

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

**Investigating the Impact of the Church Covenant  
on the Revitalization of a Declining Church**

A Thesis Project Report Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Liberty University School of Divinity  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry

by

Robert G. Gifford

Lynchburg, Virginia

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Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

**Thesis Project Approval Sheet**

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Dr. Jeff Johnsen  
Faculty Mentor

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Dr. Brandon Pugh  
Faculty Reader

## THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

Robert Gifford

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, Date Completed Here

Mentor: Dr. Jeff Johnsen

The local church finds itself in crisis and the decline in attendance and membership in churches is undeniable. The thesis project establishes that there is more to being a Christian than identifying as one. To reverse the declining trajectory, churches must understand what a church is, what a church member is, and the importance of regenerate church membership. The premise of this project thesis was that if the pastor preached on the church's historic covenant, it would serve as a starting point for the revitalization of the declining church by affecting the member's understanding of the church and their role in it. The project drew inspiration from the Bible, church history, and pre-existing literature to develop the conceptual framework. The resulting project was to create a desire in the congregation to return to a biblical ideal, create a new way of thinking, and spur internal change in the participants. The project thesis aims to answer the question, "Does knowing and understanding the covenant of Hillcrest Baptist Church make a difference in our efforts to revitalize a declining church?" The project measured any potential change through pre-study and post-study questionnaires. The ultimate result of this project thesis was that the participants expected no change following the study's conclusion. The project thesis came to an unintended outcome, but it lays the foundations for other churches that could potentially follow or develop the study further.

**KEYWORDS:** Church Membership, Church Covenant, Church Revitalization, Church Decline, Regenerate Membership.

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## Abbreviations

ACP	<i>Annual Church Profile</i>
CITI	<i>Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative</i>
COVID-19	<i>Coronavirus Disease 2019</i>
DMIN	<i>Doctor of Ministry</i>
GED	<i>General Educational Development</i>
IRB	<i>Institutional Review Board</i>
SBC	<i>Southern Baptist Convention</i>

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

The local church finds itself in crisis. Gallup polls have shown that church membership has been dropping for the last eight decades, and the number of Americans that are members of a local church has fallen below 50 percent for the first time since they first began measuring in 1937.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the coronavirus disease of 2019 pandemic (COVID-19) has only compounded this problem of a downward trend by accelerating the decline in church attendance overall.<sup>2</sup> Countless churches have been forced to shutter their doors in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic was not the sole reason for this, but the final blow for many churches.

The decline in church membership that has led to so many churches closing has not been a recent occurrence. Instead, the reduction of membership has been slow and mostly unnoticeable.<sup>3</sup> As a result, countless churches find themselves in desperate need of revitalization, with many not even realizing it. This unnoticed decline is concerning since churches must actively do something for current trends to be reversed. Lifeway Research in 2021 reported after analyzing data from thirty-four different protestant denominations that 4,500 churches closed in

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," *Gallup*, March 29, 2021, accessed May 24, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Wang, "The Decline in Church Attendance in COVID America," *Institute for Family Studies*, January 20, 2022, accessed February 16, 2022, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-decline-in-church-attendance-in-covid-america>.

<sup>3</sup> Thom Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 13.

2019.<sup>4</sup> In their study published the same year, the Center for Analytics, Research, and Data, affiliated with the United Church of Christ, says the numbers could be as high as 7,700 churches closing a year.<sup>5</sup> These statistics on church closing are concerning since these numbers are before the COVID-19 pandemic and could easily double or triple following the repercussions of the pandemic.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, churches have already seen many churchgoers shifting from in-person attendance to online worship. Lifeway reported that only 18 percent of evangelicals believe attending church in person is superior to viewing a service online, and 45 percent say online is better in at least one way.<sup>6</sup> These statistics on church attendance do not even consider that there are far many who identify as “Christian” but do not attend church at all. The shift to online attendance is exacerbating an already significant problem. Many churches are finding that their membership numbers are declining. The Southern Baptist Convention reports that church membership has dropped by 2.3 million since 2006.<sup>7</sup> With this significant decline at the national level, it is not surprising that churches say the biggest reason for church closings is declining church membership.<sup>8</sup> With all this decline in church membership, shift to online attendance, and increased church closures, it raises a question of if there is more to being a Christian than just saying you are one.

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<sup>4</sup> Yonat Shimron, “Study: More churches closing than opening,” *Religion News Service*, May 26, 2021, accessed May 28, 2022. <https://religionnews.com/2021/05/26/study-more-churches-closing-than-opening/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Marissa Postell, “Are Online Church Services Here to Stay?” *Lifeway Research*, January 27, 2022, accessed May 24, 2022. <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/01/27/are-online-church-services-here-to-stay/>.

<sup>7</sup> Bob Smientana, “Southern Baptist Decline Continues, Denomination Has Lost More than 2 Million Members Since 2006,” *Religion News Service*, May 21, 2021, accessed May 24, 2022. <https://religionnews.com/2021/05/21/southern-baptist-decline-continues-denomination-has-lost-more-than-2-million-members-since-2006/>.

<sup>8</sup> Shimron, “Study: More Churches Closing than Opening.”

This Doctor of Ministry (DMIN) project thesis establishes there is more to being a Christian than just identifying as one. This researcher believes that to reverse the declining trajectory, churches must understand what a church is and the importance of regenerate church membership. Furthermore, church members must understand their role as Christians and church members. Seventy-five percent of protestant pastors say apathy or lack of commitment is a challenging problem in their congregations.<sup>9</sup> This researcher proposes that a correct understanding of church membership will shape the lives of church members, thus reversing this apathy and lack of commitment.<sup>10</sup> One way to combat this apathy and lack of commitment is through church covenants. Church members should be known and recognized by their profession of faith in Christ, not by apathy and lack of commitment.<sup>11</sup> The profession of personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is the foundation of the church covenant.<sup>12</sup> Church covenants speak to the fact that the church is not just a loose collection of attendees, but instead, church covenants establish that church members should be born-again believers. In addition, church covenants reinforce biblical principles by which members should live.<sup>13</sup>

Since the New Hampshire Baptist Convention pushed toward a uniform covenant among Baptist churches in America in the early 1830s, church covenants have been a common element in the church's history.<sup>14</sup> Many churches of the past required new members to sign their names to

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<sup>9</sup> Aaron Earls, "Apathy in Churches Looms Large for Pastors," *Lifeway Research*, May 10, 2022. Accessed May 28, 2022. <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/05/10/apathy-in-churches-looms-large-for-pastors/>

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Leeman, "What Is a Church?" in *Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ Is Essential* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 23.

<sup>11</sup> James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1868), 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Marshall Davis, *The Baptist Church Covenant: Its History and Meaning* (N.p.: Self-Published, 2017), 19.

<sup>14</sup> Charles W. Deweese, "Southern Baptists and Church Covenants," *Baptist History and Heritage* 9, no. 1 (January 1974): 2, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000725102&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

it. However, signing the church covenant fell into disuse in the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> Churches stopped using church covenants due to several factors, including an effort to speed up the membership process.<sup>16</sup> The idea was that those that chose to unite with a particular body of believers elected to covenant together in response to God's working in their lives.<sup>17</sup> Like many other Baptist churches, Hillcrest Baptist Church, located in Carlsbad, NM, has a covenant established many years ago that has been forgotten.

This DMIN project thesis seeks to demonstrate that teaching about Hillcrest Baptist Church's covenant will revitalize a declining church. In addition, this DMIN project aims to answer the question, "Does knowing and understanding the covenant of Hillcrest Baptist Church make a difference in our efforts to revitalize a declining church?" Within this chapter, the researcher will describe the current ministry context of Hillcrest Baptist Church, including its location, demographics, history, and current context. Next, the researcher will discuss the problem, purpose, thesis, and ultimate research question that guides this DMIN project thesis. In addition, this chapter will cover a list of definitions, limitations, and delimitations that will clarify and establish the boundary lines of this project thesis.

### **Ministry Context**

Hillcrest Baptist Church resides in the city of Carlsbad, in the southeastern section of New Mexico. Carlsbad, NM, is famously known for the Carlsbad Caverns, which draws visitors worldwide to see the largest limestone chamber in North America. Hillcrest Baptist Church is a

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Third Edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 172.

<sup>16</sup> James Leo Garrett Jr., "Foreward," in *Baptist Foundations: Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), ix-x.

<sup>17</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 172.

long-established church serving the area known as "West Carlsbad," an area that includes all the locations west of a canal that has run through the middle of the city for the last eighty-two years.

According to the 2020 census, the total population of Carlsbad, NM, was 32,238.<sup>18</sup> A *Know Your Community* report compiled by the Revitalize Network shows that within a five-minute drive radius of the church, there are 14,051 people, 3,055 school-aged, enrolled in Pre-K to twelfth grade.<sup>19</sup> In addition, according to statistics, in 2019, there were 422 enrolled in college or professional schools.<sup>20</sup> Ninety-six percent of the population earns less than \$100,000, with an average per capita income of \$24,478.<sup>21</sup> Water usage studies done by the city of Carlsbad paint a different picture than the census data showing that the city's population could be as much as 86,000-88,000 people.<sup>22</sup> This disparity of numbers is centered around much of this excess population being found within "man camps" or housing quarters for oil field workers. These "man camps" can include registered and unregistered RV parks, large groups of people residing in single-family homes, and other temporary housing established by the oilfields.<sup>23</sup>

The vast majority of residents of Carlsbad are blue-collar, with the city of Carlsbad having three primary sources of employment: 1) Oil, 2) Potash Mines, and 3) U.S. Department of Energy's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant.<sup>24</sup> In the waste isolation plant, nuclear waste is deposited in

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<sup>18</sup> United States Census Bureau, "QuickFacts Carlsbad city, New Mexico," accessed March 16, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/carlsbadcitynewmexico/PST045221>.

<sup>19</sup> Revitalize Network and ESRI, *Know Your Community Report: March 23, 2020*.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Mike Smith, "Carlsbad's Population Grew in the Last Decade. Officials Differ on Total Population," *Carlsbad Current Argus*, September 21, 2021, Accessed March 16, 2022, <https://www.currentargus.com/story/news/2021/09/21/carlsbads-population-grew-according-census/8383280002/>.

<sup>23</sup> Algernon D'Amassa, "Carlsbad Wrestles with Oil, Gas Boom," *New Mexico In Depth*, January 1, 2020, accessed March 16, 2022, <https://nmindepth.com/2020/01/01/carlsbad-wrestles-with-oil-gas-boom/>.

<sup>24</sup> Rachel Mabe and Ed Williams, "Busted," *Searchlight New Mexico*, July 1, 2020, accessed April 2, 2022, <https://searchlightnm.org/busted/>.

salt formations deep underground. The potash mines and the waste isolation plant are stable employers, with the potash mines being one of the largest employers of Carlsbad residents for the last century. Carlsbad, over the years, has been one of the potash capitals of the entire world.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the oil industry is subject to significantly more turmoil. The education level of the population varies greatly. In general, much of the populace of Carlsbad does not possess much education, with 74.9 percent not having college degrees and 12.3 percent not having obtained even a High School diploma or GED.<sup>26</sup> However, in contrast, 6.9 percent of the population have graduate or professional degrees due partly to the presence of the waste isolation plant and an extension lab for the Los Alamos Laboratories.<sup>27</sup>

An oil boom recently caused an influx of transient workers, bringing prosperity and challenges to the city. However, this influx of non-resident workers has put tremendous strain on the city's infrastructure, raising housing prices, clogging roads, and stretching restaurants and supermarkets beyond their limits.<sup>28</sup> One of the highways out of Carlsbad, U.S. Highway 285, has earned the moniker "Death Highway" due to its high rate of traffic fatalities, many of which are caused by oil industry rigs.<sup>29</sup> In January 2020, newspapers predicted that the latest oil and gas boom would last for years or decades. However, the longevity of the oil and gas boom has not proven to be the case, as the boom busted within a few months of those articles due to a mixture of the COVID-19 pandemic limiting travel, the volatile oil market, and increased state government regulations. Due to the most recent oil and gas bust, over 100,000 workers were laid

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<sup>25</sup> Mabe and Williams, "Busted."

<sup>26</sup> Revitalize Network and ESRI, *Know Your Community Report: March 23, 2020*.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> D'Amassa, "Carlsbad Wrestles with Oil, Gas Boom."

<sup>29</sup> Mable and Williams, "Busted."



off, and many businesses went bankrupt.<sup>30</sup> Though this has undoubtedly influenced the local population and economy, most of the layoffs affected transient workers from out of state more than the locals.<sup>31</sup> These layoffs have caused many transient workers to depart the city, forcing many to seek employment elsewhere.

### Historical Context of Hillcrest Baptist Church

In the early 1940s, growth in the area prompted a need for a church in West Carlsbad. After a tent revival in April 1940, the First Baptist Church of Carlsbad presented a plan for the expedient establishment of a church in West Carlsbad. On July 14, 1940, a mission church was established under the name Eddy Baptist Church with nineteen people in the charter group. The church later changed its name to Westside Baptist Church before finally being renamed Hillcrest Baptist Church in August 1949. The original church congregation met in a member's home before relocating to another member's dirt-floor garage.

The church membership numbers increased in the first two decades, reaching an estimated 925 members in 1960.<sup>32</sup> Eventually, a community member donated the piece of land where the church currently stands, and volunteer labor constructed the original 24'x40' building. After the new building was built, the membership moved everything that could be moved from the original location to the new site. This original building was later supplemented by Quonset huts moved from the old air base and remodeled for classrooms and fellowship space. These Quonset huts became affectionally nicknamed "The Long Building." The church, eventually outgrowing the original space, built the current church building in 1963. And to this date, it is

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<sup>30</sup> Mable and Williams, "Busted."

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis A. Myers, *A History of New Mexico Baptists* (Albuquerque: The Baptist Convention of New Mexico, 1965), 528.

still one of the largest church worship space buildings in Carlsbad, New Mexico. Unfortunately, the original building was ultimately later torn down due to disrepair.



Figure 1.1. Picture of the original and current church buildings circa 1976-1979. Source: Hillcrest Baptist Church Historical Archives

Over the next several decades, Hillcrest Baptist Church grew in membership and planted three other churches, two in Carlsbad and one in the neighboring unincorporated community of Happy Valley. By 1990 the church had a total membership of 1200 people. However, during the

1990s, a church split divided the church in half, with the departing membership establishing a new church down the road. Eventually, the pastor at the time later left Hillcrest Baptist Church and instead joined the newly established church split. This pastor's leaving was the second time in the church's history that the pastor left to go to another church in the area, as another pastor had done so in 1950.<sup>33</sup>

Though the church has accomplished much in its history, the average tenure of the senior pastor at Hillcrest Baptist Church is 4.1 years, with a median of 3.1 years. Only one pastor in the church's history has stayed at the church for ten years or more, and that was between 1998 and 2009. This pastor led the church through building a six-thousand-square-foot fellowship hall to meet the needs of those that had trouble climbing up and down the stairs. Before that, the fellowship hall resided in the church's basement. An aging church prompted the change, which marked the first new building on the property in decades and the last addition made to the church. Since 2009 the pastoral history is probably one of the worst in the church's history, having had three pastors, one of which only stayed for six months. Due to this, the church had spent seven years since 2009 in transition between pastors before the current pastor came on staff in 2020.

### Current Context of Hillcrest Baptist Church

Hillcrest Baptist Church is currently a church of approximately twenty-five to thirty-five attendees on an average weekend, with many over the age of seventy-five. The church is primarily white, non-Hispanic, with some white Hispanic representation. Unfortunately, church attendance never recovered from the split during the 1990s and has been steadily declining since. This steady decline has been sped along by a combination of factors, including being in

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<sup>33</sup> Myers, *A History of New Mexico Baptists*, 662.

transition for many years and the decisions of a former pastor that caused many to leave. Additionally, due to the congregation's aged nature and attendance decline, the church facilities face several problems due to a lack of maintenance upkeep. This deferred maintenance has placed the church facilities at the forefront of many church members' minds.

The church did not see any increase in membership due to the oil and gas boom. So, the church was not affected by the subsequent bust. Many church members have been attending Hillcrest Baptist Church for decades and remember the "glory days" of the church when the sanctuary was packed. Unfortunately, they speak of this era as if it was only a couple of years ago, even though the church sanctuary has not been at capacity since the split over thirty years ago. Since 2009, the lack of pastoral tenure and the effects of the COVID-19 shutdown have compounded the recent decline to the point the church is at now.

The researcher of this project is the seventeenth pastor and first-ever part-time/bi-vocational pastor in the church's history. Having been at Hillcrest Baptist Church for three years, the current pastor's tenure matches or exceeds that of sixty percent of the former pastors. The current aged nature of the congregation means that without any change, the church will simply die out in the upcoming years. Eight members have passed just in the current pastor's three years of tenure, accounting for a loss of over one-third of the present attendees. The church was financially stable, with many of the older members being generous in their giving. Nevertheless, the death of many long-term members has caused a tremendous financial strain on the church, including the church's inability to continue to pay the current pastor.

### **Problem Presented**

Like many churches resembling it, the problems at Hillcrest Baptist Church are numerous. However, the prevailing concern is that the church needs major revitalization, or it

will die. Thom Rainer comments, "Once a church declines below 100 in worship attendance, it is likely to die within just a few years."<sup>34</sup> Rainer also explains that the life expectancy for these declined churches is ten years or less, but the outlook shifts from negative to positive once a turnaround has happened.<sup>35</sup>

The cause of the current situation within Hillcrest Baptist Church involves a confluence of reasons, many of which this researcher covered in the ministry context. However, this project will specifically address the need to remember what it means to be a church member under the established covenant of the church. Brian Croft comments that a lack of understanding of what it is to be a church member and the absence of any standard to become one is a common sign of dying churches.<sup>36</sup> Croft's statements hold true for Hillcrest Baptist Church as well. This lack of proper understanding can be seen in two significant ways. First, the number of people on the membership listing of the church far exceeds the actual regular church attendees. While some members on the list cannot come due to advanced age or illness, many simply have not been to the church in many years. A recent audit from the current pastor showed a membership of 137, counting only those that have been in the church's computer system in the last twenty years. However, many older members still proudly report a church membership of nearly one thousand. These numbers are concerning since actual attendance is only a tiny fraction of either. In addition, these attendance numbers are compounded in that many of the church members exhibit a general apathy and attitude of "sit and get." "Sit and get" is the attitude that the people expect to show up to the church, the "sit," and then they are fed the Word of God, the "get." The "sit and

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<sup>34</sup> Thom S. Rainer, "Is There a Church Death Spiral?" *Thom S. Rainer: Growing Healthy Churches Together*, July 3, 2017, accessed May 28, 2022, <https://archive.thomrainer.com/2017/07/church-death-spiral/>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Brian Croft, *Biblical Church Revitalization* (Ganies House, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), Kindle Location 410.

get" mentality can also be described as the "pew sitter" mentality. No matter which term one uses to describe the inaction, it shows a general lack of commitment and apathy. Mark Dever would conclude that this is a dangerous situation because it confuses the members and non-Christians about what it means to be a Christian.<sup>37</sup>

All these symptoms, the lack of understanding, commitment, and general apathy, show that the church members are not living by the church covenant and have either disregarded or forgotten it. This disregard for the church covenant is not surprising considering the low pastoral tenure of the church and the lack of emphasis on church covenants in recent times for Southern Baptist congregations in general. These symptoms show that a culture of reflecting on the church covenant has not been developed and encouraged in the church's history. The researcher of this project, the current pastor, was unaware that the church even had a church covenant until it was brought to his attention by one of the long-time church members. The problem is that instead of a culture built alongside the biblically based church covenant, another culture has developed within the congregation of Hillcrest Baptist Church, one where membership is viewed more like a social club than a church.<sup>38</sup>

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this DMIN project thesis is to demonstrate that teaching about Hillcrest Baptist Church's covenant will result in the revitalization of a declining church. The researcher of this project will accomplish this objective by preaching a five-week sermon series covering what a church is, what a covenant is, and the contents of the church covenant. Within the series,

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<sup>37</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 175.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Dever writes that many churches have come to resemble Elks Clubs or Moose Lodges more than churches. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 121.

the researcher will argue for the importance of regenerate church membership, the necessity for having a church covenant, and the need to follow it daily.

The researcher will first consult experts to gain advice on the best approach for this topic for the congregation. Then, taking these suggestions into account, the researcher will take five weeks to teach on this topic, taking questions from the congregation after each week and evaluating any change in the participants' viewpoint. After the researcher completes the series, the data will be scrutinized to determine the best solution for the church moving forward. The participants of the study will be made up of attendees and guests of Hillcrest Baptist Church who will commit to attending on Sunday mornings for five weeks and agree to participate in preliminary and follow-up questions. The goal would be for the congregation to understand the contents of the church covenant and realize their need to live by those words.

### **Basic Assumptions**

The researcher of this project is the current lead pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church and has had interactions that led to this study's creation. However, the researcher has not conversed with every attendee about this subject. Therefore, while the premise of this project will benefit all, it is unknown if every attendee is in dire need of this intervention. In addition, there is an assumption that some participants in this study might have prior knowledge of the church's covenant. However, this study will still be able to measure any changes they might experience due to the study.

The researcher assumes that the participants of this project will be able to understand, read, and write English at a sixth-grade level or above. Therefore, in the creation of the sermon series for this project, the researcher will attempt to make sure the language used will be accessible to the broadest audience possible while faithfully maintaining the message that is

being transmitted. This project is primarily aimed at the members of Hillcrest Baptist Church, and thus it will be principally directed at the gathered regenerate community of believers. However, there is an underlying assumption that all those who agree to participate in the project can contribute to the study.

### **Definitions**

The researcher of this DMIN project thesis will use some terms that might require clarification. Although many of the words used are straightforward, the researcher seeks to clarify the definitions to help convey the exact reason and purpose for which they are used. This section will allow the researcher to define the terms used in this DMIN project thesis.

*Church.* This project thesis seeks to use the term church to refer to a local assembly (ἐκκλησία) of those that have been saved through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and have been incorporated into His body through baptism. Generally, these people assemble to worship, hear the preached Word of God, observe the ordinances, affirm and oversee one another's membership, exercise discipline when needed, and encourage one another in Christ to live faithfully and fulfill Christ's mission.<sup>39</sup> The church is also referred to frequently as the “people of God” and the “Body of Christ.”

*Church Covenant.* This project thesis adopts Charles Deweese's definition of a church covenant as a series of written agreed-upon statements based on the Bible. In adopting a church covenant, members voluntarily agree to God and one another regarding their fundamental moral and spiritual commitments and practices.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Jeremy M. Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle, 40 Questions Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2017), 21–22.

<sup>40</sup> Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), viii.



*Church Membership.* Church membership extends beyond simply gathering corporately as a group of people. Above and beyond the gathering, this researcher adopts Jonathan Leeman’s definition of church membership in saying that “church membership is a formal relationship between a church and a Christian characterized by the church’s affirmation and oversight of a Christian’s discipleship and the Christian’s submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.”<sup>41</sup> In addition, church members walk together and give themselves to the Lord and one another by the will of God.<sup>42</sup>

*Covenant.* Within this project thesis, a covenant is an elective relationship of obligation. Biblically, the relationship between God and His people is covenantal, with an outline of God's promises to His people and their duties to Him.<sup>43</sup>

*Ecclesiology.* The term ecclesiology comes from two Greek terms, *ἐκκλησία*, meaning church, and *λόγος*, meaning word or study.<sup>44</sup> Ecclesiology, also known as the doctrine of the church, includes not only the nature, origin, mission, membership, order or polity, worship, and unity of the church but also its ministry, the ordinances/sacraments, and the church’s relation to government and society.<sup>45</sup>

*Unregenerate Membership.* The term *Unregenerate Membership* is used to define those who are church members in name but have not repented, placed their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and been born again.

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<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 64.

<sup>42</sup> *The Baptist Confession of Faith 1689* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 105.

<sup>43</sup> Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether, “Introduction,” in *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 31.

<sup>44</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, ed. John S. Feinberg, Foundations of Evangelical Theology Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 33.

<sup>45</sup> James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, Second Edition, vol. 2 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 499.

### **Limitations**

This section covers the anticipated limitations contained within this DMIN project thesis. The first limitation of this DMIN project thesis involves the finite sample size. This project is explicitly designed for the members and attendees of Hillcrest Baptist Church located in Carlsbad, New Mexico. Though these findings could easily apply to another church's covenant and context, the primary efforts of this project thesis will focus specifically on the historic church covenant of Hillcrest Baptist Church and its members and attendees.

Another limitation of this DMIN project thesis involves the unpredictable involvement of the participants. This proposed DMIN project thesis will occur over five weeks and require preliminary and follow-up evaluation. Attendance and participant response cannot be guaranteed and are beyond the researcher's control of this project. The researcher is conducting this study on Sunday mornings due to there not being any attendance of the congregation at other times. For example, the church canceled Wednesday night activities on March 27, 2022, due to apathy and an overall lack of attendance. From March 2 to March 23, the pastor's family was the only one in attendance on Wednesday nights. Before that, from January 12 to February 23, there were only one or two other attendees. So, to ensure enough participation from the congregation, the only possible time is to conduct this study during the usual Sunday morning service time at 10:45 AM. Total participation from the entire church membership is doubtful, and the researcher cannot ensure the full involvement of the attendees in the follow-up. However, the researcher will take steps like follow-up reminders and phone calls to mitigate these circumstances.

