

# The Concept of Church Membership and the Marks of the Church

## Biblical Background to the Concept of Church Membership

It is not unusual today for people to conceptualize their Christian experience in atomistic, individualistic, or isolationist patterns. They subordinate the corporate dimension of Christian living, taking the attitude that the concept of “church membership” is either absent from Scripture or of little consequence. (Accordingly, “church” is thought of and treated by most Americans as an individualistic, spectator sport—without commitments, without oversight, without discipline.)

God’s Word, however, defines Christians as those who follow the voice of the Good Shepherd and thereby become part of His flock (John 10:3-4, 11, 14-16, 27-28) guided by His under shepherds, the elders (1 Peter 5:1-4). The **corporate** character of salvation is conspicuous in the New Testament. To be a Christian is to be incorporated into “the people of God” (1 Peter 2:9-10), to enter “the kingdom of Christ” (Colossians 1:13), to become a “fellow-citizen of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19), to be one among many “living stones making up a Spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:4; Ephesians 2:20-22), to function as a member of “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

Scripture tells us that from the earliest days of the church people were “added” to a body of believers (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4), a body distinguished from a larger social group, which merely came into contact with gospel preaching (Acts 5:11-13). This body of believers to whom converts were added was set apart from the general public by being called “the household of faith” (Galatians 6:9-10).

It is precisely those who are members of this household who are legitimately recognized as voting for its officers (Acts 6:3, 5), participating in the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 10:17; cf. 11:20-22, 29), utilizing the church court (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 6:415), being subject to its discipline (1 Corinthians 5:12), and uniting as many members into one body of Christ, serving each other (1 Corinthians 12:7, 11-27).

What is it that distinguished those who were members of the household of faith from other people? The Biblical answer is that: (1) they were publicly recognized as professing faith in Christ, (2) they were united in a lifestyle of self-sacrificial love for each other, and (3) they placed themselves under the shepherding discipline of the elders (Acts 2:44; 4:32; Hebrews 13:17). This is what we mean today by “church membership.” The initial, outward signs of joining with the body of Christ, the church, are public profession of faith in Christ and baptism (Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:37-42).

## **Membership Class #1**

### **Does Scripture Make Church Membership Strictly Required?**

If someone is unwilling to bow to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and obey His instructions, then that person should not honestly consider himself a Christian (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:46; John 14:15, 23; Hebrews 5:9). And among those things which the Lord requires of those who are His followers is that they publicly profess faith in Him (Matthew 10:32; Romans 10:9), visibly subject themselves in service to one another in the unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3-7, 16; 5:21), and give obedience to the leaders of the church (Hebrews 13:17). Notice that these are all commands from the Savior—each is a moral requirement. Since obedience in such matters is precisely what we defined above as becoming a “church member,” it follows logically that it is indeed a moral requirement for a Christian to be a member of the church.

### **Isn't It Enough to be Part of the “Invisible” Church?**

The “invisible” church is the set of all individuals who have been (or will be) spiritually saved by Jesus Christ; it is comprised of the elect. This includes people we do not see—past saints who have died, Christians in other parts of the world, and those with whom we come into contact unaware that they believe in Christ; it excludes those who make a show of being Christians or church members, but who do not truly know Christ as Savior and Lord. Thus it is called “invisible.”

When someone is joined to Christ in salvation, he is Spiritually a member of the “Invisible church”, the company of the saved. Isn't this enough? Why should there be any need for visible and formal membership in an organization on earth called “the church”? The answer to this question is found by simply observing the way in which the New Testament speaks of “the church” of Jesus Christ: it is something which exists visibly, tangibly, externally, and identifiably in the midst of human society as an institution located in certain definite places.

That is why the Bible speaks with plurality of “churches” (e.g., Acts 15:41; 16:5; Romans 16:4, 16) as separate and (identifiable societies in particular places—e.g., Revelation 2:1, etc.). These local societies are responsible for certain things which are clearly external and visible: for instance, to avoid schism, to show care for one another, to exercise given ministries, and to submit to authorities set within the church (1 Corinthians 12:14-27). Regarding “the church” Scripture speaks of many things which are not merely “spiritual or invisible” things like “behavior in the church” (1 Timothy 3:15), the church being told things (Matthew 18:17), the church adjudicating matters (1 Corinthians 6:5), the church demonstrating unity (Ephesians 4:3-16), the church feeding widows (1 Timothy 5:16), the church being given pastors (w. 11-16) and being governed by elders (Titus 1:5-7; Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; Philippians 1:1).

