

The Covenant of Grace and Community

Covenant Reveals God

The Redemptive Covenant has implications concerning the relationship between the Father and the Son. It reveals the roles played by each person of the Godhead in the process of our redemption. That is, it gives us a glimpse of the character and attributes of God. We need to be cautious of the image of God that we keep in our mind. It must be a true image, untarnished by our human experience of fatherhood. If we want to commune with God, we must first know the one we are to commune with, his attributes and his attitude toward us. If we think that God the Father is the punisher, a God of Wrath and Judgment, and that God the Son is the loving one who protects us from the Father's wrath, and that God the Spirit coerces us rather than reconciles us to the Father, then our view of God is warped. If we misperceive who God is and what he has done for us, then we misperceive our relationship to each person in the Godhead. If we don't understand the covenant between the Father and the Son concerning our redemption, then we will also misperceive our own role.

The indemnity clause exists because of the *Father's* love for us, not because of the Son's love for us. There is no hint in the Bible that the Son negotiated the clause for us on our behalf. The Father willingly and intentionally provided a means of reconciliation between us. The Son willingly and intentionally did all that the Father asked of him with regard to that provision. The covenant between the Father and the Son informs us of the Father's love for us, and of the Son's love for the Father. John Owen once wrote that the Son did not hate our sin so much as he loved the Father. Therefore, he took our sins upon himself and was made a sin offering for us.¹ The love of Christ that we see on the cross is the great love of the Father for his children, revealed through the actions of the Son,² and realized in us by the Spirit.³

The covenant between the Father and the Son is a reflection of their relationship with one another. It is a plural relationship, an interactive relationship. The Covenant of Grace likewise reflects our relationship with other believers and with God. We are an interactive *community* of believers. Christ came to redeem all the children of God as a group, though individually paid for, so that none of his sheep would perish (Matt. 18:14). We are redeemed by the same blood. We are born of the same Spirit (Jn. 3:8). We live together under one roof as God's children. We are members of one family.⁴ We share God's name, and his blessings. We eat the same spiritual food (Jn. 6:51-56); and we recognize that whatever physical food he puts on our table is for all of us to share (Acts 4:32). He is *our* Father in heaven. The ties that bind us together are blood ties, shared in Christ by the Father's design, and created under the Redemptive Covenant.

¹ 2Cor. 5:21

² John 17:6 I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word.

³ Eph 3:4-5 you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. NIV Rom 8:9 Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ESV Eph 3:17-19 that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height — to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

⁴ Eph. 4:4-6

Public vs. Private Enterprise

I was watching PBS the day after the 2004 presidential election. They had a panel to discuss the impact of the evangelicals on the election. To paraphrase what one of them said, “Those from Catholic and Jewish traditions understand the need to know God within the context of the wider community. But Protestants tend to think of their relationship with God as one-on-one.” That’s profound and insightful. It’s not how it should be from a reformed standpoint,⁵ but it is deadly accurate as far as the modern, evangelical movement goes. Small groups are not God’s solution to church cohesion. They are the biblical locale for discipleship. In a small group setting we learn the theology of the church, the rules of behavior governing our life together in the Body, and what our obligations are to the world. It creates both a safe haven and an awkward school in which we practice our lessons. We receive our correction in the presence of other believers, and in the sight of our instructors. We learn the Way of Christ in a public place with other students, rather than receiving instruction from a private tutor, or through personal study alone. This was Christ’s way with his disciples. It has been God’s way with all of his children.

Discipleship is necessarily interactive. Why? Because the Covenant which governs our relationship with each other creates an environment which is interactive. It is public and regulated, not private and unregulated. It is contractual. We subscribe to it. Can you imagine a family in which a child has a relationship with the parents, but not with the other children in the family? Self-centeredness in our worship of God, and in our participation in the Body, is foreign to the Christian walk. It may be acceptable to the postmodern mind, but it has no utility in the life of the Church. *It’s not all about me.* Covenant is the theological basis for the church, and it forms a community of believers. It creates a family in which individuals are strengthened and nurtured using structured guidelines. Because it is a family, we are called brothers and sisters. And like a home, it should be a safe place in which to love and be loved in return.

