

ECO Essentials: “Covenant Life in the Church”

It is not uncommon to hear people say things like “I don’t have to go to church to be a Christian.” Or “I can worship God just as well at home, watching the preacher on TV” or “I can worship God fishing on the lake, hiking in the woods, or playing golf, that’s when I feel closest to God.”

Is this true? Do we really need the church to have a proper relationship with God? Can one actually be a Christian apart from active participation the life of a church?

While it is true that participating in the life of the church has nothing to do with how or why it is we are saved- sinners are saved and made right with God solely on the grounds of what God has done for them in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as received by the gift of faith. Yet it is also equally true that one who is genuinely converted to faith in Jesus will be an active participant in the life of the church.

The fact of the matter is that if you are in Christ you have been saved by God in Christ to be put into the life of the church. The church is simply God’s family- all those whom God has saved in Christ, and if you have been saved you have been saved to be put back into the family of God, not fly solo.

No Flying Solo

Cyprian, a bishop in the early Christian church once said, “You cannot have God as your Father, if you do not have the church as your mother.” He is right. We were made for life in the church, the family of God, because God made us for relationships.

God is a God of relationships- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit- so naturally when God created us He made us relational creatures. First, we were made to be in relationship with God and then we were made to be in relationship with one another, and the church is the central context in which these vertical and horizontal relationships are to be lived out in the life of the Christian.

Never fall for the lie that the church is optional for the follower of Jesus.

Jesus had 12 twelve disciples. The first Christians in the book of Acts were “devoted to the apostles teaching, the breaking of bread, prayer, and to the fellowship, and they shared everything they had in common.”ⁱ The apostle Paul wrote most of his letters to churches, and when he did write a letter to an individual he was usually writing to someone who was a pastor of a church. In the book of Hebrews the reader is exhorted to “Not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but rather they are to encourage one another, all the more as they see the Day (of Christ’s return) approaching.”ⁱⁱ

No genuine follower of Jesus in the Bible was ever flying solo. We were built and made by God to be in the church, the family of God.

This morning we are looking at what our essential tenets document teaches us about life in the church, and the word that is used to describe what life is like in the church family is the word covenant.

Covenant, a Word Full of Grace

The word covenant is a deeply biblical word that is repeated many times throughout both testaments of the Bible. Covenant is a relational word that is used to describe a relationship between two parties.

In this case, in the case of the Bible, covenant is used to describe a relationship between One who is a superior (The sovereign God) and one who is subservient and inferior (human creatures). God is the One who initiates the covenant and God is the one who defines the terms of the covenant.

Covenant is a word that is full of grace because when we study the covenants that God has made with His people throughout the Bible what we see is that God is always faithful to His end of the deal, even when His people are not, as they so often are.

For example, God made a covenant with Abraham to bless him and make a great nation come forth from seed, and God did indeed do that in birthing Israel, but Israel, God's chosen people, failed over and over again, eventually falling apart as a nation and going into exile, but God never gave up on her and He brought forth a Savior from her bosom and God still is committed to blessing this people and saving her, even though she has went off track on many occasions. We could also look at other covenants that God made in the Bible-covenants with Adam, Noah, and King David, and see how those people messed up their end of the deal, yet God remained true to His promises.

No doubt, the Superior in the covenant (God) places stipulations (demands) on the inferior party (sinful human beings) that He expects to be met, but when it's all said and done and humans fail at upholding their end of the deal, we see a God who remains doggedly faithful to the covenant promises He has made even though His people have messed up. So the good news of the gospel is that when we look at covenants in the Bible we see that they are not like contracts. Praise the Lord!

When a contract is signed two parties agree to something and if one of the parties fails to uphold his end of the deal the contract is terminated and people are hurt. But when God makes a covenant to never again flood the whole world He does not do it, even though the first thing Noah did after the flood was get "three sheets to the wind" and have one of his sons (Ham) violate him.

So if you remember anything today, remember that God has always upheld His end of the deal and He never nullified any of the covenants He made with His people even though they failed. This has had a huge effect on your life.

For example, take the covenant God made with King David- to bring forth a King from his lineage who would forever sit on the Throne. David royally messed up in his affair with Bathsheba and committed murder to cover up his sin, yet God remained faithful to His covenant promise to King David and eventually brought forth King Jesus from his family tree to forever sit on God's Throne as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. If God had nullified the covenant he made with David because of his adultery and murder you would still be dead in your sins. But God didn't and you are saved if you are in Christ.

Remember this- God is faithful even when we are not, yet God still has expectations of us in the covenants He has made with us, and as it concerns covenant life in the church there are three things that our essentials document spells out.

Three Implications of Covenant Life in the Church

Covenant life in the church calls for our participation.

I've kind of already made that point in the opening of the message when I talked about the necessity of the believer being involved in the life of the church. But to say it again, normatively speaking, one cannot genuinely follow Christ without being involved in the life of the church. Again you "cannot have God as your Father without having the church as your mother." You have been saved by Christ to be in the family of God. God calls you and expects you to participate and he has given you gifts to do just that in the life of the church.

Covenant life in the church is also to reflect a unity in Christ and the gospel.

This unity and oneness cannot be accomplished and maintained apart from a common commitment to the core essentials of the gospel. Jesus prayed for his followers to be one, just as he and His Father were one.ⁱⁱⁱ How much "creative" theology with radically divergent points of view do you think was going on between the Father and the Son? None! The Father and Son were playing from the same playbook. They weren't having disagreements on the authority of Scripture, the Lordship of Christ, salvation in Christ alone, the bodily resurrection, and matters of human sexuality. The unity of the Father and Son was rooted in a common shared will as expressed in the playbook (the Bible), and our unity must be rooted in the same unity that the Father and Son shared together.

Unity for the sake of unity is no unity at all and we can make an idol of unity, yet God does call us to one in the Lord in the life of this particular church, in the life of the denomination we now live in, and the Lord also calls us recognize unity with our other brothers and sisters in Christ in other churches and denominations who are faithful to the core teachings of Holy Scripture.

Covenant life in the church is also to reflect a diversity in the life of the church body.

Not diversity in common core theological convictions, again we must be unified, not diversified, on the basic deep truths of the faith, but we are called to work on reflecting what the Kingdom of God will ultimately look like at the end when God completes his work of redemption and renewal in creation.

What will the Kingdom of God look like? It will be comprised of both male and female, young and old, black and white, Asian, African, Arabic, and European. The kingdom of God will be comprised of people of every tribe, tongue, and nation.

There is a real tension here for the church to reflect this diversity because it is understandable how people can gravitate to cultures that are reflective of shared values and histories. I understand how churches can be predominately white, predominately black, or predominately Asian, or predominately rich, middle class, or poor in her congregational makeup, yet it must be said that we as a church can do better and grow in the diversity of our cultural makeups and backgrounds.

In fact, in order to be faithful we must do this because this is what the kingdom of God will be like. When you die and go to heaven you're not going to be living in a black, white, Latino, or rich or poor neighborhood, but you're going to be living in a diverse neighborhood, comprised of people from different tongues, tribes, and nations; therefore if this is the trajectory toward which we are moving then it would behoove us a church to be more intentional in our efforts to reflect such diversity.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

ⁱ Acts 2:42-48; 5:32-35

ⁱⁱ Hebrews 10:24-25

ⁱⁱⁱ John 17, esp. v. 20-21