We have not done justice to the textual evidence in God's Word if we are concerned merely with the “invisible” company of the saved, and not also with what the Bible calls “the church” of Christ as an external society or institution with a publicly acknowledged membership, visible functions, observable responsibilities, and a discernible authority structure. Our responsibility is to be identified with a local, visible church.

### **What Constitutes an Organization as a “Church”?**

There are groups of people made up of believers (for the most part anyway) and/or aiming to accomplish certain Christian goals (e.g., evangelism, fellowship, education, social reform). They may be very worthwhile and good organizations, but this does not constitute such groups “the church.” The church has a definite character, definition, and full-orbed function according to the teaching of the

Bible. There are certain marks of the church, which, taken as a whole, distinguish it from other social groups. These defining marks of the church are:

1. Adherence to apostolic doctrine (Acts 2:41-42; 1 Timothy 3:15; cf. Galatians 1:6—9; Romans 16:17-18; 2 John 9-11).
2. Administration of the sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper ["breaking bread"] (Acts 2:41, 42, 46; Ephesians 4:5; 1 Corinthians 11:20).
3. Discipline in purity, harmony, and good order (Acts 4:35; 5:9-11; 6:1-7; 15:1ff; Matthew 16:19; 18:17-20; 1 Corinthians 5:2, 7, 11, 13; 6:1, 4, 5).
4. Inwardly, fellowship in worship toward God and mutual concern for His people (Acts 2:42, 44-47; Hebrews 13:15-16; 1 Corinthians 12:7-27).
5. Outwardly, service toward the world in evangelistic outreach (Acts 2:40, 41, 47; Matthew 28:18-20) and seeking transforming holiness in every area of life (Romans 12:1—2; 1 Peter 1:14—16; Colossians 1:9-23; Matthew 5:14-16).

### **Is Any "Church" Perfect in These Areas?**

No. But any organization which is a true manifestation of the Church of Jesus Christ will display all of these marks to some degree. To be sure, there will be greater or lesser purity from church to church in each of these areas. All churches have their individual strengths and weaknesses. It is our responsibility to work toward greater fidelity in every area.

Some organizations have become so deficient or degenerate with respect to some of the above marks, however, that they can no longer be deemed true manifestations of Christ's church on earth. From them Christ removes their "candlestand" (Revelation 2:5), or they become unwitting "synagogues of Satan" (Revelation 2:9); they do not correspond to "the Jerusalem which is above" (Galatians 4:25-26). They no longer qualify to be called a church of Christ.

## **Membership Class #2: The Church's Doctrinal Perspective**

### **The Importance of Sound Doctrine**

We have already seen that the first mark of the church is steadfast adherence to apostolic teaching (Acts 2:41-42). Some Christian groups in our day, though, pride themselves in minimizing or denying all doctrine (at least pretending to do so). This is really self-destructive, for a church's "doctrine" (or teaching) is its message to the world; a church without a message is not a church at all (1 Timothy 3:15). The New Testament church certainly did not ignore or subordinate the importance of doctrine: it was precisely the reason for the first general assembly of the church's elders (Acts 15).

A good minister is one who is nourished in the words of the faith and good doctrine (1 Timothy 4:6) and takes heed to his teaching (v. 16). He speaks the things which "befit sound (healthy) doctrine" (Titus 2:1). His commission is to preach God's word (2 Timothy 4:1-2) as "that pattern of teaching" (Romans 6:17) originally received from the Apostles, the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20). A prerequisite for elders in the church is that they "hold to the faithful word which is according to the teaching, being able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to convict the gainsayers" (Titus 1:9). Accordingly, the maturity of the church as Christ's body is identified with it ceasing to be "tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14).

God charges ministers not to teach a different doctrine from that which was originally delivered (1 Timothy 1:3), condemning those who "teach a different doctrine and consent not to sound (healthy) words, the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness" (1 Timothy 6:3-4). Those who do teach contrary doctrine are to be marked out and avoided (Romans 16:17); the church is ordered not to receive them (2 John 10). A wicked church is one which "will not endure sound (healthy) doctrine. . . and will turn away their ears from the truth" (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

We see, therefore, how important sound doctrine is to the identity and integrity of the church. Moreover, contrary to the "minimalist" tendency of many modern churches (who wish to reduce their doctrinal basis to a lowest common denominator), the Apostle Paul commended preaching the truth of God's Word in all of its fullness: "I shrank not from declaring unto you anything that was profitable. . . . For I shrank not from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:20, 27). In examining and choosing a church, then, one should pay attention to the Biblical accuracy and fullness of its theology.