The last limitation of this DMIN project thesis revolves around the honesty of the participants. Though the researcher would hope that each participant would be completely honest with their responses to the process, the researcher also understands this is unlikely. This

limitation is due to a confluence of factors, including both unconscious and conscious. As a result, the researcher is aware that any answers provided during evaluations may not be entirely accurate.

### **Delimitations**

This research will be delimited to a particular context, the attendees of Hillcrest Baptist Church, and thus will not be broad or generalized. The study in which this research will take place will be held on Sunday mornings for five weeks during the regular 10:45 AM morning worship service. The service will be open to any attendees of Hillcrest Baptist Church and their guests, and the study will be available to adults aged eighteen or older that would like to participate. Before beginning the five weeks, the researcher will conduct surveys to assess the attendees' overall knowledge of the church covenant. In addition, this project will require a follow-up survey after the five weeks to compare and evaluate any changes.

### **Thesis Statement**

If the researcher preaches on the church covenant, it will affect the members of Hillcrest Baptist Church's understanding of the church and their role in it. The researcher's goal is that once a person better understands the church covenant and their role in the church, they will become more active members, resulting in revitalization. Therefore, this project seeks to answer the question, "Does knowing and understanding the covenant of Hillcrest Baptist Church make a difference in our efforts to revitalize a declining church?" The researcher will seek to answer this question by developing a five-week sermon series, with advice from experts, to teach the current members about the church covenant and evaluate via pre- and post-study surveys if there is any change in the participants.

## CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter covers the framework of this DMIN project thesis. This chapter includes a review of literature produced within the last ten years related to the research question, “Does knowing and understanding the covenant of Hillcrest Baptist Church make a difference in our efforts to revitalize a declining church?” The literature review explores the state of the church in America, the need for revitalization within declining churches, and the role of church covenants. The researcher pays specific attention to the idea that church covenants reinforce the importance of regenerate church membership, the doctrine that church members should be born-again Christians. Following the literature review, two sections on the theological and theoretical foundations underlie the rest of this DMIN project thesis.

### Literature Review

The term “church” derives from the Greek ἐκκλησία, which is connected to the idea of assembly. However, the local Christian church is more than just a mere assembly of random people. Jonathan Leeman defines the local church as “a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ’s name to officially affirm and oversee one another’s membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances.”<sup>1</sup> However, though Leeman defines what the local church is, what a church looks like in practice differs greatly depending on the approach someone has to ecclesiology or the doctrine of the church.<sup>2</sup> James Leo Garrett

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<sup>1</sup> Leeman, *Church Membership*, 52.

<sup>2</sup> Garrett, “Foreward,” vii.

comments that ecclesiology has always been a significant concern for Baptists.<sup>3</sup> Neil Darragh explains that God has a mission, and the church is one way that mission is carried out.<sup>4</sup> However, the problem is, as Jared C. Wilson remarks, that the Bible is vague on details regarding “how to do church” and that it would be simpler if the Bible laid out a detailed and comprehensive set of instructions.<sup>5</sup> This imprecision has led many to try and seek to figure out what a church is and how Christians are to “do church.”

### The State of the Church

As introduced in Chapter 1, there is evidence of a massive problem in American Christianity. Churches are shrinking and closing. In their National Congregations Study, Duke University found that the average attendance at weekend services has declined from ninety to sixty-eight since 1998.<sup>6</sup> Gallup polls have shown that church membership has dropped over the last eight decades.<sup>7</sup> Though 70 percent of Americans identify as Christian, far less, only one in three, of those who identify as Christian regularly attend one of the estimated 380,000 churches in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Most churches over the past decade are, at best, plateaued, and many cases are in decline.<sup>9</sup> These statistics are unsurprising as Thom Rainer estimates that only ten percent

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<sup>3</sup> Garrett, “Foreward,” vii.

<sup>4</sup> Neil Darragh, *But What is the Church For? What is the Mission of the Local Church?* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2021), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Jared Wilson, *The Prodigal Church: A Gentle Manifesto against the Status Quo* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 47.

<sup>6</sup> Duke University, *National Congregations Survey*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” *Gallup*, March 29, 2021, accessed May 24, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

<sup>8</sup> Charita Goshay, “‘Difficult Days are Ahead’ for America’s Churches, Faith Institutions,” August 22, 2020, Accessed May 24, 2022. <https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/news/local/2020/08/22/lquodifficult-days-are-aheadrsquo-for-americarsquos-churches-faith-institutions/42282593/>

<sup>9</sup> Bill Henard, *Can These Bones Live?* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2015), 49.

of churches are healthy.<sup>10</sup> Adding to that sentiment, Mark Clifton comments that many people have never experienced healthy churches.<sup>11</sup>

The statistics show symptoms of a deeper disease infecting American churches and the need for revitalization. However, church revitalization faces many challenges. One challenge facing revitalization is that numerous churches reside in a state of denial despite the evidence being clear.<sup>12</sup> People are leaving the church, students are no longer attending after high school, and attendance continues to drop.<sup>13</sup> Though these problems in attendance are not the only problem facing American Christianity, it is a well-defined widespread symptom affecting churches.

Another challenge facing revitalization is that countless churches have forgotten what it means to be a church. For many church attendees, a church is the building or the activities within that building. Often, people refer to attending or going to church but rarely speak about being the church.<sup>14</sup> The word "church" has become synonymous with the facility for many people instead of thinking about the members of the body of Christ. This confusion is understandable since English only has one word for "church," which refers to the building and the assembly within. Few people think about the church as the people that assemble to worship, hear the preached Word of God, observe the ordinances, and fellowship together as the people of God. The church is beyond the structure in which it meets or the activities in which it participates. Churches do

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<sup>10</sup> Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, 86.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2016), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Bill Henard, *Can These Bones Live?* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2015), 48.

<sup>13</sup> J.T. English, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2020), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Leeman, "What Is a Church?" 19.

not need a building, and God is not only found in said buildings.<sup>15</sup> The church building is only notable because it is where the body of Christ gathers to worship God.<sup>16</sup>

### The Heart of the Problem: Unregenerate Membership

The current state of American Christianity and the need for church revitalization indicate a much larger problem in the church, unregenerate membership. Unregenerate membership involves church members who have not repented and are not born-again. Unregenerate church members are just Christian in name only. Unregenerate membership is concerning because the health and life of the church depend on the foundation on which it is built. The difficulty is that many churches in America are full of unregenerate members who will not and cannot build their foundation on Christ. In addition, the problem of unregenerate membership has extended to many of the churches in America over the last half-century or more. In many ways, unregenerate membership has caused the church to forget what it is to be a church and has produced members who have forgotten what it is to be a church member.

How did this infection of unregenerate membership develop? There are two major contributing causes. The first cause is the development of cultural Christianity. For years to be at home in American culture, one needed to be a regular churchgoer.<sup>17</sup> It did not matter if that person believed in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, nor if they took up their cross and followed Him, but to be accepted in society and recognized as a good citizen and a good

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline: A Hopeful, Practical Ecclesiology for a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 2.

<sup>16</sup> This example is found in the fact many old church buildings have been purchased and made into restaurants, pubs, coffee shops, or other businesses. This researcher is familiar with and has dined at such a place called The Abbey in Frisco, TX, which occupied a building that was once a Baptist church (1902-1974) and later became a restaurant.

<sup>17</sup> Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 2.

neighbor, one needed to identify as a Christian and attend church regularly.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, this requirement to attend church for societal reasons created a sort of false Christianity. Many churches soon found themselves full of people with little to no desire for Jesus. Instead, these cultural Christians were church members just for the benefits it produced. Eventually, cultural Christianity would develop and promote a message that people should seek the things God could provide for them.<sup>19</sup>

The second cause is what John Carpenter calls "old-time religion." The old-time religion Carpenter speaks about is another iteration of false Christianity. In old-time religion, people are essentially sold the gospel.<sup>20</sup> In old-time religion, instead of people surrendering to Jesus as Lord and Savior, they are sold an idea that all a person must do to get salvation is to buy it with a "decision." This decision comes not in a decision to follow Jesus but instead simply walking an aisle during a specific time and repeating a prayer prompted to you. The goal of old-time religion is just to get people to make a decision that gives the status of being "saved." However, the problem is there is no repentance, surrender, or case of being born again. The problem is that a decision without repentance, surrender, and being born again is a fake conversion because, as Jesus explains in John 3:3, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

The problems of cultural Christianity and old-time religion have been compounded, at least in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), because of the typical practice of approving membership in many Baptist churches. John Mark Yeats comments that the standard method of SBC churches affirming individuals for membership on-the-spot based on a simple confession

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<sup>18</sup> Moore, *Onward*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> English, *Deep Discipleship*, 32.

<sup>20</sup> John B. Carpenter, *Seven Pillars of a Biblical Church: The Vital Truths and Essential Practices for Us to Re-Embrace God's Design for the Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2022), 49.



that they are a follower of Christ has been abused.<sup>21</sup> This practice has caused many Baptist churches to be filled with non-Christians. For many people, this phenomenon has distorted what a church is and what Christianity is.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, this distortion of Christianity has promoted a message at odds with the biblical idea of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup>

Russell Moore comments that churches cannot build themselves on a sub-Christian gospel.<sup>24</sup> However, with churches full of unregenerate members, many have built themselves on a sub-Christian gospel. In the process, numerous churches have forgotten who the church is for and what a church even is.<sup>25</sup> Many churches have forgotten what it is to be a church, and church members have forgotten what it is to be a church member.

Instead of fulfilling their intended purpose, many churches have simply fulfilled the mission of trying to grow as large as possible. Many are more interested in what works than what is true.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, this focus on what works over what is true has caused the church to become increasingly shallow.<sup>27</sup> Many churches have pushed widespread programs, crusades, and aggressive strategies for church growth, but the culture still finds itself in moral decline and disbelief.<sup>28</sup> People are not leaving the church because too much is expected of them. People are

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<sup>21</sup> John Mark Yeats, "More than Fifteen Million Southern Baptists? Recovering Regenerate Church Membership," in *The SBC and the 21st Century: Reflection, Renewal & Recommitment*, ed. Jason K. Allen. (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2019), 107.

<sup>22</sup> Leeman, *Church Membership*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> English, *Deep Discipleship*, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Moore, *Onward*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 58.

<sup>26</sup> Andy Stanley, *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 69.

<sup>27</sup> English, *Deep Discipleship*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth H. Gourlay, "An Assessment of Bible Knowledge Among Adult Southern Baptist Sunday School Participants." *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 1 (Spring, 2013): 11.  
DOI:10.1177/073989131301000102.

leaving the church because churches have not given them a reason to be there.<sup>29</sup> The existence of unhealthy churches is concerning because, as Mark Dever comments, bad churches are effective anti-missionary forces.<sup>30</sup> This is why Jonathan Leeman says that for many Christians living in a Western democracy, a change in their thought about the church is required.<sup>31</sup> Joel Beeke remarks that many church members would be disturbed if they discovered their name was missing from the church membership directory. However, they should be concerned about whether their name is written in the Book of the Lamb.<sup>32</sup>

### Symptoms of Unregenerate Membership

Unregenerate membership is a significant systemic problem facing many churches.<sup>33</sup> One can see the disease in the symptoms, including people leaving the church, students no longer attending after high school, dropping attendance, and a lack of importance among Christians about what it means to be a Christian.<sup>34</sup> The following sections will touch on some of these symptoms.

#### **Symptom 1: Churchless “Christianity”**

With attendance numbers falling far below the number of people identifying as Christian, the perspective of churchless Christianity has become so common. Churchless Christianity has become so common that it can almost be expected in many that identify as Christian. Hansen and

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<sup>29</sup> English, *Deep Discipleship*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Leeman, *Church Membership*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Joel R. Beeke, *A Faithful Church Member* (Carlisle, PA: Evangelical Press, 2011), 18.

<sup>33</sup> Richard D. Patton, “Baptists and Regenerate Church Membership: Historical Perspective and Present Practice.” *Baptist History and Heritage* 13, no. 3 (July 1978): 28.  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000767173&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>34</sup> English, *Deep Discipleship*, 7.

Leeman explain the church is long past the time when it could assume even dedicated believers in Jesus Christ understood why they should bother with church.<sup>35</sup> This idea of a churchless Christianity has become an increasing problem post the COVID-19 pandemic. Many churches shifted online during the pandemic, and people found online services to be more than enough.<sup>36</sup> As a result, many have begun to view attending church online as the same as attending in person. However, Mike Glenn asks, “Is the church still a church when there are no people?”<sup>37</sup> The answer is a simple one. A church cannot be a church without people, as there is an inherent meaning of assembly within the idea of being a church.

## **Symptom 2: Biblical Illiteracy**

The second symptom is just as dire as the first. The erosion of biblical Christianity to the point where the mindset of a Christianity without the Bible has become plausible.<sup>38</sup> Not only is the church faced with Christianity without the church, but also a Christianity without the Bible. Though a Christianity without the Bible might seem unbelievable, the numbers regarding biblical illiteracy show that it is undoubtedly a likely outcome if things continue along a similar trajectory.

Kenneth Berding, professor at Biola University and Talbot Seminary, remarked that every fall semester, he sees first-year college students raised in Christian homes who knew very

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<sup>35</sup> Collin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman, *Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ Is Essential* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 11.

<sup>36</sup> Mike Glenn, “Called to Show Up.” *Christianity Today – Jesus Creed*. June 17, 2022. Accessed June 26, 2022. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2022/called-to-show-up.html>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth A. Briggs, *The Invisible Bestseller: Searching for the Bible in America*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016), 42.

little Bible.<sup>39</sup> In addition to Berding's anecdotal evidence, Kenneth Gourlay published a study on an assessment of Bible knowledge among adult Southern Baptist Sunday School participants in 2013. In the study, Gourlay found that the participants scored an average of 65.6 percent. If 70 percent is considered passing, the average participant would have failed the test.<sup>40</sup> Berding and Gourlay's findings show that the problem of biblical illiteracy is not just a problem in the world outside of the church but also a problem within the church. Biblical illiteracy is a severe problem, as Platt explains that it is impossible to be a follower of Christ while disregarding, denying, discrediting, and disbelieving the Bible.<sup>41</sup>

### **Symptom 3: A Lack of Discipleship**

Mark Clifton explains that churches in North America are dying because of a lack of disciple-making.<sup>42</sup> J.T. English calls the lack of discipleship a disease facing the church.<sup>43</sup> However, the lack of discipleship in the church is just a symptom of the church being full of unregenerate church members. Mark Dever explains that people will not share the gospel, disciple, or do more missions if they do not first understand the gospel.<sup>44</sup> Unregenerate church members will not and cannot create disciples of Christ because they have not become disciples themselves. As a result, the church has created a generation of Christians that do not know what it means to be and live as a Christian. This lack of discipleship has created a situation within the

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<sup>39</sup> Kenneth Berding, *Bible Revival: Recommitting Ourselves to One Book* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013), 40.

<sup>40</sup> Gourlay, "An Assessment of Bible Knowledge..."

<sup>41</sup> Platt, *Counter Culture*, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 7.

<sup>43</sup> English, *Deep Discipleship*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks*, 21.

church where the church has forgotten what it is to be a church, and church members have forgotten what it is to be a church member.

#### **Symptom 4: A Focus on Activity**

Many have forgotten that what makes a church a church is not simply activity. Activity is not inherently wrong, but there are problems with a fixation on activity for activity's sake. A church cannot produce its own life, and it especially cannot do it through activities. A church's goal is not the activity, but the goal should be worship, which is the fuel and goal of everything a church does.<sup>45</sup> God is the only thing that can create life, and the church only has life through its relationship with God.<sup>46</sup> The church needs new life and revitalization because they have far too long relied on activity and not on God. Mark Clifton explains that dying churches tend to numb the pain of the death of the church with an abundance of activity.<sup>47</sup> However, the reliance on activity has caused many frustrations, as many of the programs that worked well to drive people to attend church in the past just do not work anymore.<sup>48</sup>

#### **A Church or a Social Club?**

Many churches have traded their mission to glorify God and make disciples with a mission of simply trying to grow as large as possible, assuming that numerical growth is what glorifies God.<sup>49</sup> As a result, countless congregations have focused on appealing to the largest amount of people and, in the process, oversimplifying discipleship and promoting an incorrect

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<sup>45</sup> Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 17.

<sup>46</sup> Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Mark Clifton and Kenneth Priest, *Rubicons of Revitalization: Overcoming 8 Common Barriers to Church Renewal* (Littleton: Acoma Press, 2018), 73.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>49</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 29.

image of what it means to be a disciple.<sup>50</sup> David Platt comments that by fixating on pragmatism and trying to draw people into the church, many have polluted the church to which they attract them.<sup>51</sup> These churches have been contaminated by generations of unregenerate membership bodies formed by people with a century's worth of practice at being consumers.<sup>52</sup> However, though numerous churches fixate on this consumeristic mentality to attract people from outside the church, it does not work. The people who do not have an interest in Christianity also have zero interest in something that is Christianity-lite. Nevertheless, many churches are still fueled by a practical and consumeristic mentality instead of the Holy Spirit. In the process, churches have become obsessed with things other than the Bible, theology, and spiritual disciplines. Unfortunately, in doing so, the churches have missed much of what it means for the church to be the church.<sup>53</sup>

There is a problem when the church values and fixates only on the result of numerical growth.<sup>54</sup> Often this fascination with programs and services is done pragmatically or to try and create life in the church. However, this fixation on numerical growth has led many churches to focus on individual preferences, seeking to provide a menu of services for the people to try and stimulate growth.<sup>55</sup> The problem is that when a church becomes led by personal preference and consumerism, it results in a church that is less characteristically a church.<sup>56</sup> In addition, when preferences guide a church, it does not create a healthy church but produces an unhealthy one.

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<sup>50</sup> English, *Deep Discipleship*, 8.

<sup>51</sup> David Platt, "Foreward," in *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Third Edition (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 9-10.

<sup>52</sup> Leeman, *Church Membership*, 23.

<sup>53</sup> P. Adam McClendon and Jared E. Lockhart, *Timeless Church* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2020), 17.

<sup>54</sup> Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 50.

<sup>55</sup> McClendon and Lockhart, *Timeless Church*, 17.

<sup>56</sup> Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 61.

Jared Wilson argues that the first question needs to be “What glorifies God?” not “What do the people want?”<sup>57</sup> Simply, dying churches tend to make their preferences the most important thing.<sup>58</sup> In his 2014 book *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, Thom Rainer found that every one of the fourteen churches he studied that had closed had some level of being driven by preferences. These preference-driven decisions influence everything from where people sit, the music, the programs, the preaching, the building use, and how resources are divided up and used.<sup>59</sup>

The problem is that many churches and church attendees have approached church membership like membership to a social club or country club. Members have created a social club of a church built around Christian values, a love of country, and worship of a nebulous God but have forgotten the gospel of Christ crucified.<sup>60</sup> Dean Inserra comments that for many American Christians, Jesus is no longer the Savior who takes away the sins of the world but is more a personal life coach sent to help people be winners in the world.<sup>61</sup> The problem is the church is not a club or voluntary organization with dues that serves a person’s preferences.<sup>62</sup>

When people take a country club mentality to church, they stop doing what they are supposed to in the church but instead expect to be served by the church.<sup>63</sup> This mentality is dangerous because it ultimately places a person’s preferences ahead of God. According to Vern Poythress, whatever holds ultimate allegiance in a person’s life, which for many are their own

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<sup>57</sup> Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 73.

<sup>58</sup> Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 23.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Moore, *Onward*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Dean Inserra, *Getting Over Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2021), 20.

<sup>62</sup> Leeman, *Church Membership*, 22.

<sup>63</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *I Will: Nine Traits of the Outwardly Focused Christian* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 96.

preferences, becomes a “god” to that person.<sup>64</sup> David Platt explains that God has designed people to put Him first, others second, and ourselves last, but sin reverses that order.<sup>65</sup> This reversal happens when the church focuses solely on each individual's preferences. As people focus on individual preferences, the order changes so that self becomes first, others are now second, and God becomes a distant memory at best. Instead of worshipping God, the church is now worshipping at the altar of self. A theology centered on a person's desires and comfort is unrealistic and unbiblical.<sup>66</sup> John Stott describes self-centeredness as the essence of evil.<sup>67</sup> The problem is in trying to build a church based on individual preference. In the quest to satisfy everyone, the church becomes a slave to sin.<sup>68</sup> Churches have valued the members' preferences over the priorities of God, organizing things around those preferences instead of what is most faithful to Christ.<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately, as David Platt explains, “Jesus is the one who established the church, and the church is His to grow, not ours to manipulate.”<sup>70</sup> This focus on individual preference has created a church member that looks after what makes them feel good and comfortable, so they look for churches that scratch those itches instead of looking for a church that God has called them to serve.<sup>71</sup> That is why Jim Elliff explains that there is a need to preach

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<sup>64</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 189.

<sup>65</sup> David Platt, *Counter Culture: Following Christ in an Anti-Christian Age* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2017), 8.

<sup>66</sup> Inserra, *Getting Over Yourself*, 23.

<sup>67</sup> John Stott, *Why I am a Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), Kindle Location 660.

<sup>68</sup> Platt, *Counter Culture*, 9.

<sup>69</sup> Platt, “Foreward,” 10.

<sup>70</sup> Platt, *Counter Culture*, 11.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.



regeneration to awaken churches that have become drunk with the silliness of entertaining unregenerate souls to hell.<sup>72</sup>

Albert Mohler observes that there has been too much compromise on regenerate church membership.<sup>73</sup> Richard D. Patton explains that the increasing number of nonresident members, the decline in attendance by resident members, and the increased acceptance of lower moral standards among church members can all be traced back to unregenerate church membership.<sup>74</sup> Mohler expresses a similar sentiment in saying that when things like regenerate church membership are compromised, everything is affected, including the understanding of the gospel, the work of regeneration, and the role of a covenant community as the congregation of faith.<sup>75</sup> Compromising regenerate membership is a problem because the doctrine of regenerate church membership is a fundamental Baptist belief rooted in the Bible and formed upon the teachings of Christ.<sup>76</sup>

### The Role of Church Covenants

The simple definition of a covenant is that it is a conditional promise.<sup>77</sup> In the language of the covenant, the Bible often describes mankind's relationship with God, His promises, and mankind's duties toward Him.<sup>78</sup> Historically, Baptists have insisted on a regenerate church

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<sup>72</sup> Jim Elliff, "Revival and the Unregenerate Church Member," *Reformation and Revival* 8, no. 2 (1999): 42.

<sup>73</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr. "Baptist Identity: Is There a Future?" *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. 9 no. 1 (2005):8. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001561115&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>74</sup> Patton, "Baptist and Regenerate Church Membership," 29.

<sup>75</sup> Mohler, "Baptist Identity," 8

<sup>76</sup> Patton, "Baptist and Regenerate Church Membership," 28.

<sup>77</sup> Jonty Rhodes, *Covenants Made Simple: Understanding God's Unfolding Promises to His People* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), Kindle Location 141.

<sup>78</sup> Waters, Reid, and Muether, "Introduction," 31.

membership just as they have utilized church covenants to serve that emphasis. By their very nature, regenerate membership and church covenants help to combat the consumer culture and the expectations that come with it.<sup>79</sup> Church covenants emphasize the commitment church members make to one another and the church. Covenants cover what it means to be a disciple of Christ in a body of believers.<sup>80</sup>

Regarding regenerate church membership, the church covenant establishes the boundaries there are to membership of the church. The covenant does not establish an artificial boundary prohibitive to following Christ but a Scripture-based boundary. Yeats explains that believers face expectations that a life following Jesus involves a continued commitment to orthodoxy or rightly ordered belief and orthopraxy or rightly ordered practice.<sup>81</sup> The covenant is an agreement made with each other and with God to live out what it means to be a Christian.<sup>82</sup> Jonathan Leeman explains that a person identifies with Christ and Christ's people through the church covenant.<sup>83</sup>

A covenant differs from a confession of faith in that it primarily deals with church membership and Christian conduct, whereas a confession focuses on doctrinal issues.<sup>84</sup> A covenant involves people that are deeply concerned about the welfare of each other, and there is trust, shared goals, and a common purpose.<sup>85</sup> The covenant seeks to establish a community. Ken Hemphill and Mike James explain that the fellowship and community that happens in the

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<sup>79</sup> Yeats, "More than Fifteen Million Southern Baptists?" 107.

<sup>80</sup> Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, 45.

<sup>81</sup> Yeats, "More than Fifteen Million Southern Baptists?" 99.

<sup>82</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks*, 172.

<sup>83</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 232.

<sup>84</sup> Michael A.G. Haykin, "Some Historical Roots of Congregationalism," in *Baptist Foundations: Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*. Edited by Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 42.

