

Chapter 2

Keeping God's Covenant in the Church

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There is, according to the Scriptures, the closest possible relationship between the truth of the covenant and the doctrine of the church. Or, to put it more concretely and practically, there is the closest possible relationship between God's establishment and maintenance of His covenant with His elect and His establishment and preservation of the church in the midst of the world. And there is the closest relationship between our responsibility to be keepers of God's covenant and our responsibilities to the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. So close is that relationship that I am convinced that we do not exaggerate if we say **that the covenant of grace that God establishes with His people in Christ could never come to realization in history without the church. God establishes and maintains His covenant through the church of Christ,** particularly as that church comes to manifestation in the midst of the world in the church institute.

God chose to Himself a church in Christ. When Paul begins his epistle to the Ephesians, he calls the church to join with him in a doxology of praise to Him who has chosen us in Christ from before the foundation of the world ([Eph. 1:4](#)). **Christ and the church are so much one that it is impossible to speak of Christ without speaking at the same time of the church. There is no Christ apart from the church. There is no church apart from Christ. They are one, together the elect of God.**

When the Scriptures emphasize that the church is one *in* Christ, that is covenantal language. We are His body, Scripture tells us. We are joined to Him by a true faith. He is our Head. We are nothing apart from Him. All our life comes from Him. We are His and He is ours.

The unity of Christ and His people in the church is also the realization of God's covenant with His people.

This identity of the covenant and the church was prefigured already in the old dispensation. The nation of Israel in the old dispensation was the church, as Stephen in his speech before the Sanhedrin calls it: "the church in the wilderness" ([Acts 7:38](#)). The very centre of the life of that church of the old dispensation was the temple. In that temple God dwelt in the midst of His people. Israel constituted the church because the temple had been established there; that is, because God had taken up His abode in Zion and called His people to dwell with Him in the

temple. God and His people dwelling together was the heart and centre of all of Israel's life as the church.

In God's marvelous ways of working, the temple in the old dispensation was a picture, a figure, and a type of God's covenant relationship with His people in which He dwells with them and calls them into fellowship with Himself. But because the temple was a *figure* of the covenant, the temple itself was not and could not be the perfection of the covenant. It was only a figure because God dwelt in the Most Holy Place, in the innermost sanctuary, and the nation of Israel could not enter the temple beyond the outer court. That meant that, from one point of view, God and His people dwelt together in covenant fellowship because they dwelt together under one roof. They lived together in the same house.

But at the same time, because it was figurative and because the fulfillment had not yet come in Jesus Christ, God and His people could not come very close together. It was almost as if a young man married a young woman and, though they were united in marriage, and though now that they lived together in one house under the same roof in the fellowship of marriage, nevertheless, the wife lived in the one end of the house and the husband lived in the other end of the house. They could not come together. The distance of the intervening rooms separated them from each other.

That was the way it was in the old dispensation. God was in the pillar of cloud that filled the Most Holy Place (the same pillar of cloud, by the way, that had led Israel through the wilderness for forty years, and the same cloud that took our Lord Jesus Christ to heaven at the time of His ascension). That symbol of God's presence was in the Most Holy Place. Israel was in the outer court. Between God and His people a heavy veil, the altar of incense, the table of shewbread, the candlestick, the whole Levitical priesthood and, above all, the altar of burnt offering separated the two. The blood of atonement had not yet been shed. It was prefigured in the sacrifices, but Israel could not come near to God, as near as it is possible to come, until atonement had actually been made.

That was the typical covenant fellowship in which God dwelt with His church. The church, the existence of the church, depended upon that temple. When the temple was destroyed, that was the end of Israel as a church to all intents and purposes, and the nation was scattered among the heathen.

At the very beginning of our Lord's ministry a very interesting and important incident took place, recorded for us in [John 2](#). I am referring to the cleansing of the temple by our Lord Jesus Christ at the time of the Passover. On two different occasions Christ cleansed the temple of the buyers and sellers who had made the house of God a house of merchandise. Our Lord cleansed the temple at the beginning of His ministry and at the end—almost as if it were His inaugural sermon and His farewell sermon.

