

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 4: CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

The Gathered and Committed People of God

Lesson 12

THE RESPONSIBILITIES AND PRIVILEGES OF CHURCH MEMBERS

What It Means to Belong to the Body

Membership is not a status to be claimed but a covenant to be kept, a daily, weekly, lifelong investment of the whole self in the community that Christ purchased with His own blood.

“As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

1 Peter 4:10, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Hebrews 10:24–25; 13:17; 1 Corinthians 12:7; 16:1–2; 2 Corinthians 9:6–8;

Ephesians 4:1–6; 1 Peter 4:10–11

“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

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Introduction

The covenant of church membership, as Lessons 10 and 11 have established, is a genuine and mutual commitment between a specific believer and a specific local congregation. Lesson 10 demonstrated that formal membership is not optional, the entire structure of the New Testament's ecclesial life presupposes it. Lesson 11 demonstrated that membership in the Baptist tradition is constituted on the basis of a credible profession of genuine regeneration, in direct correspondence with the new covenant's own definition of its membership. This lesson turns from the theological foundations of membership to its daily, practical, embodied content: what does it actually mean to be a member of the body of Christ? What are the specific privileges that membership grants and the specific responsibilities that membership creates?

The question matters more than it might initially appear, because the answer to it determines the actual texture of a congregation's life. A membership that understands itself primarily in terms of its privileges, what the church offers, will produce a consumer orientation in which members evaluate their membership by the quality of the services they receive. A membership that understands itself primarily in terms of its responsibilities, what the church requires, will produce either a legalistic striving to meet obligations or a guilt-driven resentment toward the community that imposes them. The biblically balanced understanding holds both together: the privileges and the responsibilities of membership are the two faces of a single covenantal relationship in which both the giving and the receiving are forms of worship, both the obligations and the gifts are expressions of the love that Christ has shown to the community He has purchased.

The structure of this lesson reflects that balance. We treat the privileges first, not because they are more important than the responsibilities, but because the proper order of the Christian life is always grace before obligation, gift before duty, indicative before imperative. The member who understands what he has been given by the covenant community will be a member who gives freely and joyfully in return. The member who understands the privileges of belonging to the household of God will not experience the responsibilities of membership as burdensome constraints on personal freedom; she will experience them as the natural and joyful response to a covenant community that has loved her, served her, prayed for her, and watched over her soul. The goal of this lesson is not to produce a more dutiful church member; it is to produce a more deeply grateful one, and a grateful member is the only kind who will consistently, joyfully, and wholeheartedly fulfill the obligations of the covenant she has made.

A brief word about the relationship of this lesson to the broader series: the privileges and responsibilities surveyed here presuppose and build on everything that has gone before. The privilege of corporate worship makes sense only in light of the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit (Lesson 3). The privilege of pastoral care makes sense only in light of the church as the flock of God under under-shepherds accountable for specific souls (Lesson 3, Lesson 4). The privilege of the ordinances makes sense only in light of the three Reformation marks and their covenantal significance (Lesson 7). The responsibility to give, serve, pursue unity, and submit to leadership makes sense only in light of the church as the body of Christ, with every member needed for the body's common good (Lessons 3, 5). This lesson gathers those threads into a single, comprehensive portrait of what covenant membership looks like when it is lived with full theological seriousness and covenantal love.

I. THE PRIVILEGE OF CORPORATE WORSHIP

Gathering with the People of God in the Presence of Their Lord

A. *What Corporate Worship Is and Why It Cannot Be Replicated*

The most fundamental privilege of church membership is the most obvious and the most frequently undervalued: the privilege of gathering, week by week, with the people of God to worship the God who redeemed them. Corporate worship is the regular, ordered, covenantal gathering of the covenant community around the means of grace that Christ has appointed, the public reading and preaching of the Word, the singing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, the prayers of the gathered assembly, and the administration of the ordinances, for the purpose of giving God the glory He is due and receiving from Him the grace that sustains and forms His people. It is the activity that most directly expresses the church's identity as the assembled people of God, and it is the activity from which all the other aspects of the church's life flow.

