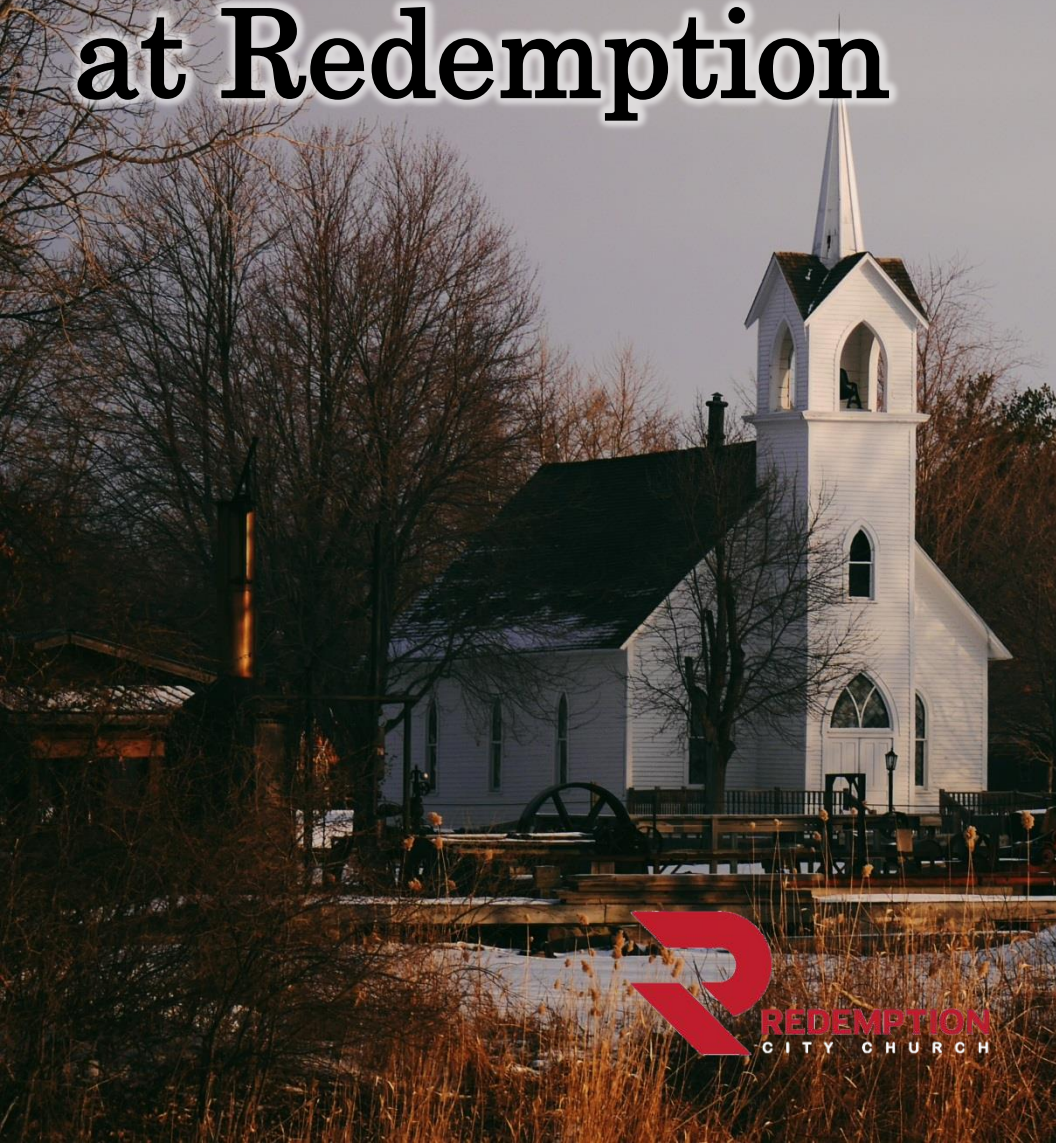


Church *Membership* at Redemption



REDEMPTION
CITY CHURCH

Contents

Introduction.....	2
1. History of God’s People.....	3
2. The Marks of a Church	7
3. Membership Responsibilities and Privileges	12
Appendix 1 – Redemption City Church Membership Covenant	16
Appendix 2 – Frequently Asked Questions	21
Appendix 3 – Recommended Resources	27

