

## 8. Doctrine of the Church

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### The Church's Identity and Mission

1. The church is the body of Christ of which he is the head, and is comprised of all humanity who through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit have come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. It exists for the purpose of worshiping God, witnessing to the gospel of Jesus Christ to all nations, nurturing those who believe toward maturity in Christ, and living in faithful anticipation of the future glorious return of Christ (Matt 24:14; 28:18-20; John 4:21-24; 20:21-22; Acts 1:8-9; 2:1-47).
2. There are two distinct perspectives found in Scripture regarding the church: (1) the church as *visible* and *invisible*, and (2) the church as *universal* and *local*.
  - a. The *visible* church refers to the church as believers on earth are able to see it, comprised of "all who profess faith in Christ and give evidence of that faith in their lives."<sup>1</sup> However, while believers can observe someone's outward actions and attitudes, only God can search human hearts (1 Sam 16:7), and he knows those who are truly his people (2 Tim 2:19). Thus, the *invisible* church refers to the church as God sees it (Matt 7:21-23; 13:24-30; Acts 20:28-31; Rom 8:27; 2 Cor 5:11-12; Heb 12:23).
  - b. While only God knows and sees the *invisible* church, the intent of the *visible* church must always be to make what is invisible *visible*. There are three important ways in which this happens:
    - i. First, the church makes the righteousness of God visible through good works, by which those inside and outside of the church see and experience God's presence and grace in his people<sup>2</sup> (Matt 5:16; Eph 2:10; 2 Tim 3:17; Titus 2:14; 3:8; Heb 10:24).
    - ii. Second, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper<sup>3</sup> are commanded for the church, and wonderfully and mysteriously make visible the invisible work of God in the life of his people (1 Cor 10:16-17; 11:17-34; 12:13).
    - iii. Third, the practice of church discipline<sup>4</sup> serves to protect the witness and purity of the visible church by addressing sin in the life of one who professes faith in Christ. A believer who refuses to repent is to be removed from fellowship as a visible demonstration that he or she has departed from the faith. This is done in the hope that, should the person

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 856.

<sup>2</sup> For more, see *Doctrine of Salvation: Good Works*.

<sup>3</sup> See below: *The Sacraments*.

<sup>4</sup> See below: *Leaders, Members and Church Discipline*, 5.

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later repent, he or she may be visibly restored to fellowship (Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:1-13; 2 Cor 2:5-8; 1 Tim 5:20; 1 John 2:18-19).

- c. The *universal church*<sup>5</sup> is comprised of all believers in all the world and throughout history who were elected by the Father to be regenerated and included into Christ by the Holy Spirit. Within each time and place, the universal church is expressed in *local churches*. A *local church*<sup>6</sup> is an assembly or gathering of believers whose members have been baptized and have committed to one another for worship, fellowship, the Lord's Supper, prayer, instruction, evangelism, and service, under the guidance of biblically-qualified leaders (Matt 16:18; Acts 14:23; 15:41; Rom 16:16; Eph 1:22-23; 3:20-21; 4:11-16; 1 Pet 5:1-5).
3. The church's mission is to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18-20). This mission is larger than any local church can fulfill on its own. Accordingly, a healthy local church recognizes the value of interdependency, accountability, and partnership with other local churches in its community and throughout the world, including the historic church,<sup>7</sup> for three main purposes: (1) to strengthen local churches where they may be weak or biblically unsound, (2) to assist other churches where a church's gifts or resources may be of benefit, and (3) to establish local churches in areas where they do not already exist (Acts 1:8; Rom 12:4-8; 15:18-27; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9).

### The Church in the Biblical Story

1. The church is the "dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph 2:22). All those who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit experience and manifest his indwelling presence, in fulfillment of God's intention for creating humans in his image<sup>8</sup> (Rom 8:9-11; 29; 1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 4:20-24).
  - a. God's desire to dwell with his people is evident from creation and has remained constant throughout history, even though humanity's rebellion against God rendered them unfit for his presence, making it unsafe for them to be in close proximity to God (Gen 2-3; Ex 19:24; 33:20; 1 Thess 1:9).
  - b. In the Old Testament, God shared his presence with the people of Israel in limited ways: on Mount Sinai (Ex 19:9-25), in the tabernacle of Moses (Ex 40), and the temple of Solomon (1 Kgs 8). Yet it was only by God's provision of animal

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<sup>5</sup> Another term used to refer to the universal church is *catholic*, as seen in the Nicene Creed: "And I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church" (see *Appendix B*). The Greek word *katholikos* simply means "whole, general, or universal," and should not be confused as a reference to the *Roman Catholic church*.

<sup>6</sup> The basic meaning of *ekklesia* (the Greek word that is translated "church") is "assembly" or "gathering."