The privilege of corporate worship cannot be replicated by any individual spiritual practice or online substitute. The gathering of the covenant community in a specific place with specific people is not merely a social expression of a spiritual reality that could just as well be experienced privately; it is itself a unique theological event. When the people of God assemble in Christ's name, the risen Christ is present in their midst in a way that He has specifically promised (Matthew 18:20). The Spirit who indwells each believer individually is also present in the corporate assembly in a way that is distinct from His individual indwelling, the temple of 1 Corinthians 3:16 is the corporate assembly, not merely the sum of individually indwelt members. The preaching of the Word in the corporate setting is not merely an educational lecture that could be heard with equal effect on a podcast; it is the address of the living God to the covenant community assembled before Him.

The writer of Hebrews identifies the forsaking of the corporate assembly as a specific and serious failure, "not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:25). The eschatological urgency of the exhortation, "all the more as you see the day drawing near", is striking: the approaching return of Christ is a reason for increased, not decreased, devotion to the corporate assembly. The gathering of the covenant community around the means of grace is itself a form of eschatological preparation, the regular rehearsal and anticipation of the great gathering that the Lord's return will bring. The member who forsakes the corporate assembly, even with the best intentions, forfeits the most direct and regularly available form of participation in the community's eschatological life.

B. *The Elements of Corporate Worship and Their Significance*

The elements of corporate worship, the reading and preaching of Scripture, the singing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, the prayers of the gathered assembly, and the administration of the ordinances, are not culturally conditioned forms that can be exchanged for more relevant alternatives without ecclesiological consequence. They are the specific means of grace that Christ has appointed for the formation and sustenance of His covenant community, and their regular exercise in the corporate setting is the primary context in which the individual believer's spiritual life is formed, sustained, and directed. The faithful member who attends every gathered assembly and receives each element with prayerful attention is exposing herself to the full range of means by which the Spirit works in the life of the covenant community. The member who attends irregularly, or who engages

with the corporate assembly primarily as an audience for the performance rather than as a participant in the worship, is depriving himself of a grace he cannot replace elsewhere.

The preaching of the Word in the corporate assembly has a distinctive authority and effect that private reading cannot replicate. Paul's description of his own preaching in 1 Corinthians 2:1–5, coming not with superiority of speech or wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that the Corinthians' faith would rest on the power of God, describes a quality of proclamation that the Spirit makes available through the ordained ministry of a specifically called and gifted preacher addressing a gathered assembly. The congregation that receives its primary theological formation from podcasts and online content rather than from the faithful, systematic, expository preaching of its own pastor has substituted a private and essentially anonymous form of instruction for the covenant relationship between shepherd and flock that the pastoral office is designed to provide. The sermon is not a content delivery mechanism; it is the Bridegroom's voice speaking to His bride through the ministry of an under-shepherd who knows her by name.

The privilege of corporate worship is also, in a profound sense, the privilege of being carried by the faith of the community. There are seasons in every believer's life when faith is thin, when the Spirit seems distant, when the spiritual disciplines feel mechanical and the promises feel abstract. The corporate assembly in those seasons is not an optional supplement to a private devotional life that is functioning well; it is the lifeline. When one member's faith is weak, the strength of the corporate assembly, its prayers, its singing, its preaching, its fellowship, carries that member through. The writer of Hebrews' instruction to "encourage one another" (Hebrews 10:25) in the context of the gathering is not incidental; it is the recognition that the corporate assembly is itself a form of mutual encouragement and mutual sustenance that no individual spiritual practice can provide alone.

II. THE PRIVILEGE OF PASTORAL CARE

Being Known, Shepherded, and Prayed For by Name

A. *The Specific Care of Specific Shepherds*

The second great privilege of church membership is the pastoral care of the elders: the specific, personal, ongoing attention of appointed shepherds who know the member by name, pray for the member by name, and are specifically accountable before God for the quality of their stewardship of the member's soul. This is not a generic spiritual support service; it is the covenantally specific, eschatologically accountable oversight that Hebrews 13:17 describes: "they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account." The elder who watches over the member's soul does so in the recognition that at the last day he will give account for the quality of that watch. That eschatological weight gives the pastoral relationship a seriousness and a depth that no informal mentoring relationship or parachurch small group can replicate.