Introduction

More than we realize our culture influences what we believe about God and his work in the world. This is especially true in what we think about the church. Our Western individualism leads us to think that salvation is something between me and God. The church is a voluntary organization that I can choose when I want to come and go. Just like any other voluntary club in our country, we choose a church to be among people who are just like us and when we don't like what is going on we leave.

So it is with much of the church today. Many churches require very little of their members and the attenders feel little personal benefit of taking the further step of membership.

Alternatively, we at Redemption City Church believe that membership is vital to the life of every Christian. It is for the good of every believer, for the advancement of the gospel, and for the glory of God. The church is where the life of the redeemed people of God takes place and it models to the world what citizenship will be like in the unfolding kingdom of God.

How can we say that? Where does the Bible talk about membership? Glad you asked. The following guide provides a brief introduction to church membership showing the trajectory of God's people through the Bible, outlining the nature of the church, and presenting the responsibilities and privileges of church membership.

1. History of God's People

The Bible is not just a collection of unrelated ideas for moral living, but the historical unfolding story of God's plan and work to create a world of people in relationship with him. It is told through a series of covenants defining who is a member of God's blessed people and who is outside that family of blessing. Church membership—though the phrase will not be found in Scripture—is not a foreign concept in God's Word, but a construct that is consistent from beginning to end. God has always defined how he relates to his people through covenants, stipulating proper relationships within the community, marking the identity of those who are in, and separating from the community those who refuse to submit to his authority delegated to his representatives. We see that pattern from Genesis to Revelation, from beginning to end. And so we should expect no different in the current age of the church on mission.

Garden of Eden

Some may not see much covenantal relationship in the Garden, but the marks are all there. God made the man outside the garden and placed him inside (Gen. 2:7–8) where presents himself to Adam and Eve as the ruler of all creation. He delegates responsibilities to them and outlines the blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. If they want to stay in the Garden they will submit to God's covenantal obligations. If they rebel they will be cast

outside the Garden community, which is exactly what we see happen (Gen. 3:22–24).

Noah's Ark

But God still has a plan to fill the earth with his glorious image. Adam and Eve disobeyed and evil spread throughout the earth so God chose to start with a new covenant community in Noah's family (Gen. 6–9). Again we see that those who obey will get in the boat and remain there while those outside will be destroyed just like those outside the garden. Being a member of God's people is a matter of life and death.

Israel

Yet even when God re-established the covenant with Noah it did not produce lasting effect. So God scattered the people throughout the earth (Gen. 11) and once again began a new community through one man, Abraham, and his children—particularly Israel. The majority of the OT explains one example of covenant living as a community under the authority of Yahweh the King. The laws provide protection for the little nation of Israel assuming they remain faithful to their Protector. The covenant documents (Genesis–Deuteronomy) outline what faithful living looks like along with blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. The community must be careful to discipline each other to keep out any impurities otherwise the entire community will be judged (which is what ultimately happened because they were not careful to hold one another accountable).

Gaining even more clarity, we see that God again delegated much of his authority to various people in this society. Nobody declared himself a clean member of Israelite society. You entered the community two ways: by birth or by conversion. Both ways required submitting to covenantal authority and practices starting with circumcision (marking your entrance into the community). And you were severely disciplined—kicked out of the camp/city/nation or killed—if you disobeyed or became unclean, treated again like a foreigner. The only way to return was to submit to covenant stipulations implemented by the priests. Only the priests could declare you clean and welcome you into the presence of God for worship. None of these declarations were made on your own, but your experience needed to be affirmed by those in proper authority (e.g. Lev. 13).