<sup>85</sup> David Keck, *Healthy Churches Faithful Pastors: Covenant Expectations for Thriving Together* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 19.

covenant community should foreshadow and create a longing for the eternal community that Christians will experience in heaven.<sup>86</sup> The Puritans used church covenants, understanding that the church is a body of believers knit together, comprising a regenerate membership.<sup>87</sup> When someone joined a church, they committed to be in covenant with the other church members. In laying out the biblical expectations of being a disciple, the church sought to define formal commitments based on the Bible's calling on the members to support one another and the church.<sup>88</sup> Establishing a strong and healthy foundation for the church is essential. The church plays an integral part in a Christian's journey in discipleship. The church is where an individual disciple is nurtured, cared for, and developed.<sup>89</sup> However, though discipleship occurs within the context of relationships, it is vital to identify and define that relationship.<sup>90</sup>

All the discussion about the church and covenant raises the question: "Who is the church for?" Andy Stanley would suggest that the church is for all people, including those that are not Christian.<sup>91</sup> Stanley goes as far as to speak explicitly against "churches designed for church people."<sup>92</sup> However, Mark Dever would disagree with Stanley. Instead, Dever states that the church was designed as a covenanted community of believers. Dever explains that the covenanted community of believers is an essential doctrine that reflects examples of the early

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<sup>86</sup> Ken Hemphill and Mike James, *V.E.L.C.R.O. Church* (Tigerville, SC: Auxano Press, 2011), Kindle Location 915.

<sup>87</sup> John B. Carpenter, *Seven Pillars of a Biblical Church: The Vital Truths and Essential Practices for Us to Re-Embrace God's Design for the Church* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2022), 28.

<sup>88</sup> Carpenter, *Seven Pillars of a Biblical Church*, 28.

<sup>89</sup> Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is...: How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group 2013), 186.

<sup>90</sup> Jonathan Leeman, "Introduction," in *Baptist Foundations: Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*. Edited by Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 13.

<sup>91</sup> Stanley, *Deep & Wide*, 67.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

church where evidence shows that only believers were members.<sup>93</sup> Jared Wilson agrees with Dever's standpoint. Wilson contends that biblically, the worship service is a gathering of Christians meant to reorient the body of Christ around its head, Jesus Christ.<sup>94</sup>

Dever goes on to express that church leaders must know who is and is not a member of the congregation, and a church that does not practice some sort of self-conscious membership is in sin because Christians cannot follow basic biblical commands without it.<sup>95</sup> Though everyone is welcome to attend, the local church membership is a body of believers committed to each other. Church covenants acted at least partly as a filter by which the local church could determine who was or was not a disciple of Jesus Christ.<sup>96</sup> This filter is integral to a congregational polity, as the members hold the authority for decisions.<sup>97</sup> The covenant community is bound together by a promise made to God and each other. It results in a church where everyone can rely upon, count on, and be responsible for each other.<sup>98</sup> A suitable church covenant does not exist to lay out a guideline of rules. Instead, a church covenant should exist to reflect the commitments the Bible tells believers to make as Christians.<sup>99</sup>

### Objections to the Use of Church Covenants

Not every author that has written about church covenants agrees with its usefulness. Wade Burleson spends two chapters writing against church covenants in his book *Fraudulent*

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<sup>93</sup> Dever, *Nine Marks*, 158.

<sup>94</sup> Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 62.

<sup>95</sup> Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), Kindle Location 311.

<sup>96</sup> Haykin, "Some Historical Roots of Congregationalism," 42.

<sup>97</sup> Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 277.

<sup>98</sup> Terry Johnson, *Who Needs the Church? Why We Need the Church (and Why the Church Needs Us)* (Geanies House, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2022), 49.

<sup>99</sup> Carpenter, *Seven Pillars of a Biblical Church*, 74.

Authority. Burleson argues that church covenants are "the turf-driven works of the flesh," Someone only needs to commit to the Scriptures and the gospel.<sup>100</sup> Burleson spends one of the two chapters listing five reasons why a person should not endorse a church covenant. Burleson explains that church covenants make the Holy Spirit irrelevant in a person's life, replace Jesus as mediator with inferior mediators, make the church equivalent to the kingdom of God, protect an authoritarian structure, and require more than a "yes" or "no."<sup>101</sup> However, though Burleson lists these five reasons why a person should not sign a church covenant, he does not thoroughly explain how he came to those reasons. In addition, the reasons he gives do not apply wholly to every church covenant.

Burleson's argument is more toward what he sees as an authoritarian institutional structure.<sup>102</sup> Burleson contends that most modern church covenants are written with phrases intent on bringing church members into submission to church authorities.<sup>103</sup> Burleson supports his argument by stating that if a covenant says "submission to church elders" anywhere within the body of the covenant, it is designed to keep control.<sup>104</sup> However, in explaining this point, Burleson never addresses church covenants that do not include any such language of submission to authority or church elders.

### Conclusion

The church has a massive problem, with many churches shrinking and closing. Average attendance at weekend services has been in constant decline, a symptom of a much larger

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<sup>100</sup> Wade Burleson, *Fraudulent Authority: Pastors Who Seek to Rule Over Others* (Enid, OK: Istorica Ministries, 2016), 61.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-56.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

disease--unregenerate church membership. Over the last ten years, much has been written about the church and church revitalization. A "Church Revitalization" search on Amazon.com reveals 145 titles, and a search for "Church" shows over 60,000. However, little to nothing has been written about the importance of regenerate membership and the use of church covenants as a method of revitalization. In the last ten years, little has been written about church covenants in general. Most material on church covenants has been authored by three people alone, Mark Dever, Jonathan Leeman, and Michael A.G. Haykin. In addition, these authors all reference the same person, Charles Deweese. Deweese's 1990 book, *Baptist Church Covenants*, has been the go-to book for many as they study the subject of church covenants. However, most of what Charles Deweese wrote on church covenants is at least thirty years old, and much of it is out of print and difficult to find a copy of outside a theological library.<sup>105</sup> There is a need for a more modern study done on church covenants and the importance of regenerate church membership. In addition, there is a need to explore the connection between implementing church covenants with church revitalization.

### **Theological Foundations**

The theological foundation is of utmost importance because it is vital to build from a solid foundation of Scripture. Jesus establishes a solid foundation, and Paul later emphasizes a solid foundation. Jesus, in Matthew 7:24-27 shares a parable about houses. In the parable, Jesus explains there are two foundations, two builders, and two houses built on different foundations. Jesus continues to explain that both foundations looked good on the surface. However, only the house built on the rock stood when the rain, floods, and wind came. The other house, the one built on sand, fell. So, Jesus encourages His hearers to select and build on the correct foundation,

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<sup>105</sup> If one can find a copy of Charles Deweese's *Baptist Church Covenants*, it can go for as high as \$230.

the rock.<sup>106</sup> The foundational rock Jesus speaks about in the parable is His Words, His definitive teaching.<sup>107</sup> This idea that Jesus expresses connects back to Isaiah 40:8 and the realization of the difference between the temporary nature of the things of man juxtaposed with the permanent nature of the things that come from God.<sup>108</sup> Since a person is to build the foundation on the Word of God, it is essential to look at the Bible and allow it to guide this thesis project.

### Biblical Covenants

The covenants of the Bible serve as a valuable lens to recognize and appreciate the biblical idea of community.<sup>109</sup> Jeremy M. Kimble and Ched Spellman define a biblical covenant as “a relationship based on a promise.”<sup>110</sup> God chose to relate to His creation and His people by establishing covenants.<sup>111</sup> The covenant established between God and Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai is a focal point for the covenant tradition in the Old Testament.<sup>112</sup> However, God’s use of covenants goes further back than that. The Bible often uses covenant language to describe God’s promises to His people and their duties toward Him.<sup>113</sup> These duties are not negotiable, and there are only two choices when faced with God’s covenant: either the covenant relationship

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<sup>106</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, “Matthew,” in *Matthew–Luke*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. VIII, *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 128.

<sup>107</sup> D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 193.

<sup>108</sup> J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 276.

<sup>109</sup> George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, “Covenant,” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1179.

<sup>110</sup> Jeremy M. Kimble and Ched Spellman, *Invitation to Biblical Theology: Exploring the Shape, Storyline, and Themes of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2020), 66.

<sup>111</sup> Eugene E. Carpenter and Philip W. Comfort, *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew Words Defined and Explained* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 41.

<sup>112</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Covenant,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 533.

<sup>113</sup> Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether, “Introduction,” in *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 31.

is accepted on God's terms and the benefits are received, or the covenant relationship is refused, and the person must face the consequences.<sup>114</sup>

Though the first use of the term covenant (בְּרִית) is found in Genesis 6:18, the hallmarks of God's covenants with His people can be seen beginning with Adam. Further covenants with Noah, Abraham, and David echo similar language to what is established with Adam.<sup>115</sup> The first hallmark of the old covenant was unconditional obedience and certain conditions required of the receiving party.<sup>116</sup> For example, in Genesis 2:17, Adam is told not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In addition, Adam, Noah, and Abraham are all told to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28; 9:7; 35:11). Iain Duguid explains, "Essentially, a covenant is a relationship based on the surrender of control."<sup>117</sup> The covenant terms are not negotiable, they are set, and the requirement is obedience to God.<sup>118</sup>

The second hallmark is that there are positive consequences or blessings for those that keep the covenant and negative consequences or punishments for those that fail.<sup>119</sup> For example, death is the consequence of failing to abide by the covenant given to Adam (Gen 2:17). Further consequences of Adam and Eve's actions can be seen in Genesis 3. However, the far-reaching

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<sup>114</sup> Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality: The Gospel according to Abraham* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 75.

<sup>115</sup> Brandon D. Crowe, *The Path of Faith: A Biblical Theology of Covenant and Law* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 23.

<sup>116</sup> John Scott Redd, "The Abrahamic Covenant," in *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 139.

<sup>117</sup> Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality: The Gospel according to Abraham* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 74.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>119</sup> Crowe, *The Path of Faith*, 11-12.



implications and consequences of their actions can be seen in sin affecting and infecting all.<sup>120</sup>

Later, God would allow a sacrificial system to provide provisions for disobedience to the perfect standard.<sup>121</sup> However, the sacrifices of the old covenant could not provide salvation (Heb 10:4).

The new covenant is the apex of God’s previous covenants fulfilling everything promised, foreshadowed, and required.<sup>122</sup> Andrew Hill and John Walton explain that all the covenants are connected, and even if distinct, separating lines were drawn between the covenants, one could not overlook the organic unity.<sup>123</sup> However, Elmer Towns and Ben Gutiérrez explain Jesus should be seen as “the guarantee of a better covenant” over the previous covenants (Heb 7:22–24).<sup>124</sup> Jesus comes as Immanuel or “God with us” (Matt 1:23). This coming of Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God (John 3:16), marks the restoration of God’s presence and restoration of the covenant that the sin of Israel had disrupted.<sup>125</sup> The New Testament writers had the conviction that the overall story of the covenants pointed to Jesus as the Messiah or Christ.<sup>126</sup>

Matthew begins his gospel with the account of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, connecting the Davidic and Abrahamic covenants (Matt 1). Luke announces the birth of Jesus with a similar connection to the previous covenants explaining that Jesus would be given the throne of David

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<sup>120</sup> John D. Currid, “Adam and the Beginning of the Covenant of Grace,” in *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 100.

<sup>121</sup> J. Nicholas Reid, “The Mosaic Covenant,” in *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 152.

<sup>122</sup> Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Biblical Theology: The Special Grace Covenants (New Testament)*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 2.

<sup>123</sup> Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 26.

<sup>124</sup> Elmer L. Towns and Ben Gutiérrez, *The Essence of the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 277.

<sup>125</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *God’s Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 132.

<sup>126</sup> Kimble and Spellman, *Invitation to Biblical Theology*, 88.

and reign over the house of Jacob forever (Luke 1:32-33). Paul speaks to Jesus as descended from David in Romans 1 and 2 Timothy 2. However, the most significant connection between Jesus and the covenants is found in the book of Hebrews. Israel entered a covenant with God, but the church entered a new covenant rendering the old one obsolete (Heb 8:7–13), which has a better high priest (Heb 7:1-6), a better tabernacle (Heb 9:1–28), and a better sacrifice (Heb 10:1–39). Jesus, the better high priest, offered this better sacrifice in a better tabernacle. Jesus removed sin, obtained eternal redemption for all of God’s people, and enacted the new covenant that Jeremiah predicted.<sup>127</sup> This new covenant differed from the older covenants in that the new covenant is not temporary and conditional. Instead, the new covenant is one where the Spirit seals those involved for the day of redemption (Eph 1:13–14).<sup>128</sup> In addition, the new covenant differs because the new covenant does not just involve those descended from Abraham by blood. Instead, the new covenant includes all those that repent, believe, and confess that Jesus is Lord and that God raised Him from the dead.<sup>129</sup>

### The Church and the Body of Christ

Jesus mentions the church (ἐκκλησία) only twice in the Bible and both in the book of Matthew. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus proclaims, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock, I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it."<sup>130</sup> Jesus declares that His church will be built on the confession of Peter, that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living

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<sup>127</sup> Towns and Gutiérrez, *The Essence of the New Testament*, 278.

<sup>128</sup> Matthew Y. Emerson and Heath A. Thomas, *The Story of Scripture: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2017), 71.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New American Standard Bible (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

God.”<sup>131</sup> Jesus built His church on the gospel, not programs or activities. No one can separate the church from the confession that Peter articulates.<sup>132</sup> Leon Morris explains that any interpretation of the passage that seeks to minimize the importance of the expression of faith in Peter’s words should be rejected.<sup>133</sup> Jesus here implies that He would establish a gathered assembly of His followers and help them to grow.<sup>134</sup> As the church grows, the kingdom of God grows.<sup>135</sup> The church is not simply to be a gathering of random people. Instead, the covenant community of the church is to be made up of those that are followers of Jesus Christ. Alan Hirsch explains that a church is a covenanted community formed by people bound together in a unique bond. Within this bond of covenanted community, members have a specific responsibility toward one another created around a covenant.<sup>136</sup> This idea echoes what Jesus explains in Matthew 18:17, the other place Jesus uses the word church. Matthew 18 suggests that each church member is to abide by a particular set of obligations. In addition to those obligations, everyone is responsible to other assembly members.<sup>137</sup> Part of these obligations is that the church and its members live by a different set of laws and values than the world centered around Jesus and His Word.<sup>138</sup> In the beginnings of the early church, the believers united around a community, as they continually

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<sup>131</sup> Doriani, “Matthew,” 253.

<sup>132</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 423.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 253.

<sup>135</sup> Sigurd Grindheim, *Living in the Kingdom of God: A Biblical Theology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 81.

<sup>136</sup> Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 40.

<sup>137</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 403.

<sup>138</sup> Grindheim, *Living in the Kingdom of God*, 82.

devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, prayer, and sharing with one another (Acts 2:42-47).

The idea of everyone having a part to play in the assembly also can be seen in the imagery of the “body of Christ” that Paul uses throughout his epistles. The body of Christ is a common metaphor for the church. Colossians 1:24 refers to the church as Christ’s body, and Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 explain that there are many different parts to the body, and each person is a part that plays a different role. Paul outlines these different roles even in his life as he speaks about the roles that he and Apollos played in the lives of those in Corinth (1 Cor 3:6-9). Rod Dempsey compares a to a physical body by saying that a healthy church looks and acts like a healthy body.<sup>139</sup> One of the tasks of the body of Christ is to make disciples. Being a disciple of Christ and following Jesus is not just about a one-time prayer for repentance but a lifelong process that begins with repentance and eventually leads to becoming a disciple-maker. Jesus calls Christians to follow Him in what Greg Ogden calls the “road less traveled.”<sup>140</sup> In Matthew 16:24-25, Jesus calls His disciples to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and lose their lives for His sake. David Platt likewise calls discipleship a “hard road,” explaining that the word Jesus uses is associated with pain, pressure, tribulation, and persecution in other parts of the Bible.<sup>141</sup> Discipleship is not an easy road to follow. Instead, discipleship is hard to follow and hated by many.<sup>142</sup> Part of discipleship is the involvement in a covenant community. The church can accomplish much within the covenant community, like carrying one other’s burdens (Gal 6:2).

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<sup>139</sup> Earley and Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is...*, 211.

<sup>140</sup> Greg Ogden. *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. 2007), 28.

<sup>141</sup> David Platt. *What Did Jesus Really Mean When He Said Follow Me?* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 25-26.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

Through the covenant community, the church can ensure that believers are not facing the world alone but instead have the type of support expressed in Proverbs 17:17, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity." God provides an example of the importance of community from the beginning, before the fall, and before sin entered the world. In Genesis 2:18, God creates a helper for Adam because it is not good that he should be alone. Lastly, the church can continue encouraging those in the covenant community to grow their discipleship. Proverbs 27:17 says, "Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." God designed disciples not to be all-encompassing, independent, and self-sufficient but instead to rely on the covenant community, one piece of the body of Christ with different gifts (1 Cor 12:27-28).

#### The Church Covenant

The church covenants are based on God's covenant with His people and the church as a covenant community. The concept of covenantal membership can be seen in the nation of Israel. Israel was a community with a distinct membership. They were a people who were in covenant with God and one another to live holy lives amid, yet distinctive and separate, from the world around them.<sup>143</sup> However, Israel did not remain distinct and separate from the world around them. As Paul comments in Romans 9:6, "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." However, in the new covenant with Jesus, there is a distinctive difference between the "children of the flesh" and the "children of God." Paul explains in Romans 9:8, "it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants."

From the beginning, the Christian church saw itself as individual members connected to something larger by being joined together under the lordship of Jesus Christ as the body of

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<sup>143</sup> Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline*, 49.

Christ.<sup>144</sup> As F.F. Bruce explains, speaking about the Lord adding to the community of the early church in Acts 2:47, “It is the Lord’s prerogative to add new members to His own community; it is the joyful prerogative of existing members to welcome to their fellowship those whom He has accepted.”<sup>145</sup> Paul emphasizes that the new covenant unites believers with each other (Eph 3:8-10; Col 3:9-11; Rom 12:4-5; 15:5-6).<sup>146</sup> Membership in this covenant community is not like that of Israel, which was simply by blood. Instead, membership in the new covenant community is by personal faith in Jesus and sealed in baptism.<sup>147</sup> There is the idea that being “in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26, 28), “baptized into Christ” (Gal 3:27), “clothed with Christ” (Gal 3:27), and “of Christ” (Gal 3:29) are all connected and used synonymously.<sup>148</sup> The New Testament makes it clear that the church should only be composed of regenerate believers.<sup>149</sup> James Leo Garrett states, “the regenerate life is a *sine qua non* for being a part of the community of Christians.”<sup>150</sup>

### Conclusion

Turning to the Scriptures is the first step in understanding the importance of covenants. The Old Testament covenants of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David show an agreement between God and His people. The covenants of the Bible serve as a method of recognizing the biblical idea of community. The Old Testament covenants contained requirements and promises, with the

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<sup>144</sup> Yeats, “More than Fifteen Million Southern Baptists?” 96.

<sup>145</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 75.

<sup>146</sup> Doug P. Baker, *Covenant and Community: Our Role as the Image of God* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 104.

<sup>147</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1982), 184.

<sup>148</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, vol. 41, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1990), 151.

<sup>149</sup> W.T. Conner, *Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1937), 260.

<sup>150</sup> Leo James Garrett Jr., “Seeking a Regenerate Church Membership,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 3, no. 2. (April 1961): 26. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000684732&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

required duties of the covenant being non-negotiable. The Old Testament covenants all pointed to Jesus, who fulfilled everything promised. Following these examples of God's perfect plan, the church continues this idea of a covenant community. A covenant community made up of regenerate members who are followers of Jesus Christ united in the new covenant with Him. Regenerate membership in the local church means that visible, particular, local churches should consist only of regenerate persons who continue to live in fellowship with Christ and their fellow believers in Christ.<sup>151</sup> Following the biblical example of a community in covenant, church covenants seek to unite people to God and each other through a particular set of obligations and responsibilities. These responsibilities involve a commitment to the church, its members, and the values centered around the Bible.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

R. Albert Mohler, Jr. explains that the church, the covenanted community of baptized believers, must take responsibility for fulfilling all Christ has commanded His people.<sup>152</sup> Jesus makes it clear that the overarching mission for Christians is to go make disciples, and the church is responsible for carrying it out.<sup>153</sup> However, what is less clear is the vision for accomplishing that mission. It is vital to have a clear vision because it is easy to become distracted without one. When a church becomes distracted, it creates a sort of ministry schizophrenia. Ministry schizophrenia is not an environment that is favorable to spiritual transformation.<sup>154</sup> Ministry schizophrenia has no direction or vision. Thom Rainer explains that it is vital for churches to

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<sup>151</sup> Garrett, "Seeking Regenerate Membership," 27.

<sup>152</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Southern Baptist Identity: Is There a Future?" in *Southern Baptist Identity: An Evangelical Denomination Faces the Future*, ed. David S. Dockery (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 27.

<sup>153</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 77.

<sup>154</sup> Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger. *Simple Church*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2011) Kindle Location 518.

have a structure because the structure allows them to continue to move forward.<sup>155</sup> Historically, church covenants have created a structure and a clear vision of expectations as it reminds members of what they have agreed to do.<sup>156</sup> Churches established covenants as they were perceived as the most suitable way to remind church members of their spiritual commitments and their responsibilities to the church.<sup>157</sup> In this section, the researcher explores the historical foundations for the use of church covenants and other DMIN thesis projects that have investigated the topic of implementing church covenants.

### Historical Foundations for Church Covenants

As a Southern Baptist, one does not need to look that far into the history of the Southern Baptist Convention and the church to see the mention of covenants. For example, the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 of the Southern Baptist Convention defines a New Testament church as:

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, *associated by covenant* in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.<sup>158</sup>

In defining a New Testament church, the Southern Baptist Convention has included the idea of the church being associated by a covenant. This idea of church covenants should be so ingrained in what it means to be a Baptist church that R. Stanton Norman goes as far as to say that every Baptist church should have a covenant, whether new or existing and well established.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Thom Rainer, *Scrappy Church: God's Not Done Yet* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2018), 36.

<sup>156</sup> Haykin, "Congregational Covenanting with God," 15.

<sup>157</sup> R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2005), 116.

<sup>158</sup> Emphasis added. Southern Baptist Convention. "Baptist Faith and Message, 2000." <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/> (accessed June 9, 2022).

<sup>159</sup> Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 118.



Historically, this language of people covenanting together in the church can be seen in American Baptist confessions of faith as early as 1833 with the New Hampshire Confession of Faith.<sup>160</sup> However, the use and mention of church covenants can be seen well before the 1833 New Hampshire Confession of Faith. In England, Robert Browne, who lived from 1550-1633, wrote of a church that consisted of a company of Christians who covenanted together.<sup>161</sup> Browne saw the local church as a gathered church as a fellowship of believers around a covenant living under the rule of Christ rather than an army of conscripts.<sup>162</sup> This idea went against the established state Church of England and was regarded as civil disobedience.<sup>163</sup> However, though many subscribers to Robert Browne's idea were faced with the possible penalty of death, the idea of a separate church united around a covenant began to grow. In America, the concept of covenanting together can be seen as early as the Mayflower in 1620. The Mayflower Pilgrims formed themselves into a body held together by a covenant.<sup>164</sup> Other covenants during the early years of American history can be seen in many of the first Baptist congregations in America. One such covenant can be seen in the Swansea Baptist Church established by John Miles, the first Baptist church in Massachusetts, ratifying their church covenant in 1663.<sup>165</sup> In subsequent years the idea of a church covenant spread throughout America as other churches established

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<sup>160</sup> The 1833 New Hampshire Confession of Faith reads very similarly to the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 saying, "We believe that a visible church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel..." California Baptist University, "The New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833)," Baptist Studies Online. <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/confessions-of-faith/#:~:text=The%20New%20Hampshire%20Confession%20of%20Faith> (accessed June 9, 2022).

<sup>161</sup> Haykin, "Some Historical Roots of Congregationalism," 33.

<sup>162</sup> Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 15.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> K.L. Sprunger, "Covenant Theology," in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, ed. Daniel G. Reid et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

<sup>165</sup> Michael A.G. Haykin, "Congregational Covenanting with God: A Forgotten Spiritual Discipline," *Occasional Publications*, no. 12 (2020): 9. <https://andrewfullercenter.org/s/No-12-Haykin.pdf>.

covenants. Some congregations, such as the 1682 Kittery Baptists, adopted church covenants before moving to other areas of the colonies.<sup>166</sup>

Church covenants are not a new or recent idea. Deweese notes that Baptists throughout their history have written and used church covenants.<sup>167</sup> Also, church covenants were one of the more necessary documents regarding expectations for Baptist church members throughout history.<sup>168</sup> For example, it was common for seventeenth-century Baptists to form new congregations by “covenanting” with God and one another to walk together in the ways of Christ.<sup>169</sup> Though these church covenants were not mandatory for all Baptist churches, almost every church adopted these strongly worded covenants.<sup>170</sup> One established church covenant that has been popular for use in many churches for over a century is the one printed in J. Newton Brown’s *The Baptist Church Manual* from 1853.<sup>171</sup> The covenant that J. Newton Brown published in his manual finds its roots in 1833, having been first developed by the New Hampshire Baptist Convention.<sup>172</sup>

Though historically, covenants have served prominently in churches for centuries, the idea of covenanting together as a body of believers has fallen out of use by many churches in the last half-century. Due to a focus on membership numbers, many churches stopped using church

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<sup>166</sup> The Kittery Baptists eventually moved to Charleston, SC, in 1696. H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1987), 144.