That cleansing of the temple infuriated the Jewish religious leaders. It

infuriated them, I suspect, because they were embarrassed. They had been made to look like fools in the eyes of the Jews. But it was above all a challenge to their authority in the nation. So they came to the Lord with a question: “Who gave you the authority to do this? Who are the ones whom God has appointed to be responsible for what takes place in the temple? If you chase us out, you must claim an authority that is higher than ours. We would like to know what that authority is that is superior to ours and that gives you the right to determine what should take place in this temple and what should not.”

To that question, the Lord gave a very striking answer, which at first glance seems almost to be evasive. Christ said to the Jews, “This is the authority by which I cleanse the temple: Destroy this temple and in three days I will build it up.” Now, you understand that the Jews *pretended* that they did not perceive what Jesus meant. They mocked. “Oh,” they said, “are you going to build this temple in three days? This temple has been in building for forty-six years and it is still not completed. Who do you think you are that you can build the temple in three days?” But, although they mocked, they were very uneasy. Those words of Christ stung so badly that they never forgot them. Even when the Lord was finally hanging on the cross, they still remembered those words that He had spoken at the beginning of His ministry, and they called out to Him: “Oh, temple destroyer! Save thyself.” They understood, maybe not entirely what the Lord meant, but well enough to be frightened.

John explains the meaning of Jesus’ words: “he spake of the temple of his body” ([John 2:21](#)).

There is the idea of the covenant. That old temple was a symbol of God dwelling with His people under one roof. But it could not be the reality. God and His people were too far apart from each other to enjoy the full intimacy and the richness of the fellowship of marriage. The blood of atonement had not yet been shed.

Our Lord claims for Himself true authority over the temple: “I have authority over this old temple because My body is the true temple, and that old temple is but a figure of My body. That old temple is Mine because it is a shadow cast by Me over the whole of the old dispensation. I have the right to do with it what I will because I own it. This body, the true temple, is Mine. I will do with it as I please. And I please to do the will of My heavenly Father. So you Jews, who will hate me enough to kill Me, will yourselves destroy this temple. But following your act of destroying this temple, when I raise it up in the resurrection, the true temple of God will be built.”

The cleansing of the temple was an amazing event in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. That it stands at the very beginning of His earthly ministry is intended to impress upon us the fact that our Lord, in the entire earthly ministry in which He was engaged, culminating in His cross and resurrection from the dead, was building the temple of God, the true temple, where God would dwell in covenant fellowship with His people. Christ is the temple of God. The perfect sacrifice for sin has been made. The blood of bulls and goats need no longer be shed. The veil of the old temple was ripped from top to bottom. Christ entered into the Most Holy Place, and He took us along. Not the typical Most Holy Place of the earthly temple in Jerusalem, but the inner tabernacle of heaven itself where God dwells.

In Christ, that perfect fellowship of the covenant is attained. Paul tells us in his epistle to the Colossians, as he describes the great glory of Christ the head of the church, that in Christ “dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” ([Col. 2:9](#)). Every word in that text is important. In Christ dwells the fullness of the Godhead: the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the fullness of His divine life and glory is in Christ, revealed in Him and through Him, dwelling in Him. But, says Paul, the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him *bodily*. It dwells in the body of Christ.

Who is the body of Christ? The church! All of Scripture testifies of that. Christ is the one, therefore, in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells with the church, so that Christ is the one in whom God and His church come as close together as it is possible to come; so close, in fact, that Peter, in a statement that never ceases to astound me, says in [II Peter 1:4](#) that we are “partakers of the divine nature.” I have never dared to preach on that text. I confess that I do not know what that means, except for the fact that it illustrates in an astounding way how close God and His people come together in our Lord Jesus Christ, so that they dwell together in the true temple of God in covenant fellowship: the church in covenant fellowship with God in Christ.