<sup>7</sup> Because we are part of the same universal church with those who have gone before us, we believe that it is valuable to learn from the lessons, teachers and events of church history. However, we do not elevate any historic church tradition, teaching or document to the level of inspired scripture (see *Doctrine of Scripture*, 3). The lessons of church history are immensely helpful inasmuch as they accord with God's Word and teach us how to apply it to different situations and cultural contexts.

<sup>8</sup> See *Doctrine of the Trinity: Holy Spirit*, 3-4, and *Doctrine of Humanity: Creation of Humans*, 2.

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sacrifices that the Israelites were able to temporarily cover their sin and uncleanness, which allowed them to be close to—yet separate from—God’s holy presence (Lev 1-6).

- C. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God shared his presence with his people closer than ever before, as “the word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14; c.f., Matt 12:6; Col 2:9). When Jesus drew near people his presence had a purifying effect on them: cleansing their impurities, healing their diseases, even forgiving their sins (Mark 1:40-42; 2:1-12; 5:25-34). Ultimately, Jesus’ death provided the one sufficient sacrifice to take away his people’s sins, making them fit to draw near to God’s presence without fear of destruction (Heb 9:11-14, 24-26; 10:12-22; 12:18-24).
  - d. Presently, the Holy Spirit regenerates and indwells those who trust in Jesus Christ. Both corporately and individually, Christians are the temple of the Holy Spirit, who manifests his presence in and through them in a greater and farther-reaching way than ever before (John 16:7; 1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19; Eph 1:22-23). Yet, even the Holy Spirit’s presence in the church is a foretaste of the ultimate fulfillment of God’s intention to dwell with his people in the New Heavens and Earth<sup>9</sup> (Rev 21:1-5, 22- 27; 22:1-5).
2. The church is the new humanity in Christ, having been united with Christ, the second Adam. He grants them the free gift of grace, righteousness, and eternal life, and redeems them from the sin, condemnation and death that came through the first Adam (Matt 4:1- 11; Heb 4:15; 5:8-9; Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:22; Eph 2:15-16; Phil 2:8).<sup>10</sup>
3. The church is the new covenant<sup>11</sup> community, spanning time, geography and ethnicity, and is distinct from the old covenant nation of Israel. However, as those who follow Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, the church exists as the fulfillment of many of the promises God made to Israel, including the promise of the new covenant, in which God would give his people a new heart, a new spirit, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the promise of salvation and blessing for all nations<sup>12</sup> (Gen 12:2-3; Isa 2:1-4; 49:1-7; 56:3-8; Jer 3:17; 4:1-2; Ezek 36:25-28; Joel 2:28-29; Eph 2:11-22; Heb 12:22-24).
- a. Through Jesus, God’s promise to bring blessing to the nations through the family of Abraham has been fulfilled. However, Jesus was rejected as Messiah by the majority of Jewish people in his day, and particularly by their leaders. As a result, a “partial hardening” of the Jewish people has taken place that remains to this day, as evident in the fact that the majority of Jewish people have refused to

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<sup>9</sup> See *Doctrine of Last Things: Eternity and New Creation*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> See *Doctrine of the Trinity: The Son*, 4d, and *Doctrine of Salvation: Justification*, 2b.

<sup>11</sup> A covenant is a formalized relationship that is based upon promises of ongoing faithfulness in pursuit of a common mission (see Gen 8:20-9:17; 15; Ex 19-24; Matt 26:26-29).

<sup>12</sup> See *Doctrine of the Trinity: The Son*, 4c.

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accept Jesus as their Messiah (Acts 2:22-23; 3:12-15; 4:8-12; 13:26-27; Rom 11:7, 25).

- b. In his sovereignty, God ordained that, while this hardening of the Jewish people continues, the gospel of the kingdom would be preached to all nations. Those who believe, whether Jew or Gentile, gather as the new covenant community of the church, share in the peace and reconciliation of the new humanity in Christ,<sup>13</sup> engage in the mission to make disciples of all nations, and await the return of Jesus Christ (Isa 49:1-7; Matt 21:33-45; 24:14; 28:18-20; Luke 24:45-47; Acts 13:44-48; Eph 2:11-22).
  - c. The present posture of the church toward our Jewish neighbors ought to be one of respect, patience and humility, knowing that much harm has been done to Jewish people throughout history by groups who claimed the name of Jesus. Yet, we must humbly, patiently and boldly communicate that Jesus truly is Israel's Messiah, knowing that while many will reject Jesus, some will believe and follow him (Rom 11:1-5, 23).
  - d. Our future perspective regarding the Jewish people is one of hope, for "when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in," Jewish men and women will repent and embrace Jesus as their Messiah on a scale that has never been seen before (Rom 11:25-32).
  - e. Therefore, while the new covenant church is distinct from the old covenant nation of Israel, when the fullness of the kingdom of God comes, there will be one people of God, made up of all those throughout history who by faith submitted to God's rule, whether under the old or new covenants (Rom 11:17-24; Rev 5:9-10; 7:9-17; 21:9-14).
4. The church is the witness to the gospel of the kingdom of God<sup>14</sup> (Matt 24:14; 28:18-20; Acts 1:1-8; 28:30-31).
- a. The biblical concept of the kingdom of God refers to God's redemptive rule: his actions in history to defeat his enemies and bring blessing and renewal to his world.
    - i. As Creator and Sustainer of all that exists, God is the sovereign King over all creation (Ps 10:16; 24:1-10; 29:10; 45:6; 47:1-9; 95:1-7; 145:1-21; Dan 4:3).
    - ii. However, Satan, demons, and humanity have rebelled against his rule and have brought the curse of sin and death to themselves and all of creation (Gen 3:1-19; Ps 2:1-3; 82:1-8; Mal 1:6; Rom 5:12-14; 8:19-23; Eph 2:1-3; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6).

