



INQUIRER'S CLASS NOTEBOOK

SESSION ONE:

What is a Christian? Why join a church?

SESSION TWO:

Where did we come from? Who are we now? What is our vision?

SESSION THREE:

What do we believe as a denomination and a church?

Session 1:

What Is a Christian?	2
Why Join a Church?	5
Homework: Read the Article <i>Six Reasons Why Membership Matters</i> (Appendix)	

Session 2:

History of Grace Presbyterian Church	7
Our Staff and Leadership	8
Our Vision and Goals	9
Our Denomination & Church Structure	10
Homework: Read the Article <i>The Ordinary Means of Growth</i> (Appendix)	

Session 3:

What Do We Believe?	14
The 5 Membership Vows of the PCA	22
Homework: Read the Article <i>Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed</i> (Appendix)	

A Few Helpful Resources for Further Study:

- *ESV Study Bible*
- *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms (with scripture proofs)*
- *Welcome to a Reformed Church* by Daniel Hyde
- *Baptism: Answers to Common Questions* by Guy Richard
- PCA Website: www.pcanet.org
- PCA Historical Center: www.pcahistory.org

PCA Book of Church Order (BCO): Chapter 6, Church Members

6-1. The children of believers are, through the covenant and by right of birth, non-communing members of the church. Hence, they are entitled to Baptism, and to the pastoral oversight, instruction and government of the church, with a view to their embracing Christ and thus possessing personally all benefits of the covenant.

6-2. Communing members are those who have made a profession of faith in Christ, have been baptized, and have been admitted by the Session to the Lord's Table. (See BCO 46-4 for associate members).

6-3. All baptized persons are entitled to the watchful care, instruction and government of the church, even though they are adults and have made no profession of their faith in Christ.

6-4. Those only who have made a profession of faith in Christ, have been baptized, and admitted by the Session to the Lord's Table, are entitled to all the rights and privileges of the church. (See BCO 57-4 and 58-4)

Basic Requirements for Membership in the PCA and Grace Presbyterian Church:

- Credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ alone as Savior (a.k.a “testimony”)
- Baptism (If you have previously been baptized, we do not require another baptism)
 - o If you have never been baptized, talk with Pastor Dave about setting it up
- Admission to membership and the Lord’s Table by the session (a.k.a “the elders”)
 - o This typically involves attending a session meeting, hearing your testimony, asking a few questions about your understanding of the gospel message and your relationship to Christ, and praying with you

What is a Christian?

What defines someone as a “Christian”? Some say that a Christian is a good person; others say that you must go to church to be a Christian. So, if you are a good, loving person who goes to church, does that make you a Christian? In this section we will explore what it truly means to be a child of God.

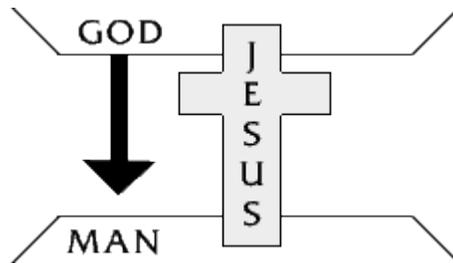
1. **Who is God?**
2. **What does it mean to be a Christian?**
3. **How does one become a Christian?**

** Grace Presbyterian is a church that takes people wherever they are and helps them explore and grow in their walk with Christ. If you have questions or are uncertain about your answers, GREAT, we would love to talk about this. Please feel free to ask a question in class, or talk to the leader after class if you would feel more comfortable.*

What Scripture tells us about our relationship with God:

1. **Who is God?**
 - a. **He is Holy** – Isaiah 6:3 – “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of host; the whole earth is full of his glory!
 - b. **He is Just** – Deuteronomy 32:4 – The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.
 - c. **He is Love** – Psalm 145:8,9 – The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all; and his mercy is over all that he has made.
 - d. **He is Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent**
See Psalm 33:13; Psalm 90:2; Isaiah 66:1; Jeremiah 32:27
2. **What Did God Do?**
 - a. **He is Creator** – Genesis 1:1 – In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
3. **Who is Man?**
 - We are made in God’s image, but that image has been tainted by the Fall. Thus, we are people both of dignity and depravity in the sight of God.
 - a. **Dignity** – Genesis 1:27 – So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.
 - b. **Depravity**
 - i. **Adam’s Fall** – Genesis 3
 - ii. **Our Fall** Romans 3:23, Romans 5:12-21
4. **How Did God Fix the Fall?**
 - a. **Romans 5:12-17** – *Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned – for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.*

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many did through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following brought justification. For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.



- b. **1 Peter 3:18** – For Christ also suffered once for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.

How Do We Become Christians?

By Faith in Christ – Ephesians 2:8-9 – For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

By Repentance – Joel 2:12-13 – “Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.

Basics of Spiritual Growth

*“...but grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” **II Peter 3:18***

1. Rely Entirely on Christ

Romans 1:16-17 - I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

2. Study the Bible Deeply

2 Timothy 3:16-17 - All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

3. Pray Dependently

1 John 5:14 - This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

4. Fellowship Often

Acts 2:42 - They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers.

5. Worship Passionately

Hebrews 12:28-29 - Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

6. Witness Faithfully

Matthew 28:18-20 - And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

7. Seek To Be More Like Christ

Romans 12:1-2 - I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

8. Be a Good Steward

a. Of Time

Luke 12:36-38 - ...and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants!

b. Of Talent

Romans 12:4-8 - For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though any, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness

c. Of Treasure

2 Corinthians 9:6-8 - The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

Why Join A Church?

A. Jesus Loves the Church:

Ephesians 5:25-27 *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.*

B. God calls His people out of the world to Himself

Exodus 6:6-8 *“Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. **I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.’**”*

Revelation 21:3 *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, **and God himself will be with them as their God.**”*

C. The People of God in the New Testament

a. Body

1 Corinthians 12:27 – *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

b. Bride

Revelation 19:7-8 *Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure” – for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.*

c. Building

Ephesians 2:19-22 *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you are also being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*

D. The Benefits of Joining A Local Congregation

a. Three Marks of the Church

i. Preaching of God’s Word

- Christ leads by example:

Matthew 4:17 – *From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

Matthew 28:19-20 – *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

ii. Proper Administration of the Sacraments

Fencing of the Table and Discipline

1 Corinthians 11:27-29 – *Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.*

iii. Proper Use of Church Discipline (Restoration and Reclamation)

Hebrews 13:17 – *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

Matthew 18:15-17 – *If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

b. Fellowship

i. Prayerful Support and Accountability

James 5:14-16 – *Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

c. Corporate Worship

Revelation 7:9 – *After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”*

The History of Grace Presbyterian Church



Grace Presbyterian Church of Fort Payne, Alabama, was formed in 1986 when several families of committed Christians of various fellowships found themselves united in an effort to serve God more effectively through adherence to God's Word. The Bible, God's Holy Word, is the unshakable foundation of our beliefs.

We became affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) because of our belief that God's plan involves Christians working together by His power to accomplish greater things. Early teaching included an in-depth study of the Westminster Confession of Faith, led by David Hammond of Westminster PCA in Huntsville, AL. Our mission pastor for almost two years was Ray Dameron of Lookout Mountain, Georgia, and Covenant College.

Initial meetings of this body were in homes; for a short period, worship was held at Howard's Chapel in Mentone. Once remodeling was completed on the former J.C. Penney building in downtown Fort Payne, this became our church home. In January 1996 we moved into a new facility located at 5760 Gault Avenue, NW, located on the Valley Head Highway north of Fort Payne High School. In April 2000 dedication services were held for the new sanctuary and offices.

In addition to the men mentioned above who helped ground us in the Scriptures, we have been faithfully served by seven pastors to this point in our history: Brad Stewart (December, 1988, through September, 1990), Stewart Jordan (May, 1991, through July, 1995), Gordon Lewis (January, 1996, through July, 2001), Ben Konopa (March, 2002, through May, 2004), and Billy Dempsey (June, 2005, through August 2011). Rev. John Matthieu served as interim pastor from 2013-2014 and then served as Senior Pastor from 2014-March 2019. Rev. Dave Latham was called to serve as Senior Pastor on April 1, 2019 after Rev. Mathieu's honorable retirement.

Our Staff and Leadership:

Dave Latham - Senior Pastor

Rev. Dave Latham was born in Charleston, SC but was raised in Greenwood, SC. He graduated from Presbyterian College in Clinton, SC with a business management degree in 2003 and later completed his M.Div. from RTS Charlotte in 2010. After seminary, he planted RUF at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, VA and was a campus minister from 2010-2015. After his time in Virginia, Dave moved back to Charlotte and served as the Director of Admissions at RTS Charlotte and also as an Assistant Pastor at Uptown Church. In April of 2019, Dave began serving as the Pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church.

He met his wife, Rebecca, at Camp Greystone and they have been married since 2003. Rebecca graduated from Ole Miss with a degree in Geological Engineering and later earned her Masters Degree in Geological Engineering from the Colorado School of Mines. They have 2 children- Stokes and Ellie-Grace who both love being outside and reading books. Dave enjoys playing golf, fly fishing, listening to bluegrass, and smoking BBQ to share with friends.

Callum Sears - Youth/Music Director

Callum is the son of a PCA pastor from Franklin, TN. He attended Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, GA from 2009-2013 where he was a 4-year player on the Varsity Basketball team. After completing a degree in music, Callum married Estes Carlson from Eaton, CO in 2014 and then began serving as the music director of Rock Creek Fellowship at Lula Lake. In early 2015, Callum began leading music at Grace Presbyterian Church. Callum has been doubling as both Youth and Music Director since June of 2017. Callum and Estes welcomed their first child, Hiland, in December of 2018.

Brandy Smith - Office Manager

A native of the Greater Nashville area, Brandy started as the office manager of Grace Presbyterian in May of 2014. Brandy is the wife of Kevin and mother of Nate.

Our Elders:

Also known as “the session”, this is a group of men elected from the congregation who work together to provide spiritual oversight to the church. Rev. Latham serves as a teaching elder (TE), these men serve as ruling elders (RE): Rick Bearden, John Crow Jr., Terry Gillis, Marty Habel, Robert Harris, Mike Harper, and Jerry Womack.

Our Deacons:

Also known as “the diaconate”, this is a group of men elected from the congregation who work together to serve the congregation in a variety of ways. They oversee the church property, finances, and the giving of funds to assist those in need and those our church supports in missionary endeavors. The deacons of our church are: Hank Chambers, Tyler Dart, Rick Hardin, and Jerry Smith

One Overarching Vision and Four Primary Goals

One Overarching Vision: “Grace TO us, Grace THROUGH us.”

1st John 4:19 tells us that “*We love because He first loved us*” and Romans 3:24 tells us that we have been “*justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*” We believe that God has extended His amazing grace to us and, because we are His people, we are called to extend that grace to others.