There is no Scriptural support for living an isolated Christian life. *None.* Did you know that virtually every promise in the bible is made to the church as a whole, rather than to individuals? Nearly every command addresses our relationship with others, not our private actions.⁶ David Wells tells us that character, up until the 20th century, was not considered a matter of private virtue either, but of public behavior.⁷ Today’s courts, in stark contrast, are more concerned with psychological motivation than with outward actions. God never asked Adam why he sinned, as if that would make a difference in the outcome. Adam’s sin, its effects, and the atonement for it, were all public matters, not private. He wanted to satisfy himself rather than God, and the ramifications of that desire impacted all of us for eternity.

⁵ John Robbins reminds us there is a ‘principle of the Reformation that is largely forgotten today: the right of private judgment. Those who defend church tradition and church authority and heap scorn on “Lone Rangers,” “schismatics,” and individualists echo the tyrants of Rome.’ (*Forgotten Principles of the Reformation*, Trinity Review No. 236, 2004; p. 4). He is correct. However, the point he makes concerns the primacy of Scripture over church authority, not the right to live outside the fellowship of the church. Heb 10:24-25 tells us to, “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, **not neglecting to meet together**”; “I will tell of your name to my brothers; **in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.**” Heb 2:12 (quoting Ps. 22:22) ESV. The corporate nature of the Christian life is inescapable in both the Old and New Testaments.

⁶ As an exercise, study the phrase “one another” throughout the NT to see how the Body of Christ is supposed to function.

⁷ Wells, David, *God in the Wasteland* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1994) p. 11

In the same way that our behavior toward others is a public affair, our communion with God is a public affair. We love God through others. That's a life principle we must not forget. Communion with God takes place in our visible interaction with the community of believers. That's where we are called to serve God; that's also where we are served by the Body. Through our personal study, we are to grow in our *capacity* to serve. Through our interactions with the community, we are to grow in our *opportunities* to serve, and to be served by others.

The Business of the Church

We are not a marketplace seeking to attract business. We are not a service organization offering the latest techniques to obtain a rich and rewarding life. Presenting the Gospel does not mean we advertise self-improvement seminars, taught by in-house specialists, hoping to establish long-term relationships with those who attend. We are not consumers of self-help products couched in theological terms. We are not an audience to be entertained in the comfort of a concert hall, using the latest technology. Our theology is flat wrong if that is what we want as a believer, or if we allow the church to be consumer-driven in this way. I'm not talking here about the media we use. We will use every means at our disposal, whether traditional or modern, to further the cause of Christ. I'm talking about content and focus. The content and the focus of church teaching and practice must always be Jesus Christ, not us. If we get our relationship with God right through Jesus Christ, everything else will follow. We cannot get that relationship right if we raise spoiled children who may come and go as they please, who have neither expectations nor duties, who are allowed to avoid their commitments and obligations.⁸ That isn't treating the believer as a dearly loved child, but as a complete stranger. Such permissiveness does not reflect the character of God in his treatment of his children.⁹

There is a covenant in every marriage, and in every family, that governs our behavior toward one another. It says something about who we are to each other, our value and importance to the family as a whole. God says that husbands and wives become one flesh (Gen. 2:24). Paul said that husbands are to treat their wives as they would treat their own body. And then he explicitly says that this is a metaphor for the church, for our behavior toward one another.¹⁰ We cannot ignore or separate from each another, because we are one Body – not in theory but in fact. We are under the bonds of matrimony, not many brides, but one bride, pledged to Christ as one. The marriage covenant is a secure setting in which we come to know our spouse and ourselves

⁸ Matt 8:21-22 "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." NIV; Acts 2:44-47 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. James 5:3-5 Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. NKJV [These verses are not describing a cult, or a communist lifestyle, nor the evil of wealth. They call us to consider that all we have belongs to God. Thus we should consider our obligations and possessions in the context of the kingdom, rather than considering them independent of our church life. The tithe is not a minimum payment to retain membership in the Body. It is a token of our acknowledgement that *everything* we have comes from God, and a pledge that all we possess will be devoted to Him if necessary.]

