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The Church and the
**SURPRISING
OFFENSE**
of God's Love

*Reintroducing the Doctrines of
Church Membership and Discipline*

Foreword by Mark Dever

Jonathan Leeman

“What happens when you bring together one of the most misunderstood subjects (love) and one of the most ignored practices (church membership and discipline) in the church today? A book like this one. Unlike the generation raised on Mr. Spock’s child-rearing advice, the Good Shepherd cares for his flock by loving discipline. There is a lot of talk these days about radical discipleship, but what we need today is a lot more ordinary discipleship, where we realize not only in theory but in practice what it means to be conformed to Christ’s image. This is the best book I’ve seen on this subject in a long time.”

—Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology
and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

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SURPRISING OFFENSE

of God's Love

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To Mark,
who taught me much of what's here,

and Matt,
who gave me a chance to say it.

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FOREWORD

In a fallen world like ours, Christian love never comes unbidden. It never comes through mere sentiment. As surprising as it may be for us, Christian love involves faith, faith that is impossible for us apart from the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul wrote, “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8 NIV).

Counting everything as loss or rubbish involves effort and self-denial. Surely such considering or counting is the opposite of love.

Love is, for us, pleasure. We associate love with happiness, family, friends, and home. Love is, we think, by its very nature familiar. It is self-evident and immediate. Love by its nature shows itself. In that sense we think that love is simple.

All these notions of love Jonathan Leeman is about to challenge and, my guess is, challenge successfully, if you read through the whole book.

And then there is the notion of offense. We have a mixed relationship with the idea of offense today. We can take offense; we’re okay with that. But many people distinctly do not like the idea of God’s being offended, and certainly not by us. And we certainly don’t associate offense with love.

At this point, Jonathan is leading us into another land—an older land—with commitments and relationships and more defined issues of right and wrong than we today are accustomed to. These once were familiar ideas. I don’t know how you deal with new cultures, but there is a cusp of discomfort that many people have to get over when they first move to a new culture. My guess is that some of you will have a similar sensation reading about love and how it can really and truly be offensive, and even how sometimes it needs to be. But the land Jonathan is leading us into is beautiful and fruitful and faithful and biblical, and it reflects God’s character.

As we come to understand more of God and his character, we come to see that God’s love involves us in self-denial. And sharing God’s love with others involves us in discipline, even church discipline. How can we love people and not treat them as Paul treated the self-deceived adulterous man in 1 Corinthians 5? How can we love people who sin against us and not treat them as Jesus

instructed in Matthew 18? I'm not saying that this is all easy or uncomplicated (which is why you are holding not just this foreword but an entire book)! But coming to understand what church discipline has to do with love can rock your world. It can even save your soul.

Now, if Jonathan shows us all this, we might not be too surprised to find that as we turn around, we've entered deeply into the Bible's teaching on church membership. "The Bible's teaching on church membership?" you ask. "Where?" And when you're asking that question, I think you're ready to begin reading this book.

Before you is a feast carefully prepared. I've known Jonathan for over a decade. He has encouraged, exasperated, amused, and amazed me. It is one of my joys in life to get to co-labor with him in writing helpful materials for pastors. Jonathan has a restless, inquisitive mind given to him by God, in part to write this book, and so to be able to show us around a world he's been fascinated by and has considered as deeply as anyone I know.

This book is the best thing I have ever read on church membership. I can give you no higher commendation. Read and profit. And thank God for the gift of Jonathan. And for the gift of God's love, which bore his own offense—to our everlasting surprise and delight.

—Mark Dever, Washington DC, July 31, 2009

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My wonderful wife, Shannon, supported me in humble, Christlike fashion as I spent many months and long hours either writing this book or walking around the house with my mind stuck in it. She therefore deserves first mention. Thank you, my love, for all your work, prayer, and affection. I'm so grateful for you.

Matt McCullough and Bobby Jamieson read an early draft of the book in its entirety, and Robert Cline and Tom Schreiner both read a couple of chapters. All of you improved it. Thank you, brothers. Thanks also to Josh Coover, my colleague who was encouraging and interested throughout the project and was also patient with me as I repeatedly dropped the ball in other matters at work!

I'm grateful for Al Fisher and Crossway and their willingness to take a chance on first-time authors like me. Thanks also to Lydia Brownback who has been an affirming editor, patient and helpful.

The reader must know that Mark Dever provided the original idea for this book, namely, centering the topic of church membership and discipline on the idea of love. He did the same in a chapter he wrote on church membership.¹ I have simply lifted the theme from him. Thank you for this and so much more, brother.

Tremendous thanks also to Matt Schmucker for his time and patience as I worked through this project. Matt is a humble man who devotes his life to providing opportunities for others. I'm privileged to benefit regularly from his leadership, wisdom, and, best of all, friendship.

Finally, Capitol Hill Baptist Church deserves perhaps the most credit for shaping the heart and mind that would write about the particular matters presented here. My prayer is that this book will be useful for many. To whatever extent it is, the reader must understand that not a page here would have been written apart from this church's instruction and love.

¹Mark Dever, "Regaining Meaningful Church Membership," in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, ed. Thomas White, Jason G. Deusing, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 45–62.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

The medium is the message. Have you heard that phrase? It was first spoken by the Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan in 1964, and it means simply that the medium in which a message is communicated affects the content of the message itself. For instance, reading about a foreign battle in the newspaper is different from watching it on television. The first is news; the second is both news and spectacle.

McLuhan's phrase is just another way of describing the symbiotic relationship between form and content. Ask any poet, artist, or architect and they will assure you that the form of something affects its content, and the content affects its form. A room with high, vaulted ceilings, massive pillars, and natural light pouring through stained-glass windows communicates one kind of message, while a room with white plaster walls, a drop-ceiling, florescent lights, and rows of gray cubicles communicates another kind. Sure, these forms and their messages are culturally conditioned, but my point is simply that there is a connection between form and content—in every culture.

An analogous relationship exists within the life of any organization when we compare the purpose for which an organization exists, what we might call the organization's message, and the structure of that organization, or its medium. How does an automobile manufacturer best structure itself to sell cars? How does an army best structure itself to defend a nation? How does a political advocacy group best structure itself to advocate its message? An organization's purpose or message will affect its structure, and its structure will in turn shape its message or purpose.

