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Re-Discovering Intentional Use of the Church Covenant as the Basis for Self-Identity in a Congregational Church Community

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RE-DISCOVERING INTENTIONAL USE OF THE CHURCH COVENANT
AS THE BASIS FOR SELF-IDENTITY
IN A CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH COMMUNITY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
RICHARD SCOTT HARTLEY

NEWBERG, OREGON

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DISSERTATION ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

RICHARD SCOTT HARTLEY

DATE: MARCH 10, 2009

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**RE-DISCOVERING INTENTIONAL USE OF THE CHURCH
COVENANT AS THE BASIS FOR SELF-IDENTITY IN A
CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH COMMUNITY**

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ABSTRACT

Title: RE-DISCOVERING INTENTIONAL USE OF THE CHURCH COVENANT AS THE BASIS FOR SELF-IDENTITY IN A CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH COMMUNITY

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Degree: Doctor of Ministry

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This dissertation seeks to awaken a clear identity of a Congregational Church as an intentional covenanted community by rediscovering a practical theology founded in the idea of covenant and exploring the praxis of covenant implementation in community. Rediscovering this identity involves the exploration of biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational concepts of covenant. In response to the lack of self-identity, the project proposes the application of covenant to community to enable the church to be empowered to practice living, adapting, loving, and serving the community in which it exists.

The problem is revealed in a semi-fictional narrative of a Congregational Church in chapter 1. Preliminary definitions of community, covenant, and praxis are presented. The thesis and plan of approach are outlined.

The second chapter explores the concept of community in Scripture. Metaphors, remembering practices, and didactic tools are extracted from the biblical narrative.

Chapter 3 discusses covenant as it relates to community. A survey of the Scriptural covenants yields insight into the implications of living in covenant community.

Chapter 4 shows the shift from community to institution in church history. Creeds, bishops, apostolic succession, and papal hierarchy replace the “covenantal glue” that binds the community together with external power and control.

The fifth chapter explores covenant community from a theological perspective which undergirds the importance of theological reflection.

Chapter 6 explores the Congregational Way. A historical survey is presented emphasizing the importance of covenant and its decline in Congregational Churches.

Chapter 7 explores the praxis of covenant community and how intentional use of covenant impacts the functions of the church. Reflections of the student regarding the project’s insights have impacted his own ministry are followed with four suggestions to begin the praxis of intentional covenanted community.

The concluding chapter reviews the findings and suggests areas for continued research.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A Narrative Dialogue

“But our last minister said that we do not need vision or mission statements. We are a Congregational church.”

Initially, I reacted with shock at this statement. An entire shelf in my library held books on strategic planning, visioning, and composition of church mission statements that I had gathered since seminary. I wondered what my predecessor knew that my seminary professors failed to grasp. After all, I had been emphatically taught, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov. 29:18 KJV). Diplomatically I asked, “Just what do you think she meant—that we do not need a vision or a mission?”

The entire group, which had met for some strategic planning for the future of our church, stared at one another with intense quizzical looks.

Finally, one member broke the silence saying, “I am not sure we know.”

“We just said, ‘ok,’ and dropped the mission and vision statements that a committee had prepared a few years earlier. I think she said something about just having a covenant—that is all that a Congregational Church needs.”

“Yes! All we need is our covenant. That is the Congregational Way. Covenant is the glue,” said a long standing Congregationalist, “that is what binds us together and allows us to maintain our traditions.”

Almost as if on cue, the jokester of the group struck a vocal note, singing the song from *Fiddler on the Roof*: “Tradition! Tradition!”

Indeed, the former minister had taught a historical Congregational belief that the church covenant is central to the church community and they should not use any prescribed creed as a test of fellowship. Rather, she taught that as with the first gathered body of Congregationalists at Salem in 1629, our churches should proclaim, “We covenant with you, O God, and with one another to walk together in all your ways as you reveal yourself to us in your blessed word of Truth.”¹ Thus, according to historic Congregationalism, covenant alone defines the church.

Clearly the group wanted to remain true to our Congregationalist heritage and traditions. However, no one knew what exactly that meant for the present, nor the future, of our church.

Complicating matters further, one woman stressed that she did not think we were much of a Congregational church any more. She said so many new people have been part of “other” churches; they did not grow up as Congregationalists and do not know “The Congregational Way.”

¹ Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 116.

One fellow said, “I have been here most of my life, and I am not sure I know what that means, either!”

“Things just are not the same any longer,” many lamented, as discussion ensued about the differences in the congregation since various “such and such” events had happened. The conversation erupted among the people. Seemingly all at once, members of the group said to each other:

“To be honest, I am not sure that we all even like each other.”

“Nor do we know each other, not really.”

“I miss the community feeling we had at my old church,” one said.

“The door is always open for you to go back,” said another, tongue in cheek.

“Yes! That is a problem too! The back door is wide open, even when folks come in, they don’t always stay.”

“What *is* our problem?!”

“We are too busy gossiping and back-biting to do anything for God.”

“Things may never be like the old days. . . .”

Trying to pull the group back on task, I asked, “How can we grasp a sense of vision of where God is taking us and the mission God has called us to as a community of faith, while hanging on to the past tradition?”

Our beloved self-proclaimed congregational historian quickly chimed in, “We cannot break the tradition of covenant! Whatever we do it must be in the context of the covenant, that is our way, after all.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to approach the question differently. “How do we live as a covenanted community—true to our identity as Congregationalists? How do we live, love, care for one another, and pass on our faith tradition to new-comers and our children? How do we become the church we are supposed to be?”

Again, the group stared at one another and me.

“Well, you’re the pastor. You tell us!” one member said.

“With that, is there a motion to adjourn?” I smiled. But, the meeting basically ended. We all chuckled, but I knew that there was much true to the “you tell us” declaration. I had to figure out how we can live in covenanted community and share that knowledge with the congregation. I began to ask a series of questions: What are the ramifications of having a clearly defined understanding of our identity as a covenanted community of faith? What does this understanding mean for how the church worships, disciples, fellowships, reaches out, and cares in ministry for one another? What needs to be done to answer these questions?

Statement of the Problem

In an ideal world, an intentional covenant community of faith knows itself and applies the self-knowledge formatively. Yet, all too often, in the real world, a church is confused about itself, holding conflicting ideas about whom and what it is. Lacking a sense of identity, a church will function as any other social organization—that is, an organized group of people who are together for a purpose, but not the God-given purpose of being a community of faith. Michael Foss says, “Organizational affiliations are casual

for many individuals and a significant number of Christians view the church as just one more of these affiliations.”² Thus, this project seeks to awaken a clear identity of a Congregational church to its calling to be an intentional covenanted community.

This road will not be easy. Many Congregational churches over-stress individual autonomy and independency rather than community. Even forty years ago, in 1969, Harry Stubbs said,

My diagnosis is that Congregationalism is suffering from acute amnesia. In contemporary pseudo-scientific, psychological jargon, we are suffering from an identity crisis. From time to time we are urged, as individuals in such a case, to sit down and meditate on the questions: Who am I? What am I doing here? My judgment is that such a procedure for us as a religious body is just as bootless as it is for individuals.³

Congregational Churches struggle with their identity as covenanted communities of faith. Without rediscovering this identity, the church will continue to suffer from a lack of genuine care for one another. There will be no vehicle for the transmission of the faith. Nor will the church have the ability to articulate and live the gospel message in its particular context.

Several questions help define this problem: (1) How does a well-defined identity as an intentional covenanted community help a Congregational church be who Christ intends it to be? (2) What are the ramifications of the community embracing its identity as an intentional covenanted community of faith? And (3) how can a Congregational

² Michael W. Foss, *Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 6.

³ Harry J. Stubbs, “On Rediscovering the Genius of Classical Congregational Church Order” (lecture, First Congregational Church Annual Lecture on Congregationalism, Toledo, OH, February 2, 1969), 1.

church apply its self-knowledge as a covenanted community? Thus, in short, the project attempts to discover a practical theology founded in the idea of intentional covenanted community and then explore the praxis of that theology, implementing covenant in community. To discover, or re-discover this identity, the project explores the biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational concepts of the church covenant as foundational for an ecclesiastic-self-identity and then explores the implications of being intentional about the use of the covenant in living out the dynamics of faith in community.

Important Definitions

Prior to an attempt to seek an answer to the question of the meaning of an intentional covenanted community, three words must be preliminarily defined. “Community,” “covenant,” and “praxis” will be presented here, with the intention that a full understanding of these terms will develop as the project unfolds.

A Preliminary Definition of Community

The idea of community cannot be assumed to be clear in the reader’s mind. The word is used in multiple ways: from a church to a section of a city, from therapeutic hospital wings to gatherings of various organisms. When used in this project, the word “community” signifies the gathered body of Christian believers into an organic and spiritual body. More than just a gathering of people (a crowd), and more than a gathering

of people claiming Christ in some fashion (a collective), the community is one of faith—intrinsically linked to one another by the Spirit of God. As Tod Bolsinger explains,

[T]here is, of course, a crucial difference between a *crowd* and a *community*. That is where a number of would-be models for the twenty-first-century Christianity get it wrong, and that is one of the key themes of this book. For many churches, the main goal is to build a big crowd, and community is tacked onto the bargain (usually in the form of a small group), the way that medical benefits and vacation days are tacked onto a job offer. But while *crowds* come and go, true and enduring Christian *community* is a foretaste of heaven, the essence of the discipleship, the enduring witness to an unbelieving world, and an absolutely necessity for human transformation. Even more subtly, but importantly, there is an enduring difference between a *collective* of individual Christians and a *community*. Many pastors and lay leaders talk the right talk—about needing to be relational rather than programmatic—but they then get hopelessly lost in creating relational programs so that their collective of individual Christians will have a sense of connection to each other. However, the fundamental reality of the church as an enduring covenantal, irreducible, and Trinity-reflecting entity *in and of itself* is overlooked entirely.⁴

Thus, in the discussion of an intentional covenanted community, the spiritual (even mystical) connection between members of the community must be retained as an essential element to the community itself. The application of an understanding of covenanted community avoids Bolsinger's warning of a false sense of community.

The church is meant to live in community. Bernard Prusak writes,

As Christians, we live into the future, not as isolated individuals, but as members of a believing community, ever responding to a call and partaking in the liberating power of our faith tradition. The faith tradition of our mothers and fathers lives in us as we move into the future of the creation we are called to reshape in love. It pulsates in our efforts to live out an identity forged by the biblical narrative and empowered by the incarnational, sacramental expressions of our life in faith.⁵

⁴ Tod E. Bolsinger, *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian: How the Community of God Transforms Lives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 15.

⁵ Bernard P. Prusak, *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology through the Centuries* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 314.

Miroslav Volf, likewise, states, “The search of contemporary human beings for community is a search for those particular forms of socialization in which they themselves are taken seriously with their various religious and social needs, in which their personal engagement is valued, and in which they can participate formatively.”⁶

A Preliminary Definition of Covenanted Community

The covenant is a theological concept found as a major emphasis in churches of the Reformed tradition, including the Congregational heritage passed-on from the Puritans and Pilgrims. Foundational Congregational documents, such as the Cambridge Platform, outline the essentiality of covenant for the church community.⁷ One of the major distinctions between other types of groups and a covenanted community is the level of commitment to the community that a covenant should bear. John English comments,

Commitments are expressed by *contracts* or *covenants*. Whether contract arrangements can express community is a moot point. Contracts involve a give-and-take arrangement. The parties pay in one form or another for goods or services rendered. In a covenant arrangement the parties share their goods, talents, and lives. Ideally, covenant is the sharing of each other’s person.⁸

⁶ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 17.

⁷ See for example, Robert E. Davis, *Historic Documents of Congregationalism* (Miller Falls, MA: Puritan Press, 2005), 95-97.

⁸ John English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community: An Ignatian View of the Small Faith Community* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 18-19.

This last line must be re-emphasized: Covenant is the sharing of each other's person. This sharing happens in the context of relationship. Shelton notes that "[T]he concept of covenant reflects a relationship that is interpersonal rather than an objective impersonal statement of law."⁹ Thus, a covenanted community participates in the (interpersonal) sharing of each other's person in a spiritual (even mystical) connective bond. Persons commit (I.e., covenant) themselves to carry each other's burdens and share in their joys and fears. They covenant to "do life" together. The covenanted community participates in common successes and failures and bears each other's sufferings and-disappointments while carrying out their God given purpose of transmitting faith and living out the gospel. Grenz says,

The community focus indicative of the New Testament images is sharpened by the reciprocal relationship between the individual believer and the corporate fellowship indicative of the church as a covenant people The church is formed through the coming together of those who have entered into covenant with God in Christ and thus with each other. At the same time, the corporate fellowship fosters the faith of those who come to participate in it. As a body of people in covenantal relationship with each other and as a faith-facilitating people, the church is a community.¹⁰

C. Kirk Hadaway, however, cautions that the church functions more like a social-club when its only reason for existence is community.¹¹ The community has a purpose and function beyond merely "being together." The intentional-covenanted community is

⁹ R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* (Tyrone, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 39.

¹⁰ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 625.

¹¹ C. Kirk Hadaway, *Behold I Do a New Thing: Transforming Communities of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 38.

to be the vessel in which transformative process of both the community and the individual can, and should, take place.

Definition of Praxis

Praxis is a buzzword in many fields of study, and, therefore, requires definition here. Praxis, as used in this project, refers to the practical application of knowledge. Praxis is “practice as distinguished from theory; application or use, as of knowledge or skills.”¹² Thus, the goal of the project’s research is to discover the praxis of a covenant community, the practical application of the knowledge of intentional covenanted community. Theoretical knowledge of living in covenant is of little use. In fact, such unapplied knowledge may harm the community instead of healing it. The research of this project must be applied, incarnated, and enlivened. In the preface to his book, Hadaway writes, “The goal, if it can be called a goal, is to engage in a process of continuous incarnation, flowering and fruiting, that cannot be predicted nor controlled. It can only be cultivated, planted and pruned, nurtured and nourished.”¹³

Thesis and Plan of Approach

The journey toward becoming an intentional covenanted community mandates an understanding of the biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational data concerning covenanted community. Anthony Robinson states, “[W]ithout an ecclesiology formed

¹² *The Random House College Dictionary*, revised edition, s.v. “Praxis.”

¹³ Hadaway, *Behold*, x.

and informed by Scripture and tradition, clergy and congregations can find themselves seriously misled and confused about their identity and purpose.”¹⁴ Armed with such data, an implementation of knowledge can be sought. The thesis of this project is that the application of a biblical, historical, theological and Congregational understanding of living in a covenanted community will enable a Congregational Church to be empowered to practice living, adapting, loving, and serving the community in which it exists. This project begins with four surveys viewing covenant community from biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational perspectives. Then the data are applied to the praxis of the data in specific aspects of the community’s life.

Two chapters address the biblical data. Chapter 2 examines the practice of community in Scripture. The various metaphors for the community of God, the remembering practices of the community, and the didactic materials used in the formation of the community offer insight into the Scriptural view of community.

Chapter 3 surveys the biblical data regarding covenant. An overview of the various covenants yields an understanding of what constitutes a covenant in the Scriptures. The chapter aims to define covenant biblically so the present community of faith can discern its own practice of being in covenant with God and one another.

Chapter 4 outlines a history of ecclesiological data regarding various forms of the church. The church has experimented with various forms of government since the time of Christ. Steven Peay states, “A Congregational ecclesiology does not place an emphasis

¹⁴ Anthony B. Robinson, *What’s Theology Got to Do with It? Convictions, Vitality, and the Church* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 158.

upon the Church as institution, hierarchy or society. Rather, it is the relationship of the believers to Christ and to one another that makes the church what it is.”¹⁵ However, this survey of church history demonstrates the church broke from the patterns of the New Testament and became institutionalized.

Veiling writes, “[W]e do not live simply in the present, rather, we are deeply shaped by history and traditions. One of the crucial questions raised by hermeneutics is: What is our relationship to the past?”¹⁶ The historical data help answer this question. By seeing what the community was, a clearer idea emerges as to what the community is and will be. Likewise, discovering the pitfalls the church has experienced leads the present community in avoiding a repeat of the past.

Chapter 5 offers an overview of theological data regarding covenanted community. Robinson observes, “Perhaps the most neglected branch of theology is the theology of the church, or ecclesiology.”¹⁷ The chapter approaches the topic from a systematic theological perspective. Using Stanley Grenz’ *Theology for the Community of God* as a foundation, the chapter examines an intentional congregational ecclesiology. Other systematic works are then considered to round-out a theology of covenant community.

¹⁵ Steven A. Peay, “We Covenant with the Lord and one with another: a Consideration of the Covenant Principle as the Basis of a Congregational Ecclesiology,” a paper presented to the Wisconsin Congregational Theological Society in September, 1996. http://www.wiscongregational.net/WCTSPapers/1996_09_19.pdf (accessed March 14, 2007).

¹⁶ Terry A. Veiling, *Practical Theology: On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 29.

¹⁷ Robinson, *What’s Theology Got to Do with It*, 157.

Chapter 6 surveys the movement known as Congregationalism. This chapter attempts to glean insight from the history and theology of the Congregational Way of being covenanted community. The survey provides much of the material necessary to maintain continuity of the present community of faith with its Congregational past as well as exposes the lost emphasis on covenant in the church.

Following these four foundational surveys, chapter 7 seeks concrete application of the identity of an intentional covenanted community from the biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational data. Methods and practices regarding how the church worships, disciples, fellowships, reaches out, and cares for one another in ministry are specifically targeted to offer practical solutions. The chapter offers reflection of the student on how covenant is applied to his own ministry as well as the use of covenant in the church.

A concluding chapter reviews the ground covered and some speculation of what may still need attention to achieve deeper applications of a biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational understanding of living in a covenanted community enabling a Congregational Church to be empowered to practice living, adapting, loving, and serving the community in which it exists.

Much more than a philosophical quest like Socrates' "know thy self," this project begins a journey to aid the First Congregational Church of Mukwonago, Wisconsin in fulfilling its God given calling to be intentional about living in covenant with God and with each other. "Finding oneself is not something one does alone—the quest for

personal growth and self-fulfillment is supposed to lead one into relationships with others.”¹⁸ Identity is found in covenant relationship.

The community must be intentional about being a covenant community. “Woody Allen once quipped that 90 percent of humanity simply ‘shows up.’ We go about our lives almost in stunned resignation, hardly giving it a thought. . . . [T]o truly live [*sic*] a full and worthwhile life is to attend to life, to be fully involved and immersed in life’s great project.”¹⁹ James Wm. McClendon, Jr. writes, “If membership in the church is intentional, then the church becomes a live circuit for the power of the Holy Spirit.”²⁰ Such fulfillment and empowerment of the Holy Spirit will come with understanding of the data surveyed and, more importantly, with the implementation of the ideas discovered in the praxis of covenant community.

¹⁸ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 85.

¹⁹ Veling, *Practical Theology*, 11.

²⁰ James William McClendon Jr., *Doctrine*, vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 371.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL DATA: INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

The first task to understand what it means to live in intentional covenanted community is to explore the biblical data regarding community. Chapter 3 will explore the understanding of the biblical witness to community of faith in a discussion of the scriptural basis of covenant as it relates to the community of faith. These combined chapters will provide the biblical background for the project.

This chapter derives insight from Scripture regarding community through three means. The chapter first examines the idea of community through the metaphors for the community of God in the Old and New Testaments. Second, it looks at the intentional praxis of the people of God to discover how the people maintained community. Third, the didactic materials in both testaments will determine how the community was instructed to live in relationship to one another and God. The chapter draws conclusions regarding what the scriptural witness says about living in community and identifies the need for further reflection to apply the biblical data to intentional community.

The Scriptural Idea of Community

The Scriptures contain a plethora of metaphors for the community of God. Examination of the metaphors yields a scriptural understanding of what it means to live in community with others. Paul S. Minear set limitations to his work on this subject that

are useful for this discussion. He writes in his first chapter of *Images of the Church in the New Testament*,

The range of images is in fact too extensive, too fluid, too variegated, to encourage a systematic survey of them all. A venture like ours, to be successful, must therefore recognize and observe certain limits [W]e cannot pursue the history of any image backward toward its hidden origins in the cultures of the ancient world. Nor can we carry its history forward into the centuries of subsequent Christian usage. . . . We must concentrate upon those texts in which a reference to the Christian community can be affirmed.¹

This section of the chapter will focus on those metaphors most useful for the matter at hand—discerning the scriptural idea of community—rather than attempt an exhaustive treatment of all biblical metaphors.

Metaphors for the Community of Israel

Walter A. Elwell's *Topical Analysis of the Bible* offers thirty-five metaphors used in the Old Testament for the nation of Israel.² These metaphors can be grouped into three broad categories that describe the concept of community in the Old Testament as people gathered, people purposefully set apart for works of service, and people intimately connected to God.

A Gathered People

Although many of the words used in the Old Testament to identify the community might be considered ordinary, words such as “assembly” and “congregation” aptly

¹ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 18-28.

² Walter A. Elwell, *Topical Analysis of the Bible with the New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 687-689.

describe the community of faith. Even the word “community” speaks to the nature of the gathered people. These terms are typically used with qualifiers such as “of Israel,” “of the Righteous,” or “of the Lord” to denote a link between the peoples and their God. The community’s purpose and identity can be discerned in these descriptors. The ordinary term “assembly” is delineated when combined with the phrase “of the faithful” (“saints” in the NIV) in Psalm 149:1 or the phrase “of Israel” in Deuteronomy 31:30.

Other metaphorical descriptions also connote a gathered people.³ The community is called the “flock of God” in Psalms and by several of the prophets (Ps. 78:52; 95:7; Isa. 40:11; Jer. 23:3; 31:10; Ezek. 34:15-16, 22; Mic. 2:12). The gathered people are described as sheep. Such metaphors point towards the unity of the community and their corporate need for oversight by a shepherd.⁴ As individual sheep are gathered into one flock, individuals comprise the community of God, which is also to be considered a unified whole.

The people are gathered to God. The narrative of Genesis recounts Jacob meeting God who declared, “I am going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers; I will make of you a company [“community” in the NIV] of peoples, and will give this land to your offspring after you for a perpetual holding” (Gen. 48:4). This underscores the fact

³ Elwell identifies the following from the NIV: Assembly of Israel, Assembly of Jacob, Assembly of the Lord, Assembly of the People of God, Assembly of the Righteous, and Assembly of the Saints, Community of Israel, Community of Peoples, Community of the Lord, Great Assembly, Great Congregation, Congregation, Flock of God, Flock of Inheritance, Sheep in a Pen, Sheep of God’s Pasture, and Council of the Upright.

⁴ Isaiah 40:11, for example, says, “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”

that God did not “adopt as his own an existing nation, but actually created a people for himself.”⁵ The scriptural community is a people gathered by God and for God.

Purposefully Set Apart for Works of Service

Coupled with the idea of the gathered people, it is evident that God purposefully chose his people and set them apart as holy.⁶ The community is redeemed and ransomed, chosen and planted for God’s own pleasure.⁷ Thus, metaphors underscore the nature of the community as a chosen people intended to serve God. The community is holy in both senses of the word: in purity and in being set apart. God declares, “You shall be people consecrated to me” (Exod. 22:31) and “You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites” (Exod. 19:6).

Intimately Connected

Several of the metaphors in the Old Testament speak of an intimate relationship between God and the community.⁸ In Deuteronomy, the community’s identity is declared, “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen

⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 1035.

⁶ Elwell identifies the following metaphors: Chosen Ones; Chosen People; Holy Nation; Holy Ones; Holy People; Planting of the Lord; Ransomed of the Lord; Redeemed of the Lord, Shoot of God’s Planting; Kingdom of Priests; Kingdom of Servants. On being holy, Leviticus 11:44 says, “Be Holy, For I am Holy.”

⁷ It is important, theologically, to note that, “It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deut. 7:7-8).

⁸ Elwell identifies the following metaphors: Bride, Treasured Possession, Lord’s Portion, People of His Inheritance, Inheritance, Oaks of Righteousness, Work of God’s Hand.

you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (Deut. 7:6). God’s community was special and uniquely set apart for the Lord. Other terms, such as “bride” and the “work of His hands,” also connote the special intimate connection between the community and God.

The Old Testament demonstrates that the community of faith is those gathered together, purposefully set apart for service to God, and intimately connected to God. Attention can now be turned to the New Testament.

Metaphors for the New Testament Church

Many of the Old Testament images are also used of the community of God in the New Testament. Continuity can be seen in the scriptural metaphors. Paul Minear writes, “The early Christians did not date the beginnings of God’s people from Jesus’ birth or ministry, from his Eucharistic feast or resurrection, or even from the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost, but from the covenant-making activity of God in the times of Abraham and Moses.”⁹

Minear created a definitive work on the images for the community of God in the New Testament. He identified ninety-six images and categorized these metaphors under four main headings (in addition to an opening chapter on minor images in the New Testament). His primary categories, adopted for this discussion, are: People of God; New Creation; Fellowship of Faith; and The Body of Christ.

⁹ Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, 70-71.

People of God

While seemingly a common phrase, “the people of God” is quite descriptive of the community. Minear writes, “Everywhere in the Bible we hear the assertion that the birth and survival of this people are due alone to God’s gracious and faithful action in creating, calling, sustaining, judging, and saving it. They are a people only because he dwells within them, and moves among them.”¹⁰ Minear cites biblical examples including 2 Corinthians 6:16, Hebrews. 8:10, Revelation 21:3, Exodus 19:5, Deuteronomy 7:6, 14:2, and Psalm 135:4.¹¹ The community is the people “of” God, not only because God “owns” the community, but because God is the creator, maintainer, sustainer, and savior of the community.

Erickson contributes to this understanding. He indicates that the image of the community as the people of God “contains several implications. God takes pride in them. He provides care and protection to his people; he keeps them ‘as the apple of his eye’ (Deut. 32:10). Finally, he expects that they will be his people without reservation and without dividing their loyalty.”¹² To say the community is the people of God is to say there is an inviolable bond in God and because of God.

New Creation

The metaphor of the community as a “new creation” can be readily found in the Pauline epistles. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has

¹⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹¹ Ibid., 273.

¹² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1035.

passed away; see, everything has become new” (2 Cor. 5:17).¹³ Minear notes a second parallel in James 1:18, which states, “In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.”¹⁴ Abundantly, throughout the New Testament, the community is called “new,” having died to the “old.” The new creation is a restoration of the *imago dei*—that is, of Jesus Christ, himself. Paul writes, “You have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (Col. 3:9b-10).

The emphasis on the activity of God is an important factor of this metaphor. God is the one who makes things new. It is an act of grace, “lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8-10). “The church is ultimately dependent upon the continuing activity of God. It is in his holiness that the church shares (Heb. 12:10).”¹⁵ The community, as the people of God, is dependent on God to be the new creation of God.

Fellowship of Faith

Minear categorizes metaphors of “saints,” “holy ones,” “followers,” and “disciples,” under the heading of the “Fellowship of Faith.” Concerning the “common life of the sanctified,” Minear states,

[W]herever the church is spoken of as the saints, the power of the Holy Spirit is assumed to be at work within it. The community of saints has been born of the Spirit and baptized into this one Spirit. On this community the Spirit is poured

¹³See also, Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 2:15; 4:24; and Colossians 3:10.

¹⁴ Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, 111.

¹⁵ Ibid., 137.

out; within this community as a temple the Spirit dwells. Thus the life of the saints is at every point circumscribed by the Holy Spirit, and determined and empowered by it. In this holiness lies the unity and power of the church. Herein also lies its participation in the new creation, for as we noted . . . the coming of the Spirit signals the coming of the Kingdom and the new creation. Herein also lies the continuity between the saints and the people of God from the beginning, since the first brooding of the Spirit “over the face of the waters.”¹⁶

The fellowship is made possible through the Holy Spirit and is founded on faith in Christ.

Here can be seen that invisible link among believers in the Spirit, because of Christ. The scriptures say, “[I]f we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

The community is bound together through its faith in Christ.

The Body of Christ

The biblical image of the Body of Christ ties the previous three metaphors together. Erickson says,

[This image] speaks of the interconnectedness between all the persons who make up the church. Christian faith is not to be defined merely in terms of individual relationship to the Lord. There is no such thing as an isolated, solitary Christian Life. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul develops the concept of the interconnectedness of the body, especially in terms of the gifts of the Spirit. He stresses the dependence of each believer upon every other. He emphasizes that “all the members of the body though many, are one body” (v. 12). They all, whether Jew or Greek, have been baptized by one Spirit into one body, and have been made to drink of one Spirit (v. 13). . . . Each member needs the others, and each is needed by the others.¹⁷

Paul illustrated this interdependency of members of the community by describing absurd situations of one part of the body denouncing another as not belonging. Likewise,

¹⁶ Ibid., 137-138.

¹⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1037.

a member cannot discount its own belonging because it does not function as another member of the community.

If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. (1 Cor. 12:15-18)

The body metaphor is useful for understanding of the community—its complex makeup of various members into one unified whole.

An important consideration for this metaphor is the fact that Christ is the head of the body (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:18). The body, with its members in community, is Christ himself. Bolsinger comments, “This led Dietrich Bonhoeffer to call the church ‘Christ existing as community.’”¹⁸ The implications of Bonhoeffer’s words—that the community is Christ himself in the world—are paramount. If the world will know that the community is Christ’s by their love one for another (John 13:35), then the community has some serious reflection to do regarding how it behaves and acts towards others and, indeed, towards itself.

Summary of the Metaphors

The objective in the first section of this chapter has been to examine the various biblical metaphors used for the community of faith to gain insight into the scriptural idea of community. The following four observations summarize the findings of this section.

¹⁸ Bolsinger, *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian*, 66.

First, the community of faith is constituted as those gathered together because God has deemed it so. They are the community of faith because God saw fit to gather them as such and set them apart for service to God. Second, the community is bound together as one—a body—in Christ. Through the agency of the Holy Spirit the community is intimately linked to God and its members are linked to each other. Third, the community of faith is continually being made new as it is set apart to be holy to God. Fourth, the present community of faith is presumed to be a continuation of the community of faith found in the Scriptures; thus, self-identity can be gleaned from the images found in Scripture.

The Scriptural Praxis of Community

The second section of this chapter will examine both testaments about what can be called “remembering practices” of the scriptural community(s). It will capture how the Scriptures demonstrate the practice of living in community.

Remembering Practices

The community’s story is linked to its sense of identity. Godfrey Phillips notes that the nation of Israel was the first (and only) to seek the religious education of the entire nation. “The people must know what God had said and done or the nation would cease to be.”¹⁹ He notes that other religious groups taught only a select few, part of the whole, whereas the Israelites’ identity is intrinsic to their story. Their history is stamped on the life of the Israelites. Phillips writes of Israel’s break from the common cultural

¹⁹ Godfrey E. Phillips, *The Transmission of the Faith* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1946), 39.

pattern of the ancient world. He says, “It made changes in it which are evidence that something tremendous had happened; in brief, it stamped upon the received culture-pattern the perpetual reminder of a national deliverance. It is impossible to explain the unique development of Hebrew religion out of this common fund of myth and ritual apart from its unique history, the epic story of which is told in the Old Testament.”²⁰ This pattern of remembrance carried into the New Testament church as well. The community of faith stands to benefit from observation and adoption of the Old and New Testament remembering practices.

Old Testament Remembering Practices

Throughout the Old Testament, numerous passages demonstrate discernable practices of the Israelites that ensure retention of the identity of the community. The story of the community was retold, written, memorized, and memorialized through ritual. These practices are worth examining for their applicability to the community of faith living in intentional covenanted community.

The story of the community re-told

In several contexts, both public and private, the Israelites held readings of the story of their covenant relationship in community (i.e., the history of the community). The history might be recounted in a portion of the law (2 Kings 22; Neh. 13), or one of the books of the Old Testament. O. Palmer Robertson notes, “The entire book of Deuteronomy presents itself in covenantal form as a renewal of the bond which God

²⁰ Ibid., 21.

established originally with Israel at Sinai. Moses assembles Israel in the plains of Moab prior to his departure from them and renews their covenantal obligations.”²¹ The retelling of both, the law and the community’s relationship with God, was a central practice of the Israelites to form the emerging community as an extension of the past community—a passing on of the faith.

Likewise, the books of Chronicles were written at a time of desperation in Judea’s history. The temple in Jerusalem had fallen into the Babylonians’ hands. The people would have interpreted their captivity as their God, *YHWH*, having lost the battle to the Babylonian god, Marduk. After the captivity, as the people are allowed to return to Judea, the Chronicler writes only the positive side of the history of God’s people to demonstrate that they are still the People of God—that there is continuity of the past with the present. This process is what Diana Butler Bass calls, “*anamnesis*, the ‘recalling to memory of the past.’”²² Ultimately, the point of the narrative is to recount in the story (*anamnesis*) of how *YHWH* has been interested in his people to demonstrate that he still is interested in them. Again, the simple-but-constant retelling of the story was an important practice to the existence and perpetuation of the community. John English comments,

As people share their stories in a faith community two memories are operative: the memory of the individual recalling experiences of life from a faith perspective and the memory of the faith community that is listening. Both of these memories are significant for the teller and the listeners. The faith memory of the community becomes the criterion for discerning the experience that is being shared. When the

²¹ O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 218. Sprinkled throughout the book of Deuteronomy are Moses’s calls to the people to remember (5:15; 7:18; 8:2, 18; 9:7, 27; 11:2; 15:15; 16:3, 12; 24:9, 18, 22; 25:17; and 32:7).

²² Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining A New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 51.

community senses a harmony between the story being told and its own faith memory it will be able to affirm the experienced as one from the Lord.²³

Through the retelling of the story past, the present community becomes a part of the living story as it was told. The community gained continuity from past to present as the narrative was gifted to future generations. Psalm 78 provides an example of this passing of story to the next generations. The psalmist states:

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments; and that they should not be like their ancestors, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.” (Ps. 78:1-8)

The story is recounted so that the present community might be joined with their ancestors. The old story becomes new. Bass states that *anamnesis* must be central to congregational life, and “insofar as congregations understand themselves as living communities in a lineage of witnesses, their work entails redefining and adapting tradition that they have received and must pass on.”²⁴ This practice is considered a “chain of memory”²⁵ as the community’s consciousness of itself and its relationship to God are passed on from one generation to the next. The chain of memory is forged as the

²³ English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*, 64-65.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. Bass relies heavily upon the work of Daniele Hervieu-Leger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. Simon Lee (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 2000), 123-125.

narration switches from past to present—from “our ancestors” to “us.” For example, Psalm 44 begins with “Our fathers have told us,” but the language quickly becomes “we,” revealing this connection of past with present.²⁶

The retelling of the past was purposeful practice in the community for the sake of passing on tradition. It was more than just remembering—it was remembering with a purpose of instruction and formation of the next generation of the community.

Furthermore, this *anamnesis* transpired in private domains. For example, the “*Great Shema*” is utilized in the community as the centrality of its belief system.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9)

Indeed, as Phillips notes, “in the simplicity of parents’ and children’s talk the great tale should be told of what God had done for the forefathers.”²⁷ The retelling of the story is often couched in a command to follow the law of God and to live in the covenant that was established with the community. The Proverbs underscore the importance of parental involvement in retelling the nation’s story (e.g., Proverbs 1:8, 6:20, 31:1). For another example, David, on his deathbed, reminded Solomon,

²⁶ “We have heard with our ears, O God, *our ancestors* have told us, what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old: you with your own hand drove out the nations, but them you planted; you afflicted the peoples, but them you set free; . . . Through you *we* push down our foes; through your name *we* tread down our assailants” (Ps. 44:1-2, 5; emphasis added).

²⁷ Phillips, *The Transmission of the Faith*, 30.

