



CHRIST COVENANT CHURCH

Faith of our Fathers for a New Generation

AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRIST COVENANT CHURCH

PART 1: WORSHIP



We begin in our identity as a church believing that there is a God whom we are called to worship and serve. But who is this God and how are we to worship Him? We will answer those questions by looking at *The God We Worship*. Second, we will examine *How We Worship*. Finally, we will see *Why We Worship* as we look at how God transforms us and the whole world through our worship of Him.

A. THE GOD WE WORSHIP: OUR THEOLOGICAL CONVICTIONS

Our theological convictions about the God we worship can be summarized in three words: **Catholic, Evangelical and Reformed.**

Our Catholic Convictions

First of all, Christ Covenant Church unashamedly embraces the catholic faith. Since we are a Reformed church, you may have already realized that this is not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church; rather, we are using the term in its original sense, which means “according to the whole” or “universal.”

By stating that we are committed to the catholic faith, we are stating that we wholeheartedly embrace those basic convictions that have been believed by the church throughout history and that are confessed in the ecumenical creeds of the early church, especially the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. These are the four basic convictions of the catholic tradition:

1. **The Trinity.** There is one God, who eternally exists in a communion of three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
2. **The Incarnation.** The Second Person of the Holy Trinity: God the Son became man in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is both fully God and fully human.
3. **The Atonement.** Jesus Christ died on the cross and was raised from the dead for the salvation of his people.
4. **The Church.** God is doing this work of salvation in and through a community of people assembled from every tribe, language and nation.

Our Evangelical Convictions

Christ Covenant Church is also an evangelical church. While in some circles evangelical simply means “Protestant”, and in others it may (wrongly) be used to refer

to a particular political slant, we celebrate the term because it refers to churches and ministries that continue to proclaim the historic faith. We are an evangelical church in that we embrace those basic Christian doctrines that have been downplayed and rejected by many “modern” critics of the faith, especially since the 19th century. Here are some of our specifically evangelical convictions:

1. **The Centrality of Christ.** Jesus said that everything written in the Old Testament was fulfilled in him (Luke 24:44) and evangelicals have centered themselves on the person and work of Jesus the Christ. While angels and saints are important to the Christian life, Evangelicals believe that Jesus is the only source of salvation. Of course, evangelicals are not the only Christians to emphasize the person of Christ, but this has always been a distinguishing characteristic evident in the preaching, liturgy and songs of evangelical churches.
2. **The Authority of Scripture.** We believe that the Holy Scriptures are completely trustworthy, our ultimate authority for our beliefs and our lifestyles. We believe that the Scriptures are inspired (2 Timothy 3:16), which in Christian theology means that God oversaw the writing the Bible in such a way that he speaks to us in and through its very words. Therefore, we believe that the Scriptures are *infallible* and *inerrant* that the Bible is without error and hence, when properly interpreted, will not lead us astray. The simple old adage is true: “What the Bible says, God says.”
3. **Salvation by Faith.** We believe that salvation is only by God’s grace, and is received solely by faith in Christ. Our good works do not contribute to our salvation, but are evidence of a transformed life. We confess that this understanding is the clearest way to articulate the biblical gospel, and that the church’s health is seriously impaired when this teaching is obscured.
4. **The Mission of the Church.** Lastly, to be “evangelical” is to be missional. The Gospel is good news for the entire world and evangelicals have always been committed to sharing that news in both word and deed (see “Calling” section 4).

Our Reformed Convictions

Last of all, Christ Covenant Church is a congregation in the historic Reformed tradition. This term locates us within the various traditions and denominations into which the church is (sadly) divided. Specifically, as a church of Reformed convictions we are committed to those doctrinal views associated with the Presbyterian, Anglican, and continental Reformed churches and with the names of John Calvin, Heinrich Bullinger, Martin Bucer, Thomas Cranmer, and others. Our official doctrinal statement is found in The Three Forms of Unity, documents drafted by Reformed churchmen in the 17th Century. We also find these helpful: The 39 Articles of the Anglican Church, the Westminster Standards, and the Second Helvetic Confession. In addition, we are committed to a Presbyterian system of church government, which is seen in our

participation in and accountability to the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC).

More specifics of this Reformed and Presbyterian theological perspective may be found in *Appendix A: The Reformed Faith*.

Knowing the God we worship is of utmost importance because we were created for worship. When we do not worship God we will necessarily worship other things. In the words of Jonathan Edwards, worship is setting the “affections” on God. Our affections are not merely our emotions, but our motives: the things that drive us and that we truly treasure. When we set our affections upon something: relationships, careers, money, accomplishments, approval, comfort, power, control, or any number of other things, we derive our meaning, and purpose from that thing. To obtain our identity from finite things, no matter how good those things may be, is to fall short of the glory for which God has created us. But when we worship the God revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we will know the joy of finding our identity in the creator of all things who is a God of boundless grace, love and glory.

B. HOW WE WORSHIP: THE CONTOUR OF GIVING AND RECEIVING

The chief task of the church is worship. We were redeemed, in the words of the Shorter Catechism, that we might “glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Worship is the central task of the Christian church.

But what is worship and how do we do it? Every Lord’s Day, God himself graciously gathers his people together renewing his covenant with them and serving them. Yes, we are gathered to be served by God! Our response to His graciousness is worship. In all Christian traditions, whether formally or informally liturgical (there is always a liturgy, a shape to the service), these two core elements exist: receiving and giving.

Receiving from God

As we hear the Word preached and are nourished by the Sacraments we receive God’s grace and see anew what He is worth.

Giving to God.

