

I want to describe the practice that I found when I arrived at my church five years ago. We had a formal membership, but there was not only no emphasis on membership, it was thought unspiritual to be concerned about membership. People who are into membership just want to vote, and if you all you want to do is vote, then you must not be very spiritual. Baptism was practiced and celebrated, but often as not, the baptism happened at a youth or adult retreat, and the church was informed of it later. The decision to baptize was a private one made by the individual and the pastor or retreat leader in charge. And though you couldn't be a member unless you'd been baptized, there was no expectation that baptism should lead to membership, much less conveyed it. The Lord's Supper was celebrated monthly, but the Table was not fenced, except to say you had to be a Christian by your own understanding. No one understood that baptism should precede the Lord's Supper, so many unbaptized self-professing Christians partook, including quite a few children based on parental judgment alone. It was also delivered remotely to children's workers and others in our very large building who weren't gathered in the auditorium. But the Lord's Supper was also regularly celebrated privately, as elders or even deaconesses had traveling kits to take to the nursing homes. And more than one Sunday school class, and small groups, celebrated on their own or at their not infrequent retreats. Finally, and ironically I might add, the church also practiced church discipline for unrepentant immorality.

Now I had done due diligence before accepting this pastorate. The process took two years, and I had asked every question I could think of. But it never occurred to me that I should ask about membership, baptism and the Lord's Supper, because I was Baptist, and the church that called me was Baptist. And though we might disagree over many things, I thought Baptists still agreed on the meaning and requirement of baptism for membership and communion. My very

first Sunday in the pulpit was a communion Sunday. I was trying hard not to change the liturgy too quickly, but when it came time to introduce the Lord's Supper, I did so as every Baptist pastor I had ever heard had done it. I limited participation to those who had been baptized and were members in good standing of a church that proclaimed the gospel. I didn't know what to make of the disconcerted looks of horror that I observed. I thought people were just irritated the service had gone long. Questions at the door afterward began to enlighten me; and the elders made sure I was fully informed at our next meeting. There were all sorts of objections. How can I refuse the Lord's Supper to a Christian? How can I require church membership, which isn't even biblical and many churches don't practice? But the objection that really shocked me was the one I heard most often. "Conservative Baptists have never believed what you're saying; we've never heard this before." I was being a divisive innovator. I had only been there a month, and I was in danger of losing my job because I was a Baptist in a Baptist church!

I begin with this true story to make the point at the outset: the question of what makes the church visible, and the role and purpose of boundary markers like membership, discipline, and the ordinances, is a live question in our churches, and an important one. Because what's at stake isn't just 2000 years of unbroken, unanimous tradition, but the very nature of the church and the gospel it proclaims and embodies. Is the church simply the plural of Christian, a collection of believing individuals whose commitments and obligations to one another goes no deeper than that between regular customers at the local Starbucks? Or is the church an authorized community with delegated authority to speak for the King and show what the kingdom is like? No doubt most of us would prefer our churches be compared to the Kingdom of God rather than Starbucks. But if that identification is going to hold true, then our practices, and specifically our practice of the boundary markers the King has given us, must back up our claim.

I'm going to examine three boundary markers: baptism, the Lord's Supper, and membership/discipline. I want to make the case that these practices are not mere tradition, a relic of a bygone High-Church age, but the means by which Jesus makes the gospel of his kingdom visible in the world. And that the church catholic has always understood them this way.

### **Baptism**

Let's begin with baptism, which at least for Baptist and baptistic churches has until recently been the least controversial of the three. There is almost no debate that baptism is an enduring dominical ordinance in the church. In his commission to the apostles, Jesus said in **Matthew 28:19** that they were to “*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” As the story of the early church unfolds on the pages of the New Testament, this is exactly what the apostles did. After Peter's stirring Pentecost sermon, Luke records in **Acts 2:41** that “*Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*” And they continued to baptize, in **Acts 8, 10, 16, and 18**. In fact, so universal was the practice of baptism that Paul could write to churches he had not started, nor even visited, and assume that those to whom he wrote had been baptized. So in **Romans 6:3**, he writes “*Or don't you know that all of us (including those Roman Christians!) who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*” And to the church in Colosse he writes, “*In him you (Colossian Christians) were also circumcised...having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.*” (**Colossians 2:11-12**) In both instances, the force of Paul's argument rests on the fact of their baptism, a baptism he could assume, so universal was the practice.