<sup>167</sup> Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, v.

<sup>168</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, *The Baptist Story*, 194.

<sup>169</sup> Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 115.

<sup>170</sup> L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 4.

<sup>171</sup> Timothy George, “Introduction,” in *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, ed. Timothy George and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 15.

<sup>172</sup> Howard B. Foshee, *Broadman Church Manual* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1973), 25–26.

covenants to speed up the membership process.<sup>173</sup> The discontinued use of church covenants may not seem to be of much significance. However, Timothy George explains that neglecting things like the church covenant has contributed to the theological amnesia and spiritual myopia that afflicts many churches today.<sup>174</sup> R. Stanton Norman echoes George's sentiment explaining that the neglect of the church covenant is a significant concern for the church.<sup>175</sup> It is easy to see the crisis. In many ways, the church covenant and the sense of belonging to God and one another have been replaced with a sense of egocentrism and belonging to self. The church covenant is the remedy for this sense of egocentrism and belonging to oneself. As A. Roy Medley explains, covenants are vital because they serve as a powerful antidote to the consumeristic view of the church that focuses on what a person can receive from church membership.<sup>176</sup>

#### DMIN Thesis Projects from the Previous Ten Years

In this sub-section, the researcher summarizes, analyzes, and comments on other DMIN thesis projects accomplished in the last ten years. Within this section, the researcher identifies how this thesis project differs from these projects while learning from their processes and outcomes. The researcher has intentionally sought to utilize three different projects on church covenants from three distinct denominational traditions: Baptist, Church of Christ, and Presbyterian. The researcher has organized these three thesis projects chronologically, beginning with the most recent and going to the least recent.

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<sup>173</sup> James Leo Garrett Jr., "Foreword," Kindle Location 143.

<sup>174</sup> Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 1.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>176</sup> A. Roy Medley, "Foreword to the Second Revised Edition" in *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. David Gregg (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2012), Kindle Location 30.

### **Four Mile Creek Baptist Church - 2020**

Todd N. Davis, in his 2020 DMIN thesis project, worked toward developing a covenant membership strategy for Four Mile Creek Baptist Church. In Davis's project, he preached five sermons on the need for a church covenant.<sup>177</sup> After the sermon series, the congregation created a strategy team to pursue a covenantal church membership strategy.<sup>178</sup> The strategy team then met over six sessions to formulate a tentative covenant before presenting the findings to the congregation.<sup>179</sup> After the presentation, the congregation voted unanimously to accept and pursue the implantation of the new covenant strategy.<sup>180</sup>

In ecclesiology, Four Mile Creek Baptist Church is the closest to Hillcrest Baptist Church since both are Baptist congregations. However, this thesis project differs from Davis's in several ways. First, the author of this thesis project is the pastor of the church where the project will take place. Davis was enacting his project as the minister of education and discipleship.<sup>181</sup> Being the church pastor allows this researcher more flexibility in implementing the plan. There is one less step in the process since this researcher does not need to obtain permission from the pastor to move forward. Second, this thesis project seeks to reintroduce and reimplement a church covenant already in place instead of having to create one. In addition, since the covenant is already in place, there is no need for a more extended strategic planning session, thus avoiding the loss of momentum Davis faced.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Todd N. Davis, "Developing a Covenant Membership Strategy for Four Mile Creek Baptist Church, Moss Point, Mississippi" (D.Min. Thesis, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2020), 2, Theological Research Exchange Network (053-0793).

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>181</sup> Davis, "Project proposal," 6.

<sup>182</sup> Davis, "Developing a Covenant Membership Strategy," 53.

## Gwinnett Church of Christ - 2016

David Chisholm explored formulating a covenant of discipleship for Gwinnett Church of Christ for his 2016 DMIN thesis project. Chisholm sought to create a covenant to facilitate the discipleship process among the members of Gwinnett Church of Christ.<sup>183</sup> Chisholm concluded that the best way to combat a loss of community in his congregation was the establishment of a covenant.<sup>184</sup> Chisholm established various sessions during the church's Sunday Bible study at 9:30 AM.<sup>185</sup> The group met a total of ten separate times. The first two at the beginning of December 2015 are what Chisholm describes as “prequel sessions.”<sup>186</sup> In these prequel sessions, Chisholm discussed the project's objectives and laid the groundwork for what would come later by studying background information on the book of Hebrews.<sup>187</sup> Beginning in January 2016, Chisholm led the group through eight more sessions starting with a review of what was covered in the prequel sessions.<sup>188</sup>

In the eight sessions, Chisholm focused on relating the book of Hebrews to the idea of a covenant for six sessions, followed by two sessions of constructing the covenant document.<sup>189</sup> Now, unlike Davis, Chisholm was not working from a blank slate. Instead, the covenant document Chisholm developed for the membership was based initially on a covenant designed

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<sup>183</sup> David Chisholm, “Formulating a Covenant of Discipleship for the Membership of the Gwinnett Church of Christ” (D.Min. thesis, Abilene Christian University, 2016), 1, Theological Research Exchange Network (050-0222).

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-54.

and created for the church's leadership.<sup>190</sup> After teaching the book of Hebrews, Chisholm found that in week seven, there was a point of contention. A problem arose, debating precisely what the covenant was supposed to be. A person questioned if the covenant was between them and God or them and each other.<sup>191</sup> In addition, there was a question of how the covenant would be implemented or utilized. However, in answering the questions, Chisholm unintentionally establishes that what they are developing is not truly a covenant. Chisholm answers the member's questions by explaining, "...our covenant of discipleship was intended to function as a lens through which we view the process of discipleship..."<sup>192</sup> The problem with this statement is that by making the covenant simply a "lens," it ceases to be a covenant. In a covenant, there is a sense of a bond between two parties that is usually ratified by some means of commitment.<sup>193</sup> If the covenant is reduced to only being a guiding lens, then there is no sense of a relationship or responsibility. This statement and idea go against what Chisholm's independent expert emphasized, the need for commitment to be a part of the process.<sup>194</sup> As Chisholm's expert explains in his evaluation of the project, "Without any accountability, however, the covenant might become a piece of paper filed away somewhere instead of a document breathing joy into the participant's life of discipleship."<sup>195</sup> Though this evaluation is more practical, there is still an emphasis on a need for adherence and accountability. It seems that Chisholm did not cover these aspects of a covenant in his sessions or did not consider them an integral piece of covenants in

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<sup>190</sup> The previous leadership team covenant was developed for a DMIN Thesis Project done by Drew Gaylor in 2013.

<sup>191</sup> Chisholm, "Formulating a Covenant of Discipleship," 52.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Scott Hahn, "Covenant," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>194</sup> Chisholm, "Formulating a Covenant of Discipleship," 67.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 109.

general. The participants in Chisholm's study seemed to see the need for community and affirmed the idea of community in their responses to the survey. Still, it does not seem like they got to the point of thinking it was essential for members to commit to the community.<sup>196</sup> So, though Chisholm's expert emphasized the need for commitment, there is no indication that Chisholm emphasized this same need for commitment when presenting it to the participants. Even though Chisholm created a document that he calls a covenant, in practice, without obligation or responsibility, it would probably be more accurately described as a "mission statement" or "purpose statement." Essentially, Chisholm created a document of principles titled "Covenant," but requires no commitment or adherence to the established covenant.

Chisholm's project created a document, but there was no implementation at the time of its completion. This lack of follow-through leads to several different questions regarding implementation. Chisholm poses a question about implementation in his conclusion that asks if there should be multiple variations of the covenant for various groups within the church.<sup>197</sup> This idea of having numerous different covenants seems to echo again a lack of an accurate picture of what a covenant is and its role in the community. Having multiple covenants for different groups in the church would functionally split the congregation into numerous groups under the various covenants. With this arrangement, each member would have different requirements than other members. As for suggestions, Chisholm considered planning a sermon series based on the principles detailed in the document.<sup>198</sup> This thesis project differs from Chisholm's in that it is centered around preaching a sermon series based on the text of the church covenant. The luxury to do this is afforded by the fact that this project utilizes an existing church covenant document

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<sup>196</sup> Chisholm, "Formulating a Covenant of Discipleship," 44.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

instead of creating or adapting one not designed for the congregation in Chisholm's case. In addition, one of the primary focuses is the uniting relational aspect of the church covenant under a consciously made commitment to God and one another.

### **Clear Lake Presbyterian Church - 2012**

Stephen Preston Oglesbee's 2012 DMIN thesis project focused on establishing a covenant with the leadership at Clear Lake Presbyterian Church. Oglesbee's DMIN thesis project differs from the previous two in that it primarily concerns a covenant for the church's leadership. However, it is included in this foundational section because Oglesbee specifically mentions it pertains to a church that has fallen into steep numerical decline.<sup>199</sup> Clear Lake Presbyterian Church and Hillcrest Baptist Church differ from an ecclesiological standpoint, but the churches are similar in history. Although Hillcrest Baptist Church is in a more dire situation than Clear Lake Presbyterian Church, many similarities can be found between the two churches.

Oglesbee's project sought a biblical and relevant model to find answers for the ministry crisis at Clear Lake Presbyterian.<sup>200</sup> In the past, Clear Lake Presbyterian implemented an aggressive programmatic and seeker-sensitive church model. However, though it seemed to produce positive results, it had one significant adverse consequence. The aggressive approach took a physical toll on the pastor, who eventually suffered a heart attack. After the heart attack, the pastor subsequently retired from the church.<sup>201</sup> Before the pastor's retirement, there were warning signs that the church could not maintain the aggressive pace it was trying to sustain. Still, after the pastor's retirement in 1991, many members found the programs required and

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<sup>199</sup> Stephen Preston Oglesbee, "Covenant Strategy Through Community, Spiritual Formation, and Mission for Renewal at Clear Lake Presbyterian Church," (D.Min. Thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2012), 4, Theological Research Exchange Network (125-0074).

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 17.



demanded more resources from the church and the people.<sup>202</sup> In the 2000s, the church found that membership numbers had continued to grow, but many inactive members were included. As a result, even though the membership peaked at 1,474, the average worship attendance peaked at 633.<sup>203</sup> Also, in the 2000s, several problems with the facility and the church staff led to a severe decline in attendance.<sup>204</sup> The trajectory and causes for the decrease in attendance are similar to what can be seen in the history of Hillcrest Baptist Church, along with both church buildings being of a similar age.

Oglesbee's project sought to lead the elders and staff of his church through a process that would result in a ministry leadership covenant.<sup>205</sup> Oglesbee accomplished this by utilizing the monthly leadership meetings and the leadership retreats the church had already established.<sup>206</sup> The structure of Oglesbee's project involved fourteen different segments.<sup>207</sup> First, Oglesbee utilized three books to lead the leadership through conversation surrounding community, spiritual formation, and missional engagement.<sup>208</sup> In addition, Oglesbee utilized Bible studies based on significant scriptural covenants.<sup>209</sup> Oglesbee then used the leadership retreats to cover the idea of covenant and crafting the covenant document.<sup>210</sup> Oglesbee's process seems long and daunting, requiring a significant time commitment. In addition, Oglesbee comments that the

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<sup>202</sup> Oglesbee, "Covenant Strategy," 17.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 147-151.

elders serve for three years, with five new elders elected yearly.<sup>211</sup> As Oglesbee explains, this elder turnover requires that the elders modify the leadership covenant to reflect the new incoming elders. This revision is significant because if the new elders do not subscribe to the covenant, it will be obsolete in as little as three years.<sup>212</sup> Though Oglesbee's goal was to create a covenant with the leadership, the stated goal was that the leadership covenant would eventually impact the church as a whole.<sup>213</sup> However, if the process is equally involved every year, this might prove problematic if the elders must revisit the covenant every year when new elders are elected. Oglesbee explains that the leadership process is ten months with a two-month transition.<sup>214</sup> If this schedule is the case and the covenant process takes up the whole ten months, the covenant is only truly in effect for two months before the church elders must revise in another ten-month long process.

Overall, it is unknown if Oglesbee accomplished or implemented his plan. Oglesbee writes everything in the thesis project in the future tense. In addition, there is no indication that what Oglesbee writes about has taken place or the project's successful outcome. As Oglesbee concludes his thesis project, he comments, "A little more than a year from now, [Clear Lake Presbyterian Church] ministry leaders will have a copy of the leadership covenant..."<sup>215</sup> In addition, another clue that Oglesbee did not implement the process is that there is no mention of possible ways to improve the process. Though seeing the process Oglesbee goes through to come up with the covenant is beneficial, it would have been of a more significant benefit if one could see the outcome. From the point of view of this researcher, a ten-month process that might need

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<sup>211</sup> Oglesbee, "Covenant Strategy," 109-110.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 173.

to be revisited yearly or at least every three years is a daunting task. In addition, Oglesbee addresses the church's leadership, but other than relying on a trickle-down effect, Oglesbee's plan does not address the congregation. Forgetting to include the membership in the covenant seems to perpetuate some of the issues that led the church to be in this situation, with everything falling on the leadership.

### Conclusion

This project's theoretical foundation finds itself in historical and contemporary sources. Church covenants have served as the foundation of many churches for centuries. Although this researcher could not find any recent existing thesis projects that explored the reintroduction of a historical church covenant as this thesis project will investigate, the recent thesis projects used in this section explore the implementation of church covenants. This thesis project will consider the lessons learned from the other projects referenced in this section. While Oglesbee's thesis project did not contain any information on the outcome of his project, there is good information collected about the process for his planned implementation. Davis's project demonstrated the need to capitalize on the momentum generated from the sermon series and to limit the time between the sermon series and implantation to maximize effectiveness. Finally, Gwinnett's project displays the need for relationship and commitment beyond a simple written document. These three thesis projects, combined with the historical use of covenants, will serve as the theoretical foundation of this thesis project.

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, the researcher describes how the problem presented in this thesis project was addressed. This study sought to identify if teaching about Hillcrest Baptist Church's covenant will revitalize a declining church. The researcher aimed the study presented within this DMIN project thesis to answer the research question, "Does knowing and understanding the covenant of Hillcrest Baptist Church make a difference in our efforts to revitalize a declining church?" This study was designed and implemented to address the problem as the researcher presented it in Chapter 1. In addition, the study used the sources and foundations established in Chapter 2 in its design and implementation. The desired outcome of this study was to demonstrate that teaching about Hillcrest Baptist Church's covenant would revitalize the declining church. The researcher will describe the study's design and implementation in this chapter. The table below details the researcher's steps in developing the study project (see Table 3.1). In addition, this chapter discusses participant recruitment, the study's structure, and the study's location.

Table 3.1. Study Design and Overview: The steps associated with the study's creation, development, and implementation

<b>Study Design and Overview</b>	
Step 1	Obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval
Step 2	Divided the church covenant into four parts to be covered on Sunday mornings.
Step 3	Met with the expert panel and obtained recommendations for presenting the church covenant to the attendees of Hillcrest Baptist Church.
Step 4	Developed the related sermons to go with the different parts of the church covenant, including a week one introduction sermon covering the biblical foundation of covenants and the history of church covenants, emphasizing the history of church covenants in the Baptist church.
Step 5	Planned and established the beginning date of the study for September 4, 2022.
Step 6	Began recruiting participants for the study through announcements and letters. (Appendix A)
Step 7	Distributed consent forms along with pre-study surveys.
Step 8	Secured informed consent from participants via consent forms. (Appendix B)
Step 9	Confirmed all completed pre-study surveys were turned in before the beginning of the study.
Step 10	Created response cards for the participants to fill out after each week's service.
Step 11	Preached the five weeks of sermons based on the church's covenant.
Step 12	Distributed the post-study surveys.
Step 13	Collected the post-study surveys.
Step 14	Analyzed data and synthesized the data trends.
Step 15	Met with the expert panel for a second time. Presented the study's findings and obtained recommendations for the best way to proceed.
Step 16	Present the findings and the recommendations to the leadership of Hillcrest Baptist Church.

## Intervention Design

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate that teaching about Hillcrest Baptist Church's covenant would result in the revitalization of a declining church. The thesis project was designed to create a sermon series to reintroduce and explain the contents of the church's covenant to the membership of Hillcrest Baptist Church. The beginning of this thesis project resulted from a conversation with a long-time member of Hillcrest Baptist Church. The researcher found from this conversation that the church had a long-established yet mostly forgotten church covenant. After some investigation, the researcher found that this historical church covenant was included in the church's old and now long disused hymnals dating from 1956.<sup>1</sup> In exploring the topic, it was evident that church covenants were typical for many churches, particularly Baptist churches, throughout history. However, many churches, including Hillcrest Baptist Church, have lost the idea of church covenants over the last century.

As the first step before commencing with this project's interactive social and behavioral research portion, the researcher compiled and submitted the project prospectus to the Liberty University IRB. Once the researcher obtained IRB approval, the researcher began finalizing the study and advertising the upcoming opportunity. The study's start time depended on obtaining IRB approval and the time required to plan out the five weeks of intervention. In planning the five weeks, the researcher divided the church covenant into various parts to be covered on Sunday morning.

The intervention began with an introduction week, covering the biblical foundation of church covenants and the historical basis of church covenants. In the first week, the researcher also included information regarding the historical use of church covenants in the history of the

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<sup>1</sup> The church covenant was included before the responsive readings in the 1956 Baptist Hymnal. Walter Hines Sims, ed. *Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1956), 476.

Baptist church, including the idea of churches being associated by covenant as demonstrated in the current Southern Baptist Convention's Baptist Faith and Message from 2000. The researcher presented the topics and themes within the church's covenant in the following three weeks. The intervention culminated with a fifth week that sought to integrate all the themes and topics of the church covenant. In preparing for the five weeks of intervention, the researcher consulted outside experts regarding church covenants and the best way to present the contents to the church. These outside experts held doctoral degrees and had experience pastoring churches. The researcher used the external experts' advice and their reflections in formulating and developing the final study.

#### Participant Recruitment

Leading up to the implementation of the project, the researcher made announcements through the church newsletter and in the Sunday morning service to recruit participants for the project. In addition, the researcher followed up on these invitations and announcements in various ways, including in-person conversations, phone calls, and emails (see Appendix A for script examples). After each service, the researcher made himself available to answer questions and hand out information packets about the study. The researcher included the consent form and the pre-study questionnaire with the information packets. The consent form included all information necessary for each potential participant to make an informed decision on their participation in the study (Appendix B).

All participants were over the age of eighteen. In addition, the researcher did not consider Bible or church background for eligibility for the study. In addition, the study did not assume the participants to have any Bible or church knowledge other than their known attendance at Hillcrest Baptist Church. Participant selection was left broad and open for two main reasons. The

first reason is that the total attendance on Sunday morning at the time of the implementation of the study ranged anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five individuals, depending on the week. In addition, several of the fifteen to twenty-five attendees at the time were under the age of eighteen. This combination of factors led to not only a tiny participant pool but also an unpredictable participant pool. Due to these issues, the researcher decided to remain broad with the requirements to ensure maximum participation. The second reason the participant selection was left wide and open was that the researcher determined that every attendee would benefit from learning about the church's established covenant. Therefore, every attendee could benefit from the project because the church covenant was relevant to every Christian and potential future church member. In addition, the church currently operates under membership practices similar to what is described in Chapter 2 by John Mark Yeats as the abused standard method of SBC churches with on-the-spot member affirmation based on simple confession. Therefore, there would be no guarantee that membership in the church meant the participant was a repentant, regenerate believer in Christ. However, though the study was open to all, the researcher designed the thesis project with its primary purpose directed toward Hillcrest Baptist Church's covenant members.

Upon expressing interest in participating in the study, the researcher explained all the expectations of the study, and each participant received an initial packet. This initial packet included a consent form for each participant to sign to agree to participate in the research (see Appendix B). In addition, the initial packet also included a pre-study questionnaire to complete and return. The researcher would use data from the pre-study questionnaire to develop a pre-study baseline. This pre-study baseline would allow the researcher to establish a starting point to measure the change in the participants' minds after the study's conclusion. After the study's



conclusion, a post-study questionnaire would be utilized to obtain data to compare and determine potential change.

In designing the project, the researcher determined that the optimal number of participants in the project pool would be twenty people. This number was established for the project to be more manageable. Depending on the overall interest in the project, if more than twenty people showed interest in the project, the researcher would limit the group to twenty people. The researcher established that the process for selecting the final twenty participants was to pick them randomly using assigned participant numbers and a random number generator. However, the researcher did not need to employ this culling process as the project interest did not reach the predetermined threshold of twenty participants.

Before starting the project, the researcher explained the process to the participants in writing and in person. In addition, the researcher clearly defined and outlined all expectations for the participants before they were recruited to minimize dropout. The researcher advertised the project verbally and in writing. Information was made available in print for potential participants to consider beforehand. Before starting the study, the researcher determined what the consequences of non-participation or dropout would be on the study. The researcher determined that the effect of the non-participant or dropout would have ultimately depended on the total number of participants not participating or dropping out. Small amounts of non-participation or dropout of participants would not be a problem for this study and would add insight to the data retrieved. However, withdrawal or non-participation from all participants would cause issues with the investigation, as it would likely not yield adequate information to answer the research question. The researcher also determined that if non-participation or dropout would lower the participation below a minimum viable group, another study, and group may have needed to be

implemented. However, if it would be impossible to stage another study, the researcher might consider any gathered information that can still be sourced from the perceived failure.

### Location and Meetings

The study occurred at Hillcrest Baptist Church, located in Carlsbad, NM. The researcher designed the weekly Sunday services so that the entire service was organized around each section of the church covenant, as divided in step 2 of the study design. Though these services were designed primarily by the researcher, they also involved coordinating with the church's volunteer song leader. The services included prayer, Bible reading, singing, instruction, and performing the ordinances. The service elements were all based on the themes of the various sections of the church covenant that corresponded to the topic and theme covered by the sermon that week.

At the time of this study, the church was meeting in the Fellowship Hall for Sunday morning services. Therefore, it was also the location where the study transpired as it occurred during the church's already established 10:45 AM Sunday morning service time. Since the church's pastor was the primary researcher, and the study occurred during the church's typically scheduled Sunday morning worship service time and its usual location, it did not require pre-approval. The only change necessary for the study involved extra coordination and cooperation between the pastor and the song leader to connect all the service elements with the theme and topic of the church covenant covered that week. Each total meeting lasted approximately one hour to one hour and fifteen minutes.

One of the primary goals of the study was to gather accurate data. Since data gathering was one of the primary goals, collecting the data was of utmost importance. Therefore, every week the researcher asked the participants to fill out a small form asking two questions: "What

did you learn today?” and “What is one question you have?” These comments and questions proved vital in understanding and tracking the participant’s thoughts during the study. The data obtained from these questions and the data obtained from the pre-study and post-study questionnaires are analyzed and synthesized in the next chapter.

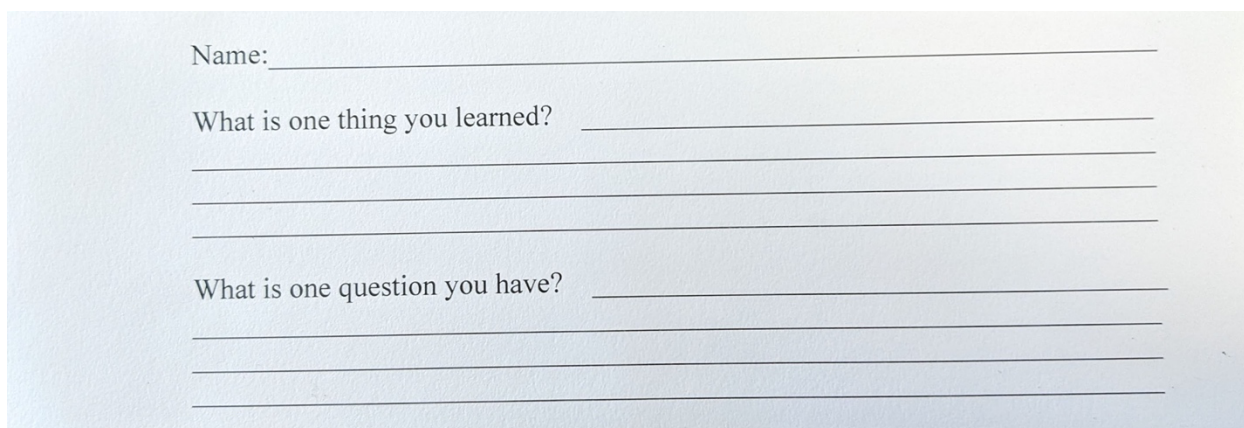
### **Implementation of the Intervention Design**

This section will cover the implementation of the study as designed and presented in the first part of this chapter. The researcher implemented the study by preaching a five-week sermon series at Hillcrest Baptist Church in Carlsbad, NM. This study covered the previously established but mostly forgotten church covenant and was developed to emphasize regenerate church membership and the themes found in the church covenant. Before the social and behavioral portion of the research began, the researcher completed training on May 10, 2022, through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) regarding social and behavioral research. This training fulfilled the CITI training requirements for social and behavioral research investigations with human subjects. The CITI training included required modules on ethical principles, federal regulations, assessment of risks, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, approaching unanticipated problems, and reporting requirements. In addition, the researcher completed an elective module covering internet-based research. After the researcher completed the CITI training and a certificate was issued, the researcher then submitted the prospectus for the study and all additional supporting documents to the Liberty University IRB for approval (see Appendix F for the IRB approval letter). Once the researcher received approval from the IRB on June 15, 2022, the researcher began implementing the steps associated with the study's creation, development, and implementation as outlined in the study design and overview established in Table 3.1 above.

