out of control that Jesus is really in charge. He is victorious. The future is in his hands. He will reign supreme as King. No one will be able to defeat him. His people will not be forsaken. They will spend forever with him. The Bible opens with a grand vision of a sovereign God creating and ruling over the universe. The Bible closes by looking ahead into the distant future. What we find in that vision is the same sovereign God, Jesus Christ, is still in control, ruling over the universe, reigning in power, and enjoying a perfect relationship with his people free from death and sin all because of what he himself has done.

Reading (And Understanding) the Bible Well

Principles of Interpretation

Hermeneutics is a word that means "**interpretation**." It's the study (and practice) of reading and interpreting the Bible correctly and faithfully. As individuals we value good communication. If you tell your husband to take out the trash, or if you tell your wife you're going to watch the football game, then you want the other person to hear you, understand the words you are saying, and know the meaning you are seeking to convey. We value faithful communication everyday in our relationships, in our jobs, and every time we drive down the road and see signs that tell us important things we should know. Communication is important.

As believers, knowing what the Bible is saying is of utmost importance. The Bible is God's message to us. We don't want to get the message wrong, so we want to do everything we can to faithfully read, understand, and put into practice what the Bible is saying. But let's

admit that can be really hard. We live in a fast-paced information age that values short and to-the-point messages. That's hardly the way the Bible is written. And it was written a long time ago, so it can be so unfamiliar to our lives. I mean, even some of the people' s names are hard to pronounce! No wonder reading the Bible is difficult, and no wonder people (unfortunately even people who claim to be believers) either slack off on reading the Bible or end up twisting it into saying something it was never saying at all.

We want you to read the Bible, and we want you to read the Bible well. We want you to be better equipped to know and understand God's Word. And we all need help in this area of our lives. The Bible is brutally honest about how difficult the Bible can be to interpret (Acts 8:30-34). So here are just five pointers and principles to keep in mind when reading your Bible:

1. **We always want to know the meaning the author (human) and Author (God) was communicating in the books they wrote**. We believe in looking for **authorial intent** when we are interpreting the Bible. Reader-response is very popular, and let's be honest, we've all done this before. We'll read the Bible and then say something like, "what this verse means *to me* is…" We've all said that, but we'd also be horrified if that's how other people treated what we said and wrote. If you told your kids, "Go clean your room," and then an hour later found them watching television and playing a game online, you wouldn't want them to look at you and say, "What your statement meant *to me* was that I should clean my room sometime in the next few days." Likewise, if you're a wife and you're going out of town for a few days and you leave your husband a note that says, "Please dear, rake up the leaves and clean out the garage while I'm gone," you wouldn't want to walk in the house and see ten pizza boxes on the floor and him just laying on the sofa watching football with none of those things accomplished. It wouldn't be good for him to look up and say, "what your note meant *to me*, was that I should have a great weekend and really enjoy some downtime while you were at your mom's." That wouldn't work. And it doesn't work when we read the Bible either. We want to be faithful in our exegesis (discovering what the text really says) and not practice eisegesis (reading into the text whatever we want to find there). So we want to be faithful to the author's intended meaning.

2. **Second, we want to always remember the entire Bible, both Old and New Testaments, are ultimately all about and continually point toward the person and work of Jesus Christ**. The Bible is a Christ-focused book, and it demands a **Christ-centered interpretation**. That may sound strange. I mean, sure we know the New Testament is all about Jesus, but is it right to say that even the Old Testament is about Jesus? Well, Jesus certainly said it was. In John 5 Jesus told the Pharisees the Old Testament was about himself (vv. 39-47). In Luke 24:25-27, Jesus taught some of his disciples the exact same thing. That's right, Jesus said the entire Bible, even the Old Testament, was all about him. So we need to know that if we're going to be faithful readers. No matter where you're reading in the

Bible, God's purpose is to show you more of the glory of Christ, the goodness of the gospel, and equip you to live as a faithful follower of him.

3. **Third, we have to pay careful attention to the genre of what we're reading**. You wouldn't read a fairytale to your kids the same way you'd read an instruction manual on how to install your brand new washer and dryer. They're totally different. Likewise, we want to pay attention to the type of literature we're reading. It's important to know if we're reading poetry or narrative. It's important to know if we're reading a parable or a letter. Those things will have a huge impact on how we understand the text.

4. **Fourth, we want to read the Bible in context.** Sometimes we treat Bible reading like looking for a message in a fortune cookie. We want to read one or two verses and then move on to something else. But that's not how the Bible was intended to be read. It was intended to be understood in connection with both its purpose in being written (its historical context) and its connection with everything written around it (its textual context). One of the simplest ways to begin learning how to read the Bible in context is to make a commitment to read through different books in the Bible instead of reading in the "popcorn method" of just jumping from place to place looking for a verse.

5. **Finally, related to reading the Bible in context, is the truth that we need to always remember the Bible is telling one great story.** That means ultimately everything in the Bible is connected to one narrative arc. Reading the Bible like this is called "**Redemptive-Historical Interpretation**." Another name for this is **biblical theology**, but really it's just the natural overflow of both reading the Bible in its own context and remembering the entire Bible is ultimately about Jesus. That means wherever we are in the Bible, we're trying to know how this passage relates to what God has done in the person of Jesus Christ, and how we as modern readers are to apply these truths in our lives as a result.