But what did it mean? To what end and purpose did Jesus command baptism? At this point, the mode of baptism need not detain us. But the object of baptism must. **Romans 10:10-13** makes clear, amongst other passages, that belief in the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, publicly professed, is the ordinary way of salvation. *“For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”*<sup>11</sup> *As the Scripture says, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”*<sup>12</sup> *For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him,*<sup>13</sup> *for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”* Justification is by faith alone. But according to the NT, while justifying faith is profoundly and inescapably personal, it is not private. There is no such thing as a secret or anonymous Christian. Genuine faith is public faith. Jesus himself made this clear in **Matthew 10:32-33**: *“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.”*<sup>33</sup> *But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.”* To be a Christian is to be a public witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostles played this role formally. Before his ascension, in **Acts 1:8**, Jesus said to them, *You are my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*, and the book of **Acts** documents the formal completion of that task, as the Gospel reaches Rome through Paul’s apostolic ministry. The apostles are gone, but having laid the foundation, we now continue that calling as public witnesses until Jesus returns.

And so the question remains, how is saving profession made? When does public witness begin? Not when we start evangelizing. Not when we walk an aisle

or sign a commitment card. As Bobby Jamieson has aptly put it in his thorough treatment of this question, faith goes public through baptism.<sup>1</sup>

We see this right at the beginning. In response to Peter's sermon at Pentecost, the crowd responded, "*What shall we do?*" Peter tells them, "*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.*" This isn't what we expected as readers. Jesus had gone around preaching, "*repent and believe,*" and if that's what Peter had said we wouldn't have missed a beat. But instead he says, "*Be baptized*" and immediately we're reminded of the Great Commission and we're alerted that conversion is more than a private, existential experience. The apostles were authorized to make disciples by bringing people who repented and believed into a public, accountable relationship with the risen Lord through baptism. From the beginning, baptism stands as a synecdoche for the entire conversion process of repentance, belief, and public profession.<sup>2</sup> This pattern of repentance and belief, publicly professed through baptism, is repeated throughout the book of Acts. (**Acts 8:12, 36, 38; 10:47; 16:14, 15, 33, 34; 18:8**)

Ironically, Baptists of all people seem to have forgotten this. Ever since the methods of evangelism popularized by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Awakening took hold in our churches, turning the weekly gathering into a stationary tent meeting, walking the aisle at an altar call, raising your hand at the invitation, and praying The Prayer has been considered the means of making one's faith public. In the early 1990's, when Mark Dever candidated at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, he was asked if he would reinstate the altar call, which the previous pastor had discontinued. When he said "No," one of his interlocutors asked incredulously, "How then is someone supposed to publicly confess his faith?" When I arrived at

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<sup>1</sup> Jamieson, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> Jamieson has ably argued this point, pp. 41-44.

Hinson five years ago, I was asked the very same question, and was told that I was keeping people from being obedient to the biblical command of public profession. Mark's reply was the same as my own: "***This is a Baptist church. I suggest they do it the way Christians have always done it: through baptism.***"

If New Testament teaching and practice is to be our guide, it seems inescapable that the design and purpose of baptism, both from its place in the dominical commission and its use in apostolic practice, is for the public confession of faith in Christ and the initiation of Christian discipleship. J.L. Dagg, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist pastor and theologian put it this way in his comments on the Great Commission: "***[The disciple] is baptized into a state of professed subjection to the Trinity. [Baptism] is the public act of initiation into the new service.***"<sup>3</sup>

And yet, if we stop there, we haven't done full justice to the biblical meaning of baptism. I've argued that baptism is a public act that declares our personal faith in and submission to Jesus Christ as Lord. That is its soteriological significance, as the public sign of an invisible faith that unites us to Christ in all of his saving work. But baptism has more than a soteriological significance. It has an ecclesial significance as well. Precisely because baptism initiates us into the life of faith as a disciple of Christ, it also initiates us into the community of faith as a member of the church of Christ.

Jesus Christ died for individual sinners. But it's also true that he died for a people, and his death and resurrection initiated the covenant that God has entered into with that people: the New Covenant. By virtue of being united to Christ by faith, we are, in Peter's magnificent description, "***a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.***" (1 Peter 2:9) As the public

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<sup>3</sup> J.L. Dagg, *Manual of Church Order*, p. 72.

confession of faith that unites us to Christ, baptism is a sign of this new covenant, and initiates us into that covenant relationship.