We give him our sins (confession), our substance (offering), our praise (singing, other responses), our needs (prayers of the people). We give him our problems (completely trusting in him), our devotion (recognizing and repudiating our idols), our thanks (not given to self-pity).

Below is the outline of how we worship in a cycle of receiving from God and giving to God. Then we will more closely examine three of the most fundamental aspects of worship (often called “the means of grace”): the Word, the Sacraments, and prayer.

1. **Calling:** God Calls us into his presence and we respond with praise and with confession of our sin.
2. **Cleansing:** God Cleanses us of our sins, and we respond with thanksgiving.
3. **Consecration:** God Consecrates us by the instruction of his Word, and we respond by giving ourselves to him.
4. **Communion:** God Communes with us when he invites us to his table to enjoy a fellowship meal, the Eucharist, with him.
5. **Commissioning:** God Commissions us after we have been renewed, refreshed, and strengthened we receive a blessing to enjoy his rest for the remainder of the Lord's Day. We are to confidently enter into our various vocations during the rest of the week as holy callings from God, serving the world in his name.

The Central Aspects of Worship

The Word of God

The conviction of the Christian is that the Creator of all things has spoken to us in many and diverse ways through the words of the Bible. We grow spiritually as we hear the Holy Scriptures read, preached and explained within our worship service, for when this takes place, God himself is speaking to us.

The Sacraments

The Sacraments are signs and seals of the covenant of grace has made with the church. These two acts, baptism and communion, not only represent Christ and His benefits to us, they are also a means used by God to make the power of the Gospel of Jesus present in our lives.

✚ *Holy Baptism.* Baptism incorporates us into the Body of Christ, the community of God's people in which God is uniquely at work by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a "visible sermon" that is picture and a tangible means of our in-grafting into Christ, of our triumph over death, of forgiveness of sins, and of the power he gives us to walk in newness of life. Baptism also provides assurance to a struggling believer. It is a covenant sign in which God says, "I will never abandon my people."

Every baptism is a community event in which all Christians are reminded of their unique relationship to God. As a result of this covenant relationship, we are encouraged to practice what the Puritans called improving one's baptism. (See Romans 6:1ff.) Baptism encourages us to live lives that are truly distinct.

✦ *Holy Communion.* Communion (or the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper) is a meal where Christ is both the host, and the feast itself. Therefore, when we receive Holy Communion we are receiving Christ himself, deepening our union with him. Just as bread and wine strengthen and refresh us physically, so the Eucharist strengthens and refreshes us spiritually.

Communion also contains a horizontal element inasmuch as we are joined not only to God, but to others at the table. Christ strengthens the entire church by uniting disparate believers into one fellowship by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer

The third principal means of spiritual growth in worship is prayer. Prayer is an offering of our desires to God for things that are pleasing to him in the name of Christ. Prayer also includes confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of the mercies of God. Prayer is offered in public worship in many ways, whether led, sung, written, responsive, in litanies, extemporaneously or silently.

These three, the Word, the Sacraments, and prayer, are the primary means of grace. While these actions are practiced most fully in our corporate worship on the Lord's Day, they can and should be practiced in our lives in various ways throughout the week. We grow spiritually when we make disciplined use of them not only in corporate worship, but also in our day to day live. There are three basic patterns to these spiritual disciplines:

1. The Scriptures teach that basic to the Christian life is the weekly pattern of using the means of grace in the context of corporate worship on the Lord's Day (See Acts 20:7; Hebrews 10:25),
2. The Bible also teaches the vital importance of a daily pattern of private prayer and Bible study. (See Daniel 6:10).
3. While not explicitly taught in Scripture, the church has traditionally followed an annual pattern than reminds us of the central truths of the gospel. That is why at Christ Covenant Church we follow the traditional church year (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and the season after Pentecost).

In the midst of our frenetic culture, where time is a precious commodity, we must discipline our lives so that we are practicing the historic spiritual disciplines. Without these means of grace, our spiritual lives will become shallow and superficial. We desire to invest our time in that which is truly important, knowing God, being formed into the likeness of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

C. WHY WE WORSHIP: A THEOLOGICAL VISION OF HOW GOD SHAPES US

At the root of all our theological convictions is the Good News that Jesus was raised from the dead and now rules over his entire creation. St. Paul says this Good News “is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” Therefore, we believe that through our worship of Christ, God shapes us into his people and uses us in building his kingdom of love and peace and justice, the Good News of Jesus Christ will have a significant impact here on Long Island, where He has placed us.

People

The Gospel changes people because it secures our identity and our future in Jesus rather than our own efforts or status. We no longer take our identity from what others think of us or even what we think of ourselves, but from what God thinks of us in Christ (I Corinthians 4:3-4). This new identity removes any sense of inferiority (since we are beautiful in Christ) and superiority (since we are sinners standing only by grace.) Instead, we are given a new reason for joy. We rejoice that Christ sets us free from anxious self-righteousness and worry. We delight that our heavenly Father cares for and delights in us.

Families

Those who believe in the resurrection of Jesus are made into a new family. This new family does not replace our natural families, but serves as a model family. Because we are brothers and sisters in Jesus, we are able to love and serve our natural families without using them and without fear of rejection. We are even capable of loving and forgiving family members who have mistreated us, because we have been recipients of God’s forgiveness. The Gospel heals broken relationships.

Churches

The gospel unites us with other Christians. The gospel breaks down all barriers (race, class, gender) and makes us one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). Therefore, we celebrate what Christ is doing through other churches and ministries. We can partner with them to learn from and serve one another (1 Corinthians 12:7), to advance the gospel (Philippians 1:5) and to demonstrate the reality of the gospel to Long Island (John 17:21). This is, of course, especially true of the King’s Chapel, and our other sister churches in the Augustine Presbytery.

