

Over the last four years we have made some major changes in our church. We had a change in ministry philosophy, in leadership, and in how we believe God is calling us to make disciples. Our new mission statement of **calling each other to live out our God given purpose in Christ every day** has become the heartbeat of our church and how God is calling us to live out the Great Commission. It is a declaration of the potential of God's people and the dependency and intimacy needed to live that out. But that statement presumes two things. The first is that we actually have the capacity to live out God's purpose for our lives, and the second is that there is an identifiable people gathered together to help each other do that. Is that true?

Hebrews tells us that, what was prophesied by Jeremiah in the Old Testament was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus. Because it was, the presumptions of our mission statement are possible.

[Hebrews 8:10] ¹⁰ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Our ability to live out our purpose from God and to be part of God's people who help each other do that is only possible because Jesus fulfilled the terms of the New Covenant. Through his perfect life, death on a cross, and resurrection, those who have believed in him as Savior have received his Holy Spirit. No longer is the presence of God in a manmade temple, nor are his words of life chiseled on stone tablets in the same place. Because of Jesus, the Spirit of God comes to live within the temple of our bodies to make the will of God known to our hearts and minds, direct our steps, and enable us to fulfill what he's calling us to. Additionally, everyone who has received the Spirit is now united into one Body, the Body of Christ, the Church, who lives out this identity as God's people in visible, local gatherings. Because of Christ's work, we can **become** what he calls us to become and we can **belong** to the people he created us to belong.

That is what we aspire to as a church, it's through the context of these two magnificent truths that I want to invite all of us to consider taking a courageous next step together. Starting this morning, on behalf of our elders, who have spent over a year working on this, we begin the process of introducing and, for some of you, reintroducing, Covenant Membership at Fellowship Dallas. I want to begin by defining what that means.

When we hear the word "covenant", our mind may go to the New Covenant, which we just discussed, or the covenant of marriage. But covenants go beyond those two things.

Covenant: a sacred bond between two parties whereby each party solemnly pledges to bless or serve the other party in some specified way.

Covenants between individuals are prevalent throughout the Old Testament and, in the history of the Church, have been used to establish who is a member of a local gathering and the ways they agree to do life together. It is a voluntary association with others to oversee and be overseen in their walk with Jesus, a pledge to be the church for each other.

Until 2016, covenant membership was part of our church, but we struggled to understand what it meant and ultimately put it on hold because we knew we were being called to a new chapter and

wanted our covenant to reflect that. Now established, we believe it is time to begin again. Over the centuries, church covenants have varied in what they say. **For Fellowship, the essence of our covenant with one another will be a commitment to become and a commitment to belong.** It is not a list of rules you must follow, or you're disqualified. It is a door to step through to raise your hand and formally acknowledge you **belong** to this family and commit to help make it **become** all that God intends as you become all God intends yourself.

So then what does it mean to become? We have spent the last five weeks answering that by looking at what happens when we answer the call of Jesus to become more like him. We said to do that, four things must be true of us. We must become:

Consistent in pursuing a God-centered life. (Mark 3:13-19)

Resistant to doing life on my own. (Acts 4:23-37)

Persistent in designing a life of intentional investment. (John 17:1-19)

Insistent on a legacy of exponential impact. (Acts 16:1-5, 2 Timothy)

We believe if these four characteristics are true of you then you will be living out your God-given purpose in Christ every day. That means, when we call each other, this is what we call each other to. They are not a checklist, they are ways of life for us to progress in. They act as a mirror to hold up to our lives and to determine how closely we are following Jesus and becoming like him. And they require devotion because, as Jesus said, they come at a cost: dying to self, courageous vulnerability, saying no, serving and investing our lives in others.

But for us to truly become, we must also belong. Unfortunately, Americans aren't great at community. French historian Alexis de Tocqueville observed Americans by saying "Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands." That was said over 160 years ago! And it's even more true now. We are independent, but also growing in isolation, division, and suspicion. All are roadblocks to becoming like Jesus. Those four ways of life will never be true of us if we go it alone. Thankfully God never intended it to be that way.

[1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 27] ¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit... ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

You and I have been saved individually from sin, but we've also been saved into something bigger than ourselves. It is a Body made of many members that he has assembled to be a witness for the Gospel and a blessing to one another. Because we belong to God, we belong to each other, and covenant membership declares your devotion to this family, to help them grow, and to ask them to do the same for you. And the way God designed it, none of us can sit it out. 1 Corinthians 12:22 says all of us are necessary, indispensable. Just like a human body is deficient without a liver, so too is this body without you. God made us to be interdependent, and we all suffer if someone is not engaged.

The way we do that is through what are called the “one anothers”. They are New Testament commands that tell us how we are to treat each other. They include love one another, honor one another, exhort one another, stir up one another, encourage one another, meet with one another, confess your sins to one another, bear one another’s burdens.

Those commands are not simple or small. Like our mission statement, they are intimate, intense, and intensely personal. **They proclaim I am a part of your life and you are part of mine.** But you and I know we wouldn’t let just anybody do that and be that. I refinanced my house recently and the mortgage company had two inches of paperwork for me to tell them I was committed to this relationship and carrying out its terms. How much more so for the body of Christ?

There is a tremendous amount of trust needed to allow someone to “one another” you, and there is a tremendous responsibility to do that for others. Declaring our commitment to one another is the place to start. Our covenant will communicate, “We are family. I am here for you, I want the best for you, and I’m not going anywhere.” It gives people permission to speak truth into our lives and asks us to do the same for them. In this transient culture we are a part of, the commitment of our life to this gathering of believers is an act of beauty and grace.