In *By Oath Consigned*, Meredith Kline argued convincingly that not only do most biblical covenants have a sign attached to them, but that the sign itself often conveys the promises and conditions of the covenant. So the sign of circumcision not only conveyed the promise of Abraham and his descendants being set apart to the Lord, being given in the organ of generation, but also conveyed the threat of being cut off from God and his people for disobedience, just as the foreskin was cut off. In this way, the sign was simultaneously a promise from God and an oath of allegiance on the part of Abraham and his descendants.<sup>4</sup> Baptism, as the sign of the New Covenant, conveys the promises of the spiritual blessings found in Christ: forgiven, washed clean, raised to new life with a new heart, and the baptism of the Spirit. However, unlike the Old Covenant, the curse of the covenant is not threatened against God's people, because God has already executed the curse against Christ. All that remains for the people of God are the blessings of the covenant that Christ has secured.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, baptism stands as our oath of allegiance as we are initiated into this new covenant relationship. Peter describes baptism as “*an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*” (1 Peter 3:21) It is an appeal for acceptance under the terms of the new covenant in Christ's blood, and therefore has corporate, as well as individual significance.<sup>6</sup> And so it's no surprise that the 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier, described baptism as “*a commitment made to God publically and orally before the congregation in which the baptized person renounces Satan and all his imagination and works.*”

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<sup>4</sup> Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), pp. 39-49, 86-89. See also Bobby Jamieson's discussion of this in *Going Public*, pp. 63-73.

<sup>5</sup> Jamieson, pp. 73-75

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

*He also vows that he will henceforth...regulate his life according to God's Word, ...and if he should fail to do so, he thereby promises the church that he would dutifully accept brotherly discipline from it and its members.*"<sup>7</sup> The modern Presbyterian, Michael Horton, agrees: *"In the covenantal economy, the function of the sign [of baptism] is not primarily to express an inner experience or wish. Nor is it primarily to refer symbolically to a state of affairs that transcends it. Rather, it is an obligation-creating act in the present that can only obtain in a relationship of persons."*<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the Puritan John Owen describes baptism as *"a solemn pledge of our entrance into Covenant with God, and of our giving up ourselves unto him in the solemn bond of religion."*<sup>9</sup> And the EFCA's own D. A. Carson has described baptism as *"a sign of both entrance into the Messiah's covenant community and of pledged submission to his Lordship."*<sup>10</sup>

This covenant community cannot simply be understood as the universal, invisible church. The baptism that brings us into that community is the baptism of the Spirit. Water baptism, the visible sign of the Spirit's regenerating, saving baptism, is given to the visible, local church, and it is into that visible community that the ordinance of baptism initiates us. Baptism therefore is a boundary marker, delineating the new covenant people of God from the world.<sup>11</sup> It marks out those who have sworn allegiance to the Lord, who have publicly taken on the discipline

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<sup>7</sup> Balthasar Hubmaier, "A Christian Catechism," in *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, ed. H. Wayne Pipken and John Howard Yoder, Classics of the Radical Reformation, vol. 5 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), pp. 350-351. Quoted in Jamieson, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: WJK, 2008), p. 102. Quoted in Jamieson, p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> John Owen, *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 3, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), p. 73. Quoted in Jamieson, p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank Gabelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), p. 597. Quoted in Jamieson, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> Jamieson, p. 78.

of Christ's rule and are therefore held accountable to it. It publicly identifies and binds the one to the many.<sup>12</sup> And this boundary is important for several reasons. On the one hand, the church is the institution that makes the Kingdom of God visible on earth.<sup>13</sup> We caught a glimpse of that in the passage from **1 Peter**, and it's why the NT is just as concerned as the OT that God's people be distinct from the world. If the church begins to look like the world, then God's embassy from heaven loses its credibility. And so baptism is the "swearing in ceremony" for new citizens,<sup>14</sup> reserved for those who have renounced their citizenship in the kingdom of darkness, and who have become citizens of God's kingdom of light. On the other hand, the church is the only institution that has been authorized to speak for King Jesus. Jesus has handed the keys of the Kingdom to the church (**Matthew 16:19**). We have an authority and a stewardship to bind and loose here on earth according to what has been bound or loosed in heaven.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, in baptism, the baptized is not the only person speaking. While he or she is swearing allegiance, the church is also speaking, affirming that this confessor is a true professor of the true gospel of our Lord. We are not, as early Anabaptists were accused of being, Se-baptizers. It is the church that baptizes, because it is the church to which the gospel was entrusted and it is the church that has the authority to confirm or deny our confession.<sup>16</sup>