Suppose then that three Christians sitting down for coffee decide to start an organization for which the purpose is to define God's love for the whole world. That is the organization's message or content. They want it to say to everyone everywhere, "Here is God's love, and this is what it's like." Of course, this message of God's love is nothing other than the gospel of Jesus Christ: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

Now, the three Christians agree that their organization exists for this purpose. And all agree, in principle, that the structure of their organization not only will affect how well they can accomplish this purpose but also has the potential to shape the message itself. For instance, an authoritarian organization that says “God is love” will effectively communicate a different message to the world than an egalitarian organization that says “God is love.”

The problem is that the three Christians disagree on how to approach this question of structure. One of them observes that the people in different countries and cultures may require different kinds of structures, so he uses the word “contextualize” a lot and concludes that the organization’s structure needs to be flexible and adaptable. The second Christian thinks the conversation about structure is interesting, but she concludes that it’s finally not *that* important; what’s important is getting the message out. The third Christian, however, thinks that it’s extremely important. He insists that the other two effectively dismiss the point with their solutions, even though the other two pay lip service to the fact that a connection exists between form and content. Not only that, but he proposes that God has mandated one structure in the Bible rather than another, that this structure perfectly matches the message itself, almost as if it were an organic outgrowth of the message, like DNA producing a body’s skeleton, and that it’s precisely this structure that God means to use to accomplish the organization’s purpose—to define his love for the world. It is his means for protecting the message, to hold it up on display, to make it attractive, and to put it into action.

Essentially, this book presents the argument of that third Christian. The structure of the church’s corporate life together is tightly tied to the content of the gospel, and the content of the gospel is tightly tied to the structure of the church’s corporate life together. They shape and implicate one another. This book doesn’t try to cover every aspect of church structure. Its focus is principally on the matters of local church membership and discipline.

In language that’s popular among evangelicals these days, one could say that the practices of local church membership and discipline are an implication of the gospel. It’s not enough to say simply that “the church” is an implication of the gospel. It’s the church *in a particular, marked-off form* that’s an implication of the message. Membership and discipline are not artificially erected structures. They are not legalistic impositions upon new-covenant grace. They are an organic and inevitable outgrowth of Christ’s redemptive work and the gospel call to repentance and faith. Missing local church membership is like missing the fact that Christians are called to pursue good works, or love their neighbors, or care for the poor, or pray to God, or follow in the way of Christ. Submitting oneself to a local church is what a true believer does, just like a true believer pursues good works, loves his or her neighbor, and so forth. Someone

who refuses to join—or better, to submit to—a local church is like someone who refuses to pursue a life of righteousness. It calls into question the authenticity of his or her faith.

Insofar as the gospel presents the world with the most vivid picture of God's love, and insofar as church membership and discipline are an implication of the gospel, local church membership and discipline in fact define God's love for the world. That, in one sentence, is the argument of this book. Along the way we will observe that the very things that offend us about church membership root in the things we find offensive about God's love itself.

What's striking, therefore, is how most evangelicals have pushed the question of church structure into the category of nonessential and therefore of non-importance. The gospel is important, even essential, we say. Church structure is neither. And since questions of church structure only divide Christians, like it divided those three individuals sitting down for coffee, it's best to leave it out of the conversation altogether. Right?

What if that's wrong? What if God, in his wisdom, actually revealed both content and form, both a message and a medium, both a gospel and a polity, perfectly suited to one another? Couldn't pushing questions of church structure into the category of "what respectable evangelicals shouldn't hold strong opinions about" eventually undermine the gospel itself?

From God to the Gospel to the Church

What we need, I believe, is a truly systematic theology of church membership and discipline. We need to consider how the practices of local church membership and discipline fit into the larger matters of God's love, God's judgment, God's authority, and the gospel. When thinking or writing about the church, it's easy to err in one direction by sidelining questions of polity. It's also easy to err in the other direction by quickly jumping to our favorite proof-texts about elders and deacons, the Lord's Supper, or church discipline, but doing so in a way that doesn't carefully consider the larger theological context.

A proper doctrine of the church should be informed by everything else we know about God, his love, and his plan of salvation.¹ It should reflect everything we know about God's love and holiness; about humanity as created in God's image but fallen into guilt and corruption; about Christ's sinless life, sacrificial death, victorious resurrection, and the imputation of his own righteousness to sinners; and about life beneath his inaugurated rule through repentance and faith.

¹Kevin Vanhoozer puts it more eloquently: "The evangelical church is a living *summa* of evangelical theology." "Evangelicalism and the Church: The Company of the Gospel," in *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Robin Parry, and Andrew West (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 52.

Though I believe it's theologically problematic to refer to the church as a "continuation of Christ's incarnation,"² as some theologians have,³ I am sympathetic with the impulse to use incarnational language to describe the church: the church is precisely where every doctrine is enfleshed or embodied. The church is where all these doctrines are put into action.

Theologian John Webster captures the spirit of what I'm getting at when he says, "A doctrine of the church is only as good as the doctrine of God which underlies it."⁴ You will only understand what or who the church is if you first understand who God is. The same relationship abides between our doctrine of the gospel and our doctrine of the church. Webster also writes, "It is . . . an especial concern for evangelical ecclesiology to demonstrate not only that the church is a necessary implicate of the gospel but also that gospel and church exist in a strict and irreversible order, one in which the gospel precedes and the church follows."⁵ In other words, you will only understand what or who the church is if you first understand what God's gospel is.

In a sense, this entire book is an exercise in working out these two comments by Webster. Specifically, it will contend that our understanding of God and the gospel will affect how we view the structural or institutional matters of membership and discipline; and how churches treat these structural matters will, in turn, affect how the world views God's love and God's gospel.

For example, suppose we conceived of God as holy but not very loving. That would have some pretty clear implications for our doctrine of salvation and how human beings should approach God or how he approaches them. Assuming that he called them to some type of corporate life together, there would be further implications for how these humans organized that life. Frankly, my guess is that with this "holy but not loving" God, the structures and rules and lines of authority would become *all* important. It would be a very severe, harsh, legalistic, and Pharisaical religion. A scary picture. Most likely, the world would reject this God and choose to define love on its own.

²To begin with, it blurs creator/creature distinctions, clouds the uniqueness of the incarnation event, over-identifies Christ and his church, ignores essential differences between sinless Christ and still sinful church, makes too much of this world, and downplays the significance of the Parousia and the church's hope in it. See Michael S. Horton, *People and Place* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 166–70; also, Ronald Y. K. Fung, "Body of Christ," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 81.