We want to see this vision happen in a few specific ways:

1. Faithful and Loving Witness- We want to be faithful to Christ, the infallible and inerrant Scriptures, reformed theology, and the gospel message of salvation. Yet, we want to communicate these great truths in a loving and patient way. We want to know the full life that is found in Jesus Christ and to share that life with those in our community, state, and around the world.

2. Helping Neighbor- We want to be active in the community that God has placed us and we want to use our time, talent, and treasure to love and serve those around us for the glory of Christ.

3. Transforming Community- God has built us to flourish in community and relationships. Ultimately, a relationship with God through Christ is the basis for wholeness in all of the other relationships we have. We want our members to be in relationship with others because this helps build the authentic community and accountability that are meant to build the church and each other.

4. Kingdom Focus- We want to hold to our reformed distinctives but celebrate the Kingdom of God in all of its diversity. We want to maintain an outward focus on God’s Kingdom, not just our church and our denomination. We want to engage with the culture and work to fulfill the Great Commission by sharing our faith, discipling others, and supporting the work of missionaries and ministries around the world.



Our Denomination: The Presbyterian Church in America

A. Benefits to being part of the PCA

1. Standards for Theology and Government
2. Systems for Kingdom Extension
3. Safeguards of Leadership, and Theology



B. History

Our birth date was December 4, 1973. But we recognize that our spiritual heritage goes all the way back to year one - the year of our Lord's first coming to establish His church.

The PCA came into existence because we felt the need for a strongly Scriptural, evangelical, and Reformed witness to Christ. We wanted to be part of a denomination that honors God and His word, desiring a fellowship of believers who are committed to evangelism and Christian education as the primary mission of the Church. We felt that ministers and church officers should affirm without compromise the great Biblical beliefs of Christianity.

Though we began our denominational life with a positive emphasis and a joyous outlook, our denomination was birthed from tension and conflict. Our birth started with a separation from the mainline Presbyterian Church (USA) over issues we felt would compromise foundational Biblical truths such as the inerrancy of Scripture and the proper use of funds for world missions.

After many years of sincere efforts to call our former denomination to revival and renewal, we were led by God to withdraw and form a new body. The denomination began with 250 congregations and about 50,000 members. The Lord had graciously brought the PCA to over 1700 congregations and over 380,000 members by the end of 2018.

C. Organizations of the PCA

ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE

Arranging General Assembly meetings is but one of the duties assigned to the Administrative Committee. Additionally, the AC manages and disperses the resources contributed by churches for the work of the Assembly's committees and causes and gives oversight to the orderly housekeeping of corporate and ecclesiastical affairs. The AC also reports to churches on the financial condition of the Assembly, oversees the Office of the Stated Clerk between Assemblies, funds the PCA Archives, and carries out other assignments given to it by the General Assembly.

The AC arranges and funds the meetings of special committees appointed by the Assembly, such as the Judicial Business Committee and various study committees. It coordinates plans for an Assembly-wide Week of Prayer and publishes stewardship materials for use by PCA churches.

In addition to the six AC staff in Atlanta, three General Assembly Representatives, retired pastors and laymen with their wives, are currently serving the PCA by visiting churches and presbyteries to promote the support of the General Assembly's committees and agencies.

MISSION TO NORTH AMERICA

Developing new churches at home is the primary work of the Committee on Mission to North America. Only with vital congregations in the United States and Canada can the PCA send and support the missionaries needed to reach the world for Christ. MNA supports 60 church-planters, three-fourths of them in growing, major metropolitan areas. The Ethnic Church Development Department oversees ministries to Koreans, African Americans, Hispanics, Chinese, Japanese, and French-Canadians. The Chaplaincy program involves 164 military and 64 civilian chaplains, both active and reserve.

Many people across the continent are first learning of the PCA through the expertise and dedication of the MNA Disaster Response Team and its many PCA volunteers. In addition to assistance in natural disasters, MNA is placing greater emphasis on the opportunities to help widows, orphans, and the needy improve their situations in life through its urban and mercy ministries. Multicultural ministries and church vitality are also key functions of this organization.

MISSION TO THE WORLD

"Going where the world is growing." MTW faces the challenges and opportunities of the greatly expanding urban areas of the world. The PCA missionary family consists of 600 long-term missionaries, over 5800 missionaries serving short term, and 640 missionaries involved with church planting, ministering in 60 countries.

While long-term missionaries will continue to be essential around the world, by the turn of the century, the majority of the unconverted will be living in countries no longer open to traditional missionaries. Thus, MTW is intensifying its development of "tent-making missionaries -- self-supporting Christians whose occupations can afford them opportunities to spread the Gospel in other countries, MTW has developed special programs for high school students with opportunities to minister in Central America, the Caribbean, and in the inner cities of North America and for church members who have reached retirement age. MTW is also involved in ministries to Street Children, university ministries, and medical missions.

COVENANT COLLEGE

Covenant College, located in Lookout Mountain, Tennessee, is the PCA's liberal arts college that is uniquely and distinctively Christian in its orientation. With overall enrollment at an all time high, the college has maintained its commitment to quality, Christ-centered education. Covenant is expanding the degree programs it offers and the number of centers from which it offers "external degree" programs in business, management, and other subjects of demand in metropolitan centers. The college now offers a Masters of Education program, along with many other standard features that are found in most collegiate-level programs.

COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Covenant Theological Seminary, located in St. Louis, Missouri, serves a vital role in equipping leaders for the Presbyterian Church in America. The Seminary's goal is to teach men preparing for the ministry to hold forth the orthodox/Reformed faith in a positive way. It maintains an unswerving commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture and the integrity of the Reformed faith as that which is taught by Scripture. Because the Reformed faith is biblical faith, CTS believes that, properly presented, it will be attractive and effective in the lives of countless individuals. With the expansion of all ministries of the PCA, the Seminary keeps pace by making use of extension work, videotaped classes, and cooperative programs with presbyteries. Extension classes for CTS' Doctor of Ministries program are already offered at Ridge haven Conference Center, and other outreach offerings are anticipated.

REFORMED UNIVERSITY MINISTRIES

RUF brings to the campus a heart for God, a love for the campus and convictions that are well formed, deeply held and which allow us to bring a fully-orbed ministry to students. As a ministry of the Presbyterian Church in America, this organization ministers to students in over 150 college campuses with the desire to promote growth in grace, evangelism, missions, fellowship, service, and a biblical world and life view.

D. THE PCA VISION

As one communion in the worldwide church, the Presbyterian Church in America exists to glorify God by extending the kingdom of Jesus Christ over all individual lives through all areas of society and in all nations and cultures.

We are committed to the Scriptures and the historic Westminster Standards based firmly on a biblical theology that answers the questions and issues of each culture and people to which we minister. We are committed to worship that practices the presence and power of God within the church to the transformation of the surrounding culture through the biblical application in population centers around the world. We are committed to the winning of new converts and their incorporation into the church through the ministry of the Word and to significant ministry to the needy through deeds of mercy and service. We are committed to the freedom of every member to minister through spiritual gifts and also to the responsibility to do so under spiritual authority and loving discipline. We are committed to dynamic, prophetic confrontation on non-Christian thought forms and behavior and also to the demonstration of the truth through the practice of holiness and love in Christian fellowship. We are committed to guarding and strengthening the biblical family also to a ministry to the broken family forms such as the divorced, the widowed and unwed parent. We are committed to reaching and disciplining men and women in the whole counsel of God and also to ministering to the needs of the whole person.

Church Structure:

The Presbyterian Form of Church Government

- Christ is the Head of the Church

Reformed churches maintain that Christ alone, not the pope or bishop or anyone else, is the only Head and King of the church, both at the local and regional level. Christ alone stands in vital, organic relationship to the church as its life-giving Lord, institutor, sole legislator, and ultimate source of all power and efficacy in the means of grace.

- Rule of Officers

Christ has ordained to rule this church through the immediate agency of ordained, qualified officers, who are commanded to govern the church by apprehending and applying the Word of God as his specific binding revelation. This does not mean that Christ transfers his authority to the officers, but that they serve as mediators exercising authority granted to them (and limited) by Christ alone.

The officers of the church are elders and deacons. Both of these offices are positions of authority over the congregation and, as such, are open only to ordained men who are qualified.

- Elders provide the direct oversight of the flock, and the session of elders is the primary governing body over the church. They are classified as either *Teaching Elders*

(e.g. “pastor”) and *Ruling Elders* (usually lay leaders). 2 Tim. 2:1-2; 1 Tim. 3:2-7; Titus 1:6-9; 1 Tim. 5:17

- Deacons provide ministries of service to the church, such as caring for the mercy needs or facility needs of the body. Acts 6:1-4; 1 Tim. 3:8-13

- **Courts**

- There are generally three courts in the Presbyterian system.
 - **Session** – consisting of the ruling and teaching elders of the local church.
 - **Presbytery** – consisting of elders from local churches that serve to govern multiple churches in a region.
 - **General Assembly** – consisting of elders from the presbyteries that provide broader national oversight.
- There are significant checks and balances to all 3 main courts of the PCA
- As you can see, PCA churches are by default “connected churches” because they do not exist independently from each other. They provide oversight, encouragement, and support to each other.

- **The PCA “Playbook”:** The Book of Church Order

- This massive document lays out the structure, standards, and procedures for churches in our denomination to follow. This document is extremely helpful to pastors, local churches, presbyteries, and the General Assembly. It helps us do everything “decently and in order” → The Presbyterian Way.

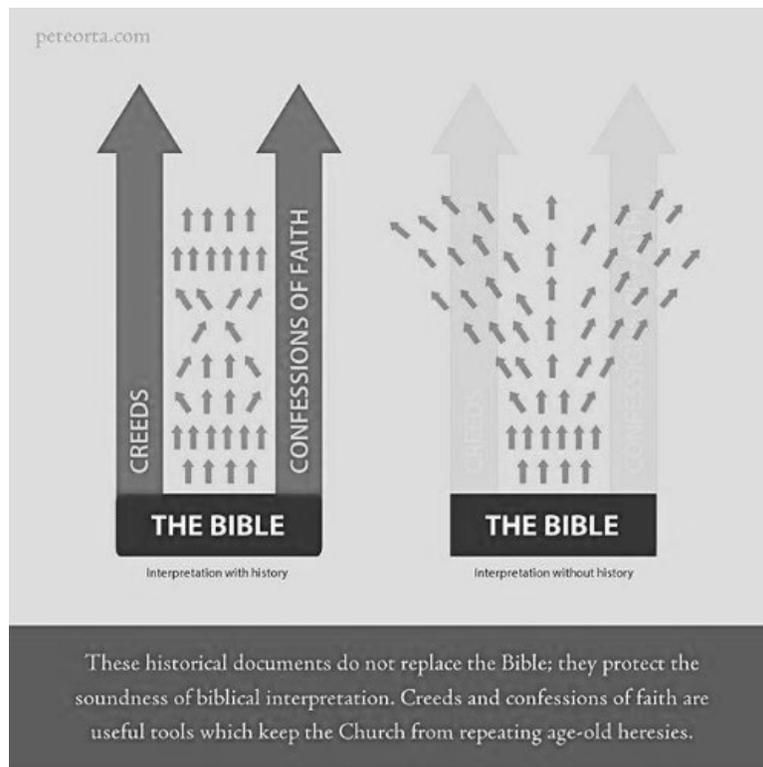
What Do We Believe?