What I've said so far about baptism might seem radical and impossibly high church for many evangelicals today. But in fact, regardless of the underlying theology of baptism, or subject or mode of baptism, the role of baptism as the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 5 *passim*; pp. 105, 142.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88; Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Crossway, 2010), pp. 194-195

<sup>14</sup> Jamieson, p. 94.

<sup>15</sup> See Leeman's excellent discussion in chapter 4 of *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*. Also Jamieson, pp. 83-96.

<sup>16</sup> Jamieson, pp. 82, 93; Leeman, p. 193.

initiating sign of discipleship and means of entrance into the local church has been universally held through church history.

That the early church baptized all those who professed faith is unquestioned. From the earliest allusions to baptism in *I Clement* (AD 96) and the *Letter of Ignatius to the Romans* (AD 98-117),<sup>17</sup> to the detailed instructions of the *Didache* in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century,<sup>18</sup> baptism was understood as the entry into the church. Ironically, the development of infant baptism and the doctrine of baptismal regeneration in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries only strengthened this connection. We even see it represented in the architecture of the medieval church. Where was the baptismal font located? Either in a separate building near the entrance of the church, called a baptistery, or in the narthex, right at the entrance of the nave, which began the church proper. The place of baptism visibly reinforced the theology of baptism as the entry into the church. Even when the Reformers developed a protestant theology of infant baptism, this aspect did not change. A baptized infant, though unregenerate, was considered a member of the visible covenant community by virtue of that baptism. And of course Baptist and baptistic churches have carried on in this unbroken tradition.

So how is that a little over 30 years ago, when my wife professed faith as a teenager in a local Baptist church in New England, the church was quick to baptize her, but no one ever talked to her about joining the church? Why is it in my church that both adults and youth were regularly baptized but not united with the church? In churches across the country, believer's baptism has become a merely personal statement about your allegiance to Christ, with no consideration of Christ's people, the church, at all. The church's role has been reduced to that of guests at a

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<sup>17</sup> Cyril C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, (New York: Touchstone, 1995), pp. 73n, 103n.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

wedding, silent witnesses to a personal transaction that did not involve them at all. From what I can tell, it didn't begin with baptism. It began with another boundary marker of the church, the Lord's Supper.

### **Lord's Supper**

In 1858, JL Dagg was concerned about a new practice among some Baptists who maintained that “*nothing ought to be a condition of communion, which is not a condition of salvation.*” These people held “*that all pious persons, baptized or unbaptized, have a right to the Lord's Supper.*”<sup>19</sup> As well meaning as it sounds, Dagg considered this a dangerous departure from Christian orthodoxy. He wrote, “*[B]aptism is a pre-requisite to communion at the Lord's Table...This is the doctrine which has been held on the subject by Christians generally, in all ages; and it is now held by the great mass of Paedobaptists. With them we have no controversy as to the principle by which approach to the Lord's table should be regulated.*”<sup>20</sup>

When we remember that for Dagg, and all Christians historically, baptism meant being brought into church membership, the reception of unbaptized persons at the Lord's Table meant that they were received on their own recognizance, as it were, without any formal examination or approbation by a local church. These innovators were not se-baptists. They were se-communionists. But what was a novelty then has become perhaps the majority practice in the evangelical world today. For such a radical change in the terms of admittance to the Table to have occurred, there must have been a radical change in what the Table means.

All four gospels recount the Lord's Supper, while the Synoptics make clear that Jesus intended this meal to be a lasting ordinance for the church, since we are to *eat in remembrance* of him. (**Luke 22:19**). Paul reiterates and amplifies that in

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<sup>19</sup> Dagg, p. 214.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

his directions to the Corinthian church, when he says that “*whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.*” (1 Cor. 11:26) But just as we asked with baptism, we must ask what does the Supper mean? To what end did Jesus institute this meal?

