

Membership Vows in the Local Church

Help or Harm?

A Biblical, Reformed, Pastoral, and Logical Examination

Tim Hill

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Membership Vows in the Local Church: *Help or Harm?*

A Biblical, Reformed, Pastoral, and Logical Examination

Prepared as a discussion paper for elders, church members, and thoughtful Christians seeking to honor Christ's authority in His visible church.

Timothy Hill • Sagle, Idaho • July 2026

Tone and purpose: This paper is not written as an accusation against any particular elder, session, consistory, church court, presbytery, denomination, or congregation. It is no polemic. It is offered in humility, fear of God, and love for Christ's church—His people, His own body, and His beloved bride, the New Jerusalem of God. Its aim is not to weaken church authority, but to precisely locate authority where God has placed it.

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Synopsis

This paper asks a narrow but weighty question: Does Scripture require a Christian to take formal membership vows in order to be a **member** of a local church, or to be within the pastoral jurisdiction of its elders?

The answer argued here is, no. Scripture requires believers to be joined to the visible church, to assemble, to receive the Word, to participate reverently in the sacraments, to submit to lawful elder oversight, and to live under discipline. Scripture does not require formal local membership vows as the condition that creates belonging, jurisdiction, or accountability.

The issue is not whether vows are always sinful. Scripture permits lawful vows. The issue is whether vows may be required as a condition of membership or communion when Christ has already instituted sufficient means to identify, govern, and discipline His church.

The central concern is that mandatory membership vows may unintentionally create several harms:

- They may imply that baptism, the Lord's Supper, and elder oversight are insufficient to identify and govern the visible church.
- They may shift the functional ground of authority from Christ's Prophetic, Priestly, and Kingly offices and ordinances to human consent.
- They may bind tender consciences with vague or broadly defined obligations.
- They may multiply sin by turning ordinary sins against God and neighbor into additional violations of solemn vows.
- They may create false or unnecessary boundary markers within the body of Christ: division and potential favoritism.
- They may expose elders to stricter judgment by adding obligations Christ did not clearly command.
- Thus, vow-dependent membership may *undermine* the authority God has given His elders by implying that appointed elders possess less duty or authority where the required local compact is absent.

The paper's positive claim is this: the church does not need less authority—nor does it need more. Rather, it needs more confidence in precisely the authority God has already given. Elders do not need vows in order to shepherd those whom God places among them. They need the Word of God, the sacraments, discipline, prayer, courage, clarity, and love.

God requires impartial justice (Leviticus 19:15). We must not impute evil motives without evidence. Likewise, faithfulness forbids us from softening the objective meaning of an erroneous practice merely because its advocates may mean well. Sincerity does not trump objectivity. But speaking of sincerity, which does have its place, this paper is offered in sincere humility to all readers. It's by no means a mean-spirited attack, but rather from both personal and practical concern—love—for God and His people—all His people, be they elders or churchmen.

This paper does not presume that elders who require membership vows intend to diminish Christ's authority or sufficiency. Many undoubtedly believe they are protecting the flock and strengthening accountability. Nevertheless, practices possess objective theological meaning and practical effects

beyond the conscious intentions of those who administer them. A requirement may unintentionally imply that Christ's Word, sacraments, officers, discipline, and visible covenant order are insufficient unless supplemented by a locally composed vow.

In some cases the error may arise from tradition, fatigue, institutional momentum, unexamined or mistakenly examined assumptions, or sincere pastoral concern. In other cases, as Scripture soberly warns, church officers may act from pride, self-interest, tyranny, immaturity, or dishonest gain. The church must therefore examine both doctrine and practice without presuming innocence or guilt merely due to office.

Table 1 - Summary of Questions and Answers

Question	Summary of Answer Argued Here
<i>Are lawful vows ever permitted?</i>	Yes. Scripture permits vows and treats them seriously.
<i>Are vows commanded for local church membership?</i>	No. No explicit biblical command establishes this.
<i>May a church keep membership records?</i>	Yes. A roll or register can be wise and orderly.
<i>May elders ask for clear profession and submission?</i>	Yes. They must know and shepherd the flock.
<i>Must that profession be a solemn vow?</i>	No. Simple visible participation can suffice, however, plain affirmation may reasonably be requested, received, and evaluated.
<i>Do vows create danger?</i>	Yes, they create a danger. They can bind conscience beyond Scripture and place man's requirement alongside Christ's appointed means as though His means were not sufficient.
<i>Danger? What, specifically?</i>	Yes. They may imply that God's appointed means are inadequate; diminish confidence in and shift emphasis from His Word, sacraments, and officers; functionally displace His institutions with a requirement of men; add to Christ's government as though He had left something essential unfinished; and tempt the church—its leaders and members—to substitute procedural classification for active shepherding or continual Christian living and community.

How to Read This Paper

This paper is intentionally both theological and pastoral. It can be read in three ways:

1. **As a short position paper:** read the Synopsis, Part 1, and Conclusion.

2. **As an elder discussion document:** read Parts 2 through 6, especially the objections and alternatives.
3. As material for teaching, a podcast, church practice, or sermon development: use the practical resources, supporting studies, and sermon or podcast outline.

The intended posture is logical but not combative. The argument is not, “I reject authority.” The argument is, “I want to submit to Christ’s authority as He has actually given it, without adding requirements He has not clearly imposed.”

Important qualifications: This paper does not deny that a church may use administrative membership forms, interviews, public reception, certificates of transfer, or records of communicant standing. The question is whether solemn vows should be required as the theological basis of membership and elder jurisdiction.

Part 1 - The Argument in Brief

1. The Main Argument in One Paragraph

Christ has already defined His visible church covenantally and sacramentally, and He has commanded elders to shepherd the flock of God among them. Profession of faith, baptism, participation in the Lord’s Supper, assembling with the saints, receiving instruction, and living under discipline already establish visible identity and accountability. Because elder authority flows from Christ and not from member consent, mandatory vows are not necessary to create jurisdiction. If vows are treated as necessary, they risk implying that Christ’s ordained means are not enough. If they are merely administrative aids, they should not be required in a way that binds the conscience beyond Scripture.

2. The Core Syllogism

Table 2 - The Logical Premises from Which the Conclusion Necessarily Follows

Logical step	Claim
Premise 1	Christ commands elders to shepherd the flock among them and to exercise oversight in the Lord.
Premise 2	The flock is visibly identified through profession, baptism, assembling, communion, instruction, and discipline.
Premise 3	No New Testament text requires local membership vows as the condition of belonging or oversight.
Premise 4	Vows are morally weighty and bind the conscience before God.
Conclusion	Therefore, required membership vows should not be treated as necessary for church membership, communion, or elder jurisdiction.

3. The Decisive Jurisdictional Point

Authority that persists without vows cannot originate in vows.

Many churches rightly continue discipline when a person under discipline refuses to appear, departs, or repudiates the church's authority. This is correct. But it proves something important. If jurisdiction continues when vows are broken, ignored, or rejected, then jurisdiction cannot logically depend upon vows in the first place. The authority must come from Christ's office, Christ's Word, and the visible relation of the person to the church.

Authority that persists without vows cannot originate in vows.

A Necessary Qualification to the Argument of This Paper

I believe my premise is sound, but a defender of membership vows may answer more carefully:

"Our jurisdiction began when the member voluntarily entered that relationship by vow. Breaking the vow does not terminate our authority; indeed, the breach itself places him under discipline."

That answer avoids the simplest contradiction, but it does not answer the prior question.

Why did the man's consent create ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the first place?

If Christ has appointed elders, commanded them to shepherd His flock, commanded Christians to submit to lawful shepherding, constituted one visible church, given baptism and the Lord's Supper, required discipline, and placed men objectively among one another, why must an additional local compact activate obligations that Christ has already imposed?

The deeper issue is therefore not merely **persisting jurisdiction after a vow is broken**.

It is **consent-defined jurisdiction at the entrance**.

And this distinction matters greatly in practice. Where jurisdiction is defined narrowly by formal membership, the church may conclude that a wounded Christian standing at its gate is not really its responsibility; that an offender cannot meaningfully be censured because he never formally joined; or that a brother may receive limited pastoral kindness but not the full shepherding, protection, adjudication, discipline, or service afforded to those inside the procedural boundary.

The question then becomes the one raised throughout this paper:

Did Christ draw that boundary, or did we?

4. Chart: Where Does Church Authority Come From?

Table 3 - Model of the Flow of the Church's Authority

Model	Authority flow
Biblical model	Christ → Word, sacraments, officers, discipline → visible church → member accountability
Vow-dependent model	Member consent/vow → local membership → elder jurisdiction → accountability

Problem	If elders must act apart from vows, then vows cannot be the source of authority.
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5. What This Paper Is Not Saying

- It is not saying that vows are always sinful.
- It is not saying that church membership is optional.
- It is not saying that elders lack authority.
- It is not saying that Christians may drift anonymously from church to church.
- It is not saying that churches should abandon order, records, accountability, or discipline.
- It is not saying that long-standing Reformed practice is worthless.
- It is not saying that Christians may evade lawful church discipline or the judgment of God merely by denying membership in the local church whose worship and sacramental life they share—or that they have rejected or left.
- Rather, the paper argues that required membership vows are not divinely necessary and may introduce avoidable harms. The better path is strong church authority grounded directly in Christ's Word and institutions.

Part 2 - Biblical Foundations

6. The Church as the Household of God

The church is not primarily a voluntary society constituted by individual contracts. Scripture calls it the household of God (1 Timothy 3:15), the flock of God (1 Peter 5), the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12), and the temple of the Holy Spirit. These are covenantal, organic, household, and sacramental categories. They are not contractual categories.

This does not mean that personal profession is unimportant. It means that belonging is defined by God's covenantal order, signs, visible participation, and appointed oversight before it is defined by any additional local procedure.

Table 4 - A Biblical Overview of Community

Biblical image	What it emphasizes	Representative texts
Household	Identity, inheritance, covenant headship, belonging	1 Timothy 3:15; Genesis 17; Joshua 24:15
Flock	Shepherding, oversight, protection, discipline	1 Peter 5:1-4; Acts 20:28
Body	Organic unity, mutual care, visible participation, shared life in Christ	1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12
Temple	Holy dwelling place, corporate worship, order	Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5
Covenant meal	Communion, remembrance, proclamation, warning, eating and being sustained by Christ's body of whom the individual believer is a part, shared delight in delicious nutrition and blessing produced by persistent produce	1 Corinthians 10-11

7. Passover, Household, and Covenant Inclusion

The Passover provides a powerful illustration. The blood was placed on the doorposts of the house. Those inside the blood-marked household were under covenant protection. Their safety was not grounded in individualized membership vows. **It was grounded in God's covenant mercy, visible obedience, household inclusion, and sacrificial blood.**

This does not mean that mere physical location saved apart from faith. It means that God ordinarily works covenantally and household-wise. The biblical category is not isolated individuals contracting themselves into religious status, but households and assemblies visibly standing under God's covenant signs.

This household principle continues in Abraham and his household, in Joshua's confession that "as for me and my house" they would serve the Lord, in the household baptisms of Acts, and finally in the church as the household of God. The Lord's Supper, as covenant meal, fulfills and surpasses the Passover. Participation in that meal visibly identifies one with the covenant community and therefore within the sphere of elder oversight.

Table 5 - Covenant Inclusion by Household

Pattern	Observation	Text
Passover house	Those within the blood-marked house were identified with God's covenant people.	Exodus 12
Abrahamic household	Covenant signs were applied in household categories.	Genesis 17
Joshua's house	Covenantal allegiance is spoken in household terms.	Joshua 24:15
Households in Acts	The gospel's visible covenant reach is often household-shaped.	Acts 16:15, 31-34
Household of God	The church is the family-house of God, not merely a contract society.	1 Timothy 3:15

8. Elder Authority in 1 Peter 5

1 Peter 5 is a central text. Elders are commanded to shepherd the flock of God among them and to exercise oversight. The flock is God's, not the elders'. Elders are under-shepherds, not owners. Yet their authority is real: they are to oversee, not merely advise, and to guard, feed, admonish, and lead.

The passage assumes a visible flock already present among the elders. It does not say, "Shepherd those who have taken vows." It says to "**shepherd the flock of God among you.**" Their authority is not created by a vow; it is entrusted and required by Christ.

Table 6 - Elder Authority Established by God

Phrase or idea	Implication
"Flock of God"	The people belong to God, not to the elders or a local contract.
"Among you"	The flock is visibly present and identifiable in the local assembly.
"Exercising oversight"	Elders have active jurisdiction and duty.
"Not lording it over"	Authority is real but bounded by Christ's character and Word.
"Chief Shepherd"	Elders answer to Christ, not merely to policy or tradition.

The Greek phrase translated "**those allotted to your charge**" in 1 Peter 5:3 is *tōn klērōn* (τῶν κληρῶν), from *klēros* (κληρος), meaning a lot, allotted portion, assigned share, or inheritance. Grammatically, it is the object of "lording it over"; contextually, it refers to the **portions** of God's flock entrusted to elder care. Peter does not describe the flock as a voluntary association constituted by formal vows, but as **God's flock visibly among the elders and allotted to their oversight.**

This language both strengthens and limits elder authority. It strengthens that authority because elders receive a real charge from Christ; they need not manufacture jurisdiction through vows. It limits that authority because the flock remains God's and may not be dominated. Elders must shepherd as examples under the Chief Shepherd. 1 Peter 5 therefore presents real jurisdiction without tyranny, stewardship without ownership, and oversight without contractualism.

The Shepherd Who Knows the One

The Lord's own teaching gives the church its deepest pastoral model. In Luke 15, **the shepherd knows his hundred sheep well enough to recognize that one is missing, and he goes after the one until he finds it.** In Matthew 18, Jesus gives the same image in the context of care for the little ones, warning against stumbling them and showing the Father's will that not one of them perish.

This is not a bureaucratic image. It is not a contractual image. It is the image of tender, watchful, personal shepherding. The shepherd knows the flock, notices the missing sheep, seeks the straying sheep, and rejoices over restoration. That is the pastoral pattern Christ gives His church.

This matters for elder authority. If elders are under-shepherds beneath the Chief Shepherd, their model is not procedural control but attentive care. They are to *know* the condition of the flock, *recognize* when one is straying, and *pursue* restoration with patience, courage, and love. Vows cannot create that kind of care. At best, they may record formal intention; at worst, they may distract from the deeper duty Christ *has already imposed*. *There is the danger of false substitution—vows becoming a proxy for actual care.*

The straying sheep is not pursued because he signed the correct document. He is pursued because he is a sheep. Likewise, elders do not attend to the flock because vows have activated their concern, but because Christ has commanded them to shepherd those allotted to their charge.

9. Some Key Texts Establishing Inherent Oversight

Table 7 - Scriptures Supporting the Inherent Authority View

Text	Biblical claim	Use in this paper
1 Peter 5:1-4	Elders shepherd the flock of God among them; oversight is entrusted, not contracted.	Primary text for inherent jurisdiction and elder accountability.
1 Thessalonians 5:12	Believers are to appreciate those who labor among them and have charge over them in the Lord.	Authority exists in the Lord and among the assembly.
Hebrews 13:17	Believers are to obey and submit to leaders who watch over souls and will give account.	Elder duty presupposes a knowable flock.
1 Corinthians 10-11	The Supper is covenant communion and carries warnings for irreverent participation.	The table already identifies and disciplines visible communion.

Text	Biblical claim	Use in this paper
Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5	Church discipline distinguishes inside from outside and requires action against open sin.	Jurisdiction is exercised because of Christ's command, not a vow.
Numbers 30; Ecclesiastes 5:1-6	Vows are binding and dangerous enough to be carefully regulated.	Do not multiply vows or bind consciences lightly.
Romans 14:23; James 5:12	Whatever is not from faith is sin; oath-like speech should be restrained.	A man should not vow what he cannot affirm in faith.
Exodus 12; Genesis 17; Acts 16; 1 Timothy 3:15	God identifies His people covenantally through household, signs, and visible participation.	Belonging is covenantal-household, not individual-contractual.
James 3:1	Teachers incur stricter judgment.	Elders should avoid unnecessary obligations beyond Scripture.
James 2:1-9; Galatians 5:1-6	Humanly elevated boundary markers can create false distinctions and burdens.	By application, avoid separations not grounded in Christ's command.

10. Fencing the Lord's Table

The practice of fencing the Lord's Table is biblical and necessary. The church must warn unbelievers, the unbaptized, the scandalous, and the impenitent not to partake. The Supper is not common food. It is covenant communion with Christ and His body.

But this strengthens rather than weakens the jurisdictional argument. If elders fence the Table, they already exercise authority over visible participation. They do not first need to ask whether the visitor or participant has taken local vows in order to warn, instruct, or restrain. Their duty arises from Christ's command, the holiness of the Table, and their office.

If someone comes openly and flagrantly contrary to God's Word, elders must act because Christ commands them to guard the Table and flock. They would not act because vows created jurisdiction. They would act because the Lord's Table belongs to Christ.

Far more terrifying to my mind is that one would dare to come to God's table contrary to His invitation. It can result in weakness, sickness, and death (1 Corinthians 11:30)! Compare also one who came to a feast in an unworthy manner, "Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" Matthew 22:13

God will superintend His own table in His righteous jealousy...and justice and mercy. The elders proclaim to the assembly that there is set a lawful guard about admission to or participation in the table, and in doing so they address visible and known sin in the body, but they must trust in the God who knows the hidden thoughts of every man for those who do not examine themselves rightly and still come.

Paul adds another striking dimension to the Supper: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). **Communion is therefore not a silent or merely private act.** By eating and drinking, the individual Christian publicly **proclaims** something. Along with the church, he proclaims the death of the Lord Jesus Christ—His crucified body, His shed blood, His saving work, **his belonging to Christ and His body**, and his utter dependence upon that work—and he does so in hope, “until He comes.” The Supper is therefore itself an enduring, perpetual, Christ-appointed confession.

This does not mean that receiving communion answers every pastoral question or eliminates the need for examination, discipline, or settled church order. But neither may the church treat sacramental participation as though it communicates nothing about the man who partakes. **At Christ’s own Table, the communicant is already making a visible, public proclamation ordained by Christ Himself.**

Before requiring an additional humanly composed promise as the decisive marker of recognized belonging, the church should therefore reckon seriously with what Christ has already commanded His people to proclaim. Why is the God-ordained sacrament, rich and full in its meaning, inadequate?

The church may say, “We need vows so that a man publicly declares what he believes and where he stands.” Paul can answer: **He is already publicly declaring something every time he comes to the Table.**

Not everything, of course. Communion is not a complete doctrinal examination—but neither are vows. A man taking communion doesn’t tell elders whether he understands every point of the confession, nor does participation erase the need for discipline or pastoral knowledge.

But it is hardly nothing.

It is a **Christ-ordained proclamation.**

A humanly composed membership vow may express commitment to a particular congregation. **But Christ Himself has already appointed a public covenantal act in which His people proclaim His death, confess their dependence upon Him, share in His body and blood, and visibly await His return.**

Peter provides a sobering example. He had already confessed Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16)—an exceptional and critical confession at that time especially—yet shortly afterward he failed grievously by denying Him three times. Peter’s preservation didn’t rest upon the strength of his confession, his courage, or his resolve. Christ told him, “Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail” (Luke 22:31–32). Peter’s confession was real and necessary, but it wasn’t the ground of his perseverance. Christ’s intercession was. The same truth appears in Paul’s assurance that “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). A membership vow may acknowledge duties already imposed by Christ, but it cannot preserve faith, create holiness, or secure perseverance. Those belong to the sovereign and faithful work of God. The saints persevere not because their promises are strong, but because their Savior is faithful. This, too, is a key Reformed concept. It seems to me that membership vows manifest an incoherence with our reliance on the work of God in His people.

The Church Reformed, Always Being Reformed According to the Word of God

Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda Secundum Verbum Dei

I quote the historical Latin not as an exercise in trivia or self-congratulatory Reformed erudition, but because much of my intended audience identifies as Reformed—and the saying itself places the Reformed church under the Word of God, never the Word beneath the church.

The Reformed church is not called merely to preserve inherited practices, but to examine every doctrine, practice, polity, and requirement *in the light of Holy Scripture*. **Tradition** deserves respect, but not immunity. Longstanding use may commend a practice for careful consideration; it cannot make that practice binding upon the conscience unless Scripture itself gives warrant.

To be blunt, I'm answering the objection that I've heard multiple times now in some form or another, "But this has been the longstanding tradition in the Reformed church," or, "This has longstanding been a practice."

This is the heart of the Reformed principle often summarized as *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei* — the church reformed, always being reformed according to the Word of God. Properly understood, this principle is not a license for novelty, instability, or private rebellion. It is a call for the church continually to submit herself to Christ's Word, even when doing so requires re-examining cherished assumptions or settled procedures.

This principle applies not only to medieval abuses, but to every age of the church, including our own. The Reformers did not challenge Rome merely because certain practices were old, widespread, or defended by church authority. **They challenged them because those practices could not be sustained by Scripture and had come to burden consciences, obscure the gospel, or displace Christ's appointed means.**

The same principle must be applied to formal membership vows. The question is not whether such vows are traditional, historically common, administratively useful, or denominationally familiar. The question is whether Christ has required them as a condition of membership, jurisdiction, communion, or pastoral responsibility.

If Scripture commands a practice, the church must gladly obey it. If Scripture permits a practice, the church may use it cautiously, provided it does not bind the conscience beyond the Word of God. But **if Scripture does not require a practice, the church must be exceedingly careful not to elevate it into a condition of belonging, submission, discipline, or access to the ordinary life of the body.**

My argument, therefore, is not anti-Reformed. Rather, it is an appeal to a deeply Reformed principle: the church must always be subject to the Word of God. Church authority is real, but ministerial. It may teach, apply, admonish, order, discipline, and guard according to Scripture. It may not make human requirements function as divine conditions.

Thus, requiring formal membership vows should itself be tested by the same Reformed standard that tested prior traditions. If the practice is merely prudential, then it must remain prudential. If it is not commanded by Christ, then it must not be treated as necessary to create church membership, activate elder jurisdiction, or establish covenantal duties already imposed by God.

Part 3 - The Theological Case Against Required Membership Vows

11. The Sufficiency Principle

The deepest concern is not administrative. It is theological. **God has already given His church enough:** covenant, Word, sacraments, officers, discipline, prayer, love, and the Spirit. **The church must not communicate, even unintentionally, that these are insufficient without an added human oath.**

To require vows as the necessary threshold of membership risks saying: “Baptism is not enough, communion is not enough, elder office is not enough, the instructions of Scripture are not enough; something more must be added.” I suspect no faithful elder would likely say this explicitly. But practices teach theology, and a practice may communicate something its defenders neither intend nor believe.

***Christ has given enough.
The church needs neither less
authority nor more, but
faithful confidence in the
authority, means, and
institutions Christ has
already given.***

Table 8 - Christ Has Already Supplied the Church’s Essential Means of Identity, Communion, Oversight, Discipline, and Unity

Church reality	Christ’s provision	Risk of vow-dependence
Identity	Baptism, profession, visible participation	A local vow must not become the decisive marker.
Communion	The Lord’s Supper	The Supper already identifies and warns participants.
Oversight	Elders appointed by Christ	Their authority does not arise from consent.
Discipline	Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5	Church action follows Christ’s command, not a contract.
Unity	Love produced by God’s grace	A vow cannot regenerate or make a bad man good.

12. Vows Are Lawful, But Dangerous

Scripture does not treat vows casually. **Numbers 30** regulates vows in detail. **Ecclesiastes 5** warns that it is better not to vow than to vow and not pay. James warns against oath-like speech. These texts do not prohibit all vows, but they place a burden of caution on anyone who would require them. (See Supporting Study 7 - A Biblical Survey of Vows for a deeper examination.)

Numbers 30 also shows that vows operate within pre-existing authority structures. A **father or husband** may nullify certain vows within the **household**. Whatever one concludes about the details of that passage, the principle is clear: **authority precedes vows; vows do not create authority.**

Therefore one answer I've been given to my objections, "Make vows and keep them," does not address the problem. The biblical question is prior: should such vows be required *at all*?

13. The Conscience and Clarity Problem

If a vow cannot be clearly understood, it cannot be faithfully kept. Many membership vows include broad language such as promising to support "the peace and purity of the church." That phrase may be beautiful, but unless defined with care, it can become unclear in application. Does disagreement violate peace? Does raising a concern threaten purity? Who determines when the vow has been broken? Does a momentary lapse in self-control resulting in a casual slander or hurtful insult now rise from an uncomplicated sin to now, *sin plus vow and thus, covenant breaking*? (Exposited in 14. The Multiplication of Sin Problem.)

To borrow a familiar legal phrase, such language may risk being "constitutionally vague." This phrase is only an analogy intended to be helpful; the real issue remains biblical. God binds conscience clearly by His Word. **If the church requires a promise in God's name, the promise should be clear enough that obedience, repentance, and violation can be understood.**

Romans 14:23 teaches that whatever is not from faith is sin. If a believer cannot take a vow in faith because he cannot clearly understand or affirm it, taking it would be sin for him. A required vow can therefore become an occasion for sin rather than a help to obedience.

Table 9 - Clear Commands Bind the Conscience Clearly; Vague Vows Can Create Uncertain Obligations

Category	Effect	Example
Clear divine command	The believer knows what obedience and repentance require.	Submit to elders; do not forsake assembly; pursue peace.
Vague human vow	The believer may not know when he has kept or broken it.	"Support peace and purity" without clear definition.
Conscience consequence	If he cannot act in faith, he must not vow.	Romans 14:23; Ecclesiastes 5.

14. The Multiplication of Sin Problem

Suppose a member sins against another member. Scripture already tells us that this is sin against God and neighbor. It may require confession, restitution, forgiveness, admonition, or discipline. The moral category is already complete.

If the member has also taken a membership vow, the same sin may now be treated not only as sin against God and neighbor, but also as violation of a solemn vow. Since God speaks particularly severely about broken vows, this creates an additional layer of liability. If the vow was not required by Christ, then the church may have multiplied occasions for guilt and judgment without necessity.

This is not a theoretical concern. Vows meant to preserve peace can become a mechanism by which ordinary conflicts carry additional spiritual weight and procedural complexity. Rather than reducing division, they may intensify it.

That God is gracious and may forgive all sin, including violations of sacred vows, is true; but we must not treat that grace casually or presumptuously. Paul asks, “Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?” His answer is emphatic: “May it never be!” (Romans 6:1–2). Or “God forbid!”, if you prefer the KJV rendering. Yes, indeed: God forbid. And He does forbid it. Thus, I cannot take the matter lightly and since I know that, like Paul, I am a sinner and do the very thing I don’t want to do, I do not ever wish to multiply my sins. I have enough—too many—already.

And frankly, this, buried here roughly in the middle, might be my greatest concern: *I am—and I believe, entirely rightly—terrified to create more occasion for me to sin!* My conscience, try as I might, simply rails and revolts every time I try to consider taking the membership vows. And *I would ask, even if you don’t agree with me or can’t appreciate my arguments, that you might then consider me a brother of weaker conscience in this matter.* Paul warns, “But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Corinthians 8:9), and again, “by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ” (1 Corinthians 8:12). If I cannot take such vows in faith, then I must not take them; and if the church presses me to do so despite my conscience, I fear that what is intended for order may become an occasion for sin.