Pastoral care in the New Testament is not limited to crisis intervention or doctrinal instruction; it is the full range of a shepherd's attention to the flock entrusted to his oversight. It includes the regular preaching and teaching through which the member is formed in the knowledge of God. It includes the pastoral visit in times of illness, loss, and crisis, the elder who sits with a grieving family, who prays over the hospital bedside, who walks alongside a member through the valley of the shadow. It includes the counseling conversation in which the elder helps the member think through a significant life decision, a doctrinal question, or a relational conflict in light of the Word

of God. It includes the gentle rebuke when a member's conduct is drifting from the covenant's demands, and the patient encouragement when the member is struggling under the weight of genuine spiritual conflict.

The privilege of pastoral care is most fully realized in a congregation where the elders know their flock personally, where the pastoral relationship is not primarily institutional (the pastor as a professional performing services for a congregation he does not know personally) but genuinely personal. The Baptist tradition's insistence on the elder's specific accountability for specific souls (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1–4) is precisely a call to the kind of personal pastoral knowledge that makes genuine pastoral care possible. The member who belongs to a congregation where the elders know her by name, know her circumstances, pray for her specifically, and are available to her in times of need is receiving a form of covenantally grounded, spiritually serious care that is genuinely irreplaceable. This is one of the most significant and most underappreciated privileges of membership in a well-shepherded local congregation.

B. The Privilege of the Ordinances

A third and closely related privilege of membership is the specific privilege of participating in the ordinances as a baptized, covenanted member of the covenant community. Baptism is the ordinance of entry, the public, enacted declaration of the member's union with Christ in His death and resurrection, her washing in His blood, and her formal entry into the visible covenant community. To have been baptized is to bear publicly the new covenant's sign, to have declared before God and the watching congregation that one has personally received the new covenant's reality, and to have entered into the mutual obligations of the covenant community in the most visible and irreversible way available to a human being in this age.

The Lord's Supper is the ongoing covenant renewal ordinance, the regular gathering of the covenant community around the Table at which the Lord's death is proclaimed, the new covenant is renewed, and the eschatological feast is anticipated. The privilege of participating in the Lord's Supper is the privilege of regular, enacted participation in the community's most direct proclamation of the gospel, the privilege of receiving the bread and cup as visible signs and seals of the covenant that Christ's blood established. Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 presents the Lord's Supper as one of the most theologically loaded acts in the Christian life: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." Every participation in the Supper is an act of gospel proclamation, a covenant renewal, and an eschatological affirmation. The member who participates in the Supper regularly and receives it with genuine self-examination and genuine faith is being formed by the gospel in a way that no other activity can replicate.

The privilege of the ordinances is also the privilege of the community's shared participation in the visible proclamation of what the community is. When a congregation baptizes a new believer, every member of the congregation participates in the public affirmation of that person's faith and in the visible demonstration that the gospel is still producing the new birth. When a congregation gathers around the Table, every member participates in the corporate proclamation of the Lord's death and in the mutual renewal of the covenant commitments that bind the community together. The ordinances are not private devotional exercises administered by professional clergy to passive recipients; they are the gathered community's shared acts of covenant worship, in which every member is an active participant in the gospel's visible proclamation.

III. THE PRIVILEGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Being Loved Enough to Be Told the Truth

A. *Accountability as a Form of Love*

The fourth privilege of church membership is the one most counterintuitively described as a privilege in the contemporary cultural context: the privilege of accountability. To belong to a community that loves you enough to speak truth into your life, even when that truth is uncomfortable, even when it addresses sin you would prefer not to confront, even when it calls you back from a path that feels good in the moment but leads away from Christ, is one of the most genuinely loving and most genuinely costly things a community can offer its members. The accountability that covenant membership provides is not the surveillance of an institutional policing system; it is the active, concerned, truth-speaking love of a community that has made specific promises to watch over your soul and that takes those promises with sufficient seriousness to speak up when the watching reveals something that needs to be addressed.