³The idea became prominent in both Protestant and Catholic followers of German idealism, beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher (see Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, Continuum, 1999], 182–83); J. A. Möhler (see Michael J. Himes, *Ongoing Incarnation: Johann Adam Möhler and the Beginnings of Modern Ecclesiology* [Herder and Herder, 1997]); and Möhler's student Karl Adam. Michael Horton also follows the trail all the way up to the present with writers such as Pope Benedict XVI, Lutheran theologian Robert Jensen, Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz, and the circle of writers known as Radical Orthodoxy such as Graham Ward (http://sites.silaspartners.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID314526|CHID598014|CII D2376346.00.html, accessed January 18, 2008). See also chap. 6 of Horton, *People and Place*, esp. 156–64.

⁴John Webster, "The Church and the Perfection of God," in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 78.

⁵*Ibid.*, 76. Cf. Vanhoozer, "Evangelicalism and the Church," 70–77.

Suppose alternatively that God wasn't very holy but that he was very loving. If I had to guess, I expect that a holy-less but loving God would be fairly permissive, whimsical, mercurial, and even dangerous. Salvation would be indiscriminate and not entirely just. And the corporate life of his people would be indistinct from the world. This religion would be increasingly licentious, shallow, meaningless, directionless, and grossly narcissistic. Again, a scary picture. One portion of the world would be only too happy to accept this all-too-human God because he would look just like them. Others, because he looked just like them, would think, "Why bother?"

But what about a God who is both holy and loving? How would such a God relate to humanity? What kind of gospel would his prophets proclaim? What kind of church would his apostles build? Would they draw boundaries and establish lines of authority?

I suspect that most pastors, church leaders, and Christians generally would quickly affirm, "Of course we believe in a God who is both holy and loving." But what if one's understanding of God's love is wrong? What if, in fact, one's understanding of love is downright idolatrous and unholy? How would an idolatrous conception of love affect one's understanding of God, the gospel, and therefore the church?

What's Love Got to Do with It?

In the first instance, therefore, this is a book about church membership and discipline. It's a theology of membership and discipline, and it's an argument for how vital the practices of membership and discipline are to biblical Christianity, to the life of the church, to the church's work of disciple-making, and to the display of God's glory in the world.

But this book is about something more than just membership and discipline. It's also about love. The world thinks it understands love, just like it thinks it loves God. Yet it doesn't. It only understands idolatrous phantoms or fabrications of them, shadows that bear some of the shape but little of the substance. The local church, therefore, is called to be a three-dimensional display of true love. And the practices of church membership and discipline are precisely what help to make the local church visible and clear. They demonstrate love's demands. They help us to know, in the apostle John's phrase, who are the children of God and who are the children of the Devil (see 1 John 3:10). Church membership and discipline give structure or shape to what it means to be a Christian—a person who displays God's love. They help to mark the church off from the world, so that the world can then look and see something *in* but not *of* itself. Can marking off something possibly be a loving thing to do, particularly to the outsiders? I will argue that it can, especially if one of the goals is to give

the outsider a hope of its own inclusion into something divinely loving and divinely beautiful.

When the boundary line between church and world gets blurred, God's picture of the loving, forgiving, caring, holy, righteous community becomes less clear. But this blurred line is itself a consequence of another blurred line—the line between holy creator and fallen creature, between loving God and idolatrous man. It's telling that many of the writers today who call for a less “institutionalized” and “boundaried” conception of the local church are the same writers who prefer the immanent God to the transcendent God, the human Jesus to the divine Jesus, and a human Bible instead of a divine one. We reach out with washrags to erase the line between church and world once we are convinced not that we image God but that God images us and have confused our idolatry for his love. Said otherwise, a deficient view of love and the church root finally in a deficient view of God and God's love.

Let me sum up the matter like this: the argument for church membership and discipline is an argument for a clear line between church and world, as clear as the line between the inside of Eden and the outside of Eden, the inside of the ark and the outside of the ark, the inside of the Israelite camp and the outside of the camp, the inside of Jerusalem's walls and the outside of its walls. Yet what stands in the way of our ability—as Christians and churches in the post-modern West—to embrace the biblical call for such a line are our distorted and holy-less, truth-less, wisdom-less conceptions of God and his love. Recovering a biblical understanding of the church and its boundaries, therefore, requires us to reconsider what love is and how it's the very boundaries of the church that help to define love for the world.

A “Love” Story

There are a number of sociological and theological reasons why the first two Christians in my imaginary conversation above responded to the question of organizational structure as they did, one saying that structure needs to be flexible and one saying that it doesn't matter. And since those two responses are both common and deeply ingrained in the Western mindset, it's worth spending some time digging into the assumptions behind them.

I read one love story in high school that, I believe, captures the essence of why it's so difficult for Christians to see the relationship between love and church membership and discipline. In fact, American students have been reading this story for over a century, which indicates something of how well it reflects aspects of our cultural consciousness. This love story opens on a sunny summer's morning with five women standing on a grassy plot outside a town jail. The date is unspecified, but it's somewhere in the seventeenth century. The place is a small Puritan settlement in New England called Boston.

The action begins with a hard-featured woman of fifty offering four other women a piece of her mind:

Goodwives, I'll tell you a piece of my mind. It would clearly be for the public's benefit, if we women, being of mature age and church-members in good repute, should be given responsibility for handling a malefactress⁶ like this Hester Prynne. What think ye, gossips? If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, would she have come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? I think not.⁷

The so-called hussy, Hester Prynne, has committed adultery, a crime proven by the infant daughter cradled in her arms inside the jailhouse. On this particular morning, the town's magistrates have decided that Hester will emerge from her cell, proceed to the town scaffold, and receive several hours of public scorn for her sin. Along the way, and for the remainder of her days, she will be required to don an embroidered scarlet "A"—for adulteress—on her chest.

The scandal has the whole church agog. The church's preacher is aghast. Says a second woman:

People say that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor, takes it very grievously to heart that such a scandal should have come on his congregation.

It's not just Hester's sin that scandalizes the good reverend and his town but the fact that her illicit lover, the child's father, remains unknown. A hypocrite is at large, a hard fact to stomach in a "land where iniquity is searched out and punished in the sight of rulers and people."⁸ Hester's refusal to reveal the father's identity doubles her guilt, and the gaggle of gossips wants blood. A third matron speaks:

The town magistrates are God-fearing gentlemen, but too merciful. At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead. Madam Hester would have winced at that, I warrant. But she—the naughty baggage—little will she care what they put upon the bodice of her gown! Why, she may cover it with a brooch or some other heathenish adornment, and so walk the streets as boldly as ever.