Christ, in order to realize the covenant of God, establishes the church in the midst of the world. The church is a covenant community. I thought long and hard about that word “community.” (I am not fond of the word. It has connotations in our modern ecclesiastical parlance that are distasteful to me. But I cannot think of a better word, so we will use it.) The church constitutes God’s covenant people. The church is an organization, an institution of God’s covenant people. That does not

only mean that the church is established for purposes of *showing* that God establishes His covenant with His people. The church, the institute of the church, the church in her organization, the church with a constitution, the church with a membership roll, the church with officebearers—that church as an institution is the means by which God realizes His covenant.

In the worship of the church, God’s people enter into covenant fellowship with God. God comes to dwell with His people. He speaks to them and they to Him in the holy conversation of covenant fellowship. He tells them His secrets ([Ps. 25:14](#)) and they respond in praise.

The church is the mother of God’s covenant people. The figure emphasizes that the church is the instrument by which God brings forth His covenant people. That is, He makes them His covenant people. He regenerates them. He makes them, through the work of regeneration, His sons and His daughters. He takes them into His family. He begets them again by a second birth so that they are children of God and He is their Father. It is through the Word of the gospel that the people of God are quickened unto new life, the power of regeneration within them is made to grow, and faith is worked within them, which unites them to Christ their Savior. Therefore, the church is necessary for the establishment and realization of God’s covenant in the world.

In Lord’s Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 54, the doctrine of the church is discussed and defined with reference to an article in the Apostles’ Creed, “What believest thou concerning the ‘holy, catholic church’ of Christ?” The answer to that question, in part, is this: “That the Son of God ... gathers, defends, and preserves to Himself by His Spirit and Word ... a church chosen unto everlasting life...” He gathers that church. He defends that church. He preserves that church by His Word and Spirit. And, as the Catechism makes clear, and as is taught throughout the Scriptures, the Word is the Word of the everlasting gospel, the power of the new life, the power whereby God’s family is brought into existence, the Word that almighty God speaks through the gospel to call out of darkness into light His elect church and to call them into fellowship with Himself in Jesus Christ. That is the work that He gives to the church

But not only is the *establishment* of the covenant dependent on the church, but also its *maintenance*. Our subject is: Keeping God’s Covenant. Keeping God’s covenant is our calling and responsibility. I want to underscore at the very outset

the fact that all of our calling is possible because of the church.

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“SMALL GROUP COVENANTS”

(Icenogle, G. W. (1993). *Biblical foundations for small group ministry: An integrative approach*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.)

The LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.” God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.” (Gen 17:1–9 NRSV)

In the Bible *covenant* is relationship defined by God. It is God’s nature to be in relationship, and covenant is what God wants the relationship to be. A covenant, then, emerges out of God’s very nature. It is God’s “unilateral” word and action. Karl Barth said that covenant “is the fellowship which originally existed between God and man, which was then disturbed and jeopardized.”

Covenant always implies community, just as community always implies covenant. [6 highlights] **The coming together of persons finds its origin in the God whose very nature is being together. God calls humanity into relationship by being and declaring covenant.** God’s invitation to be together is built into the very fiber of creation. Creation is the arena where covenant is constantly active. **God is always grouping; he is always bringing things and persons together. There is no coming together without covenant being a reality, and without the reality of divine covenant being.** [8 highlights]

God creates community with purpose, and redeems community for purpose. The character and purpose of all human groups are founded in God’s existence as divine community. God shares divine purpose with human groups. [6 highlights] That is, God has brought humanity through history in groups with a purpose. God gives human groups a sense of direction. God gives this sense of direction and purpose to those leaders and groups who are willing to listen and act upon what they hear God saying. [7 highlights] God transmits this message of purpose in the lives and relationships of faithful groups.

Making a Covenant

The word *covenant* has its etymology in the word *covene*. [5 highlights] Covenant brings two or more persons together. It is a “binding and solemn agreement made by two or more individuals

to do or not to do specific things.” [6 highlights] The gathering of persons into a small group carries the immediate implication of *covenant*. There is no human gathering that does not reflect the foundational covenant of a convening God. God’s covenantal personality may be blurred or obscured by human brokenness, but the personality of interactive divine community still haunts, if not beckons to, every human gathering.