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<sup>13</sup> For more on ethnic reconciliation, see *Doctrine of Humanity: Race and Ethnicity*.

<sup>14</sup> See *Trinity: The Son*, 4b, 5c, 6, 7. For more, see George Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God*, 1959.

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- iii. Yet God promised to conquer Satan, sin and death, and to turn humans from their rebellion in order to grant them new life and bring blessing and renewal to his world (Gen 3:15; Ps 2:4-12; 74:12; 103:1-19; 149:1-9; Jer 10:6-12; Dan 2:44; 4:32-35; 7:13-14, 18, 22, 27; Acts 17:24-31).
- b. b. The kingdom of God is manifest in history in different stages:
- i. God's redemptive rule was manifest in the Old Testament in the national life of Israel, over whom God reigned as King. Though Israel often rebelled against God's rule, God promised that he would bring a greater manifestation of his kingdom in the future and transform their hearts so that they would faithfully submit to him as King (Ex 19:6; 1 Sam 8:7; Isa 33:22; 43:15; 44:6; Ezek 20:33-38; 37:21-28).
  - ii. In the incarnation ministry of Jesus Christ, he announced that "the kingdom of God is at hand," and called people to "repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). Through his death and resurrection, Jesus accomplished the decisive victory over Satan, sin and death (Matt 3:2; 4:17, 23, 9:35; 10:7; 12:28; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 9:1-2, 11; 10:9-11; 11:20; 16:16; 17:20-21; John 5:21; 12:31-33; Col 2:13-15; Heb 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8). Those who submit to Jesus Christ as King are "delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col 1:13).
  - iii. Presently, the church exists within the broken and rebellious systems of this world as the community of those who have turned from their rebellion and surrendered to God as King. Through the Holy Spirit, the church has *already* begun to experience a foretaste of the life and blessings of the future kingdom, making it visible in this present life, though *not yet* in its fullness. In this way, the church witnesses to the world concerning the present and future realities of the kingdom of God, calls others to submit to God's saving rule, and eagerly awaits the future consummation of the kingdom when Christ returns (Matt 6:10, 33; 13:1-51; 24:14; 28:18-20; Luke 19:11-27; 22:28-29; John 3:1-8; Acts 1:1-8; 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 30-31; Rom 14:17; 2 Cor 5:17-21; Col 4:10-11; 1 Thess 2:11-12; 2 Tim 4:18; Heb 12:28; 2 Pet 1:10-11; Rev 1:4-7; 5:9-10; 12:10-12).
  - iv. God's good rule will one day encompass all of heaven and earth, abolishing death, banishing all evil and evildoers, and making all things new. This will be the kingdom of God in all of its glory, beauty, and life-

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giving fullness.<sup>15</sup> (Matt 25:31-46; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 15:20-28; Gal 5:19-21; Eph 5:5; 2 Thess 1:5-10; 2 Pet 3:11-13; Rev 11:15-18; 21:1-5, 22-26; 22:1-5).

### The Church and State

The universal church is distinct from and should not be identified with any nation-state, political party, or system of government (Matt 28:19; John 18:36; Acts 17:6-7).