And, I must humbly ask, if you compel me to take vows in order to enjoy the “full” blessings of your local church (“your”, here used as addressed to all who would require vows), would you not be sinning against the brethren and against Christ?

Do you prevent me, an older and experienced man who might prove a blessing to God’s church, from speaking in the assembly solely because I have not taken the required membership vows—without considering my doctrine, character, experience, gifts, or circumstances? (Cf. 1 Corinthians 14 and the ordinary order of the church.)

And on the ordinary, household-based order of a church, what of this?: “You shall rise up before the gray-headed, and honor the aged, and you shall revere your God; I am the LORD.” Leviticus 19:32. Is not the ordinary means that those who are older and godly are given some measure of **inherent respect and honor simply by external, visible observation**—and that such honor shown them is to *revere God Himself?* (If you disagree with my interpretation, please, let us discuss that.)

1 Corinthians 10:23–24 “All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.”

Even if the men I would recognize as “my elders” support the view that membership vows are lawful and may rightly be required, a further question remains: *are such vows profitable, edifying, and loving toward the brother whose conscience is troubled by them?*

I place “my elders” in quotation marks for two reasons. First, there is a jurisdictional irony at the heart of this paper: if I refuse to take the required vows, are they nevertheless my elders? I believe they are, insofar as I am visibly among the flock they are called to shepherd; advocates of vow-dependent membership, however, may answer differently and say they are not my elder and I am not a member. Second, at my age, many elders are younger—sometimes much younger—than I am. That

fact neither nullifies their office nor grants age an infallible claim to wisdom. Scripture can speak of a younger man possessing greater understanding than his elders (Psalm 119:100), warns against placing a recent convert in office (1 Timothy 3:6), commands Timothy not to let his youth discredit faithful ministry (1 Timothy 4:12), and gives particular duties to older men (Titus 2:2–5).

The issue, then, is not age or personal preference. It is whether a requirement that may be lawful in itself is, in this case, profitable, edifying, and loving toward a brother who cannot take it in faith.

The Filtering Effect of an Additional Boundary

But there is a broader pastoral consequence beyond my own conscience, which here might be only one example or a proxy for what becomes an unrighteous filter. A required membership vow does not merely create an additional obligation for those who take it; it also functions as a filter upon those who will enter fully into the life of the congregation. Every boundary excludes someone. Where Christ Himself establishes the boundary, the church must maintain it regardless of offense or loss. But where the boundary is humanly constructed and merely prudential, the church should ask carefully whom it is excluding, why, and by what authority.

A man may come seeking the Word, the sacraments, fellowship, discipline, counsel, and the care of Christ's shepherds. He may sincerely desire to belong, serve, submit, learn, repent, and grow. Yet if he cannot in good conscience take a locally composed vow, he may discover that an additional barrier stands between him and the ordinary life of the body. He may be welcomed as a visitor while simultaneously being told, in effect, that full belonging, service, recognition, or participation remains unavailable unless he crosses a threshold Christ Himself has not clearly required.

Such a requirement can therefore become a kind of ecclesiastical filter. It may not merely exclude the rebellious or unserious. It may also repel thoughtful Christians, tender consciences, wounded men, young believers, confused seekers, or those who have already suffered under procedural or authoritarian forms of church life. What is intended as seriousness may be perceived—and sometimes rightly—as overformality, proceduralism, institutional self-protection, or even an unnecessary distinction between Christians or elitism.

That perception should not automatically govern the church. Truth is not determined by whether men find it attractive. Christ Himself offended many, and the church must never soften what He commands merely to appear welcoming. But that principle cuts both ways. If an offense arises not from Christ's command but from a human requirement, then the church must not congratulate itself for being willing to bear the cost of an offense Christ never required it to create.

My own difficulty may be only one instance of this larger concern. I am willing to remain, ask questions, reason through the matter, and seek peace. Others may simply leave. Some may never return. A curious visitor may conclude from the outset that this is a church in which procedure carries unusual or off-putting weight. A wounded Christian may read the additional threshold as a warning of what future dealings will be like. A younger or less confident man may not argue his case at all; he may quietly disappear.

The question is therefore not merely whether required vows can be defended as lawful. It is whether their use as a boundary is profitable, edifying, necessary, and proportionate to the harm they may cause. A lawful prudence should serve Christ's flock. It should not become an artificial barrier that unnecessarily keeps Christ's sheep at arm's length.

There is a pastoral character question here as well. Christ did not treat needy men as procedural inconveniences. He received, questioned, corrected, warned, healed, taught, exposed hypocrisy, and demanded repentance. He could be severe where God's law required severity, yet He did not multiply human conditions before drawing near to men in need. A church should therefore be cautious about cultivating an atmosphere in which a man first encounters the institution's procedural threshold before he encounters the patient, discerning shepherding of Christ.

A procedural culture that places a merely human threshold ahead of pastoral reception may fail to reflect the manner of Christ's shepherding.

Do not mistake the men your filter excludes for proof that the filter is working.

Christ's rebuke of His own disciples should sober every church officer. When children—not the knowledgeable and most mature and spiritual—were brought to Him, the disciples rebuked those bringing them. “But when Jesus saw this, He was **indignant** and said to them, ‘Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them...’” (Mark 10:14). The danger, then, is not only that outsiders may oppose Christ. Men sincerely serving Him may themselves become an unnecessary barrier and a hindrance to those whom Christ would and wants to receive. This does not abolish lawful examination, discipline, or biblical boundaries. But it should make the church exceedingly cautious about creating additional thresholds and then defending the resulting exclusion as though the exclusion itself proved faithfulness.

The question is not merely whether we are guarding the gate, but whether we are guarding a gate Christ actually commanded us to guard...in the way He commands us to guard it.

Every church must make distinctions. It must distinguish truth from error, repentance from impenitence, shepherd from wolf, communicant from one who should be withheld from the Table, qualified officer from unqualified man. It must also make prudent judgments about how finite pastoral time, attention, and resources are used. But the church isn't a claims-processing office...is it?

The question is not whether distinctions will be made. The question is whether a particular distinction is one Christ requires, or one we have created for administrative convenience.

A church should therefore be cautious lest a useful mechanism produce this reasoning: “He is not one of ours; therefore, this is not our problem.”

That is precisely the reasoning the biblical man at the gate calls into question.

The fugitive did not establish the elders' duty by first entering a compact with their city. God had already established the city, the office, the law, the refuge, and the duty.

Divine jurisdiction preceded voluntary compact.

15. The Stumbling-Block and Tender-Conscience Concern

Matthew 18 warns against causing little ones to stumble. **Romans 14** warns against acting against conscience and placing obstacles before brothers. These passages should not be flattened or misused; their primary contexts must be respected. Yet by application, the principle is relevant: *church leaders should not create avoidable spiritual obstacles for tender consciences.*

A required vow that a believer cannot take in faith may become such an obstacle. The church may intend to promote unity, but the requirement can create anxiety, alienation, or **division** for one who

earnestly wants to belong and submit but cannot honestly vow what he cannot clearly understand or biblically affirm.

This is not weakness to be despised. Scripture takes tender consciences seriously. The pastoral question is whether the church can obtain the legitimate goods of clarity, accountability, and order without requiring an oath that may wound conscience.

16. False Separation and Human Boundary Markers

James 2 condemns partiality, favoritism, and false distinctions in the assembly. Galatians 5 warns against elevating a humanly imposed boundary marker in a way that compromises gospel liberty. Membership vows are not circumcision, and I don't pretend the cases are identical. But the principle is sobering: when a human requirement becomes a separating marker among God's people, the church must ask whether Christ Himself commanded that separation.

If a baptized believer professes Christ, assembles with the saints, receives instruction, participates reverently in the Supper, submits to elder care, and there is no evidence of scandalous or unrepentant living, on what biblical ground is he regarded as not fully belonging unless he takes an additional local vow? If the answer is prudence, it should remain prudential. If the answer is necessity, Scripture must be shown.

Why are favoritism and division warned against and prohibited, while the opposites of unity and the working together of the many different gifts in the body rigorously required? Here is just a brief sample, not even touching on the idea of love or unity as fundamental Christian concepts:

Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for **we all partake of the one bread**.

—1 Corinthians 10:17

But to each one **is given** the manifestation of the Spirit **for the common good**.

—1 Corinthians 12:7

But now **God has placed the members**, each one of them, in the body, **just as He desired**.

—1 Corinthians 12:18

But **now there are many members, but one body**. And the eye cannot **say to the hand**, '**I have no need of you**'; or again the head to the feet, '**I have no need of you**.'

—1 Corinthians 12:20–21

So that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

—1 Corinthians 12:25

God Himself and by His indwelling Spirit has made us one body, but we create division? I can hear the objection, I think, "We're not creating division, in that sense. We don't have the 'evil motives' James warns of." Ok, I can even agree. But some part of the body cannot serve because you restrict it. Surely one must conclude that that's a practical division of some sort?

17. Love, Grace, and the Limits of Human Promise

The peace and purity of the church are not created by vows. They are created by God's grace working through the Word, Spirit, sacraments, discipline, forgiveness, repentance, and love. A vow cannot

make a bad man good. A dishonest man can vow falsely. A faithful man is already bound by God's commands without an additional vow.

The New Testament grounds church unity in God's love poured into His people, the reconciling work of Christ, the indwelling Spirit, and the duties God commands. Required vows may unintentionally shift attention from God's work and grace toward man's promise and will. **The church should be cautious about any practice that gives *human resolve* a prominence Scripture gives to *divine choice and grace*.**

Part 4 - Pastoral and Practical Concerns

18. The "Identifying the Flock" Objection

One of the strongest practical objections is that elders must know who their flock is. This concern is legitimate. Elders cannot shepherd an undefined mass. Hebrews 13:17 says they watch over souls as those who will give account. This requires a knowable flock.

But vows are not the only way, nor the biblically required way, to identify the flock. The flock can be identified by profession, baptism, attendance, reception of the Word, participation in the Supper, pastoral interview, public reception, communicant roll, and willingness to be shepherded. These are real and objective. They do not require solemn vows.

A church may keep a roll. It may distinguish regular attenders, visitors, baptized members, communicant members, and members under discipline. The objection proves the need for pastoral knowledge and order. It does not prove the need for vows.

Yet identifying the flock is not the same as knowing the flock. A membership roll may record names, baptismal status, communicant standing, and formal reception. It cannot reveal the condition of a marriage, the quiet apostasy of a son, the hidden despair of a widow, the private addiction of a respected man, or the gradual estrangement of a sheep who still occupies the same pew. Proverbs commands, "Know well the condition of your flocks" (Proverbs 27:23)—literally, *know their face*. That requires more than classification. It requires continuing, attentive, personal shepherding.

A register may identify the flock administratively; only shepherding can know the face of the flock pastorally.

Table 10 - The Legitimate Goals of Church Membership Can Be Achieved Without Making Solemn Vows Necessary

Issue: Pastoral need	Assessment: Legitimate?	Observation: Can it be met without vows?
Know who belongs	Yes	Yes: roll or register, personal knowledge, interview, baptism/communion status, transfer letters.
Protect the Table	Yes	Yes: fencing, examination, discipline, public warnings.

Prevent anonymous drifting	Yes	Yes: pastoral care, records, follow-up, discipline.
Clarify accountability	Yes	Yes: written acknowledgement of biblical duties.
Bind by solemn oath	Not shown from Scripture	Only if one can show biblical necessity.

Liturgical Participation as Public Confession

In churches where the Apostles' Creed or other creedal confessions, the Lord's Prayer, and the Lord's Supper are part of regular weekly worship, visible participation itself becomes especially significant. A worshiper who confesses the Creed publicly, prays the Lord's Prayer with the congregation, hears the preached Word, and partakes of the Supper is not acting as a religious spectator. He's publicly identifying with the Christian faith and with the worshiping body. While such participation may not settle every administrative question of local membership, it does provide repeated public confession and covenantal identification. Therefore, in such a setting, the need for additional vows as proof of belonging or submission becomes even less compelling.

Churches That Confess the Apostles' Creed

It's common in some Reformed congregations to confess each Lord's Day, with the historic Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the holy catholic church." The creed, I think it's generally obvious to these congregations, is not Scripture, nor does it establish church polity by its own authority. Nevertheless, the confession is significant because the church voluntarily and publicly declares what she believes Scripture teaches: Christ possesses one holy, universal church.

This does not abolish the distinction between the church universal and particular congregations. Local churches possess real officers, responsibilities, discipline, worship, records, and identifiable flocks. A Christian ordinarily should be settled, known, shepherded, and accountable within a particular congregation.

Yet the weekly confession should at least make us cautious about constructing additional local boundaries that functionally divide men whom we simultaneously confess to belong to the one catholic church. If a baptized Christian credibly professes Christ, confesses the same faith, worships with the congregation, receives the Word, and partakes of the one bread with Christ's body, what exactly remains absent that only a locally composed vow can supply?

The question becomes especially pointed in churches that publicly confess catholicity every week. We should not confess one church liturgically and then unnecessarily construct two classes of Christians practically.

Local order should give concrete expression to catholic unity, not quietly compete with it.

The Apostles' Creed does not create the catholic ("universal") church; it confesses a reality Christ has already created. Likewise, a local vow should not be treated as though it creates a belonging Christ has already established.

19. Elder Accountability and James 3:1

The office of elder is not a light matter. James 3:1 warns that teachers incur stricter judgment. 1 Peter 5 says elders will answer to the Chief Shepherd. Hebrews 13:17 says elders watch over souls as those who will give account. Therefore, elders should be very cautious about binding conscience where Christ has not clearly bound it.

This concern is not adversarial. It is protective. A brother may say to elders: I do not want you to carry a burden Christ has not placed on you, and I do not want to place myself under a vow that Christ has not required. Let us trust the authority He has already given.

20. Tradition, Time, and the Reformed Principle

A common argument is that Reformed churches have used membership vows for hundreds of years. This deserves respect. Long practice may indicate pastoral wisdom. But longevity does not establish divine requirement. Furthermore, I can only find evidence from 1894, well after the Reformation.

Regardless, church history contains many long-standing practices later judged unbiblical or in need of correction: withholding the cup from the laity, clerical celibacy mandates, indulgence systems, excessive state-church nominalism, and in some modern evangelical circles the replacement of wine with grape juice in communion. The point is not that all long-standing practices are bad. The point is that Scripture judges tradition, not the reverse.

The history is more complicated than the phrase “long-standing Reformed practice” suggests. The familiar formal membership-vow system is **not** found in the foundational Westminster order and entered some Presbyterian traditions considerably later. See Supporting Study 8, *From Parish to Compact: The Historical Development of Membership Vows*.

The Reformed instinct is not anti-tradition. It is tradition under Scripture. Therefore, the question remains: where has Christ required vows as the condition of membership?

21. Human Bias and Institutional Momentum

This section is included carefully, not as an accusation. All men, including the author, are subject to human bias. **Communities that share teachers, seminaries, books, heroes, and ecclesiastical culture can develop strong inherited assumptions.** This may include *status quo* bias, authority bias, confirmation bias, social conformity, and groupthink.

These dynamics do not prove a practice wrong. But they do explain why a practice may become assumed rather than re-examined. The remedy is not suspicion, but humility: let every practice be brought again under the light of Scripture.

Table 11 - Good Men and Good Institutions Are Still Vulnerable to Bias, Tradition, and Unexamined Assumptions

Human tendency	Description	Possible effect
Status quo bias	Preference for what is already established.	“This is how we have always done it.”
Authority bias	Trusting respected leaders or authors without fresh examination.	“Our best men have defended this.” “He’s written a lot of thick books—in hardback! And I own

		them! Some of them are signed. Many are not from a thrift store!”
Groupthink	Harmony and shared identity suppress critique.	“This objection feels disloyal.”
Confirmation bias	Focusing on evidence that supports the existing view.	“History supports us; contrary texts are minimized.”
Social conformity	Desire to belong discourages dissent.	“I don’t want to be the difficult one.” “Everyone else in my church has taken vows.” “I’ve seen lots of people take vows and at different churches, too.”

22. Personal Consideration: The Need to Belong and Be Portable

This question is not abstract. A Christian needs the visible church. He needs Word, sacrament, shepherding, accountability, fellowship, discipline, service, and love. He needs to be connected to the body, like a branch to the Vine and like a member supplied by the body’s blood.

The concern raised here is not an attempt to avoid church membership. It is the opposite: a man saved by God is **unavoidably, inherently** a member of the church, which is Christ’s body, wherever it may be. It arises from the desire to belong rightly and with a clear conscience. **It is especially important for one who may relocate for various reasons of good conscience, and temporarily, occasionally, or permanently, and desire continuity across faithful churches. Examples would include those in military service, business travelers, students, missionaries, those with vocations or avocations requiring travel or relocation. A biblically grounded account of membership should be portable because it rests on Christ’s institutions: baptism, profession, communion, shepherding, and discipline.**

If membership depends on local vows of varying wording, then portability may depend on local procedures. If membership rests on Christ’s covenant signs and commands, then churches can recognize one another’s members without making local oath-taking the essence of belonging.

Elsewhere in this paper, I show that **membership is geographical—it is location based—and thus, in my summary term, jurisdictional**. For example, the letters of Paul are to cities and to be distributed and “read among you.” Christ speaks in Revelation to churches by their location, yes, each having by their reputation that He has observed, distinctives in behavior—identifiable. Christ identified His church *by where they were and their behavior*. I would suggest that that makes Him a Shepherd who knows His sheep (and the goats).

Part 5 - Objections and Responses

In this first section, I’m responding to objections from a representative sample of mainline Presbyterian Reformed statements on church vows. However, in the next section, I will address some objections from that I think I can fairly say I’ve heard in my anecdotal conversations with Reformed

ministers or churchmen. The objections in these two sections might sound very similar to one another. The nature of answering objections is problematically useful, since it's not a conversation (although I welcome dialogue), and it might reveal my faulty assumptions. So...for what it's worth....

A Steelman, not a Strawman: The Strong Reformed Case for Church Vows

Some of the objections answered in this paper are arguments I have actually heard in conversations about membership vows. They therefore deserve answers. But fairness requires something more. A serious Reformed defense of membership vows need not claim that a man's vow creates Christ's church, creates the office of elder, or gives Scripture authority it otherwise lacks. More careful Presbyterian arguments are considerably stronger than that.

They may be summarized something like this:

1. Christ requires Christians to belong visibly to particular churches, not merely to the church universal.

The New Testament presents identifiable local congregations with identifiable officers, members, discipline, responsibilities, and ordered common life. A Christian therefore ought not remain indefinitely an undefined attender or religious consumer.

2. Elders must know which sheep are ordinarily committed to their particular care.

Hebrews 13:17 requires leaders to keep watch over souls as men who will give an account. First Peter 5 requires elders to shepherd "the flock of God among you." Some definite means of identifying that settled flock is therefore necessary.

3. Membership vows provide a public and orderly way of identifying that relationship.

The vows need not be understood as creating elder authority from nothing. Rather, they publicly identify the Christian as receiving this particular congregation as his ordinary church and these particular officers as those whose lawful oversight he will receive.

4. The vows solemnly acknowledge duties Scripture already commands.

A defender may readily agree that Christians already owe Christ obedience, holiness, worship, service, peace, and lawful submission. The vow does not invent these duties. Rather, it gathers them into a deliberate public profession and applies them to the believer's settled life in a particular congregation.

5. Public vows increase clarity and accountability.

A man who has publicly said that he will participate in the church's worship and service, submit to its government, heed its discipline, and seek its peace cannot later plausibly claim that he never understood himself to be in an accountable relationship with that church.

6. Formal membership supports orderly discipline.

Church discipline requires some meaningful distinction between those ordinarily under a particular church's settled oversight and those outside it. A membership roll and public profession help identify the men toward whom a session bears continuing disciplinary responsibility.

7. Formal membership helps define participation in church government.

In Presbyterian polity, communicant members may have particular rights and responsibilities

concerning such matters as recognizing or electing officers. The church therefore needs an orderly way to identify those possessing those privileges.

8. Membership vows express covenantal seriousness.

The church is not a casual association. Public promises can fittingly express the solemnity of belonging to Christ's visible body, much as solemn promises may accompany other weighty relationships without being the ultimate source of the relationship's moral obligations.

9. Vows may protect both sheep and shepherds from ambiguity.

The member knows which elders ordinarily bear responsibility for his care; the elders know whom they are especially charged to pursue, teach, discipline, restore, and defend. The arrangement can therefore be understood as an aid to pastoral faithfulness rather than a substitute for it.

10. Requiring vows may be defended as a lawful exercise of church order rather than as an additional divine law.

The argument would be that Scripture commands the church to do all things decently and in order and grants officers genuine ministerial discretion in administering Christ's church. A particular form of public reception may therefore be required as an orderly means without claiming that the precise wording of that form is itself divinely inspired.

Two Selected Examples

Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) material explicitly argues that formal membership and vows serve at least three practical purposes: defining the relationship between members and officers, making discipline workable, and identifying those entitled to elect officers. (R.M. McGraw, R. Spec 2015, [Ordained Servant: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church](https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=473), https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=473.) OPC teaching also treats the vows as a public profession of discipleship and submission to church government, not as though the elder's office itself somehow springs into existence from the vow. (The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, no date, copyright 2026, [Professing Your Faith - Chapter 7: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church](https://www.opc.org/cce/communicant7.html), <https://www.opc.org/cce/communicant7.html>.) (All references in this subsection retrieved August 8, 2026.)

I think it can be reasonably said of the way I'm framing the opposing position is approximately like this. Me: "You're saying the vow creates the elders' authority and duty of care, and the member's duty to submit—you can't be a member of a local church without them and those who don't take vows are essentially second-class demi-citizens and pew fodder." A sophisticated Presbyterian might respond: "No. Christ creates the authority. The vow publicly identifies this particular Christian as one who has entered this particular congregation's settled care and has expressly undertaken the duties belonging to that relationship."

That's stronger.

Or: "The vows don't create biblical duties. They solemnly acknowledge those duties, specify the particular congregation in which they will ordinarily be exercised, and publicly establish an accountable relationship between identifiable members and identifiable officers."

Again, much stronger.

And then: "*Without some definite act of reception, how do we know who belongs to this particular flock rather than merely attends it?*"

I think I've answered this, but let me be more explicit in answering these, well, *particular* objections. And *particular* is a word used by Presbyterians.

This is, I think, the serious case.

And it deserves a serious answer.

My Response to the Stronger Case

I agree that Christians should ordinarily belong visibly and stably to particular congregations. I agree that elders must know their flock. I agree that public profession, records, interviews, transfer letters, and orderly reception may be wise. I agree that Christians owe real duties to particular shepherds and brethren. I agree that discipline requires identifiable relationships. I agree that the church may establish ministerial procedures for good order.

My disagreement begins at the point where ***a solemn vow becomes the required threshold without which the Christian is denied recognized membership, ordinary pastoral standing, service, discipline, or other aspects of the life of the body.***

The question is therefore not whether the church needs an identifiable flock. It does. The question is not whether there should be an act of public reception. There may well be. The question is not whether Christians should clearly acknowledge biblical duties. They should.

The narrower question is: ***Why must that acknowledgement take the form of a solemn vow before God, elders, and a fluid group of people who happen to be in attendance that day or on the roll but I've never even met them nor they me?*** Why is a mere interview and simple affirmation not enough?

A further difficulty arises from the nature of the congregation itself. A local church is a real and identifiable body, but it is also a fluid one. Men arrive and leave; children are born and grow; families move; officers change; marriages begin and end; members die; and new Christians enter whom the original vow-taker has never met. If a man solemnly vows duties toward "this congregation" or its children, what exactly is the continuing object of the vow? Does the promise automatically extend to every man who later joins? Does it cease when another leaves? What concrete conduct fulfills a promise to assist in the nurture of children whose names, circumstances, and families the vow-taker may scarcely know? These aren't merely theoretical questions. If the church asks a man to vow before God, he should be able to understand with reasonable clarity whom he's promising, what he's promising, and how he can know whether he has kept his word.

Douglas Wilson provides a particularly clear example of how seriously some Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC) churches understand such congregational promises. At child baptisms, the congregation is asked whether it will undertake responsibility to assist the parents in the Christian nurture of the child, and Wilson expressly describes the congregational "amen" as having the force of an ***oath***. ([A Corporate Amen | Blog & Mablog, https://dougwils.com/books/a-corporate-amen.html](https://dougwils.com/books/a-corporate-amen.html)). He further insists that these are "***vows***," not mere ceremonial decorations, and argues that they create real duties of mutual involvement in the upbringing of covenant children. That seriousness, however, sharpens rather than removes the question of clarity. A congregation is a real but changing body. Men enter and leave; children are born; families move; members may scarcely know one another. If a solemn vow binds before God, who exactly is its continuing object, what conduct fulfills it, how far does it extend toward members or children unknown when it was taken,

and how does the Christian know when he has kept or broken it? ([Children of the Congregation | Blog & Mablog](https://dougwils.com/the-church/s8-expository/children-of-the-congregation%E2%BB%BF.html), <https://dougwils.com/the-church/s8-expository/children-of-the-congregation%E2%BB%BF.html>.)

For example, Wilson explicitly describes the congregational baptismal response this way: “Do you as a congregation undertake the responsibility of assisting these parents in the Christian nurture of this child? If so, signify it by saying ‘amen.’” And he doesn’t treat that “amen” as casual. In another piece, he says that in Scripture *amen* can carry “the force of an oath,” and he specifically connects that corporate amen both to receiving new members and to promising help in the nurture of baptized children.

In Wilson’s own practice, the congregation really is making a solemn corporate vow.

He even asks the exact question—essentially, “What does this mean?”—and gives an answer. In *Children of the Congregation*, he says that the vow requires, at minimum, that members be willing to inquire when they observe serious child-rearing problems, while carefully distinguishing biblical standards from mere household preferences. He also says parents who are approached can’t simply respond, “None of your business,” because, in his words, “We all took a vow.”

That’s useful because it tells us this isn’t merely ceremonial language in his system. He thinks the vow creates—or at least expressly recognizes—a real congregational responsibility. And thus, to violate it is violating a vow—a very serious matter according to Scripture.

And in his 2025 *Life Among the Kirkers*, Wilson explains membership vows more generally by appealing to Hebrews 13:7, 17. His argument is that elders and congregants have reciprocal duties and therefore must know who belongs to which group. He says elders need to identify those for whom they’re responsible, comparing it to a babysitter needing to know how many children are in her charge. He calls that the biblical basis for local church membership.

Wilson’s explanation still leaves my **question about the fluid congregation** largely unanswered.

He explains **why identifiable membership matters**. He explains some of what the child-nurture vow entails. What I don’t see in these sources is a careful treatment of:

- exactly who the object of the corporate vow is as the congregation changes;
- whether a man’s original vow automatically extends to families and children who arrive years later or to the man who wasn’t there that Sunday;
- when his obligation toward a departing family ends;
- how much knowledge of particular families is required before the obligation becomes concrete;
- what counts as fulfillment or breach of the promise in ordinary cases.

And that’s not a trivial omission if Wilson himself says these are **vows, not decorations**.

There’s also an intriguing tension in Wilson’s own explanation. He says that the critic may not even know the child’s name, yet because of the way church community works, he may notice something the parents don’t. That supports his communal point—but it also almost illustrates: I can apparently be under a solemn obligation toward a child whose name I don’t know.