By definition then, covenant first of all implies *group*. People are gathered for a reason. [5 highlights] Someone or something has brought them together—they have something in common. They may be in the same room just to wait or they may be in an elevator to go up the building. The foundational common ground of a group is their common Creator and their common humanity. Their gathering creates common space and common place. The very fact that they are together implies that the covenant personhood and promise of God have been invoked and the covenant process has already begun. Once the individuals are gathered they are no longer just individuals—they are now a constituted group. [6 highlights] Their life together may be short-lived or eternal, but for this moment they are a group. They are together. They must deal with one another. They must decide how to engage and how much to engage. Those who are not convened and gathered are fragmented, disconnected or isolated individuals. The covenant presence of God works to bring order and group life out of this disconnection and fragmentation. “Order precedes and overcomes disorder. When viewed apart from covenant, creation appears as sheer randomness and capriciousness.” [6 highlights]

Second, covenant implies *family*. As Ray Anderson has said, “Being connected means being human, and being human means being part of a family.” Covenant implies the gathered group is potential family, where the group members are interwoven into each other’s lives by the creative presence of a “family” God [5 highlights] who brings people together to be a covenant community. While the word *group* may carry a certain sound of clinical sterility, the term *family* may suggest more accurately the idea that the gathered group is a reflection of the intimacy God creates through personal presence and voice. Human groups have the freedom to approach and to know one another in the way God approaches and knows us. This may be one of the positive reasons for the church’s historical and doctrinal love affair with its theology of the Trinity. The description of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit has a family sound and feel. Wherever a small group gathers, covenant works to draw that group together as human family no matter what resistance might exist.

Third, covenant implies *small family group*. [20 highlights] Every large group gathering probably began as a small group whom God called together and gave the mission to call the larger group gathering. God’s covenant with Abraham first includes Sarah and then Lot and continues to include vast numbers of persons throughout history. The small group precipitated the larger gathering of many groups. The covenantal gathering process of Israel by Moses began with God meeting Moses face to face in the burning bush (Ex 3). Moses was not called out of a vacuum. He was identified and called out as a member of a small faithful family group (the Midian tribe) among whom was Jethro, the “priest of Midian.” Moses’ relationship with Jethro and the Midian community formed him spiritually and prepared him to hear the voice of God while tending sheep. Moses’ call came in the midst of his life in the smaller tribal group.

Before he attempted to gather all the Hebrew people he clearly heard God's strategy to meet with the smaller group of elders to confirm and enable the calling out of the larger group. God said to Moses, "Go, assemble the elders of Israel" (Ex 3:16–18). In addition to meeting with the elders, he was to go with them to confront the king of Egypt: "You and the elders are to go to the king of Egypt." Even as Moses feared a lack of personal "eloquence," God enabled the smaller group of Aaron and Moses to become a leadership team together (Ex 4–5). Again, most often, larger called gatherings of God emerge out of the covenant mission of smaller called leadership meetings of God.

A recent example of this advance leadership covenant occurred when God brought together a small group of people to establish the National Conferences on Growing the Church Through Small Groups, held in 1987, 1988, 1989 and 1990. The combined vision and passions for small groups of Roberta Hestenes, Lyman Coleman, Richard Peace, Kenneth Haugk, Robert Slocum, Al Jepson, Jolene Anderson and myself brought together four major organizations to host these four events, each with a thousand participants. Out of the vision and call of the small group, the larger group was gathered. Out of the covenantal life of a few, God reestablished a covenant of national ministry with hundreds of congregations and thousands of church leaders.

God is the original "convener" of such human communities. From the beginning the people of God have heard the voice of God in the plural, "Let us make ..." (Gen 1:26). Since God created human community, the primal covenant for human community has been established to flourish. Covenant is the process of God convening groups and sharing a communal nature and purpose with human groups. God creates these faithful groups through the purpose and process of covenant by calling the group into being around group leaders, by making a covenant with the called group, and by establishing an inner framework around which all healthy human group covenants are built.