### **Distinction Between Profession and Confession of Faith**

Churches that stress sound doctrine sometimes differ from each other in their requirements for church membership. (1) Some expect full agreement with their Confession of Faith (a document that summarizes a broad range of theological points and distinctives). (2) Others ask simply a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ for membership, allowing differences with the church's Confession—but require adherence to the Confession of Faith for ordained officers in the church. Accordingly, a "confessional" church would exclude from membership someone who disagreed with some article of its Confession of Faith, whereas a "professional" church could receive such a person as a true believer, but exclude them from governing authority in the church. (Of course, a person who differs with the Confession of Faith but wants to become a member of the church must realize that the preaching and government of the church will still be guided by that Confession, regardless of his points of disagreement.)

Grace Covenant Church requires only a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ for church membership. We believe that “the doors of the church should be as wide as the gates of heaven,” admitting all who call upon Jesus Christ for salvation as He is offered in the gospel. We recognize that all Christians must grow in theological discernment, that not all true believers are at the same stage in this growth, and that despite secondary disagreements we are all brothers and sisters in the Lord. Moreover, the idea of distinguishing between (1) basic requirements for membership and (2) more advanced requirements for ordained office in the church is found in the pages of the New Testament itself. That is, there are passages (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1), which stipulate that among those who are already members of the church, men who would be elders or deacons must meet certain special criteria of maturity.

Another important distinction, which is often drawn is that between “communicant” and “non-communicant” church membership. Scripture recognizes the baptized children of believers as holy (“set apart” from the world unto God, 1 Corinthians 7:14) and as belonging to the kingdom of God even in infancy (Luke 18:15-16); thus they are addressed as members of the church (for instance, Ephesians 1:1; 6:1-4). They are members of the covenant community. However, those children who have not yet come to an understanding of redemption (cf. the Passover parallel, Exodus 12:26-27)—that is, do not partake of saving communion with Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16; cf. Revelation 3:20)—do not as yet partake of the communion meal, the Lord’s Supper. They are considered “non-communicant” members of the church, subject to its other privileges, responsibilities and discipline.

### **Are You a Christian, Someone Who Credibly Professes Faith in Christ?**

From what we have said above, it is evident that the basic requirement for becoming a member of the church who enjoys the Lord’s Supper (“communicant membership) is a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ as He is presented in the gospel. A brief summary of what makes someone a Christian is found on page 3 of the *Introduction and Invitation* booklet for Covenant Community Church. A Biblical elaboration and explanation of that brief statement is found in the booklet *God’s Good News*, which is circulated by our congregation.

When a person makes public profession of faith in Christ before the church, he or she is asked four questions:

1. Do you believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?
2. Do you confess that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God, and that you trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone?
3. Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord and do you promise, in reliance upon on the grace of God, to serve him with all that is in you, to forsake the world, to mortify your old nature, and to lead a godly life?
4. Do you agree to submit in the Lord to the government of this church and, in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life, to heed its discipline?

### **What is This Church’s Confession of Faith?**

The final standard for doctrine and life is the inspired Word of God found in the Old and New Testaments. We believe that all of Scripture and only Scripture is to be our doctrinal foundation and moral guide. However the Bible is a large book, and there are differing interpretations of its message. For that reason there is a need for a summary statement of its teachings, which, though subordinate in authority to the Bible itself, marks the distinctive doctrinal perspective of our church.

This church is **Trinitarian** in its confession, being part of the one “holy catholic (i.e., universal) Church.” This means that we recognize other Christian denominations as true churches of Christ and stand with them in affirming the historic Christian faith as set forth in the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.), and the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.).

We can begin to explain how we differ from other Christian denominations by saying that we hold to the distinctives of **Reformation** theology: Scripture as the only standard, salvation by grace alone, the priesthood of all believers. However, there are even different theological traditions which stem from the Reformation: (1) Lutheran and Anglican, (2) Anabaptist and Independent, (3) Presbyterian and Reformed. This last division is characterized by a belief in God’s predestinating sovereignty (against man’s ability to initiate or choose saving faith in his own strength), covenant theology (against dispensational discontinuity in the Bible), and Presbyterian form of church government (against congregational individualism and Episcopalian authoritarianism).