1. As ambassadors and witnesses of the kingdom of God, it is essential that every believer and local church find their identity and allegiance in Christ and his kingdom above and before any national, political or ethnic identity and allegiance (1 Pet 1:13-19; 3:15).
2. Yet every believer and local church must also embrace their missionary calling to represent Christ and his kingdom within the nations, cultures, and communities in which God has placed them (2 Cor 5:17-21; 1 Pet 2:9).
  - a. In order to be faithful to Christ and his mission to make disciples of all nations, each local church must resist the temptation to isolate themselves from or to be conformed to the idolatry of their surrounding culture. (John 17:15-16; Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 5:6-13; 1 John 2:15-17).
  - b. Local churches must maintain their distinct identity as God's people, living lives of honorable conduct, sacrificial service, critical engagement, and prophetic witness among and for the sake of their surrounding culture, so that their neighbors may see their good deeds, glorify God, and submit to Christ as King (Matt 5:13-16; Rom 16:19; Col 4:5-6; 2 Cor 6:14-7:1; Eph 4:17-5:21; Philip 2:14-16; 1 Pet 2:11-12).
3. As those who submit to Christ as King, every believer and local church must seek to obey their King's commands to submit to, honor, and pray for the human governing authorities that he has sovereignly placed over them. To disobey, disrespect (whether publicly or privately), or even to fail to pray for the governing authorities is to disobey and disrespect God (Luke 20:19-26; Rom 13:1-7; 1 Tim 2:1-7; Titus 3:1-2; 1 Pet 2:13-17).
4. However, if human governing authorities command or forbid Christians to perform actions in contradiction to the commands of Christ in Scripture, then a believer or local church must humbly, respectfully refuse to comply out of allegiance to Christ as King. They must be ready to receive the consequences that may result from this refusal without threatening or reviling, but must entrust themselves to God who judges justly,

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<sup>15</sup> See *Doctrine of Last Things: Eternity and New Creation*.

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according to the example of Jesus Christ and the apostles (Dan 1:8-13; 3:12-18; Matt 5:11-12; Acts 4:18-20; 5:27-32, 40-42; 1 Pet 2:20-25; 4:12-19).

### Local Church Life

The life of the local church is oriented in three directions: toward God, toward one another, and toward the world (Matt 22:36-40; 28:18-20; John 13:34-35; 1 Cor 10:31-11:1; Gal 6:10; Phil 2:14-16; Col 4:5-6).

1. In their Godward orientation, every member<sup>16</sup> of a local church has equal access to God by the Holy Spirit and bears the responsibility to draw near to God in worship, prayer, and Scripture (through hearing, reading, studying, meditating and teaching), both individually and corporately (Rom 12:1-2; Eph 2:18-22; 4:18-20; 6:18; Col 3:16-17; 1 Thess 5:16-18; 1 Tim 2:1; 2 Tim 3:16-17; Heb 10:19-25).
  - a. Each member is to draw near to God in fear, worship and praise. He is the only God and only he is worthy of our worship (1 Chron 16:25; Ps 34:9; 96:1-9; 150; Isa 42:8; 45:5; 46:9-11; 48:11; Phil 2:9-11).
  - b. Each member is to draw near to God for mercy and grace in time of need. Jesus is the great High Priest who understands the weaknesses and struggles of every believer (Matt 11:28-30; Phil 4:6-7; Heb 4:14-16; 1 Pet 5:6-7; 1 John 1:1-2:6).
  - c. Each member is to draw near to God for transformation into greater holiness and Christlikeness (John 15:5-8; Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18).
2. In their orientation toward one another, every member of a local church bears the responsibility to love one another, to maintain unity with one another, and to build up their fellow members and their local church (John 13:34-35; Eph 4:1-16; 1 John 4:7-12).
  - a. The local church is built up as each member seeks to live in obedience to the “one another” commands of the New Testament, and stewards the gifts, talents, possessions and abilities that God has given them to bless and serve one another.<sup>17</sup>
  - b. The Holy Spirit indwells and empowers each individual believer within a local church with grace to exercise gifts, or ministries, for the building up of the body and for works of ministry in the world. These gifts and ministries are apportioned as he wills, vital to the mission of the church, and to be practiced in accordance with Scripture<sup>18</sup> (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:4-13, 27-30; 14:1- 40; Eph 4:11-16).

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<sup>16</sup> For more on membership, see below: *Leaders, Members and Church Discipline*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> See *Appendix E: The New Testament One Anothers*.

<sup>18</sup> The topic of spiritual gifts has been understood differently by Christians throughout history. The dominant contemporary view understands these gifts as special abilities for ministry, but Christians differ on whether all the gifts listed in Scripture are still operative, or if some have ceased. We believe, as a secondary doctrinal matter, that all

3. In outward orientation, every member and every local church bears the responsibility and privilege to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ by their words and actions in all life situations, whether public or private, and to call those who believe to be baptized and join in the life and witness of the church (Acts 1:8; 3:38; 2 Cor 5:18-20; Col 4:5-6; 1 Pet 3:15).
  - a. This outward orientation begins with the immediate community in which a local church is situated, as believers seek to share the gospel, conduct themselves honorably, serve and bless their neighbors, speak gracious truth regarding sin and injustice in their community, advocate on behalf of the vulnerable, and address the physical, relational, and spiritual needs of their neighbors (Matt 22:39; Luke 10:29-37; Gal 6:10; Eph 5:11-13; Phil 2:14-16; James 1:27).
  - b. Moreover, it is the joyful privilege of a local church to engage in the global mission of the church to make disciples of all nations, in partnership with other local churches throughout the world (Matt 24:14; 28:19-20; Acts 13:3; 15:41; Phil 4:14-20; Col 1:5-6; 3 John 5-8).