Then a fourth matron:

Ah, but let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart.

⁶A woman who violates the law.

⁷This quote and those that follow belonging to the same conversation are taken from the copy of Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* that I read in high school (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972), 51–52. I have slightly modernized the language in several places.

⁸*Ibid.*, 62.

Then the fifth:

This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there no law for it? Truly, there is, both in the Scripture and in the statute-book. Then let the magistrates who have made it of no effect thank themselves if their own daughters and wives go astray.

I read Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, in my junior-year English class. The entire class was scandalized—not at the tragic heroine Hester but at the townspeople. Did people like this really exist? We glared at them with all the disdain they poured onto Hester. How could they be so self-righteous, cruel, benighted?

Hawthorne's own sympathies in his story are hardly hidden. His descriptions of the five gossips make them look like gargoyles. This last woman he describes as “the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges.” Compare this woman's portrait with Hawthorne's portrait of the woman she is attacking, Hester. The young Hester

was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. . . . And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like . . . than as she issued from the prison. Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even started to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped.

The contrast is clear. The reader can sympathize either with ugly and pitiless old women or Hester's shining halo of beauty—not a tough choice for most people. Who wouldn't choose to sympathize with Hester? It seems that employing a beautiful woman to “make the sale” is hardly an innovation of our own marketing-hysterical age.

The reverend mentioned by the gossips, Arthur Dimmesdale, has a character of more complexity. It turns out that he's the secret scoundrel who has impregnated Hester and left her alone to absorb the town's attack. His cowardice is despicable, and his double-facedness deplorable. At the same time, his character is more pitiful than malignant. He and Hester speak several times through the course of the book and at one point plan to run away and begin a new life together. Yet Arthur remains intractably torn between his affections for her and society's hold upon him. Love pulls him in one direction; church law pulls him in the other. All but the most pitiless reader can't help but cheer

for his liberation and their reconciliation. Ultimately, he is destroyed by the conflict between heart and mind, soul and society.

Hester's ignominy, ironically, frees her from church convention and social constraint. Never stingy with his symbolism, Hawthorne places her ramshackle shack outside of civilization, out in the wild woods where witches play and Indians have dominion, almost like the unclean Jew or Gentile dog forced outside the ancient Israelite camp. Yet it's out there, beyond the boundaries of respectability, that Hester is freed to love truly and divinely. She can forgive Arthur and her persecutors. She can dream of a different future with him. She can begin her career of caring for the community's poor. She can raise the sprightly daughter who will, in the novel's climactic moment, bend down to kiss her broken father's forehead in an incandescent moment of triumphant grace.

Love and Structure

Though a traditional Christian sitting in a straight-backed church pew, hands folded in lap, might have regarded the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romantics like Hawthorne as working against religion, the Romantics perceived themselves as saving it. They wanted to set God's love and humanity's spiritual impulses free from the tight strictures of Christianized civilization, from the overly scripted formulations of doctrine, from the stranglehold of ecclesiastical structure.

If Hawthorne had lived today, he might have described himself with the well-known mantra "spiritual, not religious." His fictionalized Puritan church codified every conceivable moral transgression and then handed these codes to the magistrate to be enforced. The problem was not the moral or spiritual impulse, per se; it was placing these things inside of a religious structure. It was what we today might call "institutionalism"—treating the various rules and lines of authority within an organization as more important than the people themselves. When spirituality and morality become embedded in the impersonal and authoritative structures of an institution, compliance must be enforced by the institution's keepers. A stark line must be drawn between those on the *inside* and those on the *outside*. Any impulse to individuality or creativity must be suppressed for fear of transgressing code. The men and women who demonstrate a greater ability to abide by the institution's codes tend to calcify into self-righteous postures, while the men and women unable to keep to the straight and narrow receive a slap to the hand or, worse, exclusion from the group. In all of this, grace and mercy vanish, passion is bound, and love and beauty are obliterated.

It's worth noticing how Hawthorne manages to hit all of today's panic buttons: the church has subsumed the state; the private has become public;

religious hate-mongers scorn the young, beautiful, and free. Even the innocent daughter is indirectly made a victim.

So just what kind of love story is *The Scarlet Letter*? It is one that well illustrates the assumptions about love that many people were beginning to make in the nineteenth century when Hawthorne wrote his book, assumptions which I believe are pretty much unquestioned today. It's difficult to succinctly explain those assumptions about love. In fact, I'll use all of chapter 1 to attempt such an explanation. Let me try it briefly here. We assume not that God is love but that love is God. In other words, we don't go before the real creator of the universe and say to him, "Please tell us what *you* are like and therefore how *you* define love." Rather, we begin with our own self-defined concept of love and allow this self-defined concept to play god. When I say it "plays god," I mean that we let it define right and wrong, good and bad, glory-worthy and glory-less, even though such valuations belong to God alone. Love becomes the ultimate idol.

For example, was it "wrong" for Hester to commit adultery? Would it have been wrong for her and Arthur to run away and begin a new life together, despite the fact that she was married to someone else? Or would we say that those vicious townswomen were wasting Hester's life with their self-righteous judgmentalism? The implicit urging of Hawthorne's novel and of everything in our culture today is, "No, it's not wrong because they *love* each other. Or, even if it's kind of wrong, it's justified, because love covers over sin. Love justifies!"

Assumptions about Love

Can you see the assumptions being made about love that play themselves out in *The Scarlet Letter* and which, I would contest, are absolutely unquestioned today? Assumption one is that no boundaries can be placed on love. Rather, love establishes all the boundaries. There is no conception of truth or holiness or wisdom to condition or give a structure to such love. Love runs free, unbound by truth. In fact, it alone constitutes truth, and it's the source of ultimate justification. You can justify anything these days by saying that it's "loving" or "motivated by love."

Consider for a moment what people today mean by "love" when they talk about the love between two homosexual men. What do they mean by love when they use it to justify heterosexual sex before marriage, or outside of marriage, or divorce? What do they mean by love when they spoil their children? What do they mean by love when they move from one church to the next, or never sacrifice themselves for others in their church? It's true that love is the greatest good, and it's true that love justifies, but the question remains what—or who!—defines love.