Jesus

Many people want to see Jesus as so radically transforming this pattern of history that he blows the doors wide open and allows people to come in and out as they please. But Jesus is Yahweh. He is the same God who is still implementing his plan to redeem the earth bringing his kingdom through covenants. Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). That is, he didn't come to completely overthrow the pattern of history, but to fix it, to keep it himself and then make it possible for his own followers to keep it as well.

So even in his own life we see the pattern of history repeated, but surprisingly flipped on its head. He is the only one faithful to keep the covenant and yet for our sake he took upon himself the covenant curses (Gal. 3:13). He was put outside the camp for his people (Heb. 13:12-13). He was rejected by God as a covenant breaker (Matt. 27:46; 2 Cor. 5:21). He was put outside, so that those who are in him can be welcomed in. It is the same inside-the-community vs. outside-the-community paradigm patterned throughout history.

New Jerusalem

But before we can jump right from Jesus to the church it is helpful to remember what still awaits us in the New Heavens and New Earth. Too quickly we jump to our understanding of the church by looking to what we will experience in eternity and we forget that we have not yet arrived. We must be careful to not prematurely expect the eternal church to be experienced in this in-between time. Yes we will experience perfect unity and love in heaven. At that time we will truly know who is in (heaven) and who is out (hell). The visible church in perfect relationship with God will cover the earth. But we aren't in that day yet. That is still an invisible (though very real) truth. But Jesus expected that these invisible realities would have a tangible, visible expression in this current age (Matt. 5:16).

And the local church is a wonderful opportunity to testify to Christ's work of building that eternal church during this time. In many ways the church on earth in this age

represents to the world what is promised to those who turn to Christ. In Jesus's blood he established a new covenant community defining who is in God's blessing and who is out, receiving God's curses. And amazingly, until the day he returns to finish the work himself, he has implemented a plan in the local church to model what that eternal reality will look like through authoritative representation in church membership.

2. The Marks of a Church

If this authority and boundary marking is a consistent pattern in biblical history, we would expect to see it show up in the way the Bible describes the structure and responsibilities of the church. Though some churches today don't see it, the pattern is repeated in how the NT organizes local churches. These structures and responsibilities describe the identity of the body, what makes us distinct from the world. It helps us visibly represent who is in the covenant community and who is out when there are no longer garden boundaries, ark boundaries, or city walls to distinguish between in and out. A church is more than Christians getting together (though it is not less than that [Heb. 10:25]). It is a body exercising covenant authority on behalf of the King.

Ambassadors

One place we see this reality is in 2 Corinthians 5:17–21. The church is made into a new creation. Where Adam, Noah, and Israel blew it as new creations, we will not,

because we have the Spirit indwelling us. But we are not left as a new creation without responsibility. Just like those previous societies, we have obligations as members of this new society. Being reconciled to God we are called to be instruments of reconciliation which Paul calls “ambassadors.”

An ambassador is a person who has the authority to speak on behalf of a nation in the midst of a foreign nation. Christians are given the responsibility as we sojourn through this world to invite others to become citizens of the kingdom of heaven declaring who has a legitimate claim to citizenship and who does not (i.e. who is in and who is out).

Holders of the Keys to the Kingdom

This foreign embassy concept is assigned by Jesus himself in Matthew 16:13–19. Jesus responds there to Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God by telling him he is giving Peter (and the disciples) the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Keys are to open doors and Jesus clarifies saying that the doors to which Peter has the authority are to heaven itself. Somehow Peter and the disciples (as the foundation of the universal church) have the authority to determine who is in and who is out.

For a moment this is starting to sound very Roman Catholic giving all the authority to the big guys in charge of the worldwide church. But this phrase of binding and loosing what is in heaven and on earth is found two chapters later

in Matthew 18:15–20. There we realize that this authority over determining who is in and out of the kingdom is not just given to the original 12 disciples, but Jesus expands it to the entire church (in the context to local assemblies). Every disciple is responsible for the profession of faith of every other disciple. We are all to hold one another accountable to growing in faithful obedience to Christ and if we don't maintain faithfulness to the covenant, just like the pattern of biblical history, Matthew 18 prescribes the process for casting an unfaithful person out of the community.