When David's time to die drew near, he charged his son Solomon, saying: I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn. Then the Lord will establish his word that he spoke concerning me: If your heirs take heed to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel. (1 Kings 2:1-4)

Throughout the Old Testament the community was bound together by retelling the story—the narrative of community.

The story preserved

Coupled with “retelling,” the narrative was preserved through the memorization and written documents of the community. The community itself was preserved through the story's transmission. Phillips underscores the importance of preserving the story in writing as he states,

Whether there would be any Israel at all in the days to come depended upon whether the faithful remnant would remember their God who had done so much for them. That is why the story must be written down, and to that motive we owe most of the Old Testament writings, far more than to any sense of the value of history or literature in general. Our Old Testament is the literary part of Israel's handing on, its “tradition” of that which made it Israel. Remember or perish.²⁸

The ancient historian, Flavius Josephus, wrote, “But for our people, if any body do but ask any one of them about our laws, he will more readily tell them all than he will tell his own name, and this in consequence of our having learned them immediately as soon as ever we became sensible of any thing, and of our having them as it were

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

engraved on our souls.”²⁹ Phillips claims Josephus “was indulging in a rhetorical flourish, but the exaggeration was pardonable. Has any nation ever impressed upon its members with greater success the traditions by which it lives?”³⁰ The community of God in the Old Testament worked at preserving and communicating the story of the community to others. “[T]hose who wrote the stories down expected them to be memorized. . . . Acrostics, rhythm, poetic form, all helped those who were learning Hebrew Scriptures by heart.”³¹ The written materials were read and memorized and, as we shall see in the following section, were even ritualized in their retelling.

The story memorialized

The story of the community was re-told and preserved and memorialized in ritual, festivals, and monuments. “Ritual was the perpetual reminder of a history; the priests who carried on the ritual taught the people; and in their families the parents told the history to their children, who grew up and in turn told *their* children, and the lengthening chain has never been broken.”³² Common elements of everyday life were used in this process of remembering the past for its implications for the present. Altars erected,³³

²⁹ Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion* 2:19, Early Jewish Writings web site, Peter Kirby (2004), <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/josephus/apion2.html> (accessed April 28, 2008).

³⁰ Phillips, *The Transmission of the Faith*, 28.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 27.

³³ See Joshua 4:21b-24, “When your children ask their parents in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.’ For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God forever.”

feasts and fasts, and even garments worn were meant to instruct the present with the story of the past, “so that you remember” (Num. 15:39-40).

Inherent in many festivals and feasts are explanations of the ritual or acts of remembrance calling the past into the present. The written story of the community also “provided the vocabulary and the mental imagery for singers to use in the praise of Jahweh most high, and quite a number of our Psalms (e.g., 67, 68, 91-99, 118, 132),”³⁴ which are, in turn, used at the festivals as remembering devices.

The Feast of Purim’s purpose was to remember the deliverance of God. “These days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every family, province, and city; and these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants” (Esther 9:28). In the Passover, the past was conjured through the question, “What does this mean?” as an invitation to retell the community’s story (Exod. 13:8, 14; Deut. 4:9-10; 6:7, 20; 11:19). The Feast of Booths commemorated the wilderness wanderings and God’s provisions. Hanukah, while not originating in the canon, still had a memorial function of deliverance of God in the Intertestamental Period of the Maccabees.

Summary

The Israelites made heavy use of remembering practices within the community to preserve and pass on its essence. This process of retelling the story underscored the importance of tradition and created continuity between past and present with an eye

³⁴ Phillips, *The Transmission of the Faith*, 21.

towards the future. The story kept the tradition of the past alive and dynamic—especially as the story is told from the personal perspective of “our” people in community.

New Testament Remembering Practices

As with the Old Testament, the New Testament exhibits the practice of retelling the story of faith so as to inform and form the community of faith. English notes that “the act of remembering, retelling the story, is a much more dynamic experience in both Jewish and Christian life than the rather shallow notion of memory, as popularly understood, might suggest.”³⁵ The New Testament deepened, preserved, continued, described, and memorialized the story of the community.

The story deepened

While Jesus made use of *anamnesis*, he brought deeper significance to the remembering practices. The phrase, “You have heard it said . . . but I say to you,” was used extensively in the Sermon on the Mount as a form of retelling (Matt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). This practice indicates the re-traditioning cycle where the old tradition and praxis of faith is brought into the reality of the present while reaching toward the future of God’s work.

³⁵ English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*, 61.

The story preserved

Likewise, the Gospels themselves are, in one sense, a retelling—preserving of the story of many of the things Jesus said and did while on earth.³⁶ The Gospels were written when the original apostles were dying that the story of the community might be preserved and passed on. Timothy is also instructed by Paul to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13), thereby preserving the story of faith in the community's present consciousness.

The story continued

The canon of Scripture for the New Testament church incorporates both Testaments, and the placement of the New Testament following the Old signifies a continuity of God's redemption throughout the whole of Scripture. The Apostle Paul demonstrates this continuity when he warns the Corinthians not to make the same mistakes as Israel had (1 Cor. 10).

The story described

The book of Acts tells the story of the founding of the Church, the community of Christ, in a descriptive rather than in a prescriptive way.³⁷ In other words, Luke records what happened as the first Christian communities were founded. Thus, the practice of

³⁶ But John's Gospel concludes, "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

³⁷ "The book shows effectively the main trends in the development of Christianity and presents in effect samples of the continuing work of Jesus." Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 351.

living in New Testament community can be learned from this description without being bound by how those communities were formed.

Upon the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Church was birthed. The community of Christ moved from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of Earth (Acts 1:8). What began in Palestine became a loose model for communities across the world.

The second chapter of Acts records the first actions of the newly birthed community:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

The community met frequently. They shared and held things in common. They devoted themselves to word and sacrament and were filled with an awe about God moving in their midst. Other communities adopted these practices of the early church as they prayed together (Acts 4:24; 12:12; 13:3; 14:23; and 20:36), cared for one another (Acts 4:32ff.), and shared joys in community (Acts 8:8; 13:52; and 16:34). Bolsinger notes, "The first 'spiritual disciplines' were all communal ones."³⁸ Beyond these described actions, however, Luke is silent with regard to the practices of the community as the New Testament Church.

³⁸ Bolsinger, *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian*, 71.

The story memorialized

The New Testament speaks of the sacraments/ordinances that Jesus gave to the church to memorialize the story of the community. “Christians not only keep alive their past by retelling the story of the paschal mystery, the Passover of Jesus, but they are themselves enlivened as they make the Passover with him, as the body of which he is the head.”³⁹ The “re-membering” practices of baptism and the Lord’s Supper serve as practical tools for ongoing community to remember its past. Paul speaks of eating the bread and drinking the cup as a proclamation of Christ until the Second Coming (1 Cor. 11:26); thus, participation in the ritual is a form of *anamnesis* for the sake of formation in the present community.

Summary

This survey of the Old and New Testaments relates the importance of the practice of passing on the faith in narrative. The community of faith must know itself through recalling (*anamnesis*) its historical context. This practice is seen in the community of Israel, in the Apostles’ writings, and Jesus’ teaching. The community(s) found creative means of committing its common story to memory, thereby shaping and forming the community as it continued into the future. The scriptural retelling practices have implications for the present community of faith that will be addressed in the application chapter. The following section turns to the didactic passages of both testaments, which instruct the community on how people were to live in the community of faith.

³⁹ English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*, 61.

Didactic Materials

Old Testament Didactic Materials

Although the primary means of instruction in the Old Testament comes from the narrative being passed from one generation to another, didactic materials are also found in the Old Testament. The “Mosaic Law,” and more specifically the book of Leviticus, encapsulates how the Israelites were to live in covenant with God and one another. Parameters were set for acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the community. Leviticus contains a Manual of Sacrifices (chapters 1-7), a Manual for Purity (chapters 11-16), and the Holiness Code (chapters 17-26).⁴⁰ Each section of this book outlines in detail how the people were to live in community. It declares blessings for the obedient and outlines penalties for those who transgress.⁴¹ Levitical law is striking in its specificity. Fraught with “do’s and do not’s,”⁴² Levitical law taught the Israelites exactly how to live.

The book of Proverbs is unique within the canon in its instructive function. Virtually the whole book is didactic in nature.⁴³ The first chapter sets the tone for the book.

⁴⁰ W. H. Bellinger, Jr., *Leviticus and Numbers*, vol. 3 of New International Biblical Commentary, Old Testament Series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 4.

⁴¹ Leviticus 26 is a prime example of a blessing and cursing passage.

⁴² See Leviticus 18-19 for example.

⁴³ One might argue that the introductory verses to various sections have no formative value (e.g., “The proverbs of Solomon,” 10:1a; “The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh—an oracle: This man declared to Ithiel, to Ithiel and to Ucal,” 30:1).

For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity; to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young—let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill, to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching. (Prov. 1:2-8)

The wisdom being transmitted relates to righteousness, justice, and equity. In other words, the corpus of material instructs one how to live in right relationship to God and with the community. This material emphasizes the concept of the fear of the Lord as the “beginning of knowledge.” The Old Testament's wisdom holds right relationship with God as foundational for life itself, including life in community with others. Qoheleth also makes this point as he concludes Ecclesiastes with, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccl.12:13-14).

The prophets, likewise, have much to say about living in community. The care of widows and orphans is a common theme throughout the prophetic materials.⁴⁴ God desires mercy (Hos. 6:6). God's plan for the community of faith can be summed up in the words of Micah 6:8, “He has told you, O mortal; what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

⁴⁴ Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Malachi all speak to this issue.

Much of the Old Testament is narrative and the community of faith engaged in *anamnesis* to instruct and form the community. However, ample didactic passages in Scripture also teach the community how to live.

New Testament Didactic Materials

The Gospels and the Epistles speak to the issue of living in community. However, unlike the specificity of the Old Testament, the New Testament lacks practical “how-to” instruction. Biblical interpreters are given a framework from which “to work out their salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). Texts must be read, considered, and applied to each community’s situation. New Testament authors offer several lists⁴⁵ and many exhortations that describe how Christians are to live and love within the community. These passages serve as a basis for understanding what people are called to, and even commanded to do.

The Vice Lists

Before examining the positive exhortations, this subsection briefly examines those negative characteristics of which the New Testament writers encourage the community to “rid themselves” (Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:5; James 1:21; 1 Pet. 2:1). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul refers to the list as the “acts” or “works” of the sinful nature.

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I

⁴⁵ Such lists can be found in passages such as: Romans 12; Ephesians 4; Colossians 3:5-17; 1 Peter 2:1-2; and 1 Peter 4:3, 8.

warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal. 5:19-21)⁴⁶

Clearly, the consequences of “wrong living” are framed in unfavorable terms.

The apostle contrasts right behavior with that which does not belong in the community in the letter to the church in Ephesus. Regarding the vices he says,

But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints. Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving. Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be associated with them. (Eph. 5:3-7)

After delineating the old way of life in darkness with the new life in the light (5:8-14), Paul continues with the warning to be careful how the community lives, not being foolish in their actions (5:15-17). Rather than being controlled from externals (like alcohol), Christians are to be “filled with the Spirit” and live in the community of faith in harmony and with thanksgiving.⁴⁷

The New Testament demarcates negative characteristics (vices) that believers in community are to abandon. In conjunction with these passages, however, the writers also teach positive godly characteristics (virtues) for believers to adopt.

⁴⁶ Peter includes, “all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander” (1 Peter 2:1b).

⁴⁷ Ephesians 5:18-20 specifically states, “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Love

Love marks the top of the list of virtues of living in community, both in principle, and in placement on the lists. The list of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5) begins with love. Love is to be genuine (Rom. 12:9) and above all other virtues (1 Pet. 4:8). “The commandment of mutual love is the basis of community (*koinonia*),”⁴⁸ and the community is exhorted to “let mutual love continue” (Heb. 13:1).

One cannot overstate the importance of the community being characterized by love. Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). He also spoke of the love of neighbor as the second greatest commandment—being like the first: to love God with all one’s heart, mind, soul, and strength (Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:31). The community is known by its members love for one another. The ramifications of community members loving one another include a host of other characteristics the community demonstrates (at least, *should* demonstrate). For example, in a definition of love, the Apostle Paul states,

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. (1 Cor. 13:4-8a)

Thus, the community must bear with one another in love. Indeed, love does “cover a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8) within the community as its members intentionally love each other.

⁴⁸ D. Moody Smith, *First, Second, and Third John*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 88.

Such love creates an uplifting, hopeful, and encouraging environment in which community members relate to and care for one another. The New Testament mandates this environment. 1 John draws a distinction between true members of the community and those outside the community based on the love of one's siblings in Christ. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also (1 John 4:20-21). Community members are to love one another deeply from the heart (1 Pet. 1:22ff.). Love permeates all of the other characteristics of the intentional community, thus standing as the crown of the virtues of community. Paraphrasing Paul, "Without love, the community is nothing."⁴⁹

Caring

The community is called to an attitude of care for one another. This caring is often expressed with words such as compassion, kindness, gentleness, and hospitality. Community members are to watch over one another and tend to each other's needs. The priority of providing for other's needs within the community can be seen in the writings from the early Christian community in Acts through the care for widows in first letter to Timothy (Acts 2:45; 1 Tim. 5:3).

⁴⁹ Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

Caring for the community goes beyond physical needs. Paul instructs the churches of Galatia to handle gently one who had become alienated from God and the community. “My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1-2). Thus, the community is to have a genuine concern for its members, regardless of their status or present relationship to the community.

Furthermore, the metaphor of the body of Christ appropriately communicates the need for mutual and intentional care. “But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor. 12:24b-26). Thus, put simply, in the New Testament community, members must exhibit care for one another.

Acceptance

The New Testament writers acknowledge the human propensity for division. The community of Christ must be intentional about being unified,⁵⁰ and, thus, they accept one another and any existing differences. Paul addressed the unity issue in his first letter to the Corinthians underscoring the community’s common bond in Christ (1 Cor. 1-3). Unity is held up as a goal throughout the Pauline corpus (Rom. 15:5; 1 Cor. 1:13; 2:16b;

⁵⁰ Jesus prays for the unity of his followers as he and the father were one; see John 17.

3:23; Eph. 4:4-6, 13; Col. 3:11, 14). Paul even pleads with the church at Philippi to help two of its members, Euodia and Syntyche, to agree with each other (Phil. 4:2-3).

Unity demands acceptance of “the other.” While total agreement may not always be possible or warranted, the community must diligently seek God as it moves forward to do God’s will.⁵¹ Paul instructs members of the community to seek maturity in their own faith and work through differences among themselves.⁵² Differences did indeed exist among the disciples. Consider those gathered around Christ. Levi Matthew, a former tax collector, and Simon the Zealot were an unlikely pair in community; yet, Christ called them both. People with radical extremes in belief or opinions must find and practice acceptance in community.

Two specific exhortations to this kind of radical acceptance can be found in Romans and James. James addresses favoritism and admonishes the community for treating a rich person better than the poor saying, “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (James 2:8-9). Thus, community members should be accepting of the other in Christ and because of Christ.⁵³

⁵¹ Paul says in Philippians 3:15-16, “Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.”

⁵² Ephesians 4:12-13 indicates growth in maturity until unity is found.

⁵³ Note also Jesus’ words that accepting and caring for another, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40b).

The second exhortation of acceptance is refraining from judging. Christ commanded, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged” (Matt. 7:1),⁵⁴ and Paul expounds upon this idea in Romans 14-15. “Now accept the one who is weak in faith, [but] not for [the purpose of] passing judgment on his opinions” (Rom. 14:1 NASB). Each person is accountable to God; thus Paul says, “Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another” (Rom. 14:13a).

While acceptance is ultimately founded in genuine love for one another, it is an important characteristic that many communities lack and, therefore, warrants separate attention in the scriptural examination of what it means to live intentionally in community.

Humility

James emphatically states, “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord” (James 4:10). An attitude of humility accentuates Paul’s definition of love—that love is not “boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way” (1 Cor. 13:4d-5). Humility, meekness, and patience describe this attitude of Christ, which members of Christ’s community are called to imitate (Phil. 2:5ff.; 1 Thess. 4:11). Paul commands believers, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3).

Struggling to maintain true humility is common for those seeking to respond to God’s call to be members of the community. Paul writes, “I say to everyone among you

⁵⁴ See also Christ’s discussion of the log in one’s own eye in subsequent verses 2-5.

not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3 NASB).⁵⁵

Humility, though difficult to obtain, is an essential trait for the community.

Proper speech

James adeptly states that the tongue is “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8b). Of all the virtues for the community, the use of proper speech may be the most difficult. From gossip to slander and backbiting to lying, communities have engaged in improper use of speech. “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so” (James 4:10).

The New Testament teaches people to put away falsehood and speak the truth. The reason Paul offers for this is that “we are members of one another” (Eph. 4:25). When community members speak against another, they speak against themselves since they are members of the body. When members tear another down, they tear themselves down as well. James states, “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge” (James 4:11). Members speaking against other community members violate themselves, others, and the law of God.

⁵⁵ Edwards notes that, “The Greek reflects a fourfold play on the word ‘think’ (*phronein*). **Do not think of yourself more highly** (*hyperphronein*) **than you ought** to think (*phronein*), **but rather think** (*phronein*) **of yourself with sober judgment** (*sophronein*). It is not coincidental that an admonition to think rightly follows a verse about ‘the renewing of your mind.’ It is precisely those who take their calling most serious who are most prone to overestimating or misjudging it (Gal 2:6). ‘Know thyself’ is a difficult imperative, but it is necessary for the health of fellowship.” James R. Edwards, *Romans*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 286.

In community, even speaking insensitively to another is forbidden. Paul tells Timothy, “Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters—with absolute purity” (1 Tim. 5:1-3). Paul also says that one’s conversation should be full of grace, seasoned with salt (see Col. 4:2). Thus, what and how one speaks are issues for the community to address.

Purity

The beatitudes declare that the pure in heart are blessed for they will see God (Matt. 5:8). The community can learn from James’ teaching. “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace” (James 3:17-18). The community is to seek purity and holiness as a reflection of God.⁵⁶ Righteousness, among other virtues, is the by-product of being pure.

This purity is explained as leading to other virtues: it is peace-loving (as in Heb. 12:11; Prov. 3:17), which refers not to inner peace but community peace; considerate (Phil. 4:5; 1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 3:2), which points to a noncombative spirit; and submissive, which indicates a tractable or teachable spirit, a person who will gladly be corrected or learn a new truth.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ “Be Holy, for I am Holy;” see 1 Peter 1:16; as well as Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7.

⁵⁷ Peter H. Davids, *James*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 90.

Thus, as the community seeks to be pure before God, it is enabled through godly wisdom to practice love, accept one another, exercise humility, and speak properly in an authentic way (i.e., without partiality or hypocrisy).

While many other characteristics can be extracted from the New Testament didactic practices, let it suffice here to have examined the various vices and the virtues of love, acceptance, humility, proper speech, and purity.

Summary

The didactic materials demonstrate the characteristics that the community of God should seek and those it should avoid. The Old Testament is specific in its mandates on behavior while the New Testament offers broad guidelines, calling the members of community towards application of given virtues. These guidelines (vice and virtue lists) clearly identify correct behavior. These guidelines are more than mere suggestions, rather they are exhortative commands regardless of the specific circumstance the community might face. Love is the crowning virtue, but acceptance, humility, proper speech, and purity are also deemed vital to the health of the community.

Conclusion

The goal of this part of the survey of the biblical data concerning intentional covenanted community was to derive insight from Scripture about community by examining the biblical idea of community, the re-telling praxis of community, and the teaching about living in community. The Bible abounds with metaphorical descriptions of community. The community is described as a God-gathered community set apart for

service to God. It is bound together as one in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Members of the community are intimately linked to God and to one another. The community of faith is continually being made new and holy as it reflects God's activity in and through the community. The images of the Scriptures inform the present community of its ongoing nature, purpose, and ultimate goal.

The community of faith must understand its identity as a chain from past to present. The community is a chain of memory—linked by its common experience of past into present. This continuity is maintained through the practice of *anamnesis*—a retelling the narrative of the “community past” so that the “community present” can see its roots of identity. The nation of Israel accomplished this transmission of its faith and practice with great precision through its narrative. The community adopted ritual practices in its feasts and festivals that told the story of God's activity among them.

The New Testament furthered these practices. Jesus deepened the practice to allow for further insight into God's desire for the community. The Gospels and the book of Acts preserve the narrative of the fledgling Christian community in written form. Sacramental ritual ensured reflection on the common story of the community.

The Scriptures note the patterns of “correct behavior,” for relationships among members of the community. Didactic materials teach specific “do's and don'ts” in the formation of the Scriptural community. While the Old Testament teaches detailed application of these “correct” behaviors, the New Testament offers guiding principles for the community.

In conclusion, for the community to be intentional about the application of the biblical data it must reflect on the following:

1. The community must seek an understanding of the biblical images/metaphors as self-descriptors; identifying itself as the community of God, gathered together in intimate connection for the purpose of serving God.
2. The community must learn how to engage the retelling of its narrative in creative ways through word, preservation, and ritual.
3. The community must adopt virtues of the scriptures guidelines, with special attention to Christian love and all of its ramifications, while eradicating the condemned vices.

These issues raised in this conclusion, will be addressed in the application chapter of this project (chapter 7). The next chapter addresses the more specific topic of “covenanted community” in a survey of the biblical data concerning living in intentional covenanted community.

CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL DATA: COVENANT

This chapter will examine the concept of covenant in the Bible, including what constitutes a covenant and how communities of faith apply covenants. Together with the previous chapter's conclusions on community, this exploration of covenant forges a biblical understanding of a covenanted community.

A Definition of Covenant

In the opening chapter of *The Christ of the Covenants*, O. Palmer Robertson declares, "Asking for a definition of 'covenant' is something like asking for a definition of 'mother.' A mother may be defined as the person who brought you into the world. That definition may be correct formally. But who would be satisfied with such a definition?"¹ Indeed, the definition of covenant may be elusive. If covenant is to be the binding agent that holds the community together,² the body of Christ must understand what constitutes a "covenant relationship" according to Scripture, thereby enabling the community to reach intentionally for its praxis.

Keith Inrater defines covenant as "the agreement between two parties to be committed to their relationship. Covenant comprises the principles of integrity that

¹ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 3.

² William E. Barton, *The Law of Congregational Usage* (Chicago: Advance, 1916), 102-103.

guarantee a relationship will be preserved.”³ Numerous theological dictionaries and encyclopedias point towards this “relational” aspect of covenant. G. L. Archer defines covenant as “a compact or agreement between two parties binding them mutually to undertakings on each other’s behalf.”⁴ This agreement is a “legally binding obligation,”⁵ that is, “a solemn promise made binding by an oath, which may be either a verbal formula or a symbolic action.”⁶ All of these definitions speak of a “bond” between those in covenant, and the bond is lived out in community.⁷ Robertson defines covenant in more specific terms that merit reflection.

O. Palmer Robertson’s Definition

Robertson defines covenant as “a bond in blood, or a bond of life and death, sovereignly administered.”⁸ He identifies three elements in this definition: 1) covenant as

³ Keith Intrater, *Covenant Relationships: A Handbook for Integrity and Loyalty* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1989), 11.

⁴ G. L. Archer Jr., “Covenant,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 276ff.

⁵ J. B. Payne “Covenant (in the Old Testament)” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* vol. 1 A-C, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975, 1976), 1000.

⁶ G. E. Mendenhall, “Covenant,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* vol. A-D, ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1962), 714.

⁷ Much contemporary discussion of covenant centers on research of the suzerain-vassal treaties (etc.). However, this research was not a consideration for the Reformers or the Puritan/Pilgrim forefathers or their view of the covenant relationship. Such research is based on Mendenhall, *et al.* in the twentieth century. Since the project argues for a return to the origins of the Congregational Way’s emphasis on covenant (which excluded the Hittite treaty) such comparisons will be left to another time.

⁸ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 4.

a bond, 2) covenant as a bond in blood, and 3) covenant as sovereignly administered.⁹

The elements will be examined in turn.

Covenant as a Bond

Several definitions noted previously define covenant as a bond. Although “extensive investigations into the etymology of the Old Testament term for covenant (*berit*) have proven inconclusive in determining the meaning of the word,” substantial evidence indicates covenant consistently refers to a relational bond. In short, “a covenant commits people to one another.”¹⁰ This commitment can take several forms. Robertson writes,

A verbal oath could be involved (Gen. 21:23, 24, 26, 31; 31:53; Exod. 6:8; 19:8; 24:3, 7; Deut. 7:8, 12; 29:13; Ezek. 16:8). At another point some symbolic action could be attached to the verbal commitment, such as the granting of a gift (Gen. 21:28-32), the eating of a meal (Gen. 26:28-30; 31:54; Exod. 24:11), the setting up of a memorial (Gen. 31:44f.; Josh. 24:27), the sprinkling of blood (Exod. 24:8), the offering of sacrifice (Ps. 50:5), the passing under the rod (Ezek. 20:37, or the dividing of animals. (Gen. 15:10, 18)¹¹

The relational bond might be expressed or constituted in various ways. However, a covenant in the Scriptures signifies the link among members of the community (whether God-to-human or human-to-human).

⁹ Ibid., 3-15.

¹⁰ Ibid., 5-6.

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

Covenant as a Bond in Blood

The second element identifies a covenant as a serious commitment with life-altering implications—a bond “in blood.” Parties entering into covenant are “bound for life and death.”¹² Covenant is, therefore, a total life-committing act. Robertson says, “God never enters into a casual or informal relationship with man, instead, the implication of his bonds extend to the ultimate issues of life and death.”¹³

The terminology of the Old Testament covenant indicates this “life and death” seriousness. The Old Testament phrase most often used for covenant making translates literally as “to cut” [*karath*] a covenant;¹⁴ though translators opt for the language “to make” a covenant. The Abrahamic account in Genesis demonstrates this cutting of the covenant:

He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. . . . When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made [Heb. *karath*, to cut] a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.” (Gen. 15:9-11, 17-18)

The significance is found in the total life commitment of the covenant rather than in the gruesomeness of the act of bloodshed. “The life is in the blood (Lev. 17:11) and so the

¹² Ibid., 15.

¹³ Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁴ Mendenhall, “Covenant,” 716.

shedding of blood represents a judgment on life.”¹⁵ Some argue that the cutting always indicates what will happen if one of the parties violates the covenant terms (Jer. 34:18-20),¹⁶ but such an idea implies a terminal element to the covenant that may be unwarranted. Shelton states,

The sacrifices involved in “cutting a covenant” were not a result of any applied penalty, but rather they functioned as an oath which validated the promises and guarantees that were the substance of the covenant. In the ancient world, the ceremonial sacrificing of an animal ratified or solemnized a covenant.¹⁷

The giving of life in the cutting of a covenant points towards the seriousness of the agreement between the parties. Golding states, “by initiating a covenant with man, God is making clear that this is no mere casual or informal relationship into which he is entering, but one which extends to the ultimate issues of life and death.”¹⁸ In short, the offering of life is not characteristically meant as a threat, but as a reminder of the seriousness of the covenant.

In the New Testament the shedding of Christ’s blood is seen as the giving of life for the covenant breakers—that is, humankind. One aspect of the atonement is that Christ’s death was a substitutionary sacrifice because of the violation of the covenant relationship with God. This sacrifice was not meant to terminate the covenant bond between God and humanity, but rather bring the two parties together—at-one-ment. God

¹⁵ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 11.

¹⁶ Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition* (Geanies House, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2004), 72-74.

¹⁷ Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

was in Christ reconciling with the world (2 Cor. 5:19); the giving of life (in Christ's death on the cross) was not an act of punishment. Robertson says,

In the context of the covenantal meal of the Passover, Jesus introduced the provisions of the new covenant meal. Clearly his intention was to proclaim himself as the Passover Lamb, who was taking on himself the curses of the covenant. His death was substitutionary; his blood was "poured out" for his people. His words were not those of testamentary disposition, but those of covenant fulfillment and inauguration.¹⁹

The shedding of Christ's blood was not the termination of the relationship (the covenant bond) but the beginning of a new type of relationship. The New Testament perspective presents covenant as a bond in blood—a bond in Christ's blood.

Covenant as Sovereignly Administered

Robertson identifies the third element of covenant as "sovereignly administered." Robertson notes, "Both biblical and extra-biblical evidence point to the unilateral form of covenant establishment."²⁰ Simply put, God administers covenant as top-down action. The particular signs of the covenant also illustrate this administration. Covenant signs such as the rainbow, circumcision, or the Sabbath "enforce the binding character of the covenant."²¹ Christ instituted the Lord's Supper and baptism as signs of the New Covenant, which the church is commanded to carry out. In all biblical covenants, God took the initiative of ascribing the sign to the covenant, thus the initiative, administration, and signs of covenant lie in God's actions.

¹⁹ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

Critique of Robertson's Definition

As useful as it is, Robertson's definition falls subject to his own criticism of "trying to define mother" with sterile precision. Covenant in community must be much more than "bond in blood, sovereignly administered." Covenant in the Scriptures is the substance of relationship. "A covenant can be seen as an oath that seals the relationship between two people."²² Covenant is relationship between people, much more than transactional bond. George Boynton, a writer of congregational polity from the early 1900s, emphasizes the foundational necessity of covenant for faith communities. He states, "That which constitutes a Congregational church is its covenant, in which its members, on the basis of common convictions as to truth and duty, and some unanimity of thought and purpose as to the best way of expressing that truth and discharging that duty agree on certain modes of action."²³ The covenant, therefore, becomes the scaffolding for the community as well as the bond among its members.

In her review of Robertson's definition of covenant, Susan Hunt says that covenant is Trinitarian; the Father, Son, and Spirit all participate in the scriptural covenants. The covenant is also corporate. Hunt quotes S. G. DeGraaf, "In the covenant God always draws near to His people as a whole—never just to individuals. Because of the covenant, the entire people rests secure in God's faithfulness, and every individual member of the covenant shares in that rest as a member of the community."²⁴ Covenant is

²² Intrater, *Covenant Relationships*, 19.

²³ George M. Boynton, *The Congregational Way* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1903), 52.

²⁴ S. G. DeGraaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, vol. 1 (Ontario: Paideia Press, 1977), 24, quoted in Susan Hunt, *Heirs of the Covenant: Leaving a Legacy of Faith for the Next Generation* (Wheaton, IL:

generational (Ps. 102:28) and integrative. “It is the underlying unity of Scripture. It is the framework through which we look at Scripture. Thus it should integrate, order, and govern our thinking about the world and our lives.”²⁵ Hunt points out that covenant is exclusive on the one hand (you shall have no gods before *YHWH*) and inclusive on the other, as the community of faith is to be a blessing to all nations and to “go into all the world and preach the gospel.”²⁶

While Robertson’s work can be considered foundational, an adequate definition of covenant must incorporate a broader sense of the bond among community members in order to function for the topic at hand. A review the Scriptural covenants will offer the necessary tools to forge an understanding of “covenant community.”

The Covenants of Scripture

This section will examine the covenants of the Old and New Testaments to show how God’s people live in covenant-relationship with God and each other, noting five significant factors of the covenants.

The Covenants in the Old and New Testament

Covenant theologians typically emphasize seven covenants established by God with his people. A review of these covenants provides a foundation for understanding the concept of covenant and, more specifically, how God expects people to live in covenant

Crossway Books, 1998), 31.

²⁵ Ibid., 33.

²⁶ Ibid.

community. The seven covenants are Divine-human in their constitution, yet they hold implications for human-human covenants in communities of faith. These seven covenants include: the Edenic covenant, the Adamic covenant, the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic/Sinaitic covenant, the Davidic covenant, and the “New”²⁷ covenant. Additional covenants in both Testaments also will be examined in what follows.

A Summary of the Seven Covenants

Edenic

The creation narrative implies the Edenic covenant even in the absence of the specific use of the word “covenant” for the relationship that God established with Adam and Eve. Robertson states, “If those elements essential for the characterization of a relationship as ‘covenantal’ are present, the relationship under consideration may be designated as covenantal despite the formal absence of the term.”²⁸

In this particular relational bond, God gave specific tasks to Adam. He charged Adam to work (Gen. 2:15); to enjoy the garden; and to eat of any tree but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:15-17). God brought the animals he had made to be named by Adam (Gen. 2:19-20).²⁹ Although this covenant came to an end with the Fall,

²⁷ Prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Heb. 8:8ff.).

²⁸ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 25.

²⁹ Robertson further notes three important elements of this covenant. He highlights the ordinances of Sabbath, marriage, and labor as being, “inviolable principle[s] inherent in the structure of the world as God has ordained it” (68). In other words, God has created the world and entered into relationship with it while establishing certain parameters in which human beings are to live. For example, the principles of the God-ordained day of rest in conjunction with the gift of labor are a means by which we live in covenant relationship with God. The union of marriage, where “two become one flesh,” is far more than mere marital

subsequent covenants restate many elements of the Edenic covenant, thereby indicating that God intends certain aspects of this covenant to endure for all time and not solely under the Edenic conditions.

Adamic

The Adamic covenant appears in the narrative of the Fall and God's expulsion dialogue (Gen. 3:14-19). The Adamic covenant demonstrates the divine plan for redemption.³⁰ Commonly called the "*protevangel*," many have interpreted Genesis 3:15 as the first messianic passage in the Bible. Victor P. Hamilton, however, examines this "famous crux of Scripture" and divides interpreters into two categories: "those who see in the decree a messianic import and those who see nothing of the kind."³¹ Clearly scholars debate the messianic implications of the verse, but the fact remains that God defined, or perhaps redefined, the covenant relationship with humanity, and all of creation, after the Fall.

Louis Berkhof emphasizes three factors about this covenant. First, God brought enmity between humans and Satan, thereby re-establishing a relationship with humanity. "God had to reverse the condition by regenerating grace."³² Second, the relationship

consummation but extends to a beautiful intimate bond of relationship (both Old and New Testaments use the language of marriage to describe the relationship between God and his people). Furthermore, the Edenic Covenant puts forth labor as the context in which human beings are to live. "Labor is to be seen as a principal means by which man's enjoyment of the creation is assured" (80).

³⁰ Susan Hunt says, "Here is the essence of the covenant of grace—God came, He called, He clothed." Hunt, *Heirs of the Covenant*, 25.

³¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 197.

³² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 293.

extends beyond Adam and Eve and includes their seed. Third, humanity, in covenant with God, will be victorious in the conflict with Satan. “The struggle, then, will not be indecisive. Though the heel of the woman’s seed will be bruised, the head of the serpent will be crushed. It can only bite the heel, and by doing this endangers its very head. . . . The prophecy of redemption is still impersonal in the protevangel, but it is nevertheless a Messianic prophecy.”³³

Noahic

The Noahic covenant can be considered two covenants; Golding distinguishes them as pre-diluvian and post-diluvian.³⁴ The first (Gen. 6:18) was made in the declaration of God’s intent to flood the earth. God made the second (Gen. 9) shortly after the widespread destruction of almost all that lived on earth in the flood. While new, the Noahic covenant restated elements of former covenants with humanity. “The revelation of the covenant of grace in Genesis 3:16-19 already pointed to earthly and temporal blessings. These were absolutely necessary for the realization of the covenant of grace. In the covenant with Noah the general character of these blessings is clearly brought out, and their continuance is confirmed.”³⁵

In the Noahic covenant, even though humanity can be considered central to the relationship, the scope of the relationship with God moves beyond humanity to the entire cosmos. The account states,

³³ Ibid., 294.

³⁴ Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 149.

³⁵ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 295.