Studying the Bible Individually

Remembering these five principles of reading and understanding the Bible, we now want to give you a few helpful tips on how to read and study the Bible better. These suggestions aren't absolute rules necessarily, but we do believe if you'll begin putting these suggestions into practice you'll begin to see the results of faithful reading and study:

1. **Get a version of the Bible you can understand,** but that is also faithfully accurate to the original languages. There are lots of Bible translations out there, and choosing the right one can be difficult, especially since there really are so many good versions available! We'd recommend getting a Bible that seeks to communicate a "word for word" translation from the originals rather than a more loosely translated "thought for thought" translation. The King James Version

(KJV) is a good example of a "word for word" translation, but since it can be hard to understand for modern readers there are a few others (that we actually believe are better) that we'd recommend more. For longtime Bible readers the New American Standard (NASB) is a good translation, but if you're a new believer and a new Bible reader you may want to go with a translation like the Christian Standard Bible (CSB). Another translation we strongly recommend is the English Standard Version (ESV), which happens to be the version our pastors use to preach and teach from.

2. **If possible get a really good Study Bible**. This will really help you understand the Bible better, and it is especially useful for understanding the really hard to understand sections. It is also really helpful in understanding a verse or passage's historical and textual context. We recommend either (or both!) the ESV Study Bible or the MacArthur Study Bible.

3. **Try to have a set time each day when you will sit down to read and study the Bible**. This can sometimes be hard, and you may not be able to spend the same amount of time each day, but it's really good to discipline yourself to reading every single day. A good way to make that happen is to have a time you intentionally set aside for this purpose.

4. **Keep a few study tools with you when you're reading**. You may even want to have a set place to read and study the Bible, so you can keep these things there all the time:
   A. Your Bible: What you're reading
   B. A pen and/or a highlighter: Something to write with
   C. A notebook and/or some note cards: Something to write down important things you've read as well as things you want to remember that might distract you from reading the Bible (like, "Don't forget to call and make a hair appointment when you finish reading.")

5. When you begin to read a passage, **start by asking yourself three basic questions** of the text:
   A. Is this in the Old or New Testament?
   B. What section of that testament is this passage in?
   C. What type of literature (genre) am I reading?

6. If you're using a study Bible, make sure you've read the book introduction pages, any charts or highlighted notes that surround the passage, and as you read consult the study notes as needed.

7. **When you're reading, follow these steps**:
   A. Start by praying. We need God to speak to us through his Word. We can't understand the Bible apart from God revealing himself to us. Ask God to help you understand what you're reading.
   B. In your notebook or on your note card, write down the date and the passage you're reading. This helps you keep a journal of your Bible reading.
   C. Read the passage.
   D. Ask three questions: What does this verse say about God? What does this verse say about me? How does this verse point me to Jesus?
   E. Underline or highlight in your Bible things that stand out to you like important phrases, names, places, or things that are clear applications to your life.
   F. In your notebook write out what the passage is saying in your own words in just two or three sentences.
   G. Go back and reread any of the study notes in your study Bible.
   H. Write down any key verses in your notebook that you'd like to memorize. Periodically flip back through and reread these verses.
   I. Finally, write out any questions you might have (that you can ask your pastor or Bible study teacher about) and some specific ways you believe you can apply the verses you read to your own life.

8. **Read some other great books alongside your Bible reading**. No other book is equal to the Bible. No other book is authoritative for our lives like the Bible. With that said, however, there are some other great books that have been written throughout the history of the church that are really valuable in both encouraging our growth as believers and helping us understand what the Bible is saying. Make use of the great resources available to us. At the end of this curriculum we've included some recommended resources for you to check out if you'd like.

Studying the Bible Together

Not only are believers supposed to read and study the Bible individually, but we're also to make use of our relationships with one another to help us read and study the Bible. The two major ways we do this are through our Preaching Ministry and our Sunday School Small Groups.

First, we encourage you to be committed to listening to the preaching well. We often think this is a completely passive activity, but it's not. God speaks through the preaching of his Word, and we learn how to read and understand the Bible better when we listen to faithful expository preaching. So we want to encourage you to be a trained listener. How can you do that? Well, here are a few suggestions:

1. **Pray daily.** Pray for your pastors as they are preparing their weekly sermons. Pray for yourself and your fellow believers that their faith will be strengthened and lives will be sanctified. Pray for unbelievers who will be present that God's Word will

work powerfully to shatter hearts of stone. Spend regular and deliberate time with God in prayer each week. To listen to sermons well our hearts must be prepared prior to the preaching.

2. **Read the Scripture texts for the upcoming week.** For pastors one of the many reasons they love preaching through books of the Bible is because each week we all usually know as we approach our worship services what text will be preached. Not only that, due to our connection with social media, the upcoming sermon verses and sermon titles are almost always posted well in advance. Prepare yourself to hear these passages preached by reading them in your own times of Bible study and devotions. Meditate on some of the verses coming up. Read them with your spouse or family. Not only must our hearts be prepared through prayer, our Bibles must be opened daily and deliberately.