This is a heavy responsibility. It is not a frivolous task. It tells us that church membership is more about maintaining a faithful witness to the world than simply joining some other believers for some encouragement.

All believers are called to be connected to a local embassy in order to be affirmed in our own faith and to affirm (or deny) the faith of others. That means we don't walk around this world claiming to be a Christian on our own apart from a local church any more than an American walks around Uganda claiming to be American without a United States passport. We can be certain of that identity on our own, but when we want to do anything relationally with that identity we need to have the authority of a local embassy to give that profession weight. As ambassadors we bear the name of Christ. We need the church to help us bear that name well so our lives do not bring shame upon his name before a watching world and to publically deny our profession if

we continue in sin to let the world know that persistent unrighteousness is not a characteristic of God's people.

The Instruments of Kingdom Authority

For many people this concept of authority, accountability, and membership invokes imagery of abuse and irrelevant rituals. We've all seen authority go to someone's head leading to oppressing those under his authority. But this authority is very limited in scope. Jesus doesn't give us all his authority, just the authority to hold one another accountable to our professions of faith. And he doesn't give us unlimited tools to wield that authority. He gives us two. They are rather common in churches, but most people don't connect them with membership authority. They are baptism and the Lord's Supper.

When Jesus institutes these two ordinances he does it with this same concept of representational authority in mind. In Matthew 28:18–20 Jesus sends his disciples out on the Great Commission. But he begins by saying, “All authority...has been given to me.” Then he sends his disciples out into the world to make disciples under that authority. They can only make disciples with the authority that Jesus shares with them. And Jesus gives them a tool to do this: baptism. Baptism is initiating a disciple into the community of disciples who respond genuinely to the teaching of Jesus. Baptism is the first picture of a life surrendered to Christ (Cf. Rom. 6:1–6). Baptism (immersion) into Christ is the way we enter into the kingdom of God. That invisible reality is made visible by

baptism in water as the entrance into the local church community.

The Lord's Supper is a sign of continuing unified fellowship with one another. In Matthew 26:17–29 Jesus shared a meal with his disciples who represented his new covenant society and said the meal symbolized his blood which established that new covenant people of God. Jesus's own blood obtained the authority to create this community and hold them together. And he commands us to share this sacrament as a continuing sign of our unity in the covenant. If you faithfully represent Christ in the community you partake in the meal. If a person lives in a way that breaks the covenant obligations he is to be barred from receiving this ongoing affirmation of faithfulness.

When a person enters the covenant family they then have responsibilities to the others. These realities of baptism, Lord's Supper, and membership are closely related in 1 Corinthians 11–13. The church in Corinth is a divided mess with all kinds of unfaithfulness present. Paul told them to cast someone out of the community in 1 Cor. 5. Then in chapter 11 he rebukes their division concerning the Lord's Supper telling them that this should be a time of affirming one another in Christ. The foundation of this call comes in 1 Cor. 12:13 when he says we are all baptized in one Spirit and continues to explain how we should work together like a healthy body, each part working to keep the other parts working well. The point of it all (membership, the Lord's Supper, and baptism) is to create a unified community of

love (1 Cor. 13:1–13) that points away from itself and toward its benevolent, loving King Jesus. We employ each of these tools to display Christ to the world and hold each other accountable to participate faithfully in that display. One does not receive the continuing affirmation (Lord's Supper) without first making the public surrender/commitment to local unity (baptism into membership) and remaining faithfully in that fellowship.

3. Membership Responsibilities and Privileges

That all sounds good in theory, but what does it look like practically in the life of a local church? Why should a Christian join a local church and what are her covenant responsibilities? When we surrender our lives to Christ we surrender our identities to be shaped by his covenant community. What does that look like for the believer?