As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. (Gen. 9:9-11)

Abrahamic

God called to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:1-2). This covenant brought about a “new epoch” in the revelation of the Old Testament.³⁶ In the Abrahamic covenant the community of faith was called out of the world. Before Abraham,

There were families in which the true religion found expression, and undoubtedly also gatherings of believers, but there was no definitely marked body of believers, separated from the world, that might be called the Church. There were “sons of God” and “sons of men,” but these were not yet separated by a visible line of demarcation.³⁷

God broadens and deepens this covenant relationship as God reveals more to Abraham. God cuts the covenant in Genesis 15 and in Genesis 17 gives the sign of the covenant—namely, circumcision. The relationship God established with Abraham signifies God’s intent with his people: he expects them to be a blessing to others and to inherit God’s promised blessings (Gen. 12:2-3).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

The number of times the New Testament refers to this particular covenant emphasizes the centrality of the Abrahamic covenant in Scripture. The other covenants are mentioned, “but not to anything like the extent of the Abrahamic covenant. Indeed, this covenant could be said to be the great theme of the New Testament.”³⁸ Golding says, “[T]he New Testament does not say that the Abrahamic covenant has passed away. Rather the opposite: the covenant with Abraham blesses all nations of the earth, and Christian believers of every race are described as ‘Children of Abraham’ (Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:29).”³⁹

Mosaic/Sinaitic

God established the Mosaic covenant on Mount Sinai with the Hebrews in the giving of the Mosaic Law. The relationship of this covenant to the Abrahamic covenant is important to understand in the overall scheme of God’s covenant relationship with his people. The covenant at Sinai did not overturn the covenant with Abraham, but rather, complimented it. As Golding points out:

The orthodox Reformed view of this covenant has been that it “was *essentially* the same as that established with Abraham, though the form differed somewhat.” . . . [T]here are “clear indications in Scripture that the covenant with Abraham was not supplanted by the Sinaitic covenant, but remained in force.” Even at Horeb, the Lord reminded the people of the covenant with Abraham (Deut. 1:8); and when the Lord threatened to destroy the people after they had made the golden calf, Moses based his plea for them on the covenant (Exod. 32:13). The Lord also assured them repeatedly that, whenever they repented of their sins, he would be mindful of his covenant with Abraham (Lev. 26:42; Deut. 4:31).

³⁸ Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 153.

³⁹ Ibid.

Moreover, in Psalms 105:8-10, the two covenants are clearly represented in their unity.⁴⁰

The Sinaitic covenant can also be seen as an extension or broadening of the former covenants.⁴¹ While it may seem that “the particularism of the Sinaitic *b’rith* [covenant] now embraced their entire nation rather than a mere family,”⁴² the fact remains that the descendants were those of Abraham—thus, the nation itself was the fulfillment of the promise of God to the patriarchs (Gen. 12:2, 15:5). The covenant remains intact even though those living in the covenant have multiplied greatly. Payne notes,

The large group involved, over two million people, thus accounts for the detailed Mosaic legislation that follows: both the moral requirements of the testament (Neh. 9:13-14) and the forms of ceremonial obedience that make up the ritual of the Tabernacle, which became the testamental sanctuary. . . . Such a national covenant would be impossible without externally codified law. “Essential to the national solidifying of this people...was the definitive revelation of the will of God for the conduct of his people.”⁴³

The stipulations in the covenant are more comprehensive and detailed, yet the relational bond remains true to the prior covenants.

Davidic

The Scriptural basis for the Davidic covenant is found in 2 Samuel 7:8-16. Renald E. Showers notes that, although the term covenant cannot be found here, “other passages

⁴⁰ Ibid., 156. Golding is quoting Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 297, in this selection.

⁴¹ Golding writes, “In the Abrahamic covenant, God dealt with a family. Now he covenants with a nation.” (*Covenant Theology*, 157).

⁴² Payne, “Covenant (in the Old Testament),” 1008.

⁴³ Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 157.

clearly indicate that God was establishing a covenant with His servant (2 Sam. 23:5; 2 Chron. 7:18; 21:7; Ps. 89:3-4, 28-29, 34-37; Jer. 33:19-26).⁴⁴ The essence of the Davidic covenant promises that the redeemer will come from the lineage of the king. “The whole point of this covenant is that it is made with David in his kingly office; in this way God establishes the manner in which he will reign over his people, by a king of his *own* appointing, who will appear from the house and lineage of David (cf. Gen 49:10; Jer. 33:14ff., Isa. 11:1).”⁴⁵ God intended this covenant promise for David and his kingdom after him. Payne explains,

[This covenant (*b'rith*) lays] in God's promise of salvation mediated through the kingdom of David. The Davidic *b'rith* had an immediate, contemporary application; but it contained elements that spoke of the continuance of David's dynasty after him (2 Sam 7:16, 19) and of its particular culmination in that greater Son who would be also the Son of God (v. 14; Heb 1:5). One must incline his ear and hear, or have faith, if he is to participate in the sure mercies of David (Isa 55:3). Many at that time may not have distinguished clearly between the Zion present and the Zion future, or between the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem. When a man qualified for inheritance under the Davidic *b'rith*, he was blessed with divine reconciliation and guidance in this life (Ps 32:8), with reception to glory a death (73:24), and with participation in the kingdom of Zion when the 'horn of David' should bud forth (132:17).⁴⁶

The New Covenant

Despite God's steadfast love and faithfulness, the community of faith failed to uphold the covenant with God; the people fell in and out of a right relationship with the Lord. God foreshadowed the New Covenant in the Old Testament and brought it to

⁴⁴ Renald E. Showers, *There Really is a Difference: A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), 85.

⁴⁵ Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 160.

⁴⁶ Payne, “Covenant (in the Old Testament),” 1010.

fruition in Jesus Christ. Golding observes, “The old (Sinaitic) covenant had received a new lease of life in Jeremiah’s early days, when the lost ‘book of the covenant’ was found and reaffirmed, to become the blueprint of Josiah’s continuing reformation (2 Chron. 34:30). Yet the response was only superficial and transient, and died with the death of Josiah.”⁴⁷ God, therefore, spoke a promise of a New Covenant to Jeremiah:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:31-34)

Of course, the New Testament reveals that this covenant is found in Christ. The essence of this covenant was not new to the Israelites; rather it fulfilled the relational covenant of God with his people. Robertson writes,

The obedience to God’s law which did not materialize under the Mosaic law shall find consummate fulfillment under the provisions of the new covenant (Jer. 31:33). Israel’s possession of the land as promised to Abraham shall become a solid and unshakable reality. Ezekiel particularly emphasizes the fulfillment of previous covenantal promises through the new covenant. David shall be king over Israel; the nation shall walk according to the statutes of the Mosaic covenant; the people shall live on the land promised to Jacob (Ezek. 37:24, 25). The blessings associated with the new covenant therefore cannot be regarded as the development of a perspective previously unknown to God’s people. Instead, this covenant shall bring to fruition the redemption intentions of God displayed throughout the ages.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 161.

⁴⁸ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 275-276.

Other Covenants in the Old Testament

The seven covenants examined above deal exclusively with the Divine-human relationship. Other uses of the term “covenant” found in the Old Testament also address the God-human bond, and other covenants in Scripture are made in the context of human-to-human relationships. These will be discussed briefly to illustrate the broad usage of covenant relationships in the Scriptures.

Other God-Human Covenants

Many of the covenants mentioned in Scripture continue or extend one of the seven covenants. References to the covenants with Isaac and Jacob, for example, continue the covenant with Abraham (Lev. 26:42). The “covenant with the forefathers” (Deut. 4:31), refers to all three patriarchs. Josiah renews the covenant with God (2 Kings 23:3), as do Asa (2 Chron. 15:12) and Ezra (Ezra 10:3).

At times God established specific time-bound covenants with the people. As the Israelites entered into the Promised Land, God prohibits the people from covenants with anyone but *YHWH* (Exod. 23:32; Judg. 2:21). However, despite this individual attention, the people violated the covenant as they entered the land (Josh. 7:11, 15). God established a special “covenant with Levi.” Also, Nehemiah and Malachi refer to the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Nehemiah 13:29 and Malachi 2:4-9.

Human-to Human Covenants

The Scriptures address a few “treaties” made by various people in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word “*berith*” or “*berit*” is often translated in these contexts as “treaty” rather than covenant. Abraham and Abimelech (Gen. 21:32), followed by Isaac and Abimelech (Gen. 26: 28), made such covenants. Also, the Scriptures record this kind of “*berit*” covenantal-treaty between Ahab and Ben-Hadad (1 Kings 20:34).

Laban made a covenant with Jacob to define the boundaries of their relationship (Gen. 31:44ff.). The well-known friendship of David and Jonathan is also phrased in the context of covenant (1 Sam. 18:3; 23:18), as well as the relation between Jonathan and David’s household (1 Sam. 20:16). Jehoiada, the priest, made a covenant with the guards to protect Joash, the young king (2 Kings 11:4; 2 Chron. 23). Jehoiada also instigated a covenant between the Lord and the king and then the king and the people (2 Kings 11:17; 2 Chron. 23).

Personal

One use of the word covenant differs from the rest. Scripture says the patriarch, Job, made a covenant with his eyes not to look lustfully at a girl (Job 31:1). John E.

Hartley writes,

In the OT the eyes were considered the gateway to the heart, for their gaze may arouse the deepest desires and so spur their owner to transgress God’s law (eg., Gen 3:6; 2 Sam. 11:2; cf. Sir. 9:8; Matt. 5:28). The people were, therefore, enjoined to remember God’s commandments and not prostitute themselves by following the lust of their hearts and eyes (Num.15:39).⁵⁰

⁵⁰ John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 409.

Job's covenant with his eyes demonstrates his attempt to live in a right covenantal relationship with God even prior to the time of Abraham.

Covenant in the New Testament

Testament is another word for covenant. One would, therefore, rightly expect that the New Testament would focus on the New Covenant. Behm states, "In both form and content, then, the NT use of *diatheke* follows the OT use except that we now pass from prophecy to fulfillment."⁵¹ The old becomes new. As the Apostle Paul says, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17).

The word "covenant" appears about three hundred times in the Old Testament;⁵² however, it appears much less in the New Testament. The Greek word *diatheke* (translated as "covenant") appears only thirty-three times: nine times in Paul, seventeen in the book of Hebrews, four in the Synoptics, two in Acts, and one in Revelation.⁵³ God's relational covenant with his people remains central to the Scriptures despite the lack of the term in the New Testament.

⁵¹J. Behm II, "Diatheke," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 161.

⁵²J. Guhrt, "Covenant, Guarantee, Mediator," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology: Volume 1, A-F*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975, 1986), 369.

⁵³J. Behm II, "Diatheke," 160.

Comparison of Old and New Covenants

Why a new covenant? What reasons underlie God's actions of changing the covenant? The writer of Hebrews states, "For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one" (Heb. 8:7), thus implying that the old covenant fell short in some manner—but how? The answer to this question can be seen in the differences between the Old and New Covenants in five areas: terminology, method, location, scope, and administration.

Difference in Terminology

Though covenant is mentioned very little, the covenantal-relational bond is expressed in the New Testament. Guhrt argues that the term "covenant" morphs into the language of "the Kingdom of God," a concept abundant in the Gospels. He writes, "Linguistically we can see this perhaps most clearly in Lk. 22:29 in the phrase *diatithemai . . . basileian*, appoint a kingdom, which exactly expresses the formula *diatithemai diatheken* . . . The new covenant and the kingdom of God are correlated concepts."⁵⁴ In short, God relates to the community of faith in a covenant relationship whether or not Scripture uses the term "covenant."

Difference in Method

The Mosaic covenant was built on specific laws, yet the New Testament writers point out that God's covenant with Abraham was built on faith. A law-based covenant differs from a faith-based covenant. Both the book of Hebrews and Paul's letters indicate

⁵⁴ Guhrt, "Covenant, Guarantee, Mediator," 369.

that the New Covenant replaces the law-based Mosaic covenant—with its external law—rather than the faith-based Abrahamic covenant. Paul compares the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants in Romans.

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. (Rom. 4:13-17)

The difference between the Mosaic covenant (the Law) and the faith-based-covenant-bond is foundational to the relationship of God and humanity. The Mosaic Law was given to be a “tutor” (or disciplinarian, NRSV), so that the community of faith might find Christ. Paul addresses this issue in his letter to the Galatians:

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one. Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. (Gal. 3:19-26)

Thus, even though the Mosaic covenant built upon the relationship God established with Abraham, the Mosaic covenant (law) was abolished. The Abrahamic covenant (faith), however, was fulfilled in the New Covenant.

Difference in Location

Another difference between the Old and New Covenants is simply the “locality” of the law of God. For the Mosaic covenant the law was external, written in stone. The New Covenant internalizes the law, written on the heart, thereby empowering believers to live in covenant with God. The Lord says,

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more. (Heb. 8:10-12)⁵⁵

After quoting Jeremiah’s prophecy (31:31-34), the writer of Hebrews explains, “In speaking of ‘a new covenant,’ he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear” (Heb. 8:13). Hagner states,

This statement that the old covenant is near to disappearing probably implies the continuance of the cultic ritual of the Levitical priesthood at the time the author writes. From his perspective that ritual is outmoded and pointless and therefore cannot last long The author’s courage in expressing to Jewish readers the transitory nature of the Mosaic covenant is notable. It is possible only because the discontinuity is counterbalanced by the underlying continuity of promise and fulfillment stressed by the author throughout the book. The new, the better, has come, but it was nothing other than this to which the old pointed and for which the old prepared the way.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Donald A. Hagner writes, “Nowhere, outside of Hebrews, however, do we encounter the quotation of this passage or the argument based upon it that we have here (cf. also 9:15; 10:16-18; 12:24). Our author capitalizes upon Jeremiah’s reference to the new covenant. A new situation is in view within the Scriptures of the old covenant itself, a situation that envisages a new kind of living, a new spiritual possibility, and a new experience of a definitive forgiveness of sins.” Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983, 1990), 123.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

Difference in Scope

The scope of the covenant broadens from the nation of Israel to all people. The particularism of the covenant in the Old Testament began with Abraham and intensified with the Mosaic covenant, but it was intended to be an impermanent particularism.

“When Christ brought his sacrifice, the blessing of Abraham flowed out to the nations;—those that were afar off were brought nigh.”⁵⁷ Paul speaks of the shedding of the old and the taking on of the new (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Eph. 2:15; 4:24; Col. 3:10). In Christ all things are made new. For the early church this meant that “the new creation included the fulfillment of every covenant that God had sealed with his people.”⁵⁸ The promises of the New Covenant are for all people, a “salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:30b-31).

Elsewhere Paul demonstrates that “wild olive branches” (Gentiles) have been grafted onto the olive tree (Israel/the People of God) (Rom. 11:11-24) and that the dividing wall separating the Jew from the Gentile has come down. To the church in Ephesus he writes,

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

⁵⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 300.

⁵⁸ Minear, *Images of the Church*, 111.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Eph. 2:14-22)

The separation between people ceases to exist, and all become one in Christ. Paul explains, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:28-29).

These passages clarify that the relationship between God and Abraham (with the promises made to the people of God) stands in the context of the New Covenant. The external law, given to the people at Sinai, has changed. As the writer of Hebrews says, the New Covenant is “not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt” (Heb. 8:9a). The Mosaic covenant, given after the exodus from Egypt, is what is considered to be “old.” The new supplanted the old not because of a deficiency in the Old Covenant, but rather in the people’s ability to keep it (Heb. 8:9b).

Difference in Administration

The New Testament also brings out the gracious character of the covenant relationship. The blessings of the promise are clear, as the Word, Jesus himself, became flesh and dwelt among humans—full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Jesus explained his role as the source of the New Covenant promises during the last supper. Golding states,

It is momentarily significant that when Jesus explained the memorial rite for himself that he instituted, he spoke of the wine that they were to drink as symbolic of his blood, shed to ratify the new covenant (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20). Here is a clear enunciation of the fulfillment of the pattern seen in Exodus 24 (Jesus echoes directly the words of verse 8), and the promise of Jeremiah 31.⁵⁹

The promise of this lasting covenant will be fully realized when Christ returns and the fullness of the intimate communion with God ushers the community of faith into eternity.⁶⁰

Golding also emphasizes the contrasting nature of the New Covenant with the Old. In discussing the New Covenant, he claims the old covenant refers to the Mosaic rather than the Abrahamic covenant. He writes,

[A] new covenant was essential, because although the law was given to subserve the interests of grace, it was given in external form, exemplified in the two tablets of stone on which the Decalogue was engraved. This was an eloquent reminder of the utter inadequacy of the old covenant to produce a true obedience to the law, standing as it did outside man. Hence the necessity of a *new* covenant, as a covenant that will function as a living, vital principle within man, as distinct from a code of ethics external to him.⁶¹

Notable Factors of the Covenants

Five factors of the scriptural covenants are important to note. First, though the majority of covenants in Scripture are divine-human in nature, they teach members of the community of faith how to live in relationship to each other. Second, continuity exists among the covenants. Third, the language employed in the scriptural texts does not always explicitly use the word “covenant” even though the relational bond is clearly

⁵⁹ Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 162.

⁶⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 300.

⁶¹ Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 161.

present. Fourth, the covenants point beyond the individuals with whom they were made to a broader context. And fifth, the relational bonds God established with humanity reflect God's character and intentions.

Example of Living in Relationship

People learn about covenant relationships in their interaction with God. God models and mandates the attitudes and characteristics (virtues) necessary for the intimate connection of covenant community. As members of the community walk in the divine-human covenant and study the covenants of Scripture, they learn the steadfast love of God and hear the great command to love God and love others. The example of the God-human relationship models how members of the community can live in human covenant with each other.

Covenant Continuity

Scripture identifies the continuity of the covenants. James asserts that God remains the same (James 1:17). The writer of Hebrews says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). Paul says that what God began with creation will be carried through to completion, to the end of the age (Phil. 1:6). Thus the continuity among the various covenants God established with his people is attested in Scripture.

Robertson notes that the Adamic covenant maintains ongoing currency.⁶² God altered none of the commands given to Adam in the garden in the post-fall condition;

⁶² Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 92ff.

indeed, even in the face of the fallen character of humanity, “man continues to be responsible to function in the context of the original responsibilities given him at the time of his creation.”⁶³

Hunt says that God merely “revealed” the Adamic covenant to Adam. She states the Adamic covenant “was not the establishment of the covenant of grace; it was the revelation of that covenant. This covenant was not established with Adam, but with Christ. This covenant was not an afterthought. It was not made in response to man’s sin. The divine agreement to redeem man was in place before man was created.”⁶⁴ God established his plan of redemption before he laid the foundations of the earth (Eph. 1:4). The revelation of God’s plan of redemption continues in all of the divine-human covenants of Scripture.

The text of Genesis 6 states that God regretted creating humanity.⁶⁵ This creates and interesting juxtaposition to the “covenant faithfulness” seen in the Edenic and Adamic covenants, but a thread of continuity is found even between the Edenic and Noahic covenants. Robertson notes their likeness: “Much of God’s bond with Noah entails a renewal of the provisions of creation, and even reflects closely the language of

⁶³ Ibid., 92.

⁶⁴ Hunt, *Heirs of the Covenant*, 26.

⁶⁵ “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Gen. 6:5-6).

the original covenant.”⁶⁶ God’s relationship with humanity remains—even after the destruction of the majority of human beings.

Robertson further states, “The Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants do not supplant one another; they supplement one another. A basic unity binds them together.”⁶⁷ Surely applications differ, yet the substance of God’s interaction with his community of people remains constant.⁶⁸ Golding comments,

As one contemporary writer has expressed it, the covenant with David, “has all the marks of the covenant with Noah, Abraham and Moses.” So there is no reversal or contradiction of earlier covenantal administrations. However, although the revelation of the covenant remains unchanged in its essence, there is advance and development in what is additional. Indeed, in the Davidic covenant, the Divine purposes to redeem a people to himself “reach their climatic stage of realisation as far as the Old Testament is concerned.”⁶⁹

In the Davidic covenant, the Abrahamic faith and promise are “clarified, deepened, and focused on one who will descend from King David.”⁷⁰ Thus the New Covenant reveals “the Sinaitic superstructure became antiquated. . . . But its foundation, the Abrahamic covenant, was never abrogated, and still stands today, as the abiding basis of the new superstructure, the new covenant.”⁷¹

⁶⁶ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 110.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁸ Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 158.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 159.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 160.

⁷¹ Martin J. Wyngaarden, “The New Covenant in Biblical Theology,” *The Calvin Forum* 11 (May 1946): 209, quoted in Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 162.

Even from the Old to New continuity persists. God's community of faith today can trace its origins to the Abrahamic covenant.

What we see in Abraham and his family are the beginnings of the church as a visible covenant community of believers and their children. Here again, there is frequent misapprehension in that many think of the church, the *ekklesia*, as beginning at Pentecost. But according to Paul's illustration in Romans 11, Gentile Christians are grafted in to a stock already in existence, the stock of Abraham.⁷²

God has worked, and continues to work in the community of faith in the context of covenant relationship. Each covenant in the Scriptures has its unique character and thus the continuity exists in tension with the separate nature of each covenant.

Covenant Language

The word "covenant" is not always present in Scripture passages that clearly demonstrate a covenant-bond relationship, even in the most central covenants of Scripture. For example, the Edenic covenant creates a foundation of the covenant concept throughout the Scriptures. Here one can first see God enter into the Divine-human covenant relationship, even in the absence of the term covenant.⁷³

The beginning of the Abrahamic covenant also lacks the term covenant. This beginning of a relationship is, "marked by particularism: God's choice of this one Heb[rew] family as the recipients [*sic*] of His redemption and as the medium [of] eventual communication to 'all the nations of the earth' (22:18)."⁷⁴ Again, Genesis 12 fails to mention "covenant," yet the reality of the covenant relationship is obvious. "The

⁷² Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 154. See also Gal. 3:29.

⁷³ Ibid., 148-149.

⁷⁴ Payne, "Covenant (in the Old Testament)," 1008.

promises made to Abram are not given formal covenant-status at this juncture, but the essence of covenant is clearly present. That covenant is then ratified by sacrifices and self-maledictory oath in Genesis 15, and confirmed and sealed by the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17.”⁷⁵

Some scriptural references to the concept of covenant use other terminology to describe the relationship. Throughout the Scriptures the phrase “I will be your God and you will be my people” identifies sovereignly administered covenant making. The use of the term “covenant” seems to diminish in the later years of the Old Testament chronology, yet the Scriptural writers assumed a foundational understanding of the covenant relationship.

Commencing with the latter days of Solomon, and culminating under such rulers of the divided kingdoms as Ahab and Jezebel in Ephraim or Manasseh in Judah, apostasy once again threatened Israel. The goal of the great prophets from the 8th cent. B.C. and onward was therefore to reactivate national commitment to the “covenant stipulations.”⁷⁶

Thus the prophets served as “covenant enforcers” and called people back to the relationship with God—but not necessarily with the use of the word “covenant.” Payne offers an explanation.

Among the seven 8th cent. prophets (Hosea-Micah, plus Isaiah), only Isaiah makes consistent reference to the *b’rith* concept. They knew of it (Hos. 6:7; 8:1); but they may have feared possible perversion of its judicial character into an externalized or legalistic religion (cf. Mic. 3:11). They therefore defined God’s relationship to Israel in terms of a husband or father (Hos. 2:4, 19) rather than of a testator; or commencing with Hosea 2:18, and developed in Jeremiah 31 and

⁷⁵ Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 152.

⁷⁶ Payne, “Covenant (in the Old Testament),” 1010.

Ezekiel 37 into, respectively, the “new *B’rith*” and the “*B’rith* of peace,” they were led of the Spirit to reveal God’s yet future NEW COVENANT.⁷⁷

Simply put, covenant relationships can exist without the specific terminology of covenant.

Covenant with Broad Implications

Numerous covenants point beyond the individuals within the covenant to incorporate other people, creatures, and the universe itself. Robertson points out that the Edenic covenant involves all of life in covenant relationship. The covenant relationship seeks obedience to humanity’s divine design and depends on “fellowship with the creator, which arises from an acceptance in joyful trust of all that he orders for life.”⁷⁸ Adam’s responsibility of obedience complemented his responsibility to “work and rest” or “multiply and fill the earth.” “All that Adam did had direct bearing on his relation to the covenant God of creation. . . . His life as a covenant creature must be viewed as a unified whole.”⁷⁹ God made a holistic covenant with Adam in the garden that involved all of life, and that covenant implies far-reaching responsibilities for the community of faith. “The total life-involvement of the covenant relationship provides the framework for considering the connection between the ‘great commission’ and the ‘cultural mandate.’”⁸⁰ In other words, the Edenic covenant demonstrates that God expects the community of

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 82.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 83.

faith, the church, to be involved in life around it rather than isolated from the world.

Since the Edenic covenant applies to both pre- and-post-Fall, the covenanted community of faith needs to heed the warning of strong currents against an isolationistic faith.⁸¹

Similar to the Edenic covenant's emphasis on "all of life," the Noahic covenant points beyond individuals to the whole of creation:

The explicit repetition of these creation mandates in the context of the covenant of redemption expands the vistas of redemption's horizons. Redeemed man must not internalize his salvation so that he thinks narrowly in terms of a 'soul-saving' deliverance. To the contrary, redemption involves his total life-style as a social, cultural creature. . . . [R]edeemed man must move out with a total world-and-life perspective.⁸²

As noted above, the Noahic covenant states explicitly the covenant with Noah and his family, and it includes every living creature. Furthermore, Robertson quotes Romans 8:22 and underscores the redemption from the curse to be experienced by the whole of creation, not just humanity.⁸³ As such, the understanding of covenant should retain room for the entirety of creation—the environment in which the community of faith lives, and moves, and has its being.

The Abrahamic covenant indicates God's plan for the community of faith to be a blessing beyond its own boundaries to the broader culture. While God established the covenant with a particular people, God intends the covenant to impact the world as seen in the Great Commission (Matt. 28) as well as the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12).

⁸¹ Which is often expressed with a "Me'n'Jesus" mentality detrimental to the covenant community.

⁸² Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 110.

⁸³ Ibid., 121-122.

God's Character Is Revealed

One might logically expect God to discard the human project God after humans violated the first covenant in disobedience. The act of eating the fruit was blatant rebellion against God; Adam and Eve joined with the Enemy in rebellion. However, God immediately brings words of redemption into the lives of his created beings. Although curses come as a result of the Fall, God expresses good news or gospel in the address to the woman and man and demonstrates his steadfast love.

The regulations and laws of the Mosaic covenant may cause one to lose sight of the fact that God built all the covenants on love.⁸⁴ The nation of Israel did nothing to gain God's favor or prompt God to enter into the covenant with them; instead God cites other reasons for his sovereign act.⁸⁵ The people violated each of God's covenants (Hosea 6:7), and numerous injunctions against the people of God can be found:

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early. (Hos. 6:4)

Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and played the whore there? (Jer. 3:6b; cf. Ezek. 23)

⁸⁴ "It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deut. 7:7-8).

⁸⁵ "When the Lord your God thrusts them out before you, do not say to yourself, 'It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to occupy this land'; it is rather because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is dispossessing them before you. It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfill the promise that the Lord made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Know, then, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to occupy because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people" (Deut. 9:4-6).

[T]hese people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote. (Is. 29:13)

[T]hey have rejected the law of the Lord, and have not kept his statutes, but they have been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked. (Amos 2:4b)

Oh, that someone among you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hands. (Mal. 1:10)

In these verses one sees the brokenness of the relationship between God and the people, yet the Lord remains faithful in steadfast love:

For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:5; cf. 86:15; 103:8; Exod. 34:6)

Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations. (Deut. 7:9)

For your steadfast love is higher than the heavens, and your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. (Ps. 108:4)

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments. (Ps. 103:17-18)

Despite the failures of humans, their rejection of the covenant, and their blatant disobedience, God remains faithful to his promises. The covenants reveal this steadfast character of the love of God.

Summary of Covenant in the Scriptures

A covenant is a relational bond between two or more persons. While numerous scriptural covenants exist, God established seven primary covenants in the Old

Testament. The New Testament fulfills the covenant in Christ, solidifying the relational bond between God and the community of faith. God writes the law of the covenant upon the community's hearts rather than establishing an external law. The covenant concept continues throughout the Scriptures and has implications for all of life. God's character is seen in this relational-bond established with humanity. With this sense of what covenant means in the Scriptures, this chapter turns to the task of understanding of the implications of covenant for a covenanted community, and specifically for a gathered body of Congregationalists.

Implications of Covenant for the Community

The previous chapter presented the biblical data on community. This chapter has presented the biblical data on covenant. Now, an understanding of covenant community can be crafted based on the biblical data. Hunt has observed, "Much has been written about the *content* of the covenant, but little about the day by day, week by week, generation by generation privileges and responsibilities of living in covenant with God and His people."⁸⁶ God gathers the people and establishes covenant with them, and they in turn have fellowship with one another—a bond in the covenant made with God and with one another:

Scripture clearly teaches that the content of God's covenant is to be contextualized in the covenant community. If the covenant is taught in a purely academic way, it will be anemic. God never intended the passing on of the covenant to be just a mental exercise. The covenant is corporate. Our relationship

⁸⁶ Hunt, *Heirs of the Covenant*, 15.

with God is personal and individual, but when that relationship is established, we are immediately in community with others who are in relationship with him.⁸⁷

The scriptural covenants are divine-human in their constitution. The Congregationalists have historically adopted this model in covenanting with God and one another. When transferring this concept of covenant to human-human relationships, God's actions in the covenant magnify the serious nature of the bond. In other words, if the Divine-human covenant serves as a model for human-human covenants, what does it say about persons' roles in relational bonds among two or more people? This issue prompts John English to write, "Initially the idea of covenant is quite frightening to us. Intimate relationship among members of a community takes time. We need to call upon our faith: covenant is achieved by the action of the Holy Spirit freeing people, giving them a sense of trust with each other."⁸⁸ The Holy Spirit dwells in believers and creates spiritual bonds between believers and God. Believers abide in Christ and the Holy Spirit transforms the legal aspect of covenant and writes it on the hearts of individuals and members of the community of faith. Believers internalize the New Covenant in Christ's blood when they share the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper. Believers are one with Christ as Christ is one with the father (John 17). "[I]n the Lord's Supper, repetition is expressly intended to produce remembrance (*anamnesis*, 1 Cor. 11:25)."⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁸ English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*, 20.

⁸⁹ Guhrt, "Covenant, Guarantee, Mediator," 370.

Mandates on Covenant Community

The review of the biblical data presented in this and the previous chapter imply some mandates for the faith community in covenant with God and members of the community. Chapter 2 concluded with three reflections for the community to consider:

1. The community must seek an understanding of the biblical images/metaphors as self-descriptors and their implications for identifying itself as the community of God, as people gathered in intimate connection for the purpose of serving God.
2. The community must learn how to re-tell its narrative in creative ways through word, preservation, and ritual.
3. The community must adopt virtues of the Scriptures' guidelines, with special attention to Christian love and all of its ramifications, and eradicate the condemned vices.

The community must apply the concept of covenant to the biblical metaphors, the retelling of its story, and the virtues it must adopt, and thereby heighten its self-awareness as a covenant community. Three areas should be addressed: first, the idea of *koinonia*—a covenanted sharing in community, second, the maintenance of a holistic understanding of covenant, and third, the teaching of covenant in community.

***Koinonia*—Covenanted Sharing in Community**

Being in covenant implies mutuality—a “sharing of each other’s person.” “All who are united to Jesus are united to one another in love. We are obliged to share our gifts and graces with one another. We are bound to maintain a holy fellowship. These are

strong words to the self-centered, felt-needs orientation of today's churchgoer. The church must not capitulate to this orientation."⁹⁰ The last chapter demonstrated that the community must take seriously the virtues and vices taught in the Scriptures, a requirement magnified in the covenant relationship in which the bond holds life-altering force.

Since covenant implies a sharing-bond within the community, the people of God must incorporate this sharing into the biblical images found in the Scriptures to learn how to be a part of one another. Being "gathered together in intimate connection for the purpose of serving God" heightens in the context of the covenant relationship.

Maintain a Holistic Understanding of Community

The application and understanding of the covenant must be holistic. Hunt states that covenant "is both cognitive and experiential. It is formal and informal. It is head and heart. It must get into the mind and the muscles."⁹¹ Covenant should permeate the community in how it understands itself and how it lives, and it should extend to contexts beyond the individual(s) with whom a particular covenant was made. A community's covenant relationship with God and each other that reflects the biblical pattern must incorporate this broad sense of application. The covenanted community should be a blessing to those around it.

⁹⁰ Hunt, *Heirs of the Covenant*, 58.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

Teach the Covenant in Community

To overcome the hindrances to covenant community, the community must teach what and why things are done. “Christ’s Crown and Covenant must be the impetus, the vision, and the treasure of our covenant community life.”⁹² In teaching the covenant, the community of faith must consider whether the language of covenant is always advantageous to the church. Scripture reveals covenants without the use of the term. The community must determine how explicit covenantal language needs to be in its modeling and living out of its covenant. The community must continually ask whether the covenant is expressed (explicitly or implicitly) as an “externalized-legalistic religion,” or and “internalized-pneumatic relationship.” The former poses a threat to genuine covenant community; the latter nurtures such relationship.

The self-centeredness of twenty-first century American culture runs contrary to covenanted community. “We must counteract it by teaching the content of the covenant in the context of an authentic covenant community that values our covenant privileges and responsibilities.”⁹³ In other words, the community must teach the covenant through the experience of living in covenant with each other. New generations must experience the deep relational bond of sharing each other’s persons to learn what it means to be intentional about covenanted community; therefore, the retelling practices of the community in word, preservation, and ritual must be taken extremely seriously. The story of the community must be shared; the signs (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper) and the

⁹² Ibid., 59.

⁹³ Ibid., 58-59.

language of covenant must be carefully observed. The covenant statement must express the dynamic reality of the covenant bond lived by members of the faith community. If covenant becomes merely a document to be recited periodically, the community risks falling subject to the criticism of former covenanted communities: the people “draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote” (Isa. 29:13; cf. Matt. 15:8).

The next chapter builds on the biblical data of this and the previous chapter and gleans insight from history regarding intentional covenant community.

CHAPTER 4

HISTORICAL DATA: A SURVEY OF CHURCH HISTORY

The present chapter surveys changes that occurred in the centuries leading up to the Protestant Reformation and, more specifically, the Congregationalist's attempt to restore the New Testament church. The survey identifies the transition of the church's self-identity from community to organizational hierarchy. By the end of the Medieval Era, organizational structures dominated the small groups of believers that gathered together as church.

The chapter seeks to explain why these changes occurred and to identify the views that encroached upon the gathered-covenanted community about what constitutes and unifies the church. The chapter investigates the institutionalization of the church—how the church moved away from its covenant community roots towards an “organization.” The survey will reveal some pitfalls that the community of faith can avoid.

A Historical Survey

The following survey focuses on the first fifteen centuries of the Christian church in three sections: the First Century; the Post-apostolic Era, and the Medieval Era. Decisions regarding the essence, constitution, and unity of the church were made during

these time periods. The survey concludes with a brief examination of the attempts to return to the covenant community during the Reformation.

First Century

The early church met in small groups led by the Spirit of God. The Gospel message spread from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). As the church grew, these faith communities were organized in ways contrary to their origins.

Scholars' interpretations of the data from the early church often vary as much as the gathered communities themselves.¹ For example, Walter Bauer asserts that the church of Rome imposed a "unity of the church" upon the diverse gatherings of Christians.² Originally Christian communities were unique, with only the Holy Spirit to unite them together. Prusak says, "Because they were assemblies of humans like ourselves, the early Churches were not pristine, trouble-free communities."³ The gathered communities were often fraught with divisive conflicts that had to be addressed. Hinson notes,

Most contemporary explanations make room for some kind of unity in diversity, whether or not the common elements were known and articulated. The center around which Christian identity and unity revolved was, of course, Christ himself, but it was not long before Christians realized that they depended on tangible means such as baptismal confessions, Scriptures, and authoritative teachers to guide them safely to Christ.⁴

¹ Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*, 105. Prusak claims, "A survey of these diverse leadership and service structures in the earliest Churches reveals, besides these multiple leadership positions, that some assemblies were more structural than others."

² Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), cited in E. Glenn Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 88-89.

³ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 113.

⁴ Hinson, *Early Church*, 88-89.

The Christian church of the first centuries experienced a formative period during which organizational structure became top-heavy with authority. Prusak states, “A defensive concern for the continuity of Churches now threatened by enemies of sound teaching led to the development of a new nucleus or framework of leadership.”⁵ The confessions and creeds, and the bishops who defined them became the control agent—the glue—rather than the dynamics of (covenant) relationship with the Spirit and one another. “The ongoing attempts simply to live in love were supplanted by stronger patterns of supervisory authority better able to cope with the threats to unity.”⁶ The church moved away from covenanted community as the foundation of its identity, and it found other means to unify and constitute itself.

Post-Apostolic Era

The shift away from the “covenantal glue” began as early as the beginning of the second century with the church father, Ignatius (d. ca. 107).⁷ During the centuries after the apostles, considerable change occurred in the complexity of what it meant to be a church. Competitors severely threatened the orthodox interpretation of the Gospel (that is, the Gospel as interpreted by the majority).

The first six centuries of the church display remarkable developments in the idea of what constitutes a church. Yet, as Prusak notes, there were no writings on the

⁵ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 107.

⁶ Ibid., 106.

⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1971), 387.

“theology of the Church” until the fifteenth century.⁸ Thus, changes were made in how the church functioned absent thorough, systematic reflection on “the ecclesia.”

The changes in these first centuries can be seen in four primary, interlinked areas. The areas, separated here for sake of discussion, are intertwined in their development. The four areas are: (1) creeds, (2) bishops, (3) apostolic succession, and (4) papal hierarchy. The sum of these four developing issues will demonstrate the shift away from church as a community to church as an organization.

Creeds

The church composed several creeds and statements of faith in the first centuries of its history. The gathered councils at Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon produced statements intended to unify the church and define its orthodoxy.

Jaroslav Pelikan describes three underlying presuppositions to the creedal definition of orthodoxy. The first presupposition is that there is a “straight line” from the Gospels to the creeds. Second, “that the true doctrine being confessed by the councils and creeds of the church is identical with what the New Testament calls ‘the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints’ [Jude 3]; and therefore, third, that continuity with that faith is the essence of orthodoxy, and discontinuity with it the essence of heresy.”⁹

⁸ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 229.

⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University, 2003), 9.

Emperor Theodosius I called the Nicene Creed of A. D. 325,

[A] massive and unbroken continuity of catholic and apostolic tradition which went back three centuries to the authority of the prince of the apostles, Simon Peter, and through him to Christ himself, and which was intended to be preserved unchanged for as many more centuries into the future as the world and the church militant might stand.¹⁰

With threats of earthly and eternal punishment, Theodosius banned any change or deviation from the Creed of Nicaea;¹¹ however, the next council made changes to the creed. Pelikan notes that the council at Constantinople in 381 denied making any change to the Nicene Creed. While it asserted the same doctrine, however, the council did not simply repeat the text of the former creed. Rather the council, “[P]romulgated its own ‘new’ creed . . . [and] among other new clauses, this creed contained a greatly amplified confession about the Holy Spirit, and therefore a more comprehensive statement about the doctrine of the Trinity than that of Nicaea had been.”¹² Subsequent councils also declared the creed of Nicaea unchangeable while issuing new statements, thereby adding to, or changing, the original creed.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Pelikan notes that at Ephesus under the leadership of Cyril, the council declared, “It is not permitted to produce or write or compose any other creed [*heteran pistin*] except the one which was defined by the holy fathers who were gathered together in the Holy Spirit at Nicaea” (*Credo*, 12); yet, the council went on to formulate its own affirmation of doctrine in the “Formula of Union.”

Likewise, “The Council of Chalcedon of 451, which is counted as the fourth ecumenical council, is probably know best for having issued another ‘new creed,’ The Definition of Faith of the Council of Chalcedon, which would determine the shape of the doctrine of the person of Christ for the next fifteen centuries both East and West” (*Credo*, 13).

Pelikan also demonstrates that despite all of the additions and modifications to the creed at Nicaea, the church father held nothing had changed. The Council of Constantinople II (553) declared, “When we met together, we first of all made a confession of the faith. . . . We confessed that we believe, protect, and preach to the churches that confession of faith which was set out at greater length by the 318 holy fathers

The sixth ecumenical council (Constantinople III, A. D. 680-81) specified, “*The Creed of Nicaea* of 325 and *The Creed of Constantinople* of 381 as ‘the creed,’ once again employing the noun in the singular and once again reciting both creeds, with the declaration: ‘This pious and orthodox creed of the divine favor was enough for a complete knowledge of the orthodox faith and a complete assurance therein.’”¹⁴ Note the change in the language regarding “the faith.” No longer is faith a belief in, trust in, or relationship with God, but is now a body of independent knowledge to which one gives or refuses mental assent. Having faith came to mean agreement with the creeds. Pelikan remarks,

What the church confessed and believed was “the faith of all catholics,” which was, in turn, what it had been taught by the apostles. Believing, teaching, and confessing belonged together. To believe meant to accept that which one could not see, so that “faith” could be defined as “that by which we truly believe what we are completely incapable of seeing.” From this subjective definition it was easy to move to the use of the word “faith” not for the act of believing, but for its content, the relation between God and man. . . . [T]he pattern of usage was determined by the practice of calling Christian doctrine “the faith” or “the catholic faith” in the sense of that with which one’s speaking and writing had to agree.¹⁵

Living, dynamic faith became tamed and domesticated—caged in the creeds. The transmission of faith as a dynamic process of covenant relationship became structured and formalized into sets of propositional creeds. No longer did the Spirit reign supreme in dynamic-pneumatic relationship. No longer was the Spirit “primary” in the discernment of God’s activity in the community. In fact, the Holy Spirit became only one aspect of

who met in the council at Nicaea and handed down the holy doctrine or creed” (*Credo*, 15).

¹⁴ Ibid., 16.

¹⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)*, vol. 3 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1978), 12.

cognitive belief—one line in the creed. The church moved from the dynamic relationship of person-to-person to an organized entity with hierarchical control mandating mental assent to written words as an expression of faith. The creeds, intended to be an expression of faith, were condensed into memorable formulas and then turned into measuring rods—tests of faith and fellowship. The community was being lost to an organizational beast in the control of its owners—the bishops of the church.

Bishops

The shift of the church away from gathered community can also be seen in the change of the role of bishops. In the second century, Ignatius claims bishops as the binding agents of the church. He states, “No one should do anything that pertains to an *ekklesia* apart from its *episkopos*, which we can from this point translate as *bishop*. Without the bishop, it is not permissible to baptize or to celebrate the *agape* or love-feast.”¹⁶ Furthermore, Ignatius writes, “Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church.”¹⁷ In discussing Ignatius, Prusak notes,

The bishop serves as the guarantor of orthodox beliefs and unity, particularly against the divisions being caused by the Judaizers and Docetists, who denied the full human bodiliness and suffering of Jesus. . . . Obedience to the bishop is so important to Ignatius that he virtually defines being Christian in terms of it.¹⁸

¹⁶ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 116 (cf. Ignatius, “Letters to the Smyrnaeans” 8:2).

¹⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, “The Letters of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch: To the Smyrnaeans 8:2,” *The Apostolic Fathers*, Second Edition. trans., J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Hammer, ed. and rev. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 112-113. Note that many scholars believe these comments to be spurious; however their presence indicates the extant belief regardless of whether they came from Ignatius’ or another’s pen.

¹⁸ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 117.

By the middle of the third century, the idea that bishops constitute the church was widespread in geographic breadth and the depth of commitment to it. “For Cyprian of Carthage the Church is one and holy *in its bishops*. He concludes bishops to be the essential organs of the Church’s unity and the bearers of her holiness.”¹⁹ Cyprian writes, “Each bishop, presiding over a Eucharistic assembly, personifies the unity of his local Church, which is built on him, the elders and deacons around him, and all those who remain faithful (*Ep.* 33:1).”²⁰ The church is, simply, the collection of bishops. In one epistle, Cyprian furthermore writes,

Whence you ought to know that the bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the bishop; and if any one be not with the bishop, that he is not in the Church, and that those flatter themselves in vain who creep in, not having peace with God’s priests, and think that they communicate secretly with some; while the Church, which is Catholic and one, is not cut nor divided, but is indeed connected and bound together by the cement of priests who cohere with one another.²¹

Bishops are no longer merely stewards of the “truth which binds the church together”—but they, *themselves*, are the “cement.” Prusak uses language the project has used about covenant to describe Cyprian’s views. He states, “bishops are the glue, bonding themselves and the Churches united to them into one universal Church.”²²

St. Augustine asserts this understanding as well. He states, “[The] ecclesial communion was mediated through the relationship of bishops who presided at the

¹⁹ Ibid., 126.

²⁰ Ibid., 127.

²¹ Cyprian of Carthage, *The Epistles of Cyprian* LXVIII: 8, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 374-375.

²² Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 12.

Eucharists of local Churches or assemblies.”²³ The community of faith became defined by the college of bishops rather than by the covenanted community. The “apostolic succession” of these bishops further amplified this shift.

Apostolic Succession

Many unorthodox teachings vied for the loyalty of individual Christian communities during the first centuries of the church. Champions of orthodoxy, such as Ignatius, Irenaeus, Cyprian, and Augustine responded with a “universal” claim upon the church. For example,

To counter the teachings of the Gnostics, Irenaeus emphasized the Church’s unity of faith on a universal scale: the whole Church, spread throughout a world speaking many different languages, believes and teaches as if having one heart and soul because it has received the faith from the apostles and their disciples. . . . The Church teaches and preaches the same beliefs everywhere, just as the same sun shines throughout the world. . . . What the apostles once taught is preserved through the succession of bishops, to whom the apostles gave the care of the Church in each place.²⁴

Gonzales adds,

The norm by which error is to be distinguished from truth is the doctrine that has been received from the apostles. Supposing that the apostles had some secret knowledge, as the Gnostics claim, they would not have communicated that knowledge to others than those who they trusted enough to appoint them leaders of the Churches which they founded, that is, the bishops. These in turn would have done likewise, entrusting the true doctrine to those who would succeed them.²⁵

²³ Ibid., 129.

²⁴ Ibid., 123-124.

²⁵ Justo L. Gonzales, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1987), 169-170.

“Truth” as an objective body of information was consolidated in the teachings of those who succeeded from the apostles.

Tertullian argues this same point. The apostles received all truth from God through Christ and, therefore, the bishops’ witness, in apostolic succession, is a guarantee of the true faith.²⁶ Prusak says, “Only the communion of Churches with an apostolic foundation had the rule of faith that was preserved by episcopal succession.”²⁷ While the argument is logically sound—Christ gives truth to bishops; bishops give truth to people; therefore, Christ has given truth to the people (or the people have the truth from Christ)—Tertullian and those arguing for succession fail to account for numerous factors in the mishaps of “transmission of truth.” Clearly they aim to maintain sound doctrine. However, reliance upon the apostolic succession is faulty, for there is no guarantee in the human transmitters.²⁸

Vincent of Lerins calls for a standard of interpretation of the scriptures to fight various heretical competitions. Vincent explains,

For Novatian expounds it one way, Sabellius another, Donatus another, Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, another, Photinus, Apollinaris, Priscillian, another, Iovinian, Pelagius, Celestius, another, lastly Nestorius another. Therefore, it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the

²⁶ Tertullian, “On Prescription Against Heretics XX-XXII,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian. I. Apologetic; II. Anti-Marcion; III. Ethical*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 252-253.

²⁷ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 125.

²⁸ Prusak remarks that the Montanists disagreed with this idea of pure apostolic succession. “In their view, the Spirit directly guaranteed holiness and unity, and not lenient bishops who forgave sinners (On Modesty 21, 16-17)” The Church condemned them as heretics. “But, ironically the Montanists actually helped to consolidate the power of bishops” (Ibid., 126).

rule for the right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of Ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation.²⁹

Vincent was convinced that a single interpretation was necessary for the benefit of the church.

All possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. . . . We shall follow universality if we confess that one faith it be true, which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is manifest were notoriously held by our holy ancestors and fathers; consent, in like manner, if in antiquity itself we adhere to the consentient definitions and determinations of all, or at the least of almost all priests and doctors.³⁰

Beyond the “necessity of the apostolic succession in bishops,” Irenaeus further asserted “correct teaching” is found only in the succession and primacy *of Rome*. He cites the twelve popes from Peter to Eleutherus (174/5-189) as proof that “[T]here is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the apostles until now, handed down in truth.”³¹ As Irenaeus sees it,

‘[B]y this order and succession, the apostolic teaching came down to us in the Church’s tradition and preaching of truth’ (3.3.3). . . . Thus, by listening to Rome, one heard the faith of the entire Church. Among all the Churches, the Church of Rome and its bishop effectively symbolized the unity of all Churches.³²

The creeds solidified “truth” into propositional statements. The bishops became the cement and glue for the church. Apostolic succession legitimized the bishops, and

²⁹ Vincent of Lerins, “A Commonitory,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Sulpitius Severus, Vincent of Lerins, John Cassian*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 132.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies” 3.3.3, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 416.

³² Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 134.

succession was validated through the papal hierarchy—the last factor in the early church’s move away from covenanted community and towards an organizational entity.

Papal Hierarchy

The shift away from the community to organization found its zenith in the papacy. The creeds, bishops, and apostolic succession led to the consolidation of power in one person—the pope. “The internal stratification of the Church and the marginalization of the ‘laity’ especially hardened during the fourth and fifth centuries. For many bishops ‘[h]ierarchy, and not community, has become the order of the day.’”³³

The importance of Rome increased. “Augustine considered Peter to be the representative or symbol of the unity of the whole Church and of all the apostles.”³⁴ Prusak explains Augustine’s assertion that Peter alone, among the disciples, was told to feed Christ’s sheep. Since there is one flock and one shepherd, all are “united with Peter who is one with Christ, and with the bishop of Rome who succeeded Peter (*Ep.* 53:2).”³⁵

Pope Innocent (A.D. 402-417) made claims that, “[N]o Church [has] ever been founded in Italy, Gaul, Spain, Africa, Sicily, or any of the islands unless Peter or his successors appointed bishops for it, since no other apostle was ever mentioned as having taught in those places.” Thus, he concluded that all churches must follow Rome.³⁶ The essence of the church was no longer community but rather connection with Rome, and all

³³ Ibid., 165.

³⁴ Ibid., 137.

³⁵ Ibid., 138.

³⁶ Ibid., 140.

church expansion and growth was viewed as coming from Rome. Pope Boniface (A.D. 418-422) states, “The Roman Church was a font of ecclesial discipline and acted as the head of its members, namely, all the Churches spread throughout the world.”³⁷ Calling himself an “unworthy heir” of Peter, upon whom Jesus had bestowed a personal primacy for governing the church after his confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi, Pope Leo the Great (A. D. 440-61) claimed a unique position, distinct from that of all other bishops. He declared that the whole world came to Peter’s See, and that the care of its bishop extended over the universal church.³⁸ Granted, not all bishops readily bowed the knee to these claims of supremacy, but momentum was building to secure the primacy of the Roman See.³⁹

In the fifth century, the centralization of power in the papacy took a further step towards power over secular state. Pope Gelasius I (A.D. 492-496) elevated the rule of the pope when he distinguished between sacred and kingly authority:

[T]wo kinds of rule over this world, the sacred authority of bishops and the power of kings. [Gelasius] insisted that priestly authority involved greater responsibility, since God would hold bishops accountable even for the actions of kings. Therefore, the emperor who presided over the human race had to submit, like all the faithful, to the judgment of those who oversee divine matters, and especially to the one who presides at the See that God has placed over all other bishops.⁴⁰

By the beginning of the seventh century, Pope Gregory I (A.D. 590-604) sealed the significance of the papal hierarchy. “After Gregory, the pope was no longer only a

³⁷ Ibid., 141.

³⁸ Ibid., 142.

³⁹ Prusak notes several bishops protests (Ibid., 139-148).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 147.

Christian leader; he was also an important political figure in European politics—God’s Consul. . . . Gregory’s vigorous leadership magnified the authority of the papal chair.”⁴¹

Gregory is a controversial figure. On the one hand he denounced the fancy titles that his successors would gladly claim, but on the other hand “he claimed and exercised, as far as he had the opportunity and power, the oversight over the whole church of Christ.”⁴² Shelley remarks, “No wonder, therefore, that the successors of Gregory had no scruple in using even more arrogant titles than the one against which [Gregory] so solemnly protested with the warning: ‘God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble.’”⁴³ Yet, thanks to Gregory, even a humble pope wielded incredible power.

In the Post-Apostolic Era, the gathered community of faith was essentially lost to a system of organization built upon creeds, bishops, the idea of apostolic succession, and ultimately, the papal hierarchy.

Medieval Era

The Medieval Era saw a continuation of the move away from covenant community. Three movements shall be noted here. First, in the early church, the Eucharist had been a sign of unity for the community; yet the laity became increasingly isolated from participation in the sacrament during the middle ages. Prusak comments, “Instead of emphasizing communal concelebration and divine indwelling or participation

⁴¹ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, updated 2nd edition (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 167.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 168.

in the divine life, the Medieval focus will shift to the more individualistic categories of administering and receiving sacraments, with grace viewed as something that can be received, lost, and regained, given to some and withheld from others.”⁴⁴

Second, the papacy continued to centralize its power. Shelley notes, “During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the papacy led an admirable attempt to constitute a perfect society on earth. The church achieved an incomparable power and majesty. . . . Like the cathedrals, the papacy reached for the impossible and first cracked, then, in time, crumbled to the earth.”⁴⁵

The third movement to be noted is the numerous lay efforts to recapture the sense of Christian community in the church, which ultimately led to a hardening of the organizational structure in the Reformation Era at the Council of Trent.

Eucharist

Regarding the shift of meaning in the Lord’s Supper, Prusak writes, “The Eucharist began to be considered an end in itself, separated from its ecclesial effect. The previous emphasis on ‘all being united into the body of Christ’ through the Eucharist was gradually replaced by a focus on individual, personal union with Christ through reception of the sacrament.”⁴⁶ Once a shared meal—a symbol of Christian unity—the Lord’s Supper morphed into an action of the priest, who celebrated silently and often privately. Such developments, in turn, altered the understanding of the church during the Medieval

⁴⁴ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 153.

⁴⁵ Shelley, *Church History*, 184.

⁴⁶ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 196.

Era. “The symbolism of a local Church being united through its assembly for one Eucharist began to fade, since a local community was often fragmented into groups attending different Eucharists at the same time, in the same building.”⁴⁷ Upward to forty-eight altars could be found in a single church. “To accommodate the proliferation of Masses all being celebrated at the same time, priests no longer sang the liturgy lest they disturb one another, instead, they now read in whispered tones.”⁴⁸

Eventually, the laity came to feel unworthy to receive the elements. “Preachers like Chrysostom did not alleviate that feeling by describing the Eucharist as a ‘table of fear’ where ‘frightful’ mysteries were celebrated, approached with ‘reverence and trembling’”⁴⁹ Eventually, the belief arose that only the consecrated priest’s hands were able to touch the body of Christ.⁵⁰ People became passive observers rather than partakers in the divine mystery of the sacraments. During the Medieval Era, one loaf was no longer used—loosing the image of the unity in the Eucharist of one body.

By the eleventh century, the priest was the only one who ate and drank the Eucharist. He came out to see if anyone else wished to receive only after removing his vestments at the end of Mass. It is no wonder that some theologians later characterized the communion of the faithful, who had become passive and marginalized observers at a liturgy celebrated by the ordained, as not essential for the sacrifice of the Mass.⁵¹

The community of the gathered body of believers sharing a common ritual was lost.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 188.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 189.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 192.

⁵¹ Ibid., 194.

Increased Centralized Power

The period saw an increase in the power of the growing hierarchy of the church. The laity lost their ability to be involved in the gathered community of faith. They were non-essentials to the church. Even their ability to own Scripture was prohibited. The Council of Toulouse in 1229 prescribed a prohibition against lay people owning copies of Scripture to combat the ongoing “heretic” problem. The council feared that lay people might be tempted to preach.⁵²

As the power of the laity decreased the power of the bishops increased. The bishop was now an administrator; unless, of course, those duties were delegated to another.⁵³ The spiritual role of the bishop was no longer the emphasis of the office, if present at all.

During the middle ages, the papal chair became the most powerful position of authority in Europe. It was a “universal monarchy.” “All the bishops swore fealty to the pope, no religious order could be founded without his authorization, the papal court in Rome heard appeals from all over Christendom, and in every country legates from Rome watched over the execution of papal orders. In the hands of a strong leader, the papacy could overshadow all secular monarchs.”⁵⁴ Such power was exercised through the threat of excommunication or “the interdict.” The first was a sanction against an individual; the second against a community or even an entire nation.

⁵² Ibid., 222. Prusak notes that copies of the Psalter were, however, legal to own.

⁵³ Ibid., 210.

⁵⁴ Shelley, *Church History*, 185.

In Innocent III's reign (A.D. 1198-1216), the central authority of the pope was completely established and further empowered by the title "Vicar of Christ."⁵⁵ Innocent argues that the pope's authority is like the sun whereas the king's is like the moon, which receives light from the sun. Jesus "left not just the universal Church but the whole world to Peter's governance (*Eccl. Hier.* 6:1, 1-3)."⁵⁶ The power of the papacy⁵⁷ climaxed in the early 1300s. Pope Boniface VIII (A.D. 1294-1303) declared mandatory deference to the Roman Pontiff for salvation itself.⁵⁸ "So successful was the pontiff in asserting his temporal as well as spiritual supremacy that many states, both large and small, formally acknowledged the pope as their feudal lord."⁵⁹

Prusak writes, "With regard to the universal Church, there was a shift of emphasis away from Christ as head of his body, the Church, to the pope as head of the Church's mystical body, which came to be seen as an 'ecclesiastical, apostolic, or papal kingdom.'"⁶⁰ In their perspective, the Church was the pope and the pope was the Church. Thus, Alvarez Pelagius proclaimed, "[W]here the head is, namely the pope, there is the mystical Body of Christ."⁶¹

⁵⁵ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 214.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Shelley notes the popes resorting to hosts of money-making schemes; *annates* and *reservations*, both types of taxes dealing with bishops; and the lucrative practice of granting indulgences to increase their financial power (*Church History*, 220).

⁵⁸ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 218.

⁵⁹ Shelley, *Church History*, 186.

⁶⁰ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 232.

⁶¹ Ibid., 233.

Lay Renewal Movements

Concurrent with the structural crystallization of the papal hierarchy, small and often unnoticed movements towards ecclesial reform came from the discontent and dissatisfied laity. "Bitter feelings against the papacy increased, especially when the Holy Father demanded this tax or that revenue under threats of excommunication."⁶² "Two brave souls, John Wyclif, an Englishman, and John Hus, a Czech, dared to toy with the idea that the Christian Church was something other than a visible organization on earth headed by the pope."⁶³ These two men represent the seeds of the Reformation and a clear contrast between what the church had become and what it was in its infancy.

Others followed suit, rejecting the papal and priestly claims of control and succession. The Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, for example, founded in part by the inspired preaching of Gerard Groote, taught that people should think for themselves rather than merely watching and listening to the priest at Mass. The group,

[V]oluntarily lived together with freedom from any rule or vows, which was intended to allow them to experiment, to discover a way of life suited to experience, and to avoid any formalism seen in the great religious Orders. They supported themselves by their own work, rather than by begging. Lay members were not subject to second class status, as in the major religious Orders, but were considered equal with clerical, ordained members. . . . They were not activists seeking to change the systems and structures of society or of the Church; they simply "retreated from the world's excesses and were indifferent to its large affairs."⁶⁴

⁶² Shelley, *Church History*, 220.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁶⁴ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 227.

During the early part of the thirteenth century many of the lay-catholic-poverty movements emerged. The Franciscans, Dominicans, and Beguines all sought spiritual connections with God and one another. Radical members of these groups, such as Joachim of Fiore and Meister Eckhart led the laity to a sense of purpose again. “In a time when the ‘laity’ had become marginalized and ‘depositioned’ in the Church, Eckhart’s mystical vision empowered the baptized to find God within themselves, and within their world, in a way that was not totally dependent upon the clerically administered sacramental ‘system.’”⁶⁵

The church had become something other than that which was founded in the first centuries. Some people felt the need to return to the simple relationship based community of faith. The foundations of the organizational hierarchy called church were shaken in the Reformation Era.

The Reformation Era

The abstinence of lay participation in the life of the church had dire effects upon the covenant community. The church had lost its identity. Covenant community was no longer central or necessary. The church had become an organization unified by authority. “Episcopacy was reduced to an office of external administration and government. Disconnected from its sacramental roots and its collegial dimension, the bishops’ power

⁶⁵ Ibid., 224.

of ruling, or jurisdiction, no longer reflected the structure of the Church as a communion of communions.”⁶⁶

In the face of the corruption, however, specific attempts to recapture the living dynamic of community can be found in the Protestant Reformation. A return to Scripture, faith, and glory of God “alone,” the *solas* of the Reformation,⁶⁷ point towards recognition of the raw power of God in faith. “Luther blurted out: ‘A council may sometimes err. Neither the church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture.’”⁶⁸ Luther later did away with some of the administrative power by abolishing the office of bishop. “[H]e found no warrant for it in Scripture. The churches needed pastors not dignitaries.”⁶⁹

The Anabaptists had sharp disagreements with the Catholic Church. “The true church, the radicals insisted, is always a community of saints, dedicated disciples, in a wicked world.”⁷⁰ People like Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz led the Anabaptists back to the apostolic church. “Following the reformer’s lead—the study of the Bible—they came to see the obvious differences in the apostolic churches and those of their own day.”⁷¹

Decision-making rested with the entire membership. In deciding matters of doctrine, the authority of Scripture was interpreted, not by a dogmatic tradition or by an ecclesiastical leader, but by the consensus of the local gathering—in which

⁶⁶ Ibid., 231.

⁶⁷ That is: *Sola Scriptura; Sola Fide; and Sola Gratia*.

⁶⁸ Shelley, *Church History*, 241.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 243.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 249.

⁷¹ Ibid., 250.

all could speak, and listen critically. In matters of church discipline, the believers also acted corporately. They were expected to assist each other in living out faithfully the meaning of their baptismal commitments.⁷²

The Anabaptists rejected the idea of “apostolic succession.” “Truly ‘apostolic’ was whatever was laid down in the ‘teaching of Jesus Christ and of the apostles,’ regardless of ‘all the doctors and learned men’ who might have taught otherwise ‘ever since the time of the apostles.’”⁷³

Shelley notes that no serious attempts at reform in the Roman Catholic Church came until the reign of Pope Paul III (A.D. 1534-1549).⁷⁴ Following his personal escapades and the sack of Rome, the pope issued a decree for an assessment of the state of the church. The unsurprising result was, “The papal office was too secular. Both popes and cardinals needed to give more attention to spiritual matters and stop flirting with the world. Bribery in high places, abuses of indulgences, evasions of church law, prostitution in Rome, these and other offenses must cease.”⁷⁴ Ultimately, the Council of Trent (A.D. 1545-1563) was called, but it was too late.⁷⁵ The Reformation was well underway and splinter church groups—fledgling denominations—had begun. Prusak notes the continued trend of the Roman Catholic Church away from the idea of covenanted community. “The very term ‘Church’ more and more denoted its external organization,

⁷² Ibid., 254. No doubt some cross-fertilization occurred with the Congregationalists in Holland.

⁷³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, vol. 4 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1984), 315-316.

⁷⁴ Shelley, *Church History*, 274.

⁷⁵ Shelley indicates that nothing substantial changed as a result of Trent. “The pope remained, the seven sacraments remained, the sacrifice of the mass remained. Saints, confessions, indulgences remained. The council’s work was essentially medieval, only the anger was new” (Ibid., 278).

namely its government by pope and bishops, and especially Roman teaching authority or *magisterium*.”⁷⁶ Papal infallibility would be declared in 1870 at the First Vatican Council. While Vatican II brought some hope for reform,⁷⁷ the current state of the Roman Catholic church points away from, not towards, the first century ideal of covenant community.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 250. He further states, “The nineteenth-century Roman theologian Giovanni Perrone, especially favored by Pope Gregory XVI (1831-46), conceded that the theological study of the Church had become equated with a treatment of authority. Embracing an emphasis on the teaching Church introduced by Thomas Stapleton in the sixteenth century, and further elaborated into a distinction between a teaching and a believing Church during the eighteenth century, Perrone said the word ‘Church’ primarily referred not to the community of all the faithful who formed the ‘learning Church,’ but to the body of bishops with the Roman Pontiff who formed the ‘teaching Church.’ The faithful were to accept what they had been taught, based on the authority of the teaching Church. Perrone was convinced that the removal of authority would destroy the unity of the Church, leaving only individual liberty” (Ibid., 249-250).

⁷⁷ “Beginning with the Constitution on the Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), Vatican II sought to retrieve the early centuries; vision of Church as a particular or local community gathered for the Eucharist presided at by a bishop. Section 2 of the constitution emphasizes that ‘it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.’ That statement drew opposition from a minority group of bishops clinging to the ecclesiology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which primarily identified the essence of the Church with its juridical organization as a ‘perfect society’” (Ibid., 274).

⁷⁸ At the first session of Vatican II in 1962, “a number of bishops called for a new perspective, more precisely the retrieval of the most ancient and original emphasis on the Church as community, animated and united by love, and not simply by laws” (Ibid., 277). The document *Lumen gentium* was brought before the council in 1964. “Section 4 thus concludes that the Church is ‘a people brought into unity [*adunata*: made one] from the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.’ Section 5 emphasizes that the Church continues the mission of Jesus who proclaimed the kingdom or reign of God by his deeds and words. United with the crucified but risen Christ, its members are constituted into the Body of Christ through the sacraments, particularly by baptism and the Eucharist—which effects out communion with him and with one another” (Ibid., 279).

But Prusak laments, “Unfortunately, the institutional structures that would enable a fuller implementation of that vision have not been adequately developed.” (Ibid., 295). “Much of Vatican II’s ‘new vision’ retrieved the spirit of the earliest centuries of the Church in an attempt to renovate an understanding of Church focused on the authority of a centralized pyramidal hierarchy” (Ibid., 302).

“At the extraordinary Synod about Vatican II in 1986, some bishops expressed concern that certain post-Vatican II interpretations of the ‘people of God’ encouraged civil democratic thinking in the Church. Bluntly put, this concern attests to a narrowness of mind, closed to new possibilities. Given that the Church of the past had always borrowed from the structures of the times, it is not inconceivable that the biblical notion of the Church as ‘the people of God’ might be able to assimilate some ‘democratic’ patterns of dialogue and consensus. Rather than writing off democratic patterns as a threat, the leadership of the Church might better consider both the compatibility of this model to the Church and its limits” (Ibid., 304).

Within the Protestant Reformation a sub-story develops with two small groups—the Pilgrims and the Puritans. An emphasis on the Covenant is regained—the recognition that God works through relationship. Before turning attention to this historical movement some conclusions will be drawn regarding the church’s move from community to organization.

Conclusion

The biblical data, its didactic materials and metaphors, demonstrated an ecclesiology of a gathered community of God’s people. When competing beliefs became a threat to the church, leaders took action to preserve the unity and purity of the church. These actions, however, led to the destruction of the gathered community. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, writings on the “theology of the Church” appeared only after the fifteenth century.⁷⁹ Thus, no serious reflection on “what it means to be church community” took place until after the church became an organizational hierarchy. The church ceased to be the biblical model of a “God-gathered community set apart for service to God.”

Even if one assumes the church leaders to have had the best intentions for the church, reflection on the church-as-community came too slow. Indeed, “Jesus had not provided the early Church a detailed blueprint offering specific directions in advance for resolving every problem that would ever be confronted.”⁸⁰ Yet, by the fifteenth century a

⁷⁹ Ibid., 229.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 170.

clear need to restore what John Owen called, “the old, glorious, beautiful face of Christianity”⁸¹ was certain.

This survey reveals several pitfalls the community of faith needs to avoid to keep the biblical model of gathered-covenant community. The following subsections will consider pitfalls with regard to several issues: using creeds, maintaining unity and purity, using power, and dealing with change.

Using Creeds

The creeds of the church are a wonderful gift to future generations. They symbolize what Vincent of Lerins called “that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.” They deserve study and reflection. Despite their incredible value to the church, however, the creeds became tests of faith—rules to be followed. Instead of allowing the Holy Spirit to be the inspiration and connective agent for the community of faith, the church allowed written statements to define “who did” and “who did not” belong. Forgetting that truth is a person, Jesus Christ (John 14:6), and that humans see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12a), the church declared a monopoly on objective truth. The church cannot assume that truth can be written in a creed or statement of faith. Such propositions are useful only as expressions of the dynamic relationship the body of Christ has with Jesus. The use of creeds within the church needs to be carefully reviewed.

⁸¹Michael A. G. Haykin, “The Old, Glorious, Beautiful Face of Christianity: Congregationalism and Baptist Life,” *The Gospel Witness* (October 2005), http://www.gw.ca/documents/samples/05oct_p10-13.pdf (accessed August 8, 2008).

Surely, creeds are not best used as tests of faith or means of control for the body of believers.

Maintaining Unity and Purity

A consuming concern for unity and purity can have deadly effects on the church. While the church is instructed to remain pure (to watch its doctrine carefully) and to be unified, the church need not turn to organizational structure to accomplish the task. Genuine community can accomplish the same goal—without the need for an abuse of power or external controls.

The difference between the scientific concepts of cohesion and adhesion illustrates this point. A relational-bond of unity from within (cohesion) is stronger than a unity created by adherence to creeds (adhesion). Likewise, the “binding” of the community from the something external, such as the office/succession of the bishop or the papal hierarchy, offers a false sense of unity in community. A relational-cohesion is stronger, more biblical, and theological. The community of faith must recognize its relational bonds—the covenant relationship—as central to its unity.

Using Power

Power is alluring and often abused. The community can be unified, motivated, encouraged, and maintained without the abuses of authoritarian control. This survey of church history demonstrates that power-as-a-means-of-control robs community of its essential character. In the “church hierarchical structure,” the laity became non-essential to the church, and ultimately the pope was viewed as the church. The community of faith

must find ways to prohibit a single person, or group of persons to dominate and control the church. In the gathered-covenanted community all are on equal footing—lay and cleric alike. While different roles or functions may exist among the community's members, power ought to be distributed and checks and balances instituted. Allowing one sector of the community to dominate the whole destroys community and opens the doors for the abuses seen in this survey.

Dealing with Change

Change will inevitably come and the community must adapt. "In brief, the life and practice of the community called Church have never been static. There has always been discontinuity among continuity, since the experiences of a faith community living in history have always required new responses to changing historical situations."⁸² The church has its story, and that story must be retold in the process of *anamnesis*. As the church reshapes and re-forms, the community cannot accept everything that the early, medieval, or reformation Christians held or admired. The community can learn from their imperfect efforts to live the way of Jesus in their time, and the community can make its attempts to do the same.

The next chapter examines the theological data pertinent to a Congregational theology. Chapter 6, then, explores the efforts of the Puritans, Pilgrims, and Congregationalists to recapture the early church's spirit of covenanted community.

⁸² Ibid., 171.

CHAPTER 5

THEOLOGICAL DATA

The third task in exploring what it means to live in intentional covenanted community is theological. The present chapter accomplishes this in three phases. First, it defines theology and its sub-discipline, ecclesiology. Second, it considers the doctrine of the church from the perspective of systematic theology. Finally, it draws conclusions as to the implications of a theologically self-reflecting covenanted community.

Definitions

Defining Theology

Fisher Humphries defines the task of theology as thinking about God, and he titled his systematic work in those terms.¹ This elementary definition of theology clarifies what is meant by theology: the community of faith engages in reflection about the One who calls it into existence.

