

Covenant Community

by David McKay

When a pastor looks at his assembled congregation, what does he see? If he accepts a biblical covenant theology, he knows that he is not looking at a collection of randomly gathered individuals, or even families, but at a part of the covenant people of God. That perspective, when grasped by a congregation, ought to make a great impact on how these people view their life together.

Covenant theology reminds the people of God that they are to think covenantally rather than individualistically. Such a mindset is the very opposite of that which shapes much of current Western thinking. The church of Jesus Christ is a community of redeemed sinners bound to their Lord and to one another in the bond of love known as the covenant of grace. God gives Himself to them to be their God and takes them as His people (the covenant promise, which is spelled out, for example, in [Lev. 26:12](#)). Christians belong to their covenant Lord: “None of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself...whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” ([Rom. 14:7–8](#)). This also means that Christians are bound to one another and must think of themselves as part of a community. Paul expresses this truth using the language of the body in [Ephesians 4:25](#): “We are members of one another.” We are therefore to take our covenant brothers and sisters into account in all aspects of our Christian living. The covenant community is no place for rugged individualists. We must constantly be asking, “How will this affect other believers?”

If we love our covenant brothers and sisters, we will seek what is best for them, especially their growth in grace. This can be done in a positive way by exhortation and mutual encouragement. The writer to the Hebrews, after speaking of the blessings of the new covenant that are provided by the blood of Jesus, has this stirring call for God's people: "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" ([Heb. 10:24–25](#)). The covenant community is the place where we are spurred on by fellow believers to make use of the means of grace, including the gatherings of the church for worship, which will shape us more in the likeness of the Mediator of the covenant. This is not something that happens automatically — we must consciously "consider" how to do it most effectively. A consistent example, a word of encouragement, an offer of help when a brother appears to be struggling — all these, and more, have their place. Here is a ministry in which every Christian can, and should, be engaged. Whilst elders have a special responsibility for the oversight of the community, there is opportunity for all to be involved. A particularly important element in the life of the covenant community is the bearing of one another's burdens. This is Paul's command in [Galatians 6:2](#): "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." Our brothers and sisters are called by the Lord to bear all kinds of burdens (as are we ourselves), but they are not called to bear them alone. Apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit who indwells them, there is the ministry of those who are united to the same Savior in the bonds of the covenant. Indeed, this is often how the Spirit provides His help. When a brother or sister struggles with discouragement, failure, worry, bereavement, aging, sickness, the

prospect of death, or any other problem, the burden is made heavier if others who could help stand idly by, showing no concern, apparently wrapped up in their own affairs. It can be costly to bear someone else's burden — costly in time, costly in physical and emotional energy — and there is sadly no guarantee that the effort will be appreciated. If we take seriously our covenant solidarity, however, we will make the effort and take the risk. In our own times of trial, we also need to be willing to accept ministry. It is easier to be the strong one giving help than it is to admit weakness and accept help, yet that too is part of being members of the one body.

Sin is a reality in the covenant community. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” ([1 John 1:8](#)). In love, believers can hold each other accountable for their behavior, and so deal with sin before it grows and causes even greater problems. Sin can devastate fellowship, and thus it must not be ignored in the futile hope that it will just go away. Whilst elders have a particular responsibility to exercise loving discipline, if all believers were faithful in ministering to one another, far fewer issues would require attention in formal discipline. We must not forget that receiving discipline is part of our covenant responsibility, and never easy.

A covenant community that is functioning according to God's pattern is a healthy environment for the raising of covenant children. As they grow up, they will be surrounded by examples of what it means to be a godly man or woman. We will not be afraid to have them copy what they see. Words of instruction will be supported by actions. Here the challenges and opportunities of covenant solidarity come to their sharpest focus.