Metaphors

One way to answer the question is to consider the various metaphors that are used for the church. These give some indication of how we as believers committed to one another in a local body relate to one another.

- **Ambassadors** (2 Cor. 5:20) – we verify the legitimacy of the authority claimed in our professions of faith.
- **Family** (Matt. 12:49–50; Rom. 8:12–17; 2 Cor. 6:18; Eph. 2:19; Gal. 6:10; 1 Tim. 3:14–15; 5:1;

Heb. 3:6; 1 Pet. 4:17) – we care for one another through thick and thin and share joys and sorrows, adventures and struggles together.

- **Body** (Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:11–16) – each part is connected to the others with a unique ability to help the body grow and move to accomplish its calling.
- **Bride of Christ** (Rev. 19:7–8; 21:9; 2 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 5:31–32) – we make ourselves pure and lovely to present ourselves collectively to our groom.
- **Temple** (1 Cor. 3:11–17; 6:19; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Pet. 2:5–7) – we fit our lives together like individual bricks shaped by God just right to fit together into a building and work at becoming a pleasing place for God to dwell.
- **Priests** (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10) – we represent one another before God, sacrifice on behalf of others, and work to make each other clean and holy before his presence.

Each of these certainly is true of the universal church, but is most practically lived out as we shape our lives together around one another in a local assembly.

Covenant Stipulations

Another way to talk about membership is the covenant stipulations that are required for being in this community. God required no eating of the tree to be in the Eden community. He required a specific type of holiness (guided by 613 commands!) to live in Israel. All of these may be

summarized as submission to God-ordained authority (Eph. 5:18, 21). To love God with all your heart, soul, and strength (Deut. 6:6) was to submit yourself to his commands (John 14:15, 23; 1 John 2:3). It is no different in the new covenant. Summarily, those commands are to love God and one another (Matt. 22:40; Gal. 5:14). We must be willing to give up everything else to be part of this family (Mark 10:28–30; Luke 9:23). We shape our entire lives around this new family. While we do what we can to care for outsiders (Luke 10:25–37), there is an even greater emphasis on caring for our Christian brothers and sisters (Gal. 6:10). There are almost 60 commands in the NT describing how members of a local church relate to “one another.” It is by this love for one another that together we display to the world that we are loved by Christ (John 13:35).

(For a more specific summary of these obligations see Appendix 1 for the Redemption City Church Membership Covenant, a summary of New Covenant obligations to one another.)

Some may say that these are commands for the universal body of believers from all times and places. Again, we would affirm the truth of that, but we won’t experience that reality fully until the new creation. Jesus intended for that reality to be alive today, in this age. How does one submit to his elders (Heb. 13:17) without having a local elder to submit to? How do you bear one another’s burdens unless you know someone well enough to know her burdens (Gal.

6:2)? How do we love one another deeply covering a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8) unless we have committed to be together as a local group of people through trials and failures?

Paul wrote about these glorious truths of the universal church to local churches expecting these realities to be expressed locally. He didn't tell the Corinthians to be a unified body with Jerusalem, but with one another. He didn't tell the Ephesians that leaders there are to equip the Roman church for the building of the body. Each church is its own independent (yet cooperative with others) ministry to the saints.

Church membership is a short-hand way of summarizing the history of God's people from Genesis through Christ to our hope of glory in the New Heavens and New Earth. It isn't a call to join our club; it is an invitation to join us in representing this glorious reality to a dying world. It is quite literally God's plan for filling the earth with his glory, for taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Church membership is no light matter. This committed rag-tag group of people is God's display of hope for the entire world. It is for your good and for ours and ultimately for the glory of Christ.

Will you join us in this mission?

Appendix 1 – Redemption City Church Membership Covenant

Throughout Scripture, God has related to his people through covenants. The purpose of the covenants was to establish the relational expectations placed upon both parties. As Christians, we live in covenant with God and with fellow members of the body of Christ. Relating to God under the New Covenant, we rejoice that before the foundation of the world God has ordained his people, formerly in a state of sin and death, to be made alive together with Christ. As the local body of Christ, God has also ordained that we should covenant with one another; being redeemed individuals, we are many members comprising one body.

