



# CHURCH ESSENTIALS

Soccer clubs. Political parties. Karate schools. Credit cards. Airline Flier programs. We are so familiar with the idea of membership that we think we know what membership means when it comes to local churches. Membership for most organizations is something that you voluntarily associate with. It has its benefits. You put in your time and give your money and they give you benefits. “Membership has its benefits,” American Express told us back in 1987, and this captures the mindset of most people when it comes to the local church.

When people think about the local church, however, they fail to make a distinction between sports, politics, and awards programs. Those things are all things you voluntarily associate because you get something out of them, and as long as you get what you want, you stay. Membership in our day has a transactional approach – I will stay as long as I get the benefits of staying. But in the Church of Jesus Christ, he is Lord, and he brings you in and keeps you in.

When it comes to local churches, people often object to membership for a few reasons. First, some people will say that they can’t find any verse that points to membership in the Bible. And they’re right. There isn’t one verse. Membership is something that is an entailment – it’s a doctrine built out of the implications that Christians are chosen, identifiable, and kept. The New Testament church could distinguish fairly well who was part of the church and who wasn’t. They knew who was part of the flock. They weren’t foolproof, but they could see the fruit of the Spirit who had changed lives. They were a gospel people, and because of this reality, they cared for those who had made a profession of faith.

Second, people object to membership because of a concern about authority. They reason that if they don’t commit, they can’t get hurt. This, however, is like saying you’re not going to commit to one person in a relationship because you don’t want to be tied down if things get hard. But the reality is that life gets hard and leaving doesn’t deal with the struggles we face. What we need to find is not an authority structure that ties us down, but one that understands the nature of gospel authority – service, protection, and love. We want these things done rightly. We’ve just seen it done so poorly too often. But poor or bad authority doesn’t mean we should throw it all away.

Finally, when people object to membership, they have misunderstood the nature of the Church. The church isn’t a club you join, it’s an embassy of heaven that gathers the redeemed to call others to join in the worship of King Jesus. The church has understood this through the ages. We gather together as people marked by the Spirit of God to go, show, and tell who Jesus is.

If there is one place in the New Testament that points out the beauty of what it means to belong to this embassy of the redeemed, the kingdom of the firstborn, it’s in the letter to the Hebrews. The writer of Hebrews points out how Jesus is better, and one of the major arguments he makes is how Jesus is better in creating a new covenant. The implications of this covenant is a covenant community of regenerate church members. And I want us to see why

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belonging to the assembly of the firstborn, the church of Jesus Christ is key to the writer of Hebrews.

## **The Problem: A Covenant that Couldn't Change Wayward Hearts**

The writer of Hebrews writes to great lengths to show why Jesus is better. And in showing that Jesus is better, he begins by pointing out how the covenant God made with Israel was faulty.

Now we have some difficulties here – and one of the difficulties is a confusing one that I won't get in to at great length. There are two versions of this passage, and the ESV notes that in the footnote below. One says that the problem was with the people; the other says the problem was with the covenant. Both statements are true, but it seems that the first covenant was faulty. If the first covenant was adequate, there wouldn't be need for a new one.

The weakness of the Old Covenant given at Sinai was not with God's promises – he had delivered Israel from Egypt – he had taken them by the hand (v. 9), suggesting a strong yet compassionate act of salvation, but Israel did not remain faithful to the covenant (v. 9). In the first covenant, Israel was to bind the law on their heads and wrists, to have it on their heart and write it in their homes (Deut. 6:6-9), to remember God's saving work and live in light of his grace. If Israel obeyed the covenant, they were blessed, but if they disobeyed, they would experience the curses of the covenant (Deut 26-28). By the time of Jeremiah, it was evident that Israel did not continue in the covenant. The northern kingdom had fallen in 722BC and the southern kingdom had just fallen (586BC). The exile was evidence that Israel had failed to keep the covenant. This is what Jeremiah means when he says that the Lord had said, "For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them" (Heb. 8:9). The language here of no concern or neglect was used in 2:3 where the people are told not to neglect such a great salvation.

Israel & Judah were responsible for their disobedience, and their disobedience showed the limitations of the covenant at Sinai. The Sinai covenant had a limitation – it couldn't change the heart. It could tell people what to do, but it couldn't make people want to do it. Israel returned to the land, but the dominion of Rome meant that the freedom and joy promised had not been experienced. If the only problem was human disobedience, God might have renewed the people's willingness to obey the Sinai covenant.

## **The Solution: A Better Covenant for Renewed Hearts**

So instead, God promised through Jeremiah that there was a better covenant coming (Jer. 31:31-34). This is the longest quotation of an OT passage in the NT and it is referred to here and in 10:15-17, functioning like bookends to why Jesus is better. Jeremiah tells us why a new covenant would solve the problem – how would Israel experience the blessings of the promises to Abraham – to be God's people in God's place in God's presence?

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The new covenant isn't just some future promise, but it is the realization of Deut. 30:6 – God would put his spirit in his people's hearts by circumcising their hearts – removing the heart of stone and giving them a heart of flesh. Jeremiah complained that the people had uncircumcised hearts (Jer. 4:4; 9:25-26). The purpose of a circumcised heart according to Deut. 30:6 was that the people would love God with all their heart and soul so that they would know eternal life. This means that their desires would change – an internal heart change would produce a desire to obey God's commands, showing that they were God's people and God was their God.