Our Foundation- The Scriptures

There is a lot of confusion in this day and age about how we can know what is true from what is false. Can we have absolute certainty that Christianity is true? To be honest, many churches have fed this uncertainty by compromising their Biblical theology and doctrine for false doctrines that are adopted from a desire of receiving approval in the eyes of the world. We seek to be very clear about what we believe. To put it quite simply, the Bible is the foundation for all that we do and believe.

Our Doctrinal Standards- The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms

A proper view of God's Word is at the core of our convictions. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (written in 1647), one of the key documents that Grace Presbyterian Church and the PCA use to interpret Scripture, begins by expounding its view of the Bible. This not a coincidence but an intentional move to show that, when searching for what to believe, we must start with the Bible. We do not hold the Westminster Standards above the Bible. Rather, we see them as a helpful lens through which we interpret the Scriptures. All pastors in the PCA vow to uphold these theological standards.



Reformed Theology in a Sentence → God Saves Sinners.

Here is a [somewhat] brief overview our basic beliefs:

1.) **The Bible is God's Word:**

God has revealed himself to mankind in nature through “general revelation” (Ps. 19:1-4; Rom. 1:19-20), but has more fully declared his Lordship and the knowledge necessary for salvation in the “special revelation” of Scripture (Mt. 4:4; Luke 1:3-4; Heb. 1:1-2). God continues to reveal himself to his church, but only through the means of his inspired Scriptures, which he illumines and applies to us through preaching, teaching, prayer, etc. (WCF I.1)

2.) The Bible is Inspired, Inerrant and Infallible:

(a) When we say that the Bible is “inspired” we mean that both the *revelation* in the Bible and the *story* or *record* of that revelation are immediately and supernaturally inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 1:19-21).

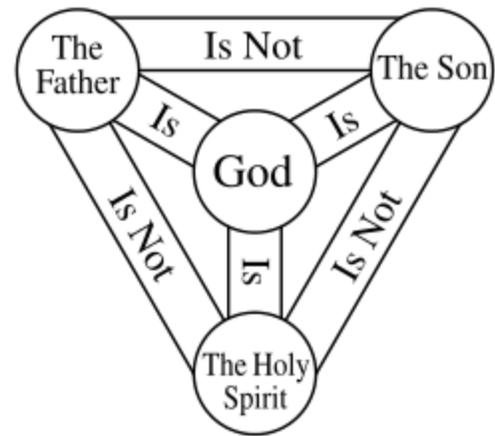
(b) Inerrancy asserts that the Bible is perfect, accurate, and completely free from all error, so that it is true in everything that it affirms. (ie- “The Bible is true and it conveys truth truthfully.”)

(c) Moreover, because the Bible is the very Word of God, infallibility asserts that it is incapable of erring or leading people astray. Because the primary author is God, the possibility of erring is categorically excluded. (WCF I.4)

3.) The Nature of God:

First, God is a Spiritual being who exists in three persons, who created all things and governs them according to his good purposes, and who has revealed himself to mankind in creation and word. (WCF II.1)

But at the same time, Christians have confessed that Jesus is God and the Holy Spirit is God. Because God is both loving and personal, by definition he must exist eternally in a multiplicity of loving relationship within himself. In other words, for God to be God as he has revealed himself to us, God must be Triune.



These two truths – God is one, and the Father / Son / Holy Spirit are all God – is difficult to understand! Yet, while the Bible does not expressly expound upon the Trinity, it is assumed throughout as an axiomatic truth (see Ps. 45:6-7; 110:1; Matt 3:13-17; Mk. 1:9-11; Jn. 14 and 16; Rom. 8:9; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Pet. 1:1-2). (WCF II.3)

4.) God’s Sovereign Decree:

God's decree is his sovereign determination of all things that will come to pass in his creation. It can also be referred to as God's “foreordination” or God’s “will.” This decree is eternal, unchangeable, holy, and extends to all things (Ephesians 3:9-11). (WCF I.1-2)

5.) God’s Decree of Predestination:

(a) Predestination is a specific category or application of God’s sovereign decree. It concerns the *election* of those chosen by God before time to be saved by grace unto eternal life, and the *reprobation* of God to pass over those who are not elected in Christ, to leave them in their sin and misery, and ultimately to condemn them in the final judgment for their sin. (WCF III.3-8)

(b) This is a particularly difficult teaching, but Scripture leaves no doubt of this Divine decree. Again, at Grace Presbyterian, the Bible is the foundation for all that we believe and do. We must submit to Scripture in our understanding of this. For proof texts, see Eph 1:3-6,12,14; Rom 9:6-12; Rom 8:28-30; John 6:44; 2 Thess 2:13; Mal 1:2-3; Gen 18:10; Exod 33:19; Rom 9:21-22; Jude 4; 1 Pet 2:8; 1 Thess 5:9; Rom 11:7; Matt 11:25-26; Exod 9:12, 10:1,20.

6.) The Biblical Story of Creation:

Genesis 1:1: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

All creation flows out of God. God created all things *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”) in the span of 6 days and all declared very good. (Gen. 1; Heb. 11:3). (WCF IV.1)

7.) The Special Creation of Man:

- (a) After all of creation was spoken into existence, God took special counsel with himself (Gen. 1:26) and created man in his own image. (WCF IV.2)
- (b) The implications of this reality are multiple: God created male and female separately but both with dignity and both in the image of God; God placed mankind in authority over creation; God gave Adam and Eve souls through the direct supernatural work of the Holy Spirit.
- (c) In their original state of innocence, Adam and Eve were perfect and without sin, possessed a free will that was neither predisposed to good nor evil (they were able to sin – and able not to sin), and were promised eternal life in their perfected state had they maintained obedience to God's commands.

8.) The Fall of Man into Sin:

Despite the perfection of creation, Adam and Eve fell into sin and became spiritually dead and unable to keep the law of God. Because all mankind was represented by Adam in God's covenantal relationship with him (this idea is known as Federal Headship), Adam's fall led to the fall of all mankind. Thus, each man and woman since Adam and Eve are born into sin. This is called Total Depravity (see below). (WCF VI.1-6)

9.) God's Covenant of Redemption:

It would have been totally appropriate for God to eternally condemn Adam and Eve and all humanity after the first sin, but by grace God has continued to voluntarily bind himself to his people through the Covenant of Grace. (WCF VII.1-3)

Genesis 3:15: I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

In the verse above, God promises to give a new representative for mankind that would be perfect in all of the ways that Adam was not. We see the first promises of Jesus, the promised Messiah who would save people from their sins, in the opening chapters of the very first book of the Bible!

10.) Jesus Christ:

The study of Jesus Christ (known as Christology) could cover an entire lifetime and more! Jesus is the central purpose and theme of the entire Bible. The Old Testament authors and writings looked forward to Jesus, and the New Testament authors and writings looked back upon Jesus as well as forward to his return. Jesus Christ is God in human form. He willingly left heaven and became man so that he could serve as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of mankind. In his death on the cross, Jesus bore the punishment of God's wrath for our disobedience, which makes it possible for us to have a free and joyful relationship with God. (WCF VIII.1-5)

11.) Union with Christ:

All who are effectually called and predestined to by God to eternal life are unified with Christ in his work and Spirit (WCF X. 1-2). Although we continue to live in bodies that are fallen and endure the effects of sin, Christians are also incorporated into Christ's body in a spiritual, yet very real, sense. This "mystical union" is brought about by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The implications of this Union are the foundation of all of the aspects of the *Ordo Salutis* (Order of Salvation), and are as follows: We are crucified with / in Christ (Gal 2:20), we have been buried with him (Rom 6:4), we have been raised in him (Rom 8:11; Eph 2:6; Col 3:1), and we have been seated with him in the heavenly realms (Eph 2:6). Thus, all benefits of salvation flow from our union with the Redeemer himself.



A.) Regeneration:

Regeneration is the miracle by which God removes the sinful heart of enmity against God and implants a new life principle in the heart of the elect sinner. We do not and cannot cooperate in our own regeneration, so it is shown that God is gracious and sovereign in this saving work. The result of a regenerated heart is a renewed spiritual creature with a will that can really respond in obedience to Christ (John 3:5-6, Tit 3:5, 1 John 2-5, Ezek 36, Joel 2, Jer 31).

B.) Conversion:

Conversion occurs when a sinner willfully embraces Christ and his atoning work. This act involves both *faith* and *repentance*. Faith is trusting in Christ as Lord and Savior and even this is a gift of grace. Repentance is seeing the conviction of sin, confessing such sin, and earnestly turning away from sin and moving towards Christ (Acts 2:38, 3:19, 11:18; Luke 17:3ff, 24:47; Rom 2:4; 2 Tim 2:25; 2 Pet 3:9; Rom 1:17, 3:22-28; Heb 11:6). (WCF XIV.1-3)

C.) Justification:

If anyone, being aware of their sin and separation from God, asks for forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ and turn to follow him in faith, God will freely justify (pardon) that person and restore him to fellowship. This justification is a free and gracious gift of God. It is not something we earn. (selected proofs of many: Rom. 3:21-31; 4; 5:1-11; Gal. 2:16, 3:1-24; Eph. 2:8-10). (WCF XI.1-6; XV.3-6)

D.) Adoption:

Those who are saved and justified by God are also adopted as his sons and daughters and receive the benefits of being his children and heirs. This is an act of God borne out of his grace and love for his elect (Eph 1:5; Gal 4:6, 5:4-5; Rom 8:15-17; John 1:12; Heb 12:6ff). (WCF XII.1)

E.) Sanctification:

God, through his Spirit, renews the hearts of those who turn to Christ, giving them a love for himself. As such, the desires of those in Christ turn away from the body of sin and, for the glory of God, are strengthened in the practice of holiness in all areas of their lives. (WCF XIII.1-3)

F.) The Perseverance of the Saints:

Those who have been truly called by God to salvation and eternal life can never totally fall away from the state of grace, but will persevere in sanctification until they inherit eternal life. This is based not upon our own “stamina” or will, but upon the will of God the Father, the effective work of Jesus the Son, and the reception of the Holy Spirit. (WCF XVII.1-2)

12.) The Threefold Use of the Law:

The Law of God, which is a reflection of God’s nature and thus eternally applicable, has 3 uses:

1st Use: Pedagogical (“Reveal Sin & Drive to Christ”) The law is like a mirror that reflects God’s perfect righteousness as well as shines light on our sinful nature and inability to perform the law. (Gal. 3:24, Rom 6:14-15, WCF XIX.1)

2nd Use: Civil (“Restrain Evil”): The law, written on peoples’ hearts, acts as a restraint of evil and allows for a limited measure of justice on earth. (Rom 1:20, Rom 2:14-15, WCF XIX.6)