Society

The Church is the society of God’s people and should serve as the model society in this world. Therefore, we strive to display Christ-like virtues where we are. Because we have received every good thing in Jesus, we are free to give that which we have for the benefit of others. Our security in Jesus also enables us to learn from and be helped by those who are not like us. The Christian Faith, therefore, serves as the basis for civil relationships in a pluralistic society. Christians should be the best citizens.

Culture

The Gospel produces cultural renewal. First, all of our work matters to God. When the gospel clears out religiosity, which makes religion and church work an idol, then so called “secular” work is as valuable and God-honoring as Christian ministry. Second, God matters to all our work. That means the gospel enables Christians to work in their vocations both with excellence and Christian distinctiveness, thus transforming the culture in which we live from the inside out.

As you can see, Christ Covenant Church is committed to proclaiming the Gospel in everything we do. The test of our effectiveness will be threefold.

1. Are people trusting in Christ for the first time in their lives and are those who follow Christ growing in their commitment to him?
2. Is our commitment to Christ visible to our friends and neighbors? Do the people in your neighborhood know that we are here to glorify God by loving and serving them. Would they miss this church if it were to close its doors?
3. Is this congregation planting and nurturing new churches throughout Long Island? We will be most effective in changing Long Island with the Gospel when all three elements are present.

So, what does Christ Covenant Church believe? When all is said and done, we are in the broad, main stream of the historical church. We are a church that is broadly catholic, passionately evangelical, and distinctively Reformed. We are also committed to living out the Gospel here, where God has placed us. If you are considering membership in Christ Covenant Church, one question to consider is, “What do you believe?” Have you embraced the historic catholic faith? Are you trusting in Christ alone for your salvation? Are you (at least) willing to learn more about the Reformed tradition? If so, then you will find Christ Covenant Church a community of like-minded people, men and women who love the historic faith, who bow before the mysteries of God, and who worship him with all their hearts.

APPENDIX A: WHAT IS THE REFORMED FAITH?

Christ Covenant Church is a Reformed church, and this means that in addition to those beliefs which we hold in common with all Christians and with all evangelical Protestants we hold certain views which are more distinctive to what is called the Reformed tradition. This handout is designed to give a basic, cursory introduction to some Reformed distinctives. We will start with what is perhaps the most controversial; in fact, many (wrongly!) limit being “Reformed” or “Calvinistic” to one’s view on this issue.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN SALVATION

1. The “Five Points of Calvinism” (TULIP)

Total Depravity: Human beings are dead in sin and unable to come to Christ in and of themselves. (See Jeremiah 17:9; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 2:1-3.)

Unconditional Election: God’s decision to save some people is not motivated by their desirability or goodness; rather, he is motivated solely by his own unconditional love. (See Matthew 11:27; John 15:16; Acts 13:48; 1 Peter 1:1-2; Ephesians 2:8-10; note virtually all of Ephesians 1.)

Limited Atonement: Christ death does not merely make salvation possible, but it actually saves all those for whom he died. (See Matthew 1:21; John 10:11; 1 Peter 2:24.)

Irresistible Grace: In those God whom has chosen to save, he will overcome all sinful resistance and pride, changing their hearts so that they will eagerly come to Christ for salvation. (See John 1:12-13; John 3:3-8; Acts 16:14; Ephesians 2:1, 5.)

Perseverance of the Saints: Though never totally free from all remaining sin in this life, all those who truly come to Christ will persevere in the Christian life. Salvation cannot be utterly lost. (See John 5:24; 6:35-40; 10:27-30; Romans 8:1; Ephesians 4:30; Jude 24-25.)

2. Some clarifications:

☞ We in the Reformed tradition do not believe that God forces anyone to accept Christ against his or her will. Rather, God changes our hearts so that we desire to trust in him for salvation.

☞ We certainly do not believe that God ever sent anyone to hell who genuinely desired to come to Christ. Rather, a genuine desire to come to Christ is evidence of God’s working in the heart, in consequence of his election of that person to eternal life.

☞ Nor do we believe that a person, simply because he or she is “chosen,” can live a notoriously ungodly life and yet still go to heaven. While we do not believe that good works contribute to meriting one’s justification, we do believe that a changed life is the necessary *evidence* of God’s saving work in the heart. In the words of Martin Luther, “We are saved by faith alone, but never by a faith which is alone.”

THE SACRAMENTS

1. Holy Baptism

Baptism is a sacrament ordained by Jesus Christ for the admission of people into the Church. The Bible calls baptism both a “sign” and a “seal” of the promise God has made to us in the good news of Jesus.

Sign: Baptism is a sign, or picture, of many things. This includes that we are joined to Christ and his body, the church (1 Cor. 12:13), and that we have been connected to his death and resurrection (Romans 6:5)

Seal: Not only is baptism a sign, but God uses baptism as a means to communicate his power to us. Just as in the baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:21- 22), our baptism is a way in which the power of Christ through the Holy Spirit is communicated to us. Baptism joins us to the death and resurrection of Christ (Colossians 3:12), provides us with access to the forgiveness of sins (Titus 3:5) and by the Holy Spirit gives us power to live faithful lives (Romans 6:4).

Infant baptism: In all of God’s covenants with humanity the children of his followers have been included in the people of God. There is no indication in the New Testament that this has changed with the coming of Christ. (See Acts 2:38- 39.) The sacramental sign and seal of inclusion in God’s covenant people in the Old Testament was circumcision. Baptism replaces circumcision in the New Testament (see Colossians 2:11-12); it seems only consistent that it should also be applied to the infant children of believers. Of course, we do not believe that baptism is an automatic guarantee of eternal salvation for anyone, whether infant or adult.

