

Membership – The People of God

Heb. 8:8-13

Oct. 6, 2013 AM

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This morning we are beginning a series of messages on church membership and the body of Christ. Our purpose in these messages is to better understand the biblical patterns and purposes around our community as God's people and to establish the context and importance of membership in a local church. While emphasizing church membership goes against modern trends in the church, we will show that it is based both on biblical arguments and principles of wisdom that establish both the responsibilities and benefits of identifying oneself with the people of God.

I believe you will find this to be an informative and helpful series. A high view of church membership is one of the distinctives of the Chapel. Unfortunately, the idea of identifying with the church in membership is no longer a popular idea. Many modern churches today are absent a membership process, have abandoned Sunday evening and mid-week gatherings. So our strong commitment to community makes us somewhat unusual. This series is intended to explain why we treasure and value the idea of believers identifying themselves with and belonging to a local body.

Our journey through this series on church membership starts with the word 'covenant'. It may seem like a strange place to start. Covenant is a concept that we typically identify with the Old Testament and not something we immediately associate with being a part of the body of Christ. However, this morning I hope to show that the relationship between God and His people is revealed to us through a progression of covenants found through the whole of scripture. These

covenants are more than just historical events and the subject of theological debate. They are foundational in understanding who we are as a community and how we are to view our life together as God's people.

I believe we would agree that the church is not a community created by man's design. Throughout scripture, it is God that has initiated and established relationships with His people as a community joined not only to Him, but to one another. The idea of community flows out of and is a reflection of the community that exists within the divine Trinity. God intends for us to live not as independent individuals, but together, as a dependent and redeemed community. Moreover, our life together in community, as brothers and sisters, illustrates our dependence both upon on Christ and one another and is a well spring of many blessings as we receive the encouragement, instruction, and accountability needed to walk the life God intended for us.

Before we begin taking a look at the idea of covenants, let's start with a prayer to ask God's favor upon our time in His word this morning.

Covenant – Dictionary Definition

covenant ('kʌvənənt) - noun

A contract or
binding agreement
based in
the rule of law

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If you were to look up the word 'covenant' in a Webster dictionary you would find that it means to enter into a contract or agreement. The modern idea is that a covenant represents a binding commitment between two parties. A contract communicates the obligations of each party, the benefits or payment upon fulfillment, and the consequences or penalties for breaching the agreed upon terms. The power to keep a contract is based upon its enforceability under the rule of law. In other words, the parties are compelled to keep the agreement knowing that the promise of both benefit and penalty will be enforced by the government.

Covenant – Biblical Definition

A promise or
pledge of performance
based in
the character of each party

A key element of God's
self-revelation

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But to fully understand the idea of a covenant, we must develop our definition biblically. While it sounds strange to our ears, the biblical definition of covenant is based upon ancient forms of treaties that Old Testament readers would have been familiar with. People of Old Testament times entered into formal, binding agreements by a form of both ritual and oath. The parties would swear an oath of their obligations to one another in the form of promises and pledges. The making or binding of these oaths was often followed by a ritual where an animal was sacrificed, divided in two, with each party walking between them. The symbolism of this ritual declared that their own life would be forfeit should they not keep their word.

The power to keep a covenant oath was based upon the character and integrity of each party. The ritual sacrifice of an animal reflected the solemn nature of the covenant and the commitment of both parties to keep their word. Compare this to today, where verbal oaths or agreements mean and cost very little. But we can understand the motivation to keep an agreement when your life is on the line. The imagery of sacrifice and penalties of death should not be lost on us today. It was Christ's sacrifice on the cross that forever paid the penalty for our "oath-breaking" and met the obligations of a covenant that we could never fulfill.

As modern believers, there is another point here for us to understand. The many covenants of scripture are also a key element of God's self-revelation of His character and His relationship with His people. What do they reveal to us? They reveal that God is a covenant-keeping God who is always faithful to His promises. They reveal that God initiates the relationship with His people; that He will be our God and we are to be His people. They reveal that He is merciful and kind; slow to anger, and steadfast in His love. The progression of these covenants repeatedly reveal a pattern of mercy and redemption for those who are unable to keep the covenant obligations God requires. And most importantly, these covenants build and lead us to the one true covenant-keeper; fulfilling all the covenants and who is the author and guarantor of a better covenant because it is based upon better promises. But now I am getting ahead of myself.