3rd Use: Moral (“Guide for Christian Living”) The law is a rule of faith for Christians and informs them of the will of God, their duty, and directs them to walk according to the desires of God. (Matt 19:16-22, WCF. XIX.6-7)

13.) The Sacraments:

The Sacraments are outward (physical) signs that have been Divinely given to represent the inward seal of God’s covenant with his people as well as Christ’s sufficient work of redemption on our behalf (WCF XXVII.1). At Grace Presbyterian, we recognize that Christ instituted only two Sacraments, which are a holy and special means of grace only through the blessing of the Holy Spirit (WCF XXVII.3-4)

Baptism: Jesus ordained Baptism as a Sacrament to represent the Christian’s being brought into union with Christ, of publically partaking in the Covenant of Grace, and of publically being set apart from the world and into the family of Christ. Baptism does not cause or make the recipient to become a Believer, but is a sign of someone being set apart for the visible church. (WCF XXVIII.1-7)

The Lord’s Supper: The Lord's Supper (or Holy Communion, or Eucharist) is the giving and receiving of bread and wine, according to the command of Christ, whereby his death is symbolized, and the recipients are by faith made partakers of his body, blood, and all his benefits for their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. (WCF XXIX.1-7)

Transubstantiation	Consubstantiation (“Real Presence”)	Symbolic/ memorial view	Dynamic/Spiritual presence
The Roman Catholic Church maintains that the elements (bread and wine) transform into the literal body and blood of Christ in the presence of the church, and that the offering of the mass is a re-sacrifice of Christ for sins.	The Lutheran church holds, in a slightly different way than the Roman church, that the bread and wine remain what they are, but that Christ's body and blood are really, locally, physically present in the elements of the Supper.	The view of many Protestant churches since Zwingli is that the sacrament is a commemorative rite by which Christ's work is remembered. It is primarily an external rite, not a spiritual transaction.	The Reformed view is that Christ is not present physically or locally in the elements, but that by the Holy Spirit he is truly encountered in both body and blood from our spiritual nourishment, through faith. The Supper brings Christ to the communicant in a real, spiritual, non-physical and thus, mysterious way.

14.) The Mission of the Church:

God calls his people to be both messengers of his grace and his servants to those in need, in this community and around the world (Is. 6:8-9; Mt. 28:16-20).

Romans 10:14-15: “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news.’”

Other Reformed Teachings: The Doctrines of Grace

The Sovereignty of God in Salvation:

Total Depravity: Fallen man in his natural (unregenerate) state lacks all power to believe the Gospel, is spiritually dead, and is blind to the things of God

- *Ephesians 2:1-2: And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.*
- *1 Corinthians 2:14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.*

Unconditional Election: God’s choice to save sinners was not based on anything they did, it was God’s free choice alone.

- *Ephesians 1:3-5: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.*
- *Romans 9:11 though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— (ESV)*

Particular Redemption: The redeeming work of Christ had a particular goal/end in mind- the salvation of the elect. In other words, Christ ACTUALLY saves. He doesn't just open up the possibility of salvation.

- Dr. Ligon Duncan *"Everybody limits the atonement. It's either limited in its EXTENT or it's limited in its EFFECT. If you believe that the atonement is for all humanity (Arminianism) and not all humanity is saved, then you believe that the atonement is limited in its effect. If you believe that the atonement is fully capable of saving those who are chosen by God (Calvinism) then you believe in limited atonement. It's fully capable, its powerful, for providing salvation for those for whom Christ died."*
- John 6:38–39 *For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.*
- John 17:12 *While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.*
- Acts 13:48 *And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.*
- Hebrews 9:11–12 *But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.*

Irresistible Grace: (aka- "Effectual calling") The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing men to salvation never fails in its objective.

- WSC #31 What is effectual calling? *Answer: Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.*
- Ephesians 1:17–18 *that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints*
- 2 Timothy 1:8-10: *Therefore, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord... who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

Perseverance of the Saints: Truly converted Christians are kept secure in their salvation (even though they continue to struggle with sin) until they are with the Lord.

- John 10:27–30 *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."*
- Philippians 1:6: *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

Infant Baptism:

Acts 2:38-39: 38 Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

To be able to fully understand why we baptize infants, we must understand the covenants of the Old Testament. After the Fall, God made a covenant with Abraham promising to be a God not only to Abraham the believer, but also to his children. This is repeated through every covenant we see in Scripture (*Mosaic, Davidic, Isa. 44, 59*). Even in the New Covenant, God’s promises are not taken away. Baptism is the sign and the seal that belong to believers, and their children as well. It is the sacrament of initiation into the *visible church*; therefore, children of Christians are baptized on the basis of the promise of faith that comes to fruition later in life. Once the child places their faith and trust in Christ, they are counted as professing members of the church and are admitted to the Lord’s Supper as “communing members.”

What Is Our Heritage?



While our beliefs and heritage as a Church are ultimately rooted in God’s Word, we also believe that we are indebted to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century for its understanding of the Bible. Beginning with the work of Martin Luther and continuing on in the life and work of John Calvin (along with other “Reformers”), we believe that the Reformation was a “Back-to-the-Bible” Movement marked primarily by a time of spiritual renewal where God intervened in human history to draw many people into a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. It was really the recovery of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the preaching thereof against the corruption, tradition, and erroneous practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

THE FIVE SOLAS

The Protestant Reformation was marked by the Five Solas (Latin word for “alone”)

Salvation is by...

- 1) **Grace Alone (Sola Gratia)**
 - 2) **Through Faith Alone (Sola Fide)**
 - 3) **In Christ Alone (Sola Christus)**
 - 4) **As Revealed in the Scriptures Alone (Sola Scriptura)**
 - 5) **To the Glory of God Alone (Sola Deo Gloria)**
-

The 5 Membership Vows of the PCA:

To Join Grace Presbyterian Church (and the PCA), you must be able in good conscience to affirm these 5 membership vows:

#1 Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope except for His sovereign mercy?

- This question describes your PREDICAMENT before a Holy God
- We have to admit that we are sinners, that we can't save ourselves, and that we need a Savior

#2 Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners as he is presented in the gospel, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for your salvation?

- This question describes God's PROVISION for you by His grace
- We have to acknowledge that Jesus Christ ALONE is the way of salvation

#3 Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will make every effort to live out your faith as a follower of Christ?

- This question describes God's POWER in your life
- We have to promise to trust Christ, obey His Word, and put it into practice in our lives

#4 Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?

- This question describes your PARTICIPATION in the life of the church
- We have to promise to be active members in the church and to support it with our time, talents, and treasure

#5 Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to promote and protect its purity and peace?

- This question describes the PROTECTION God provides for you in the church
- We have to submit to Christ as Lord by submitting to the God-given authority that He has placed over us. This does NOT mean that you cannot question your leadership, what it does mean is that you have to admit that you need oversight, care, and accountability.

Next Steps → Elder Interview, Session Approval, Installation as a Member on a Sunday

Helpful Articles

Session One: *Six Reasons Why Membership Matters*

Session Two: *The Ordinary Means of Growth*

Session Three: *Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed*

6 Reasons Why Membership Matters (Kevin DeYoung)

“Why bother with church membership?”

I’ve been asked the question before. Sometimes it’s said with genuine curiosity-“*So explain to me what membership is all about.*” Other times it’s said with a tinge of suspicion-“*So tell me again, why do you think I should become a member?*”-as if joining the church automatically signed you up to tithe by direct deposit.

For many Christians membership sounds stiff, something you have at your bank or the country club, but too formal for the church. Even if it’s agreed that Christianity is not a lone ranger religion, that we need community and fellowship with other Christians, we still bristle at the thought of officially joining a church. Why all the hoops? Why box the Holy Spirit into member/non-member categories? Why bother joining a local church when I’m already a member of the universal Church?

Some Christians—because of church tradition or church baggage—may not be convinced of church membership no matter how many times “member” actually shows up in the New Testament. But many others are open to hearing the justification for something they’ve not thought much about.

Here are just a few reasons why church membership matters:

1. In joining a church you make visible your commitment to Christ and his people. Membership is one way to raise the flag of faith. You state before God and others that you are part of local body of believers. It’s easy to talk in glowing terms about the invisible church—the body of all believers near and far, living and dead—but it’s in the visible church that God expects you to live out your faith.

Sometimes I think that we wouldn’t all be clamoring for community if we had actually experienced it. Real fellowship is hard work, because most people are a lot like us—selfish, petty, and proud. But that’s the body God calls us to.

How many of Paul’s letters were written to individuals? Only a handful, and these were mostly to pastors. The majority of his letters were written to a local body of believers. We see the same thing in Revelation. Jesus spoke to individual congregations in places like Smyrna, Sardis, and Laodicea. The New Testament knows no Christians floating around in “just me and Jesus” land. Believers belong to churches.

2. Making a commitment makes a powerful statement in a low-commitment culture. Many bowling leagues require more of their members than our churches. Where this is true, the church is a sad reflection of its culture. Ours is a consumer culture where everything is tailored to meet our needs and satisfy our preferences. When those needs aren’t met, we can always move on to the next product, or job, or spouse.

Joining a church in such an environment makes a counter-cultural statement. It says “I am committed to this group of people and they are committed to me. I am here to give, more than get.”

Even if you will only be in town for a few years, it’s still not a bad idea to join a church. It lets your home church (if you are a student) know that you are being cared for, and it lets your present know that you want to be cared for here.

But it’s not just about being cared for, it’s about making a decision and sticking with it—something my generation, with our oppressive number of choices, finds difficult. We prefer to date the church—have her around for special events, take her out when life feels lonely, and keep her around for a rainy day. Membership is one way to stop dating churches, and marrying one.

3. We can be overly independent. In the West, it’s one of the best and worst things about us. We are free spirits and critical thinkers. We get an idea and run with it. But whose running with us? And are any of us running in the

same direction? Membership states in a formal way, “I am part of something bigger than myself. I am not just one of three hundred individuals. I am part of a body.”

4. Church membership keeps us accountable. When we join a church we are offering ourselves to one another to be encouraged, rebuked, corrected, and served. We are placing ourselves under leaders and submitting to their authority ([Heb. 13:7](#)). We are saying, “I am here to stay. I want to help you grow in godliness. Will you help me to do the same?”

Mark Dever, in his book [Nine Marks of a Healthy Church](#), writes, *Church membership is our opportunity to grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. By identifying ourselves with a particular church, we let the pastors and other members of that local church know that we intend to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer, and service. We allow fellow believers to have great expectations of us in these areas, and we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving with them, and we call for their commitment to serve and encourage as well.*

5. Joining the church will help your pastor and elders be more faithful shepherds. [Hebrews 13:7](#) says “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.” That’s your part as “laypeople”. Here’s our part as leaders: “They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.” As a pastor I take very seriously my responsibility before God to watch care for souls. At almost every elders’ meeting the Book of Church Order instructed us “seek to determine whether any members of the congregation are in need of special care regarding their spiritual condition and/or not making faithful use of the means of grace.” This is hard enough to do in a church like ours where there is constant turnover, but it’s even harder when we don’t know who is really a part of this flock.