That doesn't automatically make the vow invalid. But it does intensify the clarity question: what *exactly* have I promised before God concerning this unknown child, and how would I know whether I've kept or broken that promise? Now, please don't get me wrong: *of course* I want to be kind and loving and uphold God's law and see the sanctification and flourishing Christian welfare of every member of Christ's church from the unborn child in the womb to the most moribund senior elderly man...but...does that require additional sacred vows...or isn't that just an ordinary Christian duty imposed by our King? I think there's unhelpful and sloppy conflation going on: not every good Christian duty needs to be a sacred vow, and yet, in a sense, I understand that everything is. So maybe all these pages are just imprecise "wrangling over words." Except that words matter. And vows matter. And there is, in Scripture, a clear distinction between ordinary requirements to keep all of God's law...and vows.

The CREC's own governing documents are also worth distinguishing here. The denomination itself requires vows when **churches join the CREC**, and those vows concern doctrinal fidelity, pastoral duty, unity, prayer, admonition, and rule together under the CREC constitution. ([CREC Governing Docs 2024.indd](https://crechurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/CREC-Governing-Docs-2024-6.pdf), <https://crechurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/CREC-Governing-Docs-2024-6.pdf>.) But those are vows made **by church delegations/officers** entering a defined federation of churches—not necessarily the same thing as an individual Christian vowing indefinite duties toward a changing local congregation.

In the CREC Governing Documents, "vow" (or any of its forms) is found just seven times. Six of those pertain to elders and only one to the "new members." (It seems to me that they mean members of the church, which suggests that they're already members; they also say, "current members.") They also use the term desire and pledge (p. 9) in ways that might be understood to be interchangeable with the intent of vows or even the vows themselves. So maybe my concern is with the imprecision. I *think(?)* I "get" what they mean. But we should *say* what we mean. And I think what we mean is that we affirm we have a duty to one another. That doesn't mean we should bandy the word vow carelessly or even unintentionally.

That's fair to Wilson because we first let him explain what he thinks the vow means.

Wilson himself says it's a vow. Fine. Then let's treat it with the seriousness Scripture gives vows and ask *exactly what has been promised*.

If an interview, credible profession, baptism, communion, public reception, membership roll, and plain affirmation can establish the same administrative clarity, what additional biblical necessity requires the **vow**?

And if the answer is not necessity but prudence, then the vow must remain prudential. It should not become the dividing line by which a baptized and professing Christian worshipping among the body is treated as outside the ordinary pastoral relationship Christ has already commanded.

Christ creates the authority. The disputed question is whether a solemn local vow is necessary to identify the settled relationship in which that authority is ordinarily exercised. If it's only an identifying mechanism, why may other clear forms of identification not suffice? If the vow merely acknowledges duties that *already* exist, why does refusal to take the vow result in withholding relationships, privileges, discipline, or pastoral recognition that supposedly exist independently of it?

There's also a very important Reformed wrinkle. The OPC's own Book of Discipline says **all members, including those who are members by virtue of baptism alone, are under the church's care and discipline.** (OPC, [Book of Discipline: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church](https://www.opc.org/BCO/BD.html), <https://www.opc.org/BCO/BD.html>, Chapter I, 4.) And the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) historical language says covenant children are, by God's covenant ordinance, already "members of the Church" and under its inspection and government ([PCA BCO 57.1 - Of Covenant Children](https://www.pcahistory.org/bco/dfw/57/01.html), <https://www.pcahistory.org/bco/dfw/57/01.html>).

So even within these vow-using Presbyterian systems, the strongest formulation cannot simply be: "No vow, therefore no church jurisdiction."

Some Reformed denominations have, at least at some point in their history, a polity more complicated or nuanced.

But the language of the documents might be guilty of asserting assumptions. All "members," calling them members, but then, not full members. That seems incoherent to me. Either you're a member or you're not. I understand there are Scriptural divisions: some are teaching or ruling elders by appointment, others are those who are taught. But even as to who "elects" elders, not to change the subject here, but Acts 14:23, for example, has apostles, Barnabas and Paul (v. 14), "appoint[ing] elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." To say that, "We need members who have vowed because they elect the elders," that's not essential. Elders, who have themselves been appointed, can appoint other elders. (I don't know that elders need vows either, but let's not get into that right now.) This is a better if not entirely biblical model. The church is not a democracy.

Objections I'd Say I've Heard in Some Form or Another: A Strawman? A Ballistic Gel Man?

The following are not offered as the strongest scholarly or representative Presbyterian defenses, but because they are arguments and reactions I have actually encountered in discussing this question.

Objection 1: Scripture permits vows; therefore membership vows are biblical.

Response: Scripture permits lawful vows, but permission is not requirement. The question is not whether vows may exist, but whether Christ requires them as a condition of local church membership. Because vows bind the conscience, the burden of proof rests on those who require them.

Objection 2: Vows clarify who the flock is.

Response: The need to identify the flock is real. But vows are not the only means of identification. Profession, baptism, communion, pastoral interview, attendance, transfer, communicant roll, and submission to oversight can identify the flock without requiring solemn vows.

Proverbs 27:23 **"Know well the condition of your flocks, And pay attention to your herds;"**

The phrase "condition of your flocks" is, more literally, something like "the face of your flocks." The Hebrew idea is knowing their visible state — their appearance, condition, welfare, and needs.

Elders are not told merely to know who has executed formal vows, but to know the actual condition of the flock entrusted to them.

And the next verse adds the wisdom context:

Proverbs 27:24 “For riches are not forever, Nor does a crown endure to all generations.”

So the principle is: faithful stewardship requires attentive, personal, ongoing knowledge of those under one’s care. That supports shepherding as relational and jurisdictional, not merely procedural.

Objection 3: Vows protect the church from nominalism—from unaccountable drifters or troublemakers.

Response: Nominalism is a real danger, but vows cannot regenerate. A bad man can vow falsely, and a faithful man is already bound by God’s Word. Protection comes through preaching, sacraments, discipline, shepherding, discipling, sanctification by the work of God’s Spirit, and love. The requirement and authority God lays upon the elders to shepherd the sheep and protect them from wolves remains regardless of vows.

Objection 4: Vows are an ancient or long-standing Reformed practice.

Response: History deserves respect, but antiquity does not equal divine requirement. The Reformed principle requires every practice to remain subordinate to Scripture.

Objection 5: Vows do not replace sacraments; they supplement them.

Response: If vows are truly supplementary, they should not be treated as necessary. If they are necessary for membership or communion, they function as more than supplements and risk shifting the ground of authority.

Objection 6: Without vows, people can evade discipline by leaving.

Response: Reformed churches commonly proceed with discipline when a member under charge departs or refuses to appear. That practice recognizes that lawful ecclesiastical jurisdiction persists despite the accused man’s withdrawal of consent and therefore cannot originate in his vows. Christ commands the church to hear the matter and, when necessary, to render judgment even when the offender “refuses to listen” (Matthew 18:15–18). Moreover, the church’s discipline is neither ultimate nor exhaustive. God Himself disciplines His children (Hebrews 12:5–11; 1 Corinthians 11:31–32), and no man escapes divine judgment merely by evading a church proceeding: “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap” (Galatians 6:7). Indeed, “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31).

Intent to evade might frustrate a particular church process, but it cannot remove a man from Christ’s government. The fugitive may outrun a summons or decree; he cannot outrun the Chief Shepherd nor His judgment and decree.

Objection 7: Refusing vows shows unwillingness to submit.

Response: One may gladly affirm submission to elders while objecting to unnecessary vows. The issue is not whether to submit, but whether Scripture requires a vow as the condition of submission.

Objection 8: The church has authority to require vows for order.

Response: The church has authority to order its life, but church power is **ministerial**, not **magisterial**. *It may not bind conscience beyond Scripture nor add conditions Christ did not impose.*

Magisterial means “having the authority of a master, ruler, or final judge.” In theology, especially Reformed theology, saying the church’s power is not magisterial means:

The church does not have lordly authority to invent doctrine, create new divine obligations, or bind the conscience as if its own decrees carry God’s authority in themselves.

By contrast, ministerial means “servant-like” or “administrative.” The church’s authority is real, but it is a *servant authority under Christ*.

So the distinction is:

Table 12 – Church Authority Is Real Because It Serves Christ’s Word, Not Because It Creates New Divine Obligations

Term	Meaning	In church context
Magisterial	Ruling as final authority	<i>“The church may decree what must be believed or obeyed because the church says so.”</i>
Ministerial	Serving under a higher authority	<i>“The church must teach, apply, and administer only what Christ has commanded.”</i>

As a particular application example, the church may make practical arrangements for worship—ministerial—(for example, “We start our worship service at 10 in the morning on Sunday and we meet at this location”,) discipline, membership records, meetings, and pastoral care, but it may not create new conditions of obedience that Christ Himself did not impose.

A clean example:

- **Ministerial:** “We will keep a membership roll so elders can shepherd the flock decently and in order.”
- **Magisterial overreach:** “You are not truly under our pastoral care, or not truly part of this visible body, unless you take vows Scripture never requires.”

The church is not powerless—on the contrary! But its power is derivative, bounded, and answerable to Christ. He is the source of our authority, and in submission to Him we have our abiding and certain victory.

A very Reformed way to say it:

Elders do not rule beside Christ or above Christ, but under Christ, applying His Word. Their authority is real precisely because it is not their own.

Objection 9: Public vows are merely a clear form of ‘yes means yes.’

Response: A plain affirmation may indeed be enough. But that argues for simple truth-telling, not for solemn vow-making. Jesus’ teaching that yes should be yes cautions against unnecessary oath inflation.

Objection 10: This objection is overly scrupulous. (You’re making too big a deal about this.)

Response: Scripture itself is scrupulous about vows. Ecclesiastes, Numbers, and James all warn against careless vow-making. Serious caution is not spiritual weakness; it is fear of God. (See Supporting Study 7 - A Biblical Survey of Vows.)

Part 6 - Constructive Alternatives

23. A Stronger Way: Membership Without Mandatory Vows

The church can preserve seriousness, accountability, and clarity without requiring vows. The following practices are available:

- A pastoral interview confirming profession of faith, baptism, doctrine, and desire for shepherding.
- A public reception or acknowledgement before the congregation.
- A communicant membership roll.
- A written statement of biblical duties for members and elders.
- A plain affirmation: “I understand these biblical duties and desire to walk in them.”
- Letters of transfer or standing between churches.
- Regular pastoral care, discipline, and table fencing.

These mechanisms provide clarity without elevating human vows into the basis of church belonging.

24. Example of a Non-Vow Membership Acknowledgement

The following is offered only as a constructive example, not as a proposed mandate:

“I profess faith in Jesus Christ, have received Christian baptism, desire to worship and walk with this congregation, and I acknowledge the biblical duty of believers to submit to lawful elder oversight, pursue peace and holiness, participate faithfully in the means of grace, and receive correction according to Scripture. I understand that the elders have a duty before Christ to shepherd, guard, admonish, and discipline those within the visible church.”

This is not a vow. It is an acknowledgement of biblical realities already established by Christ. It lets yes be yes without adding oath-like burdens.

25. A Pastoral Path for Disagreement

If elders remain persuaded that vows should be required, a believer with conscience concerns should still seek peace. A possible path is:

1. Ask for precise definitions of each vow.
2. Ask whether the vows are treated as divine requirement or prudential practice.
3. Ask whether non-vow membership or communicant standing is possible. Ask what that means and how the division is distinct from those members under vows and communicant standing. (Note: I do not wish to take the logically devious practice of asserting a conclusion by calling it a division, but earlier, I have asked, “How, then, is it not a division?”)
4. State willingness to submit to biblical elder authority.
5. Avoid agitation, factionalism, and public quarrels.
6. If conscience cannot be preserved, seek a faithful church where belonging is possible without violation of conscience.

Part 7 - Further Implications and Clarifications

Objection: *But Marriage Requires Vows*

Another objection appeals to marriage and military service. Christians commonly take vows when they marry, and men entering military service assume solemn obligations. “Lives and generations are at stake!” Therefore, it is argued, requiring vows for church membership is likewise fitting.

The analogy doesn’t establish the conclusion. It shows that solemn promises may lawfully accompany certain relationships; it doesn’t show that every serious relationship must be constituted by a vow, much less that Christ requires formal vows for ordinary membership in His visible church.

Scripture establishes marriage as a covenantal union between one man and one woman, but it doesn’t prescribe an exhaustive wedding formula. There are zero examples of “wedding vows” or even a “wedding ceremony” in Scripture. An omission? No, of course not. Jesus and His disciples were invited to a wedding and quite presumably attended. (Tantalizing to study the culture and implications here, but I shall endeavor to manfully resist too great a digression.) A lawful marriage is formed when an eligible man and woman freely and truly take one another as husband and wife. Public witnesses, solemn ceremony, written recording, and explicit promises are good and ordinarily wise because they declare and clarify the union. Yet the obligations of marriage arise from God’s institution of marriage, not from the completeness of the ceremony’s wording.

Furthermore, a husband cannot defend adultery by saying, “I never specifically promised not to commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14; Hebrews 13:4). Nor may a wife say, “I never expressly vowed respect, fidelity, or household faithfulness; therefore those duties do not bind me” (Malachi 2:14; Ephesians 5:22–24, 33; 1 Corinthians 7:3–5). Once a man and woman have lawfully taken one another as husband and wife, *all the duties God attaches to marriage bind them, whether or not they recognize or expressly itemize those duties!* **This is true even of unbelievers**, whose marriages Scripture recognizes as real marriages carrying real obligations (1 Corinthians 7:12–14)!

A man and woman therefore cannot redefine marriage by agreeing to an “open marriage.” They may speak or vow such an agreement, but they cannot make adultery lawful nor release themselves from the fidelity **inherent** in marriage. Likewise, two men or two women cannot enter a biblical marriage, because God created marriage as the one-flesh union of one man and one woman (Genesis 2:18–24; Matthew 19:4–6). Even any combination of more than two, despite it being common in the patriarchs and kings, and recognized as wives or concubines and protected by God’s law, was not the ideal, as Jesus taught. Man’s sin, civil legislation, private agreement, or later custom cannot redefine the institution according to which “from the beginning it has not been this way” (Matthew 19:8). **God** defines and institutes the relationship, and **God** joins the husband and wife: “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matthew 19:6). **Marriage consequently carries its God-given identity, structure, and obligations whether the parties enumerate them, understand them fully, or attempt by private agreement to alter them.**

So, frankly, I find the objection about marriage vows actually strengthens my position.

The military analogy proves even less. Under United States law, a person entering military service may “solemnly swear (**or affirm**)” (10 U.S.C. §502) that he will support and defend the Constitution and obey lawful orders. The affirmation is legally binding without requiring him to swear an oath

invoking God as witness. Moreover, military obligations arise within a civil institution whose governing law defines the service member's status, duties, authority, and accountability. The military's chosen entrance procedure doesn't establish what Christ requires for membership in His church.

The same principle applies to church membership. If a baptized Christian professes Christ, worships with the congregation, receives the Word and sacraments, and lives among the people of God, he cannot say, "I never vowed to love the brethren," or "I never vowed to submit to lawful discipline." **Christ has already commanded him to love, serve, honor, forgive, pursue peace, receive correction, preserve purity, and submit to lawful elder oversight. These duties are inherent in the relationship because Christ Himself has imposed them.**

Marriage therefore illustrates the opposite of what the objection intends: **God-ordained relationships carry God-given obligations by their nature.** A formal promise may acknowledge and solemnize those obligations, but it doesn't create them. Military service likewise demonstrates that solemn institutional obligations may be assumed by affirmation rather than religious oath. Neither analogy supplies the missing biblical requirement for mandatory church membership vows.

That version makes the governing distinction clearer:

A promise may solemnly acknowledge the obligations of a relationship without being the source of those obligations.

And it improves the military argument. We shouldn't say that military service involves no solemn entrance declaration; it plainly does. (Like marriage, one that may end in death and involves the life and death of others.) The exact and stronger point is that even the United States military permits an **affirmation** rather than requiring a religious oath—and that, in either case, the governing obligations come with the status assumed and defined by law, not merely from individually enumerating every duty.

Both United States Code (law) and the Uniform Code of Military Justice may have much to say about a military man who doesn't abide by either. A claim that he never "vowed" to do so or didn't know the extent of the law won't do much to protect him if he's brought either to non-judicial or court martial punishment for a violation. So again, his statement when he joins the military or renews his commitment, whether by affirmation or vow, will have no impact on the overriding authority of the law.

The Danger of Procedural Abdication

One of the gravest concerns with required membership vows is that they may unintentionally weaken the very authority they are intended to strengthen. If elders come to believe that their pastoral jurisdiction depends upon formal vows, then their confidence has shifted from Christ's appointment to the member's affirmation.

Scripture presents elder authority differently. Peter commands elders to "shepherd the flock of God among you" (1 Peter 5:2). Paul speaks of those who "diligently labor among you," "have charge over you in the Lord," and "give you instruction" (1 Thessalonians 5:12). The authority described is real, objective, and derived from Christ. It does not appear as a power activated by vows, but as a stewardship entrusted by God over the visible flock among them.

Required vows may therefore produce a dangerous logical chain. First, vows are said merely to identify the flock. Then they become practically necessary to establish jurisdiction. Elders may consequently hesitate to shepherd those who have not vowed, and the church may begin to conceive of authority as consent-based rather than Christ-given. **The result is paradoxical: a practice intended to strengthen church authority may undermine it by relocating confidence from Christ's institution to a human procedure.**

This is a form of functional abdication. It says, in effect, “We cannot fully attend to this sheep, nor may he participate fully in the blessings and service of the body, unless he has first taken vows.” But when a man professes Christ, receives the Word, partakes of the Supper, worships among the congregation, and places himself within the visible assembly, the elders *already* have duties toward him. His profession and practice may be imperfect—indeed, errors and sins are among the very reasons he needs shepherding—but their responsibility arises from Christ's command, not from a voluntary mechanism that creates their office or activates their care.

The broader pattern of Scripture supports this principle. God-appointed authority does not depend upon the rebel's consent. Moses did not require Korah's vow in order for Korah's rebellion to be rebellion. The question was not whether Korah had formally promised submission, but whether God had appointed Moses. Elders are not Moses and possess no prophetic or magisterial authority; nevertheless, their lawful shepherding office is given by Christ. Refusal to acknowledge that authority—whether by sheep or shepherd—does not erase it.

Vows must therefore never become jurisdictional substitutes for Christ's appointment. At most, they may acknowledge duties already present. They cannot create authority Christ has already given, nor should they become the condition upon which elders believe they may shepherd those visibly among them.

When Procedure Becomes a Substitute for Shepherding

Perhaps the deepest danger of required membership vows may not be the vows considered in isolation, but the pastoral abstraction they can encourage. A vow supplies a clear administrative marker. It records a promise, places a name on a roll, and permits the church to say that the man has formally entered its care. Those things may contribute to order. But they may also tempt elders to mistake a recorded relationship for a shepherded relationship. But:

- The record is not the relationship.
- The vow is not submission.
- The interview is not knowledge.
- The procedure is not shepherding.

A signed vow may establish that a man once stood before the congregation and spoke particular words. It does not establish that the elders know him, understand his household, recognize his temptations, notice his absence, inquire into his suffering, confront his sin, or possess his confidence.

In technical systems that we in modern (post-modern?) western civilization have grown used to, a completed form may provide evidence that an inspection was performed, that a tax was paid, that a certification was obtained, that a license was granted, or that a class was attended. But the checked box is not the inspection, and the signed job traveler is not the airworthy aircraft. A signed IRS Form 1040 doesn't mean the taxes paid weren't stolen by the government creating the form. A certified

accountant can be an embezzler. A licensed doctor can be incompetent. Just because you passed a class doesn't mean you understood the material or remember much of it a year later. Likewise, a

The record is not the relationship.

The vow is not submission.

The interview is not knowledge.

The procedure is not shepherding.

membership document may provide evidence of a formal act; it cannot substitute for competent pastoral performance or righteous living.

Competent shepherding requires the demonstrated knowledge, skill, judgment, and ability necessary to care for the flock so that Christ's intended pastoral ends are faithfully pursued.

Reformed churches rightly value doctrine, liturgy, confessional precision, ordered polity, written procedures, and historical continuity. These have genuine goods. Yet every strength has a corresponding temptation. Precision may become abstraction. Order may become proceduralism. Confession may become a substitute for fresh examination.

A church court may become machinery. A sermon may become a monologue delivered to men the preacher scarcely knows or who are barely listening.

- Polity is a servant of shepherding. If the living sheep are not served by it, it is polity that needs revision or less emphasis.
- The machinery exists for the sheep. If the machine is harming the sheep, it has become what it will always be: insensitive and needing correction by the operator or inventor.

Visible Profession and Mutual Covenant Duties

A stronger statement from elders and the local church would be:

"If you freely profess and do not deny Christ, receive the Word preached, partake of the Lord's Supper, worship among this congregation, and place yourself within the visible assembly of Christ's people, then we as elders already have duties toward you, and you have duties toward us and toward the body. We all have duties toward one another as Christ's people, body, and bride. These obligations arise not from a man-made vow, but from Christ's Word, Christ's sacraments, and Christ's ordering of His church."

Such a statement would strengthen, not weaken, church authority. It would tell worshipers that they are **not religious consumers, anonymous observers, or unattached individuals**. When men come among God's people, confess Christ, receive the means of grace, and commune with His body, **they enter a visible sphere of Christian obligation**.

Christians are already commanded to love, honor, serve, forgive, admonish, submit, and pursue peace. Peter commands believers to "fervently love one another from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22). Paul commands them to "give preference to one another in honor" (Romans 12:10). These obligations do not arise from local membership vows. They arise because Christ has joined His people to Himself and to one another and has commanded them to walk accordingly.

The same principle appears in ordinary biblical duties. We do not "rise up before the grayheaded, and honor the aged" only after an elderly man produces identification proving his age or vows that he is

old (Leviticus 19:32). We honor him because **his visible condition** places him within **a category of obligation defined by God**. Likewise, elders do not recognize the flock merely through formal procedure, but through visible profession, worship, sacramental participation, and actual life among the congregation.

This is not a weaker view of church membership, but a stronger one. Visible Christian life carries real covenantal obligations *because Christ has spoken*. Vows may acknowledge those obligations; they do not create them.

Mobile Christians, Travelers, and Situational Jurisdiction

A vow-centered model of church membership must account for Christians whose callings and circumstances involve mobility: military members, long-haul truckers, traveling or migrant workers, students, missionaries, businessmen, snowbirds, and others who may spend extended seasons away from a settled “home church.” Such men do not become ecclesiastically unaccountable merely because they are away from their ordinary congregation. There is no Christian exemption under the maxim, “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”

If a baptized Christian professes Christ, worships with a local church, hears the Word, prays with the saints, and is admitted to the Lord’s Supper while present among that body, he is not merely a religious tourist. He is visibly identifying with Christ and with that gathered assembly. He should honor its lawful order and submit to appropriate pastoral care while among them. Likewise, the elders and congregation have real duties toward him, even if those duties are not identical in scope or duration to their settled oversight of long-term members.

This suggests three useful distinctions. These are not direct biblical terms, but analytical categories derived by good and necessary consequence from biblical principles:

- **Ordinary settled jurisdiction** refers to the regular, ongoing pastoral oversight elders exercise over those who ordinarily live and worship among the congregation as their church home.
- **Situational jurisdiction** refers to the real but more limited authority and responsibility arising when a professing Christian visibly participates in the worship and sacramental life of a congregation while present among them.
- **Emergency jurisdiction** may arise when urgent sin, scandal, disruption, danger, or pastoral necessity requires immediate action to protect a man, the congregation, or the holiness and order of worship.

These distinctions protect both church order and Christian liberty. They avoid treating a first-time visitor—whose face and manner of life the elders do not yet know—as though he had immediately entered every aspect of ordinary settled oversight. But they also avoid treating visible worshipers and communicants as though they were outside all pastoral concern until formal vows are taken.

Scripture repeatedly commands God’s people to receive and deal justly with the stranger among them: “**The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself**” (Leviticus 19:33–34; cf. Deuteronomy 10:18–19; Hebrews 13:2). A Christian traveler’s unfamiliarity may warrant careful inquiry or some measure of prudent guardedness, but it doesn’t place him outside the church’s duties of hospitality, justice, and brotherly love.

The apostle Paul's itinerant ministry must be handled carefully because he was an apostle by the will of God and possessed extraordinary authority. Nevertheless, his life demonstrates that Christian recognition, accountability, hospitality, and communion were not reducible to a single local vow mechanism. **Paul was sent, received, examined, supported, opposed, commended, and recognized throughout the broader visible church. Travel did not make him ecclesiastically unattached.**

Modern mobility does create legitimate pastoral and administrative difficulties. A local church must plan, budget, shepherd, teach, organize its common life, and identify men upon whom it can depend for continuing service and leadership. Stability is ordinarily wise and should be encouraged. A man who remains deliberately rootless, evasive, and unwilling to be known is not thereby exhibiting mature Christian liberty.

Nevertheless, Christian liberty may not be restricted merely because mobility makes administration more difficult or projected tithes and offerings unpredictable. **Scripture does not require believers to remain geographically fixed, nor does it make predictable residence, attendance, or giving the essence of church membership.** Men travel and relocate for work, military service, education, business, ministry, persecution, family, providential necessity, or simply because they lawfully choose to do so. This is their freedom under Scripture and must not be restrained, merely on **magisterial** grounds. Prudence is another matter, but where lawful restraints are necessary, they should remain **ministerial** rather than magisterial.

A Christian away from his ordinary congregation therefore does not enter an accountability vacuum. While worshiping among another congregation, he remains under Christ's commands concerning love, honor, peace, holiness, order, and lawful submission. The elders among whom he worships likewise acquire real, though limited and situational, responsibilities toward him. Those responsibilities arise from Christ's command to shepherd and guard His visible church, not from whether the traveler has executed local vows.

Mobility therefore strengthens rather than weakens the *inherent-jurisdiction* argument. The church must recognize real covenantal duties wherever Christians gather around Word and sacrament. Membership vows may be lawful considered in themselves, but when treated as the necessary mechanism of belonging and pastoral responsibility, they risk creating a jurisdictional gap Scripture does not recognize.

True liberty in Christ may sometimes be administratively inconvenient. Yet the church must not flinch from the freedom Christ has given. The answer to mobility is not to manufacture jurisdiction through vows, but to trust the sufficiency of Christ's Word, sacraments, officers, discipline, and visible covenantal order—and, above all, His superintending, omniscient, and all-wise Spirit, who preserves and governs His church in every age.

The Neighbor Who Is Near: The Good Samaritan and the Proximity Argument

Proverbs 27:10 states the same principle with memorable economy: "Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother far away." This does not diminish the duties of brotherhood. It recognizes that availability matters. A distant brother may possess a deeper natural relationship but be unable to act immediately. The neighbor nearby is the man providentially situated to help.

This provides a biblically based illumination that I think can safely be applied to the case of the distinction between ordinary and situational pastoral responsibility. A Christian traveler may remain under the ordinary oversight of elders elsewhere. Yet when he worships among another congregation or arrives at its gate in distress, the local church becomes, in an important sense, the neighbor who is near. Its duties may be limited, temporary, and coordinated with another church, but they are not nonexistent.

Jesus gives the same principle its clearest and most searching expression in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite possessed recognized religious standing, covenant knowledge, and public respectability. Yet when they saw the wounded man, they passed by on the other side. The Samaritan, by contrast, had no prior affiliation with the injured man. He had received no promise of repayment, no letter of transfer, no declaration of submission, and no formal recognition that the man belonged to his care. Indeed, longstanding religious and ethnic hostility separated Samaritans and Jews.