Modes of baptism: While it is true that the Greek word baptizo originally meant “to immerse,” that verb had taken on a more specific use by the 1st century AD, specifically, it meant “to baptize,” without reference to mode. (It is a general principle that meaning is determined by usage, not etymology. For example, the word “nice” comes from a Latin root meaning “ignorant.”) The ceremonial washings of the Old Testament were normally by sprinkling, yet they are referred to as “baptisms” in Hebrews 9:10 (where the word “washings” in the NIV is the Greek *baptismois*). Note too that in the next chapter, verses 19-25, the salvation which is symbolized in baptism is described using this terminology. None of the New Testament examples of baptism necessitate immersion; in fact, in some instances circumstances make it quite unlikely. In light of the biblical evidence, the official position of the Communion of Evangelical Reformed Churches is that we don’t make the mode of baptism a divisive issue.

2. Holy Communion

The Real Presence: Communion (or the Lord's Supper) is a sacrament ordained by Jesus to be celebrated in his church so that we might remember his sacrifice. Like baptism, not only is it a picture of all that Jesus has done for us, but it is also a way that we as believers are spiritually nourished. The benefits of Jesus are actually communicated to believers through bread and wine by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13).

The Reformed view of the Eucharist is sometimes called *receptionism* (although *symbolic instrumentalism* is more accurate.) We believe that in the Eucharist, while no physical change takes place in the bread and wine, Christ is truly present through the power of the Holy Spirit, and that those who come in faith truly receive Christ's body and blood and grow into deeper union with his life-giving humanity. The elements are symbols through which we receive what the symbols signify. Communion is symbolic, but it is not just a symbol. (See John 6; 1 Corinthians 10 & 11.)

Frequency of Communion: The biblical witness, along with the earliest historical documents reveal communion to be an integral part of weekly Christian worship. In the Middle Ages, while Mass was "said" at least weekly, the people only received Communion (and then only the bread) annually, usually at Easter. In the Reformation, many leaders, especially John Calvin, tried to restore weekly communion for the entire congregation, which was almost certainly the New Testament practice. At Christ Covenant Church, we seek to honor the biblical and historical pattern by celebrating Holy Communion as the central act of Christian worship each Lord's Day.

THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST OVER ALL OF LIFE

1. Reformed Christians have often emphasized the development of a distinctly Christian worldview, a genuinely biblical way of looking at all of reality. (See 1 Corinthians 10:31.) By affirming Christ's lordship over the totality of life, the Reformed tradition has tended to stay away from drawing false dichotomies between the "sacred" and the "secular." For example, Reformed folk tend to say that being a minister or missionary is not a "higher" calling than being an artist or an engineer. This is often referred to as the Reformed doctrine of vocation.

2. Another example of this principle would be the Reformed insistence that no man-made religious rules be added to the teachings of Scripture. For example, while the Bible clearly teaches that drunkenness is sinful, it does not forbid the use of alcohol. Consequently, the Reformed tradition has never fully embraced the various movements toward the prohibition of alcohol.

AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRIST COVENANT CHURCH

PART 2: COMMUNITY

e continue our study by noting that the Christian life portrayed in Scripture is not lived in isolation, but is rather inherently *communal*. The Church of Jesus Christ is a community and in this part of our introduction we will focus on the centrality and necessity of the Church in the Christian life.

A. UNDERSTANDING THE CHURCH

“No one has God as his Father who does not have the church as his mother.” St. Cyprian first said those words 1700 years ago, and they have been echoed by Christians ever since. Yet in our day--when there is such a large number of churches, denominations, and para-church ministries--St. Cyprian’s words may sound a bit strange. What is the church? Why is the church so important? The more we learn about the church--this mysterious and multifaceted body--the more thankful we can be for our place in it. We can better understand the church, and better preserve a balanced understanding of the church, by looking at it from several perspectives.

Organism and Organization

On the one hand, we speak of the church as a living organism because it is the people of God, the living body of Christ, the vital fellowship of the Holy Spirit. (See 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 12:12-13.) The church is a supernatural creation, built upon the life-giving message of the gospel; in the church the gospel is embodied, and through the church the gospel is displayed and proclaimed.

On the other hand, we speak of the church as an organization because it has members, structure, officers, government, and authority. (See 1 Timothy 3:1ff.) The church is more than an organization, but it is not less. The organization exists to incarnate the organism.

We must keep our balance here. If we lose sight of the church as an organism, we will overly institutionalize the Christian faith and fail to appreciate the church as a living, dynamic body. Yet if we lose sight of the church as an organization, we will overly sentimentalize the faith and fail to appreciate the church as a real institution with its own God-ordained government, officers, and discipline.

Visible and Invisible

Here’s another important balance. From the invisible perspective, the church is made up of all those who have been born anew by the Holy Spirit into union with Christ and who therefore genuinely possess eternal life. (See John 3:5-7; 1 Peter 2:5.) This is the church seen *eschatologically*--that is, the church defined in terms of who will be in the church in heaven, spending eternity worshipping their Savior.

From the visible perspective, the church is made up of all those who have been baptized and who have not been removed from membership by church authority. (See Romans 9:6; 1 John 2:19.) This is the church seen contemporaneously--that is, the church defined in terms of those who are now members of the church, whether or not they are truly converted.

The distinction is a helpful one, for we need to remember that merely being on a church membership roll does not save a person. Also, there are those who believe the message of the gospel but who haven't been baptized and received into official membership. Remember how St. Peter, on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), answered those who asked how to be saved: "Repent and be baptized." The full biblical definition of a Christian is someone who is a member of the church in both senses. Just as in a good marriage there needs to be both sincere heart-felt love and public wedding vows, in the Christian life there needs to be both a passionate faith in Christ and an outward identification with the people of God.