3. **Talk to your pastors about upcoming sermons.** Talk to them about the task and beauty of sermon preparation. A pastor's primary calling is to feed God's people with God's Word. Because of this, one of the primary tasks each week is to pray through and prepare the sermons for the upcoming worship services. Yet it is rare for anyone to ever ask them about the one thing they spend so many hours each week doing. It's true that the nature of preaching means that much of the work of sermon preparation is spent with the pastor, God, and the Bible being alone in the study. But we aren't isolated in our relationships within the church, and we would never stay silent about the other things we spend our days doing. Think about your own families. One of the weekly necessities of a household is the planning and preparing of meals, and oftentimes we'll be talking about these upcoming meals on a daily basis. If we are that interested about the physical food we eat on a daily basis, how much more should we be interested in the food of God's Word that is fed to us each week through preaching?

4. **Jot down sermon notes.** Sometimes taking notes can be hard, because we're not all good at "note-taking" and some sermons are easier to take notes from than others. Still, we acknowledge how helpful this one simple activity can be in listening to and engaging with the sermon. And it's not like you have to take down every word in shorthand. When you take sermon notes, you don't have to worry about trying to write out a full transcript of what's said. Just do a few simple things: Write down the sermon title, text, a few points that may be made, observations, summary of the main point of the message in your own words, and anything that sticks out in your mind about applying the text to your own life. In all honesty good notes can be taken by just writing down a few sentences about each sermon. Taking notes may not come as naturally to me as to my wife, but that doesn't mean I can't benefit from the regular activity of taking notes.

5. **Dig into some really good Christian books.** Read some good, solid Christian books for your own personal Bible study/devotions that are connected to what is

being preached during the worship services. Our own personal growth in grace need not be isolated from the weekly ministry of preaching through the local church.

6. **Talk about and review the sermon.** Talk with your spouse and/or kids about the sermon when you get home. During Sunday lunch take a few minutes to ask your family about what the sermon said and meant for your own lives. This shouldn't be a weekly opportunity to "roast the preacher," but it can be a useful time to let the sermon's message marinate in your own family. This one simple weekly tradition of talking about the sermon after one of the worship services can have a big impact on your family. It's one of the few simple things that will begin to set an example for your spouse or kids that listening to the sermon is one of the major events of each week. It's one of the things that takes a small amount of time but pays huge rewards! When we hear the sermon and then act like we've forgotten it as soon as we crank our cars in the church parking lot we sometimes unintentionally send the message to ourselves and our families that hearing the sermon is a duty best forgotten as soon as possible.

Along with studying the Bible individually and through the weekly preaching, it's also important to study in small groups with other believers. The primary way we do that as a local church is through our Sunday School Small Groups.

These groups are provided for all ages and different groups of people. They meet during the hour just before the Sunday morning worship service, and absolutely anyone can be involved in one of these groups, whether they are church members or not. It is ground zero for small group study ministry. But you still may not be convinced being involved in Sunday School is important. We'd beg to differ. There are four good reasons to be involved in a Sunday School Small Group:

1. It provides a relaxed and informal way to read and discuss the Bible.

2. It helps explain and apply the Bible to our lives.

3. It gives us an opportunity to discuss a text with others and ask questions about the text with others who are reading the same text.

4. It provides a foundation for our relationships within the church. As members we have covenanted together, and we've already discussed what that means. But let's be honest, it can be difficult to build strong and lasting relationships within the local church with *everyone*. These groups allow us to get to know, fellowship with, pray for, encourage, and live out the things we agreed to do in our church covenant with a small group of people. It reminds us that we made a real commitment, to real people – people we sit with and talk with personally each week. And this is so important especially for new members. If you know of

someone who begins to fall away from church attendance and involvement, or complains that they just can't seem to fit in at a church, ninety-nine percent of the time you can be assured that person isn't being or staying connected to a small group. So small groups aren't just ground zero for Bible study, but in some ways they're also ground zero for church life and church ministry!

Like we said, whoever you are, and wherever you are in life, there is definitely a class for you. We have classes for children and youth. We have classes for men and women of all ages. We have classes for couples who want to be in a small group together. So how can you be involved? There are three simple ways:

1. Decide which group to be a part of. You can ask one of our pastors if you'd like.

2. Begin attending these groups on Sunday morning at 9:00 am.

3. Ask the group leader to place you on their roll, let you have a study book, and begin to meet the others in your group. We guarantee they'll make you feel welcome!

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you think the Bible's origins give evidence for it being inspired by God?

2. Is there anything confusing about the Bible's organization?

3. Why do you think it's important to understand the Bible's timeline when you're reading the Bible? How can this be a helpful tool?

4. What are the five principles of interpretation we listed? Why are they important for reading and understanding the Bible well?

5. Which English translation do you prefer? Why? Why is a good "word-for-word" translation both helpful and suggested? Why might it be good to have several translations if possible?

6. Which of the Bible study steps can you put into practice immediately? Can you think of some other suggestions that may help others read the Bible better?