Nevertheless, the man's visible distress and providential nearness created an immediate occasion for mercy. The Samaritan drew near, treated his wounds, carried him to safety, paid for his care, and undertook to return.

Jesus therefore turns the lawyer's question on its head. The question is not merely, "Which men qualify beforehand as my neighbors?" but, "Will I prove myself to be a neighbor to the man God has placed before me?" The command is not abstract: "Go and do the same" (Luke 10:37). The absence of prior relationship did not cancel the duty of love. Proximity and need made the general command—"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"—concrete and immediately actionable.

This does not mean that every nearby man acquires unlimited or permanent claims upon another. The Samaritan acted according to the need before him and within his ability. Likewise, a local church may properly investigate, establish facts, contact another congregation, distinguish temporary care from settled oversight, and recognize the limits of its competence. But it may not use the absence of formal affiliation as permission to pass by on the other side.

A Brief Aside While We're Here

Allow me a brief but important aside. It is my personal persuasion that the second commandment forbids us from making images purporting to represent Jesus. I do not need to undertake the full argument here, but there is an immediate practical consequence worth noticing. When we repeatedly see magnificent paintings in old-world museums, illustrated art books, church buildings with luminescent stained-glass, and online art collections—or, in modern times, highly polished films and television productions—we inevitably begin to absorb an imagined Jesus. We begin to think, perhaps without consciously deciding it, "That is what Jesus looked like," and even, "That is how Jesus dressed."

Yet Scripture has already told us something about how Jesus dressed. He was a faithful Israelite who fulfilled God's law perfectly. Israelite men were commanded to wear tassels on the corners of their garments, including a blue cord, as a visible reminder to remember and obey all the commandments of the LORD (Numbers 15:38–40; Deuteronomy 22:12). The Gospels themselves speak of men and women touching the fringe of Jesus' garment (Matthew 9:20; 14:36). Jesus condemned the Pharisees,

not for possessing the commanded fringes, but for lengthening them ostentatiously in order to be seen by men (Matthew 23:5).

Thus, Jesus did not move through the world as a culturally blank, vaguely spiritual figure dressed according to the imagination of an Italian Renaissance painter, a Victorian illustrator, or a modern film director. He came as the promised Messiah of Israel, born under the law, and He obeyed His Father with perfect and punctilious faithfulness.

But Luke’s account of the wounded traveler adds an even more striking detail: the robbers **stripped him**. Whatever his clothing might ordinarily have communicated—his nationality, status, regional background, wealth, or religious identity—had been removed. Maybe his Jewish haircut or circumcision gave him away as a Jew, but even that might have been indeterminate and would only strengthened the mercifulness of the Samaritan’s aid. Either way, Jesus simply calls him “a man.” He lay beaten, bleeding, and half dead.

The Samaritan therefore did not help him because a tassel, garment, membership record, transfer letter, or familiar badge established that he was one of the right men. He helped him because a man made in God’s image lay dying within reach.

That is the force of the parable. Christ does not allow us to protect ourselves from the command to love by endlessly refining the category of “neighbor.” He places a wounded man in the road and asks whether we will draw near. The man’s affiliation might have been invisible; his need was not.

Beautiful religious art may be sincerely intended, technically masterful, and emotionally moving—and still be wrong. A magnificent error remains an error. Meanwhile, the text God actually gave us directs our attention away from the imagined face of Christ and toward obedience to the words of Christ: **“Go and do the same.”**

Strip away—quite literally—the imagined visual identity markers and return to Christ’s actual teaching: **The man before you needs mercy. Draw near.**

The Limits of Ecclesiastical Authority: Ministerial, Never Magisterial

A high view of elder authority must also include a clear view of its limits. Church authority is real, but it’s not total. Elders are shepherds of Christ’s flock, not civil magistrates, tax auditors, or spiritual surveillance officers. Their authority is **ministerial**, spiritual, corrective, and disciplinary; it is not magisterial domination over every detail of a believer’s life.

For example, the church may teach generosity, warn against greed, and exhort believers to give faithfully. Yet Paul writes that “each one must do **just as he has purposed in his heart**, not grudgingly or under compulsion” (2 Corinthians 9:7). The church does not ordinarily have authority to audit a man’s income, deductions, and finances in order to calculate an amount due to the church. God sees what is given in secret, and He is the final judge of the heart.

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul warns that some were weak, sick, and some had died because of unworthy participation in the Lord’s Supper. Yet his corrective action is not institutional surveillance or coercive monitoring. He commands **self-examination**: “But **a man must examine himself**, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Corinthians 11:28). Paul acknowledges that the Lord Himself is judging and disciplining His people: “But when we are judged, **we are disciplined by the Lord**” (1 Corinthians 11:32). The church must teach, warn, fence the table, and

discipline open scandal, but it must not confuse its role with God's final judgment and personal, unceasing involvement in the life of His church.

Matthew 18 likewise shows both the reality and the limit of church authority. The church admonishes, hears witnesses, renders judgment, and, if necessary, treats the unrepentant man as a Gentile and tax collector. This is grave authority, but it is ecclesiastical, not total civil control. The church does not wield the civil sword. Nor does the individual Christian acquire the magistrate's authority merely because he knows that God's law assigns a civil or criminal penalty to an offense¹. Even in a godly civil order, accusation, evidence, witnesses, lawful adjudication, and execution of judgment belong within the jurisdictions God has appointed. Even in this, the church does not replace God as judge. It declares and enforces visible ecclesiastical separation while entrusting final judgment to the Lord.

This matters for membership vows. If vows are treated as a kind of chain and iron collar by which the church may yank a straying sheep back into line, the pastoral nature of elder authority has been distorted. Biblical shepherding includes rebuke, reproof, warning, discipline, and even excommunication when necessary; but it is fundamentally shepherding, not domination. Peter commands elders not to lord it over those allotted to their charge, but to be examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:3). Paul commands the church to "admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone" (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

But the principle of limited jurisdiction does not imply that God's law is limited in its authority. I would argue that for generations our civilization has increasingly abdicated the duty to render righteous judgment according to God's law, including in matters of grave crime. That is a civilizational question larger than this paper, but one aspect bears directly upon the argument here: biblical justice is neither private vengeance nor institutional passivity. God assigns both the duty to judge and the jurisdiction within which judgment must be exercised.

Even where Scripture assigns a criminal penalty to an offense, the individual Christian does not thereby necessarily acquire personal authority to impose that penalty. A man accused of murder must not simply be treated as guilty because another man believes the accusation. There must be accusation, evidence, lawful hearing, sufficient witnesses, righteous judgment, and action by the proper authority. Biblical law does not leave punishment to arbitrary personal vengeance or self-appointed execution. God defines the offense, the evidence, the jurisdiction, the officers or men authorized to act, and the lawful procedure. In some cases the man who carries out judgment may be personally involved—a witness may cast the first stone, or an avenger of blood may execute the murderer—but he acts within an order established by God, not merely because his anger, relationship, or private judgment gives him authority.

On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. Deuteronomy 17:6–7

¹ This is my one and only footnote in this work. This topic is an important one, and the temptation to digress into it was great. I found, however, after a merciless review, it would distract from the flow of the current topic. But if you'd like to discuss topics of *how justice is to be executed in our society today*, this would be of immediate and practical value.

The witnesses had to cast the first stones. This imposed terrible personal accountability: a man couldn't casually give testimony leading to death and then remain safely detached from the sentence.

Why does this matter for membership vows? Because the same jurisdictional principle applies. God defines the offense. God establishes the evidentiary requirements. God assigns authority to judge. And God determines the sphere in which a particular officer may act. A church may discipline a professing Christian for an excommunicable offense within its ecclesiastical jurisdiction, but even where the underlying offense is also a civil crime, the church does not thereby acquire the civil magistrate's authority.

Executing a criminal sentence is not within the local church's jurisdiction, nor is it the private authority of an individual Christian. The church may teach God's law, call rulers to righteousness, protect the flock, admonish the sinner, investigate ecclesiastical questions, and impose ecclesiastical discipline. The civil magistrate bears a different office and a different sword. The distinction does not diminish Christ's authority; it recognizes the different jurisdictions through which His authority is ministerially exercised.

Nor may a father, for example, personally impose a criminal penalty upon his son merely because he possesses genuine parental authority.

If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his hometown. They shall say to the elders of his city, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death; so you shall remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear of it and fear. Deuteronomy 21:18–21

And yes, the text describes much more than one episode of intoxication. The son is persistently:

- stubborn and rebellious;
- disobedient to both father and mother;
- *unresponsive to repeated* parental correction;
- and *characterized* by gluttony and drunkenness.

Most importantly, the parents couldn't execute him themselves simply because they were disgusted with him or offended. They were required to bring the accusation before the elders at the city gate—the recognized place of public judgment. Parental authority initiated the complaint; lawful public judgment determined the outcome. The point is jurisdictional: even parents possessing genuine God-given authority over their son were not thereby authorized to assume independently the office of judge and executioner.

Yet there is another sobering side to the law. Biblical judgment did not necessarily permit an accuser or witness to remain detached from the sentence his testimony helped establish. Deuteronomy 17:7 commands that in a capital case, “the hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death.” Thus, if the father and mother in Deuteronomy 21 were themselves among the witnesses whose testimony lawfully established their son's guilt, they would not merely bring the accusation and then hand the terrible consequence over to anonymous officials. As witnesses, their own hands would be first...first to throw the stone against their own guilty and condemned son and carry out the death penalty by and with the congregation.

(Note that, although this might be horrifying and “barbaric” to many modern minds, there is no example in Scripture of the stoning of a rebellious child recorded, so perhaps one explanation is that the law was very effective in preventing this particular evil, although we know generally that the law also reveals our sin. Romans 3:20, 4:15, 5:13-20, 7:7-13.)

That distinction is important. The father could not say, in effect, “I brought you into this world, and I can take you out,” as though fatherhood itself granted autonomous power of life and death. Anger, parental status, and private conviction were insufficient. The case had to be brought under God’s law and before the jurisdiction God had appointed. But neither could natural affection nullify righteous judgment once guilt had been lawfully established.

The same pattern appears in the law of the avenger of blood. God assigned the near kinsman a real role in executing judgment against the murderer (Numbers 35:19), yet the congregation was also commanded to judge between the slayer and the avenger and to protect the true manslayer from him (Numbers 35:24–25). Deuteronomy even provides refuge cities lest an angry avenger overtake and kill a man who was “not deserving of death” (Deuteronomy 19:6). Thus, the avenger’s personal interest did not create guilt, but neither did personal involvement disqualify him from the role God had assigned.

Biblical law therefore does something subtler than either privatizing justice or monopolizing it in a detached bureaucracy. **God defines the offense, the evidence, the jurisdiction, the adjudication, and the men authorized to act!** Sometimes those men are judges; sometimes witnesses participate directly in execution; sometimes a kinsman serves as avenger of blood. The governing question is not whether the actor is “private” or “public” according to modern categories, but whether God has given that man authority to do that act, in that case, under those conditions.

Authority is real. Jurisdiction is real. Procedure is real. And personal passion—whether anger, fear, affection, or pity—may neither invent authority God has not given nor erase a duty God has imposed.

Whatever conclusions one reaches about the continuing civil application of particular Mosaic penalties, this much is unmistakable: Scripture itself distinguishes offices and jurisdictions. The father is not the magistrate. The elder is not the magistrate. The private Christian is not the magistrate. And the magistrate is not the elder. Each must exercise the authority God has assigned without either abandoning it or seizing authority assigned to another sphere.

That is why even apparently “minor” departures from God-given jurisdiction concern me. Good intentions do not authorize us to redraw boundaries God has drawn, any more than bad intentions erase duties God has imposed.

This brings us directly back to the church. Why I’m so committed to the inherent-jurisdictional view is that, today, we are called to exercise judgment in the church, to protect the flock, to get the wolves out—it’s our duty. It’s not based on vows. You don’t get to escape God’s righteous law nor His judgment because you didn’t make a vow, because you think His law doesn’t apply to you, because you never heard of it, or you don’t understand it. Nor may elders decline duties Christ has actually assigned to them merely because a man has not entered the local procedural category they would prefer.

Therefore, the church should not seek to strengthen shepherding by multiplying control mechanisms. It should strengthen shepherding by trusting the means Christ has given: the Word, sacraments,

prayer, pastoral care, discipline, and the Lord's own government of His church. Required vows risk detracting from these duties by shifting attention toward procedural enforcement rather than faithful pastoral oversight.

The church may command what Christ commands, forbid what Christ forbids, and apply His Word to actual cases; but it must not seek omniscience, total control, or procedural guarantees that belong only to God. To claim such powers would confuse the church's limited office with the omniscience and government of God.

Elders are charged to shepherd the flock, not to mechanize obedience.

1. Vows do not create elder authority.
2. Vows do not make bad men good.
3. Vows do not replace self-examination.
4. Vows do not give elders omniscience.
5. Vows do not guarantee faithfulness.
6. Vows may create additional guilt where Scripture already gives sufficient categories.
7. Vows may tempt elders to rely on mechanism rather than shepherding.

The Danger of Causing Division Within the Body

Another concern is that required membership vows may unintentionally create a functional division within the body. Paul teaches that the church is one body, and that God has composed the body "so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another" (1 Corinthians 12:25). The KJV renders this, "that there should be no schism in the body."

If a baptized Christian professes Christ, worships with the congregation, receives the Word, partakes of the Lord's Supper, and lives among the saints, yet is treated as belonging to a lower or less recognized class because he has not taken local membership vows, then the church risks creating a distinction Scripture does not clearly authorize. The danger is not merely administrative inconvenience; *it is the possible formation of a two-tier body.*

This concern is especially serious where the Lord's Supper is involved. Paul writes, "Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17). The Table visibly proclaims unity in Christ. If those who partake of the one bread are nevertheless divided into "real members" and "not-quite members" on the basis of vows, the church should carefully ask whether its practice is consistent with the meaning of the Supper.

James also warns against making distinctions within the assembly in a way that assigns honor to one and diminished place to another (James 2:1–4). While James speaks directly of partiality toward the rich, the principle should make the church cautious about man-made distinctions that functionally say, "You sit here, but you sit there." Biblical distinctions must be maintained: believer and unbeliever, baptized and unbaptized, repentant and unrepentant, officer and non-officer, received and excommunicated. But distinctions not required by Scripture should not be elevated in a way that divides those whom Christ has visibly gathered.

Thus, required vows may risk creating schism where they intend to create order. If the church's sacramental practice says, "one body," its membership practice should not unnecessarily communicate, "two classes."

However, let me see if I can answer a possible and very reasonable objection. "But, does that mean anyone can just come in and vote on how we're going to spend money: how much to pay the pastor, what color carpet to buy, style of carpet, location of the church building..." and the 10,000,000 other decisions a local church makes? I offer that, first, in a presbyterian church, or I'd prefer simply to say, a biblical church, your elders decide those decisions, not the congregation. Congregationalism is common at time of writing in the United States, and I'd suggest that in many cases it's closer to a "pure democracy," which is a recipe for chaos and misery. I think such an objection would understandably come from someone who's only seen a "congregationally" organized (disorganized?) church.

I could write a separate paper on this (another tantalizing topic I shall try to manfully resist here), but in brief, Christ entrusts the government of His church to qualified officers, particularly elders, with deacons and other appointed men administering material affairs under lawful oversight. The congregation participates where Scripture and sound order require—especially in recognizing qualified men and maintaining communal confidence—but Scripture doesn't establish universal congregational voting as the source of church authority or require popular approval for every prudential expenditure. Faithful officers should possess real discretion, exercised through plurality, transparency, competence, and accountability to Christ.

The saints need not endure a congregational meeting and voting over whether the fellowship hall should be painted "Desert Sand" or "Slightly Warmer Desert Sand Ochre." (I suppose both might make a nice contrast and give the room some added depth though, yes?) In a phrase: The elders appoint elders who are select, sober men not fond of sordid gain expressly because they are commissioned to make these decisions or wisely delegate them. Thus, we don't need membership vows even for "voting." And even in the case of appointing or commissioning elders, the saints who are not elders do not appoint or ultimately choose their elders. Elders are appointed by elders. Thus? Still no need for membership vows.

Pastoral Synthesis and Appeal

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. The foundation is not vows. The authority of elders does not arise from vows. The identity of the visible church does not arise from vows. The power of discipline does not arise from vows. The holiness of the Lord's Table does not arise from vows. All these arise from Christ: established by His Word and covenant, applied by His Spirit, marked by His sacraments as signs and seals, and administered ministerially through His appointed officers.

Therefore the church should be careful not to say, even unintentionally: God's baptism is not enough; God's communion is not enough; God's instructions to elders and members are not enough; God's appointed officers are not enough. We need something more.

The elders do not need the Christian's vow in order to owe him lawful shepherding, and the Christian does not need a vow in order to owe Christ's shepherds lawful submission.

The better confession is: Christ has given enough. Let us use what He has given faithfully.

This paper has argued not for less church authority, but for authority grounded more directly and confidently in Christ. It has argued not for weaker membership, but for membership rooted in covenant, sacrament, shepherding, love, and discipline. It has argued not for individualism, but for true belonging without unnecessary oath-bound conscience burdens.

The Flock Is Not a Procedure: People *are* the Project

Have you ever had someone make a one-time, offhand comment that you remember years later? A dear brother in Christ once reflected on a lesson he had learned at considerable personal cost. He was a highly accomplished man, with two unusually rigorous degrees (and maybe more I wasn't aware of) and a career many would consider enviable, even glamorous—a position of real responsibility in which lives literally and daily depended upon his successful work. Calling him a high achiever would be an understatement.

Yet after years of success, he told me, in substance: “For decades, I was highly rewarded for accomplishing things. There was no substitute for success. Planning, execution, and achieving the objective drove me. Then I learned—it wasn't about the project. Rather: *People* are the Project.”

Over the years, I have added another line in my own mind: “People aren't *a* project.”

That may sound contradictory, but I think the two belong together. You cannot simply engineer a plan for the people in your life and execute it as though they were machinery. They are living souls, made to glorify God and yet corrupted by sin, requiring wisdom, patience, adaptation, correction, mercy, and love.

Yet my friend was right: People are the Project.

Even a good project plan must adapt to reality. In any work of real complexity, adjustments are inevitable. Competence is not rigidly following the plan after the plan has ceased to serve the purpose; it is knowing what the purpose is and adjusting faithfully to achieve it.

So be careful not to let the process or project displace the thing the process or project exists to accomplish. Shepherds can benefit from project management principles, but ultimately, they are carers and leaders of living souls, not of projects or data displayed on dashboards.

People are the Project. But they aren't a Project.

Thus, there's one final danger worth stating plainly. The church must not mistake *identifying* the flock for *shepherding* the flock. A membership roll may identify men who ordinarily belong to a particular congregation. A vow may record what a man has promised. An interview may establish what he professes. A Book of Church Order may establish procedures for receiving, disciplining, restoring, or removing members. All of these things may serve legitimate purposes.

But none of them shepherds a sheep.

Christ has entrusted living men, women, children, marriages, households, wounds, sins, fears, gifts, weaknesses, and hopes to the care of His church. Elders are therefore called not merely to classify the flock, but to know it. “Know well the condition of your flocks” (Proverbs 27:23). They must feed, guard, admonish, encourage, help, pursue, restore, and patiently care for those whom the Chief Shepherd has placed among them.

The danger of proceduralism is that the mechanism can become psychologically satisfying. (*Even deeply psychologically satisfying!*) The form has been signed! The interview was completed! The name appears on the roll! The required boxes are checked! The process worked!

But the Process is *not* the Purpose.

A technically excellent church system can still fail pastorally if the actual sheep are not known. A man may have signed every required document while his marriage collapses unnoticed. A son may drift from the faith while his household remains administratively “in good standing.” A widow may sit quietly in the same pew for months while loneliness consumes her. A respected man may conceal serious sin behind impeccable formal standing. Conversely, a distressed Christian traveler may possess none of the local paperwork and yet stand directly before the church in genuine need.

The forms, procedures, confessions, rolls, and polity are therefore servants. They may assist shepherding; they cannot replace it.

- **The record is not the relationship.**
- **The vow is not submission.**
- **The interview is not knowledge.**
- **The procedure is not shepherding.**

This is not an argument against order. A shepherd counts his sheep. He knows where they belong. He notices when one is missing. Precisely because he knows the number, however, he knows when ninety-nine are present and one is gone—and then he goes looking for the one.

The purpose of church order is therefore not to mechanize pastoral responsibility, but to help faithful men perform it. Polity is a servant of shepherding.

The “machinery” exists for the sheep.

And this places a particularly solemn responsibility upon elders. Brethren, do not mistake having identified the men who owe you submission for having fulfilled your duty to shepherd them. Christ will not ask merely whether their names appeared on your roll. You must give account for their souls.

That is not a diminution of elder authority. It is an exaltation of elder office. Christ entrusts His sheep to under-shepherds and commands those men to care for what belongs to Him. The answer to the difficulty, fatigue, complexity, and even heartbreak of shepherding cannot finally be a stronger mechanism. It must be faithful shepherding under the Chief Shepherd, using every lawful aid He permits while trusting the means and authority He has actually given.

A final appeal to elders may be stated this way:

Brethren, I desire to submit to your authority in the Lord, to receive the Word, to partake reverently of the Supper, to be shepherded, corrected, loved, and held accountable. I am at all times happy to confess that I am a sinner saved by God’s grace and that I desire to serve

always Christ and His body in a matter befitting my capability, calling, and place as established by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7). My concern is not that you have too much authority, but that vows may obscure the authority Christ has already given you. I ask only that we not bind conscience beyond Scripture, nor treat as necessary what Christ has not clearly required.

Church Size, Span of Care, and the Limits of Organization

The argument above should not be misunderstood as assuming that every local church is small enough for every elder personally to know every member in equal depth. Churches vary enormously in size, structure, maturity, resources, geography, and number of officers. Some congregations have too few qualified elders. Others have many. Some elders are seasoned men of unusual wisdom and experience; others may be younger, newly ordained, or still developing judgment under the care of more mature men. These realities matter.

A small church may permit unusually close pastoral knowledge, yet it may also place tremendous burdens on a few men who are already preaching, counseling, administering, raising families, working ordinary vocations, and bearing the accumulated troubles of the flock. A large church may possess greater financial resources, staff, facilities—entire “campuses” or multiple locations even, specialized ministries, and administrative capacity, yet its very size may make personal shepherding more difficult. The problem changes form, but it does not disappear.

Scripture does not require every elder to possess exhaustive personal knowledge of every sheep. No human shepherd is omniscient, and no church structure can manufacture omniscience. What Scripture does require is that the flock be genuinely known and cared for through competent, accountable, identifiable shepherding. As a congregation grows, this ordinarily requires deliberate delegation, plurality, smaller spheres of responsibility, deacons and other servants, careful communication, and perhaps (almost certainly) additional elders—not a retreat from personal shepherding into abstraction.

The larger the congregation becomes, the greater the danger that institutional scale may conceal pastoral distance. A church may acquire beautiful buildings, substantial budgets, schools, gymnasiums, campuses, programs, staff, technology, and impressive administrative systems. These things may be lawful and useful. They may also become burdens, distractions, or objects of institutional preservation. The question is not whether the church possesses them, but whether they continue to serve the sheep.

A large institution can become very good at maintaining itself. Buildings require money. Staff require salaries—predictable and even market-comparable salaries. Programs require volunteers. Volunteers require leaders and projects and resources. Campuses require administration. Systems create procedures, and procedures create additional systems. None of this is necessarily wrong or even avoidable. Yet the church must repeatedly ask whether the machinery remains subordinate to the mission Christ actually gave.

The same warning therefore applies at every scale. A small church must not excuse neglect by saying, “We’re exhausted and undermanned.” A large church must not excuse neglect by saying, “We have systems for that.” Finite resources may limit the extent and form of pastoral care; they do not erase the existence of pastoral duty.

The solution is not to idealize either smallness or largeness. A small church can be intimate and unhealthy. A large church can be complex and faithful. The relevant questions are more basic:

- ☐ Are qualified men shepherding?
- ☐ Is responsibility clearly assigned?
- ☐ Are the sheep known?
- ☐ Are the weak noticed?
- ☐ Are the wandering pursued?
- ☐ Are serious sins confronted?
- ☐ Are households cared for?
- ☐ Can a distressed man actually reach a shepherd? And when a shepherd notices someone in need, vice versa?

Church size changes the organization of shepherding. It does not change the command to shepherd.

Finite resources may limit the extent of pastoral care; they do not erase the existence of pastoral duty.

Also, there's an important connection to competence: the question is not merely **how many elders** but whether the elders actually have the knowledge, judgment, character, and ability required for the responsibilities assigned to them.

Headcount is not the same thing as pastoral capacity.

The Strategic Solution: An Elder Pipeline

Scripture provides another answer to the problem of pastoral scale: the church must deliberately raise up qualified men. Paul left Titus in Crete in part to “set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city” (Titus 1:5), and he immediately specified the moral, spiritual, and doctrinal qualifications those men must possess. Paul likewise instructed Timothy to entrust what he had received “to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). The pattern is not merely replacement but multiplication: mature men train faithful and competent men who in turn become capable of teaching and leading others. This is the optimistic postmillennial view in action.

Of course, this does not mean that qualified elders can simply be summoned into existence when a congregation needs them. Many faithful Reformed churches already desire more elders, pray for them, and struggle to find men who meet the biblical qualifications. That difficulty should be acknowledged rather than answered glibly. The elder pipeline is necessarily long-term and generational. Deuteronomy 6 gives the underlying pattern: God’s Word is to be taught diligently in the household—when men sit in the house, walk by the way, lie down, and rise up. Likewise, older and mature men are to form younger men in doctrine, character, judgment, courage, and service. Titus was to appoint qualified men; Timothy was to entrust the truth to faithful men who would teach others also. A church that needs elders today may therefore be living with the consequences of what was—or was not—cultivated ten, twenty, or thirty+ years earlier. The answer is not merely, “Find more elders,” but, “Build a culture that raises up the kind of men who may one day become elders.” It is why God’s command in Deuteronomy 6 is about today’s boys becoming the next generation of godly leaders. But, “If you want fruit from a tree, the best time to plant it was 20 years ago. The second-best time is today.” Christ Himself recognized the problem of too few laborers: “The harvest

is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest” (Matthew 9:37)

This is therefore a strategic responsibility of the church. A congregation that is growing beyond the reasonable pastoral capacity of its existing elders should not merely devise stronger mechanisms for controlling a larger population. It should ask whether it is faithfully developing or seeking additional shepherds. The problem may not be that the sheep have failed to make enough promises. The problem may be that too few qualified men have been prepared to know, teach, guard, and lead them.

Jethro’s counsel to Moses provides a striking Old Testament administrative analogy. Moses was wearing himself out hearing the people’s disputes personally. Jethro did not recommend tightening the people’s covenantal declarations. He told Moses to select “able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain” and distribute responsibility among leaders of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens (Exodus 18:21). Difficult cases could rise to Moses, while ordinary cases were handled closer to the people. The answer to excessive span of responsibility was qualified multiplication and ordered delegation.

The same principle deserves careful application in the church. As the flock grows, elder development should grow with it. More sheep ordinarily require more shepherding capacity—not merely more paperwork.