## The Sacraments

There are two sacraments<sup>19</sup> commanded by Jesus Christ in Scripture for the local church: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

1. Baptism is a one-time act that signifies an individual's union with the Triune God and his people (Matt 28:19; 1 Cor 12:12-13; Gal 3:27-28; Eph 4:4-5; Col 2:11-12).
  - a. *The Significance of Baptism:* The visible act of baptism should symbolize the invisible theological realities which it represents; namely: union with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom 6:1-7), identification with the Triune God (Matt 28:19), sprinkling and cleansing from sin (Ezek 36:24-27; Acts 2:38-41), rescue from God's judgment (1 Pet 3:20-21), pouring out of the Spirit (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-21), circumcision made without hands (Col 2:11-15), and entrance into the new covenant community (1 Cor 12:12-13).

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of the gifts mentioned in the New Testament continue in the present. We also hold as a secondary matter that the gifts should be primarily understood as ministries that serve and bless the church, not just special abilities. As Berding explains, "Every believer has been assigned by the Holy Spirit to specific positions and activities of service, small and large, short-term and long-term. These ministry assignments have been given by the Holy Spirit to individual believers and, in turn, these individuals in their ministries have been given as gifts to the church." Kenneth Berding, *What Are Spiritual Gifts?: Rethinking the Conventional View* (2006), p. 32. For an explanation of primary, secondary, and tertiary doctrinal matters, see *Prolegomena: Our Theological System and Tradition*.

<sup>19</sup> The term *sacrament* refers to a ritual act that is "sacred" or holy—not because it makes a person holy, but because the act itself is distinct from other Christian actions by virtue of its theological significance. Some Christians prefer to call these holy acts *ordinances* to emphasize that they have been "ordained" by Christ. We use *sacrament* in this document, but either term is appropriate.





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represents the body of the Lord, and the cup of wine (or grape juice) represents the forgiveness of sin and the new covenant in his blood (1 Cor 11:23-26). When these elements are taken together in a spirit of unity, believers visibly express and experience our unity in Christ<sup>24</sup> (Matt 26:26-29; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Cor 10:16-17).

**b.** *The Settings for the Lord's Supper:* Like baptism, the Lord's Supper is intended to be celebrated with other believers, not individually. Cornerstone practices the Lord's Supper in various settings: during our corporate worship services and also during shared meals in larger or smaller gatherings. In any of these settings, the significance of the meal must be explained, emphasizing unity with, love for, and service to one another. Adequate time must also be given for believers to examine themselves, confess any sin they may have committed against each other, and grant each other forgiveness, so that the bread and cup may truly be taken in unity (1 Cor 11:27-34).

**C.** *The Participants in the Lord's Supper:* Because the Lord's Supper signifies a church's ongoing union and identification with Christ and with each other, this presupposes that those who participate in the Supper are already united with Christ and with each other, and have signified this union through the initial act of baptism. Thus, Cornerstone practices a "close communion,"<sup>25</sup> in which any baptized believer may share in the Lord's Supper with us (Acts 2:41-42; 1 Cor 10:16-17).

**3.** While these sacraments may seem merely symbolic on the surface, the weight and significance of each ordinance individually and corporately must not be lost. On the one hand, they are simultaneously God's pledge to those in Christ, his divinely ordained

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<sup>24</sup> Christians hold different views regarding how Christ is present with his people when the Lord's Supper is celebrated, thus we consider it a secondary doctrinal matter. Among the four major views, we recognize two as unbiblical: the Roman Catholic doctrine of *transubstantiation* (that the bread and cup are transformed into the actual flesh and blood of Jesus) and the Lutheran view of *consubstantiation* (that Christ is present "in, under or along with" the bread and cup). We accept the memorial view (that the Lord's Supper is only a symbolic remembrance of Christ's death) as a biblical option (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24-25). However, we believe that the Lord's Supper is more than a mere remembrance of Christ. Rather, when believers share the bread and cup together, they celebrate and experience Christ's presence in their midst, but not in the elements (this is known as the spiritual presence view). As Anyabwile explains, "The elements remain bread and wine, but by faith Christ meets with and communes with his people at the Supper." Anyabwile and Duncan, *Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, 24.