Paul makes clear that the Lord’s Supper is a meal, not only in which we proclaim the Lord’s death until he returns, but also in which we testify that we, by faith, participate with Christ in his death, and so have a share in the salvation his death and resurrection obtained. *Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?* (1 Corinthians 10:16) This makes sense, given that the Lord’s Supper is a transformation of the Passover meal.<sup>21</sup> In the Passover liturgy, given in **Exodus 13**, the head of the household is to say, “*I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.*” (Ex. 13:8) Fair enough, on the lips of the first generation. But every generation was to say this, acknowledging that God’s past salvation was present in their lives today. The Passover meal was a participation in the saving acts of God in the Exodus. So it is in the Lord’s Supper. Eating the meal acknowledges that our present maps onto Christ’s past suffering, and that we are included by faith in his historical saving act.<sup>22</sup>

But like the Israelites of old, our inclusion is not simply because of a personal, existential exercise of private faith. Rather our participation in the saving events of Calvary, which the meal represents, is based on our inclusion in the covenant community that Christ’s death inaugurated and for whom he died. Again, Jesus’ words at the Last Supper are instructive. The cup does not represent the blood of a simple sacrifice for sin that an Israelite might have offered at the

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<sup>21</sup> Jamieson, pp. 110-112.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Temple for himself. Rather Jesus call the cup *the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you*. (Luke 22:20) At the cross, the New Covenant was cut, ratified in Christ's blood. It is our inclusion in that New Covenant community, through faith in Christ and publically initiated at baptism, that gives us the right to claim the blessings of the covenant as our own and so to eat the covenant meal.<sup>23</sup>

The historical practice of the church catholic affirms this relationship between baptism and the Lord's Supper. In the *Didache* we're told, "***You must not let anyone eat or drink of your Eucharist except those baptized in the Lord's name. For in reference to this the Lord said, 'Do not give what is sacred to dogs.'***"<sup>24</sup> And before you dismiss his proof-text, recall that Jesus' point was that the blessings of the covenant Messiah were for the people of the covenant, which at that point in redemptive history meant Israel. Once infant baptism became widespread, the need to defend this requirement was less pronounced. And yet even in the Catholic Church, confirmation of personal faith was required before admittance to the Table. The Reformers, who kept infant baptism but on Protestant terms, had to create a new category of membership: non-communing members. To becoming a communing member, personal profession of faith in confirmation, what we'd call a dry baptism, had to be made. As Calvin himself says, "***What remembrance of this thing, I ask, shall we require of infants when they have never grasped it? What preaching of the cross of Christ, the force and benefit of which their minds have not yet comprehended?***"<sup>25</sup> And so Calvin, along with other Reformers, refused admission to the Lord's Supper those who were not

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113-117.

<sup>24</sup> Richardson, p. 175.

<sup>25</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvi.30.

members in good standing of a local church, nor would they admit to the Lord's Supper those who had not been baptized.<sup>26</sup>

What the biblical and historical evidence points to is that the Lord's Supper is not a private meal, but a fundamentally corporate meal in which the shape and boundaries of the covenant community, the local church, are made plain. The Lord's Supper is membership, visibly portrayed. Again, Paul's instruction to the Corinthian church is helpful. Having pointed out that the bread and the cup are a participation in Christ's body broken and blood shed, he then draws the following conclusion: ***Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.*** (1 Corinthians 10:17) That one loaf is Jesus Christ, and though we are many, when we participate in that one loaf, the many become one. This is the nature of the participation in Christ that we have. The word for ***participation*** is *koinonia*, literally "a sharing in something with someone." In the New Covenant, we share in Christ's death and resurrection with each other.<sup>27</sup> We are saved individually, but not privately. We are brought into a corporate salvation, because to be united to Christ is to be inescapably in communion with Christ's people. This is a family meal, and when we eat it together, the boundaries of the family as well as the unity of the family are made plain. As Bobby Jamieson has put it, if baptism unites the one to the many, the Lord's Supper binds the many into one body.<sup>28</sup> And it is to that end that Christ instituted this meal: to mark out those who are in covenant fellowship with one another because they are in fellowship with Christ.