Our particular theological perspective is expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, composed by English and Scottish theologians at the request of Parliament between 1643-1647. This Confession is the doctrinal standard of Grace Covenant Church, subordinate to the authority of the Scriptures themselves.

### **Grace Covenant Church Distinctives**

After the Westminster Confession of Faith is taken into account, there are shades of difference (or emphasis) from one congregation to another in the denomination. The theological outlook which you will hear in the preaching and teaching of our local congregation is summarized in the *God’s Good News* booklet.

In the area of teaching, we will differ from some other congregations in that we have an optimistic (long-range) outlook regarding the success of the Great Commission and the prosperity of God’s kingdom on earth prior to Christ’s return, we see the need for the Christian world-and-life-view of God’s kingdom to be applied to all areas of life, and we adhere to the moral validity of the socio-political aspects of God’s Old Testament commandments. These perspectives (postmillennialism, reconstructionism, theonomic ethics) are not hobbyhorses for us, but they are deemed part of the whole counsel of God and are included where appropriate in our preaching.

In the area of church life, we will differ from some other congregations in that we stress and pursue interpersonal reconciliation as a high priority (cf. Matthew 18:15-35), actively and publicly practice church discipline (cf. Matthew 16:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 5:20), and celebrate the Lord’s Supper with wine and leavened bread every Lord’s Day (cf. Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7).

### **A Basic Comparison of Churches**

For clarity some readers will find it helpful to contrast the theological position of Grace Covenant Church with that of other religious bodies on basic points. To be brief, these descriptions are generalizations (not taking account of every exception) and not exhaustive (dealing with every variation). The first three religious groups, which are described below cannot be considered manifestations of the true church of Christ. Nevertheless, the groups described hereafter are very much deemed genuine fellow-believers—but Christians with whom we differ to some degree in interpreting the Bible.

1. **Various cults, world religions:** We differ by adhering to Trinitarian theology, the full deity of Jesus Christ, salvation exclusively by faith in Him, and the sole authority of the Bible.

2. **Liberal, neo-orthodox theology:** Every mainline denomination today is infected to one degree or another with teaching which denies the full Inspiration, Infallibility, and/or inerrancy of the Bible as a verbal revelation from God, maintaining the impossibility of any cognitive (rational) knowledge of Him. Likewise the deity and uniqueness of Christ is compromised, the object and purpose of saving faith distorted, the teaching of (non-evolutionary) creation, prophecy, miracles, and everlasting damnation are denied.

(Groups will be considered below according to their traditional positions, rather than liberal or neo-orthodox versions.)

3. **Roman Catholicism:** The essential reason that Romanist doctrine is not truly Christian is that it denies the heart of the gospel: justification by faith apart from meritorious works—as well as denying the sole authority of the Bible, and the priesthood of every believer. We disagree with many Romanist doctrinal conceptions (e.g., of God’s sovereignty, man’s sin, redemptive satisfaction, personal merit, purgatory, intercessory position of Mary), as well as with its practice of the sacraments, worship, and Episcopalian church government (especially the authority of the pope).
4. **Lutherans:** We differ with their views of limited foreordination, the relation of the divine and human natures in Christ, the universal intent of the atonement, synergistic regeneration, the “real presence” of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, Episcopalian church government and worship (see below).
5. **Anglicans (Episcopalians):** We disagree with their view of apostolic succession, church government (the one-man rule of a bishop), the sacraments and worship (its elements or rites not being restricted to those ordained by Scripture).
6. **Methodists (Wesleyans):** We disagree with their Arminianism: i.e., their particular conception of man’s free will, rejection of predestination, view the atonement as indefinite, seeing grace as inefficacious, and believing it possible to fall from grace. We also do not accept their teaching of perfectionism (“entire sanctification,” a view shared by the Nazarene Church) and Episcopalian church government.
7. **Brethren, Mennonites, other Anabaptist groups:** We disagree with their rejection of infant baptism, their Arminianism, perfectionism, mystical piety, rejection of the state, pacifism, (occasional) socialism, and congregational church government.
8. **Charismatics (Assembly of God, etc.):** We disagree with their view of continuing revelation through tongues, prophecy, and miraculous gifts; also with their Arminianism, baptistic view of the sacraments (see below), congregational church government, (usual) premillennial dispensationalism, and (again usual) mystical piety and antinomianism.
9. **Most Baptists:** We disagree with their (usual) Arminianism, rejection of covenant theology, view of the sacraments (necessity of immersion, rejection of infant baptism, Lord’s Supper as mere memorial), congregational church government and premillennialism.
10. **“Fundamentalists”:** Apart from the “fundamentals” on which all Christians should agree (e.g., Biblical infallibility, Christ’s deity, virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection), we disagree with certain characteristics which usually accompany the fundamentalist mentality, such as: Arminianism, a baptistic view of the sacraments, congregational church government,