Progression of Covenants

Favor	Earth	Canaan	Deliverance	Established	Bondage
Adam Genesis 1:28-3:19	Noah Genesis 8:21-22	Abraham (people) Genesis 15:1-21; 17:21; 28:15; 35:10-12	Moses (nation) Exodus 6:2-8; Deuteronomy 7:6-11	David (kingdom) 2 Samuel 7:8-16; 1 Kings 9:1-9	New (church) Jeremiah 31:31-34; Micah 7:18-20
Fall	Extinction	Captivity	Defeat	Exile	Blessing
Mankind		Israel			Mankind
Rescued Remnants					

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This morning we are going to quickly touch on each of the key covenants of scripture. So this is your fair warning that we are on the express tour and will be flying over selected scriptures. I will leave it to each of you to look at these passages for further study. The covenants you see on this slide depict the progression of God's relationship with His people throughout the whole of biblical history. You can see that there is a repeated story of God's people moving from favor to failure and seeing God rescue His people as His sovereign plan of redemption unfolds. What starts with God's favor in the garden, ends with mankind's fall through Adam. It is a pattern that is repeated in each and every covenant until Christ fulfilled them all and perfectly kept the requirements for us.

In each of these covenants, there is an obligation of performance expected with blessings for obedience and penalties for failure. We see a repeated pattern of starting off well under God's authority and blessing. But over time there is falling away from God and ending badly. Similarly, we God's people start in a place of blessing and end up being removed from that place of blessing. However, as disheartening as this pattern may seem, it is also the means by which God brings about His ultimate plan for the redemption of His people. And it is a pattern that reminds us of the patient and loving mercies of our God for His people.

The progression starts with two proto-covenants or covenant-like promises that God makes to mankind in general. The first of these is to Adam and is found throughout the first three chapters of Genesis. Adam was expected to care for and have dominion over the earth, but given one restriction. Adam and Eve were not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life. But when they fail to keep the covenant, God was merciful. Yes, I said merciful. You see Adam and Eve deserved God's wrath. And though they were spared, the consequences carried forward to all mankind, and with the curse came pain, toiling, and physical death along with removal from the place of blessing in the garden.

The next covenant promise is made to Noah after the flood. During Noah's time man had flourished upon the earth. But they had become evil and corrupt and God finally decides to destroy all living things. Noah alone is found to be righteous and God spares a few from the flood as a remnant of all mankind. So in a single cataclysmic event, mankind goes from multiplying to near extinction. Yet God relents. After the flood God makes a covenant with Noah and by extension all mankind. He makes a covenant to never flood the earth again. And out of the remnant, that is Noah's family, comes a man named Abraham who will bring forth the seed of a nation that God will use to bless all mankind.

The progression continues with three covenants made to the nation of Israel. God first makes a covenant with Abraham, and his family goes from the promised land of Canaan to captivity in Egypt. Next, God makes a covenant with Moses and Israel as a nation. They go from deliverance out of Egypt back into the Promised Land, but end up falling into corruption and defeat to the nations around them. Finally, God makes a covenant with David, and Israel is established as a mighty kingdom. But again, over time they fall into disobedience and end up divided, defeated, and destroyed. Again, like the flood, only a remnant of Israel is saved.

But out of the remnant of Israel, comes one who establishes a new kingdom for His people that fulfills all prior covenants. One, who like Adam, represents all mankind but establishes a new covenant that reverses the patterns after the fall and takes a remnant of mankind, that is to say a chosen people, from the bondage of sin in this life into the blessing of His glorious kingdom for all eternity. One, who unlike us, is able both to keep and fulfill the obligations of the covenant as well as pay the debt of our death-oath to satisfy the wrath of a just God.

The pattern of these covenants is like the story line of a movie where the characters get deeper and deeper in trouble and rescue seems impossible. And you sit on the edge of your seat wondering how and when the hero will ever get them out of such a terrible mess. Except, the bible is not a movie and the characters of history are not fictitious. And thankfully we know not only how God rescues His people, but we know the one who is so much more than a hero.

This takes us to our text this morning found in Hebrews 8:6-13. Here we find the one who comes and establishes a new covenant with His people. Feel free to turn there or follow along on the screen as I read this passage.