Would I be committing to be here forever? No. There are legitimate reasons for people to change churches. [1 Corinthians 12:18] ¹⁸ **But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.**

God has a church for all of us to be a part of, and that may be here for you, or it may be elsewhere. I talked to a couple in our church recently who said they felt God leading them to another small church in their neighborhood. They had established relationships with several families who all attended this church and they felt like God had a new assignment for them. I was thrilled and told them to go there and be the best members they have ever had. There is a gathering somewhere that God wants you to be an indispensable part of. If this morning’s message is the catalyst for you to prayerfully determine where that is, amen.

Does Scripture command us to have formal covenant membership? Not explicitly, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest some kind of joining. Throughout the book of Acts, someone is keeping count and a list of names. *Ekklesia*, which is Greek for “assembly” or “to be called out” is translated as “church” 114 times in the NT, and 90 are references to local gatherings. Letters are written to the church in Corinth, to the church that meets in Priscilla and Aquila’s house. The gatherings are identifiable, and their members are living out the one anothers together.

Additionally, Hebrews 13 commands the church to follow its leaders and says the leaders will have to give an account for how they lead. Who will they give an account for? The universal church? No. They will give an account for those identified as part of the flock they shepherd.

This feels controlling. There is a suspicion around institutions these days and the Church has done plenty to justify that suspicion. But I would tell you two things. First, **this is a covenant with one another**, not with just the elders, or with the institution of Fellowship Dallas. It is a sacred bond made between the family members God has assembled here, to belong to one another and to help each other become what God intends.

This is not an invitation to be controlled, it's an invitation to flourishing! I believe taking this step will be a catalyst for great spiritual growth for you and our church. And I'm excited to talk about it. I had to chuckle this week. I went looking for ways other pastors have talked about this and ran across a video of a pastor who very much believes in membership, but he was talking about it with this head in his hands and a dire tone. Not me! I don't have to sell this stuff or talk you into it because I believe it's an incredible opportunity to say you are my people, I'm here for you, and I need you to be here for me so we can all become more like Jesus.

One of the most encouraging moments of the last year or so is a story I heard about a lady who was new to Fellowship, asked how she could become a member, heard that we didn't have membership, and basically refused to take "no" for an answer. She kept telling Kelly that she just wanted a way to say this was her church, you are her people. So we dug up an old covenant card that had the wrong year on it and we let her fill it out and sign it. We were depriving her because she recognized the power of saying "I belong here, and I want to become like Jesus." That is the place I pray we all get to.

What if I'm not ready? If I thought this was easy, I would not be calling it a courageous next step and I wouldn't be spending an entire Sunday morning talking about it. You may be new to Fellowship and checking us out, still figuring out what you believe about Jesus, or recognize the magnitude of committing to becoming and belonging. So you may need some time to think and pray about it, and we are going to give you that time. This is voluntary, not a have to but a get to. Everyone will be welcome to continue participating in the ministries of Fellowship. But I encourage you to work towards deciding that. Again, if God is telling you it's not here, great. Go to where it is and be all in, because here is what I believe will happen when we take this step.

Growth in discipleship. Anytime we devote ourselves to something we give part of ourselves away; a marriage, a business transaction, even a gym. It may be our agenda, our independence, our pride. But the call of Jesus is ultimately to die to self and give our lives completely to his purposes. Committing to a church is part of that. But with Jesus, that which costs also blesses. When we open our lives to the family of God, they will call more out of you than you can call out of yourself, and your impact for the Kingdom of God will be multiplied. And what they do for you, you do the same for them. We will all become more like Jesus when we take this step.

Growth in unity and acceptance. A covenant confirms what our presence suggests. The bonds formed through a covenant will bring us closer together, even as the world grows further apart. The most important thing about us will be Jesus, and no matter what happens to us in the world, we can live with peace that we are part of a people who love us and are for us unconditionally.

We will also become a people of greater acceptance. Just this week I read a story about a guy who got high, broke into and vandalized a church, and six months later... was baptized in that church. I am asking all of you to consider choosing membership but, in truth, the Church has historically always chosen its members, and that's a good thing. Membership is the opportunity to formally tell someone who comes in our doors that, no matter what has come before, you are fully accepted here. It is a place where shame is eradicated by the cross, everyone is valued and needed, and the constant refrain of our people is "Welcome home".

Growth in impact. The New Testament shows that the unity and love of Christians for one another was one of the most compelling witnesses to an unbelieving world. [Acts 2:42, 47]
⁴² **And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship...**⁴⁷ **And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.** A body of believers devoted to one another attract those from a broken world who want to know the reason for that devotion. The greater our commitment to one another, the greater we proclaim Jesus to the world.

Evaluate the place Fellowship holds in your life. For many of you, this is easy. You have remain devoted during this challenging season of change and know this is your faith family. You are fully committed, and you've been waiting for the opportunity to say so. For others of you, this is a great opportunity to ask God how he sees your involvement in his Body and where he wants you to be. Perhaps this is the challenge he wants to give you to take that step.

Evaluate covenant membership and talk about it with others. We are not asking you to make a decision today. Today is just an introduction. We want to give you the next couple of months to pray, think, and talk about this. We will be gathering our ministry and Life Group leaders to roll out more specifics to help them understand and be able to share it with others. We will also be launching a page on our website that will give you much greater detail and allow you to ask questions. Be on the lookout for that in the next couple weeks. Then, in January, we will kick off the year with a series on the One Anothers called *Belonging*. It is then when we will invite you to take this courageous next step of becoming a Covenant Member.

But before all that, let's close with a celebration of what makes all this possible. COMMUNION.