Humphries offers a clear distinction between “theology” and similar words within the discipline. Three of these other words are examined here: gospel, faith, and doctrine. A brief review of these terms sets the parameters for the theological investigation of intentional covenanted community.

¹ Fisher Humphries, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Covington, LA: Insight Press, 1995).

Gospel

Gospel is defined as “the story of God acting in human history to rescue human beings from their sin.”² The gospel is a fixed point in history in which the community of faith can see itself interacting with the divine. Humphries notes, “If the gospel were an abstract principle, people might discover it for themselves. But since it is a story about particular events in history, they cannot discover it on their own; someone who knows the story must tell them about it. The gospel must be preached.”³ The gospel informs the community’s theological self-reflection at its foundation; it is the community’s story.⁴

The community is a part of the continuing gospel-narrative. Hans Küng states,

The Church must constantly reflect upon its real existence in the present with reference to its origins in the past, in order to assure its existence in the future. It stands or falls by its links with its origins in Jesus Christ and its message; it remains permanently dependent for the ground of its existence, on God’s saving act in Jesus Christ [i.e., the Gospel].⁵

Thinking about the gospel is self-reflection in the process of *anamnesis*. The gospel is the starting point of theological reflection for the community of faith. The gospel remains a touchstone, or an anchor, for all the community does. Ultimately, by remaining in touch with the primitive gospel story, the community guards against following “another gospel” (Gal. 1).

² Ibid., 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Barth states, “[T]o proclaim Jesus Christ is to attest the goodness of God, no more, no less, no other.” Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol. 4, part 3, of Church Dogmatics, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1962), 798.

⁵ Hans Küng, *The Church*, trans. Ray Ockenden and Rosaleen Ockenden (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 15.

Faith

Faith is often confused with theology. One might assume that having faith and “correct theology” are synonymous. Humphries argues, however, “It is possible to have correct theology without really having faith in Christ. It is also possible to have genuine faith in Christ but not have all of one’s theology correct.”⁶ Theological reflection is not a goal but a process in which the community engages as a lifetime venture; theology is the process through which faith or doubt emerges. “You do not have to make a ‘100’ on a theology test in order to be a Christian,” Humphries says.⁷ Nor does one have to score well on such a test to be a member of the community of faith. Growing faith should be the by-product of the community’s theological reflection. By thinking about God and the activities of God in the midst of community, members can develop an informed faith and address surfacing doubts, but faith is not theology.

Doctrine

Doctrines are particular theological beliefs as defined by a denomination or community of faith. Humphries explains, “The relation between doctrine and theology is that we all do our thinking within the context of some particular church.”⁸ Thus, the Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Baptists, and Congregationalists all have their particular doctrines. Doctrines are the result of clarified and accepted theological thinking. They are the result of theology in a particular context. McClendon states,

⁶ Humphries, *Thinking about God*, 4.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 5.

Whether acknowledged or not, this doctrinal division among Christians is awkward in practice. Christians are never just Christians; they are Greek Orthodox or German Baptist or Roman Catholic or Missouri Synod Lutheran or Iraqi Nestorian or French Reformed or. . . . The list extends far beyond these, and an account of the variety, even if limited to North American church bodies, would exceed the space limits of this volume.⁹

These denominations are communities with distinct doctrines that define them.

If allowed to become hardened, doctrines can become divisive—in essence saying, “This is what we are not.” Denominations are, in fact, bearers of contextual-doctrines. McClendon notes the negative effects that denominationalism can have on the church. He writes, “Now these varied bodies drive wedges between authentic followers of Jesus, imposing divisive limits upon membership, communion, and eligibility for ministry—limits based in many cases on long-ago history or on ethnicity or gender as well as on present convictions.”¹⁰ An example of this can be found in the doctrine of the marks of the church. Historically the Church has defined itself according to its function, or its marks.

Our famous list of these is drawn from the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381): “[We believe] *one holy catholic and apostolic* church.” Unfortunately, by the time this creed was drafted, Christian understanding had been narrowed in ways that left these four marks important, but far from definitive. For example, they fail to tell us that the church must center upon Jesus Christ, or that the church to be the church must be loving as well as holy.¹¹

Stuart R. Oglesby rightly observes, “[W]hen theology, or church doctrine, obscures Christ and His gospel of salvation, instead of making Him more understandable and His

⁹ McClendon, *Doctrine*, 332.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 328-329.

gospel more applicable to life, it has rendered a disservice to the Church, to believers, and to the world.”¹²

While doctrines can define a denomination, a particular faith community, they must not become the end of the process of theology. Rather, doctrines must fuel continued discussion and reflection so they do not drive wedges between God’s people. When communities fail to reflect upon doctrines in the process of theology, the community loses the pneumatic dynamics—the Spirit-led vitality of church—and, thus, its very self.

Doctrine is important, but ultimately, “It will come out that there is a variety of approaches to Christian community, and our goal must be to treat each fairly.”¹³ Doctrines should not be polarized as right or wrong. Rather, in the process of theology, the community must seek to understand itself in its context and then express itself as clearly as it is able.

Defining Ecclesiology

A sub-discipline of theology is ecclesiology. If theology is defined as thinking about God, ecclesiology can be defined as “thinking about the church of God.” One could assume such thinking occurs regularly and naturally. However, in spite of the simplicity of the concept, systematic-intentional, meaningful self-reflection does not always occur in the community of faith. Garrett reminds his readers,

¹² Stuart R. Oglesby, *A Practicing Faith: The Relation of Religious Thinking to Religious Living* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1948), 21.

¹³ McClendon, *Doctrine*, 327.

Systematic theologians have not always considered the doctrine of the church to be an integral or essential component of their systems of theology. In the thirteenth century the massive *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas contained no treatment of the church, even though the church per se was surely important to the Western or Roman Church in the high Middle Ages, and in the nineteenth century John L. Dagg wrote a separate treatise on ecclesiology, not including such subject matter in his systematic theology. But today Christian theologians almost universally agree that the doctrine of the church is a proper and essential subdivision of systematic theology.¹⁴

Thus thinking about the church—ecclesiology—must be done intentionally and in a way that avoids potential pitfalls inherently detrimental to the process. Two such pitfalls are thinking “my way is right” and “my conclusions end all discussion.” These two concerns are examined below.

My Way is Right

The first pitfall to avoid is thinking that a particular community has exclusive rights to Christ or to the gospel. Categorization is a necessity for understanding, and theologians often define the church in categories. Such categories identify different methods and means of being church. Lesslie Newbigin, for example, describes three models of church: Catholic; Protestant; and Pentecostal.¹⁵ McClendon adopts these models and offers a cautionary exhortation regarding assumptions about one’s ecclesiology:

[These] three major styles of church have made their appearance, each expressing some degree of confidence that it is the appropriate type for all, yet the experience

¹⁴ James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 457.

¹⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *Household of God: Lecture on the Nature of the Church* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), 1-25. In the preface to his work, Newbigin admits he neglects the Eastern Orthodox tradition as a fourth possible model (xii).

of the actively ecumenical century now ending makes it still more clear that no one type of Christian community is (for example) capable of simply absorbing the other two. This suggests that all three types may be provisional, and there are elements within each to confirm that judgment. *The upshot is that, in a sense not true of other doctrines of the faith, Christian ecclesiology is provisional ecclesiology; it looks toward a fulfillment not yet achieved.*¹⁶

Communities may determine a particular way of “doing church” best fits their context; however, they must realize that their decision is not necessarily correct for all communities of faith. Volf considers, “[T]he plurality of models to be not only legitimate, but indeed desirable. The differentiation of various Christian traditions is not to be lamented as a scandal, but rather welcomed as a sign of the vitality of the Christian faith within multicultural, rapidly changing societies demanding diversification and flexibility.”¹⁷

Dialogue within and between communities must continue. The community must be led as the Spirit chooses, not merely as its founders may have determined. Church communities change. One way of doing things may be transformed by the Spirit into another. Hans Küng writes,

There are fundamental elements and perspectives in the Church which are not derived from the Church itself; there is an “essence” which is drawn from the permanently decisive origins of the Church. This constant factor in the history of the Church and of its understanding of itself is only revealed in change; its identity exists only in variability, its continuity only in changing circumstances, its permanence only in varying outward appearances. In short, the essence of the Church is not a matter of metaphysical stasis, but exists only in constantly changing historical “forms.”¹⁸

¹⁶ McClendon, *Doctrine*, 344.

¹⁷ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 21.

¹⁸ Küng, *The Church*, 4.

There is great liberty in these words. The church community is free to be what and who it is, without the need to defend itself. “Only when we distinguish in the changing forms of the church its permanent but not immutable essence, do we glimpse the real Church.”¹⁹ But with this freedom comes the responsibility not to become arrogant about particular methods. Spirit-guided self-reflection is necessary for a healthy ecclesiology.

“End-All” Discussions

Ecclesiological thinking is a process not an end in itself; similarly the church itself is a process not an institution. Terry Veling declares that theology should be worked out in the community of faith. Life is not very systematic, he says, and theology can be as messy as life. “Practical theology is suspicious of any theology that is too solid, too well-built, too built-up. Rather it is a theology that is given over to a passion for what could yet be, what is still in-the-making, in process, not yet, still coming (“Thy Kingdom come!”).”²⁰ Any system of thought, however thorough and clear, will not encompass all things nor silence all discussion.

Ecclesiology is no different. Conclusions feed further dialogue. Ecclesiology is a task that must be performed “each and every time—not once and for all time.”²¹ For example, Calvin’s theological system defines church as, “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s

¹⁹ Ibid., 6.

²⁰ Veling, *Practical Theology*, 7.

²¹ Ibid., 16.

institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God, exists.”²² Church is a repeated “gathering event.”²³ The process of being church and reflecting on church (ecclesiology) is, therefore, an on-going progression—a dialectic. Conclusions spark further dialogue; they do not end discussions. As Veling states, “Each new age and every new generation must wrestle again with the question of what it means to act with justice and yet to love tenderly and be merciful.”²⁴

Küng illumines the varied purposes for ecclesiologies. He says that the writings of church leaders have either edified the community or defended it against external attacks or internal heresies. Thus, the type of writing will be determined by its warrant.²⁵

Furthermore, he rightly states,

The “essential nature” of the Church is not to be found in some unchanging Platonic heaven of ideas, but only in the history of the Church. The real Church not only has a history, it exists by having a history. There is no “doctrine” of the church in the sense of an unalterable metaphysical and ontological system, but only one which is historically conditioned, within the framework of the history of the Church, its dogmas and its theology.²⁶

Therefore, in the present reflection—thinking about church theologically—it will be wise: (1) not to assume a chosen way is right for all communities, (2) not to assume

²² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 21 of The Library of Christian Classics, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1023.

²³ McClendon observes, “On this view, church is by definition not an institution but an event—a repetitive event, as Sunday by Sunday acts of preaching and of sacramental ministry constitute the church anew” (*Doctrine*, 335).

²⁴ Veling, *Practical Theology*, 18.

²⁵ Küng, *The Church*, 7-9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

conclusions are the end of the discussion, (3) not to idealize the community, and (4) to acknowledge the context of the community.

Ecclesiological Choices

Two choices must be made regarding the underlying nature of the community. First, the community must decide which model of church best fits its context. Second and more importantly, the community must decide to be open to what the Spirit of God is calling the community to do and be—that is, a choice to be committed to the discovery of how the ecclesiology works out in practice.

Choice one

The community under scrutiny for this project most identifies with a Congregational ecclesiology; therefore, the reflection of this chapter is Congregational at its core. The choice obviously limits the community's understanding of itself. However, "just as the real *ekklesia* is constantly evolving, so [*this*] ecclesiology of the *ekklesia* evolves too."²⁷ The choice of a Congregational ecclesiology means that the self-reflection tilts toward a view of a self-contained, yet mutually dependent, autonomous community. "Each *ekklesia*, each congregation, community, church, however small, however poor, however insignificant, is a full and perfect manifestation of *the* *ekklesia*, the congregation, the community, the Church of God."²⁸

²⁷ Ibid., 12.

²⁸ Ibid., 86.

Choice two

The second choice is, in a real sense, the essence of this project—the discernment of the community’s identity as an intentional covenanted community. How the Holy Spirit is guiding the community—what the community is to be and do—is at the heart of the inquiry. While theological reflection can hint at the answer, it is in the practical out-workings of this reflection (ecclesiology) that the community will discover its identity. Ray Anderson says, “To have a Christian existence is, therefore, to have a theological existence. It is to have both a presence and practice in the world that reveals Christ through a ministry of reconciliation.”²⁹ The practical doing of theology is important. Veling writes,

[I]t is only in the practice or doing of theology that we begin to realize and understand its meanings and its workings more deeply. As the Christian community, for example, engages in the practices of prayer, study, hospitality, forgiveness—as we do these things—we begin to deepen our understanding of what the kingdom of God is all about, and what it means to be a people of God.³⁰

Thus the survey of the following theological data has been selected with practical application in mind, to find that which is “rooted in a living, breathing tradition that binds people across the centuries,”³¹ that can be formative to the present community as it is shaped into that which it will be.

²⁹ Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 54.

³⁰ Veling, *Practical Theology*, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

Summary

Loving God with one's mind should be the outcome of theology. "We think about God because we love God. And we do so in order to understand God better . . . thinking about God strengthens our faith; it encourages us in our prayers; it enriches our worship."³² Ecclesiology could, likewise, be considered loving the church with one's mind. Yet ecclesiology needs to be more than a mental activity. Application of love is the ultimate goal.

With gospel as its foundation, the community reflects on its interaction with God and one another. Faith is produced as the community understands its relationship to God. Doctrines are formed, not as the end of the discussion, but as fuel for further reflection. Theological understanding of its nature and essence, its task, and the paradoxes of the church allows the community to know itself intimately. The next section, therefore, turns to a systematic perspective with an eye for application.

Systematic Perspectives

What follows is a systematic summary of numerous theologians' thoughts about the congregational form of church community, divided into two parts. In the first part Stanley Grenz's systematic work, *Theology for the Community of God*, serves as a foundation for this systematic perspective. The second part gleans insights from other theologians to round out the systematic perspective.

³² Humphries, *Thinking about God*, 7.

A Congregational Ecclesiological Foundation

Grenz makes several points in the ecclesiology section of his systematic theology that elucidate the theological nature of a congregational community of God. “The church we assert is a people standing in covenant, who are a sign of the divine reign and constitute a special community.”³³ Thus, the church is covenanted community carrying forth the story of the Scriptural covenanted communities.

One particular passage in *Theology for the Community of God* warrants detailed consideration. Grenz gives a solid description of congregational community:

Congregationalism asserts that ultimately the essence of the true church lies with its people. Yet the *ekklesia* is no ordinary collection of persons. Rather, because the church has been called out of the world by the preaching of the gospel in order to live in covenant, it is constituted by people with a special consciousness. Because they all confess allegiance to Christ, participants in the church are conscious that they stand as a body under his lordship; they comprise a people in covenant with God through Christ. At the same time, their mutual confession of Jesus as Christ means that the members are conscious of their special standing in fellowship with each other, their shared commitment to be disciples of the Lord entails a commitment to one another. The church constituting covenant is a mutual agreement to walk together as the people of God. Because of this mutual covenant, each member senses a responsibility not only to belong to God but also to nurture the confession of Christ in all others. In short, because of Christ, the church is a company of believers in covenant with God and each others.³⁴

From this pericope, five points may be distilled for consideration: (1) the essence of the church lies with its people, (2) the church is called out to live in covenantal relationship in God through Christ, (3) members have a consciousness of special standing in

³³ Grenz, *Theology*, 604.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 613-614.

fellowship with each other, (4) the covenant is a mutual agreement to walk together as the people of God; and (5) there is a responsibility to belong to God and one another.

The Essence of the Church Lies with Its People

The church is often confused with the buildings or an idealized form of God's people. However, neither of these is the essence of the church. Grenz notes,

The choice of *ekklesia* as the designation of the Christian community suggests that the New Testament believers viewed the church as neither an edifice nor an organization. They were a people—a people brought together by the Holy Spirit—a people bound to each other through Christ—hence, a people standing in covenant with God. Above all, they were God's people (2 Cor. 6:16).³⁵

Volf writes, “[T]he presence of Christ does not enter the church through the ‘narrow portals’ of *ordained office*, but rather *through the dynamic life of the entire church*. The presence of Christ is not attested merely by the institution of office, but rather through the multidimensional confession of the entire assembly.”³⁶ The essence of the church is the confessing people of God. The confession of the people separates the church from the non-church.³⁷

The historical data in chapter 4 revealed the church's confusion about its nature. Creeds, bishops' succession, and the popes all vied for the center of its self-definition. Dale Moody condemningly states, “The nature of the church in the New Testament has been obscured through the conflicts of church history. Augustine's distinction between the earthly city (*civitas terrena*) and the heavenly city (*civitas Dei*) has been perverted in

³⁵ Ibid., 606.

³⁶ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 152.

³⁷ Ibid., 154.

Roman Catholicism by the identification of the historical institution with the heavenly ideal.”³⁸ The Congregational view of the church, on the contrary, asserts that people in relationship to God and one another are the essence of the church, not how they happen to be arranged in that relationship.

Küng speaks about accidental forms of the church made of people. Human beings living in time and space comprise the historical forms. Küng argues,

There is not and never was, in fact, an essence of the church by itself, separate, chemically pure, distilled from the stream of historical forms. . . . An essence without form is formless and hence unreal; a form without essence is insubstantial and hence equally unreal. . . . We can only glimpse the real Church if we see the essence of the Church as existing in its historical form, rather than as existing beyond and above it.³⁹

All of the ideals we have about church are, in fact, unreal. When thinking about the essence of the church it is essential to keep in mind actual local gathered bodies of people. Otherwise, the ecclesiology misses the community’s true identity.

The Church is Called Out to Live in Covenantal Relationship in God through Christ

The church is the people of God; it is the people in relation to the One who called and gathered them as a peculiar people (1 Pet. 2:9). Küng rightly states,

Of course, there is no Church without the decision of believers and their free gathering together. But the believers who congregate in the Church do not summon themselves. They do not even summon themselves to faith. God himself calls them through the word of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to faith and hence to the Church as the fellowship of the faithful.⁴⁰

³⁸ Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 440.

³⁹ Küng, *The Church*, 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

Michael Foss says, “All the power the church will ever need, all the relevance the church will ever need, comes from the people who love because they live consciously as disciples of the risen Christ.”⁴¹ The church is the church because of its calling to be in relationship to God through Christ as Christ’s disciples. A group of people gathered outside of the covenant relationship with God is not a church.

Christ calls and binds the people of the faith community. Oden states, “*Ekklesia* as the called community depends entirely upon *klesis* (calling).”⁴² The church is the *Ecclesia* (from the Greek *kaleo* and *ek*: called out as by a herald)⁴³ for the purpose of living *with* and *in* Christ. The community is to respond to God.

Based on the biblical data presented in chapter 3, the community must recognize—come to own—that covenant is the means through which God interacts with his people. Thomas Hawkins boldly states, “Apart from Covenant, there could be no Community.”⁴⁴ The language of covenant is important for the community, yet the covenantal relationship may not use its nomenclature. Hodge states, “There are parties, mutual promises or stipulations, and conditions. So that it is in fact a covenant, whatever it may be called.”⁴⁵ A clearly defined and labeled covenant pointing towards the reality of

⁴¹ Foss, *Power Surge*, 4.

⁴² Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, vol. 3 of Systematic Theology (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 270.

⁴³ See *Ibid.*, 265.

⁴⁴ Thomas R. Hawkins, *Cultivating Christian Community* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2001), 73.

⁴⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2. (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1872), 355.

the dynamic relationship helps clarify the relational-reality of the community and its God; therefore, an apparent-visible covenant gives the community a clearly defined identity.

The church community is imperfect. There is no ideal church. It is not “omniscient and omnipotent, not self-sufficient and autonomous, not eternal and sinless. It is not the source of grace and truth, it is not Lord, redeemer and judge, and there can be no question of idolizing it.”⁴⁶ Despite its imperfections, however, the church is a gathered-and-called community in covenant with Christ.

Members Have a Consciousness of Special Standing in Fellowship with Each Other

God established a “new humanity” of reconciled people. In doing so, God overcame “[T]he horizontal effects of the estrangement we experience due to sin.”⁴⁷ Believers, therefore, have a new relationship with one another. They are freed to carry out the biblical mandates explained in chapter 2 to love one another as God has loved them. Grenz states, “The early believers saw themselves as a special people, a people united together because they had been called out of the world by the gospel to belong to God.”⁴⁸ The community of faith must realize this special relationship that they have with one another—a relationship like no other.

⁴⁶ Küng, *The Church*, 32-33.

⁴⁷ Grenz, *Theology*, 601.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 624.

The Covenant Is a Mutual Agreement to Walk Together As the People of God

The church “becomes an *ekklesia* by the fact of a repeated concrete event, people coming together and congregating, in particular congregating for the purpose of worshipping God.”⁴⁹ Mutuality implies action and intention to walk together. The community is never a static institution, but rather, “one that exists through the repeated event of a concrete coming together.”⁵⁰ This coming together is founded when two or more gather in Christ’s name—and a mutual agreement is made to be and live together. The community’s covenant cannot be forced or coerced; it must be reciprocal among participants. Joining a community of faith is more than membership in an organization, and it is more than mental ascent to a covenant statement. Steven Peay states,

Everything we do as churches should derive from our oneness of profession of the Lordship of Jesus and our covenant relationship with him and with one another. If we view the church covenant as merely an historical document rather than a living, formative point of engagement we miss what it means to be the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in the Congregational Way.⁵¹

The phrase “covenant as a living-formative point of engagement” illustrates the dynamic interconnections within the community, each one connected with all the others in mutual agreement. As the Salem covenant simply states, “We Covenant with the Lord and with an other; and doe [*sic*] bynd [*sic*] our selves in the presence of God, to walke [*sic*]

⁴⁹ Küng, *The Church*, 84.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Steven A. Peay, “Saints by Calling: An Approach to Congregational Ecclesiology,” in *A Past with a Future: Continuing Congregationalism Into the Next Millennium*, ed. Steven A. Peay (Wauwatosa, WI: Congregational Press, 1998), 43.

together in all his waies [*sic*], according as he is pleased to reveale [*sic*] himself unto us in his Blessed word of truth.”⁵²

There Is a Responsibility to Belong to God and One Another.

The covenant is an agreement to walk together as the people of God in the ways of God as he is revealed in the “Blessed word of truth.” Covenant implies a responsibility, one towards the other. Chapter 3 offered Robertson’s definition of covenant as a sovereignly administered bond in blood with life altering implications.⁵³ Robertson’s definition underscores the responsibility members of the covenanted community have towards God and one another.

“Other” in community cannot be taken lightly. Veling writes,

Buber speaks of our age as suffering an “eclipse of God,” in which the modern world has become overshadowed by “dead and lifeless things.” What Buber calls the world of the “I-It,” the world of measurement and calculation, of profit and success, of progress and overcoming—a world that no longer knows how to relate to God’s living presence, to the signs of life that continually remind us that we are personal, living, relational beings. We have blocked the light of heaven through our unrelenting obsession with the “I”—“I think, I will, I want, I can, I am.” Reducing all meaning to my self, we are left only with “I-Me,” and rarely exposed to the call of transcendence, to the call of the other in my life.⁵⁴

The community should be a corrective to this “I-Me” world that Buber and Veling identify. Members of the community face one another—look deep into each other’s being. “‘Being faced’ means finding ourselves faced by a continual requirement of obligation and responsibility to and for the other. . . . Being faced means I am no longer

⁵² Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 116.

⁵³ Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 4.

⁵⁴ Veling, *Practical Theology*, 113.

able to stay within the realms of my own 'being;' rather, I am exposed to another who calls out from beyond my existence.”⁵⁵ The connection between individuals is substantive, real, affective, and obligatory. As Paul states, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor. 12:26).

Newbigin also stresses the importance of belonging to God. The community must intentionally work at its relationship with the One who gathered it. “The moment you begin to think of [church] as a thing in itself, you go astray. The God whose gathering it is [*sic*] may never, even for temporary purposes of thought or argument, be excluded from the picture.”⁵⁶ God in Christ is central to the church—and the community bears a responsibility to belong—intentionally—to God.

Further Ecclesiological Insights

Grenz’s work is only one of many worthy works on the subject at hand, thus consideration of other aspects of the topic is warranted to build upon this Congregational ecclesiology. This section considers the community’s membership, task, and paradoxes before turning to some conclusions regarding the theological data.

The Community’s Membership

What constitutes membership in the community? Simply put, membership in the church is predicated on membership in Christ (Matt. 16:16-20). Christian community

⁵⁵ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁶ Newbigin, *Household*, 22.

members are called to be members of Christ, called into mystical union with Christ.

Bolsinger reminds his readers that the language of mystical union can make people uncomfortable. Yet he states,

[S]ince both salvation and transformation come through the mystical union of the believer with Christ, Christianity is best understood as a *relational* life that progresses in greater trust and devotion (relationship to God) and more consistent expression and transformed living (relationship to other people). The believer brought into union with Christ is empowered by the Holy Spirit through that union for fulfilling the purposes of human existence.⁵⁷

Membership is, therefore, much more significant than having one's name on a list—an all too common understanding of what it means to be a member of Christ's church.

Membership in the community mandates trust and devotion to God as well as an expressed transformation into the likeness of Christ. This neglected concept needs to be communicated within the community.

Membership in the local community is too important to misunderstand. Michael Foss and Anthony Robinson each argue for a change in terminology. They assert the language of “discipleship” rather than “membership” captures the truth of the community's relationships. Foss states that the church's contemporary usage of “membership” overlooks the point of the Great Commission entirely (Matt. 28:19-20). Jesus calls the church to the task of making disciples—not members.⁵⁸ Robinson draws on Foss' work and illustrates a prevalent idea of membership in the church that is more akin to belonging to a country club than to the biblical models. For example, people

⁵⁷ Bolsinger, *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian*, 51-52.

⁵⁸ Foss, *Power Surge*, 4-5.

establish pecking orders based upon how long they have been members, and the ways the church does things communicates a “members only” message to outsiders. Robinson echoes Foss’ declaration of the missed meaning in Jesus’ commission. “[T]he church in this model has missed what may be our most fundamental human need, and that is to lose and to forget ourselves in commitment and relationship to that which is greater than self and self-interest.”⁵⁹ The special standing of the congregation is in fellowship with one another. People are to be disciples of Jesus, not merely members of a group.

The Community’s Task

The community must understand its task—the purpose for which it has been gathered by God. Hadaway asks some provocative questions to the church. He says,

What we should ask is, “what is a church?” Then we should ask, “why is this church here?” In other words, why don’t we close our doors, sell our building, and disperse our members to other local churches that seem to be having fewer problems? Do we have some reason for being other than the fact that we have always been here and our members feel at home? If not, then we really don’t have a purpose other than continuance or survival. We are a club that happens to hold worship services, led by a pastor serving as “clan priest.”⁶⁰

The community may lack solid answers to these questions. Hence, thorough and systematic reflection should follow. While the community may offer varied responses, proclamation, action, transformation, and self-reflection should be among its answers.

⁵⁹ Robinson, *Theology*, 162-165.

⁶⁰ Hadaway, *Behold*, 18.

Proclamation

The people of God have always been charged with proclaiming the message of God. Prusak writes,

Jesus did not found the church in the sense of bringing a society into being in a way that necessarily involved both a conscious and clear idea of its constitution and the will to establish it . . . but there has to be a “community” making present the Jesus in whose life, death, and resurrection we are called to share. There always had to be a community of believers, led by those who succeed to the task of the Twelve, proclaiming that Jesus is not dead but alive, and that he is present in his risen life through their community empowered by the Spirit.⁶¹

Schleiermacher recognizes the long historical continuity of God’s people, even from the Old Testament to the New. He asserts that people of the pre-church already had some form of connection to one another and that the coming of Christ forged the assembly into the Christian Church.⁶² The church, as God’s people, has a story to tell; a story that stretches back into the time of the Old Testament, a story which recounts God’s interaction with his people, a story which proclaims the good news of salvation in Christ.

In short, the community of Christ is called to proclaim the gospel. This task is one of its primary missions—as evidenced by Jesus’ commission to teach all they have been taught (Matt. 28:20) and Paul’s admonition in Romans 10:13-17. The community must realize the broad scope of proclamation. The concept must not be narrowed simply to evangelism or to sermonizing. The proclamation is the confession that Jesus is Lord to all—church and non-church. It is proclaiming-confession as a way of life. Volf states,

⁶¹ Prusak, *Church Unfinished*, 60.

⁶² See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, eds. H. R. Macintosh and J. S. Stewart (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1928, 1976), 532-533.

By confessing faith in Christ through celebration of the sacraments, sermons, prayer, hymns, witnessing, and daily life, those gathered in the name of Christ speak the word of God both to each other and to the world. This public confession of faith in Christ through the pluriform speaking of the word is *the central constitutive mark of the church*.⁶³

Action

The church is often considered a building where people meet. While this is true in the common usage, the word “church” refers to more than a building or structure. The church is a noun, a people called out and gathered together, and a verb. The church is a people in action. Oden writes,

Ekklesia refers both to the active congregating of the community and to the community as a congregation. This community becomes *ekklesia* by the repeated fact of being summoned by the gospel, called to assemble to praise God. Congregation presupposes congregating. There is no noun without the verb. The church is precisely this coming together in response to God’s own coming We do well not to abandon the community in which we received the regenerating word and power.⁶⁴

Karl Barth says, “The Christian Community is not sent into the world haphazardly or at random, but with a very definite task. It does not exist before its task and later acquire it. Nor does it exist apart from it, so that there can be no question whether or not it might have or execute it.”⁶⁵ This task is the church—this task is important, and the community’s grasp of the task is essential.⁶⁶

⁶³ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 150.

⁶⁴ Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 270-271.

⁶⁵ Barth, *Doctrine*, 795.

⁶⁶ Barth writes “[The church] exists for the world. Its task constitutes and fashions it from the very outset. If it had not been given it, it would not have come into being. If it were to lose it, it would not continue. It is not, then, a kind of imparted dignity. It exists only as it has it, or rather only as the task has it.

The task of the church is to act according to the will of God—to be an active agent of the Holy Spirit in the world.

The Spirit precedes the Church. The Holy Spirit is not an external extra to the church, as though the Church could exist without the Holy Spirit. . . . The Church is not something which competent and clever ecclesiastical organizers, administrators and big business men can work out and set up, after which the Holy Spirit can find it a centre of operations or even a resting-place. The Spirit of God comes first; and through the Spirit God in his freedom creates the Church, and constantly creates it anew from those who believe.⁶⁷

Thus, “if we would answer the question ‘Where is the Church?’ we must ask ‘Where is the Holy Spirit recognizably present with power?’”⁶⁸ The church is where the Holy Spirit empowers the community to action.

Transformation

Hadaway emphasizes that the church exists as a space for change. Using the analogy of a bread pan, he states the church is to be a vehicle for the Holy Spirit’s work of transformation.⁶⁹ He also writes,

Nor is it a kind of burden laid upon it. It is the inalienable foundation which bears it. Every moment of its history it is measured by it. It stands or falls with it in all its expression, in all its actions or abstention. It either understands itself in the light of its task or not at all. It either takes itself seriously with regard to it, or it cannot do so. Even to the world it can be respectable in relation to it, or not at all—though it may perhaps make a false impression in virtue of qualities and achievements which it shares with other historical constructs and which have nothing whatever to do with its true and distinctive being. The Christian community lives by and with its task. And in this task it is concerned with something very definite. This forms its content. It is of this that we must speak first. As a task, however, it is also addressed to specific people. We cannot consider the content at issue without at once having our attention turned to those addressed. Conversely, it is only from the content that we can learn who and what and how they are those that are addressed by it, i.e., only as they are revealed and understood in the light of this content. Finally, we must pose and answer the question of the purity of the task given to the community and discharged by it, namely, the purity of its content and of its relation to those addressed in it (ibid., 796).

⁶⁷ Küng, *The Church*, 175.

⁶⁸ Newbiggin, *Household*, 95.

⁶⁹ Hadaway, *Behold*, 45.

If we rediscover that the purpose of our church is to transform people—to bring down their self-constructed walls, dissolve their delusions, and help them see God—then we also have a mission. That mission is to be a church that actualizes our purpose in a way unique to our congregation. It is to form a transformational community. We incarnate (through our gifts and vocations) a system or open “vessel” in which our purpose is worked out.⁷⁰

The community is the ground in which the Holy Spirit works to form and transform people into the likeness of Christ for the sake of others.⁷¹ Robinson notes,

[T]he church is not simply a consumer-driven entity that exists to meet the religious needs of those who come to it. Church may meet people’s needs, but they must do more than that. At least, potentially, they transform people by drawing them into a larger purpose and identity. “Once you were not a people,” writes Peter, “but now you are God’s people” (1 Pet. 2:10).⁷²

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection is appropriately added to the tasks of proclamation, action, and transformation. Thinking, doing, listening, and responding constitute the essence of practical theology, a growing sub-discipline of theology. Theologians rightly emphasize the need to implement theological truths. Reflection is a vital component of such work. Michael Cowan states that practical theology is,

[D]iscerning and articulating a current concern, attending carefully with our heads and hearts to the world as it is and to the world as our faith traditions teach us it should be, asking “what must we do?” in the light of that attention, doing it, and then evaluating what we have done. This disciplined rhythm of reflection-action-reflection by members of a community of faith is practical theology. It is at the center of the vocation to which members of communities of faith are called.⁷³

⁷⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁷¹ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 40-44.

⁷² Robinson, *Theology*, 159.

⁷³ Michael A. Cowan, “Introduction to Practical Theology,” Institute for Ministry, Loyola

Attending carefully is a process for the whole community, not merely for individuals in the community. The reflective thinking-listening-responding is most fully actualized when done in community, Cowan says, “collaboratively, by members of congregation ministry teams, small Christian communities, congregations as a whole or faith-based community organizations.”⁷⁴

The process of action-reflection-action allows the community to adapt. The reflection, along with proclamation, action, and transformation, is the task of the community in doing its ecclesiology. Küng writes,

Ecclesiology is a response and a call to constantly changing historical situations. This requires repeated and determined attempts to mould, form and differentiate in freedom, unless ecclesiologists give up in despair at each new situation, close their eyes to them and simply drift. The Church’s doctrine of the Church, like the Church itself, is necessarily subject to continual change and must constantly be undertaken anew.⁷⁵

Summary of Task

The community must not become too reflective nor too action oriented. Some churches emphasize evangelism over all else, others over liturgy; some wish their buildings and grounds to be perfect and inviting to the community. The community of faith must realize that many of these things are secondary to its nature. The community is called to proclaim its Savior in action and transformation. It is called to examine itself and hear the Holy Spirit working in its midst.

University Summer 2000, Course introduction, <http://www.loyno.edu/~mcowan/PracticalTheology.html> (accessed April 30, 2008).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Küng, *The Church*, 13.

Paradoxes of the Community

The church lives with some paradoxical tensions in its very nature. In his work on historical ecclesiology, Robert Haight describes two approaches to the study of the church. He defines an “ecclesiology from above,” the approach of theologians and ministers, and an “ecclesiology from below,” an approach utilizing sociological, anthropological, and social-philosophical methods to analyze the church.⁷⁶

James M. Gustafson contends the church is a natural, human, and political community much like any other human organization.⁷⁷ He criticizes over-usage of spiritualized ecclesiological terms.⁷⁸ Haight, furthermore, cautions against the common theological reductionism that defines the church exclusively by biblical and doctrinal language.⁷⁹ Both Haight and Gustafson criticize ecclesiological language as bearing no relation to the rest of the human world. Such language “can be at best inadequate to the full reality of the church; at worst, it falsifies or distorts a proper understanding of the church insofar as it does not correspond to its full reality.”⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Roger Haight, *Historical Ecclesiology*, vol. 1 of *Christian Community in History* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 60.