premillennial dispensationalism, antinomianism regarding Old Testament law, yet legalism regarding cultural practices deemed “worldly” (drinking, dancing, smoking, movies, card-playing).

### **A Short History of the Presbyterian Church**

In the mid 1500’s, the theology of the Swiss Reformers was adopted by John Knox, who (for a time) came under the direct influence of Calvin in Geneva. Knox brought Reformed theology and the Presbyterian view of church government to bear upon his native church in Scotland. These views later came to be systematically expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).

Settlers from England, Scotland, and Ireland who had Reformed convictions and a Presbyterian view of the church came to America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (The “Puritans” of the early New England area were Reformed in theology, but usually congregational [Independent] in church government.) In 1706 a “presbytery” was organized in Philadelphia, becoming a “synod” constituted by four presbyteries in 1717. In 1729 the American Presbyterian Church adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as its doctrinal standard (with slight revisions, mainly concerning the civil magistrate’s relation to the church). In 1789 the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (comprised by then of four synods and sixteen presbyteries) was convened.<sup>1</sup>

For a short while, between 1837 and 1869, the Presbyterian Church in the USA was divided into an “Old School” assembly and a “New School” assembly, the former being more insistent upon doctrinal soundness and Presbyterian polity than the latter. Their later reunion served to weaken the witness of the church. In 1861 the Presbyterians of the southern Confederate States formed the “Presbyterian Church in the United States” (PCUS)—being driven from the northern body, the “Presbyterian Church in the United States of America” (PCUSA) by a General Assembly demand for allegiance to the federal union. In 1983, two bodies reunited, but (sadly) by this time they had both been won over to liberal and neo-orthodox theology. The story of the northern Presbyterian (PCUSA) church’s defection from doctrinal soundness in the twentieth century brings us to the origin of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936.

That theological trouble had been brewing in the PCUSA<sup>2</sup> was dramatically signaled when, in 1922, the stated supply of First Presbyterian Church in New York City, Harry Emerson Fosdick, preached a sermon entitled, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” Dr. Fosdick was a well-known modernist (and Baptist) who did not see Biblical inerrancy, the virgin birth, Christ’s miracles, the substitutionary atonement, or the bodily resurrection of Christ as essential articles of the Christian faith. When the 1923 General Assembly called upon the Presbytery of New York to bring the preaching of First Presbyterian Church into line with the Confession, reaffirming the necessity of the doctrines just listed, the action was repudiated by over 10% of the ministers in the denomination. They signed a document (later called the “Auburn Affirmation”) in which these doctrines were considered mere “theories” that a Presbyterian minister need not endorse. The General Assembly declined to discipline the signers, and the movement for a broad church with doctrinal latitude rapidly grew.

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1 He histories of two smaller, Scotch-Presbyterian bodies established in America are not traced here: the Associate Presbyterian Church groups (beginning 1753) and the reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (1798). Likewise omitted is the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (1810), an offshoot of the PCUSA with a revivalist, semi-Arminian theology and lax educational standards.

2 For instance, after failed efforts in the late 1800’s, the denomination finally revised its Confession of Faith in 1903 such that its distinctive view of God’s sovereign particularism in redemption was toned down.

In 1929 the General Assembly took action to reorganize the Board of Princeton Theological Seminary, a school which had long stood strong for the authority of God's word and the soundness of the Reformed faith. The reorganization had the effect of turning the control of the seminary over to men who were open to a contrary viewpoint in theology. Certain faculty members of the seminary who were dedicated to preserving and defending the historic Christian faith as declared in the Westminster Confession founded a new seminary in Philadelphia, led by Dr. J. Gresham Machen, the best known scholarly defender of Christianity in that day.