To give just one example, we try to be diligent in following up with people who haven’t been at our church for a while. This is a challenge. But if you never become a member, we can’t tell if you are really gone, because we might not be sure if you were ever here! It’s nearly impossible for the elders to shepherd the flock when they don’t know who really considers them their shepherds.

6. Joining the church gives you an opportunity to make promises. When someone become a member [of a local church], they make promises to pray, give, serve, attend worship, accept the spiritual guidance of the church, obey its teachings, and seek the things that make for unity, purity, and peace. We ought not to make these promises lightly. They are solemn vows. And we must hold each other to them. If you don’t join the church, you miss an opportunity to publicly make these promises, inviting the elders and the rest of the body to hold you to these promises-which would be missing out on great spiritual benefit, for you, your leaders, and the whole church.

Membership matters more than most people think. If you really want to be a counter-cultural revolutionary, sign up for the membership class, meet with your elders, and join your local church.

The Ordinary Means of Growth

by Ligon Duncan

We are living in a confused and confusing time for confessional Christians (Christians who are anchored by a public and corporate theological commitment to be faithful to the Bible's teaching on faith and practice as expounded by the great confessions of the Protestant Reformation). We are witnessing the final demise of theological liberalism, the rise of Pentecostalism, the beginnings of the so-called emerging church movement, the breakdown of evangelicalism, and an utter discombobulation about how the church is to conduct its life and ministry in an increasing "post-Christian" culture. All around us, in the name of reaching the culture with the Gospel, we see evangelical churches compromising (usually without intending to) in both message and methods.

It is not uncommon today to hear certain buzz-words and catch phrases that are meant to capture and articulate new (and presumably more culturally-attuned) approaches to ministry: "Purpose-driven," "missional," "contextualization," "word and deed," "ancient-future," "emerging/emergent," "peace and justice." Now, to be sure, there are points, diagnoses, and emphases entailed in each of these terms and concepts that are helpful, true, and timely. Sadly, however, the philosophies of ministry often associated with this glossary are also often self-contrasted with the historic Christian view of how the church lives and ministers. That view is often called "the ordinary means of grace" view of ministry.

The fundamental assumption underlying these new approaches is that "everything has changed," and so our methods must change. I would want to dispute both parts of that equation. Whatever the entailments of our present cultural moment, constituent human nature has not changed (as R.C. Sproul often reminds us). And thus the fundamental human problem has not changed. Neither has the Gospel solution to it. Nor have the effectiveness of God's Gospel means. Furthermore, one of the things that has always marked faithful and effective Christian ministry in every era and area of the world is a confidence in God's Word, both in the Gospel message and in Gospel means. Faith still comes by hearing.

In sum, there are basically three views of Gospel ministry. There are those who think that effective cultural engagement requires an updating of the message. There are those who think that effective ministry requires an updating of our methods. And there are those who think that effective ministry begins with a pre-commitment to God's message and methods, set forth in His Word.

Thus, liberalism said that the Gospel won't work unless the *message* is changed. Modern evangelicalism (and not just in its "seeker-sensitive" and postmodern permutations) has often said that the Gospel won't work unless our *methods* are changed. But those committed to an "ordinary means" approach to church life and ministry say the Gospel works, and God has given us both the *method* and the *message*. This is vitally important in a time where one of the dominant story-lines in the churches has been that of methods unwittingly, unhelpfully, and unbiblically altering both the message and the ministry.

Ordinary means of grace-based ministry is ministry that focuses on doing the things God, in the Bible, says are central to the spiritual health and growth of His people, and which aims to see the qualities and priorities of the church reflect biblical norms. Ordinary means ministry is thus radically committed to biblical direction of the priorities of ministry. Ordinary means ministry believes that God has told us the most important things, not only about the truth we are to tell, but about the way we are to live and minister — in any and every context. Hence, God has given us both the message of salvation and the means of gathering and building the church, in His Word. However, important understanding our context is, however important understanding the times may be (and these things are, in fact, very important), however important appreciating the cultural differences in the places and times we serve, the ordinary means approach to ministry is first and foremost concerned with biblical fidelity. Because faithfulness is

relevance. The Gospel is the message and the local church is the plan. God has given to his church spiritual weapons for the bringing down of strongholds. These ordinary means of grace are the Word, sacraments, and prayer.

They may seem weak in the eyes of the worldly strong. They may seem foolish in the eyes of the worldly wise. But the Gospel message is the power of God unto salvation, and the Gospel means are effectual to salvation. These are the Spiritual instruments given by God with which Christian congregational Spiritual life is nurtured, the Spirit's tools of grace and growth in grace appointed by God in the Bible.

So, when we say ordinary means of grace-based ministry, we mean a radical commitment to following the direction of God's Word as to both the message and the means of gathering and perfecting the saints. Ordinary means ministry has a high view of the Bible, preaching, the church, the ordinances or sacraments, and prayer. Ordinary means ministry believes that the key things that the church can do in order to help people know God and grow in their knowledge of God are: First, emphasize the public reading and preaching of the Word; second, emphasize the confirming, sanctifying and assuring efficacy of the sacraments, publicly administered; and third, emphasize a life of prayer, especially expressed corporately in the church. These things are central and vital but sadly often under-emphasized, under-appreciated, and undermined.

Ordinary means of grace-based ministry believes that God means what He says in the Bible about the central importance of these public, outward instruments for spiritual life and growth. God explicitly instructs ministers and churches to do the following things: "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching" ([1 Tim. 4:13](#)); "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" ([2 Tim. 4:2](#)); "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" ([Matt. 28:19](#)); "take, eat; this is my body. . . . which is for you. . . . drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins; . . . do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" ([Matt. 26:26-28](#); [1 Cor. 11:25-26](#)); "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made. . . . I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands" ([1 Tim. 2:1, 8](#)).

These are the main ways God's people grow. We are saved by grace (alone), through faith (alone), in Christ (alone). But the instruments, the tools of God's grace to bring us to faith and grow us in grace are the Word, prayer, and sacraments. Nothing else we do in the church's program of ministry should detract from these central instruments of grace, and indeed everything else we do should promote and coalesce with them.

This means, among other things, that ministry is not rocket science. Gospel faithfulness does not require the minister to be a sociologist. Because ministry is not determined (in the first place) by reading the culture but by reading the Word of God. The ordinary means minister wants to connect with the culture, but when it comes to determining method and priorities he moves from text to ministry, not from culture to ministry. He neither changes his message nor his methods based on the polling of the most recent focus group (though he strives to be fully cognizant of the obstacles and opportunities that his biblical message and methods face in his particular cultural context). He fully understands that there is no such thing as an unsituated biblical ministry, or an uncontextualized ministry (and so is careful not to universalize his particular cultural moment, nor to confuse it with universal, biblical norms). He also fully appreciates that some churches have unhelpfully baptized cultural norms and methods from the past, without realizing that baneful cultural influence. But he also knows that many churches, in the quest to contextualize the Gospel and the ministry, have in fact compromised them.

So he's constantly going back and asking "what are my marching orders?" And when he remembers, it doesn't require a Ph.D. in semiotics to interpret them: preach the Word, love the people, pray down heaven, disciple the elders, promote family religion, live a godly life. And what are the church's marching orders: delight in the Lord's Day, gathering with the saints to drink in the pure milk of the Word every Sunday morning and evening, as families; pray together as a congregation once every week; worship and catechize at home in families; love one another and all men.

What will a church look like that is committed to the ordinary means of grace? It will be characterized by love for expository Bible preaching, passion for worship, delight in truth, embrace of the Gospel, the Spirit's work of conversion, a life of godliness; robust family religion; biblical evangelism, biblical discipleship, biblical church membership, mutual accountability in the church, biblical church leadership, and a desire to be a blessing to the nations. Along with this all, there will be an unapologetic, humble, and joyful celebration of the transcendent sovereignty of the one, true, triune God in salvation and all things.

Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed

By Dennis E. Johnson, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary in California

In 1994 one of our daughters, while away from home attending college, asked me to explain the rationale I saw in God's Word for baptizing the infant children of believers. Since I was a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church when she and her siblings were born, they had all been baptized as infants; but now she was interacting with Christian brothers and sisters from other traditions through campus Christian ministry and other friendships, and many of them believed that the baptism of infants is not Christian baptism as it is established by Christ in the New Testament. In a slightly revised form, this is what I wrote to her:

Here at last is my long-overdue letter to explain why I believe it's consistent with the Bible to baptize the infants and children of believers. I want to let you know what biblical evidence changed my mind from holding a "believers' baptism" position to the conviction that both those who are converted as adults and the infants and children of believers should be baptized.

You know, of course, that I don't consider this issue one on which our trust-relationship with Jesus depends. Nor should differences on this issue disrupt our fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ who see things differently. On the other hand, since we all want to show our gratitude for God's grace by living our lives to please him, and since we learn what pleases him in his Word, we all want to get as clear a picture as we can of what the Word teaches.

The difference of views on infant baptism unfortunately does affect Christians' ability to demonstrate in practice our unity as the Body of Christ. "Infant baptizers" can and do recognize the baptism received by "believer baptizers" as genuine Christian baptism (although we may think that it's administered later than it should be in the case of children of Christian parents). But "believer baptizers" cannot acknowledge that believers who were baptized as infants have been baptized at all. So if "believer baptizers" are right--if people who have received infant baptism have not received biblical baptism at all--then there have been hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Christian believers who have never obeyed the Lord's command to be baptized in his Name, believers such as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, J. Gresham Machen, J. I. Packer, John Stott, R. C. Sproul, etc. On the other hand, if "infant baptizers" are right, then it's sad that the convictions of "believer baptizers" prevent them from recognizing the baptism of so many other members of the Body of Christ. So our difference of understanding on this issue does hinder our putting into practice the unity of the church.

Although this question is not a matter of salvation, it is certainly worth our investing time and thought and study, to see whether we can come to unity as brothers and sisters in Christ.

I Changed My Mind

First a little autobiography (I may have told you this before): It was a major change of mind for me to come to accept infant baptism. I was baptized as an infant in First Covenant Church of Los Angeles, but by the time I was an early adolescent we had a different pastor (in the same congregation!), and our new pastor didn't believe that infant baptism was valid. My parents had not really studied this

question or taught me whether there was a biblical basis for infant baptism, so I had no reason to question what my pastor said when he taught that my baptism as an infant wasn't genuine Christian baptism. Therefore, after a time of instruction in Bible doctrine (in effect, a catechism class), I publicly confessed my faith in Christ and "joined the church," being baptized by immersion on the basis of my personal profession of faith. ² (This means that, whichever view of baptism is right, I personally am covered!) I went through high school and Westmont College assuming that only people old enough to believe and testify to their faith should be baptized.