The New Testament's vision of mutual accountability within the covenant community is as clear as it is demanding. "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1–2). The accountability described here is not the exclusive province of the elders; it is the mutual responsibility of all the members toward one another. Every member of the covenant community is called to the gentle, humble, other-focused work of addressing a brother's trespass before it becomes a pattern, restoring a wandering sister before she has wandered too far to find her way back, and bearing the burden of a fellow member's struggle rather than watching from a comfortable distance.

The privilege of accountability is most fully realized in the context of genuine, sustained, personal relationships within the covenant community. It is possible, in a large congregation, for a member to attend Sunday services faithfully and remain effectively invisible to the kind of personal accountability that Galatians 6:1–2 describes, known to no one well enough to be noticed when she drifts, close to no one specifically enough to be restored when she stumbles. The antidote to this form of accountability vacuum is not the individual's resistance to pastoral oversight but her active investment in the kind of genuine covenant relationships within the congregation that make the mutual accountability of Galatians 6 possible: a small group or Sunday school class where she is known by name, where her attendance is noticed when she is absent, and where the depth of relationship creates the conditions for the kind of honest, gentle, truth-speaking love that genuine accountability requires.

B. *The Distinctive Accountability of Elders*

While the mutual accountability of Galatians 6:1–2 is the responsibility of all members toward one another, the specific accountability of the elders toward the members and the members toward the elders has a particular covenantal weight that the general mutual accountability does not carry. The elders' accountability for the members is grounded in the eschatological weight of Hebrews 13:17; the members' accountability to the elders is grounded in the same text's call to obey and submit to those who watch over their souls. This is not the servile deference of subjects to an arbitrary authority; it is the trust-based submission of a flock to under-shepherds whose authority is derivative from the Chief Shepherd, whose character has been examined against the

qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and whose ministry is exercised in a spirit of voluntary eagerness and humble example rather than compulsion and domination (1 Peter 5:2–3).

The accountability that the elder-member relationship provides has a specific form when a member's conduct publicly departs from the covenant's demands: the process of Matthew 18:15–20, which begins with private address and moves through witness and congregational address to formal exclusion if the member remains unrepentant. This process is, from the member's perspective, the most intensive form of the accountability privilege: the community's willingness to pursue a departing member through a graduated process of increasing seriousness rather than simply allowing him to drift away unaddressed. To be pursued through the Matthew 18 process is to be loved in the most costly and most demanding way that the covenant community knows: to have the community refuse to accept the comfortable fiction of departure without address, and to insist on the truth that what has been promised in the covenant must be honored, and what has been broken must be restored or formally acknowledged as broken.

The privilege of accountability is most clearly seen for what it is when it is absent. The believer who has no community that will speak truth into his life, no elders who are watching over his soul, no fellow members who will notice his drift and pursue him back, is a believer who is profoundly exposed to exactly the spiritual dangers that the covenant community's accountability is designed to address. Human beings are not reliably self-aware about their own spiritual condition. The spiritual life that is accountable only to one's own self-assessment is a spiritual life that is systematically deprived of the external perspective that genuine sanctification requires. The member who receives the accountability of the covenant community as a genuine privilege, as the costly, honest, covenantally grounded love of people who are committed to her eternal welfare, is a member who has understood what she has been given.

IV. THE RESPONSIBILITY TO ATTEND AND GIVE

Faithfulness in the Fundamental Disciplines

A. *The Responsibility of Faithful Attendance*

The first and most basic responsibility of church membership is faithful attendance at the covenant community's regular gatherings. Hebrews 10:24–25 addresses this responsibility directly: "let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near." The word translated "forsaking" (*enkataleipontes*) is a strong word: it is used in 2 Timothy 4:10 for Demas who "deserted" Paul, and in Matthew 27:46 for the cry of dereliction, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" To forsake the assembling is not merely to miss a meeting; it is to abandon a community that has committed itself to you and to which you have committed yourself.