⁹ Heb 12:5-8 And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. NIV

¹⁰ Eph 5:28-30 So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones.

more and more as we interact. The bonds of a covenant hold us together, enabling us to grow in our knowledge of Christ through others. Covenant gives us the freedom to test our relationships without fear of losing them. Covenant creates community. This is where obedience comes into play. God has given us rules to govern and protect our relationships in the community.

Obedience Demonstrates Love

Jesus called his disciples his friends and not his servants.¹¹ Why? Because he revealed to them the hidden things of the Father, which is the work that the Father gave him to do.¹² His covenantal obligation was to be our surety, our representative. His obedience, in the end, is what satisfied the Performance Clause and freed us of our debt. Christ is the final sacrifice, made once for all, making further sacrifices under the Old Testament unnecessary (Heb. 9:12). His sacrifice covered all sins, for all his people, for all time.¹³ What is most important to consider is that Christ came to atone for us out of obedience to the Father.¹⁴ His obedience was an act of love, directed toward the Father as well as toward us.

Christ revealed the Father in the *form* of his obedience. Every word he spoke was from the Father.¹⁵ Every act of healing, every gentle word of encouragement, every rebuke, was from the Father.¹⁶ He was obedient in all that he did and said,¹⁷ so that he would sufficiently reveal the will and the attributes of the Father to his people.¹⁸ Why? So that we would know the one who sent him.¹⁹ He described his friends as those who would do what he commanded, those who would abide under the covenant through obedience, just as he had done.²⁰ He demonstrated his own love of the Father through his obedience to the Father's will.²¹ We too reveal the love of the Father to the world by our obedience.²² We obey under a covenant of grace, not under a covenant of works, but we are no less obedient as a result of having God's covering of grace.²³ We obey because we love God, and we love God because he first loved us (1Jn. 4:19).

¹¹ John 15:14-15 You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.

¹² John 17:4 I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.

¹³ Titus 2:14 4 who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people...

¹⁴ John 15:9-10 "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

¹⁵ John 3:34 For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure.

¹⁶ John 9:3-4 "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him. I must work the works of Him who sent Me

¹⁷ Heb 4:15 we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin

¹⁸ John 14:8-9 Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

¹⁹ John 17:3 And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

²⁰ John 15:10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

²¹ Luke 22:42 "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done."

²² 1 Peter 2:12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, ... they may see your good deeds and glorify God NIV

²³ Rom 6:1-2 Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

Obedience in Community

God did not give us the law mistakenly, or temporarily. He provided it for our good, and for his glory, just as he provided grace.²⁴ Here are a few verses esteeming obedience as the mark of every Christian.²⁵

1 John 2:15-17 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. 1 John 2:29 If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him.

1 Thess 4:3-8 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.

1 Thess 5:14-22 Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

1 Peter 2:15-17 For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men — as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

Did you notice the repeated theme of our personal behavior within the context of community? We are not to love one another so much with *emotion* as we are to exercise correct *behavior*, to treat one another with honesty, dignity, and respect, maintaining a healthy fear of God.

How We Sow Seeds of Disunity

Unfortunately, what tends to happen whenever two or more gather is that we fall into comparison, competition, and control. The American culture advocates a competitive path to glory. Competition is the main theme of its most popular television shows: Survivor, Swan, Makeover, Big Brother, Apprentice, Amazing Race, Joe Millionaire, and American Idol (now there's an accurate title). These elevate greed, favoritism, competition, and back-stabbing to an art-form, literally. Living our lives to please others is a subtle form of idolatry in which we make ourselves the idol. Christians are not to be like that at all.

²⁴ Deut 4:1-2 "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you. Deut 4:5-10 "Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' ... 'Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.'

²⁵ Keep in mind that we always speak of obedience as a hallmark and not a benchmark; it characterizes us without enslaving us to the Law.

We are not to boast.²⁶ We are not to commend ourselves.²⁷ We are not to seek the approval of men but of God.²⁸ We are not to compare ourselves to others in order to flatter ourselves.²⁹ We are not to love the world or anything in the world.³⁰ We are not to lord it over one another.³¹ We are not to compete with one another, nor envy one another, nor be greedy for personal gain.³² We are not to exalt ourselves.³³ We are not to draw a following after ourselves.³⁴ We are not to seek our own good, but the good of others.³⁵

Contention and competition break our fellowship with each other, and with Christ.³⁶ We don't compete with Christ (Matt. 10:24-25), and we don't compete with each other (Gal. 6:4). We contend for the faith (Phil. 1:27) against the powers of darkness (Eph. 6:12), not against the children of light (Eph. 5:8).

Abusing Authority

When we compare, compete, and control, we are trying to exercise dominion over those around us. We may even use Scripture as our means of control, abusing its authority. We turn it into a bludgeon to coerce others into our way of thinking. We are striving to be like God, which is what got Adam and Eve into trouble in the first place. Remember the temptation of Christ: *worldly* authority comes from the devil.³⁷ In opposition to this, Christ's authority and the Spirit's authority come from the Father.³⁸ Whatever authority we have comes from Christ, and it is to be

²⁶ 1 Cor 5:6-7 Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast - as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. NIV

²⁷ 2 Cor 10:12 Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding. ESV

²⁸ 2 Cor 10:17-18 "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends. ESV; Gal 1:10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ. NIV

²⁹ Gal 6:3-5 If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load. NIV

³⁰ 1Jn. 2:15; Gal 6:14 May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. NIV

³¹ Matt 20:25-26 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant.

³² 1 Cor 3:3-4 For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal? 1 Peter 5:2-3 NKJV 1 Cor 1:12-13 What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ESV Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. NIV

³³ Matt 23:12 And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

³⁴ Acts 20:30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

³⁵ 1 Cor 10:24 Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others. NIV

³⁶ 1 Cor 1:9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. ESV

³⁷ Luke 4:6 And the devil said to Him, "All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish.

³⁸ John 12:49 For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. John 16:13 However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come

exercised with care. We *teach* believers to obey rather than force them;³⁹ and preferably, we teach by example (2Thess. 3:9). Our power is persuasive not coercive (see note).⁴⁰ The temptation to abuse authority is always there. Even the Sons of Thunder asked Christ if they should call down fire from heaven upon the Samaritans who did not receive him.⁴¹ Power and authority are alluring narcotics, you see. We should question our motives before we speak or act concerning another person. Better yet, we should ask God to search us, because our heart is deceitful above all things.⁴²

Covenant is a Means of Reconciliation

Because we are family, and because we are tempted to compare, compete, and control, there are bound to be family squabbles. *How we resolve disputes, and restore fellowship, is the measure of Christian maturity.* God has rules for reconciliation. They are restorative and protective rules, not punitive.⁴³ When we forgive one another, we do so God's way: whatever has transpired is not only forgiven, but forgotten. Rules help us determine whether there is just cause for action, and if so, what action to take. Whatever action we do take, our intent is to return the offender to a right relationship with God,⁴⁴ to re-establish fellowship with the Body, and to protect the flock from wolves who come in to devour them.⁴⁵ Without church discipline, there is no reconciliation or protection. In fact, without church discipline, there is no church. There is only chaos, confusion, and conflict. And without orthodoxy, without an agreed upon body of truth, there can be no discipline. ***Orthodoxy defines right behavior as well as right doctrine.*** It is an essential part of the Covenant of Grace that governs the church.⁴⁶ It forms the foundation of our fellowship, and it establishes the point at which fellowship must be broken.⁴⁷

³⁹ Matt 28:18-20 "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, ... teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you;

⁴⁰ Heb 13:17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. [The word for "obey" is *peitho*: "suffer yourself to be persuaded." There is no right to persuade against one's will, but by being such an example that persuasion is drawn out of respect for the elder's own personal walk with God – that's the thrust behind Heb. 13:7].

⁴¹ Luke 9:54-56 And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?" But He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them."