This was my view even as I started my seminary studies at Westminster, although I was puzzled that my seminary professors, who understood the Bible so much better than I in so many areas, seemed to have missed the obvious point that in the New Testament people are called to believe, and then they are baptized. I suppose I concluded that they believed in infant baptism because that was what they were accustomed to. (That explanation, however, didn't fit everyone: Dr. Strimple had remained a Baptist throughout college and his studies at Westminster, and had taught at a Baptist Bible college in Canada for many years before he became convinced that infant baptism is biblical.) "I'm accustomed to this" is not a good reason for believing or doing something as a Christian, but sometimes what we're used to does influence our faith and our conduct. In any case, at Westminster I had to face the possibility that I was the one operating on the basis of what I was accustomed to, dismissing infant baptism because of assumptions I had picked up as a teenager and had reinforced through college. In particular Westminster forced me to examine my assumptions about how to search the Bible for the answer to a theological question like this. ³

How Should We Expect the Bible to Answer the Infant Baptism Question?

I had to face the question, how should I expect the Bible to answer my question, "Should the babies of Christians be baptized?" I was expecting the Bible to answer the question with an explicit statement in one or more verses. I read verses like [Acts 2:38](#) ("Repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.") or [Acts 16:31-34](#) ("Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household Immediately he and all his family were baptized . . . he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family."). The order of things seemed so clear: first repentance/belief, then baptism. What could be plainer and simpler?

Everybody Agrees that Adult Converts from Judaism and Paganism Must Be Baptized.

But then someone pointed out something to me: Throughout the Book of Acts we read about the conversion of people who were not Christians, nor had they grown up as the children of (New Covenant) Christians, before the Apostles preached to them--either Jews or Gentiles. The preaching and examples of conversions in Acts all have to do with missionary situations, in which the Gospel is entering the lives of individuals and families and communities for the first time. Everyone, "believer baptist" and "infant baptist" alike, agrees that in circumstances like these, when people have not grown up in Christian families and the "covenant community" of the Church, those converted as adults need to receive baptism when they confess their faith in Jesus.

But Acts Is Silent About Children Born to Christian Parents.

Acts never explicitly describes a situation that would make crystal clear how the apostles handled the situation of children born to Christian parents. (Obviously, if Acts had spoken directly and clearly on this point, the discussion between "believer baptist" and "infant baptist" would have been settled long ago.) In particular:

(1) Acts never tells us about an adolescent or young adult who had been raised from infancy by parents who believed in Jesus, and who then received baptism only after he or she personally expressed his/her faith in Christ. [4](#)

(2) Although Acts records the baptism of whole households, it never explicitly states whether or not there were infants or young children in any of these homes, or whether infants in the household were excluded from receiving baptism because they were too young to express personal faith in Christ.

(3) Acts and the rest of the New Testament never record any statement by Jesus or the Apostles that the infants of believers are now to be treated differently in the New Covenant from the way that the infants of Israelite believers were in the Old: namely, that, whereas Israelite children were treated as part of the covenant community, the children of Christians are to be treated as outside the covenant community that is under Christ's Lordship. The other changes that occurred with the coming of Christ are clearly indicated in the New Testament: Circumcision is not to be required of Gentiles (Galatians), but both Jews and Gentiles who come to faith must be baptized (Acts). Animal sacrifices are done away with because of Jesus' final sacrifice ([Hebrews 10](#)). The kosher dietary laws no longer apply because Jesus cleanses people from all nationalities ([Mark 7](#); [Acts 10-11](#)). The temple in Jerusalem is replaced by a "living temple" made up of people ([1 Peter 2](#)). But the New Testament never hints that the relationship of believers' children to the church community has changed: The New Testament never suggests that, although before Jesus' coming Israelite children were "inside" the covenant community and received the covenant sign of circumcision (the boys, that is), now since Jesus' coming the children of believers are "outside" the community and therefore excluded from the covenant sign of baptism.

We'll come back to this topic of the way the New Testament views the children of believers, but for now I simply wanted to show you how I came to recognize that there is no New Testament text that answers pointblank the question, "Should believers have their children baptized?"

Starting from Broader Themes Where the Bible Speaks Clearly

So then, where do we go from here? We approach this question, like other, even more important questions (the Trinity, the mystery of the Person of Jesus as both fully God and fully man): We approach it from the perspective of broader, bigger questions that the Bible does answer clearly for us. Then, since God's Word is consistent from beginning to end, we carefully draw conclusions from what we know the Bible teaches.

This is more complicated than simply pointing to a verse or two, but it's also safer than drawing our own conclusions from what a particular verse says or does not say. Suppose every Christian concluded that Jesus' words in [Mark 10:21](#) are addressed literally to us all: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor. . . . Then come, follow me." We all need to beware of being "owned" by our possessions, but if we all sold everything, could we also obey [1 Tim 5:8](#) ("If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever")? Would there be anyone in the church for Timothy to instruct to use their wealth in

doing good (1 Tim 6:17-19)? We recognize that we have to understand Mark 10:21 in the context of Jesus' conversation with the rich young man, and in the context of the teaching of other passages of the Bible. We need to do the same with infant baptism.

Circumcision Was Administered to Infant Israelite Boys.

One clear place to start is with the fact that circumcision was administered to infant Israelite boys at the age of 8 days (Gen 17:9-14). This sign of God's covenant was given to Abraham long before the Law was given to Moses in Mt. Sinai. Apparently all of those circumcised that day in response to God's command were older than infancy: Abraham was 99 and Ishmael was 13; other males (including servants) were no doubt of various ages (Gen 17:23-27). But their age, and thus their mental/spiritual ability to respond to God's promise in faith, was irrelevant. All were circumcised because Abraham believed God.

Circumcision Was a Sign of Salvation Blessings that Are Received by Faith.

God calls circumcision a "sign" of his covenant, so we can ask what circumcision "signified," what it "pointed to" in terms of the relationship of Abraham and his family to the Lord.

A Sign of Transformation of Heart (New Birth by the Spirit). Later in the Old Testament God makes it clear that external circumcision of the flesh was a sign or symbol of a spiritual cleansing that God calls "circumcision" of the heart: "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer" (Deut 10:16). Moses prophesies that the Israelites will disobey God and receive the judgments they deserved (especially the Babylonian Exile). But after this God will regather them to the land (return under Ezra and Nehemiah), and "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (Deut 30:6). I believe God is referring to this promise when he says through Ezekiel: "I will gather you from all the countries. . . . I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. . . . I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees. . . ." (Ezek 36:24-27).

But Outward Circumcision Did Not Guarantee Circumcision of Heart. Now, receiving external circumcision did not guarantee that an Israelite boy had received spiritual circumcision, or would later receive spiritual circumcision. "'The days are coming, declares the Lord, 'when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh--Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab--and all who live in the desert in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart" (Jer 9:25-26). How shocking for an Israelite to hear these words, to be grouped among the uncircumcised, unclean Gentiles! But only if they never understood that circumcision was a sign pointing to their hearts' need for cleansing by the gracious Spirit of God!

A Sign of the Righteousness We Receive by Faith. In the light of God's teaching in the Old Testament we can understand Paul's comments on circumcision in Romans. First Paul points out that the "circumcision" that counts is "circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit," and that without this spiritual cleansing the external surgery brings no blessing or favor from God (Romans 2:25-29, especially verses 28-29). Then he comments on God's first command to Abraham to circumcise his household: "[Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while

he was still uncircumcised" ([Rom 4:11](#)). So Paul says that Abraham is not only the spiritual father of uncircumcised Gentile believers (4:11b), but also of "the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised" (4:12). Circumcision symbolized the righteousness that believers (like Abraham) receive by faith, just as it symbolized cleansing and renewal of heart by the Holy Spirit. Yet God commanded that it be administered to Israelite baby boys at 8 days old, before anyone could tell whether God had changed or would change their hearts by his Spirit, whether he would enable them to trust his promises!

A Sign of Union with Christ in His Sacrificial Death. Since the blessings of the New Birth and righteousness by faith came to Abraham and other Israelites (BC) and come to us (AD) only as a result of Jesus' sacrifice, we could even say that circumcision symbolized union with Christ in his death--his being "cut off from his people" for us ([Gen 17:14](#); see [Isaiah 53:8](#)), even though he didn't deserve the curse, since he was circumcised both in flesh ([Luke 2:21](#)) and in heart. In fact, Paul pretty much says just this in [Colossians 2:11-12](#): "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision of Christ, 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." Christ was cut off for us, put to death for us; so his death for our sins is counted by God as our own death. Circumcision symbolizes this reality of Christ suffering as our substitute, and so does baptism.

Circumcision Was Applied Before Anyone Could Know Whether a Baby Had Received or Would Receive the Spiritual Blessings It Symbolized.

Before we move on to consider what baptism symbolizes, we need to reflect on the fact that circumcision in the Old Testament symbolized the blessings that come to believers (like Abraham) by faith in Christ: cleansing and transformation of heart, forgiveness of sins, right standing before God, all through the sacrifice of Jesus. This symbol was applied to adult Gentile converts when they abandoned their idolatry and confessed faith in the God of Israel; but it was applied to the children (well, just the sons) of Israel 8 days after they were born--before Mom or Dad or priest or rabbi could tell whether that baby would later receive, through his faith, the reality symbolized in circumcision.

Baptism Symbolizes Transformation of Heart (New Birth by the Spirit), the Righteousness of Faith, and Union with Christ in his Death.

Water baptism symbolizes the same spiritual blessings that circumcision symbolized: renewal and transformation of our hearts ([Titus 3:5](#); [Ephesians 5:23](#); etc.) by the power of the Holy Spirit ([Acts 1:5](#)), who brings us into a community of faith, a Body ([1 Cor 12:13](#)). Baptism speaks of being united to Christ, clothed with Christ, right with God by faith, Abraham's seed, and heirs of God's promises ([Gal 3:26-29](#)). It speaks of being united with Christ in his death and resurrection, so that his death for us is counted as our death before the justice of God ([Romans 6:3](#); [Col 2:11-12](#)).

Water Baptism Doesn't Guarantee that the Person Receiving It Has Received or Will Receive the Spiritual Blessings It Symbolizes--Even When Adults Are Baptized after Confessing Faith!

Just as the external act of circumcision could not guarantee that the recipient would prove to be a recipient of the spiritual reality it symbolized, so also the external act of water baptism does not guarantee that its recipient will prove to have received the spiritual reality it symbolizes. Simon of Samaria was baptized, but his later attitude toward the Holy Spirit showed that he was still "captive to sin" ([Acts 8:12-13, 20-23](#)). Peter emphasizes that the flood waters that "saved" Noah and his family were pointing ahead to baptism--not merely the "removal of dirt from the body" (external water baptism) but the inner spiritual reality it symbolizes: the pledge of a good conscience toward God ([1 Pet 3:21](#)). Sadly, some churches have practiced infant baptism (and others have practiced adult "believer baptism") under the misunderstanding that the external ceremony automatically produces the New Birth it symbolizes, or guarantees that the New Birth is bound to follow eventually because of the outward ceremony. But the Bible shows that the purpose of the sacraments (circumcision, Passover and other animal sacrifices in the Old Testament; baptism and the Lord Supper in the New) is to show us our need for the spiritual blessings and to call us (as the Bible and preaching do) to receive these blessings by trusting in Christ himself.