This emphasis on the corporate aspect of the meal helps make sense of Paul's strong rebuke of the Corinthians. It seems that some, perhaps the wealthier

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.xvii.1, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Jamieson, pp. 112-113.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122, chapter 6 *passim*.

members of the congregation, were going ahead without waiting for the whole church to gather. The meal, which should have marked their unity, had become an occasion for division, and Paul rebukes them for *despising the church of God* through their actions. (1 Cor 11:17-22) Instead, Paul makes clear that they should wait for each other, so that none who were in good standing were excluded. On the other hand, those who approached the Lord's Supper without recognizing the body of the Lord were bringing judgment upon themselves. In context, "*recognizing the body of the Lord*" could mean recognizing the spiritual reality that the elements represent, but it most certainly means honoring and loving the church, the body of Christ that the meal itself creates.<sup>29</sup>

Like the Passover, which was an annual reminder of God's saving acts and renewal of Israel's covenant commitments, the Lord's Supper is also a covenant renewing meal. As the Puritan Thomas Manton put it, "*[The covenant] is sealed by us in baptism, and it is renewed in the Lord's Supper.*"<sup>30</sup> The former ordinance initiates; the latter affirms and reaffirms. And that isn't to be taken lightly. In the Old Covenant, to deliberately absent yourself from the Passover was to be cut off from the covenant community (**Num. 9:12**). In the same way, Christians should take care not to regularly and casually miss the Lord's Supper. To refuse to participate is to voluntarily dismember yourself from Christ's body. In earlier days, deliberately missing the Lord's Supper was a disciplinable offense.

But by the same token, this means that the Lord's Supper is inescapably a church meal, celebrated as a church by the church. To celebrate on our own, in our private family, at a youth retreat or Sunday school picnic, at a wedding, in small

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, vol. 6 (repr. Homewood, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), p. 72, quoted in Jamieson, p. 116.

groups, or Christian conferences is to celebrate what Paul calls, “not the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>31</sup>

And yet this is precisely what happens across the evangelical world today. From huge conferences like IVCF’s Urbana Missions conference, to local small group Bible studies; from protestant weddings to the communion kits that protestant elders take with them when visiting nursing homes and shut-in’s, we have transformed the Lord’s Supper into a private meal between me and Jesus. Just as the ecclesial shape of baptism has been lost and replaced with a private testimony of faith in Christ, so the ecclesial shape of the Lord’s Supper has been lost, replaced with a meal that we treat as a sort of spiritual vitamin that picks me up when I need it. Since it’s connection with the new covenant community has been lost, it’s connection to baptism as the necessary prerequisite has been lost. And with it, any connection to the corporate body whose meal it is.

This is graphically illustrated by the way the Lord’s Supper is most commonly served in the churches of my city. Instead of one table, and one loaf, representing one body hosted by one Lord, there are multiple tables spread through the auditorium. Instead of the table fenced, or guarded, as Protestants historically did, limiting participation to baptized Christians who are members in good standing of a local church, the congregants are simply told: “The Tables are open.” And instead of the Table being hosted by the minister of God’s Word, representing the true Host, Jesus Christ the Living Word, the tables are all self-serve. In such a context, what can it possibly mean that “*we who are many, are one body, for we all partake of one loaf*”? Indeed, such a “not the Lord’s Supper” is appropriate for today’s typical evangelical church, which is not one body, covenantally committed and accountable to one another through the ordinances, but rather a collection of

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<sup>31</sup> Jamieson, p. 119.

independent religious consumers who all decided to shop at this religious outlet this Sunday, but might easily decide to shop at a different, or no outlet, next week.

### **Membership & Discipline**

And that brings us finally to membership and discipline, easily the most controversial of the three boundary markers these days, but also the easiest to grasp once we have the first two boundary markers straight. If I only had a dollar for every time some one told me that membership wasn't a biblical concept. What I want to say when I hear that is, "***Have you never read 1 Corinthians 12?***" The language of membership is part of the imagery of the church as a body, made up of many different members. Of course, I don't say that, because we don't talk about "members of the body" anymore. We associate membership with the local gym, Costco, or professional societies, which means that in our culture, membership conveys either consumerism, elitism, or both. So what I want to do is describe membership in terms of the ordinances that give it shape and meaning.