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In 1932 Dr. Machen was grieved and concerned to find that the Board of Foreign Missions of the PCUSA was controlled by theological liberalism—evident from members who had signed the Auburn Affirmation, from the literature it recommended (including works by Fosdick), and from the missionaries it sent (among whom was Pearl Buck!). When Cr. Machen overturned the General Assembly about this situation, the overture was rejected and the Board whitewashed. This led to the organization of the independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, an agency established outside the PCUSA through which Bible-believing missionaries could be supported. However, in 1934, the General Assembly issued a mandate stating that those who will not support the denomination's own programs are in exactly the same position as someone who refuses to take the Lord's Supper! Those who were affiliated with the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions were ordered to sever all relation with it immediately, or else face church discipline. Such words and actions directly violated the church's confession of faith and constitution, yet they were allowed to stand.

Dr. Machen was the first man to be brought to trial. At the trial, however, he was prevented from making any viable defense because all questions of doctrine were ruled out—ruled out by a court supposedly committed to the Bible as the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Dr. Machen wished to prove that the order of the General Assembly was unlawful, and that his criticism of the church's mission board was well grounded; but he was not allowed. All that mattered was that he had disobeyed the General Assembly, and so he was suspended from the ministry. His treatment (and that of other ministers which followed) was appealed for redress to the 1936 General Assembly, where four of the seven ministers on the Permanent Judicial Committee were signers of the Auburn Affirmation. Needless to say, the General Assembly did not uphold Dr. Machen's constitutional protections or Biblical concerns. The unbiblical commands of men were held above (and against) the commands of Jesus Christ, the only true Head of the church.

Certain conservative members of the PCUSA had previously covenanted together to maintain the doctrinal purity and the constitution of the Presbyterian Church, calling their organization the Presbyterian Constitutional Covenant Union. It met on June 11, 1936, to disband and be re-constituted with 200 members as the Presbyterian Church of America (now called the Orthodox Presbyterian Church). The first general assembly was held, with the moderator being Cr. J. Gresham Machen. Since that time the Orthodox Presbyterian Church has grown in numbers and influence, gaining a reputation as a denomination committed to the authority of God's word, the soundness of the Reformed faith, and the government of the church by Biblical Presbyterian principles.<sup>3</sup> In June, 1986, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church celebrated its fiftieth anniversary.

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<sup>3</sup> In 1937, a splinter group left and formed the Bible Presbyterian Church, being fundamentalist in its view of Christian living (the "separated life" pitted against Christian liberty) and committed to premillennial eschatology. The larger portion of the BPC subsequently left that body and became the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in 1956, uniting with the General Synod RPCNA in 1965 to form the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod. In 1983, the RPCES underwent more radical reorganization, being received into the Presbyterian Church in America, a conservative denomination which in 1973 broke away from the southern Presbyterian church (PCUS) in protest of that church's liberalism.

## Supplemental Study

1. Please listen to the cassette tape of the second membership class lesson and discussion by Dr. Bahnsen.
2. Then for further reading and study, you will find on the next few pages:
  - a. “What Makes Someone a Christian?” and
  - b. “What is Covenant Community Church?” and
  - c. Synopsis of the Westminster Confession of Faith, from the booklet *Covenant Community Church- An Introduction and an Invitation*
  - d. “A Brief and Untechnical Statement of the Reformed Faith,” B.B. Warfield (*Selected Shorter Writings*, vol. 1)
  - e. “The Unity of the Church” (chapter 4) from *The Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (1941, 1984)

## Chapter 1: The Form of Government:

### Christ, the King and Head of the Church

1. Jesus Christ, upon whose shoulders the government is, whose name is called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, of the increase of whose government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and justice, from henceforth even forever, having all power given unto him in heaven and in earth by the Father, who raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand, far above all principality and power, and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world but also in that which is to come, and put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all; he being ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things, received gifts for his church and gave offices necessary for the building of his church, for making disciples of all nations and perfecting his saints.
2. There is therefore but one King and Head of the church, the only Mediator between God and man. Jesus Christ, who rules in his church by his Word and Spirit. His mediatorial office includes all the offices in his church. It belongs to his majesty from his throne of glory not only to rule his church directly but also to use the ministry of men in ruling and teaching his church through his Word and Spirit, thus exercising through men his own authority and enforcing his own laws. The authority of all such ministerial office rests upon his appointment, who has ordained government in his church, revealed its nature to us in his Word, and promised his presence in the midst of his church as this government is exercised in his name.
3. Christ orders his church by the rule of his Word; the pattern of officers, ordinances, government, and discipline set forth in Scripture is therefore to be observed as the instruction of the Lord. Church government must conform to the scriptural pattern and follow the specific provisions revealed in the New Testament. In those circumstances not specifically ordered by Scripture the church must observe the general rules of the Word. Among the biblical admonitions applicable to all circumstances are those requiring that all things must be done decently, in order, and for edification. A particular form of church government is bound to set forth what Christ requires for the order of his church and to arrange particular circumstances only in the manner, to the degree, and for the purposes that the Lord of the church has appointed in Scripture. The Presbyterian form of government seeks to fulfill these scriptural requirements for the glory of Christ, the edification of the church, and the enlargement of that spiritual liberty in which Christ has set us free. Nevertheless, while such scriptural government is necessary for the perfection of church order, it is not essential to the existence of the church visible.
4. Jesus Christ, having ascended into heaven, abides in his church by the Holy Spirit whom he has sent. Through his Spirit he has given his Word revealing his ordinances; through the Spirit also he exerts his saving and governing power in the teaching of his Word and the administration of his ordinances. Only by the gifts and calling of the Spirit are men endued and qualified for office in Christ's church.

## Chapter 2: The Church

1. Jesus Christ, being now exalted far above all principality and power, has erected in this world a kingdom, which is his church.
2. The universal church visible consists of all those persons, in every nation, together with their children, who make profession of saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and promise submission to his commandments.
3. In accordance with the teaching of Scripture, the many members of this church universal are to be organized in local and regional churches, confessing a common faith and submitting to a common form of government.
4. The work of the church, in fellowship with and obedience to Christ, is divine worship, mutual edification, and gospel witness. The means appointed by Christ through which the church does this work include the confession of the name of Christ before men; the exercise of fellowship in encouraging one another; the reading, teaching, and preaching of the Word of God; praying; singing; fasting; administering baptism and the Lord's supper; collecting and distributing offerings; showing mercy; exercising discipline; and blessing the people.

## Chapter 4: The Unity of the Church

1. Since the church of Christ is one body, united under and in one God and Father, one Lord, and one Spirit, it must give diligence to keep this unity in the bond of peace. To this end the church must receive those endued with gifts of Christ as Christ himself, must submit to those whose call to govern in the church has been properly acknowledged, and in particular must learn of those with gifts of teaching the Word of God. Further, since every Christian is endued with some gift for the edification of the body, he must minister this gift to the church as a Faithful steward. Church government must maintain this fellowship in Christ and in the gifts of the Spirit and seek its restoration when it has been disrupted through schism.
2. It is the right and duty of those who rule in the church of God to maintain order and exercise discipline, for the preservation both of truth and duty. These officers and the whole church must censure or cast out the erroneous or scandalous, always observing the requirements of the Word of God, and seeking the honor of Christ's name, the good of his church, and the reclamation of the offender.
3. The manifestation of the unity of the church requires that it be separate from the world. Apostasy in faith and life is destructive of the fellowship in Christ; only by rejecting such error can Christian fellowship be maintained. There are many antichrists, many false apostles and teachers. From these the church must turn away, and those who steadfastly hear the voice of false shepherds and follow them cannot be regarded as the sheep of Christ. There are organizations which falsely call themselves churches of God, and others which once were churches, but have become synagogues of Satan. Communion with such is spiritual adultery and an offense against Christ and his saints.
4. The visible unity of the Body of Christ, though not altogether destroyed, is greatly obscured by the division of the Christian church into different groups or denomination;. In such denominations Christians exercise a fellowship toward each other in doctrine, worship, and order that they do not exercise toward other Christians. The purest churches under heaven are subject both in mixture and error, and some have gravely departed from apostolic purity; yet all of these which maintain through a sufficient discipline the Word and sacrament; in their fundamental integrity are to be recognized as true manifestations of the church of Jesus Christ. All such churches should seek a closer fellowship, in accordance with the principles set forth above.