Why Apply Circumcision/Baptism to Infants Before We "Know" Whether They Will Become Believers?

When I was a "Baptist", my biggest problem with infant baptism was that baptism symbolized the spiritual benefits of union with Christ, which are received only by faith; and parents and pastors couldn't know whether or not an infant had or would have this saving faith. But then I began to see that circumcision in the Old Testament symbolized the same blessings of union with Christ, which Old Testament believers received by faith and which unbelievers in Israel did not receive. So we face the same question for both the Old Testament sign and the New Testament sign: "Why apply a symbol before we know whether or not the reality is there?" I see three main reasons:

(1) To emphasize God's gracious initiative to us in our helplessness. Circumcision and baptism are not events in which the recipient acts, but in which someone else acts (in God's name) on or for us. This is true, of course, when an adult is converted and comes for baptism: she doesn't baptize herself, but a pastor applies the water of baptism to her. The Apostles' instruction to adults is not "baptize yourselves" (reflexive) but "be baptized" (passive: receive baptism from someone else). But it's even more obvious, when infants are baptized, that baptism is "announcing" to us that God graciously gives a change of heart that we in our spiritual death could never produce in ourselves.

(2) To emphasize the mysterious role of the family in the communication of God's covenant grace down through the generations. This role really is mysterious. On the one hand, the Bible is so clear that being born into a believing family is no guarantee of salvation: every individual is accountable to respond to the Gospel in faith, or endure the consequences of rebellion. (And, by the same token, to be born into an unbelieving family doesn't condemn a person to a life of unbelief, rebellion, and condemnation. God's grace welcomes Gentiles [Pagans] and turns them to Jesus ([Acts 14:27](#)).

I was reading [Ezekiel 18](#) in my devotions earlier this week, and was struck by how powerfully God makes the point that "family tree" doesn't guarantee an individual's salvation or his condemnation. On the other hand, God has set up the family as the context in which his Word is to be taught and

lived before children as they grow up. In contrast to our American emphasis on individualism and democracy, God clearly viewed Abraham as the head of his household, with the authority to command even his servants to undergo the painful procedure of circumcision! "I have chosen [Abraham], so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" ([Genesis 18:19](#)).

Apparently, the ancient Israelites tended to look at themselves only from the standpoint of their family connection: those in the right family (Abraham's) were in (no matter what), and everyone else was out. In twentieth-century America we tend to look at ourselves only from the standpoint of our personal individualism: we think we stand as isolated individuals before God, and our parents' relationship to the Lord presumably has no influence on the benefits we have received from him or the responsibilities we bear toward him.

But God seems to view us both as members of a family, influenced (for good or ill) by our family context and identity, and as individuals, bearing responsibility for our own response to his Word of grace. This is God's perspective not only in the Old Testament, when virtually all the covenant people were of one physical family (Abraham's--although Gentiles such as Rahab, Ruth, Uriah, and Naaman were also included); but also in the New Testament, as the Gospel goes out to all the families of the earth ([Acts 3:25](#)). This is what I find striking about the baptism of Lydia and her household ([Acts 16:14-15](#)) and of the jailer and his household ([Acts 16:31-34](#)). There's no way to tell for sure whether or not there were babies or children in those households, so both sides in the infant baptism dialogue read these texts in light of their own presuppositions. But what we can agree on is that in these texts the Holy Spirit speaks of the persons involved not as disconnected individuals but as "households," as families (or perhaps even families with resident servants). Doesn't this suggest that in the New Testament God does not discard the family as a means for extending his gracious covenant-kingdom, but rather he spreads his grace to and through more families, to households not previously reached with his salvation?

Infant circumcision and infant baptism in themselves emphasize the balance: they are administered to infants not because we presume to know or predict the infant's spiritual state, but because the child is in the home of and under the authority of Christian parents (hence the sign belongs not only to "birth-children" but also to adopted children). Yet the fact that circumcision and baptism are administered to infants at all is a testimony to the fact that birth into a particular family is no guarantee of ultimate spiritual blessing, rather that something more is needed, something that only God can do for us through the shedding of Christ's blood and through his resurrection, applied through the regenerating power of the Spirit, in order for us to become children of God.

(3) To emphasize the life-or-death consequences of our response to the Gospel of Christ. Earlier I showed the spiritual blessings that both circumcision and baptism symbolize, but that is not the whole story. Both circumcision and baptism are double-edged. They have a solemn side as well, because each in its own way "pictures" the judgment that our sin deserves, the judgment that will be received some day by those who do not trust Christ. Circumcision, which of course involved shedding of blood, symbolized the penalty of breaking God's covenant, being "cut off" from God's presence and God's people ([Gen 17:14](#)). Baptism symbolizes not only cleansing, forgiveness, and the Spirit's transforming presence, but also judgment and death. The floodwaters that "saved" Noah were also God's instrument of judgment on those who refused to heed Noah's preaching ([1 Pet 3:19-21](#)). Jesus spoke of his own death as a "baptism," a painful ordeal ([Mark 10:38](#); [Luke 12:50](#)). So it's not

surprising that Paul views both circumcision and baptism as symbols pointing to Christ's death ([Col 2:11-12](#)). By symbolizing the deadly consequences of being unfaithful to God's covenant--the shedding of blood, being cut off, being overwhelmed by floodwaters--circumcision and baptism reinforce the message of the Word as we read it and hear it preached: the only place of safety for guilty rebels like us is close to Jesus, trusting in Jesus, who bore sin's guilt and penalty for those who believe in him. So I see circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New as ongoing testimonies to children raised in Christian homes that there are severe, eternal consequences if they turn away from the grace offered in the Gospel. But of course these warnings are intended by the Lord to work along with the wonderful promises of his grace to encourage us to stick close to Jesus in living, intimate faith and love.

Circumcision and Baptism Mark the Boundaries of the Community that Is Under Christ's Lordship.

Now, the fact that circumcision and baptism both symbolize spiritual blessings that are received by faith in Christ and the fact that circumcision was administered to infants before they could give evidence of faith doesn't prove that now, in the New Testament, baptism should be administered to covenant children before they personally give evidence of their faith. It suggests to me, however, that the fact that an infant cannot express faith doesn't exclude her from receiving the sign that points to blessings that are received by faith.

If circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New do not absolutely guarantee that the person receiving the sign has received or will receive the spiritual reality, what is the purpose of these covenant signs? They mark the boundaries of the community that acknowledges Christ's covenant Lordship and authority, the church. Since we can't infallibly read others' hearts, the church as we see it on a day-to-day basis may not correspond exactly to God's perfect knowledge of his chosen ones ([2 Tim 2:17-19](#)). Even when an adult convert is baptized, we do it not because we have supernatural knowledge that he is born again but because he confesses to believe in Jesus, seems to understand what that means, and his life is beginning to bear fruit consistent with his confession of faith. Sometimes, however, church leaders are mistaken or misled, and a person who once seemed to be a believer will turn away from the life of faith he had seemed to start (remember Simon of Samaria). So as an elder I have to admit my limitations: I can't read hearts to know for certain who is "born again" from the Spirit; all that I can do is to evaluate whether people acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus both in their words and in the general direction of their behavior.

In the New Testament, Are Believers' Children "Inside" This Community or "Outside"?

I'm leading up to this important question: In the New Testament, if parents confess Jesus as Lord, are their children inside this community, the church, or are they outside? Clearly in the Old Testament the children were included in the community of God's covenant, receiving the mark of the covenant (circumcision), participating in the feasts of the covenant (for example, Passover, [Exodus 12:25-27](#)), being taught the Law as the guide for their grateful response to God's redemptive grace ([Deut 6:4-9, 20-25](#)). But what about the New Testament? When Christ comes, is there a change in the composition of the community of God's covenant?

The Trend in the New Testament Is to Include People Who Used to Be "Outside." There are changes in the composition of the covenant people as we move from Old Testament to New, but they are not in the direction of excluding a category of people because of their age or mental immaturity. The most obvious change is that Gentiles, people from other physical families than Abraham's, are welcomed in droves. As we see in Matthew's mention of Rahab, Ruth, and others in the genealogy of Jesus ([Matt 1](#)), even in the Old Testament God did welcome a handful of Gentiles into his community; but with the death and resurrection of Jesus and the baptism of the Spirit which he poured out on the church, the floodgates of grace are thrown wide open to Samaritans, Greek, Romans--even the Swedes and Scotch-Irish! Secondly, the sign of the New Covenant, baptism, is one that can be and is applied to females as well as males ([Acts 8:12](#)), in contrast to Old Covenant circumcision, which was only for males. Although the New Testament still speaks of a distinction in role between men and women in the family and the church, baptism makes clear what was implied in [Genesis 1:26-28](#): in terms of creation in God's image, and now new creation in the image of Christ, and in terms of personal value and worth to God, women and men are equal ([Gal 3:28](#)).

Hence women worship with men in Christian congregations, not in a separate courtyard as in the Jerusalem temple or behind a screen as in some Jewish synagogues. So now, with Gentiles welcomed in and women more fully included by receiving the covenant sign along with males, does God now take a very different stance toward the children of believers, excluding them from his covenant people as he is welcoming other groups in?

Peter at Pentecost: The Promise to Jewish Converts, Their Children, and Gentiles "Far Off." Probably the most direct answer to our question comes from Peter's lips on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost is the climactic turning point of the transition between Old Testament and New because on Pentecost the crucified, risen, ascended, enthroned Lord Jesus baptized the church with the Holy Spirit--as John the Baptist had prophesied ([Acts 1:5](#)). Peter's audience were Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism from throughout the Roman world, and some of them (despite their heritage as covenant people) had committed treason against God's Messiah, Jesus. When they realized what they had done, Peter told them to repent and receive baptism in Jesus' name ([Acts 2:38](#)). Then he added: "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call" (2:39). "All who are far off" are the pagan Gentiles. ⁵ This is consistent with the expansion of the reach of God's gracious covenant that I mentioned above. But now notice this: the children of these people who are at the point of repentance, faith, and baptism are not bypassed as Christ's promise goes out to the pagans. The promise of forgiveness and renewal by the Spirit is spoken specifically to the children of Peter's listeners. As these children grow and understand the promise and the Promise Maker, they of course bear the responsibility to respond in personal trust (just as Peter's Pentecost audience do and the Gentiles "far off" will). But the point is: In expanding his community of grace to the Gentiles, God will not expel the children.