Local and Universal

The Scriptures often refer to a single local group of Christians, meeting to receive the Word and sacraments, as the church; this teaches us that we are to be involved in local churches. (See Romans 16:4-5, 16; 1 Corinthians 16:19.) There is a certain primacy to the local church; it is in our home churches that we are nurtured, loved, taught, and cared for. The local church (including the smaller groups within the local church) is our primary spiritual health care provider.

However, the Scriptures also regularly refer to all the Christians in the world--and to regional groups of Christians--as the church, teaching us that the church is bigger than just a local gathering of believers. There is even a certain primacy here, as well, for all of us are first Christians, not merely members of a certain church. (See Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18.) The Bible teaches that the church is to exist in widening concentric circles of accountability and encouragement. (See 1 Corinthians 1:2, Acts 9:31.)

Again, we must maintain the biblical balance. Some people have claimed to be followers of Christ without being a part of a local church; this is clearly contrary to Scripture. Every believer is obligated (and privileged!) to be an active part of a local fellowship of believers. However, we are also a part of the whole, universal church--what the Nicene Creed calls the "one holy catholic and apostolic church"--and we need to remember and to practice this truth. Ultimately, all Christians--whatever our local church or denomination--are to be united to one another, to listen to one another, to learn from one another, to hold one another accountable, and to love one another in such a way that the world sees our unity. For the whole church, and for our unity, we should pray daily.

B. LIVING AS THE CHURCH

The Christian life consists not only in growing in our relationship with Christ; it is also a life of increasing obedience to our heavenly Father. We believe that in the Holy Scriptures God authoritatively reveals to us, not only his truths for us to believe, but also his directives for us to follow. For many centuries, the church has taught that the Decalogue, or the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20 & Deuteronomy 5), serve as an excellent summary of God's moral imperatives. Though the commandments were written in a different time, before the coming of Christ, and to a different culture, they still guide us today as we seek to be obedient to our Father. In them we learn that God's law expresses his character; it tells us what he is like, what he loves, what he hates. God's law also guides us in becoming our truest selves. Since we are created in God's image, we can only find fulfillment in a life centered on him. The law expresses that for which we were both created and redeemed.

Applying the Ten Commandments to Life Today (Exodus 20)

1. *"You shall have no other gods before Me"* (v. 3).

God comes first--nothing else, not power, pleasure, possessions, relationships, sex, or money. God is to be our chief priority as well as our chief delight. Our highest good is not personal freedom but, in the words of the Shorter Catechism, "to glorify God and to enjoy him forever" (Q&A #1).

2. *"You shall not make for yourself an idol"* (v. 4)

We must never imagine God to be like ourselves, or (worse!) even lower. Rather, we must love God as he has revealed himself. We have not been given the option of redefining who God is and how to serve him. We are called to worship and serve God only in the ways he has taught in the Scriptures.

3. *"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God"* (v. 7)

We must never trivialize God, but rather take him seriously. We must treat his name with reverence, honoring him with our thoughts and with our language. We should realize that his honor is at stake in everything we say. When we encounter untruths about God, it is our calling and privilege to guard his reputation by standing up for the truth.

4. *"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy."* (v. 8)

We must never do the work of sin or assume that we can earn our salvation by our works, but rather we are to rest in the salvation won by Christ. In a culture that says that time is money, we must remember that time is holy. We are to treat all time as "God's time," and invest it wisely for his kingdom. We are called to set apart time both for rest (which is what "sabbath" means) and also for worship, especially on the Lord's Day.

5. *"Honor your father and your mother"* (v. 12)

We must treat our parents--and all those in positions of honor and authority--with proper love and respect.

6. *"You shall not murder."* (v. 13)

Human life, the very image of God, is sacred. Therefore we are commanded not to be people of malice, cruelty, violence, or revenge. As God's redeemed humanity, we should struggle for the oppressed--both before they are born (which means standing against abortion) and after they are born (which means standing against homelessness, hunger, poverty, racism, suicide, euthanasia). As both the Law and Jesus taught, we are to love our neighbors as ourselves in all situations.

7. *"You shall not commit adultery."* (v. 14)

Contrary to our culture, we Christians profess that sex is sacred. We are to honor it as God created it--an act of intimacy, love, communication, and (when it is his will) procreation between a man and a woman within the covenant of marriage. Other expressions of sexuality (various sexual addictions, fantasies about persons to whom you are not married, homosexuality, adultery, and all extra-marital sex) do violence to us as humans. Christian couples should see sex as a positive command to seek to serve, please, and fully give themselves to one another. God's intention is that the marriage covenant is permanent--"till death us do part"--although divorce and remarriage are allowable in cases involving adultery or desertion.

8. *"You shall not steal."* (v. 15)

Martin Luther said, "Love to your neighbor requires you to hold sacred not only his person (6th commandment) and his marriage (7th commandment), but also his property and his due." God calls us to be impeccably honest; we are not to steal time from our employers or to cheat on our taxes. Rather, we are to pay our debts and to use our money for the relief of the poor and the advance of the kingdom.

9. *"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."* (v. 16)

Truth is sacred. We are never to be insincere; we are never to gossip, lie, or put a "spin" on things so that reality is distorted or our neighbor is harmed. We are always to speak the truth in love, and to speak up for our neighbors' good. God calls us to be peacemakers and always to be zealous for our neighbors' reputations. Without being naive, we should always try to put the best possible construction on things.