There are three things I want us to notice that pertain to a believing church community that come out of Hebrews 8:7-13.

First, God said he would write the law on the heart. Whereas the old covenant given to Moses was written on stone tablets that the people were to write in boxes and on their doorposts and put into their hearts, God says that there will be a new covenant that he will do the work of doing. Notice the language of "I will..." throughout these verses. This is a work of God. Whereas the law given to Moses was written on stone, this law would be written on the heart, doing what Ezekiel had been told – having their hearts of stone removed and giving them a heart of flesh. And the promise of this covenant was that God would be their God and we would be his people – a refrain that is stated in Exod. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; and Rev. 21:3. This is the language of covenant. God will make a new covenant that changes the heart. The motivation would come from within now to obey.

Second, God said that the new community would be made up of believers. When Jeremiah wrote that people would no longer say "Know the Lord," he is using the language of experience. He isn't saying people would merely have information about the Lord, but that they would have experienced his saving grace. In v. 11, we discover that part of the problem with Israel was that it was a mixed community of believers and unbelievers. Since the early days (Judges 2:10) the people didn't know the Lord. This problem only increased (Hosea 4:1, 6). Jeremiah said there would come a day where people wouldn't have to tell their neighbour to know the Lord. In the new covenant community, everyone will know the Lord – meaning that from the least to the greatest, every member of the new covenant community would be regenerate – knowing the Lord, believing, loving God, the law written on their hearts and minds.

Third, the reason people would want to do God's will as believers is because their sins were forgiven. New covenant members then truly are Christians, and belong to the church of Jesus Christ. And the reason these people are truly believers is described in 8:12 – they will know the forgiveness of their sins by the Lord who remembers their sins no more. The Old covenant couldn't completely remove sins (See Heb. 10:1-4). But Christ's sacrifice brings lasting forgiveness. And because Christ has come, the old covenant has disappeared and no longer plays a role. It can be summed up by this little poem, whose source is unknown:

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Run and run, the law demands, but gives us neither feet nor hands.  
Better news the gospel brings; it bids me fly and gives me wings.

And this promise that Jeremiah speaks to is to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. This language of house, I want to suggest, implies that there was a head of a house who would over see the people and lead them. In Christ Jesus, he is the head of this house. He comes and fulfills everything that Israel and Judah failed to do. And all those who trust in him as the one who has fulfilled all of God's promises are brought into the blessings of that household.

## **A New Covenant Community of Christians**

What does this have to do with membership? I want us to understand that the new covenant means that local churches are to be made up of regenerate Christians. It is the task of the elders of the church to shepherd the flock and guard the good deposit of the gospel. What this means here at CBC is that we seek to ensure that those who are called members are people who have experienced a change of heart, who know the Lord, and whose sins are forgiven. Practically, what does this mean?

It means that as a church, our membership is made up – to the best of our ability – of people who represent King Jesus as his ambassadors. We do this in several ways. First, we have a class where we introduce people to CBC to what we believe, how we work, and what makes us tick. Our introduction class is intended to showcase that the Gospel is our priority. We are a gospel people.

Second, it means that we host a membership class where we take time to meet with and get to know every person who wants to join and be a part of CBC. The membership class goes through our beliefs and practices to a greater degree. We want to be upfront about what we believe and how these things work themselves out in showing the gospel.

Third, it means that our elders meet with every potential member. We want to care for people's souls! We want this church to reflect the kingdom of heaven as much as we can here on earth. So we ask people about their beliefs. We ask them to share the gospel in a minute or less. We ask them to share in the covenant as a church.

Fourth, it means that we work to have baptism and the Lord's supper for believers. In baptism I ask people to make a clear profession of faith. They share their testimony. They explain their forgiveness of sins and their knowledge that God is their God in Jesus Christ. It's why we explain before we eat communion that this meal is for those who belong to Jesus Christ.

And fifth, we make it our aim that those who teach the gospel, who are involved in worship ministry, who are the teachers of Sunday school or life groups are believers. We want to make sure that the gospel is going forward. God has promised the success of the gospel, and he

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makes that clear in Jeremiah by saying what he will do. He will change hearts. He will bring people to know the Lord. He will forgive sins. Our responsibility is to do what he has asked us to do – and Paul told Timothy that local churches need to guard the deposit of the gospel. One way we make sure that this church remains faithful to her mission and calling is to make the gospel central.

In the Old Testament, Israel failed miserably. The reason Israel failed miserably is that their hearts weren't changed inwardly; they were a mixed community who was not changed by the knowledge of God's saving power.

But the local church is different. We are a changed people. We know the Lord's saving power. We celebrate and never grow bored of the gospel.

And as we celebrate the gospel and keep our eyes on the main thing, the promise Jesus made will stand – he will build his church. The local church, the universal church, the church fixed on the gospel.

Brands are always trying ways to find enticements so people will buy their product. It's new and improved! The quality is better! This works more efficiently! But we don't need new and improved methods for reaching the world. We have been given the best message of all – a message that doesn't get any better than this:

When Jesus Christ came into the world, he came to save people who have been enslaved to sin – habits, patterns, ways of life that live for self instead of for God. But by living a perfect life, dying and defeating the power of death, and rising again and going to heaven to be our high priest who intercedes for us, we can know that the power of selfish, sinful ways is broken. We can live a new life. And we can love one another and show the world that there is a better kingdom – one that will never be shaken in a world where everything feels shaken.

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