⁴² Jer. 17:9-10

⁴³ Gal 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. NIV; 2 Thess 3:14-15 If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. NIV

⁴⁴ James 5:19-20 Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from [misery] and cover a multitude of sins. [Most translations use the word "death" but that would suggest we have the power to save someone. We do not. Only God does. The alternative meaning, the metaphorical meaning, of the Greek word is the death-like misery that sin causes. The idea of covering the sin is not to pay for them, or do penance for them, but to draw the curtain, or pull the window-shade down, upon a life that is past. The Greek means to hide the knowledge of something. If we turn a sinning believer from his path, we keep him from experiencing the misery of ongoing sin in his life.]

⁴⁵ See Acts 20:29-30 – exclusion from fellowship guards the flock from predatory creatures and their tempting lies.

⁴⁶ 2 Cor 11:4 For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. ESV; Gal 1:6-8 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ESV

⁴⁷ Titus 3:10 Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. NIV 1 Cor 5:9-13 I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people - not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the

“Wait!” you might protest. “We aren’t allowed to remove anyone from fellowship. What about the wheat and the tares?” The prohibition against pulling tares has nothing to do with suffering bad behavior or wrong doctrine. That prohibition concerns making judgments as to who is saved and who is not. Discipline has to do with external action, not eternal destiny. When we discipline, we deal only with objective standards of conduct. We treat everyone alike in the Body. If someone claims to be a Christian, then we take them at their word. We consider them covered by the Covenant, and we treat them accordingly. They share the same rights and obligations as anyone else. They have chosen to identify themselves with Christ, and to submit to his lordship through the local body of believers. They cannot complain that they did not sign a contract, or submit to church discipline. It is the nature of Covenant, as you learned in Lesson 2. If they want the blessings of the church, they must submit to the rules of the church.

Now, if we refuse to acknowledge that there is a covenant between us, there can be no “protocol” by which to take corrective action. We have no authority to correct someone, and we lack the submissive attitude to accept such correction. This has far-reaching implications for church order, structure, and discipline. I’m not going to go into that right now. What is important to understand is that we have more than just an *implied* covenant between all believers; we have an *explicit* covenant demanded by Scripture. The NT speaks more about church discipline than any other topic except salvation.

Church discipline is the complete set of rules governing right behavior in the church Body, not just the rules governing wrong behavior. Commands in the NT concerning relationships between believers define an order, process, and structure for the church. We either explicitly subscribe to these covenantal requirements by becoming a church member,⁴⁸ or we implicitly subscribe to them by participating in fellowship.⁴⁹ What we subscribe to is the covenant that exists between the church and its head, Jesus Christ. We are subscribing to the Way of Christ. We are agreeing to properly express what it means to be “in Christ.”

There is a dynamic between our personal and communal relationship with Christ that facilitates love between believers, but it may also generate tension. The covenant governs both. *The Covenant defines and regulates our corporate relationships. It does so by describing our relationship to God through Christ by the Spirit.* It can take a lifetime to unpack that profound little gem.

The Eternal Call of our Soul

Without Christ we would live out our days in isolation, always striving to know and be known, to see and be seen, but having no basis for community, no covenantal foundation. The

greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you." NIV

⁴⁸ Churches have gotten away from membership meaning anything more than funding the church. The idea of submitting to discipline by the church elders has become a foreign concept. The postmodern mindset avoids commitment and submission at all cost.

⁴⁹ Fellowship is more than mere association, attendance, or sitting together. Fellowship, by definition, requires submission by one in order to benefit the other. Christ submitted to death and dishonor that we might benefit from his sacrifice.

absence of God is the great gap in our human existence. Without him, without enjoying his presence, it is like having an insatiable hunger in our soul. We consume everything in sight, but nothing will satisfy us. The only thing that can quench our hunger is the practical presence of God in our lives, a presence that we can actually experience while we live. Christ is the one who draws us out of our isolation into a larger community that shares and advances our calling. Christ is the one who leads us to God through the lives of other believers. We don't stumble onto this relationship with God unless another believer is willing to reveal it to us, and demonstrate it to us.⁵⁰ We are like the Ethiopian who read the words, but needed Philip to explain their meaning.⁵¹ Our hunger requires other people if our craving is to be satisfied as God intends.