<sup>25</sup> We view the participants in the Lord's Supper as a secondary doctrinal matter. As indicated, a "close communion" is open to any baptized believer, whether or not he or she is a member of the local church in which the Lord's Supper is being shared, with the exception of a believer who has been removed from fellowship through church discipline. This is in contrast to churches that practice a "closed communion" (which is only open to those who are members in good standing of that local church) or an "open communion" (which is open to all who wish to participate, whether or not they have been baptized or profess faith in Christ). Some churches that practice close communion also allows a believer who has not yet been baptized to participate in the Lord's Supper, but this seems to confuse the significance of the sacraments. Baptism marks the beginning of one's union with Christ and his people, while the Lord's Supper is the ongoing celebration and renewal of that union. Therefore, we encourage new believers to be baptized first, and then we welcome them to participate in the Lord's Supper. For an explanation of primary, secondary, and tertiary doctrinal matters, see *Prolegomena: Our Theological System and Tradition*.

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means of grace,<sup>26</sup> public vows of allegiance to Jesus Christ, and are practiced in anticipation of his return and of the consummation of the kingdom of God. On the other hand, they reveal the unseen and mysterious unity, fellowship, and commitment that the church shares with one another as Christ's body and God's forever family.

### Leaders, Members, and Church Discipline

1. The leaders of a local church are responsible and accountable first to Jesus Christ as the head of the church, and second to their congregation, whom they oversee in love and humility, according to the standard of servant-leadership modeled by the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 1:22-23; 4:11-16; 1 Pet 5:1-4; Matt 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27; John 13:1-17).
2. The Holy Spirit empowers every believer with grace to exercise gifts or ministries for the building up of the church<sup>27</sup> (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:4-13, 27-30). Additionally, certain individuals are particularly gifted and given by God to the church for the purpose of leading and equipping God's people for their ministry to one another (Eph 4:11-16).
  - a. All of the gifts and ministries are sovereignly apportioned by the Holy Spirit to each believer, male and female, as he wills (Matt 28:19; Acts 18:26; 21:9; 1 Cor 11:5; 12:11; Rom 16:7; Col 3:16; 2 Tim 2:2; Titus 2:1-5).
  - b. However, leadership gifts, like those mentioned in Ephesians 4:11, should be distinguished from formal leadership offices, like those described below.<sup>28</sup>
3. The New Testament defines two primary leadership offices for the benefit and protection of the local church: Elders and Deacons (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1-13).
  - a. Elders, also known as "overseers,"<sup>29</sup> exercise servant-leadership through prayer and the ministry of the Word, which includes teaching sound doctrine and

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<sup>26</sup> Neither baptism nor the Lord's Supper impart saving grace, which comes only through faith in Christ (Rom 3:21-25; Eph 2:8-9). Yet when practiced in faithful obedience to Christ, baptism and the Lord's Supper are both a sign that God's grace is already at work in believers and are means through which God's grace is given to believers for ongoing transformation and growth toward maturity in Christ.

<sup>27</sup> See above: *Local Church Life*, 2b.

<sup>28</sup> Ephesians 4:11 lists five types of gifted leaders: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers (often identified by the acronym "APEST"). Christians differ on whether these roles constitute formal church offices. They also differ on whether all of the APEST gifts remain active throughout church history, with some holding that apostles and prophets were only operative during the foundational period of the church (Eph 2:20). We hold as a secondary doctrinal matter that the APEST of Ephesians 4:11 refers to gifted leaders but not to formal leadership offices (like the offices of elder and deacon). We also hold that all of the APEST gifts remain active and can be given by the Spirit to both men and women as he wills. For more, see Berding, *What are Spiritual Gifts?*, 206-210. For an explanation of primary, secondary, and tertiary doctrinal matters, see *Prolegomena: Our Theological System and Tradition*.

<sup>29</sup> The Greek words *presbuteros* (elder) and *episkopos* (overseer) each highlight a different emphasis of the same office. "They are elders in status (not in virtue of their age but in virtue of their position and accreditation), and they are bishops [overseers] in responsibility." Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (1964), vol. 2, p. 616.

## Doctrine of the Church

refuting false doctrine (Acts 6:4; 20:28-35; 1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; James 5:14; 1 Pet 5:1-4).

- i. Elders must be initially and routinely evaluated, and only those who meet the biblical qualifications in their character, grasp of sound doctrine and ability to teach should be appointed and affirmed as elders (1 Tim 3:1-7; 5:17-20; Titus 1:5-9).
  - ii. This does not imply that elders are complete in their spiritual maturity or that they no longer sin. Rather, while continuing to pursue growth and transformation into the image of Christ, elders have experienced a degree of growth and transformation so that their lives are worthy of imitation (Phil 3:12-17; 1 Cor 11:1; Heb 13:7).
  - iii. Only biblically-qualified men may serve in the office of elder.
    1. Scripture affirms that men and women are equal in every sense (Gal 3:28), and that both men and women are gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit in every way that is vital to the ministry of the local church (as stated above).
    2. However, 1 Timothy 2:12 does not permit a woman “to teach or exercise authority over a man.” This is a difficult passage to translate and interpret, and Christians understand it in different ways. We hold as a secondary doctrinal position that “to teach or to exercise authority” is best understood as a reference to the authoritative teaching office of an elder/overseer. Thus we hold that only biblically qualified men can be appointed to that office.<sup>30</sup>
    3. Therefore, we are dedicated to equipping and empowering men and women so that they may flourish in ministry for the church, while maintaining male eldership in title and function.
- b. Deacons,<sup>31</sup> like Christ, exercise servant leadership by modelling and training others in acts of service for the benefit of the local church (Matt 20:28; 1 Tim 3:8-13; Acts 6:1-6).