God Calls Groups into Being Around Leaders

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Gen 12:1–3)

Every faithful gathering of persons in a small group is a response to God's initiative and call. [5 highlights] God most often communicates this initiative through a founding leader or a leadership core group. Abram moved because God spoke. Abram's family group moved because Abram spoke. The word of God is heard only in relationship—it is spoken only in community. God *calls* groups of people together through visionary leaders who share the blessing with others. God's communication to human leaders, the Word delivered and received, is often called *election*. The election of Abram is an election of an individual *and* a community. Even before God let Abram know that there was a place for him to go and a job for him to do, God spoke to Abram. God had established a beginning relationship with Abram. God enabled Abram to hear and act upon this personal communication. Thus, when God spoke, Abram heard and acted. So he launched out from Ur with Lot and Sarai and their entire households.

From the beginning Abram was called to be a community *with* God and to become a

community *for* the benefit of all people. Abram was called to be the initiating leader of a new, unique and separate family group system, formed by God for the purpose of revealing the divine character as loving and blessing community for an estranged world lost in hiddenness and brokenness. The individual is not called alone to become a new individual to impact the world with God, but is called to establish a new community. The *lone* Abram became the *loved* Abram. God's covenant community with Abram empowered Abram to become the initiator of a new covenant community. Abram's call was to *lead* a new community to a new place to begin a new ministry of God's visible presence in the world. Abram's family group, Lot, Sarai and their traveling entourage, was out among alien people groups. Abram was in divine and human community from the beginning of God's call.

From this base community of Abram and Sarai the new generations of God's new family groups were to come into existence. Each successive patriarch (leader) after Abram represented a family system that encountered and wrestled with the character of God in community. The patriarchal communities were called to reflect the divine community of God.

The individual group leader and family always bring along their original family system, which God must confront, heal, transform and renew. God's confrontation began when Abram and company left Ur. Due to continual quarreling, Abram and Lot and their families separated (Gen 13:5–9). Abram's group worked to get Lot's group out of trouble in Sodom and Gomorrah. However, Lot's family group sank deeper into brokenness and eventually disappeared from the blessing of salvation history (Gen 13–19). Abram's family struggled through their pain to establish God's new community. Their brokenness was healed as Abram and Sarai learned to trust God's voice and presence. The renewing of their family came when Abram and Sarai became the new group of Abraham and Sarah with Isaac. God created this new community out of divine blessing and graciousness, without the help of human expertise or scheme. Isaac was born to the community in spite of Sarah's age and the impossibility of conception, beyond the group's "Hagarian" scheme to produce the new community of their own ingenuity (Gen 21).

The individual is not called alone to establish new communities of ministry. Rather, God calls individuals together into ministry through ministering groups. [5 highlights] Hans Walter Wolff argues that the patriarchs and prophets were godly individuals who called others into community with themselves for the purpose of showing the world an earthly reflection of divine community. [23 highlights] The individual leader is called to minister *to* the community, *among* the community, *with* the community and *from* the community. [24 highlights] The community, in response, also ministers to the individual leader.

Throughout salvation history, new faith-centered groups emerged by the power of God through divinely authored family group covenants. Isaac and Rebecca succeeded Abraham and Sarah, and God renewed the covenant by making a new covenant with Isaac (Gen 26:23–25). Good covenants tend to birth good covenants. Healthy groups tend to breed healthy groups. Small groups of the faithful tend to coalesce around leaders who are willing to listen to the call of God. These leaders convene and bring new family groups into estranged places and among foreign groups to be the people of God together. God gathers the group together and calls it into ministry; the leader represents God to the called group, and the group represents God to the

hostile world.

The ministry of the group is among and for other people with whom the members of the group come in touch. Faithful small groups should have both an *intragroup* and *intergroup* ministry orientation. [5 highlights] They are called together to experience the salvation of God among one another and to bring the shalom of God to persons and groups outside themselves. Every covenant group has a call to itself and a call beyond itself. Every covenant group has a call to meet God and a call to help others meet God. [7 highlights]

To help stimulate intragroup ministry, a small group leader must have the personal courage to risk the face-to-face vulnerability of encounter even though the rest of the group may sit in fear. The example of the leader letting go of his or her protective shield and venturing into the presence of another beckons the group to consider doing likewise. God initiates this summoning covenant relationship, but the group leader provides the human initiative to respond to God in the covenant, drawing others into the depth of God's personal confrontation and intimacy.