⁷⁷ James M. Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as Human Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 26-30.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁷⁹ Haight, *Ecclesiology*, 38.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

In contrast, theologians such as Küng stress the importance of the spiritual language.⁸¹ McClendon argues, “[I]t is all too easy, when we begin with a gathering assembly, to overlook that this flesh-and-blood, tangible fellowship is at the same time God’s holy church.”⁸² Some scholars approach ecclesiology from polarized perspectives; they emphasize one aspect of the church over its equally true, but converse, other essential aspect.

Yet these characteristics exist in paradox. Haight states, “The church is simultaneously a human, historical, social reality on the one hand and a theological reality on the other hand. These two dimensions of the church are quite distinct, but it is crucial that the discipline of ecclesiology not focus its attention on either dimension to the exclusion of the other.”⁸³ The church is “both/and” rather than “either/or.” Berkhof concurs, “The Bible speaks of the church not only as a Spiritual body, but also as a tangible body, as a temple of the Holy Spirit, as a priesthood, and as a holy nation.”⁸⁴ Küng cautions against the Platonic dualism of a “material verses spiritual” church. “The

⁸¹ Küng writes, “The visible aspects of the Church are quickened, formed and controlled by the invisible aspects. This means that the Church is essentially more than what it appears to be. It is not an ordinary people or group, but a chosen people; it is not an ordinary body, but a mystical body; it is not an ordinary building, but a spiritual building. True the Church can and must not deny that it is visible, essentially visible. . . . But the Church will be heading for disaster if it abandons itself to its visible aspects and, forgetful of its true nature, puts itself on the same level as other institutions” (*The Church*, 37).

⁸² McClendon, *Doctrine*, 329.

⁸³ Haight, *Ecclesiology*, 38.

⁸⁴ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 590.

one Church, in its essential nature and in its external forms alike, is always at once visible and invisible.”⁸⁵ Furthermore,

The symbiotic relationship between the church and the world, or history, or human culture, means that the one reality, which is the church, must be understood in two distinct languages, the one secular, the other theological. But the crucial element in this construct flows from the one reality of the church which implies that the two languages cannot be separated. One language without the other distorts the reality of the church, for the two dimensions must continually be held together.⁸⁶

In ecclesiology, one finds numerous paradoxes. Another example of a paradox of the community is the inherent tension between the individual believer and the church as a whole. The Apostle Paul states, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27). Though the Cambridge Platform states, “[O]ne person is incapable of being a church,”⁸⁷ many church folk fail to see the interconnection of the body and act independently of one another. Grenz reminds the community, “The church and the believer are mutually interdependent.”⁸⁸ Believers are not called out separately to live out a merely individuated relation to God but are called together and bound together as a people. God did not elect individuals separate from each other, but rather they are called jointly—joined together.⁸⁹

Horton contends it is possible to deal with this paradox. He asks, “How do we bring the individual and corporate aspects of our theology and practice together in the

⁸⁵ Küng, *The Church*, 38.

⁸⁶ Haight, *Ecclesiology*, 60.

⁸⁷ Davis, *Historical Documents of Congregationalism*, 97.

⁸⁸ Grenz, *Theology*, 614.

⁸⁹ Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 281.

face of such circumstances?” and answers, “Only, I will argue, by recovering not a concept of an idea, but a concrete covenantal context and practice within which the self is no longer sovereign and self-enclosed or lost in the crowd of the ‘community’ but liberated to belong to God and each other.”⁹⁰ Community is, therefore, formed in the gathering of individuals into a corporate body who intentionally belong to one another—a covenanted community of those striving to “walk with God in all his ways.”

Succumbing to bifurcated thinking is easy since the church exists in the world and yet is a spiritual organism. The community must avoid self-image as either a perfected union of peoples or as merely a gathering of sinful people.⁹¹ Members of the community come as regenerating, rather than regenerated, selves. They, therefore, can be described as both spiritual and earthly.

Indeed, the community of faith lives in several inherent tensions. The community of faith must acknowledge the paradoxes. It must struggle to accept the seeming dual nature of the church. Küng states,

There has always been a dialectical pendulum movement, and at the same time a circular return to the origins of the Church and a theologically orientated advance toward a future position; there have always been changing variations on a theme, using all kinds of different modulations and counterpoint—and yet the theme has remained constant, holding everything together even at times when it has been almost unrecognizable.⁹²

⁹⁰ Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 16.

⁹¹ Schleiermacher asserts that it is impossible to separate the gathered community “as church” from the world. “Even if it were possible to keep all the non-regenerate outside the Church, the whole body of regenerate would only constitute the visible Church in our sense of the term, and, because visible, would be for that very reason not be pure form alien admixture” (*Christian Faith*, 678).

⁹² Küng, *The Church*, 13.

At times the community will emphasize this or that over against the other, and then move back again. Yet the community must learn to walk in harmony with itself in the face of these polarized diversities. McClendon states,

In present terms *the line between church and world passes right through each church* (cf. *Ethics*, p. 17). The trick is to acknowledge and respect this face without being buffaloed into despair at the church's flaws or tempted into cynicism about their remedies. In despair we forget the wonder of the gospel unveiled in human history, while in cynicism we lower our eyes and miss 'the glory which shall be revealed in us' (Rom. 8:18 KJV).⁹³

The community must engage such paradoxes rather than taking a bifurcated position.

There are not two churches, one visible and one invisible, one corporate and on individual, or one from above and one from below. Simply, there is one church; albeit a paradoxical church.

Summary of Systematic Perspectives

As the community reflects on God's activity in its midst, as it lives in faith in its Creator and Redeemer, as it reflects on its own identity as a Congregational community of faith, it must grasp its essence as a called-out, other-conscious, mutually-bound, and responsibly-accountable people. The community is to proclaim the message of Christ in action and transformation as it reflects on the process. Anything less will rob the community of its true identity of being an intentional covenanted community; anything less robs the pneumatic force of the Holy Spirit leading and guiding the church. McClendon writes, "From Spirit-gifted *community practices* comes the vector of a

⁹³ McClendon, *Doctrine*, 362-363.

community that lives between the times, adapting, adjusting, transforming, interpreting so that the church can be the church even as it helps the world to see itself as world.”⁹⁴

Conclusions

Theology has been defined as loving God with one’s mind and ecclesiology as loving the church with one’s mind. But loving with the mind is insufficient. Love must be expressed in real flesh and blood situations. Henri Nouwen says, “Theological reflection is reflecting on the painful and joyful realities of every day with the mind of Jesus and thereby raising human consciousness to the knowledge of God’s gentle guidance.”⁹⁵ This is where practical theology calls the community to reflect on how such love can be worked out in its midst. To do so the community must engage in eight theological practices.

1. The community must teach one another about the process of theology and ecclesiology. A proper ecclesiology is informed by the Gospel and is faith producing. Although everyone “thinks about God,” intentional and systematic reflection must be a nurtured practice.
2. The community must find creative ways to promote ongoing theological reflection. It must embrace the dialectic as it reflects on who it is and who it is becoming. It needs to find space and time to engage in this endeavor.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 367.

⁹⁵ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroads, 1997), 68.

3. The community must live with the inherent tensions of its paradoxical nature, not stressing one aspect over the other.
 4. The community must avoid the pitfall of entertaining thoughts of superiority. The choices it makes are appropriate for itself and not universal for all faith communities. It must avoid rigid doctrinal boundaries. Rather the community must consciously keep itself open to dialogue with others while learning to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit.
 5. The community must carefully watch how it speaks of itself. The church is not primarily a building or an organization—it is the people. Membership implies more than belonging; rather membership connotes deep connectedness and a responsibility towards the other.
 6. The community must work at not idealizing and creating a false image of itself. It must be real. Thus it must accept itself for what it is while reaching for what it is to become. An open invitation to the Holy Spirit is indispensable to this process.
 7. The community must understand its covenant relationship with God and one another. The covenant must be a living-dynamic relation and more than a statement on paper.
 8. The community must be active in its God-given task of proclamation and transformation rather than a self-preserving institution.
- The next chapter focuses on the history and theology of Congregationalism to forge a better understanding of the church in its particular context.

CHAPTER 6

THE CONGREGATIONAL WAY OF COVENANTED COMMUNITY

Previous chapters have explored the biblical, historical, and theological data concerning covenanted community. Prior to applying these data to a local church, it is important to review the Congregational Way of covenanted community. This chapter briefly reviews the history of Congregationalism. A definition of “the Congregational Way” will be offered, and problems the Congregational churches encounter in the application of the Congregational Way will be explored. A survey of various manuals, histories, and service books of Congregationalism will demonstrate a shift and decline in the use of covenant as a foundation for gathered communities. Conclusions will then be drawn regarding the lost emphasis of covenant in the Congregational Way and the importance of rediscovering the idea of covenant as a basis for self-identity.

Brief History of Congregationalism

Chapter 4 argued that the church migrated from gathered bodies of Christians to the more institutional forms of the church bound together by creeds and the apostolic succession of bishops. The Reformers and Puritans, in contrast, came to see that, “The true succession is not of bishops but of believers;”¹ indeed, believers bound together by covenant. The key to the Puritan view of the Scriptures and of themselves lies in their

¹ Shelley, *Church History*, 307.

understanding of that fundamental biblical concept called “covenant.”² Covenant is rudimentary to an understanding the Congregational Way. The history recounted here is not meant to give an extensive treatment of the history of Congregationalism, rather, only enough background to see the use of covenant in the pages of history.

The history of Congregationalism begins on the British Isles during the English Reformation. Men like John Smyth, Robert Browne, and Henry Barrow believed in, and fought for, a church free from state control. Thomas Hooper says, “No one has stated the independence of the church more clearly than Browne: ‘They put the magistrates first which in a commonwealth are indeed first and above the preachers: yet they have no ecclesiastical authority at all, but are only as other Christians if so be they are Christians.’”³ Browne believed in a church gathered under God, rather than a church gathered under a monarch. Browne “[D]efines the Church thus: ‘The Church planted or gathered is a company or number of Christians or believers which by a willing covenant made with their God are under the government of God and Christ and keep His laws in one holy Communion.’”⁴ Browne and his contemporaries asserted a church based upon the New Testament. They reacted against the mandatory use of the *Book of Common Prayer* as well as the Acts of Uniformity and Supremacy whereby the King or Queen ruled over the church. Fundamentally, the Pilgrims sought to return to the scriptural

² Ibid., 294.

³ Thomas Hooper, *The Story of English Congregationalism* (London: Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1907), 20.

⁴ Ibid.

model for church.⁵ Yet, as J. D. Jones says, “I object altogether to the description of these men as the ‘founders’ of Congregationalism. Robert Browne—to whom perhaps the appearance of Congregationalism in England is mainly due—did not *invent* the Congregational system. He simply *re-discovered* it. . . . Congregationalism was not born in the 16th century; it was only *re-born*.”⁶

Thus, Congregationalism began with a handful of objectors to the way church was being conducted in England. Small separatist groups met illegally in various places. In Scrooby, a small band met in the home of postmaster William Brewster, an elder of a soon-to-be famous church.⁷

Leyden

In 1607, the group that had met weekly in Brewster’s home left their oppressors and migrated to Holland as a church. Amsterdam proved to be full of temptations, so the group settled in the small town of Leyden. There they enjoyed religious freedoms for nearly thirteen years. The group, however, unfavorably found their children growing up more Dutch than English, and in July 1620, a portion of the group left Holland to immigrate to the New World to preserve their freedom as well as their English heritage.

On September 6, the single ship set out for “northern Virginia” with 102 passengers aboard. Sixty-six days and four deaths later, the ship sighted land off Cape Cod, far north of where they had planned to land. But weary Pilgrims had

⁵ J. W. Wellman, *Polity of the Pilgrims: A Sermon* (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1857), 26-29.

⁶ J. D. Jones, *Reasons Why for Congregationalists* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1904), 92-93.

⁷ Manfred Waldemar Kohl, *Congregationalism in America* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 1977), 4.

no intention of sailing any more: if this is where God wanted them to be, here they would settle, here they would farm, here they would worship, here they would establish another Plymouth in the New World.⁸

The New World

The story of the Pilgrims landing in America to find new freedoms has a long and often debated history and is much outside of the parameters of what is needed in this investigation. Simply put, historians generally describe the migration to the New World in two primary phases. The first, in 1620, brought the group of Pilgrims on the Mayflower to establish the Plymouth colony. The second came in 1630 with the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Both waves of people came with a mixture of motives, hopes, and dreams. However, those coming to New England lived with the expectation their church would gather in covenant with God and one another to walk in God's ways. John Winthrop stated aboard the Arbella, "Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and brings us in peace to the place we desire, then hath he ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission."⁹ The people's duty was set before them, Winthrop noted, and if they neglected it, "The Lord will surely break out in wrath against us [and] be avenged of such a perjured people and make us know the price of the breach

⁸ Edwin Scott Gaustad, *A Religious History of America*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 53.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

of such a Covenant.”¹⁰ Maurer notes, “By 1640 there were thirty-five New England churches, which were all ‘covenant’ churches, organized locally.”¹¹

Defining Expressions

The Pilgrims and Puritans envisioned a free church where the local congregation was autonomous and completely free from outside control. Gaustad writes of John Cotton,

Cotton declared that the authority of the church should be congregational, not national; the highest human authority is neither king nor archbishop, but the members themselves. If that gave great power to the members, they for their part must prove themselves worthy of such power by giving evidence in their lives of their genuine conversion, of their having been chosen by God for eternal felicity with him. Finally, the church (said Cotton) is created not by legislative action from above, but by contractual agreement from below. Church members must covenant together to create a fellowship of the redeemed. The church is not a building (that’s called a meeting house), but a gathering of the faithful.¹²

The movement was eventually and aptly named “Congregational” because of its means of church governance: by the congregation. Both in England and the Americas, movements to define and explain this new method of church were born. In America, one document surfaces above others in defining what it meant to be a Congregational church. The document, known as the Cambridge Platform, was written between 1646 and 1648. Ahlstrom notes other works were also of importance: “Among them were John Cotton’s *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared, in Two Treaties*, Thomas Hooker’s

¹⁰ Ibid., 55.

¹¹ Oscar E. Maurer, *Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches: A Compendium of Information, Forms, and Services* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1954), 4.

¹² Gaustad, *Religious History*, 55.

Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline, and John Norton's *Responsio*, as well as other works by John Davenport and Thomas Shepard."¹³ The Savoy Declaration must be added to this list; it was to the English Congregationalists what the Cambridge Platform was to the Americans. Both of these documents will be reviewed here as defining expressions of the Congregational Way.

The Cambridge Platform

The Massachusetts general court called a synod in 1646 to deal with "various matters of disagreement relating to church membership and fears that the results of the Westminster Assembly would be forced on the churches of New England."¹⁴ A small group of ministers met in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but shortly afterwards adjourned to generate potential models of governance. Various ministers drafted working documents to be examined by the synod, but sickness led to further adjournment until 1648. The synod eventually based the Platform on the work of Richard Mather.

The Platform argues the essential nature of the church is a gathered body of believers bound together by a covenant.¹⁵ The covenant is the glue that holds the church together. The covenant is in Christ—meaning that Christ is the common bond between members of the community. Ahlstrom says,

¹³ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 156.

¹⁴ Boynton, *The Congregational Way*, 47.

¹⁵ Cambridge Platform, Chapter IV. See Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 207-209; or Davis, *Historical Documents*, 95-97.

Against the Presbyterians the Cambridge Platform defined the polity of Congregationalism in great detail, documenting the New England Way as history had already exhibited it yet making explicit “the communion of churches one with another” and giving to councils and synods strong advisory and admonitory powers but not legal coercive authority.¹⁶

The Platform became the quintessential document for Congregationalism in America.

The document did not deal with doctrine, per se. Rather, the preface to the document, written by John Cotton, says that the Westminster Statement of Faith would suffice.

“This synod having perused, & considered (with much gladness of heart, & thankfulness to God) the cōfession of faith published of late by the Reverend Assembly in England, doe judge it to be very holy, orthodox, & judicious in all matters of faith: & does therefore freely & fully consent therunto, for the substance thereof.”¹⁷

While the Platform was not a statement of faith, it does address concerns of Congregational polity and ecclesiology. The assembly produced a document explaining the practice and principles of how Congregational churches were formed in New England. Ahlstrom notes, “Many critical problems were left unresolved, but a crucial foundation had been laid. So supported, the Cambridge Platform long held a central place in the confessional history of American Congregationalism.”¹⁸ Some of these problems Ahlstrom notes returned to the Congregational Way, perhaps even hindering its growth and success. However, in America, this crucial foundation of “covenant as the basis Congregational Way” was laid.

¹⁶ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 155-156.

¹⁷ Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 195.

¹⁸ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 156.

The Savoy Declaration

Second in importance to the Cambridge Platform is a document composed in England in 1658. The Savoy Document was an adaptation of the Westminster confession, modified slightly to fit a Congregational polity rather than the Presbyterian one of its authors. Rouner states, “It is in this overpowering sense of Christ’s leading, and of being a peculiar people charged to live out a bold experiment, that the Saints at Savoy present their Declaration to the world.”¹⁹ The document is important for American Congregationalists because they adopted it in full as the Saybrook Platform of 1708.

In its discussion of church (Communion of Saints) the Savoy declaration does not explicitly make use of the word “covenant” like the Cambridge Platform. Rather, the idea of covenant is assumed in the theology that undergirds the document. The Declaration speaks of implicit covenant when it says the saints are united to Jesus Christ and “being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other’s gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.”²⁰ This lack of explicit use of covenant in this defining document opened the door for the followers of the Congregational Way to exclude emphasis upon this foundational idea of covenant.

¹⁹ Arthur Acy Rouner, Jr., *Congregational Way of Life: What it Means to Love and Worship as a Congregationalist* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 26.

²⁰ Davis, *Historical Documents*, 62.

Developments after the Seventeenth Century

The history of the Congregationalists becomes more complex after the seventeenth century. Congregationalists busied themselves with building colleges, the abolition movement, and the expansion westward. In the nineteenth century, Congregationalism experienced its first denominational split. In 1825, the Unitarian Controversy split many churches; those denying the doctrine of the trinity could no longer see themselves in fellowship with those that embraced a triune God.

Williston Walker recounts several statements of faith and platforms of the Congregationalists composed during the nineteenth century. The Burial Hill Declaration of Faith and the Statement of Principle of Polity (1865) do not mention covenant. The later part of the Statement of Principle and Polity asserts that the church's power and authority is from Christ, that churches are to respect one another, and that ministers do not have ecclesiastical power over the churches.²¹ But, again, there is no mention of the church covenant; the statement fails to echo the historic principles of visible saints bound together by covenant.

The Oberlin Declaration of 1871 also lacks covenant language.²² The Commission Creed of 1883 asserts fellowship, but not according to a covenant.²³ In the appendix to Walker's work, Douglas Horton adds a section about the 1913 Kansas City

²¹ Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 567-568.

²² *Ibid.*, 570-576.

²³ *Ibid.*, 580-581.

Statement of Faith.²⁴ Where once covenant was central to Congregational definitions and dialogue, for over a hundred years (1800-1920s) the main statements produced by Congregationalists conspicuously lack the terminology of covenant. No one has ventured to guess why this phenomenon had occurred; perhaps during this period the attention of Congregationalists lay elsewhere.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, many unions with other denominations were discussed. Only three came to fruition. In 1871, Congregationalists formed a national body and created the National Council of Congregational Churches in Oberlin, Ohio. The Congregationalists subsequently joined with the Christian Churches and became the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches in 1931.²⁵ The major merger, however, occurred in the creation of the United Church of Christ (UCC). In the 1930s and 1940s discussions began about an organic union of Congregational Christian Churches with the German Evangelical and Reformed Church.

The discussion of the UCC merger led to a fragmentation of the Congregational Christian churches into three separate bodies (in addition to those independent churches that abstained from joining any of the three). The United Church of Christ resulted from the merger. The Conservative Congregational Christian Conference (4Cs) and the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NACCC) were the minority groups formed out of this merger controversy. Each, in their own way and to varying degrees, has carried forward the traditions handed to them from the forefathers of the

²⁴ Ibid., 587-615.

²⁵ Kohl, *Congregationalism in America*, 44-46.

Congregational Way. However, denominationally appropriate to the church addressed in this project, the concern lies primarily in the use of covenant by the NACCC as a continuing body of the Congregational Way.

The Congregational Way of Covenanted Community

The Congregational Way is often contemporarily expressed by three alliterated words: Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship.²⁶ “Like most popular slogans, however, ‘Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship’ conceal as much as they reveal and many of the debates in modern Congregationalism have in effect, turned on the kind of meaning which they should carry.”²⁷ Stubbs asserts autonomy and fellowship as the prevailing principles.²⁸ However, while faith, freedom, fellowship, and autonomy are all important Congregational principles, the founding fathers expressed the essence of the church in two different principles: visible saints and covenant. John Cotton (1584-1652) argued that the “visible saints” were the matter of the church and “covenant” was the form of the

²⁶ See Arvel M. Steece, *A Thoroughfare for Freedom: Continuing a Short History of the Congregational Christian Churches* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 1993), 75-78. See also, Henry David Gray, *What it Means to be a Member of a Congregational Christian Church* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 1995); Nancy W. Smart, *We Would Be Free: The Story of the Congregational Way, Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship* (Oak Creek, WI: National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, 1974); and Steven A. Peay, ed., *A Past with a Future: Continuing Congregationalism into the Next Millennium* (Wauwatosa, WI: Congregational Press, 1998).

²⁷ Daniel Jenkins, *Congregationalism: A Restatement* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 40.

²⁸ Harry Stubbs laments that 90% of the churches fell prey to Presbyterianism in the merger of the UCC, and feared the other 10% would fall to Independency (*Rediscovering the Genius*, 9). He, furthermore, claims the two prevailing principles of Congregationalism are autonomy and fellowship, and the key to ensuring a proper balance is the ecclesiastical council (*ibid.*, 10). As quoted in the introduction to this project, Stubbs stated, “My diagnosis is that Congregationalism is suffering from acute amnesia. In contemporary pseudo-scientific, psychological jargon, we are suffering from an identity crisis (*ibid.*, 1). This rings true in the 21st century as it did in 1969 when Stubbs delivered his lecture. However, it will be argued that the cure will be found in a return to the central idea of community intentionally covenanting with God and one another.

church.²⁹ Likewise, John Davenport (1597-1670) wrote, “The church of Christ arises from the coadunion or knitting together of many saints into one by a holy covenant, whereby they, as lively stones, are built into a spiritual house.”³⁰ This twin idea of visible saints and covenant are well documented in the original sources of the seventeenth century and the secondary sources that quote them. The guiding principle of Congregationalism is visible saints bound together by covenant. A closer examination will expand upon these principles for rediscovering their use in the local church.

Visible Saints

The Congregational Way was born out of, or rather against, a national-church milieu. Ahlstrom states that the English notions of a national church were abandoned for Congregational ideas. “They no longer accepted the pure preaching of the gospel and correct administration of the sacraments as sufficient marks of a true church.”³¹ They saw in the Scriptures the church was more; personal transformation in Christ was a necessary component of the church. Shelley notes, “Their plans for a new England arose from a deep conviction that spiritual conversion was crucial to Christianity. This rebirth

²⁹ Cotton writes, “We judge that *real* SAINTS uttering in discourse the breathings of the Holy Spirit, and experiences of conversion, witnessed in a stricter conversation to be the *matter*; and their *solemn confession* of their faith, and *express open covenanting* with the Lord to walk with such a body of saints in all the ways of Christ to their light and power for reciprocal edification, to be the *manifest form*.” John Cotton, *On the Churches of New England*, ed. Larzer Ziff (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1968), 170-171.

³⁰ As quoted in Preston Cummings, *A Dictionary of Congregational Usages and Principles According to Ancient and Modern Authors: To Which Are Added Brief Notices of Some of the Principal Writers, Assemblies, and Treatises Referred to in the Compilation* (Boston: S. K. Whipple and Co, 1857), 54.

³¹ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 145.

separated the Puritan from the mass of mankind and endowed him [*sic*] with the privileges and the duties of the elect of God.”³² This idea of “conversion” became a defining mark of the early Congregationalists. “[T]hey believed that the church should consist only of “visible saints” and their children, with a knowledgeable profession of faith and consistent God-fearing behavior as the tests of visibility.”³³ Ahlstrom also writes,

The one crucial characteristic of “classic” New England Puritan thought that is not revealed by the famous Salem events was the conviction that particular churches should be formed by men and women who could give credible evidence that they had inwardly experienced God’s effectual call. On this point they had not arrived at consensus by 1630, though years of private introspection and collective searching of hearts led in that direction.³⁴

Thus, it can be seen here that the idea of covenant precedes that of visible saints.

Ahlstrom continues,

By 1635, however, with John Cotton probably leading the way, the leaders of the Bay Colony reached this significant corporate decision. They made a narration of the experience of regenerating grace a requirement of adult church membership. Seen in full perspective, this was a radical demand. For the first time in Christendom, a state church with vigorous conceptions of enforced uniformity in belief and practice was requiring an internal, experiential test of church membership. Many future problems of New England churches stemmed from this decision.³⁵

Church included only those who could express a genuine encounter with the Living God and who then intentionally bound themselves to others in covenant. Preston

³² Shelley, *Church History*, 292.

³³ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 145.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 146.

Cummings notes Thomas Goodwin's (1600-1679) argument for this additional requirement for a Congregational church.

[A] church must be composed of those who not only make confession, as Peter did, but are united together for divine worship, ordinances, and church government; and that it is a holy nation . . . a household of faith, . . . a holy temple," and thus is an organized body; and that it is an instituted body, assembling in on place, built by a special covenant.³⁶

The early Congregationalists clearly understood their identity as visible members of the household of God. They expected to express and live in that relationship bound by the second part of this twin idea—covenant.

Covenant

A covenant bound, unified, and defined the church—one member with another.

Cummings states, "It was the united opinion of the early Congregationalists, that any number of persons, united together by a covenant either expressed or implied, for the worship of God, constitute a church."³⁷ Stubbs also concedes, "A mutual covenant was the fundamental basis on which all rested. The outward signs and seals were baptism and the Lord's Supper."³⁸ Indeed, the early Puritan and Pilgrim Fathers well attest to this concept of covenant. Brief selections from William Ames (1576-1633), John Cotton (1584-1652), and John Robinson (1575?-1625) will serve as representative of the movement as a whole.³⁹

³⁶ Cummings, *Dictionary*, 53.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁸ Stubbs, *Rediscovering the Genius*, 2.

³⁹ Burton quotes statements about covenant from: John Davenport; the Unitarian Handbook;

Ames

William Ames' *Marrow of Theology* became the standard theology book for Harvard, "and was often read and quoted throughout the colonies."⁴⁰ His theology, and therefore his ecclesiology, became foundational for the training of pastors. In his chapter on the "Church Mystically Considered," Ames writes of relationship, affection towards Christ, and faith. He falls just short of using the word covenant when he states,

The form or constituting cause of this church must be something found alike in all those who are called. This can only be a relationship, and the only relationship which has this power is that which comes from a primary and intimate affection toward Christ. In man this comes only by faith. Faith, therefore, is the form of the church.⁴¹

Later in the work, however, Ames becomes very explicit about the use of covenant in the church. In the chapter entitled "The Church Instituted," he writes (in points 14-15),

14. Believers do not make a particular church, even though by change many may meet and live together in the same place, unless they are joined together by a special bond among themselves. Otherwise, any one church would often be dissolved into many and many also merged into one.

15. This bond is a covenant, expressed or implicit, by which believers bind themselves individually to perform all those duties toward God and toward one another which relate to the purpose [ratio] of the church and its edification.⁴²

Boyton; the Cambridge Platform; Emmons: Platform Eccle. Govt.; John Goodwin; Burton: Rejoinder to Prynne; Cotton; and Morton. All of these could be recounted, in addition to many others, but the point that covenant is central to the early Congregationalist can be made with the three representatives (Burton, *Law*, 392-394).

⁴⁰ Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 44.

⁴¹ William Ames, *Marrow of Theology*, ed. John D. Eusden (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 176.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 180. Point 29 states, "The profession of the true faith is the most essential mark of the church" (*ibid.*, 181).

Thus, the idea of covenant is embedded in the theological education of the pastors of the church.

Cotton

Cotton's preaching demonstrates the practical out-workings of the covenant concept in the early Congregational church. For example, in "A Sermon Delivered at Salem 1636," John Cotton explained the necessity of covenant for the gathered community. Built into the foundation of the covenant theology of the Reformed tradition, Cotton preaches the distinctions between the covenant of grace and the covenant of works. Grace is pure gift from God. Works are futile attempts of humans to please God or earn a place in God's salvation. While both the covenants of grace and works are attested to in Scripture and both can be extant in a church, only the covenant of grace binds people together in the Lord, thereby founding the church.

Cotton explains at length how someone outside of the church covenant is in no way accountable to the church community; the church has no right to correct or exhort such a person. The church, likewise, cannot offer any of the sacraments to the one who refuses to join in covenant. Cotton states, "[T]ill you join yourselves in covenant with the church, they have no power of excommunication; therefore till then, they have no power to admit you to communion with them, for there is the like reason of both."⁴³

Cotton also stressed the importance of repentance in the reception of the covenant from God. "We must fall down before the Lord in our spirits, and profess ourselves

⁴³ Cotton, *Churches*, 44.

insufficient to keep any covenant, and profess ourselves unworthy that the Lord should keep any covenant with us.”⁴⁴ Cotton’s sermon is exemplary of the kinds of sermons delivered by the seventeenth century Pilgrims and Puritans which underscore the absolute importance of covenant.

Robinson

John Robinson is known for being the pastor of the Plymouth Pilgrims—even though he never set foot in America. His views on covenant can, therefore, illustrate the concept at the Congregationalists’ beginnings. Robinson wished the Pilgrims well when on September 16, 1620, “with uplifted arms, [he] interceded with God for his people as they crossed the sea, as had Moses in Old Testament times.”⁴⁵ “He was very confident that the Lord had more truth and light to break forth out of his holy word.”⁴⁶

William Barton quotes many definitions of the church in his work, *The Law of Congregational Usage*. John Robinson’s definition of church was, “A church is a company of faithful holy people, with their seed, called by the Word of God into a public covenant with Christ, and among themselves, for mutual fellowship, in the use of all the means of God’s Glory and their salvation.”⁴⁷ Robinson joined in covenant with the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁵ Kohl, *Congregationalism in America*, 7.

⁴⁶ Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, *History of American Congregationalism* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1942), 60.

⁴⁷ Barton, *The Law of Congregational Usage*, 102.

Scrooby congregation and moved with the group to Holland.⁴⁸ Barton states, “[T]he church at Scrooby was organized by a covenant. We are told in Bradford’s history how its members ‘shook off the anti-Christian yoke of bondage and as the Lord’s free people joined themselves into a church estate by a covenant of the Lord, to walk in all his ways, made or to be made known unto them according to their best endeavors, the Lord assisting them.’”⁴⁹

Cummings summarizes the point, “The voluntary covenant, either expressed or implied, our fathers considered a *sine qua non* to a regular church organization. They therefore rejected the ideas of a national church, and of the full communion of those not in voluntary personal covenant.”⁵⁰ Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence of the “covenantal foundation” of the Congregational Way, numerous detractors led churches to soften or abandon the emphasis on covenant. The Congregational Way is rarely defined in such terms in the twenty-first century. Such trends of declension away from covenant as foundational to the Way can be identified early in the history of Congregationalism.

Early Declension of the Congregational Way of Covenanted Communities

Arthur Rouner, Jr. says, “One of the sorrows of Congregationalism in America is that it became so quickly embroiled in matters of discipline and detail.”⁵¹ Indeed,

⁴⁸ Albert Peel, *The Congregational Two Hundred 1530-1948* (London: Independent Press, 1927), 38.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 392.

⁵⁰ Cummings, *Dictionary*, 53.

⁵¹ Rouner, *Congregational Way*, 27.

problems were almost built into the very fabric of the Congregational Way. Numerous solutions were proposed to deal with the inherent difficulties. This section of the chapter deals with these problems and solutions in the decline of the Congregational Way of covenanted communities.

Problems

The spiritual fervor of the new colonists began to wane within fifty years of its founding. Cotton Mather said, "Religion brought forth prosperity; and the daughter destroyed the mother."⁵² The decline can be attributed to several factors. Gaustad states,

Both political and religious leaders of the second and third generations are anxious about the declining faith, the cooling zeal. Would the children and grandchildren of the original settlers prove worthy of their noble inheritance? Or would they fall into a kind of indifference, taking for granted that for which parents and grandparents had been prepared to die?⁵³

One major contributing factor to the decline of interest in spiritual matters is the lack of uniformity among the autonomous churches. Quoting John Davenport (1597-1670), Cummings says, "Though church covenant be common to all churches in its general nature, yet there is a special combination which gives a peculiar being to one Congregational church and its members, distinct from all others."⁵⁴ Because each church was at liberty to write their own covenant, giving it "peculiar being," there was nothing to say the underlying meaning of the covenant held sway with the people. There was also no uniform definition of what was acceptable as a confession of faith or of visible sainthood.

⁵² Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 164.

⁵³ Gaustad, *Religious History*, 57.

⁵⁴ As quoted in Cummings, *Dictionary*, 54.

Ahlstrom notes that the influential Thomas Hooker “was less stringent in applying the experiential test of true sainthood.”⁵⁵ Many followed Hookers lead.

With a spiritual decline, “Churches began to relax their requirements for membership, no longer insisting that all newcomers tell the whole congregation of their own personal, intense experience of conversion. Economic concerns loomed large over religious ones, as the earlier piety no longer dominated the life of the whole society.”⁵⁶

Ahlstrom also says, “Some churches, more ‘presbyterian’ or simply more lax than others, either did not ‘quibble too much’ over evidences of a conversion experience or defined the family in broad terms.”⁵⁷

Such practices began to create turmoil within the New England area. This “decline of ‘experimental’ piety . . . was almost inevitable in communities organized at so high a pitch of fervency. Very significant for this trend was a series of disputes over the qualifications for church membership and the rights of children to baptism.”⁵⁸ The problem gave birth to an attempted solution, the so-called, “Half-Way Covenant.” Other ministers, such as Samuel Mather, warned “the New England churches not to give up on the business of examining candidates, to the elders, not to be negligent of their duties; but to insist on an open profession from all candidates for church fellowship and to except against all whom they think to be disqualified for communion with them.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 152.

⁵⁶ Gaustad, *Religious History*, 57.

⁵⁷ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 158.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ George Punchard, *A View of Congregationalism, Its Principles & Doctrines; the Testimony of Ecclesiastical History in Its Favor, Its Practice, & Its Advantages* (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1856), 196.

Ultimately, the lack of uniformity and the vagueness of the covenant statements led to an ecclesiastical chaos. “The church covenants of the early Puritans, moreover, were so simple as to allow of almost any interpretation. . . . [P]eople could “walke together” into a theological world wholly removed from the covenantal faith of their fathers—and so they gradually did.”⁶⁰

The problem of the lack of uniformity remains in the twenty-first century. A half a generation ago, Harry Stubbs said,

On this continent, through almost three hundred fifty years, the Congregational churches have carried on their individual and collective lives with an evolving Church Order living in the context of an evolving civil order. The nature of this Church Order has not been identical from one decade or one century to the next—nor, for that matter, from one place to another.⁶¹

These problems led to a variety of attempted solutions, which are important for consideration to the present task of the application of covenant theology to a local Congregational community.

Solutions

Some sought spiritual answers to the problems; others looked towards practical solutions. Many of these so-called solutions, in reality, caused a different set of problems. Ultimately, the closely-knit idea of “visible saints walking in covenant” faded in emphasis in the Congregational Way, rendering the need for a church to discover, or rather rediscover, the historical use of covenant.