We are eternal beings. Only our body is temporal. If we try to satisfy our eternal need for God and for belonging with temporal things, then we've got an itch that can't be scratched. I'm not talking about salvation and our need to come to Christ. I'm talking about what happens *after* that. We all search for eternal meaning, and we all search for contentment in this life. Apart from Christ, our search must fail. Yet, if we remain isolated after receiving Christ, if we never draw near to God beyond our intellect, if we never enjoy communion and fellowship with him, if we never express or receive his love in the physical presence of the Body, *then we are nearly as destitute as those who are lost*. We have salvation without any satisfaction. We have eternity without any present comfort.

We cannot enjoy the riches of the saints (Eph. 1:18), the love of Christ (Eph. 3:14-19), or the fellowship of the Spirit (1Cor. 1:9; Phil. 2:1), unless we actively pursue a relationship with God *through* the Body of Christ.⁵² The church, as a community, is God's means of grace to us. In the church, we find encouragement, support, discipline, and recognition.⁵³ Furthermore, the church is God's means of grace to the world. We are the yeast which causes the bread to rise.⁵⁴

The Purpose of the Christian Disciplines

The disciplines are designed to draw us into the larger community, for our benefit and for the benefit of the community. Bible study, prayer, fasting, meditation, journaling, private and corporate worship, evangelism, discipleship, and service are only a means to an end. They are never ends in themselves. They are never done in isolation for purely personal profit. They are intended for these purposes:

⁵⁰ Rom 10:14 And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? NIV; James 2:16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well ; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? NIV

⁵¹ Acts 8:30-31

⁵² 1 John 4:20 If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. NIV

⁵³ 1 Thess 5:12-14 And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves. Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.

⁵⁴ Matt 5:16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. Matt 13:33 "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough." NIV Matt 5:44 But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you... Gal 6:10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

- to draw us near to God (to know and be known),
- to express his love by loving others (to know and be known)
- to receive his love from other believers (to know and be known)

I suggested earlier in the course that God's covenant with his people, and the Christian disciplines, are linked. *The disciplines express the content of the covenant within the context of the community.* They inform us of the covenant, and of the Covenant-Maker (prayer and bible-study); they prepare us for responding to God (meditation and journaling); they are the means of receiving and dispensing God's love and encouragement (submission and service); and thus they are a means of experiencing God, and demonstrating our love for him.

They are tools to help us find answers to the questions each of us asks sooner or later: Do I matter? Has anyone been affected by my life? Did I make a difference? What is my legacy? This isn't about having children, or leaving wealth behind, or enjoying lasting fame. We are asking about our destiny. "Did I have a purpose, and have I fulfilled it?" If we could only know that we succeeded, I suspect we wouldn't need any fanfare. What I have observed over a lifetime is that God's purpose for each believer is fulfilled publicly through the Body of Christ. It is never fulfilled in isolation.

Conclusion

We have now finished examining the covenantal foundation of the Christian Faith. We have a shared body of truth upon which to build our fellowship. The Covenant of Grace has given us a family to belong to. We mustn't ignore, betray, or mistreat one another. We have an affirmative duty to maintain a good reputation in the eyes of the world, and to establish unity in the Church. God is the Father of us all. Because he loves us all, we are to love each other, just as Christ loved us (Jn. 15:12). We are to walk in truth (3Jn. 4).

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. Eph 4:1-6

Unity in the Body results from the biblical truth we preach. That truth is the foundation of our communion with God and with each other. Worship and fellowship cannot flow from love alone, independent of the truth from which they arise. If we do not share the same view of God, of who Jesus Christ is and what he did on the cross, of the Holy Spirit and his role in our salvation and sanctification, then we are not worshipping the same God. Disunity will tear apart whatever fellowship we think we have. And so we strive for doctrinal purity as a way to maintain unity in the Body, and to glorify God in truth. That is our covenantal responsibility to each other and to God.⁵⁵ We desire unity, but it cannot be at any cost. More about this topic in the next lesson when we discuss matters of indifference.

⁵⁵ Rom 16:17 Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. 1 Tim 4:16 Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. NIV 2 John 9 Whoever is turning aside, and not abiding in the doctrine of Christ, does not have God. [One] abiding in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son.