The call of God for a group to move, or the call of God for a leader to move a group, sets the group in motion. God, the leader and the group move on the way together. [7 highlights] The covenant is that God is going with them, that God has a place for them to go, and that the group will be transformed together on the way of the journey. God enters covenant partnerships with special leaders to develop special groups. Every faithful small group has such a covenant origin. Every faithful small group has had faithful initiating leaders who heard, received and acted on God's call.

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The Paradox of Countercovenant

The whole earth had one language and the same words.... And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens; otherwise, we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of the earth, and they left off building the city. (Gen 11:1-8 NRSV)

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country.... I will make of you a great nation ... so that you will be a blessing." (Gen 12:1 NRSV)

The movement from Babel in Genesis 11 to Abram in Genesis 12 is a countercovenant movement. The people of Babel were a kind of covenant people. They were functioning out of their countercovenant humanity. This was the remnants of humanity left after intimacy was shattered in the Garden. People of broken human community build great systems, structures

and cities. The first signs of the fruit of broken community came from the alienated Cain. [5 highlights] Cain “built a city and named it Enoch after his son Enoch” (Gen 4:17). Ham, the errant son of the broken family of Noah, begat a line of great city and civilization builders, including Nimrod, who built Babel and all the cities of Shinar and Ninevah in Assyria. Other descendants built Egypt and the great Philistine cities (a rather awesome and industrious heritage for the cursed sons of Canaan). When exploring these early Genesis texts we must ask what the connection is between broken human community and the establishment of powerful city-nation states. Why was it that Cain and Ham, the low-faith, nonrelational, insensitive sons of the elect Adam and Noah would turn out to be such powerful and influential men? And why does Abram suddenly appear as the lone family of election out of the midst of the great cities of the Chaldeans?

Genesis 1–11 is about a theology of community in paradox and appears as a countermovement with the establishment of cities and civilizations. Broken humanity builds cities. **Covenant humanity builds covenant family communities.** [11 highlights] Human sin finds expression in the building of functionally interrelated things. **Covenant finds expression in the nurture of relationships, families and groups. Covenant builds community.** Broken humanity is cut off (like Cain) from the presence of God. The people of Babel had no covenant experience with God, so they expressed their blurred covenant image in the building of things that showed themselves as gods. Rather than wait for God to come down from heaven to build a covenant with them, they said, “Let us build a tower which reaches heaven.” This was humanity’s attempt to express covenant from the down side, from earth to heaven. God’s expression of full covenant is always from heaven to earth. When humanity enters into a countercovenant movement community is not the result. The **countercovenant movement of humanity** builds structures, bricks, buildings, functions, hierarchies, pyramids, tyrannies or anarchies, but **cannot build community. Community flows out of the very nature and presence of a covenant God, a God who convenes people into healing and intimate relationships.**

The realization that humanity’s orientation is constantly moving in a countercovenant direction gives us insight about the pseudocommunity possibilities of small group gathering. Humanity without God will convene itself to accomplish great things. Wherever there are multitudes of human beings, if they do not hear the convening voice of God they will attend to their own convening voice and gather together to build something. The gathering instinct in us is powerful. When we say, “Let us build . . .,” our countercovenant industriousness will build great cities, influential governments, high-rise structures, asphalt jungles, “principalities and powers” and pyramidal hierarchies. But we cannot, by ourselves, say, “Let us make community.” **Only God who exists as a covenantal community of being can create human community, for such community only flourishes in the intimate presence of a God who comes down to walk with humanity in the “cool of the day.”** Humanity can build only a faint replica of community, a pseudocommunity where God is not present, a community that shatters under

the stress of construction, fragmenting and scattering people to the four winds.