## **A Brief and Untechnical Statement of the Reformed Faith<sup>4</sup>**

1. I believe that my one aim in life and death should be to glorify God and enjoy him forever; and that God teaches me how to glorify and enjoy him in his holy Word, that is, the Bible, which he has given by the infallible inspiration of his Holy Spirit in order that I may certainly know what I am to believe concerning him and what duty he requires of me.
2. I believe that God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and incomparable in all that he is; one God but three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, my Creator, my Redeemer, and my Sanctifier; in whose power and wisdom, righteousness, goodness and truth I may safely put my trust.
3. I believe that the heavens and the earth, and all that in them is, are the work of God's hands; and that all that he has made he directs and governs in all their actions; so that they fulfill the end for which they were created, and I who trust in him shall not be put to shame but may rest securely in the protection of his almighty love.
4. I believe that God created man after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness and holiness, and entered into a covenant of life with him upon the sole condition of the obedience that was his due: so that it was by willfully sinning against God that man fell into the sin and misery in which I have been born.
5. I believe, that, being fallen in Adam, my first father, I am by nature a child of wrath, under the condemnation of God and corrupted in body and soul, prone to evil and liable to eternal death; from which dreadful state I cannot be delivered save through the unmerited grace of God my Savior.
6. I believe that God has not left the world to perish in its sin, but out of the great love wherewith he has loved it, has from all eternity graciously chosen unto himself a multitude which no man can number, to deliver them out of their sin and misery, and of them to build up again in the world his kingdom of righteousness: in which kingdom I may be assured I have my part, if I hold fast to Christ the Lord.
7. I believe that God has redeemed his people unto himself through Jesus Christ our Lord; who, though he was and ever continues to be the eternal Son of God, yet was born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem them that are under the law: I believe that he bore the penalty due to my sins in his own body on the tree, and fulfilled in his own person the obedience I owe to the righteousness of God, and now presents me to his Father as his purchased possession, to the praise of the glory of his grace forever: wherefore renouncing all merit of my own, I put all my trust only in the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ my redeemer.
8. I believe that Jesus Christ my redeemer, who died for my offences was raised again for my justification, and ascended into the heavens, where he Sits at the right hand of the Father Almighty, continually making intercession for his people, and governing the whole world as head over all things for his Church: so that I need fear no evil and may surely know that nothing can snatch me out of his hands and nothing can Separate me from his love.
9. I believe that the redemption wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ is effectually applied to all his people by the Holy Spirit, who works faith in me and thereby unites me to Christ, renews me in the whole man after the image of God, and enables me more and more to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness; until, this gracious work having been completed in me, I shall be received into glory: in which great hope abiding, I must ever strive to perfect holiness in the fear of God.

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<sup>4</sup> From *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, Volume 1 (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1970)

10. I believe that God requires of me, under the gospel, first of all, that, out of a true sense of my sin and misery and apprehension of his mercy in Christ, I should turn with grief and hatred away from sin and receive and rest upon Jesus Christ alone for salvation; that, so being united to him, I may receive pardon for my sins and be accepted as righteous in God's sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to me and received by faith alone: and thus and thus only do I believe I may be received into the number and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God.
11. I believe that, having been pardoned and accepted for Christ's sake, it is further required of me that I walk in the Spirit whom he has purchased for me, and by whom love is shed abroad in my heart; fulfilling the obedience I owe to Christ my King; faithfully performing all the duties laid upon me by the holy law of God my heavenly Father; and ever reflecting in my life and conduct, the perfect example that has been set me by Christ Jesus my Leader, who has died for me and granted to me his Holy Spirit just that I may do the good works which God has afore prepared that I should walk in them.
12. I believe that God has established his Church in the world and endowed it with the ministry of the Word and the holy ordinances of Baptism, the Lord's Supper and Prayer; in order that through these as means, the riches of his grace in the gospel may be made known to the world, and, by the blessing of Christ and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them, the benefits of redemption may be communicated to his people: wherefore also it is required of me that I attend on these means of grace with diligence, preparation, and prayer, so that through them I may be instructed and strengthened in faith, and in holiness of life and in love; and that I use my best endeavors to carry this gospel and convey these means of grace to the whole world.
13. I believe that as Jesus Christ has once come in grace, so also is he to come a second time in glory, to judge the world in righteousness and assign to each his eternal award: and I believe that if I die in Christ, my soul shall be at death made perfect in holiness and go home to the Lord; and when he shall return in his majesty I shall be raised in glory and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoyment of God to all eternity: encouraged by which blessed hope it is required of me willingly to take my part in suffering hardship here as a good soldier of Christ Jesus, being assured that if I die with him I shall also live with him, if I endure, I shall also reign with him.

And to Him, my Redeemer,  
with the Father,  
and the Holy Spirit,  
Three Persons, one God,  
be glory forever, world without end,  
Amen, and Amen.