At this point, the researcher instituted a start date of September 4, 2022, to begin the public portion of the study with participants. The public part of the study involved the preaching of a five-week sermon series with additional questions to be answered by the participants. Advertisements for the study began on July 27, 2022, just over a month before the study's start date. The researcher advertised the study via the church's weekly newsletter, the weekly announcement time during the Sunday morning service, and by word of mouth. All eligible potential participants, including all attendees over eighteen, were informed they could speak with the researcher before or after the church service to learn more about participating in the study. When approached by interested participants, the researcher explained the study, the purpose, and the requirements. Initial interest in the project was lower than expected. Initially, eight participants came forward to express interest in participating in the study. The researcher determined that this number would not provide an adequate sample for the project. In response to the low interest, the researcher began to ask individuals one-on-one to see if they would be interested in participating. A week before the study was to commence, the researcher recruited the help of four more participants to bring the total number of the study to twelve. Ultimately, these twelve proved to be an adequate cross-section of the church and represented over half of the adult attendance on an average Sunday.

To better understand the participant's starting awareness of the covenant, the researcher asked each participant to complete a pre-study questionnaire. The pre-study questionnaire was included along with the informed consent form (Appendix B) and distributed to the twelve church attendees over the age of eighteen who either expressed interest or were recruited to participate in the study. As part of the project study process, the researcher asked the participants to attend all five Sunday morning services between September 4 to October 2, 2022, in which the

study was to take place. In addition, the researcher asked participants to fill out a pre-study questionnaire (Appendix D) before the sermon series began and a post-study questionnaire (Appendix E) once the sermon series was complete. In addition, each participant was asked to answer two questions after each week's service. The researcher printed these two questions on a slip of paper for each participant (Figure 3.1). These slips were handed to each participant before the service began. Each participant was instructed to complete and turn the questions in before leaving the service. The slips of paper were to be collected at the end of service in a folder used explicitly for this purpose and then stored in the pastor's locked office.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

What is one thing you learned? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What is one question you have? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Figure 3.1. Weekly questions slip example.

The researcher collected each of the informed consent forms and the pre-study questionnaires from all participants prior to the start date of the study, September 4, 2022. The purpose of the pre-study questionnaire was to establish a baseline of awareness. The pre-study questionnaire was designed to understand each participant's awareness of the church covenant, its contents, and perceived adherence to it. The researcher asked these questions to establish a pre-study baseline, as the same questions were asked later in the post-study questionnaire to determine any change due to the study. A more in-depth analysis of individual participant pre-study and post-study questionnaires, including an examination of similarities and differences, is

included in the next chapter. In addition, the answers to the pre-study questionnaires helped to shape the coming five weeks as they informed the researcher of any prior knowledge or awareness the participants might have had in the church covenant. Ultimately, the pre-study questionnaire showed that many were aware of the covenant. However, it also showed that while many were aware of its existence, they were less aware of its contents or importance.

The study began on September 4, 2022, during the already established 10:45 AM service and proceeded for the following five weeks concluding on October 2, 2022. All meetings for the project were held in the Fellowship Hall of Hillcrest Baptist Church located in Carlsbad, NM. Each week's meeting lasted approximately one hour to one hour and fifteen minutes. The researcher did not offer, nor did he give any monetary compensation to the participants. The final participants of the study consisted of nine women and three men. These twelve participants included those who were either members or those who have attended Hillcrest Baptist Church, with a time of connection with the church ranging from less than one year to over twenty years. The study commenced as shown by date and topic in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Study Date and Topic by Week

<b>Week #</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>
1	September 4, 2022	Biblical and Historical Foundations of Church Covenants
2	September 11, 2022	Salvation and Baptism
3	September 18, 2022	The Relationship of a Church Member to the Church
4	September 25, 2022	Personal Christian Living
5	October 2, 2022	Christian Love and Fellowship

The following sections detail each week's preparation and implementation of the study, beginning with the weeks leading up to the five-week series and ending with its culmination.

### Week Zero – Preparation

Before the first week of the study, the researcher confirmed that all consent forms and pre-study questionnaires had been collected from the participants. Then, to prepare for the first week, the researcher printed copies of the church's covenant on card stock. The researcher provided copies of the church covenant in both a half-sheet version and a full-sheet larger print version for the congregation. The researcher prepared two different formats to allow people to choose the best format. A larger print version offered the more elderly members of the congregation a copy that was easier to read. At the same time, the smaller format provided a version that could easily fit in a Bible. The printed copies of the church's covenant were made available to the study participants and all church attendees to have a copy. Both sizes of the church covenant ultimately proved popular, and the researcher had to print more copies of each.

Next, after preparing copies of the church covenant, the researcher also began coordinating the other elements of the church service with the volunteer song leader. The design of each service was to coordinate the music and other aspects with the topic and theme of each week. As the researcher and song leader began working through the service elements, it was decided that the final week would culminate with taking the Lord's Supper together as a church. Concluding the study with the Lord's Supper would symbolize the congregation's unity and fellowship through Christ's sacrifice.

Last, as the researcher began to prepare the sermons for the week, the weekly themes shown in Table 3.2 (above) began to develop. The researcher had already divided the church covenant into sections based on similar themes. However, the researcher's original intention of the sermon series was to go line by line through the covenant and show how each part connected to the Bible. However, as the researcher developed each week's sermons, basic core themes

continued to shine through from the covenant. At this time, the researcher considered that instead of covering the covenant line by line, the sermon topics should shift to the topics and themes of each of the covenant's basic core themes. This change of direction proved to be the right decision as the pre-study questionnaires showed that many participants were familiar with the contents of the covenant, thus requiring less explanation of the explicit contents of the covenant. However, the pre-survey questionnaire also showed that the study needed more focus on why the covenant was significant.

#### Week One – Biblical and Historical Foundations of Church Covenants

Leading up to the first week, the researcher prepared a handout linked to the week's message. The contents of a completed handout from week one are shown in Figure 3.2. These handouts were prepared and made available for each week's sermon. The handouts were available to all service attendees for their own personal reference, not just those participating in the study. The researcher did not collect the handouts at the end of the service as they were designed for the benefit of the attendees.



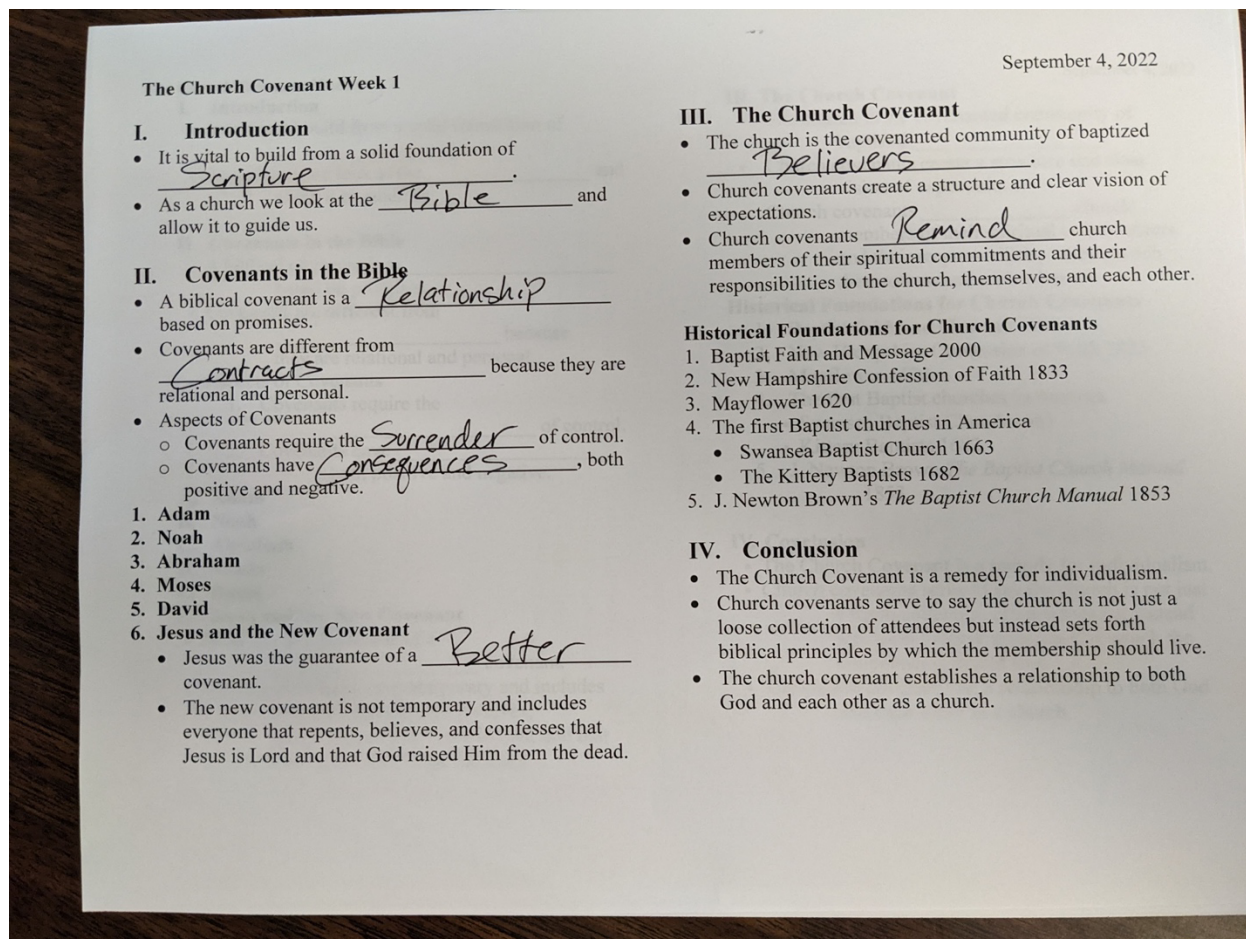


Figure 3.2. Example of a completed handout

The overall church service followed a similar pattern as the church's usual services, as outlined in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3. Typical Hillcrest Baptist Church Morning Worship Service Order

Welcome and Prayer (Usually done by the Chairman of the Deacons)
2 Songs
Pastor's Welcome and Announcements
3 Songs
Message
Invitation/Response Time
Offering
Pastoral Benediction

The first week's focus was the biblical and historical foundations of the church covenant. All service elements, including the songs and the sermon, were tied to this topic. The contents of this sermon included information about the biblical covenants as well as the historical use of covenants. Response from the first week was generally positive, with some of the participants beginning to ask questions that the researcher would later answer in subsequent weeks of the study. Overall, this first week served as an introduction to begin to create an interest in the topic while establishing a foundation to build on in later weeks. Table 3.4 identifies the content outline for week one contained in the handout provided to attendees.

Table 3.4. Contents for Handout 1

<b>Foundations</b> <b>The Church Covenant Week 1</b>	September 4, 2022
<p><b>I. Introduction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is vital to build from a solid foundation of <b>SCRIPTURE</b>.</li> <li>• As a church, we look at the <b>BIBLE</b> and allow it to guide us.</li> <li>•</li> </ul> <p><b>II. Covenants in the Bible</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A biblical covenant is a <b>RELATIONSHIP</b> based on promises.</li> <li>• Covenants are different from <b>CONTRACTS</b> because they are relational and personal.</li> <li>• Aspects of Covenants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Covenants require the <b>SURRENDER</b> of control.</li> <li>○ Covenants have <b>CONSEQUENCES</b>, both positive and negative.</li> </ul> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Adam</b></li> <li>2. <b>Noah</b></li> <li>3. <b>Abraham</b></li> <li>4. <b>Moses</b></li> <li>5. <b>David</b></li> <li>6. <b>Jesus and the New Covenant</b></li> </ol> </li> <li>• Jesus was the guarantee of a <b>BETTER</b> covenant.</li> <li>• The new covenant is not temporary and includes everyone that repents, believes, and confesses that Jesus is Lord and that God raised Him from the dead.</li> </ul> <p><b>III. The Church Covenant</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The church is the covenanted community of baptized <b>BELIEVERS</b>.</li> <li>• Church covenants create a structure and clear vision of expectations.</li> <li>• Church covenants <b>REMIND</b> church members of their spiritual commitments and responsibilities to the church, themselves, and each other.</li> </ul>	

### **Historical Foundations for Church Covenants**

1. Baptist Faith and Message 2000
2. New Hampshire Confession of Faith 1833
3. Mayflower 1620
4. The first Baptist churches in America
  - Swansea Baptist Church 1663
  - The Kittery Baptists 1682
5. J. Newton Brown's *The Baptist Church Manual* 1853

### **IV. Conclusion**

- The Church Covenant is a remedy for individualism.
- Church covenants say the church is not just a loose collection of attendees but instead sets forth biblical principles by which the membership should live.
- The church covenant establishes a relationship to both God and each other as a church.

### **Week Two – Salvation and Baptism**

The service for week two followed the template, as shown in Table 3.3. Like the first week, the songs and message were based on the week's topic. The songs for this week focused on the themes of salvation and baptism. The second week's primary focus was the necessity for church members to be born-again Christians. The songs and the sermon were based on salvation and repentance. This sermon included the importance of a true profession of faith, repentance, and baptism. This emphasis incorporated the importance of being born again and not simply being a Christian in name only. This week also began to introduce the importance of the church being a covenanted community of baptized born-again believers, which would be emphasized throughout the study. Responses from the participants in the second week continued to be positive, with interest building on the contents of the covenant. The handout for this week is available in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5. Contents for Handout 2

<b>Salvation and Baptism</b> <b>The Church Covenant Week 2</b>	September 11, 2022
<p><b>I. Introduction</b></p> <p><b>II. The Importance of a Profession of Faith and Repentance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members of the church should be <b>CHRISTIANS</b>.</li> <li>• A Christian is a professed repentant surrendered baptized believer.</li> <li>• A decision without being born again is a counterfeit conversion (John 3:3).</li> <li>• Jesus calls us to <b>REPENTANCE</b>.</li> <li>• Repentance is a change of mind that results in a change of action.</li> <li>• The first part of the church covenant is the idea that we must be <b>BORN AGAIN</b>.</li> </ul> <p><b>III. The Importance of Being Baptized</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The first step after being born again is <b>BAPTISM</b> (Acts 2:38).</li> <li>• The Bible teaches two things about baptism: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Baptism is for the <b>BELIEVER</b>.</li> <li>2) Baptism does not <b>SAVE</b>.</li> </ol> </li> <li>• Baptism symbolizes four things: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) The Trinity (Matthew 28:19).</li> <li>2) The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6).</li> <li>3) A person's cleansing from sin (2 Corinthians 5:17).</li> <li>4) A person's incorporation into the new covenant community (Ephesians 4:5; 1 Corinthians 12:13).</li> </ol> </li> </ul> <p><b>IV. The Importance of Being One Body in Christ</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The church is the covenanted <b>COMMUNITY</b> of baptized believers.</li> <li>• The church was formed and built on the gospel. (Matthew 16:16-18).</li> <li>• Members have responsibilities toward one another. (Matthew 18:15-17).</li> <li>• The church should live by laws and values centered around Jesus and His Word.</li> <li>• The church can ensure that believers are not facing the world <b>ALONE</b>.</li> <li>• Jesus called Christians to be a part of the covenant community of believers.</li> </ul> <p><b>V. Conclusion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Church covenants remind members of the body of Christ of their spiritual commitments and responsibilities to the church, themselves, and each other.</li> </ul>	

### Week Three – The Relationship Between a Church Member and the Church

The service for week three followed the template, as shown in Table 3.3. The service proceeded as weeks one and two did prior, with the songs and message once again being based on the topic. The third week covered church members' relationship with the local church. The contents of this sermon included an emphasis on the importance of church members gathering to worship and fellowship as a body of Christ. In addition, there was an emphasis on individual generosity. The sermon covered generosity from two standpoints: 1) financially and 2) sharing God-given gifts, skills, talents, passions, experiences, and strengths to further God's kingdom and His church.

Week three again emphasized the church being a covenanted community of born-again, baptized believers. Included in this week was a personal story from the researcher about a church building that was purchased and turned into a restaurant. This researcher followed this story by explaining that many church attendees have indeed begun to treat churches like they are restaurants, simply a menu of goods and services available and an expectation to be served. Unfortunately, included in this was an admission that many churches have accepted, surrendered, or even enabled that mentality. However, this week ended with a push to refocus the view of the church. The researcher emphasized that there is a need for church attendees to shift from thinking of a church as a restaurant or a club to instead thinking of a church as a covenanted community of believers that have committed to worship together, fellowship with one another, and generously share their God-given gifts to further God's kingdom and His church. Participant responses from the third week continued to be positive, with anticipated interest in what was coming next. The handout for this week is provided in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6. Contents for Handout 3

<b>The Relationship Between a Church Member and a Church</b> <b>The Church Covenant Week 3</b>	September 18, 2022
<p><b>I. Introduction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The church is a covenanted community that assembles together to worship GOD.</li> </ul> <p><b>II. Worship</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worship is both communal and a lifestyle.           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Worship is about gathering as <b>COMMUNITY</b> (Hebrews 10:25).</li> <li>○ Worship is also about giving the Lord all of who you are (Romans 12:1-2).</li> </ul> </li> <li>• True worship is done in spirit and <b>TRUTH</b> (John 4:23-24).</li> <li>• We worship God because of what he has first done for us (Psalm 150:1-6; Romans 5:8).</li> </ul> <p><b>III. Fellowship</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fellowship is <b>WALKING</b> together in Christian love.           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Walking together means being a part of each other's walks as a covenant community of believers. (Philippians 1:27).</li> <li>○ Fellowship involves Christian Love (John 13:34-35).</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>IV. Generosity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jesus calls us to love one another as He loved us (John 15:12).</li> <li>• Generosity starts with love, the love that Jesus has shown (Ephesians 5:1-2).</li> <li>• Part of generosity is the importance of all sharing their God-given gifts, skills, talents, passions, experiences, and strengths to further God's kingdom and His church. (1 Corinthians 12:21-28, 1 Peter 4:10)</li> </ul> <p><b>V. Put It All Together</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many people treat church like a restaurant, and many churches have accepted, surrendered, and enabled that mentality.</li> <li>• God is the only thing that can create life, and the church only has life through its relationship with God.</li> <li>• Hebrews 10:24-25           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 24. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25. not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>VI. Conclusion</b></p>	

### Week Four – Personal Christian Living

The service for this week differed from the template, as shown in Table 3.3. The change in the service order involved moving the offering time from after the “Invitation/Response Time” to before the message. The movement of the offering time was made because of the urging of one of the church’s members and was unrelated to this study. The researcher implemented the move of the offering time since it was determined this change did not impact the course of the study. Besides this change, the service proceeded as in the previous three weeks.

The fourth week's topic shifted from looking at the church to looking primarily at the members themselves. The fourth week’s topic covered personal Christian living or personal piety. The contents of this sermon included an emphasis on church members to exhibit Christian behavior and engaging in the spiritual development of themselves and their families. Included within this week was a focus on personal Bible intake. Donald Whitney explains, “No spiritual discipline is more important than the intake of God’s Word.”<sup>2</sup> From Whitney's point of view on this topic, the researcher focused primarily on Bible intake for this week's study as it was determined to be the foundation of the other spiritual disciplines. The handout for this week can be seen in Table 3.7.

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<sup>2</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for Christian Life, Revised and Updated* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 22.

Table 3.7. Contents for Handout 4

<b>Personal Christian Living</b> <b>The Church Covenant Week 4</b>	September 25, 2022
<p><b>I. Introduction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Circumspectly means in a careful and wise way.</li> <li>• Deportment means demeanor, conduct, and behavior.</li> </ul> <p><b>II. Christian Behavior</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members of the church should <b>ACT</b> like Christians (Romans 8:9; Titus 2:11-14).</li> <li>• A Christian's behavior and heart should <b>REFLECT</b> Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:27).</li> <li>• What does it mean to act like a Christian? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Galatians 5:22-23 - The Fruit of the Spirit.</li> <li>○ Romans 12:9-21 - "Marks of a True Christian."</li> </ul> </li> <li>• "You are the only Bible some unbelievers will ever read, and your life is under scrutiny every day. What do others learn from you? Do they see an accurate picture of your God?" – John MacArthur</li> </ul> <p><b>III. Spiritual Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The goal of the Christian life is to become more and more like <b>JESUS CHRIST</b> (Romans 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 11:1; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:1-2; 1 John 2:6).</li> <li>• Spiritual development occurs through the practice of Spiritual Disciplines. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Reading the Bible (MOST IMPORTANT)</li> <li>○ Prayer</li> <li>○ Fellowship with other believers</li> <li>○ Active participation in the local church.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• A Bible-less Christianity is not only possible but a reality for many.</li> <li>• For many, their understanding of God, His Church, and the things of the Bible are influenced, at least to some degree, by the <b>MEDIA</b>.</li> <li>• Within the pages of the Bible, we find: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Rest for the weary soul (Matthew 11:28-39).</li> <li>2) Spiritual nourishment (1 Peter 2:2; Matthew 5:6).</li> <li>3) A guiding lamp to our feet (Psalm 119:105).</li> <li>4) A weapon against the enemy (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).</li> </ol> </li> </ul> <p><b>IV. Conclusion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Church covenants remind members of the body of Christ of their spiritual commitments and responsibilities to the church, themselves, and each other.</li> </ul>	



### Week Five –Christian Love

The service for week five differed the most from all the other weeks as week five did not follow the Table 3.3 service template. The main reasons for this change resulted from additions to week five's service, including an extended prayer time and the observance of the Lord's Supper. The revised service order for week five can be seen in Table 3.8.

Table 3.8. Hillcrest Baptist Church Morning Worship Service Order for October 2, 2022

Pastor's Welcome and Announcements
Prayer (Chairman of the Deacons)
4 Songs
Offering
Message
Extended Prayer Time
Lord's Supper Song
Lord's Supper
Pastoral Benediction

The topic for the fifth week returned to an emphasis on the church. However, week five emphasized again the idea of the church being a covenanted community of born-again, baptized believers. This sermon focused on the ideas of Christian love and the fellowship that arises from that. After the sermon, the researcher led the congregation through an extended guided prayer time. During this extended guided prayer time, the researcher called upon the attendees to break into small groups with the people sitting around them. After the attendees broke up into groups, the researcher guided the congregation in prayer through the church's covenant and, in turn, the topics covered in the five weeks of the study. The topics and prompts of the prayer are visible under point six of the handout for the week (Table 3.9). The service concluded with the Lord's Supper, symbolizing the congregation's unity and fellowship through Christ's sacrifice.

Table 3.9. Contents for Handout 5

<b>Christian Love</b> <b>The Church Covenant Week 5</b>	October 2, 2022
<p><b>I. Introduction</b></p> <p><b>II. Christian Love (1 John 4:7-21).</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We love because <b>GOD</b> first loved us (1 John 4:19).</li> <li>• The Bible paints for us a picture of love that is <b>SACRIFICIAL</b>.</li> <li>• Jesus calls us to love, even to love our enemies (Luke 6:27-36).</li> <li>• We are called to love one another in Christian love for two reasons:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Love comes from God, and we should reflect that love in us as believers (1 John 4:7a).</li> <li>○ Love shows that we have been born of God and know God (1 John 4:7b).</li> </ul> </li> <li>• We are adopted by God (Romans 8:12-17).</li> </ul> <p><b>III. Fellowship</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fellowship is walking together in Christian love.</li> <li>• “The cross is a plus sign; it reconciles sinners to God and people to one another. If two Christians do not love one another, they have taken their eyes from the cross.” – Warren Wiersbe</li> </ul> <p><b>IV. Summary</b></p> <p><b>V. Conclusion</b></p> <p><b>VI. Guided Prayer Time</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Thank God for sending His son Jesus for our salvation.</li> <li>2. Pray that we would be a church that worships, fellowships, and is generous.</li> <li>3. Pray that we would be a people committed to Christian behavior and spiritual development. Spiritual Development is reading the Bible, prayer, fellowship with other believers, and active participation in the church, among other things.</li> <li>4. Pray that we would be filled with and show Christian love.</li> <li>5. Last, pray that we seek to live by the spirit of the covenant and the principles of God's Word.</li> </ol>	

### Week Six and Beyond

In the next several weeks after the survey, the researcher collected each of the post-study questionnaires. The post-study questionnaire sought to determine if there was any change due to the study. In addition, the post-study questionnaire asked questions designed to see if the

participants themselves anticipated any positive outcome from the study moving forward. Again, a more in-depth analysis of individual participant pre-study and post-study questionnaires, including an examination of similarities and differences, are included in the next chapter. However, ultimately the answers in the post-study questionnaire showed that little change happened or was expected moving forward.

Though ultimately, only time will tell what changes might occur, if the weeks after the study are of any indication, it is unlikely that there will be any change. Though week five ended with what seemed to be a powerful prayer time and the Lord's Supper, everything returned to normal the following week. The next coming weeks also continued just the same as any other week prior to the study. Overall, there appeared to be no difference in the weeks following the study from those prior to the beginning of the study.