Assumption two is that love is disassociated in our minds from institutional structures and institutional acts of judgment. At best, the idea of an institution is a cold, impersonal, and bureaucratic idea. Structures have inflexible scaffolding and hard edges. Love, we all know, is flexible, yielding, and personal. At worst, institutions are all about power, not love. And institutional acts of judgment—even if in the rarest of circumstances they are necessary—always indicate a failure of love or a failure to love. They are most certainly not acts of love. What is an institution or an institutionalized church but an impersonal and indiscriminate authority claiming to speak on behalf of God and telling us what is right and wrong when we might know in our gut that love is telling us something else? What are institutions and institutionalized churches other than attempts by a privileged few to grab power? The Romantics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wanted to be guided by love rather than structure, by internal desire rather than external constraint, by spontaneous impulse rather than rationalistic deduction, by feeling rather than fact, by beauty and freedom rather than efficiency and order, by the sweaty wisdom of hardworking days rather than the bloodless ruminations of theology books.⁹ Analogous impulses, I believe, characterize the postmodern West. In our minds, the word *love* and the word *institution* could not be further apart.

Assumption three is that *love* and *church* don't go together, particularly a church with sharp boundaries and authoritative pronouncements. Hester wasn't loved by the church. She was persecuted and excommunicated. Say the word *love* and most people's thoughts immediately jump into some other category: maybe the relationship between two lovers, or the relationship between parents and their children, or even the relationship between an individual and God. But how many people today associate love with the relationships that subsist inside the local church? Often, just the opposite is the case. Local churches are better known for bickering, backbiting, and bigotry.

Behind all this is one more assumption the Western mind makes about love: love and authority have nothing to do with one another. Authority restrains. Love frees. Authority exploits. Love empowers. Authority steals life. Love saves life. This disassociation between love and authority is nothing new. They have been divided ever since the Serpent suggested to Adam and Eve that God's love and God's authority were incommensurate. I would contest that the contrast between love and authority has come into even sharper relief with the Enlightenment and the counter-Enlightenment Romantics, who shared all the autonomous individualism of the rationalists and classicists they were reacting against. Love is what we need, they said. Not boundaries. Not structures or institutions. Not

⁹For a helpful introduction to the late eighteenth-, early nineteenth-century movement of Romanticism, see Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 465–89.

authority. Maybe not even churches? These things are the “bad guys” that the Romantics such as Hawthorne and our culture today pit against this greatest good called “love.”

Not many Christians today go so far as to say that Christians don’t need churches, but for at least two centuries a number of writers have contended that churches need to be de-institutionalized. Liberal Protestants have been calling for “more community” and “less institutional authority” ever since Friedrich Schleiermacher borrowed language from the Romantics to pit religious experience against what he viewed as the Enlightenment’s rationalistic formulations of doctrine.¹⁰ About the same time, a Romantic renewal movement began in earnest among Roman Catholic writers as influenced by Schleiermacher and others, a revolution that would eventually culminate in a number of changes made in Vatican II.¹¹ The mainline Protestants and the Catholics worked within their respective traditions, to be sure, but their doctrines of salvation and the church began to approximate one another, largely because they “share in the same post-Enlightenment Romantic renewal.”¹²

Conservative evangelicals have harbored anti-institutional, “essentialist” impulses at least since George Whitefield found the Baptists and Presbyterians in America more amenable to his revival work than his own Anglicans.¹³ It crops up, rightly, whenever nominal Christianity and “cheap grace” become a concern within the church.¹⁴

What’s more striking for our purposes is the spate of books released in the last few decades by evangelical and so-called post-evangelical writers within or sympathetic to the emerging church or the missional church that echo this same call for less institution and more community.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, this

¹⁰See Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History, vol. 2: Comparative Ecclesiology* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 312–13.

¹¹Among them, Johann Adam Möhler in particular helped inaugurate a “conceptual revolution” in the doctrine of the church among Catholics in the 1820s with his *Unity of the Church*; Haight, *Christian Community*, 355. See also Dennis Doyle’s helpful overview, *Communion Ecclesiology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000); and Avery Cardinal Dulles’s chapter “The Church as Mystical Communion,” in *Models of the Church*, expanded ed. (New York: Image Books, 2002), 39–54. Following after the work of Johann Adam Möhler, key thinkers in the last century of Roman Catholic communion ecclesiology that are commonly cited include Charles Journet, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, and Jean-Marie Tillard (see Tillard’s *Church of Churches*). Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI also made significant contributions.

¹²Haight, *Christian Community*, 356; Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 23–37.

¹³A helpful survey of George Whitefield’s effect on the evangelical ecclesiological consciousness can be found in Bruce Hindmarsh, “Is Evangelical Ecclesiology an Oxymoron? A Historical Perspective,” in *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion?* ed. John G. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 15–37.

¹⁴It’s not coincidence that the theologian well known for his criticism of cheap grace in *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is the same man who would also write, “The whole interpretation of the organizational forms of the Protestant Church as being those of an institution must therefore be dismissed as erroneous”; in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (London: Collins, 1963), 178.

¹⁵Here is a far from exhaustive sampling of both academic and nonacademic works by evangelicals and post-evangelicals, chronologically listed, which, in varying degrees, call for a greater emphasis on community and less on institution relative to common Protestant practice in the last couple of centuries: Colin Gunton, “The Church on Earth: The Roots of Community,” in *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community*, ed. Colin E. Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 48–80; Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 62–108; David J.

same Romantic impulse surges through many of these books as well, as does one of their rallying cries: soften the boundary between the church's inside and outside. As one author puts it, "The boundary between those who belong to the church and those who do not should not be drawn too sharply."¹⁶ After all, "the establishment of clear boundaries is usually an act of violence."¹⁷

IN SEARCH OF A BOTH/AND

Jesus knew that in a fallen world no authority, institutional or otherwise, could be entirely trusted. He knew that in the hands of sinful human beings it always has been and always will be a weapon for the worst acts of exploitation and destruction. Concerning Jesus, the apostle John wrote, "Many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man" (John 2:23–25).

Those are arresting words. He didn't *entrust* himself to them, because he knew what was *in* them. He knew what kinds of appetites ruled even their best actions. In one sense, of course, Jesus did finally entrust himself to the authorities—to the point of death—but never did he entrust his conscience, will, loyalty, or mission to any human authority. Even at the age of twelve he managed to be submissive to his parents while reminding them that his ultimate submission belonged to his Father in heaven (Luke 2:49, 51). Given Jesus' track record with the Pharisees and his less-than-kind comments concerning their traditions, I think we can also safely say, despite the anachronism, that Jesus knew all too well the dangers of institutions and the human temptation to exploit institutional power for selfish gain.

Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Marynoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 50–51; Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 107–36; 159–72; Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church: An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005; orig. SPCK, 1995), 8–22; *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 80, 84, 93–94, 221ff; Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 181–204; Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 55–58, 74–75, 125, 157–58; Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 65–91; Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster, 2001), 331–36; Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 23–31, 47–48; Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 135–64; Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 62; Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 26–27, 34–36; Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 89–115; Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005); *Trinity in Human Community: Exploring Congregational Life in the Image of the Social Trinity* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2006), 1–3; Ray Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 92; Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 73–95.

¹⁶Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 148 n. 84.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 151 n. 97.

All this produces something of a dilemma. What if we want the gracious love that Hawthorne embodies in Hester without condoning adultery? What if we want to describe some things as “wrong” and yet remain loving people? What if we want both heart and head, both love and truth, particularly given the fallen state of this world, which often pits these two impulses or two kinds of people against one another, as Hawthorne does? Are we to assume that God calls us to submit to authority only when submission accords with our personal opinions or rational calculations? If so, then what does *submission* really mean? The dilemma is captured in one Anglican writer’s statement: “The popular cry is for unequivocal pronouncements from Canterbury—provided they are the ones with which the speaker happens to agree!”¹⁸

Surely church history is replete with churches falling into this thing called “institutionalism,” which can be antithetical to Christianity itself, whether we have in mind the centralization of all authority in the bishop, the commingling of church and state following Constantine, or an over-proliferation of committees in the local Baptist church. The Gospels themselves place no small emphasis on Jesus’ opposition to the life-stealing structures the Pharisees established for maintaining Israel’s spiritual life. One of the church’s perennial temptations has been to allow the institutional elements of its corporate life to be treated as primary;¹⁹ to allow its rules and hierarchies to become more important than the people and their relationships; to let the traditions of men trump the commands of God.²⁰ Perhaps the wrong rules are enforced. Perhaps the right rules are given a wrong emphasis. Perhaps the institution’s keepers simply enjoy having power. These types of things surely can and do happen—often.²¹ In fact, so inclined are humans to the abuse of authority and so quick are even Christians to wrongly ground their traditions into the poured-in-concrete foundations of their institutions that it actually feels dangerous to take our eyes for one moment off that impending threat, almost like a jet fighter pilot deciding to turn his radar off even though he hears the beep of his enemy’s missile zeroing in on his craft.

Along these lines, I broadly sympathize with significant aspects of recent critiques of “institutionalism” in Western churches, particularly in the missional church literature. Sinful humans in this world—even sinful Christian humans in

¹⁸Paul Avis, *Authority, Leadership, and Conflict in the Church* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), ix.

¹⁹Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 27.

²⁰Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann provide a helpful introduction to the idea of institutionalization and its origins in *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 47–79. “Institutionalization occurs,” they say, “whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution,” 54. An easier way to say “typification of habitualized actions,” I think, is to say “tradition,” an idea that is not intrinsically problematic but becomes problematic when, as Jesus said to the Pharisees, “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men” (Mark 7:8 NIV). One way we might define “institutionalism” would be to say that our institutions become “institutionalized” whenever our traditions trump the commands of God.

²¹Paul G. Hiebert presents a helpful analysis of the characteristics of a church succumbing to institutionalization as well as some of the dangers of doing so, in *Anthropological Reflections*, 159–64.

churches!—will always want to ensconce their traditions into authoritative structures, and they will do so in ways that ultimately impede loving community.

That said, the threat of institutionalism and the abuse of authority are not what this book is responding to.²² In fact, it's responding to the opposite error, the error which I think besets more Christians and churches today in light of the anti-institutional, anti-borders, anti-morality, anti-authority worldview and impulses of Western culture. It's responding to the threat of anti-authority boundary-lessness and the threat of un-submissiveness. Properly doing so in a fallen context, of course, requires us to do so without turning our radar screens off. We need to consider what it means to submit to the authority of a local church and its leaders in the very face of the threat of authority being wrongly used.

Implicitly, this book will argue that the dichotomy between love and structure, between authentic community and the structured institution, is a false dichotomy. At the risk of oversimplifying, the Romanticist needs the Classicist; the heart needs the head; creativity needs order; love needs truth and authority. With many such dichotomies we need to take care not to be forced into an *either/or*, but to search for the elusive *both/and*. Emphasizing one against the other yields something less than human because, as we will see later, an over-emphasis in either direction yields an image of something less than divine. The mere presence of institutional elements (rules, resources, hierarchies) within a church does not necessarily imply institutionalism, any more than law implies legalism or dogma implies dogmatism.²³

Church Membership and Discipline

Explicitly, this book will examine the boundary lines of local church membership and discipline—the very things that, in Hawthorne's fictional world, pinned the scarlet "A" to Hester Prynne's bodice and cast her out of the village into the unprotected wilds. Local church membership and discipline, as much as anything, represent the institutional side of religion and church life. Church membership is a line in the dirt, a boundary marker, a wall around the city. It's a list of names. It's an institutional way of saying, "The people on this list are on the *inside*. Everyone else is on the *outside*." Church membership—no doubt about it—is exclusivistic.

²²Miroslav Volf's book *After Our Virtue: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* promotes a relational conception of the local church, but he does so without jettisoning the institutional elements of the church: "According to a view widespread in Protestant circles, the Spirit of God and church institutions stand in contradiction. 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Cor. 3:17); by contrast, institutions are perceived as mechanisms of repression. If this view was correct, then resolute 'pneumatic anarchy' would be the only appropriate 'structure' for a charismatic church. This view, however, is prejudiced, and anyone sharing it fails to recognize both the character of ecclesial institutions and the way the Spirit of God acts"; in *After Our Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 234.

²³Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 27; cf. Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church*, 21–22.

Church discipline, then, is the mechanism used to enforce this exclusivistic practice, the pen that writes some names on the list and scratches other names off. It's the bailiff that evicts the imposters. Church membership and discipline are the two sides of the same coin.

Not only will this book examine the practices of church membership and discipline, but also it will argue that God means to use these very structures to help define his love for the onlooking world. That means, just to be clear, it will advocate *in favor* of these exclusivistic practices.