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<sup>30</sup> Some Christians view 1 Timothy 2:12 as addressing a husband and wife in the context of their own home, concluding that it is not applicable to the local church. Others hold that Paul was forbidding a woman from teaching in a domineering way, which Jesus forbade all of his followers to do, whether men or women (Matt 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27). Conversely, others interpret this verse as forbidding women to teach in any setting where men are present (cf., 1 Cor 14:33b-35). We appreciate the complexity of this issue, and we grieve that churches have often applied these texts in ways that have undervalued the essential contribution of women to the mission and ministry of the church. We do not believe that women are forbidden from all forms of teaching. Rather, we hold that Paul’s prohibition of a woman “to teach or to exercise authority” relates only to the authoritative teaching office of an elder. For more, see Kathy Keller, *Jesus, Justice, & Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry*, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> The Greek word *diakonos* means “servant.”

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- i. Both men and women may serve as deacons.<sup>32</sup> They must be initially and routinely evaluated, and only those who meet the biblical qualifications should be appointed and affirmed as deacons (1 Tim 3:8-13; Rom 16:1-2).
  - ii. Unlike elders, deacons are not required or responsible to teach or to decide matters of doctrine for the local church. Thus, deacons carry out their servant-leadership under the doctrinal oversight of the elders.
  - iii. The responsibilities of deacons are not clearly specified in Scripture, thus, a local church has freedom to determine how deacons express their service for the blessing and benefit of the body.
4. Local church members are followers of Christ who have explicitly committed to worship God and pursue discipleship through teaching, fellowship, the sacraments, and witness, in partnership with one other and in submission to their leaders<sup>33</sup> (Matt 28:19; Acts 1:8; 2:42; Rom 12:3-5; 1 Cor 12:12-26; Eph 4:1-16; Phil 1:27; 1 Tim 5:17; Heb 10:23-25; 13:7, 17; 1 Pet 5:5).
  - a. Members and leaders are both under the authority of Jesus Christ as the head of the church and of Scripture as his inspired Word (Matt 28:19; Eph 1:22; 5:21-24; 2 Tim 3:16-17; James 1:21-25).
  - b. Therefore, leaders are called to lead in accordance with Scripture, and members are called to follow their leaders, unless doing so would violate Scripture (Acts 20:28-32; 1 Tim 5:17-20; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:1-5).

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<sup>32</sup> Some churches, following several English Bible translations, hold that 1 Timothy 3:11 refers to the wives of deacons, and not to women serving as deacons. However, in the Greek text, the word *gunaikas* (“women/wives”) lacks the possessive pronoun “their”; thus, the most literal translation is simply “women.” Furthermore, in Romans 16:1-2, Paul identifies Phoebe (the woman who carried his letter to the church in Rome) as “a deacon of the church in Cenchrea.” Therefore, we hold as a secondary doctrinal matter that a woman may be appointed to the office of deacon in her own right, whether or not her husband is a deacon, and whether she is married or single. For an explanation of primary, secondary, and tertiary doctrinal matters, see *Prolegomena: Our Theological System and Tradition*.

<sup>33</sup> We view formalized membership to a specific local church as a secondary doctrinal matter. Clearly, the “one another” commands of the New Testament (see Appendix E) call believers to a substantial commitment to love, serve, build up and seek unity with one another, and the majority of these commands are addressed to local churches (or to groups of local churches in a common region). However, we acknowledge that the New Testament never explicitly commands believers within a local church to formalize these commitments to one another (outside of the command to be baptized as a symbol of one’s identification with God and his people, as discussed above). Nevertheless, the New Testament does state that elders/ overseers are responsible for specific, identifiable groups of believers (Acts 14:23; 20:28; Phil 1:1; 1 Pet 5:2; Titus 1:5). Likewise, believers are called to respect and submit to the specific, identifiable leaders “...who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you” (1 Thes 5:12; see also, Heb 13:7, 17; 1 Pet 5:5). Thus, we believe that formalized local church membership, while not explicitly commanded in Scripture, is a very helpful way to specify and identify the believers and leaders who together comprise this local church, so that we can encourage each other and hold each other accountable to obey what Scripture does explicitly command. In particular, we describe membership at Cornerstone as a mutual commitment to the Great Commission: “...to be a disciple and to make disciples of others...in partnership with the other members and elders of Cornerstone.” For more information, see Cornerstone’s membership booklet. For an explanation of primary, secondary, and tertiary doctrinal matters, see *Prolegomena: Our Theological System and Tradition*.