Jesus: The Kingdom Belongs to Little, "Useless" Children. This continuing inclusion of children in Christ's community is what we would expect when we reflect on the way Jesus rebuked his disciples' adult arrogance in trying to shield him from "insignificant" (in their minds) children ([Luke 18:15-17](#)). In fact, I'm convinced that it was precisely children's "insignificance" and "uselessness" that Jesus had in mind when he said, "Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." When some people hear these words, they think romantically of the "innocence" or "simple trust" that they suppose children have. But Jesus knew children better than that. His point is:

Unless you come to the kingdom without any claim that you deserve it, you will never enter it. Apparently by Pentecost Peter had absorbed the point that Jesus made that day: Jesus does not expel children from his community, for his kingdom belongs to them (those left outside are those who refuse to swallow their pride, who refuse to come as insignificant children, unworthy in themselves but dependent on the King).

Paul Talks to Children in the Church, Calling Them to Obey "in the Lord" without Distinguishing Between "Insiders" (Who Have Confessed Faith and Been Baptized) and "Outsiders" (Too Young to Be Baptized as Believers). This perspective--that children are not excluded from the community of the King with the coming of the New Testament--also explains why Paul can address children in his letters with instructions that presuppose Christ's authority over them: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother' which is the first commandment with a promise 'that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.'" ([Eph 6:1-3](#); [Col 3:20](#): "for this pleases the Lord.") Paul does not talk to two categories of children: (1) children who have confessed faith and been baptized; and (2) children who have not been baptized, and are presumed not to be believers. Rather, he speaks to all the children present in the congregation, and he implies that their identity "in the Lord," their trust in the promises of God, and their desire to do what "pleases the Lord" should motivate all these children to obey their parents. Of course, these congregations may include some children who are not born again, not believers; but Paul is not presuming to read individual hearts at long distance. He is simply treating the children, as a group, as members of the King's community, under the King's authority, and therefore responsible to the King for their response to their parents.

What About Infant Dedication as a Way of Symbolizing that the Children of Christian Parents Have a Special Place and Special Responsibilities?

Now, we could ask, couldn't a "dedication" ceremony such as that practiced at many Baptist churches serve the same purpose as infant baptism in recognizing that the children of believers do have some sort of special place in the community of Christ's covenant? Well, yes and no. Yes. Infant dedication in Baptist churches seems to reflect a sort of Spirit-prompted "instinct" that, even though (in such churches) they are treated as unbelievers and outsiders by being denied baptism, the children of believers actually do have some sort of a relation to Christ and his church. It would be more consistent, it seems to me, for churches of "believer baptism" convictions not to replace infant baptism with dedication, but simply to wait and see what path kids choose (faith or rebellion) as they grow up. Typically the dedication services I have heard still imply that believing parents are doing something in relation to the Lord on behalf of their infant children. Wouldn't it be more consistent to wait until children are old enough to decide for themselves whether they want to be dedicated to God? And yet, frankly, I'm glad that Baptist churches are inconsistent enough to have infant dedication, and that Baptist parents bring their children to church and teach them the Gospel at home and sing "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know" with their kids. The way I see it, in all these ways they are acting as though their children have a place in the community of Christ, even though Baptist parents don't acknowledge that their children can receive the sign of inclusion in Christ's community, baptism. And since (in my view) the Bible teaches that believers' children have a place in the community of Christ (though that doesn't guarantee their salvation!), the more that Christians

act in ways consistent with the Bible (even if our understanding of its teaching is unclear), the more the Lord is glorified.

No. A Biblical Case for Infant Dedication in the New Testament Is Far Weaker than the Case for Infant Baptism. If we are looking for a biblical justification for how we treat the infants of believers, it seems to me that it is far harder to make a case for dedication than for infant baptism. Consider the biblical examples of infant dedications: There was Samuel, whom his mother Hannah promised to return to the Lord for tabernacle service even before he was conceived (1 Sam 1:11, 24-28). But Hannah's dedication of Samuel did not replace his circumcision, of course. Rather, it made him a "Nazirite," whose uncut hair signified his special consecration as a servant of God (1 Sam 1:11; Numbers 6:1-21). Nor is it treated as an ongoing pattern for Israelite infants in the Old Testament, let alone for the children of believers in the New Testament. There were Samson and John the Baptist (also Nazirites from conception), whom God had promised to barren parents and set apart for his own special purposes even before their conception (Judges 13:3-5; Luke 1:13-17).

Then there is the presentation of Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:22-24) when he was about 41 days old. (He was circumcised at 8 days, and then 33 days later Mary could be "purified" following her son's birth, Lev 12:37). But we should notice that this presentation fulfills the command that came from the Exodus from Egypt, and specifically the night when the Passover lamb died in the place of the Israelites' firstborn: "Every firstborn male shall be called holy to the Lord" (Exod 13:2). Firstborn animals were to be sacrificed as holy to the Lord (Exod 13:12). Firstborn sons were to be redeemed (Exod 13:15). It is hard for me to see how this Old Testament custom, which had to be observed carefully for Jesus since he came to fulfill every requirement of the Law of Moses, could be viewed as a model for Christians dedicating their children. Christian infant dedication services don't mention the ceremonial purification of the infant's mother after the birth; they are performed not only for firstborn sons but also for later children--of both genders! They do not involve offering sacrifices for the redemption of the child from death or the purification of the mother. In all these ways Christian infant dedication services today are very different from Jesus' presentation to the Lord at the age of a month and a half--and they should be! The Old Testament sacrificial system, which included the redemption of Israel's firstborn and the ceremonial cleansing of Israel's mothers, was fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

Because I find no convincing biblical command or example that would provide a basis for infant dedication by Christian parents today, if we have to choose between infant dedication and infant baptism on the basis of biblical evidence, it seems clear that the weight of biblical evidence favors infant baptism, because of the continuity between circumcision and baptism as signs of entry into God's community.

"Dedication" Focuses More on the Parents' Action Than on God's Promise of Grace through Faith. Finally, infant dedication as a ceremony lacks an important element that infant baptism has: Infant baptism encourages us and our children to trust in Christ by symbolizing the promises of God, achieved for us by Christ and received by faith alone. Dedication tends to focus more on what we do than on what Christ has done. As parents look back on that day with their kids, they are saying, "We dedicated you to the Lord's service when you were a baby." On the other hand, as "infant baptist" parents look back on the day of their child's baptism, they say to her, "On that day long ago, the Lord Jesus promised to you that if you trust him he will wash away your sins and give you a heart to love

and serve him by the power of his Spirit. Just as the water 'cleansed' your baby skin, so the Holy Spirit will make your heart clean if you trust in Jesus, because Jesus died for the sins of everybody who trusts in him." You can see the difference. Both sets of parents are calling their kids to respond in faith and both sets do so by teaching the Gospel about what Jesus did for us in his sacrifice on the cross, but children baptized as infants have received a sign/symbol that points directly to that gift of God's grace.

So I would say that infant dedication is better than nothing (since it is a way of recognizing that the children of believers have the privileges and responsibilities of being included in the Lord's community), but it seems to me that infant baptism has much stronger biblical support than does infant dedication in the New Testament church.

Fatherly Encouragement: Study the Scriptures. Pray. Think. Ask

Since I've walked the road between "believer baptism" and "infant baptism," I appreciate the fact that you want to re-examine childhood assumptions in the light of what God's Word teaches. Go to it! I also sympathize with you, since we both realize that this issue is not as "cut-and-dried" as whether Jehovah or Baal is God, or whether we are saved by faith in Jesus or by our own obedience to the Law. The biblical answers to those questions are plain and clear. But sincere believers who love the Lord and want to follow his Word have drawn very different conclusions on this question of infant baptism. So I would just encourage you to study the Bible's teaching, not only in individual verses that contain the word "baptism" but also in passages that explain the symbolism of circumcision and baptism, that show how God treats children in the Old Testament in the New, that show us who belongs to the community of Christ on earth (both ancient Israel and the Church today), and that explain ideas like "covenant" and the role of the family/household in God's plan for his covenant people. I would encourage you to think and pray over what you have read. No doubt I haven't covered in this letter all the questions you may have, so please feel free to ask them and I'll do my best to give you answers that are faithful to God's Word.

Love,
Dad

Notes:

1. © 1998 Dennis E. Johnson. Corrected 2003. This is not a polished, published document yet, but I reserve the right to turn it into one in the future. It is circulated for the benefit and discussion of students at Westminster Theological Seminary in California and, with permission, to other Christians who may be helped by it. To contact the author, see regular and e-mail addresses at the end.

2. My pastor also believed that immersion ([Romans 6:4](#)) is the only right mode by which to apply the water of baptism. He would not recognize sprinkling ([Hebrews 9:13-14](#); [1 Peter 1:2](#); [Ezekiel 36:25](#)) or pouring ([Acts 1:5](#); [2:17-18](#)"You will be baptized with Spirit" = "I will pour out my Spirit"; see [Titus 3:5-6](#)), even though these methods of applying cleansing liquid (water/blood) are used repeatedly in Scripture, and sometimes tied directly to the language of baptism (as in [Acts 1-2](#)). The verses above suggest that baptism symbolizes not only death, burial, and resurrection with Christ, but also cleansing from sin's uncleanness (sprinkling) and the gift of the Spirit (pouring). Therefore it seems that any of these modes is appropriate, since each mode points to some aspect of the spiritual reality of which baptism is a sign.

3. Over Labor Day weekend I was preaching in Portland, OR, and spent the afternoon with a couple in the church there. We were talking about infant baptism and I learned that the husband had come to faith in a Baptist church and had then come to believe that infant baptism is biblical while he was studying at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary. I asked him what had changed his mind, and he mentioned especially coming to see that circumcision in the Old Testament was a sign of "the righteousness of faith" ([Romans 4:11](#)), and yet Abraham was commanded to circumcise infants who were too young to demonstrate faith. If that was so in the Old Testament, he concluded, it could also be true of baptism in the New. I'll pick up this idea below, but I thought you would be interested to learn of this brother's experience of coming to believe in the appropriateness of infant baptism not in an "infant baptist" seminary like Westminster but in a "believer baptist" seminary like Western.

4. Timothy is the only individual whose "childhood history" we know much about, but it's likely that both he and his mother were, so to speak, "Old Testament believers" until Paul arrived in Lystra, bringing the news that God's Old Testament promises had been fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah ([Acts 16:13](#); [2 Tim 1:5](#); [3:10, 15](#)). Since Timothy's mother taught him the Scriptures "from infancy," apparently she would have had him circumcised as an infant as the Law commanded, were it not for the fact that his Gentile father forbade it. Paul circumcised him as a young adult not because circumcision is a sacrament/sign still applied to believers under the New Covenant, but simply to remove a potential obstacle to the effectiveness of Timothy's ministry among Jews. Anyway, we don't ever read about when Timothy was baptized.

5. The expression is from [Isa 57:19](#) and is applied to Gentiles in [Acts 22:21](#); [Eph 2:13, 17](#).

New Member Installation Information Form

Please fill this form out to help others in the congregation get to know you better
*[*Couples/Families please fill this form out together (i.e.- only 1 per family is needed).]*

Name(s):

Name(s)/Ages of Children (if applicable):

Occupation:

Hobbies/Interests: