

Introduction

This book is an attempt to help us better understand the vows that we take when becoming members of a local church. Each chapter addresses the particulars of one of the five vows that professing believers take when they join a church in the denomination known as the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). These vows come from one of the documents that makes up our constitution – The Book of Church Order (57-5).

Joining a local body of Christ’s church may seem odd or unusual to some. Unbelievers and believers alike, will sometimes ask, “Why be a member of a church?” Or, perhaps even more foundational: “Why the church at all?”

I suppose that people have asked these questions for generations. It seems, however, that both inside and outside of the church, there is a growing trend to question one of the central doctrines of the Christian faith: namely that the local, visible church is the house and family of God, and as such is God’s idea, and God’s institution that He uses to establish and grow His kingdom on this earth. (WCF 25:2).

Yet, the biblical notion that the Church is important – indeed essential to growing in one’s faith – is often called into question. One may ask, “If we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone, what need do I have of the Church?”

Similarly, one may ask, “If faith is all that is required, why am I asked to make vows when joining in the membership and fellowship of a church?”

These questions – along with many others – are addressed in this booklet, with the goal of finding answers through the revelation of God’s Word. The Church is important; vows are important. These two propositions are assumed in this booklet. My hope and prayer is that this little booklet will be an aid to those who are contemplating joining the membership of a local church. But, even more, my hope and prayer is that those who have already joined a church – who are already members of the body of Christ – will come to a greater understanding and conviction as to the privileges and obligations of their membership.

This booklet is based on a series of sermons at North Macon Presbyterian Church in August 2008. I have become convinced and convicted of the biblical teaching concerning the primacy and centrality of the Church in God’s mission to have His will be done on earth, as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10). God cares about the Church; she is His blood-bought bride. She is a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, the people of God who have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10). May God bless His Church for the gathering and perfecting of the saints.

For Christ & His Bride,

Peter M. Dietsch

The Vows of Church Membership

Presbyterian Church in America
Book of Church Order, 57-5

- 1: Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?
- 2: Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?
- 3: Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?
- 4: Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
- 5: Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

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God's Sovereign Mercy

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

- I. The Covenant of Works
- II. The Covenant of Grace
- III. God's Sovereign Mercy
- IV. The Question to the Answer

1

God's Sovereign Mercy

As a chaplain in the United States Army, I remember having a conversation with a young soldier who came to me with several issues. As I began to ask him questions about his faith – trying to ascertain where he was spiritually, and even if he was a Christian at all – he made a very interesting comment to me that has stuck with me to this day. He said, “You know, I’ve heard all my life, ‘Jesus saves, Jesus saves’ but what I can’t understand is this: What do I need saving from? I mean, what is it that Jesus has supposedly saved me from?”

That’s the question that we must ask and answer before we get to the second of the membership vows which talks about how Jesus is the Son of God and the only Savior of sinners. Otherwise, there is no context. One cannot understand or recognize that he needs to be saved, until his eyes are opened, such that he can finally see the rising waters of God’s judgment and recognize that he needs saving.

The five questions for membership have a nice thematic progression, but this is where they begin. Every person who professes to have faith in Christ, and who seeks membership in His church must begin with an

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acknowledgment of his own sin and lost-ness, and an acknowledgment of the necessity of God's sovereign mercy.

Now, there are many ways of talking about this, and many passages of Scripture which speak of both our sin and our need of God's mercy. We will mention some of those as we go along, but let us consider a passage in Scripture that teaches these truths – more succinctly and deliberately than most others: Romans 5:12-21.

In the important passage from the Apostle Paul's epistle to the church in Rome, I want to talk to you about Covenant Theology. Covenant Theology is really the heart of Scriptures, and thus, the heart of Reformed theology. But in order to understand Covenant theology, we must first understand the concept known as "Covenant Headship" (sometimes called "federal headship").

I had a professor in seminary who loved to mess with our heads. You know the kind. If there was a way that he could make you squirm or apply pressure on you in the classroom that would make you work harder, he would do it. But, when he messed with your head, it wasn't without purpose or design.

On the second day of Hebrew class, we were all sitting in our seats, anticipating a quiz just as he had warned us on our first day. The professor came in, sat down on his stool, looked out and scanned the faces of these eager, young seminarians, and then fixed his gaze upon one man. He said, "Keith, take out a sheet of paper." Keith dutifully took out a sheet of paper. The professor said, "Keith, here is the quiz. It's just one question. I want you to parse the Hebrew verb for 'guard' or 'keep.' The word is Shamar." Keith looked around at the rest of us in the class with that

classic deer-in-the-headlights sort of look. We had no clue what was going on, so we just stared right back, like the fellow deer that we were, not knowing what was coming.

Our professor said, “This is a pass or fail quiz, Keith. And, whatever grade you get, I will record that grade for each student in this class. If you pass, everyone passes. If you fail, everyone fails. Class, welcome to Covenant Theology!”

That is “covenant headship” in a nutshell. And, it is the heart of Covenant theology. If a person is your ‘covenant head’ then whatever he does (or fails to do) is credited to your account. Now, you won’t find the phrase “covenant head” in the Bible. You will, however, find this concept taught throughout the Scriptures (sometimes just the word “head” is used).

I. The Covenant of Works

In Romans 5, we learn that Adam is the ‘covenant head’ of all humanity. Consider Romans 5, verse 12:

¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death spread to all men because all sinned--

Through Adam – the ‘covenant head’ – sin and death entered into the world. And, notice the all-sweeping statement, “death spread to *all* men, because *all* sinned.”

In Hosea, chapter 6, God compares His judgment of sin to light. He says, “...and my judgment goes forth as the light.” In other words, just as the sun rises and casts its

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light on all people, so is the judgment of God. Two verses later, in Hosea 6:7, God gives the reason that His judgment falls upon every person. He says, "But like Adam, they transgressed the covenant."

Adam transgressed, or broke, the covenant between himself and God. It's the reason that Paul says in Romans 5:12 that death spread to all men, because all sinned.

From the opening chapters of Genesis, we learn that God gave Adam a command – a command that Adam was to keep upon penalty of death. God said, "...but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Genesis 2:17)

God said, "Obey me perfectly, and you'll live. Disobey me and you'll die." This is called the covenant of works. It's called the covenant of works because Adam had to work – he had to keep God's Law perfectly. God was obviously being gracious to Adam just by the mere fact that He created him and set him in the garden. When Adam disobeyed God and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, however, he broke that covenant of works with God and death entered the world. As a result, Adam's sin and God's judgment of that sin, spread to all mankind. Thus, you and I are born separated from God, dead in our trespasses and sins. Another verse from Paul's letter to the Romans that succinctly teaches this is Romans 3:23: "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

There's a well-known story concerning G.K. Chesterton of how *The London Times* had asked people to write in to the editor to answer the question, "What is wrong with the world today?" Many people wrote in and expounded on

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all their thoughts as to what was wrong with the world today. But, the shortest and best answer came from G.K. Chesterton. In response to the question, “What is wrong with the world today?” Chesterton simply wrote: “Dear Sir: I am. Yours Truly, G.K. Chesterton.”

In our self-esteeming, self-aggrandizing culture, that just won’t do, will it? Listen to the world and you will most likely hear something like this, “The best way to have a happy and successful life is to believe in yourself. You cannot learn to love others until you learn to love your self.”

But the Word of God tells us that because of Adam’s sin, and our own sinfulness, we are by nature children of wrath – all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 5:12 states it very clearly: “sin and death entered the world, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.” Adam is our covenant head, through whom God made a covenant demanding perfect obedience.

God’s covenant with Adam – this covenant of works – is still in place. That’s the starting point. As a descendant of Adam – God requires that you obey His Law perfectly.

Some have tried that. You, yourself, may have even tried to earn God’s favor and forgiveness by trying to keep His Law perfectly. If that’s you, then I just have one question – “How has that worked out for you?” Pretty rough, huh? The reason is because as a human being and descendant of Adam, not only does the covenant of works apply to you – that is, God’s demand of perfect obedience, but so also has Adam’s sin and death-sentence been imputed to you.

Remember our earlier illustration? It’s a pass or fail test. Because Adam is the ‘covenant head’ of the human race,

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whatever he did is credited to your and my account. If Adam had passed, all humanity would have passed. But...Adam failed, so all humanity failed and fell short of the glory of God, with him.

II. The Covenant of Grace

At this point, some may say, “Well then, there’s no hope!” Now we are ready to talk about the Covenant of Grace. Consider our text from Romans 5 again. This time, verse 18:

18 Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, (That’s the Covenant of Works through Adam), ***so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.*** (There’s the Covenant of Grace)

We’re going to return to the verses which immediately precede this in just a moment, but hopefully it is clear enough from the context to understand what is being said. The next verse, verse 19 actually explains it:

19 For as by one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners (Adam sinned and made all human beings to be sinners), ***so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous*** (but, Jesus Christ, the Son of God was obedient, and He has made all those who have *Him* as their covenant head *righteous*).

So, there are two covenant heads: Adam and Christ. Since Adam is your covenant head by the simple fact that you are a human being descended from him, then his sin has

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been credited or imputed to you. But, if Christ becomes your covenant head, then His righteousness – His obedience – is credited or imputed to you.

This, then explains in a much fuller way what Jesus meant in that most famous of Bible verses, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” If you don’t believe in the Son of God, then you will perish. The only way to come out from under the death sentence that is ours through Adam, is – according to John 3:16 – to believe in Jesus.

Jesus’ statement in John 3:16 comes in the middle of a conversation that the Son of God is having with a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee – a teacher of the Law. In that conversation, Jesus tells Nicodemus that because he was a teacher of the Law and knew what we now call the Old Testament, he should have understood all of this. Jesus concludes this conversation in John 3:36:

***“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life;
whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life,
but the wrath of God remains on him.”***

Think about that. Speaking about Himself, Jesus says that the person who believes in and obeys Him has eternal life. But the person who does not believe in and obeys the Son, the wrath of God *abides* (or remains) on him. In other words, if you do not believe and obey Christ – if He is not your ‘covenant head’ – then you will remain or abide in your previous state. And, your previous state is with Adam in the covenant of works – where the wrath of God is on you.

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There are two places in which a person may reside – either under the wrath of God (condemnation) or under the special grace of God (justification). A person is either *in Adam* under the covenant of works or *in Christ* under the covenant of grace. Consider just two other passages in Scripture that flesh this out.

The first passage is Colossians 1:13-18. Speaking of Christ, the Apostle Paul writes:

¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

The Word of God speaks of two domains – two realms or kingdoms: “the domain of darkness” and the “kingdom of God’s beloved Son.” If you have been rescued and transferred from “the domain of darkness” into “the kingdom of God’s beloved Son,” then you have redemption – the forgiveness of sins. This place is where Jesus is your covenant head. And this place where Jesus is your covenant head is called “the church.”

Now, you might be thinking, “Wait a minute. I was with you up until you mentioned Jesus is the covenant head and that place is the church.” Well, keep reading – Colossians 1:15ff:

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things were created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷ He is before all

things, and in Him all things hold together. ¹⁸
And He is head of the body, the church...

Aha! Stop right there! There it is! – “He is also head of the body, the church!” There’s a wonderful hymn that we sing in the church whose opening words declare this truth. It’s about Jesus’ dominion and covenant headship of the church – “Shout, for the blessed Jesus reigns; through distant lands his triumphs spread; and sinners, freed from endless pains, own him their Savior and their Head.”¹

Another passage of Scripture that speaks of these two realms is in 1 Corinthians 15 – that great chapter in which the Apostle Paul expounds upon the doctrine of the resurrection. Consider 1 Corinthians 15:21-22:

²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.

²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive.

Do you see it? This idea that there are two domains, two realms, two covenants? It’s woven into the entire warp and woof of the Bible. In the domain of darkness where Adam is the covenant head, all die. In the kingdom of Jesus Christ, the church where Christ is the covenant head, all will be made alive.

Later in the same chapter, we read these words in 1 Corinthians 15:45:

1 Hymn: *Shout, for the Blessed Jesus Reigns*, Benjamin Beddome, 1769.

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⁴⁵ Thus it is written, The first MAN, Adam, BECAME A LIVING BEING; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

Adam became a living soul when God breathed life into him in the Garden of Eden, but the last Adam – Jesus Christ, the Son of God – became a life-giving spirit, when God raised Him up from the dead.

In the Covenant of Works, God demands perfection. As a descendant of Adam, you and I are born into this Covenant of Works, and God still demands perfection. But, thanks be to God, that He was pleased to establish a *second* Covenant – the Covenant of Grace – through His Son, Jesus Christ. Where Adam failed miserably, Christ obeyed perfectly – and, by faith, He gives you and me the reward: eternal life.

By the way, the first covenant – the covenant of works with Adam – was established in the Garden before sin entered the world. The second Covenant – the covenant of grace through Jesus Christ – you might be tempted to think that it only applies to New Testament believers, after Jesus came into this world.

But as you read through the New Testament (or even just Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus in John, chapter 3) – it is evident that those who placed their faith in the God of Israel throughout the Old Testament are also part of this Covenant of Grace. The believers of the Old Testament have Jesus Christ as their covenant head, just like us. They may have not had the full revelation or known His name, but God revealed Himself to them through His Laws and the worship rituals. These were enough for them to put their hope and trust in the last Adam – Jesus Christ – the

One who would come at some point in the future and save them from their sins – just as He has done for us.

The Covenant of Grace through Jesus Christ extends all the way back – even to Adam and Eve. Immediately following their sin, God promised in Genesis 3:15 that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the seed of the serpent. From the first day when sin entered the world, God was already telling them that He had prepared a way of salvation for the human race. The answer to their sin-problem would be one of Eve’s descendants – the God-man – Jesus Christ.

III. God’s Sovereign Mercy (vv 15-17)

Let’s return to our primary text – Romans 5 – and consider Jesus’ free gift to us in the Covenant of Grace: the gift of righteousness. Consider Romans 5, verses 15-17:

¹⁵ But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many die 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 abound for many. ¹⁶ 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 many trespasses brought justification. ¹⁷ 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

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righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 15, we learn that in His resurrection, Jesus became a life-giving spirit. Here in these verses we see more fully what that gift of life looks like. Verse 16 tells us that the free gift through Christ is, first of all, justification. If you are in Christ – if you have accepted Him as your Savior and Lord – then, He gives you that which He earned for you: His righteousness and His perfection. Jesus got your salvation the old fashioned way – *He earned it*.

Second of all, verse 17 tells us that if you receive this free gift through Christ, then death *will not reign in you*, but *you will reign in life* through the One, Jesus Christ.

IV. The Question to the Answer

The first word that Jesus spoke in His public ministry on this earth was: “Repent!” – “Repent!” – “Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand!”

The reason Jesus first called for repentance was this: if human beings – if you and I – remain in our natural, sinful state, abiding under the Covenant of Works in Adam, and the wrath of God – there is no hope. And, that’s why the first membership vow of our church asks: *Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?*

Like that soldier that I told you about, we often miss the context of the answer: Jesus saves. Before we can

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understand that Jesus saves, we must first understand how and why we need saving. We must first understand and confess, “I am lost and without hope, therefore, I must turn to the only One who can save me and cry out for mercy.”

This isn't a very popular statement in our culture. We don't want to admit, “I am dead in my trespasses and sins, and in need of God's mercy.” But, it was no different in Jesus' day. At one point during Jesus' earthly ministry, whole crowds were deserting Him because He told them that it was impossible for anyone to come to Him unless God the Father had given them life. When He said that, everyone deserted Him except for His twelve Disciples. (John 6:60-71)

So, Jesus turned to the twelve who remained and He asked, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” And that's when Peter made the confession that best summarizes the first vow of membership of our church. Peter said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.”

If God has opened your eyes to your sin and revealed Himself to you, then simply confess, “I am a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope, save in His sovereign mercy.” Trust in the righteousness, the forgiveness, and the mercy of Christ. There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)