The Biblical Foundation of Membership:

1. The author of Hebrews forbids Christians to walk apart from the local church (Hebrews 10:25).
2. The early church kept account of who was a Christian (Acts 2:37-42), cared for their spiritual growth (Acts 2:42, 44-47), and updated their membership as new Christians were added (Acts 2:47).
3. The local congregation in Jerusalem held elections (Acts 6:1-6).
4. The care of members among the body was not to be neglected; therefore, a clear list of widows was made (1 Timothy 5:3-16).

5. Discipline and restoration takes place within the local congregation (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 6:1).
6. Obedience to exercise the gift(s) given to us happens while being engaged in the local church (Romans 12:3-13; 1 Corinthians 12).
7. Members and leaders of the local body are accountable to each other (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Timothy 5:19-21). For mutual accountability, it is necessary to know the members of the local congregation.

The Purpose of this Covenant:

1. To acknowledge and join the work of the Holy Spirit that is already present in our lives. It is only through the Christ exalting work of the Holy Spirit that the community of believers is brought into true fellowship.
2. Encourage members to hold one another accountable in love, as we all seek to be conformed into the image of Christ.

By the grace of God, the leaders covenant to do the following:

1. Preach the Word that exalts Christ and edifies and equips the body (Ephesians 4:11-16; 2 Timothy 4:1-2).
2. Lovingly care for you and seek your growth in Christ (Colossians 1:28-29; 1 Peter 5:1-3).
3. Conduct ourselves, before you and God, in a manner that is above reproach and representative of the calling that God has placed on our lives (1

Timothy 3:1-13 and 5:17-22; Titus 1:5-9, 1 Peter 5:1-4).

4. Pray for you throughout the week, especially when there are trials or sickness in your life (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12; Ephesians 1:15-20; James 5:14).
5. Humbly and prayerfully exercise church discipline for the sake of God's glory, the purity of the church, and the soul of the one being disciplined (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 6:1, Hebrews 12:4-11).
6. Shepherd the church selflessly, knowing that we will have to give an account for your soul that God has entrusted to us (1 Peter 5:1-4; Hebrews 13:17; James 3:1).
7. Guard and shepherd the flock, whom God has entrusted to us, from false teachers and doctrines (Acts 20:26-30; Matthew 7:15; 1 Timothy 1:3-7).
8. Oversee care to the genuine physical needs among church members (Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 5:3-16; James 1:27).
9. Equip and encourage you to serve Christ with the gift(s) that the Spirit has given you. (Ephesians 4:11-13, Romans 12:3-13; 1 Corinthians 12).

By the grace of God, I covenant to the following:

1. That I am a Christian, who has been forgiven of my sins and bought with the blood of Christ. In a proclamation of this transfer from death to life I have been baptized in obedience with Scripture (Galatians 3:13-15; Colossians 1:13-20; 1 Peter 1:18-19; Romans 6:3-4).
2. Pursue a joyous and devout walk with Christ in our

lives and homes, through personal Bible reading, prayer, and meditation (Philippians 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Psalm 119:97; Psalm 1:1-3).