Many gatherings of people look like small group community, but the common language of the group is not covenantal. These are countercovenantal groups that say, “Let us make for ourselves ...” Pseudocommunity does not have a long life, a real life or a sense of God’s covenant. Such groups have a “form” of godliness, but deny the power and presence of the convening God. Such groups are demonstrations of the paradox humanity confronts daily as a result of being driven out of the Garden, missing the presence of God and not hearing God’s call.

Building Covenant Community

The ongoing reality of Genesis 11 and the city of Babel is why God calls Abram in Genesis 12. The countercovenant language of a common humanity is “Let us build.” God’s covenantal and conciliatory response is “Let us confuse and scatter,” then “I will make you a great nation.” Abram is the leader called by God to gather and nurture God’s community, a contrasting action to humanity’s self-initiative. **The human initiative ends in fragmentation. God’s initiative ends in eternal covenant community. Every small group has to wrestle with being formed of their own initiative or being formed by the covenantal presence of God who draws them into life together in the very presence of the nature of God’s plural being.** [5 highlights]

The small group paradox is *productivity* together or *life* together. At first the two images may look the same, but over time the healing results are much different. **Long-term small group community is not possible except that God has intervened into the lives of group members and group relationships** (*Ed. Note: eg. LifeWay*). Groups that continue to gather without the enlivening presence of the covenant God are reduced to activity without relationship (games), meeting without presence (avoidance) or dissonance without recognition (denial). Such groups will typically disband (scatter) rather than tolerate such ambivalence in gathering. [6 highlights]

This paradox of productivity or life together was experienced by a mainline church that had a strong history and reputation for mission group activism. They had several small groups working to meet needs in various parts of the city: a homeless shelter, a food center, a center for battered women, a group to help children find foster parents, a group to work with government to meet the needs of the poor, a group to build homes for the poor, and a group to visit in the area jails and prisons. They had a phenomenal small mission group network, growing newer ones each month. However, as they reviewed the quality of life in these mission groups, they discovered that people were generally feeling disconnected from one another and from God. They were out doing wonderful things, but they had little sense of mutual covenant or community (a typical picture of Christendom today). In sensing the vacuum of personal presence this congregation decided to invest in the spiritual disciplines of group prayer,

personal storytelling and interpersonal Bible study. They encouraged their mission groups to reflect on the nature of covenant and community and allow God to reform their life together. They continued to do their mission work, but with a new passion to experience the presence of God and to know one another. Their mission groups were transformed. The need and deed groups also became gatherings who experienced the transforming presence of God's love.

The antidote for fragmentation resulting from pseudocommunity **can only be the intervention of the God of covenant. The core of small group life [5 highlights] must be a personal experience of the God who makes covenants with people. Small groups must be God's groups or they become the fragmented groups of human industry, losing any sense of common life together.** Sin is choosing to be outside the presence of God or not choosing to be in the presence of God. Powerful human structures will eventually collapse while delicate gatherings of God's people will grow and thrive. This is the paradox of human depravity and God's grace.

CHURCH

GOD PLANTS HIS PEOPLE IN A NEW COMMUNITY

**J.I. Packer – “*Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Belief*”s (1993)
Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House.**

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Eph. 2:19-22)

The church (Greek: *ecclesia*, meaning “assembly”) exists in, through, and because of Jesus Christ. [21 highlights] Thus it is a distinctive New Testament reality. Yet it is at the same time a continuation, through a new phase of redemptive history, of Israel, the seed of Abraham, God's covenant people of Old Testament times. [21 highlights] **The differences between the church and Israel are rooted in the newness of the covenant by which God and his people are bound to each other** (“so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another”-Rom. 12:5). **The new covenant under which the church lives** (1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 8:7-13) is a new form of the relationship whereby God says to a chosen community, “I will be your God; you shall be my people” (Exod. [18 highlights] 6:7; Jer. 31:33). Both the continuity and the discontinuity between Israel and the church reflect this change in the form of the covenant, which took place at Christ's coming.

The new features of the new covenant are as follows: First, the Old Testament priests, sacrifices, and sanctuary are superseded by the mediation of Jesus, the crucified, risen, and reigning God-man (Heb. 1–10), in whom believers now find their identity as the seed of Abraham and the people of God (Gal. 3:29; 1 Pet. 2:4-10).