Pastoral overload is not necessarily evidence that the church needs stronger membership mechanisms; it may be evidence that the church needs more qualified shepherds.

overload → qualified men → distributed responsibility → difficult cases escalated appropriately.

Scripture’s answer to span of control is not procedural abstraction but multiplication of competent, wise, godly, faithful men.

Conclusion

Christ has not left His church without government, identity, discipline, unity, or shepherds. He has spoken. He has appointed officers. He has given signs and seals. He has commanded His people to assemble, love, submit, teach, admonish, receive, restore, and judge righteously.

The question throughout this paper has therefore not been whether the church requires order, accountability, or authority, but whether Christ’s order requires an additional local vow as the foundation of membership, jurisdiction, or pastoral duty. I have argued that it does not.

Let lawful vows remain lawful. Let prudence remain prudence. Let administrative tools remain servants. Let elders shepherd boldly within the authority Christ has given them, and let Christ’s people receive that shepherding without pretending that no duty exists until a local compact creates it.

Christ has given enough. Let us faithfully use what He has given.

Practical Resource 1 - Scripture Index by Theme

Table 13 - Key Biblical Texts Underlying the Paper’s Major Theological and Pastoral Claims

Theme	Texts
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Church as household/flock/body	1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Peter 5:1-4; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 2:19-22
Elder authority	1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Acts 20:28; Titus 2:15
Sacraments and covenant meal	Exodus 12; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 1 Corinthians 11:23-32
Discipline and jurisdiction	Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; Titus 3:10-11
Vows and conscience	Numbers 30; Ecclesiastes 5:1-6; Matthew 5:33-37; James 5:12; Romans 14:23
Elder accountability	James 3:1; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:4
Love and unity	John 13:34-35; Romans 14:19; Ephesians 4:1-16; Colossians 3:12-17
Warnings about false burdens or distinctions	Matthew 18:5-7; James 2:1-9; Galatians 5:1-6; Colossians 2:20-23

Practical Resource 2 - Logic Map

Table 14 - The Argument at a Glance: From Christ's Institutions to the Proper Place of Membership Vows

Step	Claim
1	Christ instituted covenant signs, officers, discipline, and worship.
2	These identify and govern the visible church.
3	Elders are commanded to shepherd those among them.
4	No Scripture requires local membership vows as a jurisdictional precondition.
5	Vows are dangerous enough that Scripture regulates and warns about them.
6	Therefore, vows may be lawful aids, but should not be mandatory conditions.

Practical Resource 3 - A Sermon or Podcast Outline

Suggested title: "Christ Has Given Enough: Church Membership, Vows, and the Authority of His Shepherds." This outline is offered in the event that the arguments of this paper prove persuasive and biblical, especially if they lead a church to reconsider or change its position or practice. In that case, the reasons for the change should be explained clearly to the congregation. It is also offered as a useful ordinary sermon outline regardless of whether any change in practice occurs.

Movement	Content
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Opening	Why church membership matters: no individualism, no drifting, no contempt for elders.
Text 1	1 Peter 5: shepherd the flock of God among you.
Text 2	1 Corinthians 10-11: the covenant meal and the fenced Table.
Text 3	Numbers 30 and Ecclesiastes 5: the seriousness of vows.
Main point	Authority comes from Christ, not from vows.
Application 1	Elders: trust the authority Christ gave you.
Application 2	Members: submit, assemble, commune, repent, forgive, and love.
Application 3	Churches: do not bind conscience beyond Scripture.
Conclusion	The church's <i>one</i> foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord!

Practical Resource 4 - Short Verbal Version for an Elder Conversation

Here is a concise way to present the concern:

I take what I might call a jurisdictional view, or perhaps you could say, an “inherent-jurisdictional” view of church authority. If a baptized Christian is worshiping among the saints, receiving instruction, participating in the Supper, and presenting himself as part of the visible church, then he is already within the sphere of elder care and authority. I gladly affirm that authority. My concern is that requiring vows may unintentionally suggest that Christ’s Word, sacraments, and appointed officers are not sufficient to establish what Scripture already presents as real. I am not trying to avoid submission. I am trying to submit without making vows I do not believe Christ requires.

I might even say, “proximate, inherent, jurisdictional” view, but that just sounds pompous...and redundant.

Practical Resource 5 - Editable Thesis Statements

- Authority that persists without vows cannot originate in vows.
- The church needs not less authority, but more confidence in the authority Christ has already given.
- The sacraments are not bare symbols; they visibly identify and bind the covenant community.
- A vow that cannot be understood clearly cannot be kept faithfully.
- A faithful man is already bound by God’s Word; a faithless man will not be made faithful by vows.
- Tradition deserves respect, but not immunity from Scripture.
- The question is not whether vows are lawful, but whether they are necessary.

Practical Resource 6 - Suggested Questions for Elders

1. Do you regard membership vows as divinely required, prudentially useful, or some other description?
2. If they are required, what text establishes that requirement?
3. What exactly does each vow mean in concrete terms?
 - a. How do these concrete terms differ from what God already requires of every believer in Scripture?
 - b. If there is no difference, what value does the vow have?
 - c. If there is a difference, how is this justified and required by Scripture?
4. How does one know when he has violated the vow?
5. Can the legitimate goods (blessings, benefits) of membership clarity and accountability be achieved without solemn vows?
6. If discipline continues when vows are rejected, in what sense do vows establish jurisdiction?
7. Would you consider a non-vow membership acknowledgement grounded in profession, baptism, communion, and submission to biblical oversight?
8. If someone vows to support the peace and purity of the church, but then gossips about another church member, have they merely sinned by gossiping or have they also broken a vow?
 - a. Please explain how you distinguish, if you do
 - b. What benefit would a vow add to prevent the sin, in this case?
 - c. Do vows prevent sin?
 - d. Do vows define sin or establish what sin is?
 - e. What does define what sin is?
 - f. Does the source of the definition of sin need vows for support?

Supporting Study 1 - The Jerusalem Council: Church Authority, Command, and Counsel

Acts 15 is relevant to Presbyterian polity because the apostles and elders deliberated together and issued decrees received by the churches. It is not, however, identical to an ordinary post-apostolic presbytery: apostles were present, and the council could say in an extraordinary sense, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). The passage therefore demonstrates genuine church authority while requiring careful attention to the unique apostolic setting.

The Question and the Judgment

The controversy concerned whether Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law in order to be saved. The council rejected that added condition. James judged that the church should “not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,” but should instruct them to

abstain from things contaminated by idols, fornication, what is strangled, and blood (Acts 15:19–20). The resulting letter laid “no greater burden than these essentials” (Acts 15:28–29).

The decree included at least two distinguishable categories. Fornication belongs to the abiding moral law and was not newly prohibited by the council. The instructions concerning blood, strangled things, and food associated with idols addressed Jewish-Gentile fellowship, ceremonial sensitivities, and the unity of the church during a unique covenantal transition. The council did not invent a new moral law. It authoritatively applied God’s revelation to the circumstances before it.

Why the Council Was Ministerial, Not Autonomous

The council interpreted Scripture, recognized what God had done among the Gentiles, rejected a false requirement, and applied biblical wisdom for the peace of the church. Peter appealed to God’s own action in giving the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles (Acts 15:8). James appealed to the prophets (Acts 15:15). The reasoning was not, “We possess independent authority and therefore may create obligations.” It was, “God has spoken and acted; Scripture confirms it; therefore the church must judge and apply the matter faithfully.”

Luke presents the decision positively. The churches rejoiced at its encouragement (Acts 15:31), received the decrees, and were strengthened in the faith (Acts 16:4–5). Acts 15 therefore cannot be reduced to a merely descriptive report. ***Yet neither can it become a blank check for later courts to create additional covenantal requirements.***

The Relevance to Membership Vows

Acts 15 establishes that church courts may render binding, ministerial judgments for doctrine, peace, and order. But the council did not add another entrance requirement to the people of God. It did the opposite! It refused to make circumcision and Mosaic observance necessary conditions for Gentile inclusion. Its stated concern was not to trouble those turning to God and not to lay a greater burden than necessary. *The passage therefore supports real ecclesiastical authority while warning against unnecessary burdens imposed as conditions of belonging. Cf.:*

Matthew 23:4 They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.

Luke 11:46: Woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers.

And there’s a broader related theme in **Acts 15:10**, where Peter says regarding circumcision and the Mosaic yoke: Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

Acts 15 is therefore especially instructive because the council confronted a genuine problem of church order, doctrine, fellowship, and accountability without solving that problem by adding a new covenantal entrance requirement. The apostles and elders exercised real authority, but their authority was ministerial: they recognized what God had already done, interpreted His revelation, rejected an unnecessary burden, and gave concrete instruction for the peace and holiness of the church.

This is an important pattern for later church courts. Difficulty, disorder, pastoral strain, or institutional complexity may require careful judgment and specific direction. But the existence of a real problem does not by itself authorize the church to create a new condition of belonging. The

proper question remains: what has Christ commanded, what does obedience require in this case, and what may wisely be counseled without being treated as though it carried the force of divine law?

Command and Counsel in 1 Corinthians 7

Paul carefully distinguishes commands, apostolic applications, and circumstantial counsel. In 1 Corinthians 7:10 he gives **instruction already spoken by the Lord** concerning marriage. In verse 12 he addresses a case the Lord had not directly addressed during His earthly ministry; this remains **inspired apostolic instruction, not private opinion**. In verses 25–26, however, Paul expressly gives a trustworthy judgment concerning virgins in view of “the present distress.” He **recommends** singleness without declaring marriage sinful: “But if you marry, you have not sinned” (verse 28).

Paul thereby models a distinction church officers must preserve. An officer may say, “This course is wise,” without saying, “God requires this course of every Christian.” Strong counsel does not become divine law merely because the counselor is an elder or the advice is prudent.

Conclusion

The church may exercise real authority without creating new covenantal conditions Christ has not imposed.

Acts 15 shows that church courts may apply Scripture ministerially for peace and order; it does not authorize the church to impose additional covenantal conditions beyond what Christ has required. First Corinthians 7 shows that even apostolic counsel can distinguish wisdom from command. Membership vows may be defended as prudentially useful or administratively orderly. Unless Scripture requires them, however, they should not be elevated into a condition of belonging, communion, or conscience-binding obedience.

Supporting Study 2 - Signs and Seals: The Sacramental Sufficiency of Christ's Church

Reformed theology does not treat the sacraments as bare symbols. They are signs and seals appointed by God. Romans 4:11 describes circumcision as “a sign” and “a seal of the righteousness of the faith” Abraham possessed while uncircumcised. In the new covenant, baptism corresponds to circumcision as the initiatory covenant sign, while the Lord's Supper visibly confirms communion with Christ and His body.

Baptism therefore visibly marks covenant inclusion, and the Lord's Supper visibly declares covenant communion. “**Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread**” (1 Corinthians 10:17). The Table does not create a merely private relation between Christ and an isolated believer. It visibly identifies communicants with Christ and with one another as His body.

If baptism and the Lord's Supper are God-given signs and seals of covenant belonging and communion, then requiring an additional local vow as necessary for visible belonging is not merely administratively redundant. It risks placing a human requirement alongside Christ's appointed means as though those means were not sufficient for the work He assigned them to do. The concern is not that every additional form, interview, record, acknowledgment, or voluntary promise is inherently wrong. Such things may be lawful and useful. The concern arises when a humanly composed

requirement is treated as necessary to establish a standing, belonging, accountability, or jurisdiction that Christ has already ordered through His Word, covenant, sacraments, and appointed officers.

This distinction matters. A church may use administrative tools to help recognize, record, and shepherd those whom Christ has placed among it. But the tool must remain a servant. It must not become the theological basis of belonging. The sign Christ appointed must not be treated as though it requires a human supplement before it can do the work Christ assigned to it.

This is not an argument for sacramental presumption. Baptism does not excuse unbelief, and communion does not protect an impenitent man from discipline. Rather, the sacraments establish objective, visible categories within which profession, faith, holiness, pastoral care, and discipline operate.

Christ's signs and seals are sufficient or adequate for the work Christ appointed them to do; church procedures may assist that work, but they may not redefine it. (Here "adequate" is used in the older, stronger sense of fully sufficient and fitted for the purpose Christ assigned—not merely acceptable, minimally satisfactory, or "good enough.")

Supporting Study 3 - Church Decrees: Ministerial Authority Without Magisterial Overreach

The argument against required membership vows must not be misunderstood as an argument against real church government. Elders may teach, direct, warn, adjudicate, and discipline. **In actual cases they may issue specific judgments. The decisive distinction is between ministerial authority, which applies Christ's law, and magisterial overreach, which creates new law or binds the conscience where God has left liberty.**

A lawful church decree *applies* Christ's authority; it *does not augment* it. It *clarifies* obedience; it does not manufacture obligation. It serves the Word; it does not stand beside it.

This distinction is especially important because not every wise, orderly, or useful church practice carries the same binding force. Elders may make judgments necessary to administer worship, discipline, pastoral care, property, finances, schedules, records, and the common life of the congregation. Such decisions may require submission within the lawful sphere of elder authority. **But administrative necessity does not convert prudence into Spirit-breathed revelation.** A church court may decide what must be done to carry out a biblical duty without claiming that every detail of its chosen method is itself commanded by God.

The question is therefore not whether elders may make decisions beyond merely quoting Bible verses. Of course they must. The question is whether a particular directive truly applies an existing biblical obligation or instead creates a new spiritual obligation and then treats refusal as sin. That boundary is sometimes difficult to discern, which is precisely why elders must judge with humility, competence, and fear of God.

Specificity Is Not Itself Tyranny

Biblical authority must often become *particular*. Elders may have to direct a thief to restore what he stole, a slanderer to retract his false report, an adulterer to end the adulterous relationship, or a factious man to cease conduct that divides the body. Matthew 18 requires adjudication; 1 Corinthians

5 required action concerning a particular man; and Titus 3:10 requires the rejection of a factious man after warning.

Such direction is ministerial when it identifies an established sin and explains what repentance necessarily entails. **It becomes magisterial when an elder's preference is treated as though God Himself had commanded it.** The crucial question is: Can the church show from Scripture that refusal of this directive would violate a biblical duty, rather than merely disagree with the elders' preferred strategy?

Specified Repentance

Repentance cannot always remain abstract. Concrete sin ordinarily requires concrete amendment. Elders may therefore state what repentance must include, provided that the requirement is biblically tethered, factually grounded, proportionate, and reasonably related to the sin being addressed. The church should distinguish what God commands, what the established facts show, what repentance requires, what the elders counsel as wisdom, and what orderly discipline temporarily requires.

A Brief Aside

In a fully restored biblical civil order, repentance for theft would ordinarily involve more than returning the bare amount stolen. God's law requires restitution and, depending upon the nature and circumstances of the offense, an additional penalty. Exodus 22, for example, requires double restitution where stolen property is recovered in the thief's possession, and more severe restitution—in some cases fourfold or fivefold restitution—where the property has been disposed of. If the thief had no means to make restitution, the law even provided that he could be sold for his theft (Exodus 22:3–4). Leviticus 6:1–5 likewise requires restoration plus one-fifth in certain cases of fraud or wrongful taking. Jesus praised Zacchaeus, who was a wee little man and a wee little man was he, because in his repentance, He kept the law (Luke 19:8.)

Thus an elder should not reduce repentance to, “Tell him you're sorry,” nor tell the victim merely, “You need to forgive him,” as though forgiveness erased justice or restitution. The church may declare and teach the duty of restitution and require evidence of repentance within its own disciplinary sphere. In a properly ordered society, however, the coercive enforcement of civil restitution and penalties belongs to the civil magistrate, not to the church court. A tantalizing trail to follow another day—but let us return to the matter before us.

An Example

If a man has stolen from another member, an elder need not merely say, “Please consider repentance.” Scripture already condemns theft, and repentance requires restoration. The elders may therefore require him to make restitution as evidence of repentance because they are applying God's command to established facts. But if they further dictate that he must sell a particular possession, take a particular job, or follow one specific financial plan where several lawful means are available, that method may be wise counsel without carrying the same binding force.

Forgiveness addresses personal reconciliation; **restitution** addresses what was wrongfully taken; **punishment** addresses public justice. They overlap, but they are not the same thing.

The church has a real role in teaching, admonishing, disciplining, and requiring fruits consistent with repentance. That role does not arise from membership vows. It arises from Christ's appointment of the church and the authority He has given her within her proper sphere.

If the church mistakenly limits its authority and duty as though it were based on vows, it may fail to exercise duties Christ has already assigned wherever those vows are absent. Such an error can train Christians to think of God-given authority and obligation as matters of voluntary consent rather than objective responsibilities established by God. A church uncertain about God-given jurisdiction within her own sphere will be poorly equipped to teach a civilization how to recover righteous jurisdiction in the family, church, and civil magistracy.

It can—and this is chilling—produce withdrawal and abdication: a kind of **internalist procedural pietism** in which the church becomes increasingly preoccupied with administering its own internal machinery while shrinking from proclaiming the comprehensive Kingship of Christ and the rightful claims of His law upon every man, institution, and nation. We are not called to be a church effeminate and shrinking, merely personally pious and mostly harmless.

And the answer is not for the church to seize the jurisdiction God has assigned to the family or civil magistrate. That would merely commit the opposite error. Rather, each sphere must faithfully exercise the authority God has actually assigned to it, while the church fearlessly proclaims and presses that every sphere stands under the authority of the same King.

Christ's church must know the limits of her own jurisdiction while fully exercising her calling within them, yet never confuse the limits of the church's jurisdiction with the unlimited jurisdiction of her King.

Table 15 - Not Every Church Directive Binds in the Same Way: *Distinguishing Divine Law, Necessary Application, Prudence, and Administration*

Category	Function	Binding force
Divine command	States what God expressly requires or forbids.	Binds because God has spoken.
Necessary application	Identifies what obedience or repentance entails in an established case.	Binds insofar as the application truly follows from Scripture and the facts.
Prudential counsel	Recommends a wise course among multiple lawful options.	Should persuade, not bind as divine law.
Administrative order	Coordinates the church's common life and procedures.	May regulate conduct within the church's lawful sphere, but may not redefine covenant standing.

Doctrine, Position, Policy, and Case Judgment

A **doctrinal statement** declares what Scripture teaches. A **position statement** applies doctrine to a recurring cultural question. A **policy** explains how the church will act institutionally. A **case judgment** applies Scripture and lawful church order *to established facts involving particular men*. As

the action becomes more specific and coercive, the need for clarity, evidence, due process, proportionality, stated limits, and meaningful appeal increases.

Precedent may encourage consistency, but it must not replace **judgment**. *Church cases involve souls, facts, motives, repentance, and circumstances. Elders are shepherds, not mechanical administrators.* A prior judgment may guide a later one, but the later case must still be heard righteously on its own facts.

The Balance of Liberty and Rule

Christian liberty must never become a covering for evil (1 Peter 2:16), and freedom must not become an opportunity for the flesh (Galatians 5:13). **Elders must not micromanage lawful liberty; neither may they stand idle while a man weaponizes liberty to excuse rebellion.** Biblical authority should restrain sin, not lawful liberty; clarify obedience, not manufacture obligation; and protect the weak, not control the mature.

The two corresponding errors are abdication and tyranny. Abdication could say, “We will not intervene because intervention might restrict liberty.” Tyranny could say, “We will control lawful details because liberty might be abused.” Wisdom judges actual cases righteously. The faithful elder neither shrinks from Christ-given authority nor inflates it. He is an under-shepherd accountable to the Chief Shepherd.

Procedure Must Remain Ministerial

Church procedures are necessary. Discipline without procedure can become arbitrary; pastoral care without organization can become inconsistent; financial stewardship without records can become irresponsible. The answer to proceduralism is therefore not the abolition of procedure.

But procedure must remain ministerial. It exists to help elders perform duties Christ has already given them. It must not become a mechanism by which additional duties are quietly created or by which the completion of a process is mistaken for the fulfillment of the pastoral duty itself.

A form can record an investigation; it cannot make the investigation righteous. A policy can prescribe steps for discipline; it cannot supply wisdom, courage, impartiality, or love. A membership roll can assist elders in identifying the flock; it cannot know the face of the flock.

Procedure is a servant of judgment and shepherding, not their substitute.

This returns directly to membership vows. Elders do not need vows to teach, admonish, adjudicate, or discipline. They need Scripture, Christ-given office, established facts, due process, pastoral wisdom, and accountability to Christ. Their authority to apply the Word does not arise from a member’s oath.

Their authority to apply the Word arises from Christ’s appointment and command, not from a member’s oath; and their duty to shepherd cannot be discharged merely by administering the oath or the procedures surrounding it.

Supporting Study 4 - The Man at the Gate: Divine Duty or Local Vow?

The Man at the Gate: Divine Duty, Not Local Vow

God's prior command created the community's duty toward the man at the gate. Numbers 35:12-25, Joshua 20:4, 5. His lack of a previous local pledge did not erase their obligation to receive, protect, hear, and judge him according to God's law.

The same principle appears in wisdom literature: "Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother far away" (Proverbs 27:10). The proverb does not diminish the importance of family or settled relationships. It recognizes that proximity can make a general duty immediately actionable. A distant brother may possess a deeper ordinary obligation, yet the nearby neighbor is the man presently positioned to help.

This distinction is useful here. Prior relationship may determine the ordinary scope and duration of responsibility; present proximity and need may create an immediate duty to act. The man at the gate did not become a lifelong member of the city merely by arriving there, but his presence and condition placed real duties upon the men God had appointed within that jurisdiction.

They were obligated to investigate his claim. They could distinguish manslaughter from murder. They did not have to accept his account unquestioningly. But Joshua 20:4 says they were to hear him, admit him, and "give him a place" among them. They couldn't leave him outside to die because he had never formally affiliated with their particular city.

The cities of refuge provide a striking biblical illustration of obligations that arise directly from God's command and geographical, instantaneous location—in a word, jurisdiction—rather than from a prior voluntary compact between a needy man and the receiving—or let us say, affected—community.

When an unintentional manslayer arrived at the city gate—perhaps exhausted, frightened, and pursued hotly by the avenger of blood—the elders could not refuse him on the ground that he had never sworn allegiance to their particular city. God had already assigned the city its duty.

Joshua 20:4 states that the fugitive was to present his case before the elders, and that they were then to receive him into the city and "give him a place" in which to dwell among them. This reception was discriminate and with conditions—conditions established by God's law-word. The facts still had to be examined, witnesses heard, and the killing distinguished as either murder or accidental manslaughter. Nevertheless, investigation followed reception into protection. That there is zero evidence of a prior local vow or even tribal or familial affiliation did not nullify the city's God-given responsibility. It was by presence, appearance, location, jurisdiction—words I'm listing here essentially as synonymous or at the very least, directly pertinent.

The analogy to the visible church should not be pressed as though a Levitical refuge city and a New Covenant congregation were identical institutions. Yet the jurisdictional principle is important. The church's fundamental duties toward professing Christians, distressed persons, visitors, the weak, the accused, the endangered, and those seeking shepherding do not originate in a supplementary membership contract. They arise from Christ's commands, the apostolic constitution of the church, and the objective relationships God has established among His people. By God's all-wise decree, the cities of refuge were geographically dispersed throughout His dominion—blanketing it with the

provision for mercy and justice—providing a **locally accessible system** of *proximate justice and mercy*. God’s mercy was always near at hand. His glory covered the earth.

A local church may properly inquire into a person’s profession of faith, baptism, doctrine, conduct, circumstances, and previous ecclesiastical relationships. It may distinguish between someone entitled to Christian care and someone seeking to manipulate the church or evade rightful discipline. It may also maintain biblical qualifications for communion, office, discipline, and orderly participation in congregational life. But it may not treat the absence of a locally composed vow as though it relieved the church of duties that Christ has already imposed.

The harried man at the gate did not create the city’s duty by promising himself to it. God had created that duty beforehand. In the same way, the church does not become responsible to act as Christ’s church only after a man assents to additional local promises. Membership vows may record intentions or assist administration, but they cannot be the source of the church’s divine vocation. Nor may they be used to deny responsibilities that belong to the church by virtue of Christ’s own law.

The church has a jurisdictional duty to execute justice within its purview! But the corollary is unavoidable and logically necessary (forgive the redundancy done for emphasis): if they didn’t do their duty, judgment would be upon them. If they created an extra law that said the man had to have an identification number and card stamped by the local authorities before they would investigate, they would have violated God’s law.

This gives the argument a much firmer jurisdictional foundation. The murdered body in the field, the fugitive at the gate, the resident alien, and even the blasphemer were all addressed by duties God had already imposed—not duties created by voluntary local affiliation.

This model is God’s own:

“You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.”
—Deuteronomy 16:18

This has several implications for the jurisdictional argument.

1. God established local, identifiable jurisdictions

Judgment wasn’t left to whichever individual happened to possess power. God required *appointed* judges “in all your towns.” Each city had officers responsible for administering justice *within its proper sphere*.

Jurisdiction therefore arose from:

- God’s prior command;
- the officers’ lawful appointment;
- the defined place entrusted to them;
- and the presence of a person or case within that jurisdiction.

It didn’t arise from each accused man’s willingness to recognize the court or to cherry-pick the liberal district judge who might be most favorable to him or able to be bought or intimidated.

2. Jurisdiction was proximate rather than abstract

The elders judged matters arising among the men living or acting within their city. The stubborn and rebellious son was brought to where he lived:

“to the elders of his city at the gateway **of his hometown.**”

—Deuteronomy 21:19

3. The stranger wasn’t outside justice

Local jurisdiction wasn’t limited only to men born in the city or tribe. Moses commanded:

“Hear the cases between your fellow countrymen, and judge righteously between a man and his fellow countryman, **or the alien** who is with him.”

—Deuteronomy 1:16

The alien’s lack of native status didn’t place him beyond either the protection or judgment of God’s law. His presence “among” Israel created duties toward him and subjected his conduct to the lawful order God had established.

That supports the principle:

A man need not be a permanent native of the community before the community acquires God-given duties toward him.

4. Local courts existed within a larger ordered system

Most cases were handled locally. Exceptionally difficult matters could be taken to the place God chose and heard by the priests and judge serving there (Deuteronomy 17:8–13). This gives us a rudimentary pattern of local adjudication with recourse to a broader court in difficult cases.

It isn’t identical to Presbyterian polity, but by general equity it harmonizes with representative and graded government: qualified local officers exercise genuine jurisdiction, while difficult cases may be reviewed by a broader lawful assembly.

A Qualification

Israel’s cities were civil and covenantal jurisdictions under the Mosaic administration. A local church isn’t a miniature Israelite city, and its elders don’t possess civil authority over every man living nearby. The church’s jurisdiction is spiritual and ecclesiastical, identified through profession, worship, sacramental participation, pastoral relationship, and life within the visible assembly. At least, under our current situation. As I wrote earlier, we have a duty to advance Christian civilization and the Kingship of our majestic Lord in every sphere. Thus, the righteousness of the civil sphere in a godly society would be, to be perhaps overly convenient, “blurred” with the claims of the church while remaining distinct. The church would rightly preach that kidnapping and blasphemy are capital crimes. The civil and criminal courts would condemn and sentence those who stole to repay, including through indenture, and have blasphemers stoned to death.

Nevertheless, the governing principle carries:

Biblical jurisdiction may arise from God’s command, lawful office, and a person’s objective presence within an entrusted sphere; it need not be manufactured by the person’s prior vow or continuing consent.