3. Walk with other members in love, so that we may be mutually encouraged and edified in our relationship with Christ. (Acts 2:46-47; John 13:34-35; Proverbs 27:17, 1 Peter 4:8).
4. Live a life characterized by humility, abstaining from gossip, and working to resolve all conflict with other members. (Philippians 2:1-8; James 4:10; Proverbs 16:28; James 1:26; Ephesians 4:1-3; Matthew 18:15-20).
5. Joyfully share the unsearchable riches of Christ with those whom God has placed in my life (Matthew 28:18-20; Ephesians 3:7-10; Psalm 96:3-4; Acts 1:8; Luke 24:44-47).
6. Welcome and biblically test the instruction of the elders, in accordance with the Statement of Faith, as we seek to grow in biblical unity of the truth (Hebrews 13:17; 1 John 4:1; Ephesians 4:13-14).
7. Cheerfully give to support the ministry of this church and be faithful stewards of everything that God has entrusted to us (2 Corinthians 9:6-11; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; Luke 16:1-13; Matthew 25:14-30).
8. Live out the gospel in community, so that we may not dishonor God, pollute the church, or corrupt our souls. If the need should ever arise, we will submit to biblical church discipline, so that we may be restored in our relationship with God and the church (Leviticus 20:7; Matthew 18:15-20; Galatians 6:1; Hebrews 12:4-11)

9. Exercise the spiritual gift(s) that been given to us for the building up of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13, Romans 12:3-13; 1 Corinthians 12; 1 Peter 4:10-11).
10. Covenant and submit to another likeminded church, as far as it is possible, if I remove myself from this church.
11. Submit to the authority of Scripture as the final arbiter on all matters (Psalm 119; 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Appendix 2 – Frequently Asked Questions

What must a person believe to be a member of Redemption?

Our church rejoices to affirm to modern statements of faith among others from history. Members are held accountable to the Southern Baptist Convention's *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*. This is a fairly simple statement of faith that allows for multiple secondary doctrines to be united under more basic essential doctrines affirmed by Baptists throughout history.

Our elders are expected to affirm a more thorough statement of faith which reflects the distinctions of our theology that will be reflected in our teaching and defense of the gospel. The *Bethlehem Elder Affirmation of Faith* (both of these statements can be found on our website) is the expectation of belief for those tasked in teaching and shepherding the flock of God at Redemption.

We are also especially sympathetic to the work of the London Baptists who carefully crafted the 1689 2nd London Baptist Confession. (See also the New Hampshire Confession of Faith of 1833 and the Westminster Confession of Faith.)

We recognize that everyone is not a theological scholar and expresses biblical truths in such a systematic way. These statements are not intended to be a minimum set of truths to

be fully understood at the point of joining in membership, but as a guide to gently keep us on the narrow path as we grow to understand them more fully. We all begin this spiritual journey toward Christ as newborn babes with a basic knowledge of the gospel and grow in maturity toward a more complete understanding of God's work as described in the Bible. These statements are simply expressions of our understanding of the Bible's description God and his work in creation which will guide us to hold one another accountable to God's righteousness and faithful stewardship of his authority on earth.

How do we practice church discipline?

Matthew 18:15–20 is the text most commonly referenced to describe the process of discipline. We do not undertake this task lightly as we are dealing with the glory of God reflected in one another. Truly, the entire life of the church is one of discipline as we exhort one another to flee from sin and run to Christ in repentance and faith.

Unfortunately, sometimes we fail to heed that call, so we follow a pattern outlined by our Savior to urge one another to humbly submit to the call of Christ through the church (i.e. faithful members of the local church). First, we plead individually with the wayward brother. Then, we pursue him with a group of witnesses who can attest to the sin and whose voice may have better relational weight. Next, we encourage the whole church to join in this effort. Finally,

the wayward member is removed from membership, publically declaring that we can no longer affirm his profession of faith.

Jesus says in Matthew 18 that the whole effort is intended to “gain your brother.” Seeking a heart of humility and repentance is the goal, not declaring who is right and wrong.

It is a sad thing for someone to leave the church no matter how it happens (sending a beloved brother on mission, transferring a faithful sister to another church, or disciplining a wayward friend). But discipline requires pleading in tears and with urgency because the soul of someone we deeply care about is at stake. This isn’t about declaring who is right or who is at fault. It is about seeking hearts of repentance for the whole church.

With that goal in mind it, this kind of discipline isn’t a quick process (usually) but a long, patient pleading which strives for love to cover a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8). We don’t want people to leave, but we have mercy on those who doubt and save others by snatching them out of the fire (Jude 22–23). The first step of this process should be occurring regularly as we confess our sins to one another (James 5:16) with the hope that we obtain assurance together in the faith.