BINDING AND LOOSING

Why would anyone want to do that? Most importantly, because Jesus gave the church this kind of institutional authority. The Gospel writers recorded Jesus' using the word that we translate into English as "church" only twice. It's perhaps ironic then—in light of our own cultural revulsion to anything smacking of institutionalism—that in both those places he grants this gathering of people the authority to "bind and loose."

I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matt. 16:18–19)

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. (Matt. 18:18–20)

These passages have been debated by churchmen at least since Matthew wrote them down, and understanding everything about them is not easy. We'll return to an extended discussion of them in chapter 4. For now, it's worth pointing out a couple of matters that, I believe, are fairly straightforward. In this first passage, Jesus describes this power with the metaphor of a key, which is why pastors and theologians throughout church history have referred to the "power of the keys." The metaphor is a simple one. What do keys do? Keys lock doors and unlock doors. Keys allow some people to come inside while keeping other people outside, which is exactly what Jesus intended for this assembly of people gathered in his name to do—regulate who was coming in and who was going out.

Where does Jesus say this key should be used? Where will this binding and loosing take place? Again, his answer is simple and helpful: on earth. Jesus calls this assembly of people gathered in his name to bind and loose people *on*

earth. A little less clear is what exactly this binding and loosing on earth signifies in heaven. Roman Catholics say one thing, Protestants another, but just to be clear: this binding and loosing takes place among real flesh and blood people on earth—not among abstract or idealized realities. It necessarily takes place locally because human beings exist locally. Real *gatherings* comprised of real people are granted by Jesus both the power and the obligation to decide whether Euodia or Cyrus or Catherine or Friedrich or McKenzie or Farhod or Jeng is really “one of them”—a Christian, a Christ follower, a disciple. If this real, not-abstract gathering determines that the individual’s profession of faith is credible, they will unite the individual to themselves. If not, they won’t. How do they exercise their authority to unite? They unite with the two external, visible, institutional mechanisms given to them by Jesus: initiation through baptism and ongoing participation through the new-covenant meal. How do they unbind or loose? They deny the individual the opportunity to participate in this ongoing meal.

It’s within this power of binding and loosing for oversight and discipline among real gatherings of Christians on earth that we find the doctrines of church membership and discipline.

The Relevance of This Topic

The topic of church membership and discipline is particularly relevant in our Western postmodern context for at least four reasons.

AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL MESS

First, the pragmatism that has reigned in American churches at least since the twentieth century, especially since the advent of (Donald McGavran-like) church-growth thinking in the middle of the last century, has left our understanding of the church itself fairly doctrine-less, principle-less, structure-less. It’s almost as if the wind currents of pragmatism and the barometric pressure of postmodernism came together with the temperature drop of evangelical “essentialism” (the evangelical knack for discarding any doctrine not regarded as essential for salvation) in order to produce the “perfect storm,” a storm that left a decimated ability to think seriously and freshly about the local church in its trail.

On the evangelical right are careful thinkers who are absolutely scrupulous in other areas of doctrine but tend to flow with the pragmatic stream in how they lead and structure their churches. When conservatives do write about the church, they usually rehash what the Fathers said about the church being one, holy, universal, and apostolic or what the Reformers described as the two marks of the church. This latter emphasis usually translates into a commitment to preaching and taking the ordinances seriously, which is surely essential, but does not always offer immediately evident guidance in questions facing

the contemporary church like the place of programs, small group ministries, multiple services, multiple campuses, pastoring by video feed, relativism, the role of contextualization, the challenges of globalization, a cultural reluctance to commit or join, consumerism, cynicism, contemporary conceptions of tolerance, and much more.

Meanwhile, on the evangelical left interesting new conversations are occurring in how the church relates to the Trinity or how the church's essence is bound up in mission. Yet many of these same writers are building their doctrines of the church upon doctrines of the triune God and the gospel that would prove unsatisfactory to conservatives. The result is something of a mess, with evangelicals across the spectrum building their churches based upon a random mix of tradition, pragmatism, and new ideas that have helpful bits but are premised on inadequate conceptions of God and the gospel.

AN OPPOSITION TO MEMBERSHIP

Second, the topic of church membership and discipline is particularly relevant right now because a growing number of books written for pastors and church leaders in the last several decades explicitly oppose the practice of church membership. Some argue that local church membership is irrelevant, unnecessary, or dated and therefore *can* be dispensed with. Others argue that the exclusivistic boundary line of church membership presents a distorted picture of the gospel and therefore *should* be dispensed with. Among these voices, the words repeated over and over are “less institutionalism” and “more authentic community” or “less structure and more love.” As mentioned a few moments ago, certain Roman Catholics and liberal Protestant authors have been saying this since the middle of the nineteenth century and increasingly in the decades before and after Vatican II, but a number of evangelicals and so-called post-evangelicals have been saying this in the last decade or two. It's almost become a mantra: institutionalism, bad; loving community, good.²⁴

THE DIMINISHED SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

These authors and leaders are not thinking in a vacuum, but in the context of deeper culture impulses. This brings us to a third reason for the relevance of the topic of church structure, namely, Western Christians have a weak and anemic conception of the local church and its role in their Christian faith. Evangelical pollster George Barna has testified to that fact:

While nearly half of the adult population attends religious services during a typical week . . . fewer than one out of every five adults firmly believes that a congregational

²⁴See n. 15.

church is a critical element in their spiritual growth and just as few strongly contend that participation in some type of community of faith is required for them to achieve their full potential.

Only 17% of adults said that “a person’s faith is meant to be developed mainly by involvement in a local church.” Even the most devoted church-going groups—such as evangelicals and born again Christians—generally dismissed that notion: only one-third of all evangelicals and one out of five non-evangelical born again adults endorsed the concept. Only one out of every four adults who possesses a biblical worldview (25%) agreed with the centrality of a local church in a person’s spiritual growth.

Just as few adults (18%) firmly embraced the idea that spiritual maturity requires involvement in a community of faith.²⁵

In my experience as well, asking the average Christian how important committed church membership is to his or her Christianity will yield an answer somewhere in between “Not at all” and “Sort of.” Many Christians are happy to attend a particular church indefinitely without formally joining. Others are happy to visit different churches from one month to the next and continue in this pattern for a year or more. Still others don’t attend church at all and try to sustain their spiritual lives through a self-directed use of Christian books, fellowship groups, radio stations, or other forms of Christian media. Should you attempt to explain the importance, even necessity, of joining a church to someone with such a mindset, you will probably meet with, at best, a shrug of the shoulders or more likely the charge “That’s legalism” or “That’s dogmatic” or “That’s not loving.” Mention the words *church discipline* and you can be pretty confident that these charges will follow.