7. Why should believers, and especially members of the church, want to be active in the way the listen to and respond to the weekly preaching? How can we all be better sermon listeners?

8. How is the preaching ministry organized? Why is it good to attend more than one service per week and hear more than one sermon?

9. Why is studying the Bible in a small group so vital for growing believers and members of a local church? Why might being involved in one of these groups be difficult or intimidating? How can you be involved in one of these groups?

Chapter Six
The Practices of This People:
The Disciplines of Church Membership

Key Terms

Worship	Service	Evangelism
Unity	Fellowship	Missions
Prayer	Cheerful Giving	Testimony

The Church Builder

Matthew 16:13-20 is a remarkable passage. It marks the first mention of the church from Jesus. It also marks the triumphant statement about Jesus' identity from the apostle Peter, and it contains one of the most remarkable promises Jesus ever makes.

Jesus is camping out with his disciples, and let's just be honest, they're a motley crew. There's Matthew the former tax-collector. Sitting over by the trees are the fishermen. Just outside the firelight is Judas, beginning even now to scheme about how he can make a few extra dollars if he becomes a double agent. And there's Jesus. The question about who he is hangs in the air. Finally, Peter offers his conviction: Jesus is the "Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus looks into Peter's eyes. He looks around the circle at the other men, and he smiles. They're not much to look at. There's not much promise around this campfire. The talents here are limited. This isn't the group you might expect to be chosen to turn the world upside down. And yet here they are.

And then Jesus says it. "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Wow. Notice what he says. The church belongs to him. It's not ours. It's not our project. We don't have ownership. It's "his church." And he's going to do something amazing with it: "I will build." He is over its construction. He's the architect and the builder. Ultimately its future isn't in the blank stares sitting around that campfire. Its future is all because of Jesus. And that future is certain. "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The church will be triumphant. Satan's armies will not stop it. Jesus will be victorious!

That's really good news for us as believers. That's really good news for us as church members. There's a lot in our future that seems uncertain. We really don't know what tomorrow might bring. But we're certain of one thing. Jesus will be victorious. Jesus will take you and I, the same motley crew of failures, ne'er-do-wells, scalawags, cowards, and nobodies and build us into a temple for his own presence and glory. That's the present and the future we have waiting for us.

That future, and Jesus' great promise, should impact the way we live in community together within the local church. Because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done and what Jesus has promised, you and I are freed to live in radical obedience to him in all of life.

We've made it to the last session of this new member orientation. Over the course of the last five chapters we've explored our beliefs, our Baptist heritage, covenant membership, and the foundation of our faith, which is the inspired and inerrant Word of God. In this session we want to look at some of the disciplines or practices that you and I are freed to do in our life within the church. These practices are God's means of building his church in our own lives and in the lives of those we are committed to together.

Philippians 2:12-13 informs us that God works to accomplish his purposes in us as we are obedient to live and work diligently and faithfully. In other words, you and I are built up as a church by God as we are faithful to obediently work and practice what he has commanded as a community together. As individual believers and as a community of faith we are to "work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in [us], both to will and to work for his good pleasure." We work. Jesus builds.

So as a local church our membership is called to be faithful to the promises and pledges we've made to one another. The things God has commanded his people to do are the means, the tools, the instruments by which God is building his church. So what are we to be doing? What are we to be about? Well, down toward the very end of our Covenant of Fellowship is a little phrase that may seem tucked out of the way, but it's really the heartbeat of the covenant that we are making together: "We will work together for the continuation of a faithful gospel ministry in this church."

That little sentence says a whole lot. "We will work." We will be active. We will diligent. We will be faithful. "Together." We aren't doing this alone. We aren't doing this solo. "For…a faithful gospel ministry." The gospel is at stake. We're servants of the gospel. Jesus builds his church as a community of the gospel. "In this church." We are working together for the gospel in the place that God has put us, and in the local church that God has placed us. This is our covenant. These are our orders. This is the promise we've made to God and to one another.

So how do we do it? What are the building blocks, the bricks, that we put into practice that connect our "work together" with Jesus' commitment to build his church? Well, our faithfulness to Christ in our faithfulness to the Bible is the foundation. That's what we talked about in our last session. So in this session we want to begin laying some of the brick and mortar on that foundation. We are built as a church by God as we are obedient to live out the reality of our faith through our worship, prayers, fellowship, giving, service, and evangelism. This is the framework for our construction project.

As we go through these various "disciplines of church membership," we will be framing these practices through the lens of the practice of the early church. In **Acts 2:42-47** we're given an intriguing picture of the way the early believers lived together in the local church. Notice what it says:

"And they devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day attending, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Here is a key picture of how the early church lived out its faith through the means Jesus used to build his church. As we dig into this passage we're going to see all of the foundational practices all of us together are called to put into practice in our own lives:

The Disciplines of Faithful Church Membership

Faithful to Worship

The first major practice of church membership that we are called to be faithful to is corporate worship. In our last session we saw how we are to be faithful readers and interpreters of the Bible. That's essential, but we must always remember that personal and group Bible study can never be divorced from the weekly corporate worship services with other members of the local church. Why? Well, there are several reasons:

1. The Bible has commanded believers to meet together weekly for worship and the ministry of the Word (Hebrews).

2. The Bible has commanded the preaching of the Word of God, and our sitting under it, to be the primary means by which believers are fed and nourished from God's Word each week.