10. *"You shall not covet"* (v. 17)

We are to be content with what God in his wisdom has chosen to give us. We are commanded not to lust for more than we have or for what others have. We are called not to worry or be anxious, but to delight in the love of Christ, and to seek his kingdom and righteousness. Christian living is eucharistic, so we must be thankful for all God's providences in our lives.

This is the kind of life that should characterize gospel-centered people--lives of increasing intimacy with and obedience to God, our heavenly Father. Our desire is that the people of Christ Church will be men and women of deep integrity--seeking to live holy lives, both publicly and privately--and of deep spiritually--growing closer, day-by-day, year-by-year, to God their heavenly Father.

C. RESPONDING TO THE CALL: MISSION

As we now turn our attention in our next session to the details of membership in Christ Covenant Church, please remember that a commitment to this church involves a commitment to our *mission* to spread the Good News of the Kingdom. In fact, the word “mission” comes from the Latin word *mittere*, “to send.” In other words, our God calls us to be his people not only that we might know the peace, love and joy that comes from belonging to God, but also that He made us into a people of mission.

But what do we mean when we say “mission”? For some, the idea of mission brings to mind ideas of an arrogant conquest or a condescending attitude towards people. For others, mission has to do with our personal talents and occupations. But when the Bible talks about calling and mission, the primary focus is communal and cosmic in scope. For example, when Abraham was called out of Ur it was in order that he become a great nation. Israel was called out of Egypt to be God’s people in God’s land. Every baptized follower of Jesus Christ has been included in the call and mission of God. Jesus said, “Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do, and greater works than these will he do.” As the Body of Christ, the Church is called to carry on the work of Christ. So what is the nature of this work and how is the church to carry it out?

We may summarize the work of Jesus ministry in one word: shalom. The word shalom is a Hebrew word that is usually translated as “peace.” This translation, however, fails to grasp the entirety of what the Bible means when it speaks of shalom. While “peace” often means an absence of disunity or conflict, shalom means the well-being, wholeness and flourishing of all that God has created. It is for this glorious goal that the church works. In the words of Psalm 34 (a psalm filled with what shalom is about), God’s people are to “turn away from evil and do good; seek peace (shalom) and pursue it.” Cornelius Plantinga says that biblical shalom is “the way things ought to be.” Therefore, the mission of the church is to demonstrate shalom to the community in which we live. We are to be an “advance copy” of the kingdom of God here on earth and when people look at our church they should be able to glimpse eternity.

The call to be a people of peace is extended to Christians in every community on earth, but our church is called to live out this peace in one of the most influential regions of our time: Suffolk County, Long Island. In the 1st century, the Apostle Paul knew he would reach the world with the Gospel if he could reach the city of Rome. To be effective agents of gospel peace in the 21st century, Christians must focus on many places and Suffolk County is one of those important places! We can say with all confidence that if we seek God’s peace for our small, but influential corner of the world, we will truly see the effects throughout a much wider area.

This emphasis on a heavily populated region is reflected in a biblical understanding of God’s plan for salvation. Revelation 21 depicts the apex of God’s redemption as a city,

the New Jerusalem. In fact, when we look at the New Jerusalem, we discover something strange. In the midst of the city is the Tree of Life, bearing fruit and leaves which heal the nations of all their wounds. In other words, this city is the Garden of Eden remade. We began in a garden but we will end in a city; God's purpose for humanity is a special community! Why? Because the city is God's invention and design, not just a sociological phenomenon or invention of humankind.

Yet in every earthly city, there are two 'cities' vying for control. To borrow from Augustine's great work, these two cities are the City of Man and the City of God. The City of Man deifies power and wealth and human culture, making art, technology, business as an end in itself instead of a way of glorifying God. The city of God, however, is marked by shalom (Jerusalem = *Jeru-shalom*, which means God's peace). The City of God is a place where justice, compassion and righteousness lead to harmony, family building and cultural development under God's gracious rule. Christians are to see the earthly city not as a place to serve ourselves, nor as a place to be opposed, but as a place to serve--by seeking its shalom.

What are the implications of this call? The following points are ways that we as a church, and as individuals, can seek the shalom of the city as seen in the Scriptures:

1. *Our words* (Ezra). Ezra emphasized the importance of God's words for the community in which he lived. We can talk about the good news as revealed in the Bible in a way that is contextualized to the concerns and capacities of the people of our area of ministry.
2. *Our deeds* (Nehemiah). Nehemiah made the city safe and functional for the people of the city. Holistic ministries that promote safe streets, good jobs, decent housing, good schools and other facets of healthy community life should be one of our concern as a church.
3. *Our work* (Esther). Esther rose high in secular society and then, at a great risk to herself, used her position to work for godly justice in society and for her people. A key part of ministry is for Christians to work distinctively as Christians in the vocation to which God has called them.
4. *Our Community* (Jeremiah). The prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter (Jeremiah 29) that told the exiles from Jerusalem who lived in a foreign city to neither assimilate nor separate but live out their lives as a community "seeking the peace of the city". So we are not only to be "witnesses" by our individual lives, but by the beauty of our communal life as a church.

AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRIST COVENANT CHURCH

PART 3: MEMBERSHIP

e now conclude our studies in this series by examining what it means to to be a member of The Church of Jesus Christ and this church in particular.

THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

To be a member of a church is to make a public promise to live according to biblical teachings and to support the mission and ministry of the church. In the Bible, this is called a covenant. Biblically speaking, such covenants are the basis for all of society. Marriage and citizenship, for example, are all relationships of accountability.

The Benefits of Membership

Of course, many of the benefits of a vital church are available to anyone who attends. But there is a rationale for membership.

1. Members have the benefit of accountability to the pastors and elders, the spiritual leaders. Hebrews 13:17 teaches us to “obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls.” The command presupposes that you are in a covenantal relationship with certain leaders. Those who say, “I am accountable only to God,” are not only in disobedience to Scripture, they are placing themselves in great spiritual danger.
2. Members have the benefit of church authority to shape the ministry of the church. It is members who vote in congregational meetings to elect the officers who guide the direction of the church. And only members are eligible to serve as pastors, elders, and deacons.
3. There are certain other benefits to church membership as well. Ordinarily, only those who are members of Christ Covenant Church may have their children baptized into the membership here. And only members may lead in church ministries. If you decide not to join, you may certainly worship with us, but we do believe that active church membership is a biblical mandate and, if Christ Covenant Church is to be your “home” church, we hope that you will prayerfully consider membership soon.

Membership & Accountability

In Reformed churches, each local church and each minister is held accountable to the church as a whole, while preserving local autonomy on things such as style and philosophy of ministry. In the same way, while expression of individual gifts is a priority, each individual church member has a relationship of accountability to the church.

1. General oversight. As Christians, we are to encourage one another constantly to follow Christ. Moreover, pastors and elders have the authority to inquire into the general lifestyle of believers, to disciple, to encourage, and to admonish. This general oversight is a privilege for which we should all be thankful. (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13)
2. Judicial discipline. While ministers and elders cannot bind the conscience of believers beyond the teachings of Scripture, they do have genuine authority to lead the people according to biblical standards. For example, they cannot say, "You must be in a community group," but they can say, "You must break off this adulterous affair." In those cases where pastoral counsel regarding sin does not result in repentance, the stages of formal church discipline begin. This starts with formal admonition, and then can escalate to removal from membership in the church (excommunication). Discipline is never merely for some particular sin, but is always for refusal to repent over a sin. The goal of church discipline is always the complete restoration of the offender. (1 Corinthians 5)

One more comment on church discipline and accountability: For many people in our secular society, the idea of accountability to the church is quite novel. Yet hundreds of thousands of Christians will testify to the benefits of being a part of a community where people love you enough to be honest with you. If you have questions about this, please speak with the pastor or an elder. But remember: One of the great benefits of being a Christian is being a part of a community, knowing that there are fellow believers who love you and are looking out for you.

Membership Commitments

According to the Church Order of Christ Covenant Church voting members must give their assent to the following five membership vows:

❖ Do you believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?

It is important to come to grips with the bad news of our depravity because, without understanding this truth, the good news of the gospel is robbed of its glory. It is vital to admit that God's displeasure is justly deserved, that we are naturally, deliberately, and slavishly sinful.

❖ Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in need of salvation by Christ, and do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, receiving and resting upon Him alone as He is offered in the gospel?

Of course, this membership vow presupposes orthodox Christian belief in the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Atonement. A key word here is alone. It is vital to realize that justification comes through faith plus nothing. In no way do we contribute to our salvation. Also key is the word resting, conveying the idea that we have repented not only of our sins, but of our righteousness--of

our attempts to earn God's favor through good works. By affirming this vow you are publicly confessing that you are trusting only in Jesus Christ--in his sacrificial death and his glorious resurrection--for your acceptance by God the Father.

❖ Have you been baptized in accordance with His Word?

A proper Christian baptism is performed in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and is not an event to be repeated.

❖ Do you swear in the name of God, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, to live in a way that is fitting for followers of Christ?

In our culture there is a great deal of confusion about what it means to live the Christian life. The issue is not whether you are struggling with a particular sin; we all struggle with sin, and we look to the church community to help us in our struggles. The issue is whether or not you hold biblical convictions on these issues and are fighting against known sin. The phrase "in humble reliance on the Holy Spirit" implies that you are using the means of grace, practicing basic spiritual disciplines in order to grow spiritually.

❖ Do you swear in the name of God to support the ministry of this church in its worship and work, submitting to its government and discipline, while pursuing its purity and peace?

This includes assent to the church's general vision and philosophy of ministry, including our commitment to the centrality of worship, to being a church for the un-churched, and to serving where God has placed us. This promise also includes the understanding that Christ Covenant Church is a Reformed church and that, while you may not hold Reformed views yourself, you are knowingly and willingly joining a church which holds these distinct views. This also includes the responsibility of supporting the church with your time and money, being a good steward of that with which God has entrusted to you, and being involved in the ministry of Christ Covenant Church. A basic four-part membership expectation would involve a principled commitment to:

- 1. genuine spiritual growth -- more and more appropriating the teachings of the Word of God in your life and (if applicable) in your family;*
- 2. participation in Sunday worship as an indispensable priority in your life;*
- 3. support of the church through giving your time and your money;*
- 4. a commitment to ministry--telling others the good news of Christ and using your spiritual gifts for the benefit of those inside and outside the church.*

In this vow, you are agreeing to submit to the leadership of Christ Covenant Church and our regional and national governing bodies. It is important that you understand the ramifications of this. In the event that you disagree with the leaders of the church, especially in a disciplinary case, you have full recourse to the courts of the church, but by joining Christ Covenant Church you are agreeing not to involve the church in the civil courts.

You are also committing yourself to a balanced pursuit of purity and peace, of truth and love. This means that you will deal with conflict in biblical ways--in honest, loving, confrontation--and that problems will be brought to the pastors and elders; you are promising to avoid gossip, slander, and all hurtful means of communication.

MEMBERSHIP & STEWARDSHIP

Supporting the worship and work of the church to the best of your ability is one of the membership vows. Church members do this in myriad ways, but most fall into two categories--money and time--both commodities that seem to be constantly in short supply!