“AS I HAVE LOVED YOU”

As Christians lose sight of God’s call to live out their Christian lives corporately, tragically they lose the ability to define love for the world—a fourth reason why this topic is so relevant. The doctrine of the church, as I said at the beginning, brings the whole of Christian doctrine to bear on how a concrete group of people actually gather and organize their lives.

What evangelicalism needs today is not just a renewed and re-articulated center; it needs boundaries. By that I don’t just mean doctrinal boundaries or the “affirmations and denials” signed by the leaders of evangelicalism’s various denominations and movements. I mean the boundaries that belong around local

²⁵From the “Barna Update” entitled, “Americans Have Commitment Issues, New Survey Shows” by The Barna Group, April 18, 2006. The data is based on 1,003 telephone interviews with adults from across the nation. <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=235>; accessed January 23, 2008.

churches. This is the tool that Christ has given the church on earth to enforce such statements of faith and vibrant doctrinal centers!

This is precisely why the doctrine of the church is most suited to defining love in a way that even the doctrine of salvation or the doctrine of God's love cannot: it prepares God's new-covenant people for displaying God's character, wisdom, and glory to all the universe (Eph. 3:10). This is exactly why Jesus said to his disciples, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35 NIV). The world will understand who Christ is and what love is *when* the church defines it for them by loving one another in the gospel—"as I have loved you." But there's the catch—the word "as" in "as I have loved you." Christians are to love one another *as* Christ has loved us. What if, as I said, we have idolatrous conceptions of love—even idolatrous conceptions of Christ's love?

The argument of this book, quite simply, is that God calls the church to draw boundaries, boundaries which mark off these people from those people, boundaries which prevent some individuals from joining while excluding other individuals after they have joined. Not only that, God intends that the church use these boundary markers in order to help define for the world what exactly love is.

The church defines love. It often defines love poorly, mind you, but that's what God calls the church to do—to define love for the world in the very process of including some sinners and excluding others.

Hopefully Relevant for All Polities

My goal in this book is not to make an explicit argument for the form of polity that I personally believe is best—baptistic and congregational. My primary goal, rather, is to argue for two particular aspects of church polity—membership and discipline—that I believe should be applied in every denominational context, even if I would simultaneously maintain that different forms of church government will do better or worse jobs of maintaining these two aspects properly. In other words, I hope to see Baptist, Anglican/Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Mennonite, independent but elder-ruled, and all other gospel-preaching congregations practice meaningful church membership and discipline through the mechanisms of their particular polities, even if some of these polities are better suited to doing so than the others.

Therefore, I will attempt to leave some ambiguity in how I define the church "on earth," not because I don't think this is important but because this is not the battle I'm trying to wage here. For example, I would disagree with a Presbyterian who says that the visible church consists, "of all those who

make profession of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, together with their children,”²⁶ or the Episcopalian who refers to an entity called the Episcopal Church in America.²⁷ Nonetheless, I believe that a church and its children that take biblical care in binding and loosing Christians on earth is better than one that does not. Yes, I think that including potentially unregenerate children in the church will introduce problems of its own, particularly in the next generation, but my goal here is to consider matters that I hope will benefit both Baptist and Presbyterian churches. Deeper into the book, particularly when I begin to discuss more practical matters, the reader may find more aspects of my congregationalism emerging. And in one or two places I’ll even present an argument for why a congregational approach to church polity, along with being biblical, best solves some problems, such as the threat of abuses of authority. I simply ask for the non-congregationalist’s patience when I do.

As for disagreements that I as a Baptist might share with non-Baptists over the meaning of baptism or the Lord’s Supper, which are two matters that are important to the topics of membership and discipline, the good news for the non-Baptist reader is that most other conservative and moderate Protestant denominations can affirm just about everything a Baptist says on these two topics. On the whole, their disagreements won’t typically involve *taking away* from what a Baptist believes; it will involve whether *more should be added* to what a Baptist believes. For that reason, I hope that Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists, and others will find themselves able to affirm much of what I will say in relation to the meaning of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

LITERATURE

Also, the reader will notice that I use references to generally well-known works of literature throughout the book, as I have done with *The Scarlet Letter*. I have done this for two reasons. First, it’s been fun for me in the writing process. Second, and more importantly, I believe that good literature, with its images and pathos, can better capture a *zeitgeist*—the spirit of the times—than polls can, which is what most books these days seem to employ to characterize the cultural landscape. A good theology must constantly be mindful of how embedded we all are in our own times, and hopefully these literary references will help us become more aware of our presuppositions.

²⁶“The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America,” 6th ed.; Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, as approved by the 35th General Assembly, in Memphis, TN, June 2007: 2–1, 4–1.

²⁷E.g., Thomas Witherow, *The Apostolic Church* (1858; repr. Glasgow, Scotland: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2001), 15. On this point, see Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 138.

OUR SERVICE PLAN

Finally, here is what's ahead. Chapter 1 begins as a sociological consideration of the cultural factors that inhibit meaningful church membership and discipline. This is another part of my attempt to make theology dialogue with our own time and place. Ultimately, I will argue that these sociological considerations give way to spiritual ones.

Chapters 2 to 5 present one sustained theological argument for church membership and discipline. Chapter 2 attempts to articulate a right understanding of love. Chapter 3 attempts to articulate a godly understanding of authority. I take the time to do both these things for two reasons. First, church membership is a function of God's love and authority exercised among covenanting believers. Second, I believe that most evangelicals have, at best, reductionistic understandings of love and authority. You might almost say that I'm trying to use these two chapters to introduce a new worldview before making the more specific arguments concerning church membership and discipline in chapters 4 and 5. If you're anxious to cut to the chase, however, go straight to chapter 4, where I formally define church membership and discipline, and I defend this definition based on Matthew 16, 18, and 28. Membership, I argue, is a kind of covenant. Chapter 5 then pans the camera in on this covenant and considers what exactly it is in light of the covenants of the Old Testament and the new covenant.

Chapters 6 and 7 are then an attempt to get more practical and "apply" the doctrine developed in the previous four chapters. Chapter 6 walks the reader through the membership and discipline process from the church's perspective. Chapter 7 does the same from the individual Christian's perspective.