Second, the ethnic exclusivism of the old covenant (Deut. 7:6; Ps. 147:19-20) is replaced by the inclusion in Christ [19 highlights] on equal terms of believers from all nations (Eph. 2–3; Rev. 5:9-10).

Third, the Spirit is poured out both on each Christian and on the church, [20 highlights] so that fellowship with Christ (1 John 1:3), ministry from Christ (John 12:32; 14:18; Eph. 2:17), and foretastes of heaven (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:14) become realities of churchly experience.

The unbelief of most Jews (Rom. 9–11) led to a situation depicted by Paul as God breaking off the natural branches of his olive tree (the historical covenant community) and replacing them with wild olive shoots (Rom. 11:17-24). The predominantly Gentile character of the church is due not to the terms of the new covenant but to Jewish rejection of them, and Paul taught that this will one day be reversed (Rom. 11:15, 23-31). [17 highlights]

The New Testament defines the church in terms of the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes and patterns through a relationship to all three Persons of the Godhead, brought about by the mediatorial ministry of Jesus Christ. The church is seen as the family and flock of God (Eph. 2:18; 3:15; 4:6; John 10:16; 1 Pet. 5:2-4), his Israel (Gal. 6:16); the body and bride of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; 5:25-28; Rev. 19:7; 21:2, 9-27); and the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16; cf. Eph. 2:19-22). Those in the church are called the “elect” (chosen), the “saints” (consecrated ones, set apart for God), and the “brothers” (adopted children of God).

Essentially, the church is, was, and always will be a single worshiping community, permanently gathered in the true sanctuary which is the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal. 4:26; Heb. 12:22-24), the place of God’s presence. Here all who are alive in Christ, the physically living with the physically dead (i.e., the church militant with the church triumphant) worship continually. In the world, however, this one church appears in the form of local congregations, each one called to fulfill the role of being a microcosm (a small-scale representative sample) of the church as a whole. This explains how it is that for Paul the one church universal is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-26; Eph. 1:22-23; 3:6; 4:4), and so is the local congregation (1 Cor. 12:27).

It is customary to characterize the church on earth as “one” (because [24 highlights] it really is so in Christ, as Eph. 4:3-6 shows, despite the great number of local churches and denominational groupings), “holy” (because it is consecrated to God corporately, as each Christian is individually, Eph. 2:21), “catholic” (because it is worldwide in extent and seeks to hold the fullness of the faith), and “apostolic” (because it is founded on apostolic teaching, Eph. 2:20). All four qualities may be illustrated from Ephesians 2:19-22.

The New Testament assumes that all Christians will share in the life of a local church, [20 highlights] meeting with it for worship (Heb. 10:25), accepting its nurture and discipline (Matt. 18:15-20; Gal. 6:1), and sharing in its work of witness. **Christians disobey God and impoverish themselves by refusing to join with other believers** (i.e. aspondos) when there is a local congregation that they can belong to.

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David's Notes:

“Therefore, when He came into the world, He said, ‘Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, **But a body** You have prepared for Me” – Heb. 10:5 ... “by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, **his body**” – (10:20)

“and that He might reconcile them both to God **in one body through the cross**, thereby putting to death the enmity” – Eph. 1:16

“This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, **members together of one body**” – Eph. 3:6

“The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the **body of Christ**? For we, *though* many, are one bread *and* **one body**; for we all partake of that one bread” -1 Co. 10:16b-17; “For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not **discerning the Lord's body**” – (11:29)

“For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that **one body, being many, are one body**, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” – 1 Cor. 12:12-13

“to make all see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that **now** the manifold wisdom of God might be made known **by the church**” – Eph 3:9-10

“And He is the head of **the body, the church**, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence ... for the sake of **His body, which is the church**” – Col. 1:18, 24

“ ...you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is **the church** of the living God, **the pillar and foundation of the truth**” – 1 Tim. 3:15
(*Note: There is no Truth, no ministry, indeed no salvation outside the context of the Church, the Body of Christ*)