“In all your cities” therefore strengthens my position in two directions. It establishes genuine local authority, but it also confines that authority to an allotted sphere. It argues against both voluntarism and tyranny: the man cannot nullify lawful jurisdiction merely by withholding consent, and the officer cannot extend his jurisdiction wherever he pleases. God defines both the authority and its bounds.

And God laid out plans by law, conditional, in this case, to expand the protection of justice and mercy. What nation has a god like our God and a law so perfect as His law?!

If the LORD your God enlarges your territory, just as He has sworn to your fathers, and gives you all the land which He promised to give your fathers ... then you shall add three more cities for yourself, besides these three. Deuteronomy 19:8–9

And a brief but relevant aside:

These cities would have been well established and a well-known, recognized part of Israel's public legal geography: named, distributed, connected by roads that would be maintained, administered by known elders, and available and widely known to the sons of Israel and the regions' aliens and sojourners. These weren't mere obscure theological abstractions. These were real, maintained places where people could be protected, ministered to, and justice and mercy applied.

God ordered, where biblical civilization spreads, accessible institutions of ordered mercy, provisional protection, due process, and righteous judgment will spread with it.

Just...like...your local church...wherever you go. (Assuming the nation we speak contains a godly church.)

A brief thought, combining our earlier discussion on travel. When that travel is international, finding a faithful, biblical church may be very difficult. This is what drives the preaching of the gospel, the evangelism of other nations. This missionary work (I mentioned missionaries under the “mobile Christians” topic) is yet another reason for an inherent-jurisdictional view. When a missionary preaches the gospel in a foreign, godless nation, are his calls to righteousness valid—even though none of the people recognize his authority? Even if there is no local church? Even though none have taken vows to obey God? Yes. Because God eternally possesses all authority and has commissioned His church to proclaim His truth to every tribe, tongue, nation, and dominion. This is why we have, for example, Paul's letter to Titus, which tells him how to establish a faithful church even among “liars, lazy beasts, and gluttons.” And God's work in Nineveh through Jonah: even a foreign, evil, merciless nation is called to submit to His authority. Why? Because there is no place in the universe where God does not rule.

Blood in the Field: Jurisdictional Duty Before Voluntary Compact

The cities of refuge are not an isolated example of God assigning duties to a community apart from any voluntary agreement between that community and the man needing justice. Deuteronomy 21:1–9 establishes the same principle from another direction.

If a slain man was discovered lying in the open country and no one knew who had killed him, the matter couldn't simply be dismissed because the murderer was unknown. Elders and judges: “Shrug. Not my problem. I don't even know this guy. No ID, no papers.” No: God required the elders and judges to come out **and measure the distance** from the body **to the surrounding cities**:

“Then your elders and your judges shall go out and **measure the distance to the cities** which are around the slain one.”

—Deuteronomy 21:2

The elders **of the nearest city** then became responsible for carrying out the prescribed rite. They were to take a heifer that had never been worked or placed under a yoke, bring it into an uncultivated valley with running water, and break its neck there. The Levitical priests were also required to be present. The elders washed their hands over the heifer and declared:

“Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it.”

—Deuteronomy 21:7

They then prayed:

“**Forgive Your people Israel whom You have redeemed, O LORD**, and do not place the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of Your people Israel.”

—Deuteronomy 21:8

(Who? God’s people. Why? *God* redeemed them!)

The passage concludes:

“So you shall remove the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, when you do what is right in the eyes of the LORD.”

—Deuteronomy 21:9

This legislation reveals how seriously God regards innocent blood and **public responsibility**. The elders could truthfully declare that they had neither committed the murder nor witnessed it. Nevertheless, the unknown killing **created a duty within the nearest jurisdiction**. Their personal innocence or lack of awareness of the circumstance did not relieve them of their official responsibility.

The measuring of the distance is especially significant. God did not permit every surrounding city to say, “We didn’t do it, therefore it is not our concern.” The elders and judges had to determine which community was nearest and therefore which leaders bore the responsibility to act. **The jurisdiction was established by an objective relationship to the event, not by a contract, pledge, or vow between the victim and the city.**

The slain man had never applied for membership in the nearest city. He may not have owned property there, participated in its civic life, or promised submission to its elders. He might even have been a traveler or resident alien. None of that erased the duty of the nearest magistrates. The presence of innocent blood within their sphere of responsibility placed them under obligation before God.

This does not mean that proximity made the elders personally guilty of the murder, of course. Rather, it made them responsible for ensuring that the bloodshed was not ignored, concealed, trivialized, or **left covenantally unaddressed—because, that was their assigned sphere**. God required investigation, public acknowledgment, priestly involvement, and an appeal for atonement. Innocent blood mattered to the entire covenant community because the LORD dwelt among His people.

The Foreigner Was Not Outside the Protection of Justice

The law repeatedly forbade Israel from treating the resident alien as a person without legal standing or human dignity.

Moses commanded Israel's judges:

"Hear the cases between your fellow countrymen, and judge righteously between a man and his fellow countryman, or the alien who is with him."

—Deuteronomy 1:16

The alien was therefore entitled to righteous judgment. He was not outside the jurisdiction merely because he lacked tribal ancestry or inherited land.

Leviticus makes the principle even more explicit:

"When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself."

—Leviticus 19:33–34

(I'm extremely tempted to italicize or yellow-highlight some words in Leviticus 19:33-34, but you get the point, I hope.)

Other passages reinforce the same principle:

- "There shall be **one standard** for you; it shall be for the stranger as well as the native" (Leviticus 24:22).
- "There is to be **one law and one ordinance** for you and for the alien who sojourns with you" (Numbers 15:16).
- "You shall not pervert the justice due an alien or an orphan" (Deuteronomy 24:17).
- The LORD "shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing"; therefore Israel was also to love the alien (Deuteronomy 10:18–19).
- "There shall be **one law** for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you" (Exodus 12:49).

A foreigner murdered within Israel's territory was not disposable merely because he had not sworn a local civic vow. The elders could not declare him outside their concern. The general equity of Deuteronomy 21 requires that innocent blood be investigated and addressed regardless of the victim's ancestry or voluntary affiliation. There were, in essential ways, no divisions or distinctions when it came to the mercies, justice, and law of God. Sure, we can divide a native and stranger, but we *treat* everyone the same when it comes to justice under God.

Even the Blasphemer Was Subject to the Existing Jurisdiction

Leviticus 24:10–23 provides a particularly striking example. A man whose mother was an Israelite and whose father was an Egyptian fought with an Israelite man and blasphemed the name of the LORD. He was placed in custody until the LORD's judgment was made clear.

The matter was not ignored because his father was a foreigner. Nor was he treated as though he were outside all authority because he had not taken a local vow. He was within the covenant commonwealth's territorial and judicial jurisdiction, and therefore the leaders were responsible to address his offense according to God's revealed law.

And by what authority would this man charged with a capital crime be arrested and his freedoms confined in some manner? By the authority God gave! (We'd think of jail, but let's not get anachronistic. He might have been placed under guard or perhaps chained or even tied up, but the point is, he was taken into custody rather than allowed to move freely, as is normally granted to every man otherwise living a visibly or even ostensibly righteous life. Innocent until proven guilty, we've said in these United States. Not that we live up to our sayings...but anyway...)

The passage concludes:

“There shall be one standard for you; it shall be for the stranger as well as the native, for I am the LORD your God.”

—Leviticus 24:22

This demonstrates both sides of jurisdictional equality.

The stranger was entitled to the protection of the law, but he was also accountable to the law while dwelling within the community. He could not be wronged as though he were subhuman, and he could not blaspheme as though he were beyond all authority.

Jurisdiction therefore creates both protection and accountability.

The law does not make foreigners into second-class persons, but neither does it erase meaningful distinctions between faithful worshipers, resident aliens, criminals, and blasphemers. Different conditions may require different judgments. Yet the responsibility to hear, judge, protect, restrain, or discipline arises from God's ordinance—not from a supplementary vow, register, or identification card devised by the local authorities.

The Neighbor Who Drew Near

Jesus gives this principle its clearest New Testament expression in the parable of the Good Samaritan. A wounded man lay beside the road after robbers had stripped him, beaten him, and left him half dead. A priest saw him and passed by. A Levite did the same. The Samaritan, however, saw him, felt compassion, drew near, treated his wounds, transported him to safety, paid for his care, and undertook to return.

The Samaritan had no prior affiliation with the wounded man. He possessed no membership record, letter of transfer, promise of repayment, declaration of submission, or established pastoral relationship. Indeed, significant religious and historical hostility separated Jews and Samaritans. Yet the man's visible need and providential nearness created an immediate occasion for mercy.

Jesus then turns the lawyer's question—“Who is my neighbor?”—toward action: which man proved himself a neighbor? The answer was, “The one who showed mercy toward him.” Christ's command is direct: “Go and do the same” (Luke 10:37).

The principle does not mean that every nearby man acquires unlimited or permanent claims upon another. It means that lack of prior affiliation does not erase an immediate duty of mercy where God has placed a needy man within reach.

Prior affiliation may determine the ordinary scope of care; present proximity and need may create an immediate duty to act.

The General Equity of the Judicial Law

The Westminster Confession of Faith recognizes that the particular judicial laws of old-covenant Israel expired with Israel as a distinct body politic, while their enduring moral principles remain relevant:

“To them also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the **general equity** thereof **may require**.”
—Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 19.4

The church is therefore not required to reproduce Israel’s geographical measurements, heifer ceremony, Levitical administration, refuge-city boundaries, or civil penalties. Those belonged to a particular covenantal and national order. In fact, sacrificing an animal to atone for sin today would be blasphemous and quite possibly a capital crime (I digress a bit.)

Nevertheless, their general equity remains instructive. And the WCF even uses the language “may require,” (which seems to be a little bit too much of a hand-wave for me, but that’s another topic.)

The enduring principles include:

1. Innocent blood and serious injustice may not be ignored.
2. Authorities have duties arising from the jurisdiction God has assigned them.
3. Responsibility is not limited to men who have entered voluntary contracts with local authorities.
4. Foreigners and outsiders are entitled to truthful and impartial justice.
5. Presence within a jurisdiction may create both protection and accountability.
6. Leaders must investigate facts before reaching irreversible judgments.
7. Personal non-involvement does not excuse official neglect.
8. God’s prior law, rather than a locally invented vow, establishes the fundamental duty.

Application to the Visible Church

The church is not the old-covenant civil commonwealth, and ecclesiastical discipline must not be confused with the civil sword. Nevertheless, Christ has given the visible church real jurisdiction, duties, officers, sacraments, discipline, and responsibilities of shepherding.

The same principle cuts in both directions. The absence of local vows does not release elders from duties Christ has imposed, but neither does it release the Christian from duties Christ has imposed upon him. A man who comes among Christ’s assembled people cannot claim the benefits of worship, teaching, fellowship, protection, and sacramental communion while insisting that he remains an autonomous religious spectator merely because he has taken no local vows. The question on both sides is not first, “What have we promised one another?” but, “What has Christ already commanded?”

The city of refuge illustrates the same reciprocity. The fugitive acquired real protection by entering the city, but he also came under the law governing the refuge. He could not demand the city’s protection while rejecting the conditions God had attached to that protection. Divine jurisdiction creates both protection and accountability.

The protection of the city was not unconditional. The fugitive’s claim had to be judged according to God’s law. If the killing proved accidental, the congregation was to protect the manslayer and return

him to the city of refuge, where he remained until the death of the high priest (Numbers 35:24–25). But if the evidence established deliberate murder—if, for example, he had hated his neighbor, lain in wait for him, and killed him—the elders were required to remove him from refuge and deliver him for judgment (Deuteronomy 19:11–13; cf. Numbers 35:16–21).

Mercy did not abolish justice, and refuge did not nullify God’s law.

There is also an important unity beneath the local jurisdictions. Israel had multiple cities of refuge, each exercising real local responsibility, but *they were not independent legal systems. They administered the same law of God within one covenantal order.* The manslayer’s lawful release was tied to the death of the high priest—and for clarity, there was by definition only one high priest at any given time for the entire nation—not to a locally invented rule of a particular refuge city. Local jurisdiction therefore existed within a broader unified government. *The city was locally responsible, but it was not locally sovereign. Its elders did not invent the terms of refuge, guilt, innocence, justice, or release; they administered what God had already established.* Not only did they not need to invent additional terms, but to redefine any of these terms that God had already established, whether by adding conditions or removing them, would result in injustice, would not protect the nation as God designed (“...you shall purge the evil from your midst.” Deuteronomy 17:12, 19:19), and would presume an authority God had neither delegated nor permitted.

The analogy should not be pressed beyond its proper sphere, but the principle is instructive. Particular churches possess real local responsibilities, yet they remain particular expressions of Christ’s one church under one King, one Word, and one Lord. Local officers administer Christ’s government; they do not manufacture an independent ecclesiastical jurisdiction by voluntary compact.

The local church is particular; Christ’s government is universal.

So also in the visible church, elder duty and Christian duty arise together under Christ. The elders must shepherd according to their lawful sphere, and the Christian must receive lawful shepherding, walk peaceably among the saints, honor Christ’s order, and submit where Scripture requires. Neither side creates the other’s obligation by vow. Christ establishes both.

The elders do not need the Christian’s vow in order to owe him lawful shepherding, and the Christian does not need a vow in order to owe Christ’s shepherds lawful submission.

Those responsibilities arise from Christ’s institution of the church and from the objective relationships He has established among His people. They do not originate in supplementary local membership vows.

When a distressed man comes to a church seeking protection, counsel, discipline, adjudication, communion, or pastoral help, the elders may need to investigate carefully. They must determine whether his claims are true, whether another church already has ordinary or immediate responsibility in the matter, whether discipline is pending elsewhere, whether he credibly professes Christ, whether his conduct bears upon the matter before them, and what kind of assistance Scripture requires.

But the elders cannot properly reason: “This man has not taken our local vows; therefore Christ has imposed no duty upon us concerning him.”

The man fleeing to the city of refuge had not sworn vows to that city. The unknown murder victim had not contracted with the nearest elders. The resident alien had no tribal inheritance. Even the

blasphemer of mixed parentage had not created the community's authority by voluntarily promising submission to it.

God had already established the relevant duties and jurisdictions.

Likewise, the church's obligation to act as Christ's church precedes any supplementary covenant composed by a particular congregation. A local vow may record a man's profession, intentions, or willingness to live peaceably under biblical oversight. It may provide useful evidence and administrative clarity. But it cannot create powers Christ has not given, and it cannot extinguish duties Christ has already imposed.

The covenantal order is inherent because God establishes it. It is imposed by divine authority rather than manufactured by private agreement.

The elders of Israel measured the distance because jurisdiction had to be objectively identified. Once identified, responsibility followed. The question was not whether the dead man had voluntarily joined the nearest city. The question was which leaders God had placed nearest to the unresolved bloodshed and therefore charged to respond. Innocent blood within their sphere could not simply be ignored because no prior contractual relationship existed.

Divine jurisdiction precedes voluntary compact.
God's commands create the duty; human vows may acknowledge that duty, but they do not bring it into existence.

That principle remains deeply relevant:

Divine jurisdiction precedes voluntary compact. God's commands create the duty; human vows may acknowledge that duty, but they do not bring it into existence.

The church must therefore distinguish between two questions:

"What is our ordinary settled responsibility toward this man?"

and the prior question:

"What duty has God placed before us right now because this man is here?"

Leviticus 24 considerably strengthens the argument because it demonstrates that the same jurisdiction that must protect the stranger must also address his wrongdoing. That prevents the argument from collapsing into sentimental hospitality. Biblical jurisdiction carries both mercy and judgment, protection and accountability.

The stranger was not outside justice because he was a stranger. The fugitive was not automatically innocent because he sought refuge. The local authority did not become sovereign merely because it possessed jurisdiction. And the man did not become autonomous merely because he had never entered a voluntary compact with the community.

Presence is not ownership, but neither is it neutrality.

God defines the jurisdiction, God assigns the duty, God establishes the law, and God determines its limits. The officer must act within the sphere entrusted to him; the man within that sphere must reckon with the lawful authority God has placed there.

That is the jurisdictional principle at the heart of this paper.

Denominational Branding and the One Flock

Modern Christians often encounter the visible church through denominational structures. Such structures may provide real benefits: doctrinal clarity, mutual accountability, training, cooperative mission, and orderly appeal. Yet they remain subordinate to Christ's ownership of His church. The flock is His. In the Apostles' Creed, in some local churches, recited weekly, the church confesses that it believes in "the holy catholic church," a phrase that some hasten to add something like, "*not* the Roman Catholic church, but rather, the church universal," which in the meaning of the Apostles' Creed is correct.

Therefore, a Christian traveler who worships among a faithful congregation of another denomination does not become a religious outsider merely because his ordinary church bears a different institutional name. The receiving church may properly inquire into his doctrine, baptism, discipline, and standing elsewhere. But denominational affiliation should assist recognition, not replace it.

Churches must also resist the temptation to treat believers as institutional possessions or denominational brand market share. A shepherd may rightly desire stability, loyalty, and settled membership, but his ultimate concern must be the welfare of Christ's sheep rather than the expansion or preservation of his own ecclesiastical brand.

Denominations may serve the one flock; they do not divide Christ's ownership of it.

Supporting Study 5 - Pastoral Intake and Inquiry for the Man at the Gate

Purpose

This section is something of an "operations manual" for Church leaders, including elders and deacons. It may understandably be viewed as having little to do with the topic of membership vows and the local church. However, the reason I include it is because I'm not merely wanting to discuss the topic in academic theological terms, but in practical terms. I'm not trying to be a little boy who takes delight in smashing the windows out on someone else's house, but rather, I want to be someone who builds God's house up. Thus, if we take an inherent-jurisdictional view, what actually happens if we have someone show up at our "gate"? This section builds a practical framework for further development to begin an answer to that question.

A Qualification on Use

This study is offered as a pastoral framework and to raise awareness of the need to get help when situations get complicated. It's not legal, medical, psychiatric, law-enforcement, or other specialized professional guidance. Difficult cases may rapidly involve several overlapping jurisdictions and areas of competence. Elders should know the limits of their own office and ability and obtain qualified professional assistance when circumstances require it. They should also understand the applicable law of their jurisdiction *before* a crisis occurs rather than attempting to discover it while frightened men, endangered families, attorneys, law-enforcement officers, medical personnel, reporters, or government agencies are already at the gate.

Yet complexity is not an argument for pastoral passivity. In fact, complexity is one reason churches should think through these questions *before* the crisis arrives. Pastors and elders may face serious

consequences for acting wrongly, including harm to the vulnerable, injustice to the accused, damage to the church, civil liability, criminal exposure, or public scandal. But fear of such consequences cannot become an excuse for refusing duties Christ actually requires.

The purpose of this framework is therefore not to make elders into attorneys, physicians, psychiatrists, detectives, or magistrates. It is to help them recognize what kind of matter is before them, what immediate pastoral duties may exist, what lies beyond their competence or jurisdiction, and where qualified assistance should be sought. It is also offered because I do not want to seem as though I merely offer criticism and destruction, but rather that I offer a solution to protect and build up.

A Brief Practical Guide: How to Process the Man at the Gate

The intake process exists to answer two different questions that should not be confused: **What duty has God placed before us because this man is here?** and **What is the proper scope and duration of our responsibility toward him?** The first question guards against neglect; the second guards against disorder, duplication, and overreach.

Presence does not automatically create ordinary settled membership or unlimited jurisdiction. But neither does the absence of settled membership create neutrality. The church must receive the actual case before it, determine what God presently requires, and then identify the proper sphere of continuing responsibility.

When a person comes to the church with a specific claim of need, the church should neither ignore him nor receive his account uncritically. The proper response is an ordered pastoral process: receive the person, identify the nature of his claim, assess immediate danger, provide provisional care, verify facts and jurisdiction, evaluate credibility, determine worship and communion status, decide the appropriate pastoral outcome, and follow up according to Scripture.

In summary, the process should move as follows:

Initial contact received → basic identity and church status established → nature of claim identified → immediate safety assessed → provisional care provided → facts and jurisdiction verified → credibility and character evaluated → worship and communion status considered → pastoral disposition determined → follow-up plan assigned.

This process protects both the person “at the gate” and the congregation “within the city.” The analogy is therefore practical rather than merely abstract: it protects the man seeking refuge or fellowship, and the church. It prevents cold procedural neglect on the one hand and gullible, undiscerning reception on the other. It also preserves the key theological point of this paper: the church’s duty to receive, examine, protect, admonish, discipline, or restore arises from Christ’s command, not from whether the person has taken local membership vows.

A church should distinguish between an ordinary visitor and a person who comes to the church with a specific claim of need. A man who quietly visits worship, sings hymns, hears the Word, and leaves may require ordinary hospitality and follow-up. But a man who comes seeking protection, counsel, adjudication, discipline, communion, refuge, or pastoral intervention presents a different kind of case. He has come to the gate, as it were, with a claim that must be heard.

The church must neither gullibly believe every claim nor coldly refuse responsibility. Scripture requires both mercy and judgment, both hospitality and discernment, both protection for the vulnerable and protection of the flock from falsehood, manipulation, frivolous demands that consume limited pastoral resources, scandal, or danger.

Therefore, elders should have a clear process for pastoral intake and inquiry.

1. Initial Reception

The first duty is to receive the person with sobriety, kindness, and caution. Not all questions need to be asked if discretion or obvious observation dictates otherwise.

The receiving elder or appointed mature representative, such as a deacon, should ask:

- ☐ What is your name and contact information?
- ☐ Are you a professing Christian?
- ☐ Are you baptized?
- ☐ Are you presently a member of, or under care of, another church?
- ☐ What church have you most recently attended or belonged to?
- ☐ Are you currently under discipline, investigation, or unresolved conflict with another church?
- ☐ What is the specific nature of your request?
- ☐ Are you seeking counsel, protection, communion, church membership, discipline, adjudication, financial help, shelter, mediation, or something else?
- ☐ Is there any immediate danger to you, to another person, or to this congregation?

The tone should be pastoral, not suspicious in spirit; but the process should be careful, not naive.

2. Nature of the Claim

The church should then identify the kind of claim being presented.

Possible categories include:

- ☐ Request for ordinary pastoral counsel.
- ☐ Request for church membership or regular pastoral care.
- ☐ Request for communion or temporary participation.
- ☐ Request for help while traveling or displaced.
- ☐ Claim of being wronged by another Christian.
- ☐ Claim of being unjustly disciplined by another church.
- ☐ Claim of abuse, threat, coercion, unlawful violence, or danger.
- ☐ Confession of personal sin requiring counsel or discipline.
- ☐ Request for financial or material assistance.
- ☐ Disruptive, confused, manipulative, or possibly dangerous or criminal behavior.
- ☐ Other: _____

The church should ask:

- ☐ What happened?
- ☐ When did it happen?
- ☐ Where did it happen?
- ☐ Who was involved?

- ☐ Was this a single event, or part of a series of events or offenses?
- ☐ Who witnessed it?
- ☐ Do you have anyone who you'd like to call for help or support, or that you'd like us to call? It may be wise to obtain written permission or have the person make the initial introduction.
- ☐ What protection or assistance are you requesting, and what permission are you giving us to speak with others or collect and preserve relevant information?
- ☐ Are alcohol, illegal drugs, prescribed medications, or other substances relevant to the present matter? If so, what information is necessary to understand immediate safety, judgment, or the need for professional care? (For example, someone who is "off meds".)
- ☐ Are there known medical, psychiatric, neurological, cognitive, or other conditions relevant to immediate safety or the person's ability to communicate, understand, or participate in the present inquiry?
- ☐ Does this involve anyone in the custody of law enforcement or another government agency, subject to a court or legal order, involved in current legal proceedings, incarcerated, on parole or probation, or hospitalized?
- ☐ What evidence exists?
- ☐ Who else has already heard this matter? Are any government or law enforcement agencies involved? Medical or other health professionals?
- ☐ Has another church, elder board, session, consistory, presbytery, civil authority, counselor, or family member been involved?
- ☐ What outcome are you seeking from this church?

The purpose of such questions is not medical or psychiatric diagnosis. Elders necessarily make pastoral assessments—and in that ordinary sense, diagnoses—about sin, safety, danger, credibility, repentance, and the kind of help required. But they should not mistake pastoral discernment for professional, specialized competence they do not possess. First, get facts.

3. Immediate Safety and Legal Concerns

If there is immediate danger, the church must act promptly and wisely.

The church should ask:

- ☐ Is anyone in immediate physical danger?
- ☐ Is there a threat of violence, self-harm, abuse, coercion, or retaliation?
- ☐ Are children, elderly persons, disabled persons, or vulnerable persons involved?
- ☐ Is there a possible crime?
- ☐ Are civil authorities already involved?
- ☐ Is mandatory reporting implicated?

Civil law itself remains subject to God's law. A reporting requirement does not become righteous merely because the state enacted it, and circumstances may arise in which obedience to God requires resistance to an unlawful civil command. Reformed resistance theory and the doctrine of the lesser magistrate are therefore relevant in principle. But such judgments are grave, fact-dependent, and capable of harming both the innocent and the church if made recklessly. Elders facing a genuine conflict should seek competent legal and theological counsel rather than improvising from either blind submission to the state or reflexive distrust of it.

It is possible for a man—or woman—who appeals at the city gates in apparent distress to later sue or accuse the church of impropriety, slander, libel, assault, sexual assault or rape, or other crimes. It is possible that the accusations may in fact be true. For example, a pastor who receives a distressed woman is not above rape or adultery simply because of his title or respected role. The caution is to protect justice, God’s name, and all parties, and nothing less. No favoritism on any side.

As a prudential safeguard, significant pastoral matters—especially allegations of serious wrongdoing, sexual misconduct, abuse, threatened litigation, or cases involving vulnerable persons—should ordinarily involve at least two elders or other appropriately qualified representatives, preferably with continuity of personnel throughout the matter. This is not because Scripture commands two elders at every pastoral meeting, but because plurality protects the parties, improves recollection and judgment, reduces misunderstanding, and provides witnesses to what was actually said and done.

I will specifically advise that an elder should avoid counseling a woman alone, except under the most dire circumstances of unavoidable immediate need, and even then, the primary action should be to call another elder or spiritually competent witness into the matter as soon as possible.

This raises a practical administrative consideration. Elders should have clear channels of communication and could establish a roster of “who’s on call” and their specialized competencies, if any.

The practical answer is neither self-protective suspicion nor naive trust. It is righteous, prepared process: protect the vulnerable, avoid unnecessary isolation in high-risk situations, preserve appropriate records, seek witnesses or additional qualified persons where wisdom requires, respect confidentiality within its lawful bounds, and judge without favoritism. The objective is not merely institutional risk reduction. It is justice before God for every man involved.

4. Provisional Care Without Final Judgment

At the beginning, the church may need to provide provisional care without yet rendering a final judgment.

This may include:

- ☐ Listening carefully. Interview consistently and thoroughly, and check using feedback to confirm shared understanding.
- ☐ Taking appropriate notes, preferably with the person’s knowledge, while protecting confidential information carefully and limiting access to those who genuinely need it.

Pastoral confidentiality is morally serious and may also receive legal protection under clergy-penitent privilege or related evidentiary rules. However, the scope of such protection varies by jurisdiction and circumstance, particularly where abuse, threats, mandatory reporting, or imminent danger are involved. Elders and pastors should therefore treat confessions and pastoral communications with grave care, know the governing law of their jurisdiction, and consult competent legal counsel when difficult cases arise.