### **Conclusion**

This DMIN project thesis intervention aimed to answer the research question, "Does knowing and understanding the covenant of Hillcrest Baptist Church make a difference in our efforts to revitalize a declining church?" This chapter detailed the design and implementation of the study design to aid in answering that question. All meetings for the study were held in the Fellowship Hall of Hillcrest Baptist Church located in Carlsbad, NM with each week's Sunday service lasting approximately one hour to one hour and fifteen minutes. Every Sunday morning service was designed around the weekly theme, with the music and sermon focusing on that week's topic. Twelve participants began the five-week sermon series study on September 4, 2022. The study ultimately concluded on October 2, 2022, with an extended guided prayer time based on the church's covenant and the Lord's Supper.

The researcher kept all data obtained during the study secure. The data for this study was secured in two locations before, during, and after the study's conclusion. First, the researcher secured all print data, including the consent forms, pre-study and post-study questionnaires, and answers to the two questions after each church service, in the researcher/pastor's desk in his office. The office was locked when he was not there, and only the researcher/pastor and the church employees had access to a key to the office. Second, the researcher secured all digital data, including all the study notes and the digitized and transcribed answers from participants, on the researcher's password-locked computer. This study is confidential. Though the researcher knows which participant gave what response, all identifying information has been removed from this DMIN thesis project. For this project report, the researcher assigned a pseudonym to each participant. The researcher stored the list of each pseudonym separately from the participant data in a locked area.

Though twelve participants signed up to participate in the study, only eleven of the participants followed through all five weeks. Unfortunately, one of the male participants could not continue due to personal medical issues. The researcher attempted to make other arrangements for the person to continue but could not arrange alternate arrangements. In addition, one of the female participants had unexpected problems during the five-week study that made it so she could not attend the study in person. However, the researcher was able to make other alternate arrangements so that she could still participate. The next chapter, Chapter 4, takes an in-depth look at the collective results of this study. Furthermore, the following chapter highlights and interprets significant trends and applies them to answer the study's primary question.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS**

The primary focus of this study was to identify if teaching about Hillcrest Baptist Church's covenant would result in the revitalization of a declining church. The researcher designed and implemented the study to answer the research question, "Does knowing and understanding the covenant of Hillcrest Baptist Church make a difference in our efforts to revitalize a declining church?" The desired outcome of this study was to demonstrate that teaching about Hillcrest Baptist Church's covenant would revitalize the declining church. This chapter outlines the study's results proposed in Chapter 1 and developed in Chapters 2 and 3. The researcher outlines and synthesizes the results from the questionnaires. Using the research provided, the researcher establishes the outcome of the study proposed, developed, and conducted within the previous chapters of this project thesis. The researcher addresses the unexpected outcome if the study had not produced the initially anticipated results. As mentioned in Chapter 3, one of the participants, participant number nine, could not complete the study due to personal medical issues. Considering this, the researcher did not include data from that participant in this chapter. All participants' responses are listed and copied as they originally appeared, including all misspellings, incorrect word usage, and grammar issues.

### **Participant Background**

Before beginning the study, the researcher sought to identify how long each participant had attended the church. Figure 4.1 shows that the participants had been attending the church for various lengths of time before the start of the study. This data is beneficial as it demonstrates how participants of varied backgrounds and experiences in the church perceive the church

covenant. However, though the data indicates a participant's current attendance and involvement with the church, the graph cannot indicate that several people in the study grew up in the church, left, and have returned. In the case of those who grew up as part of Hillcrest Baptist Church, the data and figure 4.1 only show the amount of time the participant has been attending Hillcrest Baptist Church since returning. Nevertheless, the data shows a relatively balanced distribution of attendance, with the largest group being in the five years to nine years range.

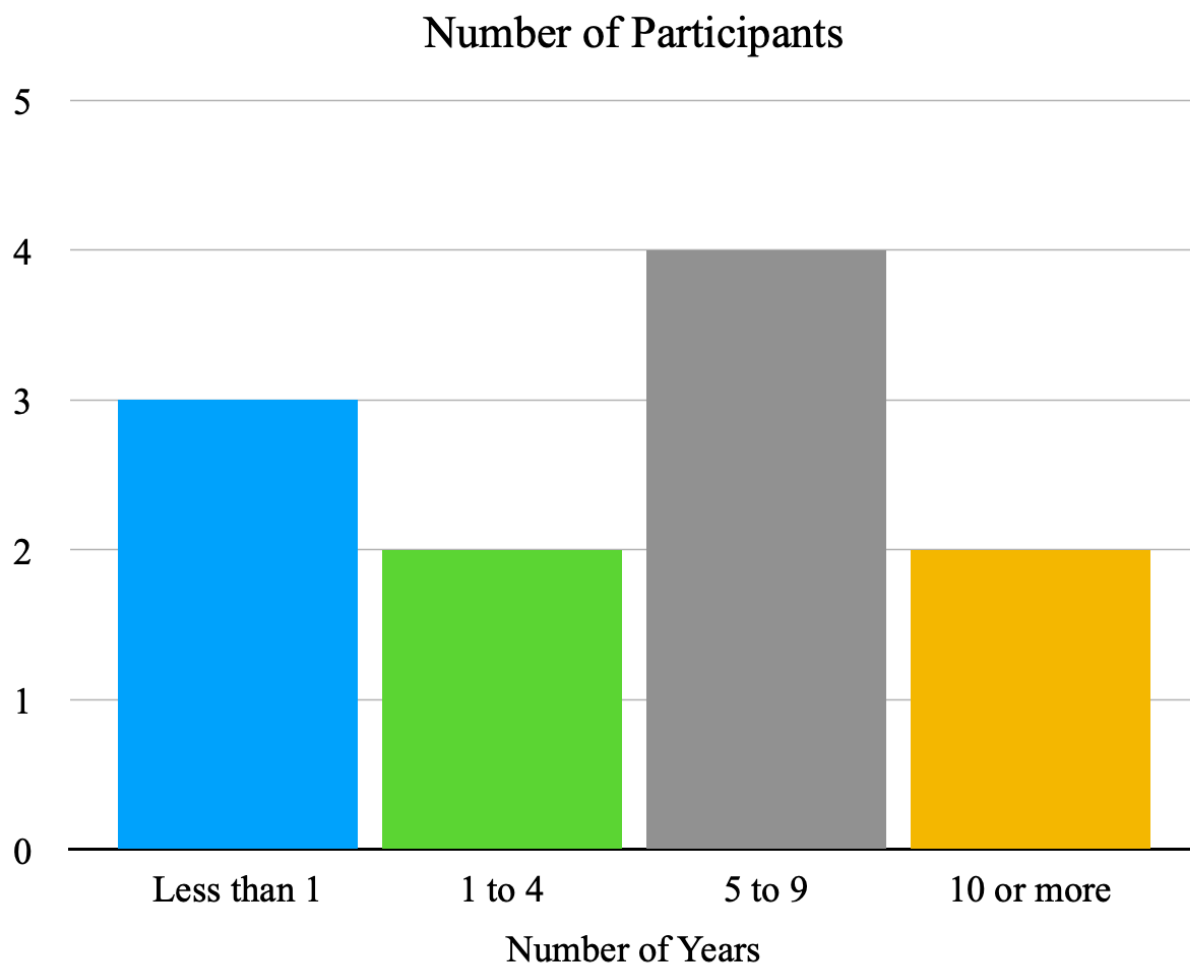


Figure 4.1. "How long have you been attending Hillcrest Baptist Church?"

Table 4.1. Participants and their length of attendance

Participant	Number of Years
1	1 – 4
2	Over 10
3	Over 10
4	5 – 9
5	Less than 1
6	Less than 1
7	5 - 9
8	1 - 4
10	5 - 9
11	5 - 9
12	Less than 1

### Weekly Responses

The researcher asked each participant to answer two questions after each week's service. The researcher distributed the two questions on a slip of paper to each participant before the service began. At the conclusion of the church service, the researcher instructed the participants to place the completed questions into a specific folder left on a table. Not every participant answered both questions every week. For example, every participant answered the first question for the first four weeks, "What is one thing you learned?" However, some people did not answer the second question, "What is one question you have?" In addition, many did not answer or did not turn in the question sheet for week five.

#### Week 1

The answers to the two questions in the first week were highly varied. The researcher expected mixed responses since this week introduced the idea of covenants for the first time and

was primarily focused on covering the history of covenants. Three of the participants began to ask questions that the researcher would answer in the following weeks: 1) Participant 1: “What are the promises of the church covenant?” 2) Participant 5: “What is my part in a church covenant?” and 3) Participant 4: “What is coming?” Participant 3, in their response, immediately concluded that a church should not accept members unaware of the covenant.

The researcher designed the study to convey the idea of the importance of awareness of the church covenant, and it was interesting that one participant came to that conclusion in the first week. The concept of membership was probably fresh in the minds of many since the church added a new member two weeks before this study commenced. However, the church welcomed this member according to the church’s current tradition, which involves walking down during the invitation time and asking to be a member.

In addition to the previous responses of the participants mentioned in the first paragraph, there were three more overarching thoughts. The first was that participants were unaware of the long history of church covenants. The researcher expected that many were uninformed of the long history of church covenants, which was one reason this week focused heavily on this topic. The second overarching thought was that biblical covenants were promises, not contracts. Again, the researcher emphasized this idea this week as the researcher pointed toward the biblical covenants. The last thought was a significant one from eight out of twelve participants: a desire for a deeper understanding (see Table 4.2).



Table 4.2. Week 1 Responses

<b>Participant</b>	<b>One thing learned</b>	<b>One question</b>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long History of Church Covenants</li> <li>• Definition of Covenant</li> </ul>	What are the promises of the church covenant?
2	Our covenant is supposed to encourage members to help each other and stay close to God and each other and talk to non-church goers, invite them to come and participate.	Who was Kittery?
3	We are doing things backwards.	Why are we doing things backwards? We have people join before they know the covenant.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Covenant not a contract for the church</li> <li>• Promises with warnings</li> <li>• Personal Sacrifice</li> </ul>	What is coming?
5	Baptist churches have historically had covenants	What is my part in a church covenant?
6	Learn more to be a Christian Spread the word through the years How the church are losing their way	How to spread the word to get the people to listen to the word of God
7	A biblical covenant is a relationship based on promises not a contract	None
8	The church constitution was separate from the covenant	None
10	That a covenant is a promise and a personal relationship with God	(Did not answer)
11	The number of churches that have closed in the last few years How people don't feel the need to be in church	(Did not answer)
12	learned that church covenants call for a commitment from members so churches are not just a loose collection of attendees (like a marriage vs just living together).	Have we moved away from requiring a commitment in fear people would not join?

## Week 2

The participants' answers to the two questions for the second week focused on three themes: church family, the body of Christ, and togetherness. The researcher this week emphasized the importance of a Christian being born again and repentant. Two participants keyed into the importance of repentance. In addition, eight more participants resonated with other themes. Six focused on the importance of church family and togetherness, and two others on baptism. Participant 5 mentioned what they learned was that "baptism was required for membership." This comment from Participant 5 was fascinating because even though the participant has not been connected to Hillcrest Baptist Church very long, this participant has been a member of a Southern Baptist Church for over thirty years. Baptism as a requirement for membership is not just something in this church's covenant but is also contained in the Southern Baptist Convention's Baptist Faith and Message.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it should be the standard practice for Southern Baptist Churches.

The last person simply replied they agreed with the section covered but did not "put stock [on] how deep the meaning was." This sentiment shared by Participant 10 here this week would be shared in conversations with other participants throughout the study. They did not realize the deep meaning behind what was in the covenant. One goal of the study was to emphasize the profound importance of conveying that the covenant was more than just a list of rules or regulations, but that, instead, there was a deep meaning to it. Six of the eleven participants did not include a question in their weekly responses, a trend that would continue throughout the rest of the study. Out of the five others that responded with a question, like in week 1, there was an interest in a deeper understanding of the material (see Table 4.4).

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<sup>1</sup> Article 7 on Baptism and the Lord's Supper states, "Being a church ordinance, it [baptism] is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper." Southern Baptist Convention. "Baptist Faith and Message, 2000." <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/> (accessed June 9, 2022).

Table 4.3: Week 2 Responses

<b>Participant</b>	<b>One thing learned</b>	<b>One question</b>
1	Seems like we have to change the church culture to emphasize the depth of what a Christian is- not just professed, and baptized but also repentant and surrendered.	How do we do that? Get the whole body to move beyond old time religion?
2	We must join together as Christians to learn, aide, teach, and pray as God's Children and Christians	Is this in any other passages in the Bible?
3	More the importance of church family.	(Did not answer)
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body of the Church</li> <li>• Profession of faith</li> <li>• Repent</li> <li>• Baptizing</li> <li>• As part of church body of Christ.</li> </ul>	(Did not answer)
5	Baptism is required for membership	If baptism doesn't save, why do Baptists require it? Jesus did it so we do it... I guess. The ritual of it turns some people away.
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More than just being Christian</li> <li>• Baptized does not save you</li> <li>• Being one with Christ</li> </ul>	How would you grow church with in are community.
7	We are never alone. We have the church	(Did not answer)
8	Basic reminder of what our cotenant is and how we work together, with each having their own part	(Did not answer)
10	I agree with the paragraph. But did not put to much stock how deep the meaning was.	(Did not answer)
11	How important it is to be part of the church	(Did not answer)
12	Repentance and faith are inseparable experiences of grace.	What percent of Baptist churches still have a covenant?

### Week 3

The third week focused on church members' relationship with the church, emphasizing the importance of church members gathering to worship and fellowship as a body of Christ and individual generosity. Overall, the participants picked up on these stressed topics. Three participants mentioned all the themes, with one speaking about the Christian life as a whole. Four participants noted the idea of fellowship, three of which included the concept of unity and togetherness. Finally, two of the participants zeroed in on the problems of worship.

Participant 8 latched on to the idea that generosity is more than money, which the researcher covered. However, Participant 8 also had a conclusion that the researcher did not intend, that people are to be generous “in our love not only [to] ourselves but spread this love through out [*sic*] the world.” The study intended to focus on personal revitalization, but many participants, like Participant 8, continually focused on others. This trend continued throughout the study even though the researcher hoped to focus the study on personal growth.

Table 4.4. Week 3 Responses

<b>Participant</b>	<b>One thing learned</b>	<b>One question</b>
<b>1</b>	Wow! Worship, fellowship, and generosity. That's concise and easy to see what we must do. Something to strive for.	How do we do this? Guess we have to all be doing our job individually for all to work together in a healthy way?
<b>2</b>	Joining together is very important to carry on fellowship. Love and generosity go hand in hand. One carries on to the other. Sharing love and generosity is fellowship and being together.	What has happened to the old time week-long revivals we had in the past? Even 4 day revivals? Even the feeling of fellowship has diminished. What a sorrow!
<b>3</b>	Further importance of dedication and unity	(Did not answer)
<b>4</b>	Walking together with the aid of the Holy Spirit	(Did not answer)
<b>5</b>	The covenant says that people should participate, support, and use their spiritual gift for the local church.	What is "truth"? Does "truth" mean visible demonstration of worship.
<b>6</b>	How to be a better Christian by following church covenant by worship, fellowship, generosity, learning to be a disciple. Be more committed. You are doing a wonderful bless for the church, thank you.	Is there anything you would add or change in the church covenant?
<b>7</b>	Conflict in the churches is called worship wars. The letter about the music was written in 1723.	(Did not answer)
<b>8</b>	Generosity is more than money. But that we are to be generous in our love not only ourselves but to spread this love through out the world.	How can we (the body of the church) use (our gifts and talents) share our love to our surrounding community and share Christ's love.
<b>10</b>	Did not realize that so many things were part of the Christian life as we are to live. I hope I do it all.	(Did not answer)
<b>11</b>	Most people come for entertainment	(Did not answer)
<b>12</b>	I learned fellowship is walking together in Christian Love	How many members live out 1 Peter 4:10

#### Week 4

The fourth week shifted from looking at the church as a whole to individual personal responsibility. The researcher stressed the importance of personal piety and spiritual disciplines this week. Participant 1 simply wrote a verse down, James 4:17, which says, "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin." Five more participants keyed into the idea that the church has not been doing what the church should be, with Participant 7 explicitly saying, "We have forgotten what we should do as a Christian." Three participants identified with the statistics regarding a lack of Bible reading in America and emphasized the need to prioritize Bible reading.

However, though most participants picked up on the main themes of this week, four participants did not. First, Participant 4 and 10 keyed in on the importance of teaching children but seemed to have missed the emphasis on personal spiritual development as part of the process. Though the section of the covenant covered this week included "religiously educating our children," it was not a point of emphasis in the sermon. The researcher mentioned discipling and religiously educating children only in passing to say that the first step does not start with them but with a parent's heart. Last, Participant 8 again seemed to shift the focus to outside the congregation. Participant 8 keyed in on the lack of Bible knowledge but immediately attributed it to those unchurched or uneducated in the Bible. This misunderstanding was probably the researcher's fault for not making the study demographics involved in the study referenced more straightforward. However, it shows Participant 8's continual focus on others rather than contemplating potential personal responsibility.

Table 4.5. Week 4 Responses

<b>Participant</b>	<b>One thing learned</b>	<b>One question</b>
1	James 4:17	I think you explained it fully
2	Christians are a lot to blame because God-Religion is distorted. Wrongly thought of by the public because of us too. This is a sad state of affairs!	How can we remedy this? Can we remedy this? When we see this, change it by enlightening them to our Savior and to the Scripture and truth about both.
3	Excessive Bible knowledge can be detrimental to spiritual development	(Did not answer)
4	The church covenant required the teaching of our children the Christian way of life	(Did not answer)
5	I don't want to be included in those sad statistics. This makes me read the Bible! It is true that people find time for what they prioritize.	(Did not answer)
6	Read the Bible, prioritize learn to be a better Christian, to reflect, learn spiritual growth	How did God move you. What brought to learn more about the Bible and church. If committed to word, why is it so easy to stay on task.
7	My actions as a Christian might be the only work of God that some people see and know. We have forgotten what we should do as a Christian	(Did not answer)
8	The average Sunday school attendant fails the test of Bible Knowledge. Said it was 65% which is failing.	Would this not include the new people coming into the church that are unchurched or educated yet?
10	It's like when Children of Israel were about to go to promised land. He teaches the Children of Israel how they are to teach their children the word of God with all their heart, mind, and strength. That does not end today.	(Did not answer)
11	I need to read the Bible more than what I do now.	(Did not answer)
12	We don't know what authentic Christianity is and we fall short. (Lukewarm and Matt 7:21 come to mind)	Do persecuted churches do better?

### Week 5

Week five served as a wrap-up week for the whole study with a re-emphasis on the church being a covenanted community of born-again, baptized believers. The researcher focused on the ideas of Christian love and fellowship this week. All the participants who turned in their slips this week emphasized those ideas except for Participant 3. However, Participant 3 keyed in on the concept of God's love. Participant 8's response shifted this week from looking at others to self-reflection. Unfortunately, four out of the eleven did not turn in a response this week.



Table 4.6. Week 5 Responses

<b>Participant</b>	<b>One thing learned</b>	<b>One question</b>
1	Love and fellowship and interconnected.	Should the covenant merely be a list of guidelines/best practices or should we be held accountable in some way?
2	A church covenant is the plan God gave for a Christian Church. All people need love even love our enemies, no matter how alien that seems, that is what Christians should do! That is what being a Christian should do.	None at this time but maybe after I study the covenant more I'll have a question or 2. Thanks for your explanation of how important a covenant is to a church.
3	0 terries to be with me. It is not just me staying to be with Him. He is with me always, but puts forth effort to be with me.	(Did not answer)
4	Hillcrest church covenant is what God word say we should do for the people of the world and for us.	(Did not answer)
5	(Did not answer)	(Did not answer)
6	Christian love is a wonderful feeling. Bet buy prays for each other and ever one	How would you explain you calling when He called upon yourself?
7	When I needed prayer for my daughter, our church family stepped up and prayed for Veronica and checked p on me too.	(Did not answer)
8	I learned that I don't aid others when their sick, I will when in distress but some reason I only pray for them when sick but I don't take food to them or visit them or take them to the doctor. I will have to see how to work that in somehow.	(Did not answer)
10	(Did not answer)	(Did not answer)
11	(Did not answer)	(Did not answer)
12	(Did not answer)	(Did not answer)

### **Pre-Study and Post-Study Questionnaire**

The researcher designed the pre-study questionnaire to help establish a baseline of where participants were starting and the post-study questionnaire to see where participants were after the study. This section seeks to compare the answers from the two surveys and extrapolate any meaning from the difference between the two. In addition, there were several questions only on the post-study survey designed to see people's feelings moving forward.

#### **“What Would You Say is the Role of a Church Member?”**

There was a distinct shift in the responses to this question from the pre-and post-study questionnaires. For example, a common term found in six of the eleven answers was “to attend/attendance.” However, the participants did not include this significant initial response to attendance as part of the role of a church member in the post-study responses. Instead, there was a shift in mindset from attendance to personal piety and spiritual disciplines like praying, studying the Bible, and serving. For example, Participant 7 moved from speaking about attendance to involvement. In addition, four out of eleven participants mentioned Bible, God’s Word, or devotion. While the pre-study responses had many relevant answers, this concept of personal piety was utterly absent from the initial pre-study responses. These answers indicate a beginning understanding that church membership is more than a name on the attendance list (see Table 4.7).

Table 4.7. “What Would You Say is the Role of a Church Member?”

Participant	Pre-study	Post-study
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worship</li> <li>• Grow</li> <li>• Serve</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commit to a relationship with Jesus and a relationship with other church members.</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participate in each service when possible</li> <li>• Help by any method to enhance the service.</li> <li>• Help others understand why we should all worship and work together as a church.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To pray</li> <li>• To be loyal to the church</li> <li>• To encourage others to come, at least, visit the (our) church</li> <li>• Pray for the members of the church especially for the Pastor and family, the deacons and family, the Sunday school teachers and families, and the congregation.</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attendance</li> <li>• Attention</li> <li>• Involvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spread the good news.</li> <li>• Support fellow Christians.</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help around the church</li> <li>• Help members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To study the Bible</li> <li>• Teach the Word of God to all people (family and city)</li> </ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support the Pastor</li> <li>• Support the church with tithes and offerings</li> <li>• Use spiritual gift for the church</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To worship with the body</li> <li>• Share my gifts with the body</li> <li>• Care for members of the body</li> <li>• Love members of the body.</li> <li>• To behave in a way that would glorify Jesus.</li> <li>• To grow spiritually and help others grow spiritually.</li> </ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reach out to others</li> <li>• Invite to church</li> <li>• So many to list</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To be a rock</li> <li>• Study God word.</li> </ul>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend church regularly</li> <li>• Tell others about the Lord</li> <li>• Call and visit other church members who are sick</li> <li>• To go out and visit others to come to church</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To do their best to serve the Lord.</li> <li>• To help others,</li> <li>• To be involved in activities in the church.</li> <li>• To tell others about Jesus</li> </ul>

8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To support the church in prayer</li> <li>• Attendance</li> <li>• Use talents</li> <li>• Tithes/Offerings</li> <li>• Support members in prayer</li> <li>• Support members needs/Visitation</li> <li>• Moral Support and Constructive Criticism</li> <li>• Support community in prayer/needs</li> <li>• Love as Christ loved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow the Bible and then the Covenant will be followed</li> </ul>
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To do God's Work wherever He leads you</li> <li>• To teach God's saving grace to students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To be a part of the Church - meaning its worship, giving, teaching and any where the church needs you for your talents.</li> </ul>
11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To attend services</li> <li>• Take part in the functions of the church</li> <li>• Pray daily for church and members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To be part of the church body and take part where they are needed.</li> </ul>
12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend Regularly</li> <li>• To worship God</li> <li>• Grow in Christ</li> <li>• Support the Church with giving</li> <li>• Support the church with serving</li> <li>• Help others grow</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Live like a Christian</li> <li>• Worship together</li> <li>• Seek their own spiritual growth and the growth of others</li> <li>• To share the Gospel</li> <li>• To have family, Church, and private devotion time</li> <li>• To love other members and help them with their needs,</li> <li>• Develop relationships</li> <li>• Encourage other</li> <li>• Pray for the church and members</li> <li>• To join a new church and continue the covenant relationship there if you leave</li> <li>• Support the church with your tithes and spiritual gifts.</li> </ul>

### “Are You Aware of the Church Covenant?”

Nearly all participants indicated an awareness of the church covenant. Only two of the newest participants responded, “no.” Unfortunately, this data is probably skewed as the researcher conceivably influenced responses to this question through the weekly announcements leading up to the start of this study explaining the scope and sequence of the project (see Figure 4.2).