While stewardship certainly includes much more than money, it does not include less. Here are three basic biblical teachings on the subject of giving to the work of the kingdom.

1. Giving must be in significant proportions. The Bible gives three guidelines:

The guideline of the tithe: In the Old Testament, believers were required to give a tenth of their income to the support of the ministry and needs of the poor. While the New Testament does not specifically mention the tithe, since we are far more blessed and indebted to God than Old Testament believers, we assume that we are held more responsible for generosity, not less. Thus the tithe (10% of annual income) is a kind of minimum guideline for giving.

The guideline of sacrifice: St. Paul says of the Macedonians, “they gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability” (2 Corinthians 8:3). That means they gave until it meant a sacrifice in their lifestyle. Some believers are blessed to be able to give significantly above ten percent.

The guideline of generosity: Christians are called not only to give a regular portion of their income, they are also called to give generously. This is both an attitude and a unique spiritual gift. All Christians are able to give with gladness and thanksgiving when they remember Jesus’ sacrifice for us and the riches that await us at his return. In addition to this attitude, St. Paul lists “generosity” as one unique spiritual gift possessed by some Christians (Rom. 12:8). How do you know if you have the gift of generosity? The same way you discover any spiritual gift: try it and see if you are good at it. If you find yourself dreaming about ways to give away your money and get frustrated when you can’t give more than a tithe to the work of God’s kingdom, then you probably have the gift of generosity!

2. Giving must be a joyful response to God’s grace. St. Paul asked for money by saying, “I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich”(2 Corinthians 8:8-9). What a test! St. Paul says that the difference between moralists (those who think that God accepts them because of their goodness) and Christians (who know they are sinners saved purely by grace) is that a Christian

wants to give as generously as he or she has received. Put starkly, we always give effortlessly to those things that give our life meaning, to our “gods.”

3. Giving must be systematic and thoughtful. St. Paul directed the Corinthians to set aside a portion of their wealth each week until he came and received it, in this case for the relief of famine victims in Palestine. (See 2 Corinthians 8 again.) Giving “spontaneously” might meet point 2 above, but it’s rarely up to point 1. You need a plan, and the church can help with reminders and directions. Here’s a plan:

- ✓ Evaluate your own heart with regard to money. What do you most enjoy spending money on? What percentage of your income is going to (1) God’s kingdom (your church, other Christian ministries) and (2) to help those in need (outside your family)? How close is it to 10%? Read Matthew 6:19-34; 1 Timothy 6:6-10; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5; 9:6-15. Do you need to adjust your giving in light of biblical values, in terms of eternal investments?

- ✓ Evaluate the use of your “non-liquid” resources--time, talents, energy, home.

- ✓ Do you have a regular plan for giving? First, decide what percentage of your income you will give to the Lord’s work this year. Then ask yourself, on the one hand, if this is sacrificial and, on the other hand, if this is responsible. Last, whenever money comes in, set aside the Lord’s portion first, with the understanding that it is his, not yours.

- ✓ Prayerfully distribute the money among Christian causes. Of course, your church is your primary avenue of spiritual growth, and giving to your home church should be your first priority. But there are other ministries that are worthy of support as well.

Remember: The more you trust God with your material treasure, the more He will entrust you with spiritual treasure. (See Luke 16:9-12; 2 Corinthians 9:10-12.)

BECOMING A MEMBER OF CHRIST CHURCH

Membership in Christ Covenant Church means that you have committed yourself to this family of believers, that you have agreed to participate fully in the life, ministry, and mission of our church. We belong to a wider family, that of the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches, and members of Christ Covenant Church are members of this body as well.

The process of becoming a member looks like this:

1. **The membership classes.** This INTRODUCTION TO CHRIST COVENANT CHURCH is ordinarily the first step, although it in no way obligates you to membership.

2. **The Membership Interview.** After the classes, you need to take the initiative and speak with the pastor or elders regarding setting up a membership interview. Generally, these meetings last about an hour and are designed to allow us to get to

know you better, to hear how you came to be a Christian and where you are in your Christian life, and to allow you to ask any questions you might have about the church. You will be asked if you can give your assent to the five membership vows.

3. **Reception.** Following the interview, the Session will meet to receive new members into the church. Then, at a Sunday worship service, you will be asked to come forward and affirm publicly the membership vows. Those who have not been baptized previously will receive Holy Baptism at that time. Welcome to Christ Covenant Church!

(Members are received in three basic ways: (1) profession of faith, for new believers who have never formally declared their commitment to Christ; (2) transfer, for those coming from other churches; and (3) reaffirmation of faith, for those who cannot (for various reasons) obtain a transfer of membership. Of course, those who have not been baptized will receive Holy Baptism, the rite of entrance into Christ's church. How are members lost? Again, three basic ways: (1) death, which is a promotion from the church militant to the church triumphant; (2) excommunication, discussed above; and (3) transfer to another church.)

There you have it--a synopsis of what membership in Christ Covenant Church is all about. If you decide not to join--or decide to think about it a while longer --then please know that we welcome your active involvement in the life of Christ Covenant Church. If you decide to join us, then we welcome you, and we look forward with expectation to what God will accomplish through your participation in this church. If you are trying to decide what to do about membership, then please keep this thought in mind:

✎ Baptism and church membership are *normative* for the Christian life--a life lived within the community of the church. If you are a committed follower of Jesus Christ, then Christ calls you to active membership in his Church (though not necessarily at Christ Covenant Church, of course), including, if you've not already done so, receiving Holy Baptism. Remember these words of St. Cyprian: "No one has God as his Father who does not have the church as his mother."