CAUTION: Cases involving alleged abuse, serious threats, criminal conduct, vulnerable persons, mandatory reporting, disputed confidentiality, or likely conflict between ecclesiastical and civil duties require particular care. This also goes for whatever other unimaginable horrors I couldn’t imagine when making this list: Elders should not improvise beyond their competence. They should protect

those in immediate danger, preserve confidentiality as far as righteousness and applicable law permit, secure competent legal counsel when needed, and carefully distinguish the church's pastoral and disciplinary responsibilities from the investigative and coercive authority assigned to the civil magistrate.

Pastoral confidentiality and clergy-penitent privilege should not be treated as magic phrases that automatically resolve the matter. Their legal scope varies by jurisdiction, and mandatory-reporting rules may intersect with or limit privilege in different ways. Nor should a legitimate doctrine of resistance to unlawful civil authority become a pretext for concealing abuse, shielding evildoers, or neglecting the helpless. Conversely, fear of government, litigation, or adverse publicity must not cause elders to surrender duties God actually requires. Hard cases require truth, courage, competence, counsel, and the fear of God—not panic or improvisation.

- ☐ Praying with and for the person. With permission and discretion, consider whether prayer by a wider circle of the church would be helpful. But prayer must not become sanctified gossip. A prayer request can slander, prejudice an unresolved matter, unnecessarily expose private sin, or permanently injure a man's reputation just as surely as ordinary conversation can. Share only what is necessary and appropriate.
- ☐ Providing temporary pastoral counsel.
- ☐ Warning the person against sin or rash action while also helping him identify righteous and practical alternatives. (Ephesians 4:22-24, Galatians 5.)
- ☐ If a person is acutely distressed, simple calming measures may help him regain enough composure to communicate and make safe decisions. For example, consider learning techniques like slowing the pace of your speech, pausing, speaking in a lower relaxed register, guided controlled breathing (inhale-hold-exhale; 4-3-7 seconds), etc. But elders should not mistake such measures for mental-health treatment and should obtain appropriate professional assistance when the situation exceeds ordinary pastoral competence.
- ☐ Referring to civil authorities and resources where appropriate.
- ☐ Referring to qualified specialized resources where appropriate, including Christian legal counsel, medical or mental-health care, crisis services, pregnancy-resource ministries, shelters, or other competent assistance. Where appropriate and with the person's consent, the church may help make the initial connection rather than merely handing him a telephone number and sending him away.
- ☐ Helping contact family, lawful guardians, or prior elders.
- ☐ Temporarily withholding judgment until facts are verified.
- ☐ Allowing attendance at worship while restricting communion if appropriate.
- ☐ Protecting the congregation if there is reasonable evidence or suspicion that the person appears or is unstable, deceitful, predatory, or dangerous.

Provisional care is not the same as believing every claim. It is a way of saying, "We will not ignore you, but neither will we render judgment before hearing the matter." This is the pastoral equivalent of refuge pending judgment. Protection is not exoneration. Listening is not endorsement. Temporary assistance is not a final adjudication of the facts. The church can act immediately where mercy or safety requires while remaining deliberately provisional about questions that require evidence and inquiry.

5. Verification and Jurisdiction

The existence of another church's ordinary jurisdiction does not necessarily eliminate every responsibility of the church presently receiving the man. A traveler, disciplined member, displaced Christian, or man seeking emergency help may remain principally accountable elsewhere while simultaneously presenting a real local duty of hospitality, protection, inquiry, warning, or referral. The goal is not to compete for jurisdiction, but to identify it truthfully and cooperate where righteousness requires. The elders should determine whether another church already has ordinary jurisdiction or whether this church has only situational responsibility.

Questions to ask include:

- ☐ Are you currently a member of another church?
- ☐ Have you left that church? If so, when and why?
- ☐ Are you under discipline or pending discipline?
- ☐ Have you informed your elders that you are seeking help here?
- ☐ May we contact your current or former elders?
- ☐ Are there documents, letters, emails, decisions, text messages, social media, charges, or witnesses relevant to this matter?
- ☐ Are you willing for us to hear from the other side?

Proverbs 18:17 warns, "The first to plead his case seems right, Until another comes and examines him."

The church should receive serious claims with sobriety and compassion, but it must also verify facts, hear appropriate witnesses, and avoid rendering judgment on one man's report alone.

Similarly, rushed "on the spot" inquiries or responses should be treated with caution or avoided altogether. This is of particular concern if the investigating or hearing elders are impatient, rushed themselves, irritated, distracted, stressed, or tired.

A man who has been blindsided by an accusation, sued for divorce, who is exhausted, frightened, ashamed, angry, confused, or placed immediately on the defensive may not be able to answer with the clarity, precision, or restraint the matter requires. The principle of Proverbs 18:17 applies not only to hearing both sides, but also to giving each side a fair opportunity to speak carefully, recollect facts, gather evidence, seek appropriate counsel or advisers of his own, and where necessary receive reasonable opportunity to obtain independent assistance, and respond without being unfairly pressured by surprise or emotional shock. See Supporting Study 6, "Righteous Judgment and the Character of Those Who Judge."

Therefore, elders should avoid treating an immediate reaction as the final account unless urgent safety concerns require immediate action. When possible, serious allegations should be received soberly, documented accurately, and then followed by a deliberate process of inquiry.

Justice is not served by panic, ambush, intimidation, or haste. The church should be quick to protect the endangered, but slow to render final judgment.

A basic principle should govern the process: No serious matter should be judged on one man's report alone when other witnesses or authorities can reasonably be consulted.

This follows the biblical concern for multiple witnesses, careful judgment, and righteous procedure.

6. Credibility and Character Assessment

The church should consider the credibility of the person and the claim.

Questions include:

- ☐ Does the person give a coherent account?
- ☐ Does his story change materially?
- ☐ Is he willing to provide names, dates, places, and evidence?
- ☐ Is he willing to be corrected?
- ☐ Is he seeking righteousness, or merely vindication?
- ☐ Is he fleeing accountability?
- ☐ Is he attempting to recruit the church into a faction?
- ☐ Is he slandering others without evidence?
- ☐ Is he repentant where his own sin is involved?
- ☐ Is he living in open sin related to the matter?
- ☐ Does he submit to Scripture when challenged?
- ☐ Does he display humility, patience, and teachability?

Character evidence may assist judgment, but it must not replace evidence concerning the allegation itself. A respected man may be guilty; a troubled man may be telling the truth. Likewise, an unpleasant or emotionally unstable accuser may still have suffered genuine wrong, while an articulate and apparently humble accuser may be false. Credibility should therefore be assessed as one part of the evidence, not used as a shortcut around the facts.

The church must protect its own flock from wolves, manipulators, liars, abusers, and factious men. Mercy does not require gullibility. Hospitality does not require naivety.

7. Communion and Worship Participation

The person's participation in worship and the Lord's Supper should be considered carefully.

The church may ask:

- ☐ Are you baptized? When, where, by whom, and under what circumstances?
- ☐ Do you credibly profess faith in Jesus Christ? Explain.
- ☐ Are you a member in good standing of an evangelical or Reformed church? Which one, why, what's your current relationship to them?
- ☐ Are you under church discipline anywhere?
- ☐ Are you living in any open, unrepentant sin? Are there habitual sins in which you repeatedly fall and from which you are seeking to repent?
- ☐ Have you recently had to deal with or recover from open, unrepentant or other scandalous sins or accusations, regardless of judicial outcome? Were you exonerated, convicted, excommunicated, or restored?
- ☐ Are you reconciled to the body as far as it depends on you? What actions have you taken?
- ☐ Does your manner of life demonstrate a commitment to live according to the Word of God? Do you work with your hands and earn your sustenance lawfully?
- ☐ Do you understand the warning attached to the Lord's Supper?
- ☐ Do you understand the authority of the local church that you are appealing to?
- ☐ Are you willing to submit to the lawful leadership of the elders of this local church?

Because “lawful leadership” is a weighty phrase, the elders should be prepared to explain what they believe it requires and what limits Scripture places upon their authority.

- ☐ Would you be willing to submit to the lawful decrees of this local church?

A visitor may be welcomed to worship even when communion is withheld or delayed pending clarification. Fencing the Table is not cruelty; it is care for Christ’s holiness, the man’s soul, and the local body.

8. Possible Outcomes

After initial inquiry, the elders may conclude:

- ☐ This is an ordinary visitor requiring normal hospitality.
- ☐ This is a believer seeking a new church home and should enter a more permanent or pastoral-care process.
- ☐ This is a traveler or temporarily displaced Christian requiring situational pastoral care.
- ☐ This is a man under another church’s jurisdiction, and communication with that church is needed.
- ☐ This is a discipline case requiring referral, cooperation, or further inquiry.
- ☐ This is a person in danger requiring immediate protection and possible civil involvement.
- ☐ This is a false, frivolous, manipulative, or factious claim requiring warning or refusal.
- ☐ This is a matter outside the church’s competence requiring referral to civil, medical, legal, or specialized help.
- ☐ This is a person who should not be admitted to communion at this time.
- ☐ This is a person who should be warned, admonished, or barred from disrupting the congregation.

9. Guiding Principles

The following principles should govern the process:

- ☐ Receive before rejecting.
- ☐ Listen before judging. Interview consistently and thoroughly, and check using feedback to confirm shared understanding.
 - Gather facts and observe carefully
 - Assess
 - Decide
 - Take and require calm and appropriate next action
- ☐ Verify before adjudicating.
- ☐ Distinguish ordinary jurisdiction from situational responsibility.
- ☐ Contact prior elders when appropriate.
- ☐ Protect the flock from false claims and dangerous men or women. This is one context where naming both sexes is useful: partiality can arise from assuming that danger, deceit, manipulation, or abuse will present in one predictable form. Scripture requires judgment according to truth rather than stereotypes, social status, appearance, wealth, sex, reputation, or familiarity.
- ☐ Do not confuse pastoral care with civil investigation. God has limited the church’s sphere, and it becomes a practical issue of how the church operates in the local, state, and national legal

systems under which providence has placed it, rather like Christ under Roman rule or dealing with the religious authorities of His contemporary times.

- ☐ Do not use a lack of local vows as an excuse to neglect a God-given duty.
 - ☐ Do not use mercy as an excuse for gullibility.
 - ☐ Do not use caution as an excuse for cowardice or neglect.
 - ☐ Do not bind conscience beyond Scripture. See Supporting Study 3, “Church Decrees: Ministerial Authority Without Magisterial Overreach.”
 - ☐ Trust the Chief Shepherd, who knows His own perfectly. You are not required to know the unknowable. You are required to judge as faithfully as finite and sinful men can, while remembering that even the wisest and most faithful elders are not omniscient.
-
- ☐ **Receive the case before defining the limits of the case.**
 - ☐ **Protect provisionally without pretending provisional action is final judgment.**
 - ☐ **Honor existing lawful jurisdiction without using it as an excuse for local neglect.**
 - ☐ **Use procedure to serve shepherding and judgment; never mistake procedure for either.**
 - ☐ **Know the limits of pastoral competence, and seek qualified help before those limits become a crisis.**
 - ☐ **Protect the church institution, but never make institutional self-protection the standard of righteousness.**

10. The Central Principle

The church need not choose between open-gate chaos and vow-dependent neglect. A faithful church can receive the man at the gate, ask careful questions, provide provisional care, verify the facts, protect the flock, honor other lawful jurisdictions, and act according to Scripture.

The city of refuge did not refuse the fleeing man because he had taken no prior vows to that city. But neither did it abolish inquiry or judgment. It received him, heard him, protected him provisionally, and proceeded according to God’s law.

So also the church should be ready to receive, hear, examine, protect, admonish, discipline, and restore according to Christ’s Word. Local vows are not the source of that duty. Christ is.

Summary

In short, the church should respond to a person seeking help by receiving him soberly, identifying what he is asking, assessing danger, providing appropriate provisional care, verifying facts, honoring any existing church jurisdiction, protecting the flock, and assigning a clear follow-up path.

This is not open-gate chaos, and it is not vow-dependent neglect. Furthermore, it’s not bureaucratic self-protection nor pastoral heroics. **It seeks ordered, competent, courageous care:** mercy without gullibility, judgment without haste, accountability without overreach, and shepherding under the authority of Christ. The church receives the man at the gate, hears his claim, guards against falsehood, seeks justice, protects the endangered, respects lawful authority, and acts according to Scripture.

Local vows do not create this responsibility. Christ does.

Supporting Study 6 - Righteous Judgment and the Character of Those Who Judge

Righteous Judgment, Impartiality, and the Fear of God

When the church receives serious claims, hears accusations, considers discipline, or seeks to protect the flock, the bride of Christ must judge with her Husband's righteous judgment. Compassion is essential, but compassion must not become partiality. Caution is critical, but caution must not become cowardice. The church must neither be carried away by the first report nor intimidated by status, wealth, poverty, emotion, reputation, influence, man, woman, young, old, educated, uneducated, position, power, or in general, fear of man.

Our Lord commands, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24). This does not forbid judgment. It forbids shallow, merely external, partial, or unrighteous judgment. The church is not permitted to avoid judgment where judgment is required; rather, she must judge as God commands, according to truth.

This principle runs throughout Scripture. Moses instructed the judges of Israel, "Hear the cases between your fellow countrymen, and judge righteously between a man and his fellow countryman, or the alien who is with him" (Deuteronomy 1:16). He then added, "You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not fear man, for the judgment is God's" (Deuteronomy 1:17). That last statement should sober every elder, pastor, father, magistrate, and church court: judgment does not belong to man as an independent possession. Judgment is God's.

Leviticus states the same principle with particular clarity: "You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly" (Leviticus 19:15). This is especially important because partiality can masquerade as compassion. Scripture does not permit the judge to favor the rich because they are powerful, respectable, generous, influential, or feared. But neither does Scripture permit the judge to favor the poor merely because they appear weak, pitiable, distressed, or socially disadvantaged. The great may not be deferred to; the poor may not be flattered. Both must be judged fairly.

Jehoshaphat's charge to the judges of Judah presses the matter even further: "Consider what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the LORD who is with you when you render judgment" (2 Chronicles 19:6). He then warns, "Now then let the fear of the LORD be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the LORD our God will have no part in unrighteousness or partiality or the taking of a bribe" (2 Chronicles 19:7). That is an astonishingly weighty word. Those who judge must consider what they are doing. They are not playing politics, managing optics, protecting institutional reputation, appeasing strong personalities, or indulging emotional narratives. And a fat stack of cash delivered into the inner suit jacket pocket in a manilla envelope is one form of bribe, but that's too easy. The bribe can be subtle, merely perceived, "This judgment will make me look good. This judgment will make me famous, get me promoted, make my teachings sell better, get me a respected position at the university, or get me speaking engagements. The rich guy will remember me. This violent man won't threaten me." They are rendering judgment before the Lord.

This has direct application to pastoral inquiry. If a man comes to the church with a serious claim, the church should receive him soberly and compassionately. But Proverbs 18:17 warns, "The first to

plead his case seems right, Until another comes and examines him”. Therefore, the church must not render judgment merely because the first account sounds plausible, emotional, detailed, or urgent. A claim may be true, partly true, confused, exaggerated, weaponized, or false. Righteous judgment requires hearing, examination, witnesses where available, documentation where appropriate, and careful distinction between what is known, what is alleged, what is suspected, and what remains unknown. That requires what is probably a too unusual degree of humility and precision and diligence of mind.

The same principle applies to the accused. A rushed, on-the-spot response from a man who has been blindsided, exhausted, ashamed, angry, frightened, or shocked should not normally be treated as his final and settled answer. Justice is not served by ambush. Elders should avoid panic, manipulation, intimidation, and haste. They should be quick to protect the endangered, but slow to render final judgment.

Nor should elders fear man. They must not fear the wealthy donor, the respected family, the loud faction, the emotionally persuasive accuser, the influential accused, the internet, social media, the denomination, or the civil consequences of doing righteousness. They must fear God. Yet fearing God does not mean acting recklessly. It means telling the truth, protecting the vulnerable, refusing partiality, seeking witnesses, preserving due process, obeying lawful authority, resisting unlawful commands where necessary, and remembering that the Lord Himself weighs the case.

This is why a church should develop careful processes before a crisis arrives. Righteous judgment requires more than good intentions. It requires ordered inquiry, impartial standards, wise documentation, multiple witnesses where possible, legal awareness where necessary, pastoral courage, and prayerful dependence on God. A church that refuses to judge when judgment is required abdicates its duty. A church that judges hastily or partially sins against God and neighbor. The faithful path is neither cowardice nor presumption, but righteous judgment in the fear of the Lord.

Thus, when elders hear claims, accusations, confessions, and pleas for help, they must remember: the judgment is God’s. They must not judge according to appearance, but with righteous judgment. They must not defer to the great or favor the poor. They must hear the small and the great alike. They must receive the first report without being ruled by it. They must examine carefully before rendering judgment. And in all things, they must act as men who will answer to the Chief Shepherd.

The Selection of Judges and the Character Required for Righteous Judgment

Scripture does not treat judgment as a casual task to be performed by any available man. Those who hear cases, receive accusations, adjudicate disputes, protect the vulnerable, and render judgment must be carefully chosen and spiritually qualified.

Jethro counseled Moses, “Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens” (Exodus 18:21). The qualifications are striking. Judges must be able men, not incompetent men. Calling a man “incompetent” sounds like an insult. Strictly speaking, it’s not. Rather, if a man does not objectively possess the competence for a task, then he is, by definition, incompetent. The insult comes when that man should have been competent and mature, but through neglect or other deficiency for which that man may properly be held responsible, is not.

They must fear God, not merely possess administrative skill. They must be men of truth, not manipulators of narrative. They must hate dishonest gain, not merely avoid scandal when watched.

Moses later recounts the same principle to Israel: “Choose wise and discerning and experienced men from your tribes, and I will appoint them as your heads” (Deuteronomy 1:13). These men were to be chosen from among the people, but not randomly or sentimentally. They were to be wise, discerning, and experienced. Judgment requires more than sympathy, more than charisma, and more than confidence. It requires trained moral perception, sober experience, and the ability to distinguish one matter from another.

Scripture’s requirement that judges be “able,” wise, discerning, and experienced points to more than good intentions. Judgment requires competence. In practical terms, competence is *the demonstrated knowledge, skill, judgment, and ability required to perform a defined task so that the intended result is consistently achieved*. In church discipline and pastoral adjudication, this means that a man may be sincere, articulate, respected, and even formally ordained, yet still lack the maturity, discernment, evidentiary judgment, self-command, or experience required for a difficult case.

Authority and competence are therefore related but not identical. **Authority gives a man the right and duty to act within his lawful sphere; competence concerns whether he is presently equipped to act faithfully and well.**

Deuteronomy also commands, “You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment” (Deuteronomy 16:18). The goal of appointment is not mere administration but righteous judgment. God’s people must have ordered processes, qualified officers, and local responsibility; yet all of it exists so that judgment may be rendered according to righteousness. And note again the jurisdictional nature of God’s command!

Jehoshaphat’s reform presses this still further. He appointed judges city by city—in fulfillment of God’s law—and charged them, “Consider what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the LORD who is with you when you render judgment” (2 Chronicles 19:6). He then warned them, “Now then let the fear of the LORD be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the LORD our God will have no part in unrighteousness or partiality or the taking of a bribe” (2 Chronicles 19:7).

This is recapitulated by Paul, who says of an elder overseer: Titus 1:7 “For the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain,”

And positively: Titus 1:8 “but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled...”

These qualifications also imply a continuing duty to develop qualified men. The church should not wait until existing elders are exhausted, overloaded, or facing a crisis before asking who is being prepared to judge, teach, shepherd, and lead. Paul left Titus in Crete to “set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city” (Titus 1:5), and he instructed Timothy to entrust what he had received “to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2).

The biblical answer to excessive span of responsibility is therefore not merely stronger procedure, but the multiplication of faithful and competent men. Jethro’s counsel to Moses follows the same pattern:

select able, God-fearing, truthful, incorruptible men and distribute responsibility among them.

Pastoral overload may indicate not that the church needs stronger control mechanisms, but that it needs more qualified shepherds.

Has your church emphasized the continual discipleship Christ modeled? Are you building a pipeline of elders? In a mature Christian society that has been diligent to prayerfully teach the whole of God's law to its "sons, talking of them when you sit in your house, when you walk along the road, and when you lie down and when you rise up," (Deuteronomy 11:19), godly men should be common and abundant enough to be able to lead down to the tens level and higher. This is the strategic solution, if God will bless it by His will and Spirit.

These texts establish a biblical pattern. Those who judge must be chosen carefully. They must fear God, love truth, hate bribery, possess wisdom, show discernment, and act without partiality. They must not be swayed by wealth, poverty, emotion, influence, faction, reputation, or fear of man. They must remember that judgment is not theirs as an independent possession. They judge under God.

This has direct application to the church. Elders who receive serious claims, hear accusations, conduct discipline, protect the flock, or adjudicate conflict must act as men under the eye of the Chief Shepherd. They need more than procedures. They need character.

Competence also includes knowing one's limits. A righteous judge must be willing to say, "I don't yet know," "I need more evidence," "I need counsel," or even, "I should not hear this case because I am too personally involved." Confidence is not the same as competence, and decisiveness is not the same as wisdom. The fear of God should make a judge courageous enough to act when action is required and humble enough to pause, seek help, or recuse himself when righteousness requires it.

A checklist may assist righteous judgment, but it cannot replace righteous judges.

The church should therefore seek men who are not merely articulate, popular, educated, or institutionally loyal, but able, truthful, wise, discerning, incorruptible (not to say sinless, but having a demonstrated, character-based resistance to corruption, the taking of bribes, or incentives to pervert justice), and deeply governed by the fear of God.

The church needs not merely men who hold office, but men fitted by character, wisdom, experience, truthfulness, and the fear of God to exercise that office faithfully. Oh, that God would make such men commonplace.

Supporting Study 7 - A Biblical Survey of Vows

This supporting study surveys the principal biblical categories of vows. It is not intended to prove that vows are inherently sinful. Scripture records **lawful, faithful, rash, deceitful, and idolatrous vows**. It **regulates vows, commands men to fulfill lawful vows, and expressly teaches that refraining from a voluntary vow is not itself sin.**

Scripture neither treats vows as inherently suspect nor makes them necessary wherever they might be useful. **A lawful vow is a serious, voluntary act by which a man assumes an obligation before God that he was free to assume and has the means to carry out. Once lawfully made, it binds the conscience because God commands truthfulness and faithfulness in keeping one's word.**

The central question, therefore, is not whether Christians may make vows. They may. The question is whether the church may require a particular vow as a condition of belonging, communion, jurisdiction, or pastoral responsibility when Christ has not required that vow.

A lawful vow may create an additional obligation; it cannot be used to create an obligation God has already imposed or to erase one He has already established.

The relevant question for this paper is therefore not whether Scripture permits vows, but whether Christ requires formal vows as a condition of ordinary membership in His visible church.

Table 16 - Scripture Permits Lawful Vows, Regulates Them Strictly, and Never Establishes Them as the Basis of Local Church Membership

Category	Representative texts	What the texts establish	Relevance to membership vows
<i>Voluntary vows made to God</i>	Genesis 28:20; Numbers 21:2; 1 Samuel 1:11; Jonah 1:16; 2:9	Men sometimes voluntarily promise particular acts to God in response to His provision, deliverance, or mercy.	These establish the lawfulness of certain vows, but not a command requiring membership vows.
<i>Vows connected with sacrifices and offerings</i>	Leviticus 22:21–23; Numbers 15:3, 8; Deuteronomy 12:11, 17; Malachi 1:14	A vow may entail a particular offering, and God requires the promised offering to meet His standards.	A voluntary vow becomes a serious obligation once made; its object and performance remain subject to God’s law.
<i>Special vows of consecration</i>	Numbers 6:1–21; Acts 18:18; 21:23	Scripture recognizes special, limited commitments such as the Nazirite vow.	A special vow is distinguishable from the ordinary duties binding every covenant member.
<i>Regulation by existing household authority</i>	Numbers 30:1–16	A vow does not operate in an authority vacuum. Certain vows could be confirmed or annulled by a father or husband.	Sincerity alone does not make every vow independently binding; God regulates who may bind himself and under what authority.
<i>The duty to fulfill a lawful vow</i>	Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21, 23; Ecclesiastes 5:4; Psalms 50:14; 116:14, 18	Once a lawful vow is made, it must not be treated casually or left unpaid.	Requiring vows creates genuine additional obligations and possible additional guilt.
<i>The freedom not to vow</i>	Deuteronomy 23:22; Ecclesiastes 5:5	“If you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you”; it is better not	This is central: Scripture distinguishes duties God commands from voluntary

Category	Representative texts	What the texts establish	Relevance to membership vows
		to vow than to vow and fail to perform it.	obligations a man may choose not to assume.
<i>Warnings against rash or unlawful vows</i>	Judges 11:30–39; Proverbs 20:25; Ecclesiastes 5:2–6 (Cp. Deuteronomy 12:31)	Zeal, urgency, or religious emotion may lead a man to bind himself foolishly before considering the consequences or to promise what God has not required—or even what God forbids. An unlawful vow must be repented of, not performed, because no human promise can make sin into obedience.	Churches should be reluctant to normalize or require solemn promises whose scope or future application may not be understood.
<i>Deceitful or manipulative use of vows</i>	2 Samuel 15:7–8; Proverbs 7:14; Malachi 1:14	Religious vows can be invoked while concealing rebellion, seduction, fraud, or inferior performance.	The existence of a vow does not establish sincerity, holiness, or submission.
<i>Unlawful and idolatrous vows</i>	Jeremiah 44:25	Men may sincerely perform vows made in service of false worship.	A vow’s solemnity cannot sanctify an unlawful object. The content and authority of the vow must first be judged by God’s Word.
<i>Vows paid publicly among God’s people</i>	Psalms 22:25; 61:8; 66:13; 116:14, 18	Lawful vows to God were sometimes fulfilled publicly in the assembly.	Public performance does not convert every vow into a condition of belonging to the assembly.
<i>Christ’s warning concerning oath-bound speech</i>	Matthew 5:33–37	Christ condemns manipulative and unreliable oath-taking and requires transparent truthfulness: ordinary speech should be trustworthy.	The church should cultivate men whose “Yes” is “Yes,” not assume that multiplying solemn formulas creates honesty.
<i>Apostolic warning concerning oaths</i>	James 5:12	James repeats the demand for plain, truthful speech and warns against falling under judgment.	The New Testament intensifies caution rather than encouraging routine

Category	Representative texts	What the texts establish	Relevance to membership vows
			multiplication of solemn obligations.

Principal Observations

First, Scripture recognizes lawful vows. Any categorical assertion that all vows are sinful would go beyond the biblical evidence. Jacob, Hannah, David, the psalmists, sailors in Jonah, and apparently Paul participated in vows of various kinds.

Second, biblical vows are ordinarily made to God. They commonly concern sacrifice, consecration, thanksgiving, promised service, or a particular response to divine deliverance. This differs significantly from a standardized promise required by church officers as a condition of ordinary ecclesiastical membership.

Third, vows are generally voluntary before they are made but binding afterward. Deuteronomy 23 states both sides with unusual clarity:

“When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it...”

“However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you.”

—Deuteronomy 23:21–22

The man who refrains from making the vow has not sinned. The man who voluntarily makes it must perform it. That distinction is directly relevant when a church considers transforming an optional religious act into a universal condition of membership.