⁶⁰ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 390.

⁶¹ Stubbs, *Rediscovering the Genius*, 4.

A Spiritual Solution

An example of a spiritual solution can be seen in what is known as the Reforming Synod. The synod was called in 1679 because it was discerned that God was displeased, and because of God's displeasure the church had declined. Ahlstrom writes,

They went on to prescribe the cures, calling for a "solemn and explicit Renewal of the Covenant," and, as a further antidote to waywardness, they devoted a second session in May 1680 to the adoption of a Confession of Faith, the first to be formally published in New England. The synod's confession was virtually a verbatim edition of the Declaration issued by the English Congregationalists at Savoy in 1658.⁶²

Thus, renewal of the covenant and adoption of a confession of faith were seen as a solution, in fact *the* solution, to the problems of decline. While the synod may have had fair success with some churches, by no means was it a corrective for all the churches.

The Half-Way Covenant

The Half-Way Covenant attempted to acknowledge those who had not experienced a conversion (thus visible sainthood), allow them to remain within the care of the church, and allow their children to be baptized by the church.⁶³ Edmund Morgan notes the Half-Way Covenant meant,

[I]f a person born and baptized in the church did not receive faith he could still continue his membership and have his own children baptized, by leading a life free of scandal, by learning and professing the doctrines of Christianity, and by

⁶² Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 160.

⁶³ The fifth proposition of the Half-Way Covenant states, "Church-members who were admitted in minority, understanding the Doctrine of Faith, and publicly [*sic*] professing their assent thereto; not scandalous in life, and solemnly owning the Covenant before the Church, wherein they give up themselves and their Children to the Lord, and subject themselves to the Government of Christ in the Church, their Children are to be Baptized." Quoted in Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963), 130.

making a voluntary submission to God and His Church. This submission, which proposition five calls “owning” the covenant, involved acknowledging the covenant with Christ and the church that had been made for one in infancy by one’s parents, acknowledging, that is, so far as it lay within human power to do so.⁶⁴

The Half-Way Covenant solved some of the intergenerational problems of a system of visible saints in covenant and allowed the third or fourth generation access to the church. “Yet this situation was highly unstable and confusing.”⁶⁵ While it solved some important doctrinal uncertainties, it created others.⁶⁶ Broadening “membership” allowed for a mixture of commitments and spiritual experiences to be bound together in one covenant—at least “half-way” as the name implies. Historians note that just as many churches rejected the notion of the Half-way Covenant as those that embraced it,⁶⁷ thus in many ways, it was no solution at all.

Stoddardism

Another attempt to deal with the inherent difficulties in a church comprised of visible saints bound together by a covenant came from Jonathan Edward’s grandfather Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729).

[He] had also been attempting to heal the woes of a declining church by startling innovations of theory and practice. . . . [H]e called for the abandonment of church covenants, demanded more effective preaching, redefined the Lord’s Supper as a “converting ordinance” which was open to all morally responsible “professors”

⁶⁴ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁵ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 158.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 160.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 159.

and advocated a “presbyterial” organization to prevent local churches from wandering into doctrinal errors.⁶⁸

In short, Stoddard abandoned the Congregational Way of its founders and asserted something new. The “converting ordinance” may have stemmed from personal experience, says Starkey.⁶⁹ This lax admittance to the Lord’s Table and church membership became more of a norm than the exception. By 1927, many, if not most, Congregational churches no longer required an extensive testimony of faith. A carry-over of this trend can be seen in what A. D. Martin wrote in 1927: “We require of our members, in Congregational churches, no elaborate confession of faith, no controversial theology, nothing but what the Apostles required of all who would enter their fellowship,” that is, confession that Jesus is Lord (Rom. 10:10).⁷⁰ As it will be seen in the next section, the use of covenant also faded in many churches as well.

The Congregational Way began as a strong Spirit-led movement emphasizing visible sainthood and covenant; however, as time progressed and the culture changed, so did the understanding of what it meant to be visible saints walking in covenant with God and one another.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 162.

⁶⁹ Marion L. Starkey, *The Congregational Way: The Role of the Pilgrims and Their Heirs in Shaping America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 150. She states, “Stoddard carried it a step further by welcoming to the Lord’s Supper those who had not owned the covenant. This was completely contrary to the idea of the church as a gathered community of visible saints. The Half Way Covenant had tried to preserve something of this understanding of the nature of the church by allowing baptism for people not in covenant with the church, but limiting the Lord’s Supper to those who had owned the covenant.”

⁷⁰ A. D. Martin, *The Principle of the Congregational Churches* (London: Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1927), 87.

Further Evidence of Decline

Over the centuries various manuals and books of worship have been published for Congregationalists. Several manuals from the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century are still readily available in the originals and reprints. This section of the chapter gives a brief analysis of the use of the concept of covenant in their pages.

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

In the late 1800s and early 1900s several historical works document the founders' emphasis on covenant as the basis for the gathered community. Henry Martyn Dexter (1821-1890) was most prolific in his writing. Henry David Gray calls Dexter "our leading historian."⁷¹ Throughout Dexter's works, he underscores the use of covenant as essential to the church's foundation and unity. He states, "To constitute a true Church, these professedly Christian people must be united together by voluntary compact, or covenant. The necessity for this arises out of the very nature of things."⁷² Dexter meant that any organization needs a binding element to accomplish its purpose. Dexter also states that,

This covenant must be for the purposes of Christian work and worship. . . . It is laid down as the duty of the members of the church, to 'consider one another, to provoke unto love, and to good works; not forsaking the assembling of themselves together.' All which (coincident with the whole tenor of the Gospel) goes to show that when men form a church or join themselves to one, they enter into a covenant for sacred purposes;—the maintenance of all Christian doctrines, the practice of all Christian duty, the salvation of men and the glory of God.⁷³

⁷¹ Henry David Gray, *Bluebook of Congregational Usage* (Boston: Whittemore Associates, 1966), 35.

⁷² Henry M. Dexter, *Congregationalism: What It Is; Whence It Is; How It Works; Why It Is Better Than Any Other Form of Church Government; and Its Consequent Demands* (Boston: Noyes, Homes and Co., 1871), 29.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 30.

George Punchard also wrote during the late nineteenth century. Covenant was a key element of his definition of Congregationalism.⁷⁴ Punchard's definition of church, according to Barton, includes the phrase "voluntary association of persons professing repentance . . . united together by a solemn covenant."⁷⁵ Of interest in Punchard's work is his description of a candidate's admission to the church. He writes,

If, after being propounded, no objection appears to the admission of the candidate, on the next sacramental occasion—which, in most churches occurs as often as once in two months, in many monthly, though in some country churches less frequently—he publicly assents to the church covenant, articles of faith, government, and practice, and solemnly promises to walk with the church in accordance with these, and in the observance of all the duties of religious life.⁷⁶

Thus, the "assent" to walk with the church in covenant is not an ordinary occasion, but rather, one which should accompany observance of the sacrament of the Lord's Table.

Boynton writes, "That which constitutes a Congregational church is its covenant, in which its members, on the basis of common convictions as to truth and duty, and some unanimity of thought and purpose as to the best way of expressing that truth and discharging that duty, agree on certain modes of action."⁷⁷

Thus, two-hundred years after the founding of Congregationalism there is a resurgence of an acknowledgment that covenant is foundational to the community gathered in Christ. This resurgence is found in the American manuals of Congregationalism. However, several manuals and books on Congregationalism printed

⁷⁴ Punchard, *View of Congregationalism*, 17.

⁷⁵ Quoted by Barton, *Law*, 102.

⁷⁶ Punchard, *View of Congregationalism*, 197.

⁷⁷ Boynton, *Congregational Way*, 52.

in England during the early twentieth century fail to use the word covenant in their pages.⁷⁸ Benjamin A. Millard questions whether the Congregational churches of his time had gone too far to “tolerate a laxness which ill accords with our fundamental conception of Christian discipleship”⁷⁹ Indeed, he boldly states, “In present-day Congregationalism discipline is too lax . . . it has almost entirely disappeared.”⁸⁰ Perhaps the lack of explicit covenant contributes to the laxity.⁸¹

In a 1925 textbook, Frederick Fagley defines the Congregational church in terms without mention of covenant. He states that the reception of new members is done in a modified way from the early days.⁸² W. B. Selbie, in his history of Congregationalism, does mention the American church gathering in covenant to walk together in all of God’s ways,⁸³ but does not make use of the covenant in any sort of definition of the Congregational Way. Thus, despite some writers’ assertions of covenant as foundation

⁷⁸ For example, Martin, *Principle*; Benjamin A. Millard, *Congregationalism* (London: Constable & Co. 1912); Jones, *Reasons Why*; and Nathaniel Micklem, *Congregationalism To-day* (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1937).

⁷⁹ Millard, *Congregationalism*, 63.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸¹ The 1954 *Polity and Unity Report* of Congregationalism states, “The English Congregational Churches are actually working together under a covenant relation after spending a frustrating time in exploring union with the English Presbyterian Church. They find that they are able to walk together in many ways, ways which laws, ecclesiastical as well as civil, had said were impossible.” Steven A. Peay, and Lloyd M. Hall, Jr., *Congregationalism: The Church, Local and Universal, The 1954 Polity and Unity Report* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 2001), 63. It may be concluded that the English use covenant in a more implicit way as an explanation of why the manuals do not use the explicit term. In any case, covenant is not explicitly apparent in the English Congregational documents of the early twentieth century.

⁸² Frederick L. Fagley, *The Congregational Churches: An Outline of the History, Beliefs, and the Organization of Congregational Churches in the United States* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1925), 78-79.

⁸³ W. B. Selbie, *Congregationalism* (London: Methuen & Co., 1927), 58.

(Dexter, Punchard, Boyton), others simply abandon or ignore it as essential to the Congregational Way.

The Days of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches

During the years between the formation of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches and the fragmentation of the Congregational Christian Churches (1931-1957), four important works were published: The *Pilgrim Hymnal*, the *Book of Worship for Free Churches*, Oscar Maurer's *Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches*, and the *Polity and Unity Report* of 1954. Each of these documents contains an extant concept of covenant and further reveals the diverse and somewhat fading use of the idea of the church covenant as essential to the Congregational Way.

The Pilgrim Hymnal

The 1931 *Pilgrim Hymnal* was published in the same year that the General Council was formed. The *Hymnal* incorporates the church covenant into its services of reception of new members, baptism, and confirmation.⁸⁴ The order for reception of members into the church explicitly outlines duties of the new member in relation to the church. The questions charged to the candidate(s) state,

[D]o you give yourself unreservedly to his service, and take this to be your church? Ever mindful of the welfare of your fellow members, do you promise to walk with them in faithfulness and Christian love? And do you promise that, so far as you are able, you will attend the services of this church, observe its

⁸⁴ *Pilgrim Hymnal* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1985), 497-502.

sacraments, share in its work, support, and benevolences, and endeavor to make it a fruitful body of Christians?

Thus, the language of a relational covenant was retained in the worship services of the church. Of course, the presence of this service in the hymnal implies no mandatory usage, but it is important to note the concept is still found within the Congregationalism.

Book of Worship for Free Churches

The 1948 *Book of Worship for Free Churches* also uses explicit language of the covenant. It can be found, for example, in the service of adult baptism.⁸⁵ The confirmation service includes a section on “Reading and Owning of the Covenant” in which the minister asks the candidates, “Do you accept and own with us this the covenant of our church?”⁸⁶ Likewise, the service for the reception of members from other Congregational churches includes a litany of owning the church covenant. “You, and you who have newly confessed your faith, now cordially unite yourselves with this church of Christ, and accept its covenant of mutual service.”⁸⁷

Oscar Maurer’s *Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches*

In Maurer’s work the terminology used for the definition of covenant shifts. “The covenant of the church is its basic document, and it is to the covenant that new members

⁸⁵ *A Book of Worship for Free Churches: Prepared under the Direction of The General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 124-125.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 129 and 133.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

are asked to give their assent before being received into the church.”⁸⁸ In the chapter on the church covenant he states again,

The church covenant is the document upon which a Congregational Christian church is founded. Through it the members express their common convictions as to truth and duty and pledge unanimity of thought and purpose as to the best way of expressing that truth and discharging that duty.⁸⁹

Thus, the covenant is not primarily the relationship, but, rather, a document. While this transition may seem minor, in reality, it is a definite move away from the original intent of the covenant-as-relationship of the Pilgrims and Puritans. The *Manual* asserts an almost creedal sense of covenant as a written document to which members must adhere.⁹⁰

The Polity and Unity Report of 1954

During the discussions of the merger to create the UCC, a committee was formed to investigate the current state of the Congregational Christian church. Steven Peay and Lloyd Hall, Jr. write,

The members of the Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity did not set out to write a classic. The report of their four-year study process was intended to fulfill a specific purpose. The purpose was to provide background information during the consideration of merging the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches with the Evangelical and Reformed Churches. Their study, however, serves a much broader purpose since it provides insight into (1) Congregational polity, in theory and in praxis, and (2) varying approaches to the functional question of ecumenical cooperation.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Maurer, *Manual*, 40.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁹⁰ This creedal sense is found in the description of covenant even though Maurer cites the covenant-as-relational statements of John Davenport, the Pilgrim Covenant of Scrooby, the Salem Covenant, and the Covenant of the First Church in Boston (ibid., 42-43).

⁹¹ Peay and Hall, *Congregationalism: Polity and Unity Report*, 2.

The findings of the committee support the use of covenant (even relational-covenant) within the church. “It is within our covenant relationship that we find both our freedom and our restraints. This freedom is known and followed under the law of Christian dedication, and of the shared experience which binds us together.”⁹² The report also clearly states,

The covenant is an agreement of Christian fellowship with those others who profess this common experience in Jesus Christ, an agreement to companion in the Christian way according to the guidance of God’s truth, presently known or to be made known at a later time. The covenant is always with God and before God, with each other.⁹³

Again, the report “[S]hould be considered not on the basis of what one thinks or wishes Congregational polity to be but rather on the basis of what Congregational principles and polity actually are as based on history, documents, and practice.”⁹⁴ Thus the report demonstrates the covenant relationship idea was alive in 1954.

The idea of the Congregational Way of covenant community remained in the Congregational Christian Churches until the time of the merger, at least to some degree or another. Yet the tentativeness seen in some of these documents indicates it certainly lacks the power and conviction of the early founding fathers and mothers.

Post-Merger Resources of the NACCC

In 1966, A. Vaughan Abercrombie and Henry David Gray produced works to assert a continuation of historic Congregational practices and principles for the NACCC.

⁹² Ibid., 62.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Steece, *Thoroughfare for Freedom*, 19-20.

Abercrombie writes,

A congregational Christian church begins, as the Hartford statement says, when a number of believers, under Christ, make a covenant together, and with God to be his children in spirit and truth . . . [and] that a competent number of visible saints (with their seed) embodied by a particular covenant, are a true, distinct, and entire church of Christ.⁹⁵

Likewise, Henry David Gray's⁹⁶ works point towards the historical usage of covenant. Gray states that one of the first steps of gathering a congregational church is to create a covenant committee "to write a covenant for consideration by the church-that-is-to-be."⁹⁷ In the section of his work on the covenant, Gray echoes the historic definitions of covenant, scriptural foundations for the idea of covenant, and differences between creeds and covenants.⁹⁸ He also states, "A covenant is a testimony to the Father-son-relationship of God and man. It deliberately stresses the personal, the moral, and the spiritual. It is an agreement to act together as a church, 'not because we must but because we may!'"⁹⁹

⁹⁵ A. Vaughn Abercrombie, *How to Gather and Order a Congregational Christian Church* (Milwaukee, WI: Abercrombie, 1966), 5. Abercrombie furthermore writes, "The Boston Platform speaks in detail about the significance of a church covenant. Those believers who dwell together in one place become a church by their recognition of each other, and their mutual agreement to observe Christ's ordinances in society. Their covenant with Christ to be his disciples and obedient subjects becomes, but that mutual recognition and agreement, their covenant with each other to be fellow disciples and helpers of each other's faith in a distinct church."

⁹⁶ Gray served on the Polity and Unity Committee.

⁹⁷ Gray, *Bluebook of Congregational Usage*, 7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

Gray's little booklet includes some of the relevant materials for the church he pastored in Hartford, Connecticut. He describes the first two of the main principles of the Congregational Way:

1. That visible saints—those who sincerely choose to be Christ-followers—are the true members of a visible church.
2. That a body of Christ-followers united by a particular covenant is a true, distinct, and entire church of Christ.¹⁰⁰

Gray also gathered material for a book of worship in 1978, which was reproduced four times through 1990. In it, he offers the definition of covenant as, “[A] solemn agreement with God and with each other to work in a Christian fellowship toward a community and world of peace, partnership, love, and goodness.”¹⁰¹ Through the induction services for members, covenant language describes the relationship among church members and God. In one service for accepting new church members, Gray couches the entire ceremony in terms of “covenant affirmation.” In that service the pastor asks the inductees,

According to your purpose to live a Christian life, do you now covenant with God, this church, and each other to order your daily life in a way acceptable to God; to fully participate in the worship, life, work, fellowship, and service of the church as God shall lead you so to do? And do you now solemnly undertake to keep this covenant, so far as God shall give you strength?¹⁰²

From the late 1960s to the mid 1990s no works were apparently written to aid the definition of Congregational principles and practices. In 1995, however, Lloyd Hall, Jr.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹⁰¹ Henry David Gray, *Congregational Worshipbook* (Venture, CA: American Congregational Center, 1978, 1990), 646.

¹⁰² Ibid., 87.

and Karl Schimpf wrote a small twelve-page booklet entitled *Principles and Practices: The Congregational Way of the Churches of the National Association*. In it the authors write,

Each Church is a group of Christians who regularly meet and worship together and who are bound to one another by a covenant. The words of the covenant may be borrowed from an historical Congregational Church or may be original to that particular congregation. The covenant may be very brief or somewhat expansive. In any event, the covenant of the Church is the promise of the members to “walk together” in seeking to learn and to do the will of Christ. We make a promise to one another and to God that we will be mutually supportive in all of life’s contingencies, that we will work together to serve God in our time and place, and that this mutuality is what calls our Church into being and gives it legitimacy.¹⁰³

Thus, the NACCC has preserved at least a remnant of the covenant concept.

The Twenty-first Century

As stated above, no recent manuals have been published for continuing Congregational churches since Abercrombie and Gray’s works of the mid-1960s.¹⁰⁴ While some discussions have taken place about undertaking such a venture, other concerns have been more pressing.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Lloyd M. Hall, Jr., and Karl D. Schimpf, *Principles and Practices: The Congregational Way of the Churches of the National Association* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 1995), 5. They furthermore write, “The recent 150 years or so of Congregational history have embraced a high regard for individual conscience within the framework of the Church’s covenant” (ibid.). Since Congregationalism has often been defined as the freedom to think what one wills, it has led to some of the difficulties existing in the National Association. Steve Peay says, “The church, again, like doctrine, should not grow into something that it is not, but into the ever-increasing fullness and expression of what it is: Christ’s Body. Here the relational principle of covenant church life comes fully into play. The essence of Congregational ecclesiology and polity is the notion of the completeness and autonomy of the local church and those churches in fellowship.” (Steven A. Peay, “Getting the National Association Out of the Box,” *The Congregationalist*, 2008, 3, 9). Each covenanted community is free to discern Christ’s will in its autonomy, but not free to abandon the Christ-centered principle of covenant, lest it cease to be Congregational.

¹⁰⁴ Abercrombie’s *How to Gather* was republished in 1986, but the original copyright was 1966.

¹⁰⁵ Peay stated he and Lloyd Hall, Jr. had discussed doing a manual but it always was buried under

The latest hymnal produced in 2007 by GIA publications and the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches includes an owning of the church covenant in the service for confirmation;¹⁰⁶ however, it fails to mention covenant in the service of baptism,¹⁰⁷ nor does it include a service for the reception of new members.

Of note is the entire lack of the concept of covenant in the service manual for the United Church of Christ.¹⁰⁸ The service for baptism fails to mention covenant. The service of Confirmation: Affirmation of Baptism mentions covenant only once, in one of three *optional* prayers—and only then in reference to God’s covenant with humans, not the church with itself.¹⁰⁹

The lack of guidance from a current manual or book of Congregational usage leaves the contemporary Congregational church with scant statements about covenant as a foundational principle aside from those in musty manuals. The contemporary Congregational church too easily overlooks and ignores covenant, which was essential to the definition of Congregationalism. The church needs to re-discover its identity as a covenanted community.

“greater needs.” Steven A. Peay, e-mail message to author, October 14, 2008.

¹⁰⁶ The hymnal contains 234 hymns under the heading of “God’s Covenanted People.”

¹⁰⁷ *Hymns for a Pilgrim People: A Congregational Hymnal* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2007), 740-741.

¹⁰⁸ The book does use the language of covenant in church-to-church relationships, for example in the litany for reception of a new church into the denomination, *Book of Worship: United Church of Christ* (Cleveland, OH: United Church of Christ, 2002), 442-443.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 155. “Confirm in us the power of your covenant that we may live in your spirit.”

Conclusion

From the survey in this chapter, one can deduce that the idea of visible saints walking together in covenant with God and one another was central to the Congregational way. The manuals and books of worship reveal a notion of this fundamental concept, but the Congregational churches of the twenty-first century largely ignore. Many churches completely fail to stress covenant or they assent to a written document for the sake of their heritage; however, the communities' identities do not depend on covenant.

The local congregation will need to overcome the trend away from historical commitment to covenant in order to utilize covenant as its primary binding agent. The application of the biblical, historical, and theological understanding of living in a covenanted community revealed in this dissertation will aid and empower the community to practice living, adapting, loving, and serving the community in which it exists. Yet there is no set program, no current manual for guidance in this endeavor. The community will have to forge ahead with the great cloud of witnesses of Congregationalism's founders encouraging them.

The next chapter will examine how the application of the data presented will impact the local church.

CHAPTER 7

APPLICATION: THE PRAXIS OF COVENANTED COMMUNITY

Bolsinger reminds the church that covenanted community involves more than friendliness, neighborliness, or living in close proximity with one another.¹ Community is more than sharing cup of sugar and a lawn mower. Community is more than a corporately shared experience. He writes,

It's not people who sit together in pews or a movie theater or a football stadium (even if they are the audience for a Christian event!). It's not a polite conversation at a potluck or a great weekend together at a Christian camp. Christian community is an ontologically irreducible organism. It is a living reality that is imbued with the Spirit of God. And most dramatically, it is the very life of the Triune God drawing people into a covenantal relationship with God and one another. It is God's own being on earth lived in and through believers for the single end result of seeing each person become like Jesus Christ. Thus, the community together is a witness for Christ.²

This dissertation has reviewed the biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational data concerning covenanted community. Attention now turns to the application of the data. First, the functions of the church will be examined: how intentional use of covenant impacts worship, fellowship, discipleship, evangelism, ministry, and the reflection of the community. Then pastoral issues will be reviewed in light of intentional covenant, and

¹ Bolsinger, *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian*, 24.

² Ibid., 25.

issues regarding the use of covenant will be explored. Finally, conclusions will be drawn regarding the application of the data presented in this project.

Reflections on the Use of Covenant in the Functions of the Church

The church engages in numerous activities, and an intentional covenant affects the church community. This section of the chapter explores how covenant impacts the various functions of the church: worship; fellowship; discipleship; evangelism; and ministry. The discipline of reflection is added to this traditional list of functions.

Worship

The covenant practice of “walking together in all of God’s ways” centers the community in the context of worship. The covenant relationship of a people with their God necessitates that worship; the worship service gathers the community together. As Hadaway states, “[W]orship should draw us together; it should form us into a people, a community, rather than fostering our separation as individual, isolated worshipers.”³ The covenant reminds people of their role and responsibilities to God and to one another.⁴ Worship for the covenanted community broadens awareness of Christ and each other.

Peay writes,

When the body of believers is engaged in the living-out of the covenant, that is through acts of worship (“the Word preached and the sacraments rightly administered”) or service, then Christ is present in and to the church. To believe

³ Hadaway, *Behold*, 110.

⁴ Abercrombie states “The essence and meaning of the covenant are retained where the agreement of certain believers to meet constantly in one congregation for the worship and edification is expressed only by their practice of these meeting, and their actual observance of Christian ordinances” (Abercrombie, *How to Gather*, 5-6).

in the “communion of saints” as a Congregationalist implies a this-worldly faith in the presence of Christ in one’s brothers and sisters within reach and not just in the abstract of universal presence or the hereafter.⁵

Christ is present to the community when they worship and serve; worship reminds its members of one another and of the relationship they share. Intentional use of covenant impacts several components of the community’s worship summarized here under “proclaiming the covenant” and “ritualizing the covenant.”

Proclaiming the Covenant

Telling the story of the covenant community in the worship setting is important. “Our” story, in community, assumes a richer meaning when viewed in the context of covenant relationships stretching back to biblical heroes such as Adam, Abraham, and Moses. Proclaiming the theology of covenanted community awakens the significance and self-identity of the people as God’s people. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 10 that faith comes through hearing and that there must be a messenger. The story must be told; within the context of a worship service the people are reminded of their relationship with God and with one another. They are exhorted to do what is right, to avoid what is wrong, and to live fully in covenant.

Every sermon does not need to mention covenant, yet each message must be framed within the context of covenanted community as the covenant concept undergirds the self-identity of the community. The covenant is, in one sense, the mission and the vision of the community. It holds up the ideal and paints the picture of what the

⁵ Peay, *We Covenant*, 7.

community should be. It defines what it means to be church and how the community is to live out its faith. The covenant statement should reflect the idea of who the community is—who it aspires to be—who it is in Christ. This vision of covenant must be proclaimed in the context of the community's worship.

Ritualizing the Covenant

The biblical stories of creating covenant inform the church of the richness of covenanted relationship. Biblical covenants were filled with profound imagery and were accompanied by a sign of the covenant. Drawing from the biblical examples of covenants, the church needs to create memorable acts commemorating the relational bond between members and God. The seriousness of the bond in blood can be captured in the commitment to the relationship without actual blood-shed if the imagery is understood and shared by the community. With the possible exception of inductees signing a membership book, the church may currently offer little for the act of covenant. Ritual is important, however. Regular recitation of a covenant statement can be a powerful, yet simple, reminder of the covenant relationship. The idea of covenant is, in its essence, the shared-myth that informs the identity of the community. The church can strengthen the shared myth by utilizing ritual. The use of artifacts, renewal ceremonies, and signs of the covenant can ensure formation of the covenanted community.

Covenant artifacts

The use of historical documents and other artifacts of the church can help ritualize the covenant. Display of the church's first clerk's records, an old Bible, or a communion

table cloth can demonstrate the historical continuity of the covenanted people gathered in a local congregation. Highlighting these artifacts in a worship service can help the community feel the connection to those who have gone before them. Likewise, current artifacts can be held up as a legacy to be passed to forthcoming generations.

Communication of the significance of the ritual is vital, however, to ensure that the meaning behind the actions or artifacts is not lost.

Covenant renewal

The Scriptures describe acts of covenant renewal; the present community of faith stands in a long tradition when it renews its commitment to God and one another. John Rohr writes about renewal services in the Congregational churches in the late seventeenth century. He states, “The actual service of covenant renewal varied from church to church, as did the covenants themselves. Often the covenant [statements were] freshly written for these occasions, ‘enlargements’ of the original covenants upon which the churches were founded, bringing them up to date in terms of current circumstances and needs.”⁶ The community should continually examine the words of the covenant statement to ensure continuity of past to present and that the message of the covenant relationship remains understandable in contemporary language.

An enlargement of the covenant statement may be unnecessary; in fact, at times the statement may need to be simplified, more than it needs to be renewed. In any case, the substance of a renewal needs to focus on the relationship of the community, the bond

⁶ John von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism 1620-1957* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1992), 164.

between sisters and brothers in Christ. Recommitment to a relationship grows over time as people stop and look each other in the eye and remember they are human beings, not objects.

Covenant signs

Communion, baptism, and confirmation offer opportunities to emphasize the covenant in the worship service. Explicit language reminds people to whom they belong—each other and God. Speaking to them about the relationship they are entering is the key to this ritualization. Explaining to children being baptized that, though they do not understand it now, Christ died for them and they are accepted members of the community of Christ in a covenant relationship serves as powerful tool to remind the whole community who they are in Christ. Likewise, confirmands must understand that as they complete a year or two of religious education, they gain the opportunity to intentionally join with the people of God, affirm the promises of their baptism, and covenant with God's people to walk in all God's ways.

The Lord's Supper also signifies Christ's covenant with the people of God. The remembrance practice of taking tangible elements and partaking of them reminds congregants of the seriousness of the covenant relationship. The sharing of the bread and cup at one table symbolizes the unity of the covenanted community.

These ritual practices performed in the worship service reinforce the self-identity of the community as the gathered covenanted community. Yet these worship practices alone are insufficient. Similar proclamations and rituals occur weekly in churches that

lack an intentional use of covenant. The covenanted community must be reminded of the covenant bond to which they committed themselves, and it must engage in worship in light of that relationship to God and one another.

Fellowship

The Christian faith is not meant to be lived in isolation. St. Basil asked of those who wished to live in solitude, “Whose feet will you wash?”⁷ God said in the garden, “It is not good for man to live alone” (Gen. 2:18). Human beings are, by their nature, social creatures. Christians need community to survive. Ecclesiastes speaks of two being better than one (Eccles. 4:9). Emil Brunner wrote, “Togetherness of Christians is . . . not secondary or contingent: it is integral to their life just as is their abiding in Christ.”⁸ Covenant creates this fellowship. As Hawkins says, “Through Covenant making, God creates the context where we experience the gift of community. Covenants establish a new quality of relationship. They also unite us around a shared purpose to which God calls us.”⁹ The covenanted community accepts and practices being together and truly accepting others in the function of fellowship.

Togetherness

“Genuine spiritual community provides a safe space where we can unbind and reveal our wounds, find healing by opening them to the transforming and transfiguring

⁷ Anna M. Silvas, *The Asketikon of St. Basil the Great* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 185.

⁸ Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 12.

⁹ Hawkins, *Cultivating Christian Community*, 74.

love of God made known in Jesus Christ. As we share our wounds with Christ and one another, we are restored to wholeness.”¹⁰ But what a frightening prospect this is; one which cannot be entered into negligently or lightly. The potential for deeper wounds occurs whenever people come together and open themselves to others. However, fellowship occurs only when people come together.

At First Congregational Church of Mukwonago, a transition in the congregation has taken place since this project began—some have stated that there more happens there now than in a very long time. For many years church served as merely one aspect of members’ lives. Church involved worship, but little more. Other Christian duties, and even fellowship, occurred outside of the context of church in a variety of social organizations. Covenanted community involves more than one slice of life. It incorporates all of one’s life. People need not be “at church every time the doors are open,” but they should be open to share their lives among the members of the community whether inside or outside of the church.

Scripture uses the word *koinonia*—sharing. The word typically translates as fellowship. The key concept of fellowship lies at the core of covenant. The covenant relationship involves dynamic sharing of personal substance. Paul speaks of this sharing when he uses the illustration of the body of Christ. The parts of the body link together in relationship; its parts share in each other and join together for common purpose. When people “come together in mutuality and community, God’s gifts are released. People

¹⁰ Ibid., 18.

experience a sign and foretaste of God's reign."¹¹ The church is at its best when it shares life, when it is gathered—together.

True Acceptance

People who live in covenanted community accept others as they are. Each person has a laundry list of faults, idiosyncrasies, and habits—some more socially acceptable than others. Yet the community must question the unspoken laws that define social acceptability. In true community, people see Christ in others; they do not judge them (Rom. 14-15) because of their odd behavior or habits.

The covenanted community must embrace one another. As the Apostle Paul implies, one has no right to say to another that they have no place. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor. 12:21). Hawkins rightfully states, "To be excluded is literally to be sentenced to death. It is to be rendered unreal, invisible, without value. The ugliest word in the English language is the word *exclusivity*."¹²

Only a mature person can embrace another because of Christ. Covenanted community builds upon love (1 Cor. 13). Pride and arrogance lead to the downfall of the community, and humility is a scarce trait in modern times. People laugh and poke fun at others as if to bind together the mockers against the mocked. Rationalizations mask judgmentalism and say, "We are only expressing our frustration with 'them,'" but more judgmentalism reveals an awkwardness about people. Such denigrations violate covenant

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

¹² Ibid., 15.

at the very core of what community means. They destroy fellowship. How can the Spirit of God be alive, flowing dynamically through the community and active in its midst, when one beats and bruises the very conduits of the relationships with gossip, backbiting, slander, and malice under the “guise” of jokes? Covenanted people must accept one another.

Veling speaks of “facing” the other. “Being faced means I am no longer able to stay within the realms of my own ‘being;’ rather, I am exposed to another who calls out from beyond my existence.”¹³ In covenant relationship, others are people to relate to, not things to be used. That community should engage in “I-You,” as opposed to “I-It,” relationships¹⁴ cannot be underscored enough. True fellowship involves this facing of the other—looking into their eyes and valuing them because they are human beings created in the image of God.

Bearing one another’s burdens also takes on a fuller meaning when people truly accept the other in the fellowship of covenanted community. External struggles call for encouragement, as do the burdens of inter-personal relationship within community. One hears people say that Christians must *love* one another—but they do not have to *like* one another. While cute in its expression, this concept falls short of the nature of love. Paul’s 1 Corinthians 13 is far more than a stoic tolerance of other. It is genuine love, a seeking other out, and when found, a true accepting of other. Covenanted community mandates true acceptance of the gathered body being together in fellowship.

¹³ Veling, *Practical Theology*, 129.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

Discipleship

The Great Commission in Matthew 28 commands the church to make disciples.

Foss contrasts discipleship with membership: “Membership is about getting; discipleship is about giving. Membership is about dues; discipleship is about stewardship.

Membership is about belonging to a select group with its privileges and prerogatives; discipleship is about changing and shaping lives by the grace of God.”¹⁵ In the covenant relationship of community, people awaken and become who they are in Christ.

Hadaway quotes Peter Drucker with regard to the purpose of the church, saying, “The business of a church is to change people; the business of a corporation is to satisfy them.” Hadaway comments, “Of course, to change people or transform them begs the question of what they should be changed into. The obvious answer is that they should be changed into disciples who are open to the spirit of God and live a life of faith, vocation, and reconciliation in God’s Realm.”¹⁶ Thus, discipleship transforms people. The community needs to create time and space for this transformative process to develop. Part of the solution in creating the covenanted community’s identity requires time and space to hone, sharpen, and bring about community.

The statement of the covenant can be a didactic tool to teach people about the particular faith community; the statement of the covenant expresses the faith community’s vision and mission. The statement points to the reality of the covenant

¹⁵ Foss, *Power Surge*, 21.

¹⁶ Hadaway, *Behold*, 11.

relationship existing between members of the community. Careful crafting and re-crafting of the covenant statement deserves attention.

As mentioned previously, the retelling the community's story in worship promotes the community's ongoing self-understanding. This practice of *anamnesis* also appropriately pertains to this reflection on discipleship. The story must be told in worship and outside of worship. The *Great Shema* of the Israelites commanded the community of faith to transmit their story in all contexts (Deut. 4:4-8). The past-present-future continuum, where the story of the past becomes "our present story," guides transformation of the present into the future. This vital process should be done intentionally; space and time must be used to create these contexts. Forums for discussion, studies of Scripture and topics of concern, and formation in Sunday school offer platforms to teach the community what it means to live intentionally in covenant relationship. These times provide opportunities to create and nurture relationships in addition to academic knowledge about the community, the Bible, or theology. Discussion must accompany any teaching in order that covenant might be worked out in the community.¹⁷

¹⁷ With this in mind, First Congregational Church of Mukwonago has approached the 2008-2009 confirmation class in a radically different way. The youth spend time discussing questions they have about God, the world, and how they can live as a Christian. Then "school stuff" is couched in a short twenty minute application of discipleship—how to find a verse in the Bible, how to serve by doing things for someone else, and other hands-on application. The goal is to help the youth realize what it means—experientially and transformationally—to live in covenant with others and how to walk in all of God's ways as He is revealed rather than creating book-smart teens who quickly forget their acquired knowledge.