3. We are called to live in Christian community together with the entire congregation, and this is hard to do if we are never gathering together with the entire congregation.

4. We are called to proclaim visibly to one another and to the world around us that we are identified with Christ and his people, and our participation in the weekly worship services is a primary means by which this is accomplished each week.

These are four good reasons why church members need to make participation in worship services a top priority. Notice what Acts 2:42-47 says. The early believers devoted themselves to "the apostles' teaching" (v. 42). That's their commitment to the Word of God. They were a "people of the Book." But they didn't stop there. We're also told they were "attending the temple together" (v. 46). We've already spent some time discussing this practice of the early church meeting "together" in the temple. Remember what we said. They weren't meeting there to offer sacrifices because Jesus was the last sacrifice. They were meeting (we're told in Solomon's Portico) for the corporate worship of the church that was grounded on the apostles' preaching and teaching of the Word of God. Later in the passage we're explicitly told they were "praising God" (v. 47). Corporate worship was a community priority.

These weekly worship services in our local church are the most important aspects of our life together that we all are called to participate in together. Nothing can take its place. So how can believers and new members be intentional about participating in worship services? Well here are four suggestions:

1. **Know when your local church meets** for worship each week. Our church has three worship gatherings each week, two on Sunday (Morning Worship & Evening Small Groups) and one on Wednesday (AWANA, Youth Group, & Adult Bible Study).

2. **Make a commitment to your spouse and your family** that you will meet with the rest of the church during the weekly worship gatherings.

3. **Prepare yourself throughout the week for the upcoming worship service**. Put into practice the steps to becoming a better sermon listener we mentioned in the last chapter. Don't wait until Saturday night to think about whether or not you're going to be involved in the corporate worship service. The decision about whether or not you'll be in church is made long before Sunday morning.

4. **Continually remind yourself that true worship isn't really about attendance at a worship service**. Oh, it is important. The Bible commands it. We all need it, and as members of the church we've made a commitment to take these services seriously. But you can attend every worship service that's offered and never really worship God. True worship is about loving God, desiring God, joy in God, living life for God on a daily basis, and not just at the corporate worship gatherings.

Faithful to Pray

The second discipline we must be intentionally committed to practice is prayer. Prayer has been rightly compared to breathing for the believer. Just like our brains cannot live without a steady intake of oxygen, our spiritual lives are suffocated if we are not continually inhaling and exhaling through prayer and Scripture reading. One of the

practices the early church was devoted to was "the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The early church was a praying church.

Sadly, this is one area where so many believers continually identify themselves as weak and stagnant. Prayer can sometimes be a practice we all know we need, but one that can be easier talked about than practiced. But as believers, and as church members who have made a commitment to one another, we are called to grow in prayer. We desperately need it. We need others to be praying for us, and we need to be praying for our brothers and sisters in the church.

So how can we take some steps toward growing toward a life of faithfulness in prayer? Here are a few suggestions:

1. **Pray**. That sounds really simple doesn't it? But it's true. The best way to learn how to grow in prayer is to pray. We learn by doing.

2. **Don't be afraid about how your prayers sound** to yourself (if you're praying silently) or to others (if you're praying aloud). Many of us are self-conscious about how we sound to others, and many of us in local churches unfairly compare ourselves to others we think are really "good" at praying.

3. **Pray at all times and pray at set times**. We're invited to have an ongoing conversation with God throughout the day. You can pray anywhere and at anytime! So take God up on his offer for continued fellowship with him. With that said, it's still good to intentionally set aside certain times throughout the day so you can be specifically devoted to spending time with God in prayer.

4. **Your prayers don't have to be long**. Whether you're praying silently or aloud, be intentional about both honesty and simplicity. There's no need to try and include fancy sounding words. There's no need to try and change your voice inflection. Just be yourself. Come to God simply, and whether you're praying aloud or silently, your prayers don't have to be like a prepared speech. You are one person speaking with another Person, who in the case of prayer happens to be the Creator of the universe!

5. **When you're praying, try to include some key elements of prayer**: praise/thanksgiving, confession of sin, requests for mercy and grace, intercessions (requests) for others, requests for yourself, and thanksgiving again.

6. **Never separate praying from Bible reading**. While the practices of Bible reading and praying are distinct from one another, they cannot be separated. The person who isn't reading his Bible isn't praying, and vice versa. Prayer is the fuel of Bible reading and understanding, and Bible reading is the way we hear from God. So while it's not necessary to only pray while you are doing your daily Bible

reading/study, if you are to be faithful in prayer you must be committed to taking the Bible into your mind, heart, and life.

Faithful to Fellowship

Third, faithful believers and church members are to make fellowship an intentional part of their life together. That may sound strange. We might not normally think of fellowship as a crucial component of the church's life or a practice we have to be intentionally committed do. Fellowship is something we often think of as "just happening," and it's something we associate only with good food and good conversations. Now, certainly good food and good conversations are often great aspects of fellowship, but the biblical command for believers to fellowship together is far deeper.