6 But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. 7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. 8 For he finds fault with them when he says:

*"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, 9 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.*

*10 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and **I will be their God, and they shall be my people.** 11 And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. 12 For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."*

13 In speaking of a **new covenant**, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

The Superiority of Christ

Christ in Hebrews

- **Superior** to the angels and Levitical system of priests in **1:4** and **7:7**
- Has a **more excellent** name and ministry in **1:4** and **8:6**
- Receives **more glory** than Moses in **3:3**
- **Better hope** of **7:19**
- **Better covenant** in **7:22**
- **Better priest** of **Chap. 8**
- **Better promises** in **8:6**
- **Better sacrifice** of **9:6**
- **Better possession** of **10:34**
- **Better word** in **12:24**
- The hope of a **better country** and a **better life** in **11:16** and **11:35**

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In Hebrews, we see the superiority of Christ over the forms and covenantal systems of the Old Testament. Christ is “superior” to the angels and Levitical system of priests in 1:4 and 7:7. His name and ministry are “more excellent” in 1:4 and 8:6. He deserves “more glory” than Moses in 3:3. Christ is the “better hope” of 7:19. He is the guarantor of a “better covenant” in 7:22. He is the better priest of Chapter 8. We see that the covenant Christ mediates is better, since it is enacted on “better promises” in 8:6. He is the “better sacrifice” of 9:6. He is the “better possession” of 10:34 and His blood speaks a “better word” in 12:24. And Christ brings to us the hope of a “better country” and a “better life” in 11:16 and 11:35. The repetition and breadth of scope makes it clear that Christ is better and brings a better covenant.

The heart of our passage this morning is taken directly from Jeremiah 31:31-34. Here Jeremiah prophesies of a covenant that is to come that will not be like the previous ones. The previous covenants with man were imperfect. They could not produce the righteousness God required nor did they restore what was lost in Adam’s fall. Time after time, mankind and Israel are unable to fulfill their covenant obligations as God’s people. But the problem was not with the covenants, but rather with man’s sinful nature and his spiritually dead condition. What was needed was someone to redeem us from our hopeless state.

Our passage this morning makes it clear that Christ fulfills the first covenant with Israel. Christ comes and lives a perfect life, dies taking the penalty for our sin, and is then raised again on our behalf. He now stands as the mediator of a new covenant on our behalf. Christ fulfills Jeremiah’s prophecy and inaugurates a new covenant. He is the one who both arbitrates and meets the obligation that we could not fulfill. He restores the fellowship lost in the Garden and re-

establishes our relationship with God under a new covenant that is far superior and supersedes the previous covenants.

The People of God

- **To Abraham**
 - “to be God to you and to your offspring” in **Gen. 17:7**
- **To the Israelites**
 - “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God” in **Ex. 6:7**
 - “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God” in **Deut. 7:6**
 - “He may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God” in **Deut. 29:12-13**
- **To David**
 - “And I will appoint a place for my people” in **2 Sam. 7:10-11**
- **To Believers**
 - “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’” in **Romans 9:25-26**

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Look at the last part of verse 10. In speaking of this new covenant we see the phrase *“I will be their God and they shall be my people.”* This language is a key thread to the covenantal language of the Old Testament. Let me take you back for a quick look at these phrases in the covenants we looked at earlier. To Abraham God covenanted, *“to be God to you and to your offspring”* in Gen. 17:7. To the captive Israelites in Egypt God makes a covenant with the words, *“I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God”* in Ex. 6:7. Later speaking to the Israelites before entering the promised land God says, *“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God”* in Deuteronomy 7:6. And later in Deuteronomy 29:12-13 He says, *“so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the LORD your God, which the LORD your God is making with you today, that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”*

To David God says, *“And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies.”* in 2 Sam 7:10-11. And finally in Romans 9:25-26, Paul quotes the prophet Hosea’s words with *“Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’”* *“And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”*

The People of God

the covenant story of scripture
speaks to **commitment**

the covenant story of
scripture speaks to **identity**

the covenant story of scripture
speaks to a **place of blessing**

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But the old covenant language of belonging to God and being joined together as His people did not end with Israel. It carries through into the new covenant and now those who are truly of Abraham are brought together as the church. Gentiles have been grafted into the true Israel. And just as Israel was the primary means by which God made himself visible to the world around them, under the new covenant the Church is now the primary means by which he makes himself visible and accomplishes His great mission. How does He do this?