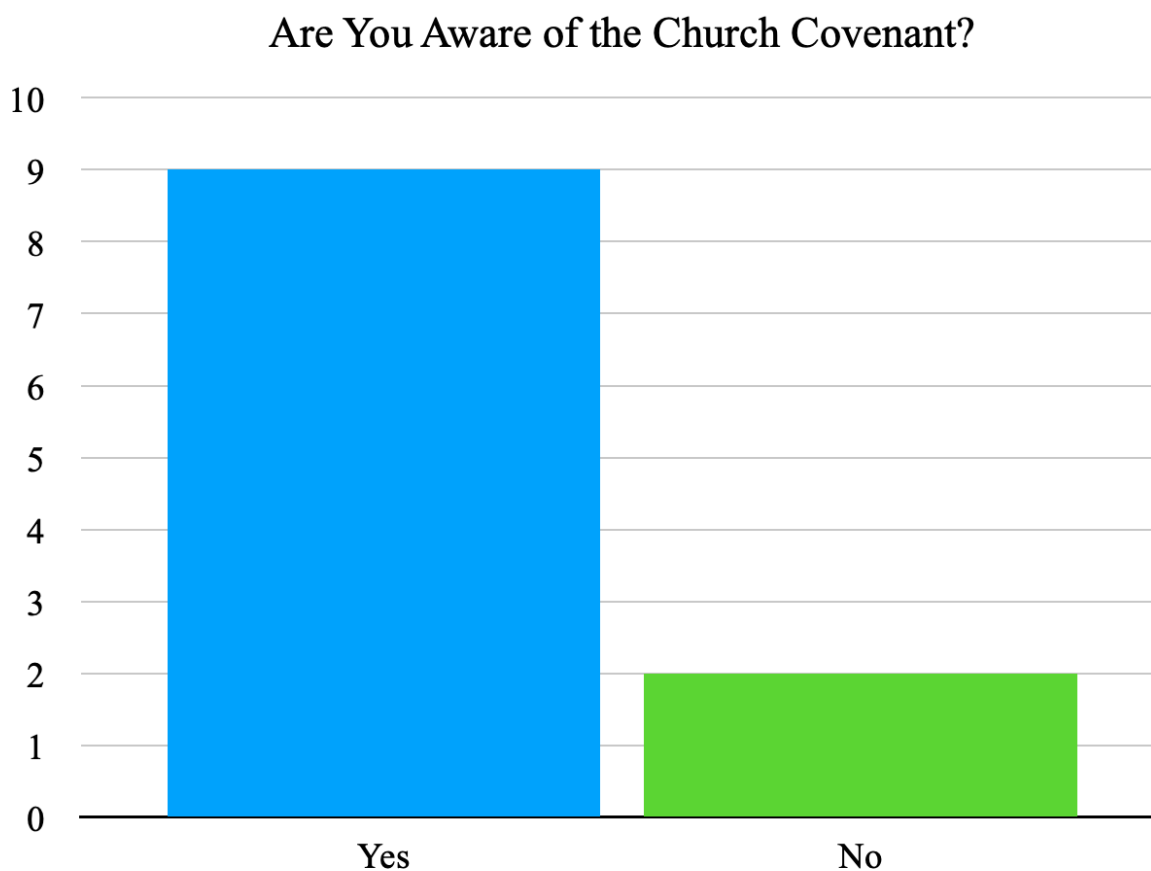


Figure 4.2. “Are You Aware of the Church Covenant?”

Participant 5 and Participant 12 indicated they were not aware of the church covenant, but they were also not present for most of the announcements and explanations of the study. Not being present for most of the announcements and explanations of the study, combined with the

two participants being relatively new to the congregation, explains their unawareness of the covenant.

“What Do You Think is Covered by the Church Covenant?”

Even though the church covenant covered in this study was a preexisting, already-established covenant of the church, the variety of responses from this question shows that participants had a vague understanding of the church covenant before this study. As indicated previously, only two participants were unaware of the church having a covenant. The other nine participants were aware of the covenant, but many either did not remember what it said or did not know. The misunderstanding of the covenant shows a lack of referencing and teaching about the church covenant. In addition, several responses from the participants pointed toward aspects that were a part of the covenant. Some answers focused on the requirements for members, deacons, and pastors. These responses show confusion between the church’s constitution, bylaws, and covenant. An example of this confusion can be seen in some of the answers of Participant 4, 5, 6, 7, and 11. This misconception is somewhat understandable in Participant 6 and 7 since they have been attending the church for less than a year. However, the incorrect understanding is concerning for the other participants since they have been a part of the church for a longer time (see Table 4.8).

Table 4.8. “What Do You Think is Covered by the Church Covenant?”

Participant	
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations of church member behavior and actions</li> <li>• Things to avoid being the pew spa</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't remember</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goals</li> <li>• Requirements of involvement</li> <li>• Church portion in relation to other churches</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How church business is done</li> <li>• What the church teaches and believes</li> </ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requirements for being a member</li> <li>• Requirements for being a deacon</li> </ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What the church believes</li> <li>• Foundation of the church</li> <li>• Keep it together</li> </ul>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be a Christian to hold office in Church</li> <li>• Deacons can only have 1 wife unless she passes</li> <li>• All times show you are a Christian</li> <li>• Pay your tithes</li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jesus Christ as Savior</li> <li>• Baptism</li> <li>• Enter into fellowship of the Church</li> <li>• Live lives in accordance of the Holy Bible</li> <li>• Allow Christ to lead our daily lives</li> <li>• Christ gives comforter to guide us</li> </ul>
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't know</li> </ul>
11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to be a member of the church</li> </ul>
12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agreement to Support the church</li> <li>• Purpose of the church</li> </ul>

“I Feel as Though I am Abiding by the Church Covenant”

In answering the question regarding personally abiding by the church covenant during the pre-study, the consensus was that most participants either said they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement. Interestingly, one of the participants who said they did not remember what was in the church covenant responded that they “agreed” that they felt they were abiding by the church covenant. These answers are interesting as it shows an expectation that this participant was living up to the church covenant, even though they were not aware of the contents of the covenant. In general, most participants thought they were following the church covenant, even if they were incorrect in their assumptions of what it included. All but two participants either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that they abided by the covenant. Of the other two participants that did not mark “agree” or “strongly agree,” one wrote that they were “neutral,” and the other person did not answer. The person who did not answer, Participant 10, also replied that they did not know the contents of the covenant.

In the post-study questionnaire, none of the numbers from the participants went up. Of the eleven participants, seven remained constants, and three went down. In the pre-study questionnaire, one participant replied with a five or “strongly agree” but decreased to a four or “agree” in the post-study questionnaire. Two participants went from a four “agree” to a two “disagree.” Though it is not indicated in these numbers, as the weekly reports showed, throughout the study, every participant stated a need for growth in at least one area.



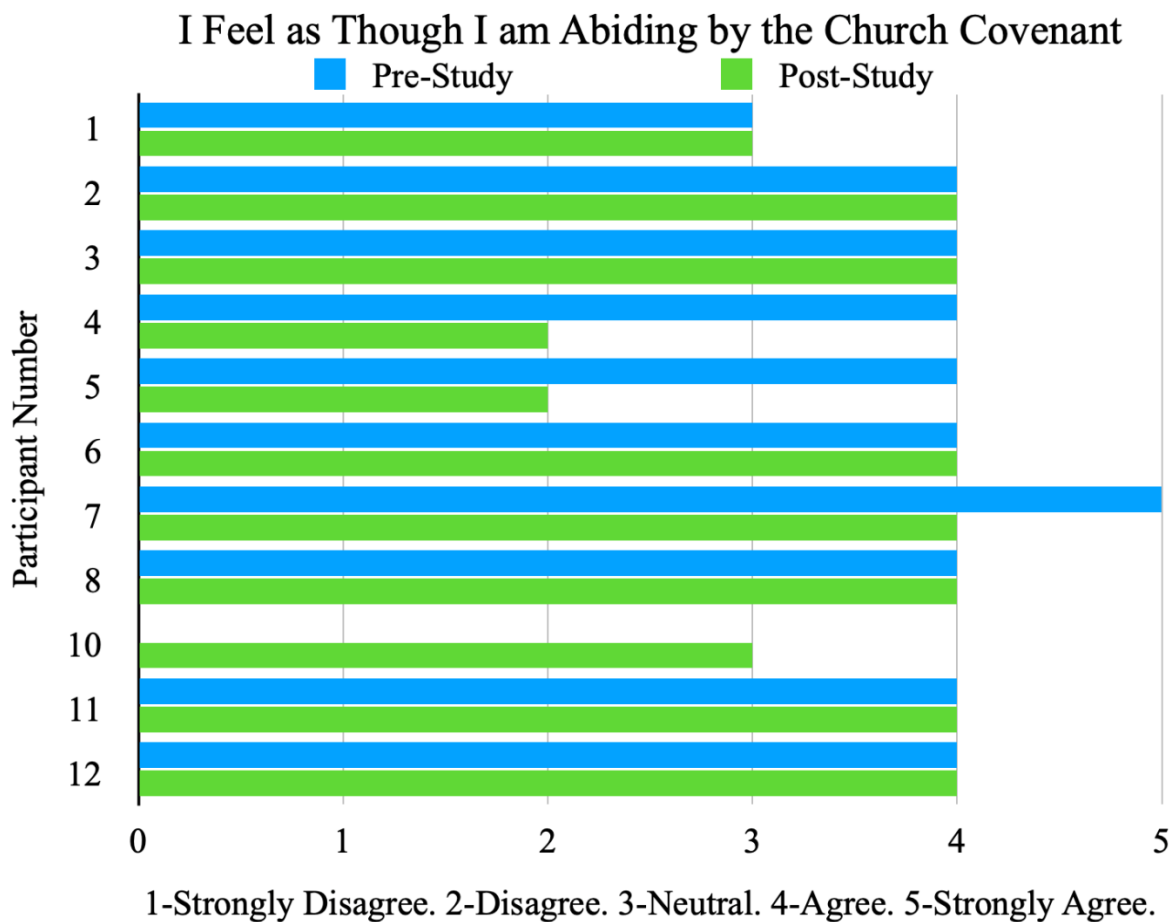


Figure 4.3. “I feel as though I am abiding by the Church Covenant.”

“Are You More Aware of the Church Covenant?”

Nine out of eleven participants felt more aware of the church covenant after the study. Participant 8 and 11 indicated no more awareness of the church covenant after the study. However, their answers to the weekly slips seem to suggest otherwise. For example, in week one, Participant 8 mentioned they did not realize that the church constitution was separate from the covenant. In addition, Participant 8 and 11 seemed to key in some things they needed to improve in their Christian life. So, even if they were no more aware of the church covenant, they were more aware of things they should improve.

Table 4.9. “Are You More Aware of the Church Covenant?”

Participant	
1	Yes! I didn't know what was in it before.
2	Yes, I never know really what a covenant entailed, but I know all churches had one. Now I see the use and need for the covenant. Thanks for taking time to explain and expound on a covenant.
3	Yes
4	Yes, didn't read it before this study.
5	Yes. I didn't know anything about a church covenant before your sermon series. The sermon series was very helpful.
6	Yes, learn one historical fact about the church and what it stands for.
7	Yes. It made me more aware of it all.
8	No, but it was a good reminder.
10	Yes in turn to it more deeply and I know I have a lot more to think about and do.
11	No
12	Yes

#### “Did Anything About the Church Covenant Surprise You?”

The responses to this question were mixed. Seven of the eleven participants found nothing about the church covenant surprising. Only one participant, participant three, specifically mentioned that they did not find anything unexpected because they had read the covenant before. Of the other four participants, they each found a different aspect of the covenant surprising.

Table 4.10. “Did Anything about the Church Covenant Surprise You?”

Participant	
1	Join w/ another church as soon as you leave.
2	The beginning of the covenant wasn't clear to me or why it was necessary. Now that that had been made known the reasons for it. I feel I understand its use and intention.
3	No. I had read it.
4	No, but I had not read it.
5	I was surprised that it talked about using my spiritual gift and that members were to grow spiritually. I was dismayed that it mentioned alcohol. There are a lot of things that could be mentioned but it seems that baptists have something against alcohol. The covenant doesn't mention provocative dress, drugs, dancing, divorce, over-eating, smoking, or homosexuality.
6	All of it because. Didn't know how/why it stood for or understanding it.
7	No. I don't believe so. It was explained very clear. Thank you for going over our covenant with us.
8	Can't think of anything
10	no
11	No
12	No

#### “How Have Your Thoughts on Church Covenants Changed?”

Like the previous question, five out of the eleven indicated that their thoughts on church covenants did not change because of the study. However, out of the participants whose thoughts changed, they felt that there was either a renewed effort to follow the church covenant or a renewed awareness of it. Participant 1 felt that the church covenant should be used more frequently as a reminder and encouragement to live as a Christian.

Table 4.11. "How have your thoughts on church covenants changed?"

Participant	
1	There are many things I know we should do, but it is interesting to see it all laid out. I feel it should be used and reference much more frequently as a reminder and encouragement.
2	It has helped me understand the need for a covenant and how it is (should be) used to govern the church.
3	No, but it did renew my awareness.
4	No change, just more studying of the church duties.
5	I now consider a church covenant to be something I need to be aware of a follow. It is good for a church to have a covenant so that the pastor can say, "We want to do this because it's in our covenant." Otherwise, people will say, "That's the pastor's opinion."
6	It's made me believe in a stronger foundation is better for the people in the church.
7	I feel there is a lot I wasn't doing, I am working to do better.
8	None
10	Not much because I feel I do most of what it talks about.
11	Didn't
12	It is helpful to examine the covenant and clarify what salvation is and what the church is for. It's a guide to Christian life in the church and in the world like Psalm 119:105. It can be a check list to help you grow in Christ and can be used by the Holy Spirit for conviction and recommitment. It helps us to understand that church is not just to serve them.

#### "A Church Needs to Have a Church Covenant"

Apart from two participants, all either increased in their agreement or stayed the same. Of the participants who remained the same, three initially put down a five, "strongly agree" to the statement, and four more put down a four, "agree." Two participants raised their number, Participant 1 moved from a four to a five, and Participant 12 moved from a three, "neutral" to a four. Participant 4 and 10 lowered from their initial, moving from a four to a two, "disagree," and a five to a four, respectively. This decrease is interesting because Participant 4 and 10 in the

previous question said their thoughts on church covenants had not changed. Yet, they indicated their belief that a church needs to have a covenant decreased. Although most participants stayed the same or increased, the average fell from 4.27 to 4.18 from the pre-study to the post-study.

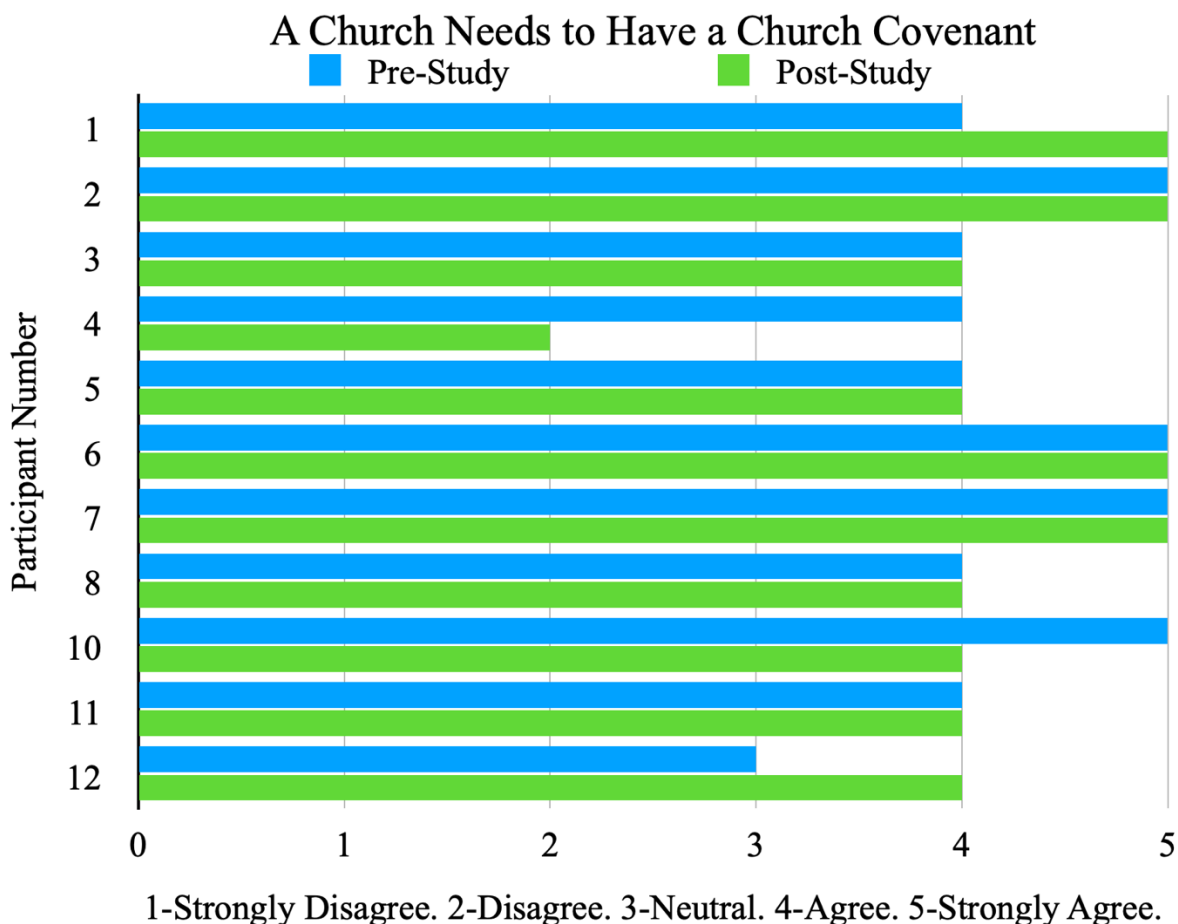


Figure 4.4. “A Church Needs to have a Church Covenant.”

“Should Agreeing to the Church Covenant be Required for Membership?”

Of the eleven responses, six responded yes, two answered no, and three said maybe. Out of the two that responded negatively, one simply said it is a topic that should be brought up later. The other, Participant 5, stated that the church should be a hospital, not a club. However, the covenant is not necessarily designed to set up a club or exclude non-Christians from attending.

Instead, it is intended to build the body of the church on the proper foundations needed for life.

Thus, the covenant makes the church healthy and able to be a hospital for the lost.

Table 4.12. “Should Agreeing to the Church Covenant be Required for Membership?”

Participant	
1	Yes - being a member is more than just having access to a free party space.
2	I think every member should make up their own minds if they can accept the church covenant.
3	Yes, but one should be made aware of what they are agreeing to.
4	Yes, how can you be a part if you agree.
5	No. The church should be a hospital not a club.
6	Yes on one hand and not on the other. I think they need to be informed of it and maybe after it has to be read to them and see if they understand it.
7	Yes. Because that is what being a Christian and a member is about.
8	Yes, because it is part of what we believe we should believe we should live up to as Christians.
10	No, but it needs to be brought up at a later time.
11	It’s part of our church, so it should be discussed with the person wanting to be a church member.
12	Maybe, it would probably be good to have a class for potential members and help them understand the covenant and commitment.

### Conclusion

The question, “Do You Expect Any Personal or Congregational Change?” (see Table 4.12) was one of the more essential questions following the study designed to gauge the possible success or failure of the study. In addition, the researcher included this question to see if there would be any change or potential viability moving forward. Hillcrest Baptist Church is in trouble, and change is required to make progress. Unfortunately, six out of eleven participants felt there would be no change.

Participant 1 summarized the feeling well by saying there is potential for significant change and everyone could improve. Nevertheless, Participant 1 continued to explain that the change would require the congregation to complete things like study and accountability. However, Participant 1 did not expect the congregation to put the needed work in and did not expect change to occur.

This perceived lack of potential change was not the hopeful outcome of the study. However, with the researcher's previous experience as the pastor leading into the study, the negative result was probably the researcher's fair expected outcome. Interestingly, those participants that have begun attending the church most recently, specifically those that have started attending since the researcher became the pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church, also appeared to have the most hope for change. It might seem that the longer-term members are content and have already accepted the future continual decline of the church. Participant 8's response sums up some of Hillcrest Baptist Church's problems. The consensus of the congregation is that most of the congregation is doing what they are supposed to do. However, this researcher's observations as the church pastor show that very few church members are following the covenant fully.

Though the answers to this question produced an overall general negative result, there were still glimpses of possible hope. One participant, Participant 12, already experienced a change because of the study. Participant 12 indicated that the study encouraged them to reach out and give benevolent aid to someone. In addition, Participant 7 and 10, even though they are not confident that there would be change, they at least see the need for it. Seeing the condition is the first step to there being a meaningful change.

Table 4.13. “Do You Expect Any Personal or Congregational Change?”

Participant	
1	There is potential for great change. I think we could all improve in practically all areas of the covenant (except alcohol) but I think change would require continued study and accountability which I don't expect to happen.
2	Only to be more dedicated to the church and the congregation
3	I would only go
4	No
5	I want to be a good church member. I want to try and abide by the covenant and be a good example.
6	Yes. Knowledge is in powering our minds and body to spiritual to show us How to embrace our brother and sister.
7	No. We just need to practice what we learned.
8	No, not really. We are an old congregation that pretty much follows all the covenant anyway.
10	I feel our church (each member) loves the Lord. We are just OLD and set in our ways. We want young people to come, yet we are slack in getting God out to people. (Me included) We need to be more zealous for God and invite so we can teach them how to love as we do.
11	No
12	It encouraged me to reach out to someone and take him and his wife out to eat. It probably made me more likely to give a lady walking very slowly a ride to the hospital this morning. She looked like she was 98 years old (but wasn't). I heard her say, “Thank you Lord”



## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This DMIN project thesis aimed to demonstrate that teaching about Hillcrest Baptist Church's covenant will result in the revitalization of a declining church. There is evidence of a massive problem in American Christianity. This massive problem has created a need for revitalization. In the face of this need, the researcher of this project developed a sermon series covering the contents of the church's covenant, and this study took place over five weeks. This thesis project was designed to answer the question, "Does knowing and understanding the covenant of Hillcrest Baptist Church make a difference in our efforts to revitalize a declining church?"

Chapter 1 established the context in which this study was conducted. Hillcrest Baptist Church is in peril, like many other churches in America. At the time of the study, the researcher was the seventeenth pastor of the church, following a complicated and checkered history. Though the church has been in the community since 1940, unable to recover from a massive church split in the 1980s and a lack of pastoral tenure through the last two decades, the church is now in dire circumstances. In addition, post-COVID-19, the church experienced its lowest attendance numbers since its founding. Considering this confluence of factors, the church is at dire risk of closing.

In addition to establishing the context of the study, the first chapter also explained the initial project hypothesis. The premise of this project is that if the pastor preached on the church covenant, it would affect the members of Hillcrest Baptist Church's understanding of the church and their role in the church. The primary goal was that if church members better understood the

church covenant and their role in the church, they would become more active members. A secondary goal would be that long-term attendees would be motivated to unite with the church in membership. The researcher thought establishing a good view of church membership would result in renewed life in the church. In addition, because of this renewed life, the church would experience much-needed revitalization, hopefully leading the church in a positive direction.

Chapter 2 surveyed the study's conceptual framework by examining the pre-existing literature. The researcher did extensive research regarding the state of the church in America, the need for revitalization within declining churches, regenerate church membership, and the role of church covenants. Though the literature review primarily covered materials written in the last decade, additional insight was provided by older literature that contributed significantly to the topics. The researcher required this further insight from older sources because the amount of information written on the subject of church covenants in recent times is minimal. In addition to the literature review, the researcher examined the theological and theoretical foundations that inspired this study. The theological foundation section provides special attention to the Bible and the covenants. In addition, the theoretical foundation considers the historical use of church covenants.

Chapter 3 outlined the plan for the project itself and its implementation. The project was not necessarily intended to create a new system or program but instead to create a desire in the congregation to return to a biblical ideal, create a new way of thinking, and spur internal change in the participants. The researcher, knowing that the congregation would be resistant to any significant shift, decided that it would be best to accomplish a change by reviving the already existing church covenant. The purpose of the study was not to create a new church covenant but to reinforce what was already in place. The researcher hoped this study would lead to a heart

change and a return to a biblical ideal in the congregation, bringing a new life to the church. The driving force for the project was to answer the research question, “Does knowing and understanding the covenant of Hillcrest Baptist Church make a difference in our efforts to revitalize a declining church?”

The project occurred between September 4, 2022, and October 2, 2022. A total of twelve participants began this study, and eleven of them finished. These twelve represented over half of the adult attendance on an average Sunday and included people from recent attendees to long-time church members. The participants in the study provided an excellent cross-section of the congregation. All meetings for the project were held in the Fellowship Hall of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Carlsbad, NM. Each week's meeting lasted approximately one hour to one hour and fifteen minutes. Every week the researcher asked the participants to fill out a small form asking two questions: "What did you learn today?" and "What is one question you have?" These questions, in addition to pre-study and post-study surveys, proved crucial in collecting data for the project.

In Chapter 4, the researcher analyzed the data obtained from the study outlined in Chapter 3. This process allowed the researcher to gain insight into where the participants were before and after the study. In addition, the data provided enabled the researcher to ascertain specific trends and synthesize conclusions. The following chapter summarizes the findings obtained from this DMIN project thesis and offers recommendations for future steps that need to be undertaken. This chapter will include suggestions for improvements and possible areas that may need further research.