Fourth, Scripture distinguishes ordinary obedience from specially assumed obligations. Every Israelite was obligated to obey God’s law. Not every Israelite was obligated to become a Nazirite, promise a special offering, or make a conditional vow. The special vow added an obligation that did not attach to every covenant member merely by virtue of his covenant standing.

Fifth, the biblical warnings are substantial. Scripture presents vows as capable of being rash, manipulative, deceitful, idolatrous, or hypocritically performed. It is therefore insufficient to argue, “Vows are biblical.” Sacrifices, fasts, circumcision, and Nazirite consecration are also biblical. The necessary questions are: What kind of vow is this? To whom is it made? Who requires it? What does it promise? Is it voluntary or mandatory? What authority may confirm, interpret, enforce, or annul it? Has Christ appointed it for this purpose?

Finally, no passage in this survey institutes a formal membership vow as the means by which a Christian becomes a member of a local church or comes under elder jurisdiction. Scripture’s recognition of lawful vows proves that such vows may exist. It does not prove that church officers may require a particular vow as a condition of belonging where Christ has not required one.

Scripture’s warnings about vows presuppose an important distinction between a duty God commands and an obligation a man voluntarily assumes. Deuteronomy 23:21–23 is especially instructive: once a vow is made, failure to perform it is sin; yet **“if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you.”** The man is free not to create the additional obligation. But once he creates it, he must keep it.

That distinction is foundational. **Christian liberty includes the liberty not to vow where God has left the matter free.**

Jephthah

Jephthah vowed that if the Lord delivered the Ammonites into his hand, whatever came from the doors of his house to meet him would belong to the Lord, and he would offer it as a burnt offering (Judges 11:30–31). His daughter came out to meet him.

There are two principal interpretations:

1. **Jephthah literally sacrificed his daughter.**

By this reading, he murdered her in an unlawful imitation of pagan child sacrifice.

2. **He devoted her permanently to the Lord, resulting in perpetual virginity.**

This interpretation emphasizes that she mourned her virginity rather than her impending death and that the text says Jephthah “did to her according to the vow,” without expressly describing her death.

I lean toward the literal-sacrifice interpretation, although the matter can be disputed (or maybe it can’t and I’m just wobbling in my confidence for some unrealized reason?) The natural meaning of “burnt offering,” the gravity of the narrative, and the annual commemoration by Israel’s daughters support it. Her mourning of virginity is understandable because she would die unmarried, extinguishing Jephthah’s only line. Furthermore, the depravity of the era in the context at the end of Judges, a *concubine*, already not a good situation, is gang-raped and left for dead, then chopped up and her severed bits of decaying corpse posted and disbursed nationwide—sounds like Quentin Tarantino might find plot (if that’s a justifiable term to apply to a Tarantino movie) material. They were depraved. Further furthermore, God, who knows the hearts of all men, made a law against such things, and He does not make extraneous laws, I think I can safely say.

But either interpretation condemns the vow as rash. If Jephthah killed her, the act was explicitly forbidden:

You shall not behave thus toward the LORD your God, for every abominable act which the LORD hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Deuteronomy 12:31

Human sacrifice was not made holy because Jephthah pronounced the Lord’s name over it. Nor was he obligated to commit murder because he had promised it. The proper response would have been repentance for the unlawful vow, not performance of the unlawful act. One may not vow to murder, commit adultery, steal, worship an idol, or disobey any command of God—and then claim that keeping the vow is righteousness.

The story does reflect Israel’s covenantal decline. Judges repeatedly depicts Israel absorbing the beliefs and practices of the surrounding nations. Jephthah appears to approach YHWH with something resembling pagan bargaining: “If You give me victory, I will give You this costly offering.” Yet the Spirit of the Lord had already come upon him before he made the vow (Judges 11:29). God’s empowering presence—not Jephthah’s bargain—was the ground of victory. *The vow was unnecessary. The vow, even if well-intentioned—which I can’t interpret as being that—was dangerous...to himself, to the nation, to his daughter, to his unborn line.* Very, very not like the son of David, for example, and God’s promise to establish David’s throne.

This fits the downward trajectory of Judges:

- Israel repeatedly forsakes the Lord.
- Its judges become increasingly morally compromised.
- Tribal unity deteriorates into internecine violence.
- Men confuse what seems right to them with what God has commanded.
- The book moves toward its terrible refrain: “Every man did what was right in his own eyes.” (To be fair, I long interpreted that as proto-libertarianism in a positive sense, but methinks I probably need to rethink that.)

Jephthah himself later participates in catastrophic conflict with Ephraim, culminating in the deaths of 42,000 Israelites (Judges 12:1–6). The deliverer of Israel is simultaneously evidence of Israel’s disorder. **Yet Hebrews 11:32 includes Jephthah among men of faith!** (Sorry, if my mind is sort of blown and yet my astonishment can only glorify God’s great mercy. Compare too, how Lot is called righteous.) That prevents us from treating him as merely a pagan villain. He was a real, deeply flawed man whom God used through faith amid a covenantally deteriorating society. Scripture can commend his faith without approving every act of his life.

The governing principle is worth stating independently:

A vow is subordinate to God’s law. It may bind a man to perform a lawful promise. A vow can never bind him to commit sin. Yet, men can and are even prone to make vows that are an occasion for sin. That is foolish and to be avoided if we learn from Scripture (Romans 15:4). Even when there is repentance regarding a false or sinful vow, the sin can bring negative consequences, even if forgiven.

Membership Vows and the Conscience

This becomes particularly serious where the proposed vow covers matters already commanded by Scripture. The Christian is already bound to worship God, love the brethren, pursue holiness, preserve peace, receive lawful discipline, honor faithful officers, and submit where Christ commands submission. A local vow may solemnly acknowledge those duties, but it does not generate them.

Requiring the Christian to **swear** them as an additional condition therefore creates a second question that should not be brushed aside: **What additional spiritual obligation is the vow actually adding?**

If it adds nothing, its necessity is difficult to explain. If it does add something, then the church must identify that additional obligation and demonstrate from Scripture her authority to require it as a condition of belonging.

Positive Doctrine of Vows

None of this diminishes the holiness of lawful vows. But precisely because Scripture treats vows seriously, the church should be slow to multiply them. A man should not vow casually, and the church should not require vows casually. The weight Scripture places upon oath-bound promises is an argument for restraint, clarity, voluntariness, and faithful performance—not for making them routine prerequisites wherever administrative certainty seems desirable.

There may be circumstances in which a Christian freely chooses to make a lawful promise concerning service, giving, ministry, reconciliation, marriage, or some other good work. Such a promise may be deeply appropriate and, once made, genuinely binding. The church may teach him to keep it and discipline him for deceitful or faithless violation where Scripture warrants.

But a voluntary vow and a divine command remain distinct categories. One arises because a man lawfully binds himself; the other binds him because God has spoken.

Teach God's duty clearly. Preserve lawful liberty. Take vows seriously. And do not manufacture oath-bound obligations where Christ has left His people free.

Membership vows may lawfully acknowledge Christian duties; they must not be treated as though they create the church, create the flock, create elder authority, or create the Christian's obligation to obey Christ.

Supporting Study 8 – Novelty and Innovation: The Historical Development of Membership Vows

The Historical Question

Are membership vows from the times of the apostles? From old covenant times? From Moses? The kings? The judges? Abraham? Genesis? When do we first see membership vows?

Formal membership vows can feel ancient in a modern conservative Reformed church. They may be printed in the Book of Church Order, administered by elders, repeated publicly, inherited from respected fathers, and defended as ordinary Presbyterian practice. After several generations, a practice can become so familiar that asking where it came from may itself sound peculiar.

But it's worth asking.

Ecclesiological differences—that is, differences in church order, organization, and government—may begin like two channels near the headwaters of a river: close enough that the divergence initially seems slight. Yet as each stream follows its own logic, the distance between them grows.

Presbyterian and Congregational polity emerged from the same Reformation world and shared much doctrine, yet they differed significantly over what makes a particular church a particular church and what role voluntary covenant plays in that relationship. The question I'm asking is not which tradition possessed all truth and which possessed none, but which stream our present practice most closely follows.

For a Reformed or mostly Reformed audience, that is worth investigating. Did later membership practice continue along an older Presbyterian stream, or did it gradually take on some of the logic of the Congregational stream? Does the answer even matter? History is rarely neat enough to say that a particular church on a particular Lord's Day consciously knows exactly how its practice descended from seventeenth-century debates. We may have long since lost sight of the connection. But we still got here from somewhere. Membership vows did not simply spring from the rocky soil fully formed.

I have a saying: Novelty in theology is usually heresy. It's a qualified statement—and admittedly a novelty itself. But if it has any usefulness, it's as a warning to stop and examine innovations when they begin to affect what we say Scripture requires. Earlier I asserted, "Divine jurisdiction precedes voluntary compact." So the historical question now is this: Did the Reformed church historically operate according to that same logic, and if so, when and why did formal compact acquire such weight? If some consider formal membership vows indispensable to establish local membership or elder jurisdiction, why are they **conspicuously absent** from Scripture and from centuries of

foundational Presbyterian church order? Where were they in the Scottish Reformation, Westminster, and the original American Presbyterian constitution—and why did the familiar formal vow structure appear only later?

When did formal local membership vows become a normal feature of Reformed church order?

They did not descend from heaven with the New Testament. So, no, I don't see them from the times of the apostles. Thus, I think we can eliminate, too, anything earlier.

Scripture contains vows and regulates them seriously, but it nowhere gives a set of vows by which a Christian becomes a member of a particular congregation or by which elders acquire jurisdiction over him.

Neither do the familiar modern membership vows appear in the foundational documents of classical Presbyterianism.

The Scottish Reformation possessed churches, parishes, ministers, elders, catechesis, examination, communicant standing, discipline, and identifiable pastoral responsibility **without making a modern set of membership vows the constituting mechanism of the relationship.**

The Westminster *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* likewise prescribed **no ceremony of membership vows.**

The **Westminster Larger Catechism** (Q. 173) speaks of a man who “profess[es] the faith, and desire[s] to come to the Lord’s Supper,” and permits exclusion for ignorance or scandal until he is instructed or reformed. Its categories are profession, doctrine, life, sacramental admission, and discipline—not a supplementary local oath.

The original American Presbyterian constitutional order likewise predates the now-familiar vow system. **The 1789 Presbyterian constitution provided means for examining and receiving communicants without prescribing the later set of formal membership vows.**

The historical question therefore cannot be dismissed by saying simply, “Presbyterians have always done this.”

They have not.

A Much Older Fork in Church Order

This does not mean, however, that voluntary covenanting among members suddenly appeared in the nineteenth century. An important counterexample existed much earlier within the broader Reformed world.

The **Cambridge Platform of 1648**, representing New England **Congregationalism**, described a particular church as “a company of saints by calling, united into one body by a holy covenant.” It went on to say that the substance of this covenant could consist in the “real Agreement & consent” of faithful men to gather together continually for worship and mutual edification. **In that model**, the covenant wasn’t merely an administrative recognition of a local church relationship that already existed. The saints’ **voluntary agreement** to walk together was part of how that **particular congregation** came to exist as a distinct local church. *In other words, the “holy covenant” here*

wasn't simply God's covenant with His people, imposed by His sovereign claim upon them as their King. It also included a distinct local agreement by which these particular Christians joined themselves together as this particular congregation.

This point also needs an important qualification. Even The Cambridge Platform *didn't require that this agreement take the form of a particular written membership vow*. It allowed the members' agreement and consent to be shown simply by their actual, self-evident practice of gathering together for worship and submitting to the ordinances of Christ. In other words, even this strongly covenantal Congregational model didn't necessarily say, "Until you make these particular promises, no local church relationship exists." Its emphasis was upon real agreement and consent, but that agreement could be expressed through the life of the congregation itself rather than only through a formal vow.

Even the older voluntary-covenantal model was not necessarily as procedurally formal as some modern membership systems have become.

That raises a further historical question. Not merely, when did local covenant and consent become important? But, *when did formal promises become the required threshold for recognized membership?*

Here we encounter an old ecclesiological fault line.

Classical Presbyterian polity and Congregational polity shared enormous theological territory. Both arose from the Reformation. Both confessed Christ as Head of His church. Both valued discipline, godly officers, doctrinal purity, and identifiable congregations.

But they did not answer every question of ecclesiology in the same way.

Presbyterianism ordinarily placed greater emphasis upon the church as an **objective** institution established by Christ, governed through officers whose authority derived from Him, and expressed locally through identifiable congregations and, historically, territorial parishes.

Congregationalism placed greater emphasis on particular saints **voluntarily** covenanting together, so that their agreement was part of how that local church came to exist as a distinct congregation.

Put very simply, the two tendencies can be pictured this way:

Presbyterian institutional logic:

Christ → church → office → visible flock → mutual duties

Voluntary-covenantal logic:

believers → mutual covenant or consent → constituted local congregation → local duties

This simplification—although I think it shows a watershed difference—should not be pressed beyond its usefulness. It's merely a summary observation and subject to your criticism. Presbyterian churches certainly recognize voluntary acts of profession, reception, transfer, and association. Nor does the existence of seventeenth-century Congregational covenants prove that later Presbyterian membership vows were borrowed directly from Congregationalists.

That genealogy would have to be demonstrated, not assumed.

But the **structural affinity is worth noticing.**

A model in which formal consent becomes necessary to create local membership—and especially a model in which elder jurisdiction is thought to begin only after that consent—is conceptually closer to a voluntary-covenantal account of the particular church than to an institutional account in which Christ’s church, officers, sacraments, discipline, and pastoral relationships already exist prior to a member’s supplementary promise.

Perhaps, then, the deepest historical question is not merely:

When did Presbyterians begin administering membership vows?

It is:

When did Presbyterians begin thinking about local belonging and jurisdiction in a way that made such vows seem necessary?

The Later Presbyterian Development

In the Southern Presbyterian line that eventually contributed to the formation of the Presbyterian Church in America, formal membership vows are comparatively late.

The Presbyterian Church in the United States introduced four such vows into its Directory for Worship in **1894**. A further vow concerning support for the worship and work of the church was added in **1929**, producing substantially the familiar five-vow pattern later inherited by the Presbyterian Church in America.

Whatever judgment one reaches regarding the wisdom of those changes, this chronology establishes an important fact:

The modern vow structure is a later development within Presbyterian history, not part of the original Presbyterian pattern of church order.

By the time those vows arose, American ecclesiastical life differed dramatically from the older **European parish environment**. *By then, the older European territorial—or parish—model had largely given way in American church life to religious disestablishment, extraordinary geographic mobility, westward expansion into thinly populated or unpopulated areas where no church yet existed, denominational multiplication, doctrinal variation and heresy, revival movements, voluntary societies, parachurch organizations, and congregations existing alongside numerous competing congregations in the same town.*

That situation created real pastoral problems.

- Who belongs to which church?
- Who is responsible to shepherd whom?
- Who may be disciplined?
- Who may participate in the government or service of the congregation?
- How does a church distinguish a settled sheep from a transient religious consumer?

Formal membership mechanisms offered an understandable answer.

Historical explanation, however, is not biblical authorization.

A prudential mechanism devised in response to a particular institutional environment does not thereby become an ordinance of Christ.

Table 17 - Survey of Church Membership Vows in Key Historical Church Documents

Date	Document / Tradition	Relevance	Vows Required?
1560	<i>First Book of Discipline</i> — Scottish Presbyterian	Church order, catechesis, discipline, parish structure; no modern membership-vow system	No
1645–1647	Westminster Directory / Larger Catechism — Presbyterian	Profession, examination, communion, discipline; no prescribed formal membership vows	No
1648	<i>Cambridge Platform</i> — Congregational	Particular church described in terms of holy covenant, agreement, and consent	No
1789	American Presbyterian Constitution	Early American Presbyterian order without the later familiar vow structure	No
1894	PCUS Book of Church Order	Four formal membership vows appear	Yes
1929	PCUS revision	Fifth support vow added	Yes
Later	Modern conservative Presbyterian practice	Fixed vows become familiar and may function as the recognized membership threshold	Yes

PCUS –Presbyterian Church in the United States

From Useful Procedure to Presumed Necessity

Institutional practices can acquire weight gradually.

One generation may say: “This will help us identify the flock.”

Another: “This is how our church identifies the flock.”

Another: “This is how Presbyterian churches identify the flock.”

And eventually: “Without this, you are not one of the flock over whom we have responsibility.”

Nothing nefarious need occur at any stage. There need be no conspiracy, no dishonest elder, and no deliberate attempt to add to Scripture.

The shift may happen precisely because good men inherit a useful procedure, find that it works adequately, teach it to the next generation, and eventually cease asking what theological work the procedure is being made to perform.

A useful administrative marker can quietly become a jurisdictional boundary.

And once that happens, the consequences are not merely theoretical.

A man who has made the required promises may be treated as a sheep for whom the elders must give account. Another professing Christian worshipping beside him, receiving the same preaching, confessing the same Creed, eating the same bread, drinking from the same cup, and seeking the same pastoral care may be treated differently because he has not crossed the formal threshold.

The vow has then ceased merely to record pastoral reality.

It has begun to define it.

History Explains; Scripture Judges

None of this proves that every membership vow is sinful.

Nor does the lateness of a practice prove its error. Churches use countless lawful administrative mechanisms unknown to the apostles: printed directories, electronic records, microphones, background checks, accounting software, and scheduled elder meetings.

Innovation in administration is inevitable.

Innovation in what binds conscience, constitutes church membership, creates ecclesiastical jurisdiction, or determines who receives the church's full pastoral care is another matter.

That is why the historical origin matters.

If formal membership vows were a later prudential response to changing ecclesiastical conditions, they should be judged as a prudential response—not quietly elevated into something necessary to the existence of a relationship that Christians and Presbyterian churches recognized for centuries without them.

A few simple questions may help. For the elder requiring membership vows: Where did these vows come from? What is their history in your church? Are they required by your church constitution, your book of church order, denominational tradition, or local custom? Where did that requirement come from? And what, ultimately, gives it authority?

Keep asking until the source is clear—and until the distinction between what is biblical, what is confessional, what is denominational, and what is merely local or prudential is clear as well.

History can explain a practice without establishing its authority.

Perhaps the innovation was not first the vow.

Perhaps the deeper innovation was an ecclesiology in which the vow came to seem necessary.

The purpose of this historical inquiry is therefore not to mock later Presbyterians for attempting to solve genuine problems. They faced a changing ecclesiastical world and developed mechanisms they believed would strengthen order, accountability, and pastoral clarity.

The Reformed response should simply be the response Reformed churches have always professed:

Test the practice again by Scripture.

- Was the innovation lawful?

- Was it useful?
- What problem did it solve?
- What new problems did it create?
- Does that original problem still exist in the same form?
- Has the procedure remained a servant—or has it gradually acquired theological authority it was never intended to bear?

And here is an important question for those of us in the Reformed community, especially those who confess postmillennial hope: What—or rather, Whom—are we trusting to advance Christ’s kingdom? Daniel’s stone was “cut out without hands.” It did not begin, grow, or conquer because autonomous men first agreed to permit it. God does bring men to repent, believe, obey, and serve willingly, but their willing response is the fruit of His rule, not the source of it. So, does a membership vow simply acknowledge Christ’s *already-existing government*, or are we asking it to create a local authority and obligation that Christ Himself has already established?

A prudential solution from one generation must not become an unquestioned divine necessity in another.

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei.

The church reformed, always being reformed according to the Word of God.

Bibliography for Supporting Study 8

Unlike the rest of this paper, which I’ve intentionally limited to Scripture and “good and necessary consequence”, or logic, this section makes historical claims and analysis. Thus, I offer these references in support. Their listing here does not equate to my unqualified endorsement.

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If You Remember Nothing Else: Remember These 5

1. Authority

Authority that persists without vows cannot originate in vows.

2. Sufficiency

Christ has given enough.

3. Shepherding

The procedure is not shepherding.

4. Jurisdiction

Divine jurisdiction precedes voluntary compact.

5. Reciprocity

Elders owe shepherding; Christians owe lawful submission—neither obligation is created by the vow.

End Notes

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Scripture quotations identified as KJV are from the King James Version, which is in the public domain.

Statement on My Use of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Tools

Artificial-intelligence tools were used during the development of this work for purposes including research assistance, brainstorming, organization, editorial refinement, comparison of arguments, and the generation and development of visual concepts. Tools used included ChatGPT and Gemini, with possible limited use of Microsoft Copilot during the course of the project. Canva was also used in developing the cover artwork. The original visual concept was generated with artificial-intelligence assistance and was subsequently revised and edited by the author using Canva, Microsoft Paint, and his own artistic judgment and manual modifications.

Artificial-intelligence output was not accepted as authoritative. Biblical, theological, logical, and editorial judgments were reviewed, selected, rejected, revised, or developed by the author according to his own conclusions and understanding of Scripture.

The conclusions, arguments, judgments, and statements presented in this work, considered as a whole, are wholly those of the author, Timothy "Tim" Hill.

About the Cover Art

The cover was created with artificial intelligence, but is believed to be an entirely original image commissioned, refined, and worked by the author. It depicts a scene inspired by the biblical cities of refuge in Numbers 35, Deuteronomy 19, and Joshua 20. It is not a reconstruction of any particular biblical episode, but a visual representation of the jurisdictional and pastoral themes explored throughout this paper. It was commissioned in a style inspired by Titian and is therefore

concerned primarily with artistic representation rather than archaeological precision. For example, the Israelite men depicted might have worn tassels on their garments according to the law of God, a detail not represented in the artwork.

The man at the gate has been running for his life from the blood avenger who has pursued him in hot anger. Now on one knee before the elders, the man who was fleeing to the city of refuge is bloodied—perhaps still bearing the blood of the man whose death the avenger seeks to avenge—exhausted, frightened, and importuning the elders at this (admittedly small and possibly minor backdoor) gate for mercy and protection.

He has reached the place where his claim must now be heard.

His arrival creates an immediate duty without creating an immediate verdict. He may be an innocent manslayer entitled to refuge, or he may prove to be a murderer who must be delivered for judgment. The elders do not yet know. Their duty is therefore not immediately to declare him innocent, but to receive him, protect him provisionally, hear his case, investigate the facts, and judge according to God's law.

The three elders represent different aspects of righteous judgment.

One elder **withholds judgment**. He is not cold or indifferent. He is attentive. He represents restraint, sobriety, and the willingness to say, in effect, "I do not yet know." Mercy must not become gullibility, accusation must not become conviction, and urgency must not abolish judgment.

Another elder is **actively engaged with the fugitive**: concerned, welcoming, and ready to help. He represents mercy, reception, and the duty to draw near rather than pass by. The distressed man is not left outside the gate merely because his history has not yet been verified or because he has entered no prior compact with that particular city.

The third elder stands between the fugitive and the approaching blood avenger. His posture is protective but not hostile. He restrains the momentum of passion and possible anger so that justice may be served lawfully rather than precipitously. He is not declaring the fugitive innocent, nor is he treating the avenger as a criminal. He is preserving the conditions in which righteous judgment can occur.

The blood avenger is deliberately **not portrayed as the villain**. Under the Mosaic law, the *go'el haddam*—the avenger of blood—possessed a real, God-recognized role. Numbers 35:19 assigns him a part in putting the murderer to death. Yet the same law requires the congregation to judge between the slayer and the avenger and to protect the accidental manslayer from him (Numbers 35:24–25) should he reach their gate. Deuteronomy 19 likewise provides refuge lest the avenger, "while his anger is hot," overtake and kill a man who is not deserving of death.

Thus, the avenger on the cover stands ready to act, but he too is restrained by law. His sword is not raised in attack; it is held in readiness and deference. He is not portrayed as lawless or bloodthirsty, but as a man whose personal interest, grief, and passion must remain subject to God's appointed order of judgment. He has pursued the fugitive prepared to avenge blood, yet whether the man before him is truly a murderer deserving death remains a matter for righteous judgment.

His personal interest does not erase his lawful role. But his anger does not define guilt.

The image therefore depicts **need, mercy, and justice meeting at the gate**.

The landscape itself also participates in the meaning of the scene. Outside the city lies the open country—the road, the wilderness, the dangerous space through which the fugitive has run for his life. There, before he reached the refuge appointed by God, he might have been overtaken and slain. The road leading to the city therefore matters. Under God's law, the cities of refuge were not merely theoretical places on a map; access to them had to be real. Israel was commanded to prepare the roads and arrange the land so that the manslayer could flee to refuge (Deuteronomy 19:3). The way had to be open and accessible so that a fleeing man could actually reach the place of protection and judgment. **Mercy was given institutional and geographical form.**

By contrast, the city behind the elders represents ordered society under law. Within its walls are homes, families, worshipers, laborers, children, and neighbors—the ordinary people going about their ordinary day, likely unaware of the events, yet whose peace depends upon righteous judgment being done at the gate. The elders are not deciding an abstract legal puzzle. Their judgment concerns a real man, a real death, a real avenger, and a real community that must be protected from both bloodguilt and injustice.

Outside the gate, passion may catch a man on the road. At the gate, passion must submit to judgment. Inside the city, justice preserves the peace of the people.

The inhabitants visible beyond the elders are therefore not mere background figures. They represent the community within whose jurisdiction the matter has now arisen. They too have a stake in righteous judgment. If a murderer is falsely protected, innocent blood is tolerated. If an innocent manslayer is surrendered to passion, innocent blood is shed. The elders stand at the threshold between those two injustices.

The wild country outside the walls reminds us that order is not automatic. Roads must be maintained. Gates must be kept. Elders must be present. Law must be known. Men must exercise judgment. Inside and about the city stand the visible fruits of generations of ordered, organized labor: walls of hewn stone, quarried, planned, hauled, and set; gates of timber, taken from felled trees, sawn, fashioned, hung, guarded, and secured. Such refuge did not appear by accident. **Mercy had been given structure, location, maintenance, and guardians.** God's mercy often comes to His people not merely as inward sentiment, but through visible, ordered, accessible institutions of justice and protection.

By His blessed law and the civilization it creates:

**The fugitive is not abandoned.
The avenger is not ignored.
The elders do not assume guilt or innocence.
Each man has a place, an obligation, and a limit.**

Biblical justice here is more subtle than either private vengeance or detached bureaucracy. God defines the offense, the evidence, the land, the city, the road, the jurisdiction, the adjudication, the men authorized to act, and the lawful procedure by which they act. Personal involvement does not necessarily disqualify a man from a lawful role, but neither does passion create authority or establish guilt.

That is one of the central themes of this paper: **God gives real authority, but He also defines its jurisdiction, purpose, procedure, and bounds.**

The man at the gate does not create the elders' duty by first taking a vow. His presence, his need, and the law of God already place obligations upon them. At the same time, mercy does not abolish judgment, protection does not amount to exoneration, and compassion does not authorize the elders to rewrite the law.

The scene is therefore suspended between possible outcomes. The man may be restored to refuge. He may be delivered for judgment. The avenger may possess a righteous claim, or his hot anger may threaten a man who does not deserve death. The elders must hear and judge so that righteous action can follow.

In that sense, the cover is intended to capture in a single moment the larger argument of this work:

Go. Appear. Appeal. Receive. Protect. Hear. Judge righteously. Act within the creation and authority God has actually given. Show love, mercy, and justice according to the law of God.

Soli Deo gloria
Glory to God alone

Dedicated with much love to Joel and Josiah.