In Acts 2:42-47, we're shown this picture of the church's life and fellowship. They "devoted themselves to…the fellowship, to the breaking of bread" (v. 42). Later we're told in addition to their corporate worship in the temple they also were "breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts" (v. 46).

Notice what that tells us about fellowship. First, it's something we're to be devoted to. It's not something we just "let happen." We're told to be committed to it. Second, it involved the entire local church. "All who believed were together" (v. 44). Third, fellowship oftentimes centered around a meal or a table. In the first century world, to share a meal together was the most intimate and serious bond of friendship and love. To eat together was to be joined together in love and relationship. Fourth, it occurred throughout the week in the "homes" of the believers. In other words, there was no separation between the believers' "church life" and their private or "home life." All of life was life lived in the context of the local church. The Christian life couldn't be compartmentalized into one or two days a week. It was an "all-the-time" life.

So how do we practice fellowship in the local church? What are some beginning steps we can take to be "devoted" to this discipline? Here are a few suggestions:

1. **Be involved in small group Bible studies and the weekly worship services.** If you're not involved in these foundational commitments, you definitely won't be involved in fellowshipping with other believers in the local church. Fellowship is a byproduct of your commitment to the primary devotion to worship and the Word of God.

2. **Seek to make friends with other believers.** This is one reason why being involved in a small group during Sunday School is so important. It allows you a weekly time to gather with a small group of men and women to talk together, pray together, and study the Bible together.

3. **Try to arrive at church a little earlier** than you have to (something we know can be difficult, especially if you have children!). At the very least, try and linger a little while after services end. This is an easy way to begin to establish relationships. If you arrive late (or right on time) to corporate gatherings and then leave as quickly as possible, what you're communicating is that you want to be with other believers as little as possible.

4. As much as possible **be involved with other activities or events** that take place in and through the local church. Be involved in more (but definitely not less) than just the weekly worship services.

5. As you make friends in the church over time**, be involved in the lives of each other.** Take an interest in what they (or their kids) are involved in. Invite them into their homes. Accept invitations when and if you're invited into their homes.

Faithful to Give

The fourth discipline of church membership is cheerful and regular giving. Oh no, you may be thinking, here's where they begin to talk about money! While that's true, we want to emphasize that giving to and through the local church is about a lot more than simply writing a check each week. Giving is a discipline of faithful church membership.

Acts 2:42-47 has some strange and interesting descriptions of the early church's life together. We're told they "had all things in common" (v. 44), and they "were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need" (v. 45). Sometimes we read that and get a little freaked out. That may sound a little like socialist communism! Is that what's going on? We don't think so, but we do believe there are some very important things happening in these verses! These verses set up a good foundation for our understanding of faithful giving:

1. First, what they were doing was voluntary. This in and of itself sets the early church's practice apart from communism. It wasn't a demand for a certain amount of giving, nor was it a denial of private ownership. That point is clear from Peter's words to Ananias in Acts 5:3-4.

2. Second, the early believers did seem to have a very different understanding of possessions than we often have. While they certainly didn't annihilate private property nor did they establish community ownership and redistribution, they certainly viewed their private possessions as gifts from God that should be used in the service of God. In other words, they believed the possessions they had been given by God were to be used within the context of their most important relationship – their life together with the people of God. They didn't cling to their possessions with a death grip. They had open hearts and open hands, and used their resources for the good of their local gospel community – the church.

3. "Selling their possessions" was the early means by which they were able to contribute financially to the local church. Later in some of the New Testament letters we're not told to sell everything we have, but we are commanded to give for the ministry of the church. The early practice of selling their possessions was the early believers' initial obedience to be men and women who contributed to the ongoing ministry of the church.

4. Finally, the actions of the early church was through the means they already had (they used the gifts that God had already given them), and the financial gifts were used not to serve themselves but to meet the needs of others, primarily through the message of the gospel and the display of the love of the gospel.

So how do we as church members begin to put into practice giving that follows this example and the commands of the Bible? First, it's important to remember our local church doesn't receive any funding from any outside agency, denomination, or fund. That's part of what it means to be an autonomous body. We only operate through the committed giving of our membership. So however we go about putting giving into practice, we do so knowing that we are together the physical and financial means by which God equips our fellowship for gospel ministry. Our giving as church members helps to support:

1. The basic utilities and operating costs of the building and facilities

2. The salaries of all paid pastors and other employees

3. The yearly budget of the church

4. The ministry of Calvary Christian School

5. The work of missions and evangelism in our own community and around the world through the Cooperative Program of the SBC

With that said, we like to encourage our church members to begin practicing what the Bible calls tithing as the means of **cheerful giving**. The first truth that must grip our hearts is that God wants us to practice cheerful giving, meaning giving that comes from a willing, joyful, and loving heart, not giving through compulsion, guilt, or greed. Second Corinthians 9:7 says, "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." So God looks at our heart as much and more than he looks at our pocketbooks. The believers in Acts 2 displayed "generous hearts" (v. 46). We pray that our hearts and lives display generosity as well.