## Research Implications

The researcher enacted this project to effect a change in the congregation at Hillcrest Baptist Church. The study presented in Chapter 3 was designed to address problems established in Chapter 1. The research done throughout this project has both personal and public implications.<sup>1</sup>

This section addresses the personal and public implications of the research and study done in this project. Since the researcher pursued this project to affect change, the researcher addresses the public implications of this study by considering the project's long-term sustainability. In addition, this section compares the results obtained in this study with the results from the other DMIN thesis projects from the last ten years referenced in Chapter 2.

### Personal Significance

This study has raised the researcher's understanding of regenerate church membership and covenants. After going through the extensive research for this project and the implementation of the study, the need for churches to return to the biblical doctrine of regenerate church membership is reinforced in the researcher's mind. In addition, this researcher is convinced that church covenants provide an excellent framework for conveying biblical church membership. Examining the literature, the researcher had no difficulty seeing the importance and reasoning behind regenerate church membership and church covenants. Churches are in peril, and something needs to be done. This researcher cannot think of a better start than reinforcing the need to return to a biblical model of church membership.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 226.

## Sustainability

Ultimately, the perceived success or failure of this study is dependent on the effectiveness and sustainability of the study to create significant and lasting change in the congregation. The major hurdle in this study's sustainability is the congregation's mindset. In conversations with many of the participants, there is a general sense that they believe they adhere to the covenant. However, from general observation and the responses throughout the study, many are not following the covenant in its entirety. Broadly, there is overconfidence from the longer-standing members of the congregation about their knowledge of the covenant. However, though this study seemed to impact the longer-term members very little, it did appear to have some impact on the shorter-term members' outlook.

Tim Sensing explains that for change to be sustainable over time, it needs to be integrated into the life of the community.<sup>2</sup> However, integrating any change is arduous as many church members refuse to change. In his book *Who Moved My Pulpit?* Thom Rainer devotes an entire chapter to identifying five categories of unmovable church members: 1) The Deniers, 2) The Entitled, 3) The Blamers, 4) The Critics, and 5) The Confused.<sup>3</sup> While Hillcrest Baptist Church might not have “The Entitled” or “The Critics,” plenty of the other three are in the congregation. For the most part, the people in these groups are well-intentioned. However, it makes any significant substantial change difficult as any type of change disrupts the status quo with which many have become comfortable. These other three groups, “The Blamers,” “The Confused,” and “The Deniers,” cause significant roadblocks, either consciously or unconsciously, to substantial

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<sup>2</sup> Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 227.

<sup>3</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Who Moved My Pulpit? Leading Change in the Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2016), 17-22.

changes. These groups put up roadblocks even if the proposed changes benefit the congregation. "The Blamers" would rather blame others instead of being obedient.<sup>4</sup> Instead of looking at themselves, they resist change because they do not see that they need to change. Simply, they do not see anything wrong with themselves.<sup>5</sup> "The Confused" want to hang on to how things are being done for their own sense of security and comfort.<sup>6</sup> This group sees the *status quo* as more important than anything else, including returning to a biblical ideal. The reason for this resistance is that they give priority to the way things are. So, they place the things that are not a high priority at a high priority.<sup>7</sup> The third group, "The Deniers," are ones that Rainer claims are the most difficult to lead in change.<sup>8</sup> The third group is the most difficult to lead in change because they do not see the need for change. "The Deniers" are okay with everything the way it is, and they see no need to change it. There is no motivation to do anything differently.<sup>9</sup> However, Rainer remarks, "Denial is the fastest path to death."<sup>10</sup> The common theme of all three groups is a failure to see why things need to change.

So, how does change happen? It might seem daunting and hopeless, but Rainer does give a solution to overcome these groups. Rainer provides an eight-step roadmap for leading change. However, Rainer explains that this eight-step roadmap is not a quick-fix solution. Instead, the eight-step roadmap is a solution that requires significant follow-up.<sup>11</sup> Thus, what is necessary for this study to remain at the forefront and not be forgotten as a lost memory is considerable follow-

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<sup>4</sup> Rainer, *Who Moved My Pulpit?*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 25.

up. Unfortunately, this long-term follow-up will not be possible. Shortly after the study's conclusion, due to financial issues in the church, the researcher found that he would be unable to continue as pastor of the church.

In a perfect world, a culture would be established where the regenerate church membership is reinforced, and the church covenant is taught and revisited frequently. Reinforcing regenerate church membership and teaching about the church covenant could be done in various ways. For example, one participant found the final week's prayer time to be especially effective and suggested that praying through the themes of the covenant could be a regular part of the church calendar. However, without the researcher continuing to work for and integrate the church covenant into the church's culture, it seems that sustainability is not feasible. Considering that the researcher cannot continue to reinforce the ideas included in this study, in this case, the participants' responses must be the primary factor to evaluate the sustainability of this study. Hillcrest Baptist Church is in trouble, and for things to turn around, there needs to be a significant change. One of the questions, "Do you expect any personal or congregational change?" was designed to provide essential responses to gauge the success or failure of this study, and the answers to this question can go toward evaluating the sustainability of the study. Unfortunately, six out of eleven participants felt there would be little to no change following the study. With over half of the participants being pessimistic about any kind of change, it seems that even though there might have been some statistical difference from the study, there will likely be little substantive change. However, there is still an open door of hope for the remaining five participants to continue integrating these ideas.

Nevertheless, three of the remaining five participants will not likely continue at the church once the researcher/pastor leaves. With these three participants leaving the church, it

would only leave two remaining members confident that there would be any change in the church. This reinforces the conversations and general feelings the researcher has ascertained through interactions with the congregation. Ultimately, this study's results were not surprising to the researcher. In general, the attendees of Hillcrest Baptist Church see themselves as faithful church members that are faithful to the church covenant, even if they were not aware of its contents. The results of this study showed that this mindset holds, even though it might not be accurate. Thus, left on their own, this mindset is unlikely to change, change in the church is doubtful, and the *status quo* will likely continue. Thom Rainer explains that if given a choice between life and death, most people would choose death if life required change.<sup>12</sup> This seems to hold true for Hillcrest Baptist Church as well.

#### Necessary Next Steps

Though the researcher cannot continue with the follow-through, this section addresses the necessary next steps for the congregation. Through this study, the researcher was keenly aware of a lack of proper foundation within the church. First and foremost, there is a need to return to the biblical doctrine of regenerate church membership. Unfortunately, Hillcrest Baptist Church is not alone in this need, as many churches have forgotten this basic foundation.

Like many other churches, Hillcrest Baptist Church has found itself in a predicament where membership greatly outnumbers attendance. Many long-term attenders of Hillcrest Baptist Church boast of a membership of over one thousand. However, in preparing the church's Annual Church Profile (ACP) for 2022, the researcher/pastor found a membership closer to 150 by generously considering old church databases dating back to 2006. These older databases include anyone who contributed to or attended the church in the previous eighteen years. In addition,

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<sup>12</sup> Thom Rainer, *Anatomy of a Revived Church* (Spring Hill, TN: Rainer Publishing, 2020), 13.



recent attendance in the last several years shows something far different than even that number. The average attendance, as mentioned in chapter one, is twenty-five. This membership to current attendance disparity shows that, at best, 125 members are not attending the church, and, at worst, 875 members are not. Many of these members grew up in the church and were baptized there but have not darkened the church doorstep in decades, nor does the church even have contact information for most of them. However, the church is biblically made up of regenerate believers, not simply those who sign up for membership.<sup>13</sup> The church must adopt a formal membership based on Scripture to move forward. However, this process will not be easy or quick, as the researcher/pastor has already felt significant resistance to revising church membership standards. It would first require planning out and intentionally teaching church membership. The process cannot continue until the congregation understands and agrees to a biblical standard of regenerate church membership.<sup>14</sup>

After adopting a formal membership based on Scripture, the second step would require trimming the membership rolls. Matt Schmucker has a five-step strategy for reducing the membership rolls beginning with the easiest to the most difficult: 1) Members who are dead; 2) Members whom you cannot find; 3) Absent and disinterested members; 4) Members out of the area; and 5) Non-attending members in the area.<sup>15</sup> Schmucker also remarks that this process can take years, as a pastor should not lead the church to clean the rolls more quickly than the congregation can handle.<sup>16</sup> From the researcher's experience at the church, this would prove to be accurate, and it would be a lengthy process requiring lots of time, careful consideration, and a

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<sup>13</sup> Yeats, "More than Fifteen Million Southern Baptists," 96.

<sup>14</sup> Wyman Lewis Richardson, *On Earth as It Is in Heaven: Reclaiming Regenerate Church Membership* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2011), 133.

<sup>15</sup> Matt Schmucker, "Cleaning Up the Rolls," February 26, 2010, accessed February 19, 2023, <https://www.9marks.org/article/cleaning-rolls/>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

delicate approach. In addition, this process would require not only the commitment of the congregation to a biblical standard of membership but also conveying this to those who potentially would be removed from membership. Though this process could be painful, it would allow the church to gain some critical insight. Approaching the process with humility and introspection can help the church understand why those members have stopped associating with the church. In addition, it can allow the church to recognize how they can improve in ministering to those who were once a part of the church and those who are currently a part of it.<sup>17</sup>

After establishing a formal membership based on Scripture and trimming the membership rolls, a membership renewal of the current membership would follow. This renewal would include a recommitment to the church covenant. This process would need to begin with the old membership. It would be easier to start the process with new incoming members, but it is vital that if the church is asking new members to adhere to the church covenant, the old members should be held to the same standard. In addition, this process would include integrating the church covenant into the church's culture through frequent revisitation. This revisitation might include reciting the covenant together as the church prepares to partake of the Lord's Supper and before beginning the monthly business meetings.

The final step would be establishing a new member class to explain the process and inform new members of their commitment. In addition, part of this step would be to develop a more rigorous member acceptance procedure. Unfortunately, a commitment to regenerate church membership and a church covenant is not standard or expected in most churches. So, a process would need to be in place before a person joins the church. In addition to conveying information, these membership classes have two additional benefits: 1) People are much more committed if

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<sup>17</sup> Richardson, *On Earth as It Is in Heaven*, 136.

the church publicly expects them to be committed up front and a membership class conveys these expectations, and 2) The membership class is an opportunity to convey that what the church believes and does is important.<sup>18</sup> Included in the membership class would be a history of the church, the church's doctrinal standards, the church covenant, and an explanation of the structure and ministries of the church. The class would also allow potential members to ask questions or voice concerns before finding themselves committed or signing on to something for which they are unprepared. As part of the membership class, the potential member would receive a list of questions about themselves personally and their profession of faith in Christ and a copy of important church documents, like the constitution and covenant. The questions and documents will determine if the person has a credible profession of faith and if they agree with the church's teachings. At that point, the potential member could be accepted as a church member and welcomed into the church family.

#### Comparison of Results to Other DMin Thesis Projects from the Previous Ten Years

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Davis's Four Mile Creek Baptist Church is closest to Hillcrest Baptist Church in ecclesiology since they are both Baptist congregations. Though initially, the researcher thought this project would not experience a loss of momentum as Davis faced, that was not the case. A similar loss of momentum occurred after this study, though for different reasons. Davis met a loss of momentum because there was a need for an extended strategic planning session. At Hillcrest Baptist Church, there was a loss of momentum due to financial issues that arose, which diverted much of the church's leadership's attention. In addition, Four Mile Creek Baptist Church moved forward with creating a strategy team to pursue a covenantal

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<sup>18</sup> Chuck Lawless, *Membership Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 32–33.

church membership strategy. After this study, there was no impetus to do anything further with the church covenant.

It is difficult to compare the results of this study to either Chisholm's results at Gwinnett Church of Christ or Oglesbee's at Clear Lake Presbyterian Church. The researcher cannot make a comparison because it is unclear what, if any, outcome there was to either Chisholm or Oglesbee's projects. Chisholm created a document for his project, but there was no implementation at the time of its completion. In addition, it is unknown if Oglesbee accomplished or implemented his plan. The entirety of Oglesbee's project is written in the future tense, and there is no indication that Oglesbee was able to enact his plan. So, in light of this, there are no results to compare.

### **Research Applications**

Ultimately, the study was designed around the limitations and particular situations facing Hillcrest Baptist Church. However, much can be garnered from this study and applied to future studies done in the field. Though potentially this study was not successful, it does not mean that future applications of teaching about regenerate membership and/or church covenants would not be. In another context, the results would potentially be quite different. It would be interesting to see if responses would differ if another researcher did this study in a larger environment. This researcher cannot guarantee the findings in this study would apply to a larger church with more participation or that the results would be markedly dissimilar. However, at the very least, with a larger participant size, there would be substantially more data. At the very least, the study's results appear to be partially dependent on the participants' mindset. So, it would be essential to understand the context in which this study is utilized to ascertain the potential for change. If the primary participants belong to one of Rainer's five kinds of unmovable members, the likelihood

of substantial change is significantly reduced. However, the potential for change is high if participants enter the process with an open heart and mind. After concluding this study, the researcher strongly believes that participant mindset is the primary factor affecting the outcome.

This study would easily be reproducible in any church context. However, there are two primary variables. The first variable would involve the covenant itself. The covenant used in the material produced for this project was based on a historically widely used church covenant. All the material would be directly applicable in any other church using this covenant. In addition, the material could be adapted easily for churches that have adopted another covenant since the themes would undoubtedly be similar. The only issue might be with covenants that include themes or language significantly different from the covenant in this study.

The second variable would involve the environment and situation in which the material is taught. This variable is not necessarily a factor of church size, as someone could easily lead a group through this material in a small or large church. This variable is more a factor of environment and the type of service in which the material is taught. However, the material could also be adapted to fit any variety of meeting situations. For example, the material could be covered as part of a new members' class instead of a five-week sermon series. In addition, a church could cover the material during a Wednesday or Sunday evening Bible study or training time. In addition, the study could benefit from a discussion time instead of asking the participants to provide questions via slips of paper.

### **Research Limitations**

Several limitations hindered this study's research. These results would likely be very different in a different environment and situation. Some of the anticipated research limitations proved to be true in this study. First was the finite sample size. The researcher limited this DMIN

project's scope to the members and attendees of Hillcrest Baptist Church. Unfortunately, with an average attendance of about twenty-five, this only allowed a small pool of participants. In addition, it required the participants to commit to attending for five consecutive weeks, as well as to contribute by answering questions about the study. Many in the congregation were unwilling to make this commitment, and others could not.

The second major limitation of this DMIN project thesis is related to the first, which involves the participants' unpredictable involvement. As mentioned in the first chapter, attendance could not be guaranteed and was beyond the researcher's control of this project. Though twelve participants signed up, one could not continue due to unforeseen consequences regarding health. The researcher attempted to accommodate this person being out but was unsuccessful. So, the researcher was forced to ultimately drop this participant from the study. In addition, a second participant had to go out of town, but the researcher could provide the sermon recordings and question slips to complete while they were away. Another aspect related to unpredictable involvement was that participant response was not guaranteed in this study. A lack of participant response proved challenging as there were times when the participants did not answer some of the questions. Though the researcher did anticipate a lack of response at times, the researcher did not anticipate how little response would be received in the final week of the study.

The last limitation of this DMIN project thesis revolved around the accuracy of the data received from the participants. Having a prior understanding and relationship with the participants, the researcher suspects some participants were not entirely accurate in their responses to the process. This admission of a lack of accuracy is not to say that the people were not truthful, as the researcher believes in their minds the participants were being honest.

However, the researcher does not think they are necessarily accurate in their personal view of how things are and how well they might be doing. The researcher hoped there would be a shift in viewpoint through the pre-study and post-study questionnaires, causing the post-study questionnaire to be more accurate. However, it does not seem that there was much of a change in the viewpoint of many participants.

If the researcher were to recreate this study, certain format aspects would certainly be changed. As two participants suggested, adding a discussion component would be the main change. A discussion component was not part of this study due to one of the limitations. The researcher conducted this study on Sunday morning due to the lack of attendance of the congregation during other scheduled church meeting times. In an effort to not modify the Sunday morning service excessively, the researcher could not add a discussion component to the study. Therefore, for a discussion component to be a part of the study, the researcher would have to conduct the study outside the usual Sunday morning service. However, the researcher concluded that if this study had been held at any other time, the participant number would have been even smaller than it was already. The reason for the timing is that the church had already canceled Wednesday night activities on March 27, 2022, due to apathy and an overall lack of attendance. In addition, the Sunday evening service was not well attended. So, to ensure as much participation from the congregation as possible, the only reasonable time to conduct the study was during the usual Sunday morning service time at 10:45 AM. However, in a different situation, holding the study on a Sunday evening or Wednesday evening and adding a discussion component would benefit the study as the discussion would allow for clarification of responses and for questions to be asked and answered. Outside of the discussion component, any other modifications would depend on the study's context and participants.

### Further Research

Even though this study has concluded and contributed to the topics of regenerate membership, church covenants, and church revitalization, there is still much that could benefit from additional research and analysis. First, this researcher believes that further research and study should be done on the doctrine of regenerate membership. This doctrine seems to be the *sine qua non* of being a biblical church, yet it seems to be a teaching many American churches have neglected and disregarded. In addition, an additional analysis could examine if the compromise of regenerate membership is limited to just American churches due to cultural Christianity and old-time religion or if it is a systemic problem with the Christian church worldwide. Looking at the source of the problem might help overcome the compromise.

Second, additional modern study needs to be done on church covenants. Though historical, church covenants are another aspect of the church that many in current times seem to disregard. Some contemporary authors like Dever and Leeman are writing about the topic, but most of the texts come from the same source, 9 Marks. Though these writings are valuable, adding additional voices would benefit the conversation. In addition, some investigation can be done to ask why many churches have disused church covenants.

The last aspect that could benefit from additional research involves the mutual relationship between the doctrine of regenerate membership and the use and teaching of church covenants. This researcher has found a significant overlap between these two ideas, and exploring the interaction between them would be beneficial. At least in the case of historical church covenants, they cannot exist without the doctrine of regenerate church membership. For example, the first paragraph of the Hillcrest Baptist Church covenant reinforces regenerate church membership. In many ways, the church covenant seems to strengthen a church's



commitment to regenerate church membership and as church covenants. Perhaps, as church covenants have been lost, so has the doctrine of regenerate church membership or *vice versa*.

### **Conclusion**

This research project sought to answer the question, “Does knowing and understanding the covenant of Hillcrest Baptist Church make a difference in our efforts to revitalize a declining church?” Though the study was not as successful as the researcher had hoped, much has been learned from the process, specifically, the need to return to biblical membership principles. In addition, the researcher feels that there has been substantial personal growth through researching and developing this study.

Now, understandably, there are potentially many who would disagree with the conclusion that a church covenant is necessary. Not everyone who participated in this study agreed. One of the participants remarked that they strongly disagreed that everyone should study their church's covenant. However, even though everyone might not support the idea of church covenants, this researcher hopes everyone should acknowledge that something must be done to combat the problems plaguing so many churches. This researcher concurs with others that churches have compromised far too much, and there is a need to return to the doctrine of regenerate membership.

Many churches have forgotten what it means for a church to be a biblical church, and likewise, many church members have forgotten what it means for a church member to be a biblical church member. Too many have overlooked the requirement for church members to be baptized, born-again believers. This lapse is especially problematic in our Baptist churches since the doctrine of regenerate church membership is a fundamental Baptist belief.<sup>19</sup> Church

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<sup>19</sup> Patton, “Baptist and Regenerate Church Membership,” 28.

covenants emphasize the commitment church members make to one another, the church, and ultimately God. Church covenants also cover what it means to be a disciple of Christ within the body of believers. However, most importantly, church covenants reinforce the need for regenerate church membership.

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## APPENDIX A

## SAMPLE STUDY ANNOUNCEMENTS AND LETTER

**Sample Announcement:**

Good morning, as a doctoral student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree, and I would like to invite you to join in the study. Participants must be over the age of 18. Participants will be asked to participate by attending service on Sunday morning and completing pre- and post-study surveys that should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. All identifying information requested in the process will remain confidential in the publishing of the results.

**Sample Email/Letter:**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Good morning. As a doctoral student in the School Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. My research aims to explore the question, “Does knowing and understanding the covenant of Hillcrest Baptist Church make a difference in our efforts to revitalize a declining church?” Therefore, I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants will be asked to participate by listening to a series of five weekly sermons and completing two surveys, one before the study and one after the completion of the study. All identifying information requested in the process will remain confidential in the publishing of the results.

To participate, please complete the attached survey and return it by handing it back to me or placing it in the provided envelope. For more information do not hesitate to contact me.

A consent document is provided on the first page of the survey. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to commit to attending all five weeks of the sermon series and sign the consent document and return it to me when you return the survey.

Sincerely,  
Robert Gifford  
Pastor  
Hillcrest Baptist Church

## APPENDIX B

## PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**Title of the Project: TBD**

**Principal Investigator: Robert Gifford, doctoral candidate, Liberty University School of Divinity**

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be over the age of 18. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to participate in this research.

My research aims to explore the question, “Will understanding and knowing Hillcrest Baptist Church’s covenant make a difference in our efforts to revitalize a declining church?”

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete a pre-study survey. The survey will take approximately 5-10 minutes.
2. Commit to attending and listening to a 5-week sermon series. This will take place during the 10:45 AM Sunday Morning Worship time at Hillcrest Baptist Church which lasts 1 hour to 1 hour and 15 minutes.
3. Complete a post-study survey that will take approximately 5-10 minutes.

The direct benefit participants should expect to receive from taking part is to learn more about the church covenant of Hillcrest Baptist Church. The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms and no identifying data will be shared with others. Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and after three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study. Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Hillcrest Baptist Church. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

The researcher conducting this study is Robert Gifford. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, Dr. Jeff Johnsen, at [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

---

Printed Subject Name

---

Signature & Date

## APPENDIX C

## CHURCH COVENANT OF HILLCREST BAPTIST CHURCH CARLSBAD, NM

Having been led, as we believe by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior and, on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, in the presence of God and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.

We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love;  
To strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness and comfort;

To promote its prosperity and spirituality;  
To sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines;  
To contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the Gospel through all nations.

We also engage to maintain family and personal devotions;  
To religiously educate our children; to seek the salvation of our family and acquaintances;  
To walk circumspectly in the world;  
To be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our deportment;

To avoid all tattling, backbiting and excessive anger;  
To abstain from the sale of, and use of intoxicating drinks as a beverage;  
And to be zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Savior.

We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love;  
To remember one another in prayer;  
To aid one another in sickness and distress,  
To cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and Christian courtesy in speech;  
To be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the rules of our Savior, to secure it without delay.

We moreover engage that when we remove from this place, we will, as soon as possible, unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's word.

## APPENDIX D

## PRE- STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

Answer the following questions below to the best of your ability. Do not overthink the questions. Just answer as honestly as you can. This questionnaire is used to help the researcher understand where you currently are before beginning the study. Therefore, please read each question and carefully answer.

1. How long have you been attending Hillcrest Baptist Church?  
Less than a year    1 to 5 years    5 to 10 years    10 to 20 years    Over 20 years
2. What would you say is the role of a church member?
3. Are you aware that the church has a church covenant?
4. What do you think are some things covered by the church covenant?
5. A church needs to have a church covenant.  
1-Strongly Disagree. 2-Disagree. 3-Neutral. 4-Agree. 5-Strongly Agree.
6. I feel as though I am abiding by the church covenant.  
1-Strongly Disagree. 2-Disagree. 3-Neutral. 4-Agree. 5-Strongly Agree.



## APPENDIX E

## POST-STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

Answer the following questions below to the best of your ability. Do not overthink the questions. Just answer as honestly as you can. This questionnaire is used to help the researcher understand where you currently are before beginning the study. Therefore, please read each question and carefully answer.

1. What would you say is the role of a church member?
2. A church needs to have a church covenant.  
1-Strongly Disagree. 2-Disagree. 3-Neutral. 4-Agree. 5-Strongly Agree.
3. I feel as though I am abiding by the church covenant.  
1-Strongly Disagree. 2-Disagree. 3-Neutral. 4-Agree. 5-Strongly Agree.
4. How have your thoughts on church covenants changed after going through the study?
5. Are you more aware of the church covenant after going through the study?
6. Did anything about the church covenant surprise you? If so, what?
7. Do you expect any personal or congregational change because of this study? How/What?
8. Should agreeing to the church covenant be required for membership?
9. I feel that everyone should study their church's covenant.  
1-Strongly Disagree. 2-Disagree. 3-Neutral. 4-Agree. 5-Strongly Agree.

## APPENDIX F

## IRB APPROVAL LETTER

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 15, 2022

Robert Gifford  
Jeff Johnsen

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY21-22-1163 Investigating the Impact of the Church Covenant on the Revitalization of a Declining Church

Dear Robert Gifford and Jeff Johnsen,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study does not classify as human subjects research. This means you may begin your project with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Explanation: Your study is not considered human subjects research for the following reason:

Your project will consist of quality improvement activities, which are not "designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" according to 45 CFR 46. 102(l).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

Also, although you are welcome to use our recruitment and consent templates, you are not required to do so. **If you choose to use our documents, please replace the word *research* with the word *project* throughout both documents.**

If you have any questions about this determination or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your application's status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**Research Ethics Office**