So long as the ordinances remain private symbols describing me and my relationship with Jesus, utterly devoid of ecclesial shape, then membership will seem like an alien imposition upon the church. Such a thin view of the ordinances will lead us to say things like: *the requirements for membership in a local church should be no higher than the requirements for entry into heaven*. It will lead us to disconnect baptism, the Lord's Supper, and membership as if they are three entirely separate things, existing independently of one another. But when we recover the ecclesial shape of the ordinances, we begin to see that membership is what we call the relationship between believers that the ordinances create, and to which they point. Far from being three separate things, they are three different ways of talking about the same thing: my union with Christ and consequent communion with Christ's people. Baptism is the sign of my union with Christ and initiation into the covenant community of the church; participation in the Lord's

supper is the sign of my reaffirmation of that union in common fellowship with the covenant community; membership is what we call the on-going, accountable covenantal relationship within Christ's covenant community.

As we've seen, the ordinances have an ecclesial shape, and that shape is what gives membership its meaning. In baptism, I not only declare my allegiance to Christ, but the church is authorized to affirm my declaration and include me in its number. In the Lord's Supper, I not only reaffirm my allegiance to Christ, but the church agrees, and so admits me to the Table. Church discipline then is that action of the church that says, in response to a false confession, we cannot affirm that you are a true confessor, and so we will not baptize you. In response to a false life, we cannot affirm that you are presently in union with Christ, and so we will not admit you to the Table.<sup>32</sup> Without the ordinances, there can be no such thing as membership, because membership is admission to the Table upon a credible profession of faith in baptism. But without membership, authorized and disciplined by the church, the ordinances can be nothing more than private symbols and testimonies. And when that happens, the corporate existence and testimony of the church dissolves in the acid of modern individualism, and our churches begin to resemble nothing so much as various storefronts in the strip mall of religious entertainment, catering to the sovereign whims of the religious consumer. This week I'm at Starbucks, next week Stumptown, next month Dunkin Donuts. I'm not there alone. I'm there with all the other people who made the same consumer choice. But my presence today doesn't obligate my future and the only accountability I have is to myself.

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<sup>32</sup> For a full and compelling argument for the authority of the church to confirm or deny what constitutes a true confessor and true confession, see Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*.

Membership is nothing other than the local church exercising the keys of the Kingdom Christ entrusted to her in **Matthew 16**. On the basis of a right confession of Christ, the local church admits through baptism a true confessor into her fellowship, the visible manifestation of Christ's Kingdom on earth. We do not admit ourselves. We are admitted under the authority Christ delegated to his church. And according to **Matthew 18**, when we live in a way that consistently and unrepentantly undermines that baptismal confession, the church has the authority and responsibility to exercise those keys again, and set us loose from the church. The church does not have this authority independent of Christ. Rather all authority belongs to Christ, as he himself declared in **Matthew 28**, and in the same breath he has authorized us to baptize and to teach, to bind and to loose.

This is why the boundary markers of the church matter, and must be recovered in the fullness and richness of their ecclesial significance. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and membership, rightly practiced, mark out the church as visibly distinct from the world. And it is in that distinct visibility that God's purpose for the local church is accomplished. As Paul says in **Ephesians 3:10**, *God's intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known*. If the church, the body of Christ, cannot be seen and discerned in the world, if it loses its distinct ordinance-defined shape, if it blends and blurs into the world, then of what use is it? The last thing the world needs, after all, is another religious club. What it needs is to see the gospel made visible, and so credible. And that happens when the boundary markers of the church are applied faithfully so that the church is really the church.

There is much that we can do to recover what our forebears in church history took for granted. We can start by guarding the front door of the church a little more closely. While we don't want to needlessly delay baptism, we can learn from the early church that catechized before they baptized. We can institute membership

classes that slow the process of uniting with a church long enough that the nominal lose interest and the immature are edified. We can teach what it means to covenant with a local body through baptism and membership, and stop baptizing young children who cannot meaningfully bear those obligations. We can make membership meaningful by connecting it to the obligation and privilege of loving one another, and not just having a vote. We can fence the Lord's Supper, teaching why you must be baptized and accountable to a local church before participating. We can begin to practice church discipline, and we can clean up our church rolls of non-attending, non-resident, and in some cases, non-living members. We can change the liturgy of the Lord's Supper, so that it's not solely an introspective look at your relationship with Jesus, but also an outward look at the fellowship of the body. We can incorporate baptism into the main Sunday meetings of the church, rather than separate services that only family and friends attend. But most of all we need to teach that our union with Christ brings us inescapably into communion with each other in the local church, and it is that fellowship that God is using to evangelize the world and bring glory to himself. Amen.