Evangelism

Evangelism can be a sore and frightening subject for many. “Evangelical” can be a bad word, even among Congregationalists who stand in a tradition of evangelicalism. Yet, *evangelion* is Jesus’ message of the good news of God. Jesus clearly calls the church community to share the good news of Christ. Anderson states that “Jesus was taking sinners to himself and graciously binding them in his own sonship to the Father.”¹⁸ When viewed through a hermeneutic of covenant, evangelism incorporates people into the community of God through their faith in Christ, not merely changing individuals’ status with God and leaving them on their own. The community must be willing to take in additional folks and be transformed with them into that which the community will become.

Evangelism must be an act of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual transformation occurs through the Spirit, and only the Holy Spirit controls the process. The covenanted community walks in God’s ways, not their own; transmission of the faith is never to be considered the task of human beings alone. The church cannot bottle or harvest the power of the good news. The covenant community, in this sense, serves as the tool of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit transforms lives into the likeness of Christ. Anderson says that the church’s work must do more than “[P]roclaim revealed truths about God and . . . indoctrinate disciples in those truths,” it must “also touch broken and alienated human lives with liberating and healing power, [or it is] not of God.”¹⁹ Thus, to be a covenant

¹⁸ Anderson, *Shape of Practical Theology*, 62.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

community means Christ lives in the midst of the community doing God's work of evangelism—reconciliation, revelation, and transformation. Bolsinger reminds the community,

The Church is God's incarnation today. The church is Jesus' body on earth. The church is the temple of the Holy Spirit. The church is not a helpful thing for my individual spiritual journey. The church *is* the journey. The church is not a collection of "soul winners" all seeking to tell unbelievers "the Way" to God. The church *is* the Way. To be part of the church is to be part of God—to be part of God's communion and to be part of God's ministry. To belong to the people of God is to enjoy relationship with God and live out the purposes of God. The church is God's present-day word and witness to an unbelieving world. And most importantly, the church is the only true means to be transformed into the likeness of God.²⁰

In short, the covenanted community, as the agent of the Holy Spirit, evangelizes by offering an invitation to people to join in walking with the community in God's ways as God is revealed—nothing more and nothing less.

Ministry

Being intentional about covenant also affects the ministry of the church. The community's relationships are the very platform through which people are touched and transformed. Hadaway identifies a common misconception: "The product of the church is transformed lives—not quality ministry. Ministries help form people and provide the channels for living transformed lives."²¹ Thus the emphasis of the church should not be on perfecting its ministry so that it looks good or yields the greatest number of people. Rather the transformative process of relationship is paramount. Anderson states, "There

²⁰ Bolsinger, *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian*, 17.

²¹ Hadaway, *Behold*, 18.

are forms of ministry that appear to be comforting and even reconciling, but if they do not reveal Christ, these ministries are not of God. That is, these ministries are not actions of God. For God has acted in Jesus Christ and continues to act in him in such a way that Christ is revealed in all of God's actions."²²

Churches always consider programming as they examine their ministry. Fitting people into leadership of these programs is an exhausting and never-ceasing task. However, ministry viewed as covenant relationships allows a different approach to emerge. Ministry should focus on utilizing people's gifts and strengths as they walk together seeking the Lord. When this occurs, ministry should spontaneously erupt.

Hadaway says,

When church members are transformed (and this is a continual process, much like photosynthesis), they will do ministry in unexpected ways. They will "allow their natures to select their choices." They will develop new ministries about which they are excited. They will innovate rather than imitate, and efforts to drum up excitement about a new ministry will not be required. If people feel passionately about something they will not view doing it as a chore or as their duty to the church; they will see it as their personal mission.²³

A covenant community engaged in ministry mirrors the image of the people of that community.

Reflection

Reflection is absent among the lists of the "functions of the church." Yet, a conviction of the necessity for the covenanted community to reflect on itself to gain the

²² Anderson, *Shape of Practical Theology*, 54.

²³ Hadaway, *Behold*, 46-47.

knowledge of genuine self-identity leads to the inclusion of reflection in this discussion.

Anderson states, “Theological reflection is the activity of the Christian and the church by which acts of ministry are critically and continually assessed in light of both revelation and reconciliation as God’s true word.”²⁴

Relationship mandates communication. To be in covenant—to walk in all of God’s ways as God is revealed—demands conversation about God and the community. If the community seeks God in their midst, space and time must be created for this type of reflection. The reflection must be integrated into Bible studies and group forums. “Ask the pastor” sessions and frank discussion groups need to be held within the ongoing activities of the community. Nouwen says, “Real theological thinking, which is thinking with the mind of Christ, is hard to find in the practice of the ministry. Without solid theological reflection, future leaders will be little more than pseudo-psychologists, pseudo-sociologists, pseudo-social workers.”²⁵ The covenanted community must ensure that it makes time to reflect together.

As the community seeks God they must remember that they do not have to be the creative force defining itself. The Spirit shapes the community. God seeks the covenant community. Hadaway warns,

We are not called to pursue truth like it is a deer we are chasing through the woods. We are called to open ourselves to truth and let it run through us. In order to continue the process of transformation, we must stop and be still. When we stop, listen, and reflect we see what we were, what we have become, and that we

²⁴ Anderson, *Shape of Practical Theology*, 55.

²⁵ Nouwen, *Name of Jesus*, 66.

didn't do it ourselves. We didn't find the truth. It found us because we were forced to drop what we thought we knew.²⁶

The community's function of reflection combines dialog and stillness. It must work out its ecclesiological self-understanding while working to avoid the pitfalls of pride and exclusivity in drawing hard and fast boundary-lines delineating who is in and who is out.²⁷ The community must be still together and allow the Spirit to move through it in the process of listening and reflecting.

Conclusion

Intentional consciousness of covenant relationships adds meaning to these functions and thus forges a clearer understanding of the community's self-identity. If the church is intentional about its covenant relationship, it is better equipped to understand who it is. The community is transformed. It becomes who and what it is intended to be.

Hadaway says,

Once a church begins to concentrate on its primary business rather than on attracting an audience, working a program, or satisfying its members, the decisions required for continued improvement should be obvious. Once in place and producing products for which they were designed, systems tend to be self-organizing. That is, they do not need micromanagement. Let the system grow, and don't try to over-institutionalize it or constrain its evolution. Encourage, water, and fertilize its growth. Let it bloom, share in the harvest, prune it when necessary, and keep eye out for bugs.²⁸

²⁶ Hadaway, *Behold*, 125-126.

²⁷ As Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

²⁸ Hadaway, *Behold*, 34.

Reflections on Covenant and Personal Pastoral Ministry

Being intentional about covenant relationships transforms an understanding of the church community, and it adds depth to an understanding of what it means to be a pastor in and among the covenanted community. In the exploration of the biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational data of this project, my own personal thoughts about my ministry have been radically transformed. This section of the chapter recalls several ways my perception of my calling has been impacted by this study of intentional covenanted community.

Covenant changes how I perceive my relationships with church members. I am not to stand above the others, but rather, I am one among the community. I am neither the commander-in-chief nor a head over the rest of the body. While I have the role of pastor, of care-giver, of leader, and of teacher, the church is not about me. There is mutuality among “us” as the church. There exists a great need of one another. I need to be transformed with the community, not stand outside of it watching the work of God.

Covenant awakens my accountability to walk in all of God’s ways. While my “employment” is to be a pastor, my vocation is to be a whole and healthy member of the body of Christ, and specifically in this particular church community of Mukwonago. As I lead, teach, and articulate a sense of vision and mission, I am called to follow, learn, and hear from my fellow pilgrims, equally, if not more so. Hadaway reminds ministers they pastor people, not sheep.

Churches are not passive in the sense that members are aimlessly milling around without strong relationships with other persons in the flock. People in social collectives are never passive, and people in churches should never be treated as an

audience of isolated individuals or family units who meet for worship. Churches are like tribes, with rich histories, embedded conflicts, unspoken rules, and expected patterns of behavior. They are cultural groups, but they can be led.²⁹

Covenant reminds me of my commitment to this particular local church—to this community of others whom I must accept and face. I am not a temporary “hired-hand” to act as the clan chaplain. I join with this community in covenant. Not to say that I will never be called elsewhere, but in this place and at this time, I am in covenanted community. I am truly a “settled minister,” the traditional term used for one who is not an interim or fill-in. My focus is to be here using my gifts to serve and encouraging others to use their gifts. I am to strive to enable others to see the covenant relationship they have with the community.

I am called by God to help this community see a vision of the future that God is drawing us toward. Hadaway prefers the term “vow” instead of “vision.”

A vow is an intention to do something great that emerges from working out our purpose. It is not a specific goal or a targeted, idealized destination. It is a compulsion that suggests specific achievable things (objectives). Because of what we are (our specific incarnation as a transformational vessel), we decide to do important things—and then we do them.³⁰

Thus I am called to vow with these people of faith to know our identity as a covenanted community and lead them accordingly.

The covenant allows me the freedom to remind the people of the boundaries we share. It underscores the need for me to genuinely love others—to treat them as people

²⁹ Ibid., 67.

³⁰ Ibid., 20. Hadaway continues illustrating his point with the task of eliminating social injustice. “[I]t is a vow, even a ‘covenant’ with the world. Rather than following a vision, we give ourselves vision—the ability to see—and then we act accordingly (and resolutely).”

and not things. The context of the covenant relationship also allows me to declare when someone is acting outside of the covenant relationship—to say, “Stop-It-Now,”³¹ when gossip or ill-speaking transpires. Likewise, the covenant allows the community to say to me, “you are acting outside of covenant,” when I lapse into sarcasm or slander of another.

Covenant reminds me of the need to be right with God and to strive for *all* his ways. Covenant calls into question the “professional” nature of ministry. Nouwen says,

Confession and forgiveness are the concrete forms in which we sinful people love one another. Often I have the impression that priests and ministers are the least confessing people in the Christian Community. . . . there is so much fear, so much distance, so much generalization and so little real listening, speaking, and absolving, that not much true sacramentality can be expected.³²

The isolation of ministry abounds. Covenant reminds me that I belong not only to God but also his people. While being professional in my conduct is vital, I am not a super-human being ontologically changed with ordination. I am a human member of a community that needs to stand in right relationship with God—confessing and being absolved.

Covenant reminds me that I must continually place the reality of this self-identity in front of the people. I must work to find creative ways of communicating the reality of covenanted identity. All the while, it does not rest on my shoulders to make the people into a mold or force them to be transformed. Indeed, as Hadaway states,

The pastor cannot command such an organization to change. The pastor must lead members to an awareness of what the function of the church should be, and she must do so within a structure of entrenched power and influence that may hinder

³¹ A concept I have labeled the S. I. N. principle.

³² Nouwen, *Name of Jesus*, 46.

(or help) her efforts. The church, like all other social groups, is not a machine that has been constructed to perform specific tasks. It is a living thing that has grown. It cannot be taken apart, fixed, and reassembled like an automobile engine, but it can be fertilized, pruned, and its growth can be guided. Future growth will only emerge from what is already there.³³

My role as the minister is to be the non-anxious presence in a stressed system.³⁴ By differentiating myself from the other I can move among the people, encouraging them to strive towards the common vision of the covenanted community.

Covenanted community means that being and doing church is a process whereby I grow, personally and ministerially. The process is on-going and this reflection is only a beginning of that process. Being intentional about covenanted community calls for creative thinking in the community about how to sharpen one another and strengthen the relational bonds. Being a minister means I am blessed with the time to think and create ways to be in covenant, leading the community toward our God given task.

Rediscovering the Use of Covenant in Community

The use of covenant within the church community has dwindled. There is not a universally clear sense of how to use covenant, or what it means to live intentionally in covenanted community. The community lacks books on the exclusive subject of the application of church covenant. Thus, Congregational communities of faith must rediscover the use of covenant in community by doing four things: (1) return to the

³³ Hadaway, *Behold*, 73.

³⁴ This is the teaching of Dr. Frank Green in two classes I had with him on the spiritual health and wholeness of the minister.

founders' vision, (2) differentiate between the covenant relationship and statement, (3) adapt in transformational change, and (4) address issues of intimacy.

Returning to the Founders' Vision

A resurgence of an emphasis on covenant relationship is making its way into the discussions of some contemporary Congregationalists.³⁵ Yet, there will need to be much nurture for this emphasis to become a movement within the Congregational Church. Such a "return to the founders" is a tricky venture. John English recognizes how the story, or myth, of a community can change over time. He writes,

Myth is not fiction but an imaginative explanation that carries with it a truth that is larger than individual events. As the years pass by new experiences colour our old experiences and further meaning is given. Recognizing the presence of its myth is part of the communal spiritual consolation that a community is seeking as it reflects and plans and seeks confirmation for its decisions. When the Second Vatican Council urged religious communities of women and men to return to the spirit of their founders, members were encouraged to tell the history of their community so as to get in touch with its basic myth, vision, dreams, hopes, and desires.³⁶

The Congregational church needs to explore its roots and return to its founding principles as it forges into the transformation ahead. Note that it is not a return in totality, to the seventeenth century way of life, but rather a re-discovery of the driving, Spirit-led zeal infiltrating the contemporary understanding of whom and what church is and shall be.

³⁵ Peay's article "Out of the Box" states that in light of the shift in form of Congregationalism, "What we need is what could be called Congregationalism D, a re-founding of the NACCC, that would express the relational nature of the church." (Steven Peay, "Getting the NA Out of the Box," *Congregationalist*, no. 3 [2008]: 10). Congregationalism A is what was founded in the seventeenth century; Congregationalism B is that which was founded in the UCC merger; and Congregationalism C is that which was created in the NACCC. Peay speaks of a return to the founders but in the context of the 21st century. Thus the return to the founders is not a regression, but a forward movement.

³⁶ English, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 63.

The idea is not to become seventeenth-century pilgrims. The community should not use the covenant because as a Puritan ideal, but rather as a biblical ideal. God calls the community to the tradition of covenant as the means of doing church—not to a tradition for the sake of the tradition itself.

Differentiating Relationships and Statements

The data presented in this project show that a covenant can be stated or implied; the language of covenant is not always explicit, written or otherwise. Yet, implicit covenants may not carry the force or weight of explicit ones. The community will do well to specify the covenant relationship in a written statement, but it must always be remembered that the covenant is the relationship, not the statement. As Hooker states, “[I]t seems that covenants were originally the basis of Congregational church organizations, and that with regard to the *substance*, and not the words of them.”³⁷

Covenant statements have the same potential danger as creeds in binding a community together externally. Peay states, “[T]he Church is seen as primarily a communal, and consequently a relational, reality.”³⁸ The cohesive power of the relational bond is what gives strength to the covenant. Abercrombie addresses this ongoing tension between explicit or implicit covenants:

Different degrees of explicitness in the church covenant do not affect the being of the church, or the duties and responsibilities of its members. . . . However explicit the covenant may be, it can rightfully express nothing more than a mutual

³⁷ Cummings, *Dictionary*, 130.

³⁸ Peay, *We Covenant*, 7.

agreement to observe all Christ's laws and ordinances as one church of Christ, and however informal the agreement, it can mean nothing less.³⁹

The covenant statement serves as a tool to remind the community of the dynamic cohesive agent that holds the community together. The covenant statement expresses the covenant relationship in a common language agreed upon by the parties of the community. The shared language thus defines the community; it becomes an expression of the hopes, dreams, goals, and values of the community. It defines the relationship in its ideal form. The community agrees upon the expression and attempts to live out the reality of the agreement. The covenanted community must work at being genuine and authentic to their expression of the covenant and to the relationship itself.

Having a covenant statement, or even regularly reciting it, does not make it true. There can be a real difference between the proclaimed covenant of the community and its actual practice. The tension between the proclaimed covenant of the community and the actual practices of the community can inhibit the community in everything from attracting new members to keeping the ones it has. Some level claims of hypocrisy against Christian communities, and unwritten codes of behavior or unmentioned issues may lurk therein.

The community occasionally may find itself professing one thing and living another, or only partially attending to what it claims and strives to be. Yet this struggle is worth having. The community occasionally may fall short of its claims because it is a striving community—reaching for its transformation in Christ. It has not arrived at its

³⁹ Abercrombie, *How to Gather*, 5-6.

destination and, therefore, remains an imperfect community; as Christ continues to minister and work within the community it forever changes. On the one hand, the community is dying to itself, and on the other, it is being quickened (to use an old biblical phrase)—awakened and enlivened to the reality of Christ.

Thus, simply saying the covenant statement, while important, is insufficient. It must be lived, reviewed, remembered, and renewed. It must be “written on the door posts and talked about while lying down and rising up” (Deut. 6). The community should follow the Israelite practice of re-reading the covenant often as a means to enhance the reality of the covenant. The Israelites kept the covenant before themselves day and night, reciting it often, talking about it at all times. The covenanted community should do likewise—using the covenant statement to summon the vision of who the community is and who the community is becoming.

Adapting to Transformational Change

Intentional covenanting requires adaptation to change and transformation. Küng writes, “If the Church wants to remain true to its nature, it cannot simply preserve its past. As an historical Church it must be prepared to change in order to fulfill its essential mission in a world which is constantly changing, which always lives in the present, not the past.”⁴⁰ Hadaway reminds his readers, “All organizations are in a state of constant evolution, as members and leaders grow older, move out, move in, and as the group necessarily adjusts to a changing context. . . . All organizations are in the process of

⁴⁰ Küng, *The Church*, 24.

becoming something different—new social incarnations—even as they try to hold on to their most cherished traditions.”⁴¹ Covenant relationship begets transformed community. Bolsinger states, “Real godly change—real sanctification—requires people to live together in covenantal relationships.”⁴²

Personal egos often inhibit the transformation of community. All come to the table with their own visions of community. All have a sense of what they think the community is and should be (whether stated or unstated). There can be a clashing of visions, so to speak, as people negotiate the covenant community in reality. The community can cling to both the aspirational values and the actual values of the community (and the individuals in the community). Yet, as Hawkins states, “Without clear norms and a compelling vision, a group drifts aimlessly.”⁴³ Thus, to overcome these clashes requires intentional sharing of personal visions and dialogue that helps the constant redefinition of the community. “Shared visions emerge from personal visions. Groups that are intent on building shared vision continually encourage members to share their personal visions for self and the group. They work to make the group’s current stated or unstated goals explicit.”⁴⁴

The process of transformation is difficult. People resist the painful process of change. Robinson says, “Transformation often begins with provocation, disorientation,

⁴¹ Hadaway, *Behold*, 4.

⁴² Bolsinger, *Takes a Church*, 22.

⁴³ Hawkins, *Cultivating Christian Community*, 80.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

loss of control, and emptying.”⁴⁵ People sense a loss of control with change, as things cease to be comfortable or “the way they were.” The community will do well to recognize this process and be ready for it. There is no set program of how the Holy Spirit will transform the community—thus there is no real preparing for it. Simple awareness of coming change and a willingness to embrace, rather than resist it, is all the community can do. Research and group discussion on the principles of change and transformation may help the community reduce some of the stress related to the process. The practice of love and acceptance, however, will strengthen the community as it becomes intentional about being covenanted with one another.

Addressing Issues of Intimacy

Intentional covenanted community brings about an intimacy that may not be experienced elsewhere. English states,

People seek intimacy in a faith context to counteract the isolation, ostracism and insignificance they experience as they try to live more fully the Christian life. . . . [P]eople seek a forum and mode for expressing intimately the meaning of their Christian faith and concerns that arise in their lives. People desire a context of trust where they can risk vulnerability and self-revelation, a context that permits critical evaluation of personal and communal life. People want a context in which they can fulfill their desire to live a real faith before humanity and where their critical reflection will find positive support.⁴⁶

Intimacy is one of the great blessings of covenanted community. The fellowship and sharing that transpires as people “do life” together feeds and nurtures the core of the human self. The *Polity and Unity Report* recognizes that covenant can “give the

⁴⁵ Robinson, *Theology*, 172.

⁴⁶ English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*, 11.

opportunity for a profound shared experience in Christian fellowship and activity.”⁴⁷

However, with this great blessing comes an awesome responsibility as people share each other’s lives. The vulnerability that one longs for at the same time poses a great threat to the well-being of the individual. The covenanted community must be vigilantly conscious of this factor and take measures not to abuse members of the community. Risk is involved; pain will likely come. When one opens the self to “other,” loss and hurt may result. As the community lives with one another they will not always be patient or always giving—the selfishness of “my way” and “my wants” will surface. Yet the commitment to be together—intentionally and mutually—must be held over these desires lest they become insurmountable bumps in the road or landmines.

D. Elizabeth Audette explains in her dissertation about confidentiality that communities today view the church as a professional setting rather than a covenanted community.⁴⁸ The need to respect the individual’s personhood and privacy is paramount. As life is shared, the community must acknowledge people’s rights to privacy. The intimate knowledge of a shared life is to be held with the greatest of care.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Peay and Hall, *Congregationalism: Polity and Unity Report*, 63.

⁴⁸ D. Elizabeth Audette, *Confidentiality, Congregationalism, and Covenant: A Survey Uncovering Assumptions about Confidentiality in Congregational Churches* (D.Min diss., Princeton NE, 1997 UMI Number 9820381), 93.

⁴⁹ Audette observes that entering into covenant limits personal autonomy but guarantees a degree of liberty in mutuality. The implication is that the well-being of the community is more important than the freedom of an individual; the relationships that the covenanted community establishes become the definition of what is good for the individual. *Ibid.*, 95.

Conclusion

Intentional application and use of covenant in the community of faith impacts all areas of church life and ministry. The relationships of members with one another and with God when viewed through the lens of covenant are freed from confusion and conflicting ideas about the community's identity. Unfortunately, the Spirit-led movement that the founders of the Congregational Way emphasized so clearly, and clung to so dearly, has all but faded as *The Way* to be church. Yet the concept of being an intentional covenanted community can be re-founded if the community will examine and put into practice the biblical, historical, theological and Congregational data presented in this project. Review of this material will awaken a clear sense of identity as a Congregational church. The community will begin to recognize its calling to be an intentional, covenanted community. As English states, "Belonging to a Christian community gives the members a new sense of personal identity, and Christian community is dependent on the members having a communal identity. This sense of identity is in the members and in the group as a whole."⁵⁰ This identity calls forth a sense of unity and responsibility to each other and to the Holy Spirit's activity within and beyond the boundaries of a church. Lacking this identity, the church community will fail to be what it is supposed to be and function as another social organization without its God-given purpose of being a community of faith. The covenant is foundational to the community. Intentional use of the covenant is the foundation upon which the faith community must build all that it does so as to be empowered to practice living, adapting, loving, and serving the community in

⁵⁰ English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*, 15-16.

which it exists. As McClendon states, “If membership in the church is intentional, then the church becomes a live circuit for the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁵¹

⁵¹McClendon , *Doctrine*, 371.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS

This final chapter of the project explores two subjects: a summary of the findings of the project, and suggestions for further research. The project concludes with a final exhortation for the church to engage the praxis of intentional covenant community.

A Summary of Findings

The introductory chapter of this project revealed a Congregational church lacking self-identity that prohibits the community from living out its God-given call. The community recognized the term “covenant” as an important part of the Congregational Way, but its exact meaning was ill-defined. The congregation lacks clear understanding of how a covenant can help the church know itself and live out its purpose. The project outlines an application of biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational data for an understanding of how living in a covenanted community will empower a Congregational Church to live, adapt, love, and serve the community in which it exists.

Chapter 2 examined scriptural materials regarding community. Rich biblical metaphors and images describe the community of faith. The church must realize its identity as a continuation of God’s people. The community is God’s own possession, gathered together in intimate connection for the purpose of serving God. Because of this connection, the community must engage in the retelling of its narrative. The community

also must strive to live out, in praxis, the virtues of Christian faith while eradicating the vices of human nature. The church must live as community because God created it to be community.

Chapter 3 built on the findings of the second chapter and reviewed the biblical concept of covenant, creating a clear idea of how covenant impacts the community. The primary covenants in Scripture serve as a model of living and loving for the community. Community implies a relationship, and covenant magnifies the commitment in that relationship. Covenant points to a sharing (*koinonia*) of each other's person. Covenant also reveals a broad responsibility of the community to bless those around it. The covenant must be taught in authentic relationships. Covenant must be lived by the community, not merely talked about or written down; although these are vital in the praxis of covenant community.

Chapter 4 offered an overview of the change in emphasis from the early biblical communities to the institutionalization of the church. The shift away from the "covenantal glue" began in the second century and was not fully recovered until the sixteenth century in the onslaught of the Reformation and Puritan movements. Creeds, bishops, apostolic succession, and the papal hierarchy took the place of the binding agent of the community within the first six centuries of the Christian church. The medieval period saw a further hardening of these adhesive agents as power became increasingly centralized and the Pope became the most powerful man on earth.

The historical survey in chapter 4 cautioned the community to use creeds wisely as expressions, rather than tests, of faith. Unity and purity must come from within the

relationship—not external to it. Power must not be used as a means of control since all members of the community are on equal footing—pastor and people alike. The survey also revealed the church as a movement of change rather than a static institution. The faith community is far from perfect; it has made mistakes. The present community of faith can learn by reading its history and retelling its story.

Chapter 5 addressed covenant community from a theological perspective. Theology and ecclesiology were simply defined as thinking about God and thinking about church; tasks in which the community must engage. Some pitfalls were highlighted for the community to avoid. The community must realize that God has created diversity; and open dialogue is paramount for the people of God.

A survey of systematic theologies emphasized a deeper understanding of the faith community. From a passage of Grenz, five points were distilled.¹ The chapter ended with eight theological practices in which the community must engage to help the community reflect on who it is and what it is to become.

Chapter 6 defined and explored the Congregational Way. The history of the Congregational church was laid out from its origins in England. The chapter presents evidence that the Congregational Way of covenanting communities has slowly faded from its proper role as the defining element of Congregationalism. Early writers, Cotton, Ames, and Robinson, as well as foundational-defining documents, such as the Cambridge

¹ That is, (1) the essence of the church lies with its people; (2) the church is called out to live in covenantal relationship in God through Christ; (3) members have a consciousness of special standing in fellowship with each other; (4) the covenant is a mutual agreement to walk together as the people of God; and (5) there is a responsibility to belong to God and one another.

Platform of 1648, all point to a covenant community as the definition of church.

However, conflict, “discipline and detail,”² all encroached upon the use of covenant as the defining and binding agent of the church community. Further evidence of decline was presented in a survey of various Congregational manuals, worship books, and hymnals. The twenty-first century church is left without a clear declaration of the use of covenant as the basis for church community.³

Chapter 7 examined the application of the biblical, historical, theological, and Congregational data of covenanted community. Covenant was applied to six areas of the church: worship; fellowship; discipleship; evangelism; ministry; and reflection. The praxis of intentional covenanted community changes the way the community views itself and what it does. At the heart of covenant community is worship—proclaiming and ritualizing. The community hears and experiences the relationship bond. The essence of fellowship lies in being together and truly accepting one another. Covenant reminds people of the importance of intentional practice of hearing each other and loving one another. Covenant must be taught in all contexts of the community’s life. Sharing the good news of the gospel of Christ (i.e., evangelism) inculcates people into the fellowship of the community. Covenant relationships transform the community’s ministry as it focuses its efforts on utilizing people’s gifts and strengths. Since relationships need

² Rouner, *Congregational Way*, 53.

³ Steven A. Peay has written a few articles, quoted through out the project, which underscore an ecclesiology built upon covenant. Yet, it seems, his voice is a lonely cry in the wilderness.

communication, reflection is a vital task for the community. This process is a combination of being still and in dialogue with one another and God.

The application chapter also offered a section on the personal reflections of a congregational minister and how the concept of intentional covenanted community has impacted his thinking about ministry. Perceptions of vocation, relationships, accountability, commitment, and shepherding are transformed in light of covenant.

The application concluded with four important tasks for the church to begin the praxis of intentional covenanted community. First, the church must return to a vision of the founders of the Congregational Way because it is a biblical vision of how the church community is to live and serve. Second, the church community must differentiate between the covenant statement and the dynamic, spirit-led relationship of covenant. Third, the community must adapt to the transformational change that takes place in covenanted community. And finally, the church needs to be ready to address issues of intimacy. These four responsibilities enable the community to move from theory to praxis of intentional covenant relationships. Veiling states, “Practical theology as its name suggests, is less a thing to be defined than it is an activity to be done.”⁴ Ultimately, covenant must not only be talked about, but lived in community.

Suggestions for Further Research

Limitations in this already space-taxed project have prohibited the exploration of numerous related problems, issues, and topics. They are suggested here with the hope that

⁴ Veiling, *Practical Theology*, 4.

further research will be done in these areas. This section of the chapter will introduce further application of the covenant in community, covenanted communities in covenant with other communities, and unexplored theological issues.

Further Application of the Covenant in Community

Writing Covenants

Many books cover the writing of mission and vision statements, but no current publications address writing a covenant. The church needs a single resource that offers examples, the components, and the process of creating covenant statements. Most importantly, however, such a work should address the subject of entering into covenant relationship with one another. The praxis of covenant relationship (living, loving, adapting, and caring) needs to be published for the community to learn, reflect, and discuss.

Re-writing Covenants

Many communities have covenant statements that fail to represent the current relationships in which they live. How a community addresses re-writing a document extant in the church—especially, one with a long history—demands examination. Often the existing covenant is outdated in language and applicability. The community may resist the change required for updating the covenant statement. An exploration of how to ease this process will be a valuable contribution to the subject of covenant community.

Dealing with a Sordid Past

The project has argued for the importance of retelling the past in the process of *anamnesis*. However, not all faith communities have a glorious past to be share; some quite the contrary. Thus, the question must be addressed as to “what happens when the past is better forgotten than re-lived?” Certainly, both Israel’s and the Church’s history can provide models for this question. Yet it is a good question to be considered further. The community must have tools to deal with its mistakes and sins.

Covenant Communities in Covenant with Other Communities

Congregational Associations

Models for Congregationalism say that associations of churches are covenanted communities in association with other covenanted communities. Writers quoted throughout the project⁵ hint at or directly discuss these issues; however, discussion about the association of churches falls outside the parameters of this project. Nevertheless, inter-church relationships are as important as the individual churches’ intra-church relationships. Attention to these relationships will ultimately strengthen intra-church covenant relationships.

Contributions to the Ecumenical Dialogue

The Congregational Way of covenant offers a great gift to the ecumenical community. It offers a means to cooperate with each other without necessitating

⁵ E.g., Stubbs, Abercrombie, Dexter, and Peay.

agreement on fine points of theology or polity. *The Polity and Unity Report* states, “The expression of the covenant relation can bridge existing barriers of polity and tradition, and can objectify the fact which is so frequently overlooked, the fact of an already existing spiritual unity between our denominations.”⁶ Likewise,

[T]he focal point of the organized life of our churches is founded in the church covenant. There is only one test by which a person is permitted to enter or is prohibited from entering into a covenant relation—his acknowledgement or denial of a personal committed relation to Christ, in which devotion is given to Him and to His way. The covenant relation encompasses the widest differences of experience and practice within the limits of our devotion to Christ, and it offers the possibility of bringing together in shared fellowship believers of varying traditions and practices.⁷

Exploration of covenant as a model for ecumenical dialogue deserves attention in the twenty-first century milieu.

Unexplored Theological Issues

Suzerain-Hittite Treaties

Chapter 3 explained that the research of the Suzerain-Hittite treaties, done by Mendenhall and others, was intentionally omitted because it relates to information unknown to the Reformers, Pilgrims, and Puritans. The historic Congregational Way was founded on a view of the biblical covenants without the broad knowledge of the cultural influence of the communities surrounding Israel. Although deliberately omitted from this paper, the potential yield of engaging this material as it relates to covenant community seems most fruitful.

⁶ Peay and Hall, *Congregationalism: Polity and Unity Report*, 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

Trinitarian Models for Church

Theologians, such as Grenz and Volf, write about the community of the Trinity and its relevance to the church which the project has not addressed due to space limitations. Treasures regarding covenant community are bound to be found when the subject is mined.

Boundaries of Visible Saints and Covenant

The Puritan practice of only admitting “visible saints” into the covenant needs to be examined. Two issues were addressed in the chapter on Congregational data (chapter 6): visible sainthood and covenant, but only covenant has been emphasized in this project. Rohrer in his book demonstrates the limitations placed on the gathering of an early frontier church. He recounts an instance where a hundred folks came to the church but only twelve were admitted into full communion.⁸ The church was gathered around a covenant, but they were far too concerned about the purity of the church members. Thus, the covenant became a divisive tool rather than one which unified and bound people together. Such anecdotes raise questions of calling, salvation, sainthood, and boundaries of the community.

Towns and Stetzer use a parable of a “perimeter of light” in which Christ stands as a fire in the darkness to discuss the practice of ministry. The illustration emphasizes that people walk in various degrees of darkness and light.⁹ Drawing hard and fixed

⁸ James R. Rohrer, *Keepers of the Covenant: Frontier Missions and the Decline of Congregationalism 1774-1818* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 146.

⁹ Elmer L. Towns and Ed Stetzer, *Perimeters of Light: Biblical Boundaries for the Emerging*

boundaries is an exclusive practice defining who is in and who is out of the community. Yet the place to be educated about the Christian faith and covenant community is within the fellowship and discipleship of the covenant community. What better place for the unregenerate to hear the gospel and learn about the community of Christ than in church? Granted, some may “sneak in” and be unregenerate members within the covenant community (but then Jesus spoke of the wheat and the tares). If the covenant is at its core a commitment to seek God together (i.e., walk together in all God’s ways) then it is a “converting ordinance” practice. Hard and fast boundaries beg the question if a full knowledge of God’s ways is given prior to admission to the Kingdom; or if it is a process of growth. At what point should a person be admitted into the covenant? The earliest Congregationalists stressed visible sainthood (with the evidence of God at work in one’s personal life) on the same plain as covenant. This project has argued for the rediscovery of the covenant. The question remains if visible sainthood is as equally important to the Congregational Way.

A Final Exhortative Conclusion

Mao Zedong is reported to have said, “If you want to know the taste of a pear, you must change the pear by eating it yourself. . . . All genuine knowledge originates in direct experience.”¹⁰ If the community of faith seeks to know covenant community, it

Church (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2004), 13-14. The authors use the parable throughout the entire book.

¹⁰ Mao Zedong, reference: unknown. Website: Said What? Quotations (2007). http://www.saidwhat.co.uk/quotes/favourite/mao_zedong/you_want_to_know_the_taste_10746 (accessed December 18, 2008).

must join in covenant relationships with one another; people must commit themselves to God and each other to walk together in God's ways as God is revealed. The Prophet Jeremiah proclaimed,

Thus says the Lord: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls (Jer. 6:16).

After quoting the prophet, J. I. Packer comments,

As we study the Puritan idea of communion with God [and here, "covenant" can be added], may it be that God is speaking in similar terms to us? These are "old paths," paths, indeed, as old as the Bible, and paths which our Puritan forefathers found to be in truth "the good way." We do well to ask ourselves whether we have yet learned to walk in them, and if not, to humble ourselves and seek for grace to begin now. "And ye shall find rest for your souls."¹¹

May the grace of God permit the Church to rediscover the intentional use of the church covenant as the basis for its self-identity as a Congregational Church community.

¹¹ J. I. Packer, "The Puritan Idea of Communion with God," *Puritan Papers Volume 2 1960-1962*. J. I. Packer, ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001), 118.

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