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5. Because all believers will continue to battle with sinful thoughts, desires, and actions throughout their lives, God has provided the local church with processes of restorative church discipline as means of grace for our strengthening and growth. Therefore, all members and leaders are called to submit to discipline by God through the Holy Spirit for the purpose of repentance and restoration<sup>34</sup> (Heb 3:12-14; 10:24-27; 12:3-17).
  - a. Members and leaders are called to lovingly and regularly exercise biblical processes for church discipline in their relationships with their brothers and sisters in Christ and to submit to discipline when approached biblically by their brothers and sisters in Christ (Matt 18:15-17; Gal 6:1-5; 2 Tim 2:24-26; Titus 1:9; James 5:15; 1 John 1:6-10).<sup>35</sup>
  - b. Those who refuse to submit to discipline, or who refuse to repent of their sin despite the biblical practice of discipline by their fellow members and leaders, are to be publicly removed from membership and fellowship<sup>36</sup> in their local church until they seek repentance and restoration<sup>37</sup> (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:1-13; 1 Tim 5:20; Titus 3:10-11).
  - c. Those who have been removed from membership through church discipline, yet later demonstrate repentance and a desire for reconciliation with their leaders and brothers and sisters, should be lovingly and fully restored to membership and fellowship within the local church (Matt 18:15; Luke 15:1-32; 2 Cor 2:5-8).

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<sup>34</sup> See *Doctrine of Salvation: Sanctification*, 5.

<sup>35</sup> The biblical processes of church discipline outlined in these passages include voluntary confession of sin and struggle to a brother or sister, approaching a brother or sister regarding sin or struggle that is observed, praying for one another, instructing and assisting each other in practical steps to pursue repentance, and wisely involving others in approaching a brother or sister regarding sin they have thus far refused to acknowledge or forsake.

<sup>36</sup> Removal from fellowship means that the unrepentant person would no longer be recognized as a member of the congregation, would be removed from any leadership or ministry roles, and would not be permitted to celebrate the Lord's Supper with the congregation. The unrepentant person should not be shunned or treated poorly, and should be welcomed to attend church services, if willing, so that he or she might hear God's Word, observe the fellowship of the church, be convicted of sin, and long for repentance and restoration. However, until restoration occurs, a clear distinction between the church and the unrepentant person must be asserted, for the sake of the honor of God, the purity of the church and its witness to the community, and the ultimate good of the individual.

<sup>37</sup> 1 Timothy 5:19-20 calls for an elder who refuses to repent or submit to church discipline to be publicly rebuked before the congregation. This would render the elder no longer "above reproach," according to the qualifications of an elder (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). An unrepentant elder would no longer be fit to serve in that office and should be removed from it. Depending upon the situation, it may also be wise for an elder who does seek repentance to be removed from office for a time, in order to pursue transformation and growth in his personal life without the added responsibility of overseeing the church.

## Resources for Further Study

### Theology of the Church

- Edmond Clowney, *The Church: Countours of Christian Theology*, 1995.
- George Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God*, 1959.
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Part 6: The Doctrine of the Church, 1994.
- R. C. Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian*, Part Seven: Ecclesiology, 2014.

### Local Church Life, Spiritual Gifts, and Sacraments

- Thabiti Anyabwile and J. Ligon Duncan III, *Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, 2011.
- Kenneth Berding, *What Are Spiritual Gifts?: Rethinking the Conventional View*, 2006.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*, 1954.
- Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church: Gospel Communities on Mission*, 2012.

### Mission, Evangelism, and Discipleship

- Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 2nd ed., 1993.
- Michael Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church in the Biblical Story*, 2011. (Advanced)
- Scott Hildreth and Steven McKinion, *Sharing Jesus Without Freaking Out: Evangelism the Way You Were Born to Do It*, 2020.
- Andy Johnson, *Missions: How the Local Church Goes Global*, 2017.
- Scott Mehl, *Loving Messy People: The Messy Art of Helping One Another Become More Like Jesus*, 2020.
- John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 1993.

### Leadership and Membership

- Kathy Keller, *Jesus, Justice, & Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry*, 2012.
- Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds. *Women in the Church: An Interpretation and Application of [1 Timothy 2:9-15](#)*, 3rd ed, 2016. (Advanced)
- Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*, 2012.
- Thom Rainer, *I Am a Church Member: Discovering the Attitude that Makes the Difference*, 2013.
- Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus*, 2014.
- PJ Smyth, *Elders: Developing Elders & Revitalizing Teams*, 2020.
- Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, 1995.
- Alexander Strauch, *Paul's Vision for the Deacons: Assisting the Elders with the Care of God's Church*, 2017.