How does Redemption relate to other churches?

Emphasizing church membership does not mean we don't respect other churches. In fact it means even more that we need other churches. We could not possibly do all the work of the harvest without other churches (Matt. 9:38). We want to plant more churches and work in partnership with others as much as possible so they can reach and equip people in ways that we are unable. We can share broader ministry efforts that we could never do alone (while at the same time not losing each church's identity as a separate embassy). We pray for other churches in town every Sunday morning from the pulpit asking God to bring revival not just through us but all the churches near us.

This spirit of teamwork means then that we aren't interested in grabbing everyone in this city for ourselves. We want every Christian to be committed to a local church somewhere so their gifts can be employed where they might not have a place for expression at another church. For many people Redemption won't be the right fit so we encourage many people to connect more deeply with another church. We meet regularly with other pastors to understand their ministries better so we can in good conscience send faithful Christians to any church in town.

By emphasizing church membership we aren't suggesting we are the only church in town that does it right. We are simply saying that every Christian should find a church (and there are more than a few decent options in our city)

where they can give themselves as fully to the life of the church as possible.

Why do I need to formally join a church? Can't I just give myself relationally without doing something so structured like becoming a member?

We live in a culture that hates formal commitments and loves free association above all else. We decide whom to relate with and when. Marriage has been on the decline while cohabitation is on the rise. People say, “I don’t need a pastor/judge/priest/piece-of-paper to show my commitment to another person.” But the evidence seems to suggest we do.

There is something about a formal commitment that cements an idea in our hearts and gives it a sense of permanence. Sure it is just a piece of paper, but the words on that paper that hold my name on it inscribe a gravity and longevity on my heart. It is that ceremony containing vows and promises that comes rushing to memory when a moment of weakness, doubt, or despair comes along.

Our salvation is similar. There is a legal aspect and a relational aspect to it. Relationally we are family with one another and indwelt by the Spirit. God walks with us and invites us into his presence where we can commune with him. The memories of these relational experiences draw us deeper into faith. This is the process of sanctification.

But there is also the legal aspect. There is a ceremony (Luke 15:7, 10), a “piece of paper” (i.e. a book: Rev. 13:8; 21:27). Our justification is a legal declaration that is the foundation of our relational sanctification. In our justification nothing physical actually happens, but in the heavenly courtroom our file is stamped with declarations of a new position. We are “not-guilty.” Our debt is paid (John 19:30). We are given new names (Rev. 2:17) adopted into a new family (Rom. 8:12–17). It is these formal commitments from God that confirm in us and lead us to better relational commitments.

So it is with church membership. There is a formal ceremony or initiation of publicly welcoming someone into the family (Baptism) along with ongoing relational affirmations (Lord’s Supper). We can’t enjoy the privileges of relational life together without first having the initiation ceremony (however each church decides to formalize it involving baptism).

Just like in marriage where we cannot enjoy the relational affirmation (sexual intimacy) without the formal commitment ceremony (public wedding). So we at Redemption emphasize membership and its two formal and relational signs in order to be consistent with the covenantal pattern of Scripture. This is not an attempt to legalistically create structures to limit God’s people, but to free them into the life of abundance he intends for us to experience within the human parameters in which he designed us.

Appendix 3 – Recommended Resources

1689 2nd London Baptist Confession of Faith (Chs. 26– 30)

Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (Chs. VI, VII)

Bethlehem Baptist Elder Affirmation of Faith (Ch. 12)

Church Membership – Jonathan Leeman

The Church: The Gospel Made Visible – Mark Dever

Sojourners and Strangers – Gregg Allison

The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love –
Jonathan Leeman

That Hideous Strength – C. S. Lewis

Nine Marks of a Healthy Church – Mark Dever

I Am a Church Member – Thom Rainer

What Is a Healthy Church Member? – Thabiti Anyabwile