So why do we encourage a tithe as a way to practice cheerful giving? Well, there are several reasons. A tithe is a gift of ten percent of a person's income and/or resources, and

there are good reasons why this practice should set the standard practice for believers in the local church:

1. Tithing has a basis in the biblical teachings about giving (Malachi 3:6-15).

2. Tithing is a minimal commitment of only ten percent of God's blessings that if practiced by all the members within a church would more than make up all the necessary financial requirements for our church and more. It is based on individual provisions for giving, and doesn't place an unneeded burden on our church members.

3. It is far better to encourage a regular gift of ten percent of one's income rather than occasional gifts of large amounts.

4. It is the basic and beginning suggestion. Remember, God wants cheerful givers, and oftentimes God asks us to be cheerful about making sacrificial gifts. So some of our church members have been given the means, the calling, and the hearts to give far more than ten percent. That's great, and if God is asking you to give more, then you absolutely should. A tithe is simply a minimum amount we encourage you to begin disciplining yourself to give cheerfully.

These are just three basic reasons why we encourage our church members to be serious about tithing. A good way to remember this is, "If you have a dollar, give a dime." This type of giving is a good thing to put into practice, but it can be abused. We do need to remember what tithing is not:

1. Tithing isn't giving to God something he doesn't already have. He gives us all things we need. We don't give him anything he needs. Our giving is a response to his giving.

2. Tithing is not a rule or a law that somehow makes us right with God or earns God's favor. Our salvation, forgiveness, and justification are gifts of grace and not something we pay for.

3. Tithing is not an investment program that obligates God to pour out additional blessings. God's heart is good. God delights to give his children good gifts. These good blessings, however, are not due to our obedience but are completely an act of grace alone. We deserve nothing. On top of that, God is far more passionate about making us holy than he is about making us rich. That's why we are commanded to give out of trustful obedience, not the desire to be given more.

That's why we encourage tithing, and that's why we want you to be reminded what tithing isn't, and we also want to be constantly reminded why we are to make giving an intentional and ongoing practice. Why do we give?

1. Giving financially to the church is demonstrated in the early church and commanded by the New Testament (see 2 Corinthians 9).

2. Giving financially to the church is a tangible demonstration of our love for the local church. We invest our resources into the things and people we love.

3. Giving financially to the church is the appropriate response for enjoying the privileges of participation in the local church.

4. Giving financially to the church is a visible reminder to ourselves and others that everything we have is a gift from God and is to be placed in submission to God.

5. Giving financially to the church is a visible means and symbol of our trust and confidence in God's provision.

So how do we practice this discipline? Here are a few suggestions:

1. **Plan to give**. Don't wait until Sunday morning to think about giving. Make it a personal budget commitment.

2. **Talk with your spouse about how much you will give**, then pray that God will give you and your family the grace to give cheerfully and the provision to be obedient in giving.

3. **Give regularly and/or weekly**. Giving can't be a sporadic commitment. We've got to be ongoing givers! This weekly giving is spoken of in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2.

4. **Place your weekly giving in the offering plates** that are passed around to our members during our weekly Sunday morning worship services.

Faithful to Serve

A fifth discipline of membership is basic gospel service. We are called to model the servant heart of our Lord, and we do this by serving those in our fellowship and outside our fellowship in the gospel. The early church met needs. That's something we saw in our discussion of faithful and intentional giving. They "distributed" the proceeds of their goods to all, "as any had need" (v. 45). As believers together in the local church we are to continually pray that God will give us these same hearts of service, one to another. Why is this so important? Service is important for two major reasons:

1. Service is the display of the servant heart of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

2. Service is the active display of the love and affection we are to have for God and for one another.

Now it must be said that there are lots of ways believers are called to serve one another in the local church. Sometimes it may be individual service. Maybe we prepare a meal for someone who has been ill, or babysit children while their parents have a date night. The New Testament talks a lot about meeting the needs of those who are the most in need, so sometimes service may be mowing the grass of an elderly church member, or helping them with some project that can't be done alone. Other aspects of service are more corporate. It may take the form of working the church's nursery during a worship service or getting involved in the church's media and sound team. Sometimes service might be getting involved in church work days or by helping to clean-up after a church meal, fundraiser, or event. There are lots of ways that church members serve the local church, and we're all called to this practice. So how can we begin to put this into action: Here are a few ways:

1. **As always, get involved in a small group Bible study** and be involved in the weekly worship services. It's during these times that needs will be discussed and opportunities for service will be available.

2. **Find areas of ministry you're interested in and passionate about**, and then see how you can be involved.

3. **Take responsibility** as a member for meeting needs and serving the church. If you see something that needs to be done, don't assume someone else will do it. If you walk into a room and a child has messed it up, don't think to yourself "someone else will straighten things up." Serve your church by straightening up those rooms! If you see that someone has spilled something, grab some towels! Be faithful to serve in the small things, because the small things are really big things.

4. **Take joy in serving behind the scenes**. We all have a desire for and a temptation to want be noticed and appreciated. We want people to value us. We want people to appreciate who we are and everything we do. As believers, however, we're called to serve the church without an agenda for recognition. God sees and God knows.