First, the covenant story of scripture speaks to commitment. As a people chosen by God, we are to be committed to God and to one another. There is to be a desire and loyalty to God and His people that is evident to each other and all who observe our lives. We desire to walk in obedience to God and in service to one another. And you cannot do either outside the context of being a part of the community of God's people. It is this commitment to God and to one another in love and service that makes His name great to every neighbor and to every nation.

Second, the covenant story of scripture speaks to identity. We are to see ourselves first and foremost as people of God. We belong to Christ. We are new creatures and we find the essence of who we are in Him. That identity also impacts our relationships with each other. We are first brothers and sisters in Christ. As God's people we now find our identity and priority in the community of Christ. This world is no longer our home and just like the Israelites coming out of Egypt, we join together as pilgrims who journey together as we hope for a better land. This transformation of who we are and who we are becoming in Christ, is to be a reflection to others of our God. They are to see the image of Christ in us.

Lastly, the covenant story speaks to a being in a place of God's blessing. When God's people are committed and identify themselves as His people, there is a promise of blessing. The story of redemption is God's people in God's place for God's purposes. And there are blessings that comes to those who identify themselves and join together with God's people. In a new covenant

community, this happens through baptism and church membership. The church is a place of protection, instruction, accountability, and love. And I believe that the fullness of the blessings of community comes through public identification with the body of Christ.

The importance of this connection between covenant language and God's relationship with His people is seen in its repetition throughout scripture. The unmistakable theme of these covenants is that those whom God calls are **His people**. They are "called-out" ones. They are chosen ones. They are a special and holy people. They are the place of God's dwelling. They are the object of God's affection. And all of this language applies in new and greater ways under the new covenant established at the cross. Christ has called us out and chosen us. We are to be a special and holy people. Through the Spirit, we are the place of His dwelling. Christ's great love at the cross had shown us his great affection. Christ gave His life to redeem and rescue us; to make us His people.

Reflect and Respond

- "Belonging" is so much more than just casual attendance and staying on the periphery of church activities
- The measure of our commitment is demonstrated by how much or how little it takes to pull us away
- The fruits of our lives gives evidence to what we identify with
- God is jealous for His people

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So how does this affect our view of being a part of this local body? While the remaining messages in this series will flesh this out, let me ask you to consider a few areas to reflect on. If God chose to use covenant relationships to call out and identify His people and to reveal Himself to us, shouldn't it be something we pay close attention to? Please understand, that I am not making a case for infant baptisms and covenant communities as we see in Reformed denominations. But just because we do not follow those practices does not mean we should ignore the importance of belonging to the new covenant community of the church. And let me emphasize that "belonging" is so much more than just casual attendance and staying on the periphery of church activities.

Belonging to the church involves commitment and joining with God's people in service to Him and His great mission of bringing glory to His name and making disciples. So as you examine your heart and life, ask yourself, "Am I committed?" Do you make gathering regularly with God's people a priority? Do you give of your time, talents, and treasures in a way that demonstrates

the value you place upon belonging to Christ? What does it take to get you to break the commitments you have made? You see the measure of our commitment is demonstrated by how much or how little it takes to pull us away. How committed are you to God and His people?

Belonging to the church also involves your identity with and as God's people. So what do you identify with most? Or maybe a better question, is what do other people identify you with? Are you known more for your passion for a particular sports team than as a Christian? Are you known more for your conservative political views or as a tea party patriot than a follower of Christ? Do you view your identity based more upon your occupation than your identity in Christ? You see the fruits of our lives gives evidence to what we identify with. If your family or livelihood were threatened because of you identity with Christ, would you deny going to the Chapel? Such a question may become reality sooner than we think.

Brothers and sisters, the new covenant community of the church is holy and precious to our God. He is jealous for His people. Zechariah 1:14 says, *"I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion."* James picks up this same thought in 4:5 when he writes, *"Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, 'He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us'?"* Are you jealous for the church? Do you yearn to be a part of the community and be with God's people? Is there a passion in your heart for ministry and service at the Chapel? If you have not joined in membership, what is holding you back? May God work in all our hearts to make His church and its mission the defining purpose and identity of our lives.

Let's close in prayer.

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