Faithful to Proclaim

The final discipline of church membership is the calling of every believer to be passionate about sharing and speaking the gospel. Every believer is called to be a missionary. That doesn't mean every believer is called to move to another country and to a life of "fulltime" missions. It does mean, however, that every believer is under the command of the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:16-20. There was no person in the entire New Testament who encountered the risen Christ and was not commissioned to take his message to the nations. If we have encountered the risen Christ in our own lives, then we have been commissioned to proclaim the gospel as well.

The final verse of Acts 2:42-47 is important. We've been examining what that passage says about the disciplines (the ongoing and continual practices) of church membership. Now look what it says in the final sentence: "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." Not only was the church in Jerusalem a worshipping, praying, fellowshipping, giving, and serving church, but it was also a growing church, and it was a growing church because it was an evangelizing church. The church took the gospel seriously, and as a result it took the command to speak, share, and display the gospel seriously as well.

As this new members' book comes to a close, that's where we come back to. We're a gospel people. We're a people all about the gospel. We're not ashamed of this gospel, because it is the power of God unto salvation, to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16-17). That's our heart. That's our passion, and God calls every believer to this same passion. We are a church that is passionate about evangelism. We are a people passionate about missions. We are a church that is passionate about seeing men and women saved by the grace of God revealed in the gospel of God, the message of what God has done in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

We want to invite you to join us in this mission. Seeing souls saved and lives changed is not the responsibility of the pastors and church leaders alone. It's the calling for every single one of us. Will you take the gospel seriously? Will you share it with those around you? How can you do that? Well, we're glad you asked. Here are a few simple ways to begin developing a heart for gospel proclamation:

1. **Know the gospel**. If we've been saved by the gospel, then we are called to know and treasure it. We are called to lives that continually seek to see ever more clearly the beauty of God's grace that has rescued us.

2. Know how the gospel has changed your life. Another way of saying this is to **know your own personal testimony – to know your story**. Every believer has a testimony, and every testimony is a powerful demonstration of God's grace and love. Write out in a few paragraphs how God led you to faith in him and how God has changed your life. Know your own testimony well enough to be able to share it with someone in just a few minutes.

3. **Look and see the people God has placed in your life** that need the life that only can be found in the gospel. We all have friends and family members we're called to share the gospel with. Identify the people in your own life God wants to use you to share the gospel with. As you have opportunity, take the time to share your testimony with them and invite them to believe the gospel as well.

4. Another easy way to begin to share the gospel is by simply **inviting friends**, family members, and neighbors to join you for some of the church's weekly worship

services. They will hear the gospel in these services and will be given an opportunity to repent and believe.

5. Again, **be faithful to give**. A portion of every dollar you give goes to support missionaries who are taking the gospel to people all around our world. Every believer who regularly gives in some small way is a supporter of missions.

6. **Always be praying** for the cause of world missions in general and your friends and family members who aren't believers in particular. Prayer is the fuel of evangelism. We can't save anyone. Only God can save, and he has called us to be faithful to pray for the salvation of those we encounter.

7. **Be involved in various ministries** and areas of service in the local church. Whether you're volunteering with the youth group, involved with our ministry at the Cornerstone Rescue Mission, taking a mission trip overseas, or any of our other ministries, you'll have the opportunity to display the love of Christ and the life-changing message of the gospel.

8. **Finally, take advantage of the ongoing opportunities for evangelism and missions**. Our church is passionate not just about supporting missions causes, but in being actively involved in missions causes. As a church member you will have the opportunity to be involved in and engage in missions both in our community, the United States, and short-term mission trips around the world. Get a passport. Be praying. And then as you have opportunity, be obedient to go. Talk with one of our pastors about ways you can be involved in any of the upcoming mission and evangelism opportunities through our local church.

Questions for Reflection

1. How does Jesus' statement that he will build his church give us confidence? Why is it important to remember the means Jesus uses to go about building his church?

2. What is worship? Why is corporate worship with the local church so important? How might believers also be involved in personal and family worship?

3. What is prayer? What are some of the basic components of prayer? How might believers be more faithful in their prayer lives?

4. Why do you think so many of us don't think of fellowship as a crucial aspect of discipleship? How can we be intentional about making fellowship a priority?

5. Why is it important to see our church life as happening every day of the week, and not just on Sundays and Wednesdays?

6. What is "cheerful giving?" How might cheerful giving also be sacrificial giving? Why is giving to and through your local church so important?

7. Read 2 Corinthians 9. What does this chapter say about the discipline of giving?

8. How can we serve one another in the local church? What are some ways you believe God has equipped and gifted you to serve others?

9. What is your testimony? Why do you think it is sometimes so difficult to share the gospel? What are some ways we can be faithful to share the gospel?

10. Why should evangelism and missions be a priority for a local church? What happens if these things aren't priorities? How do we ensure they are priorities?

Take and Read

Recommended Resources for Life in the Church

The Christian's life in the local church is both a journey and a battle. Sanctification isn't easy and it isn't quick, that's why we're so completely convinced we need one another if we're to grow into maturity in Christlikeness. That primarily means we grow in relationship with one another in the local church as we're rooted, grounded in, and fed from the Bible itself.

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