Faithful attendance is not the heroic achievement of the spiritually extraordinary; it is the basic, regular, consistent practice of the covenantally committed member. It means being present on Sunday mornings not as a matter of religious habit or social conformity but as a form of covenant faithfulness, the visible expression of the member's commitment to the community he has joined and the means of grace it provides. It means being present even when the preaching is less than inspiring, when the fellowship is less than warm, when personal circumstances

make the gathering feel inconvenient or the worship feel mechanical. The member who attends only when the conditions are favorable has substituted personal preference for covenant commitment, and has revealed that her relationship to the congregation is essentially consumer rather than covenantally oriented.

Faithful attendance also means more than the Sunday morning gathering. Many congregations provide regular opportunities for additional engagement, Sunday evening services, midweek prayer meetings, congregational business meetings, small group or Sunday school gatherings, and special seasons of study and prayer. The member who engages only with the Sunday morning service is a member who is receiving the most public face of the congregation's ministry while declining participation in the most formative and relational aspects of the community's life. The prayer meeting, in particular, is an expression of the covenant community's corporate dependence on God that is unlike any other gathering; the member who never participates in corporate prayer has a significant gap in his understanding of what covenant community life requires.

B. The Responsibility of Generous Giving

The second foundational responsibility of membership is generous, regular, and proportional financial giving to the support of the local church's ministry. Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 16:1–2 establishes the pattern: "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come." The three characteristics of the giving Paul prescribes, regular ("on the first day of every week"), personal ("each one of you"), and proportional ("as he may prosper"), constitute the New Testament's pattern for the local church member's financial stewardship. It is a pattern of planned, disciplined, proportional contribution, not sporadic giving when the member feels particularly moved or particularly flush.

The theological ground of generous giving is the grace of God. Paul's most sustained treatment of financial giving in 2 Corinthians 8–9 begins with the example of the Macedonian churches, who gave "beyond their ability" in the midst of deep poverty, and traces the ground of their generosity to the grace of God working in them (2 Corinthians 8:1). The governing principle is stated in 2 Corinthians 9:6–8: "Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed." The grace of giving flows from the grace already received; the cheerfulness of the giver reflects the gratitude of the one who has understood what has been given to him in the gospel.

The specific obligation of the church member's giving is to the local church in the first place. The New Testament's consistent pattern is that the congregation's financial resources, given by the members in their regular, proportional contributions, support the pastoral ministry of the elders (1 Corinthians 9:14; 1 Timothy 5:17–18), the practical needs of the community's members (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35), the financial support of missionaries sent by the congregation (Philippians 4:15–16), and the relief of the broader church's poor (2 Corinthians 8–9). The member whose primary financial giving goes to parachurch organizations while the local church is under-resourced for its own pastoral and missional work has inverted the New Testament's order of priority. The local church is the first and primary recipient of the covenant member's financial stewardship; parachurch giving is properly secondary to and funded out of what remains after the local church's needs have been met.

V. THE RESPONSIBILITY TO SERVE THE BODY

Every Member a Minister of God's Grace

A. Every Member Gifted for the Common Good

The third fundamental responsibility of church membership is the active, ongoing exercise of the member's spiritual gifts within the congregation's life for the common good of the body. First Corinthians 12:7 is the governing text: "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." The gift is given "to each one", not to a professional class of ministry workers while the congregation watches, not to the spiritually extraordinary while the ordinary rest, but to each member of the covenant community without exception. And the gift is given "for the common good", not for the individual's private spiritual enrichment, not for the enhancement of the gifted person's status within the community, but for the building up of the whole body in love.

First Peter 4:10–11 describes the service of gifts as an act of stewardship: "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God; whoever speaks, as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves, as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ." Three features of this description are worth noting. First, the service is mutual, "in serving one another." The member is not serving a program or an institution; she is serving specific people within the covenant community, with the personal, relationally specific quality that genuine service requires. Second, the service is doxological, "so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ." The purpose of every act of service within the covenant community is ultimately the glory of God, not the benefit of the institution or even the welfare of the recipient, though both are genuine and important. Third, the service is empowered, "serving by the strength which God supplies." The member does not serve by her own resources; she serves as a conduit for the grace of God, whose sufficiency is available to every member who serves in dependence on Him.

The specific forms that service takes within the covenant community are as varied as the gifts of the Spirit and the needs of the body. Teaching and preaching are forms of service. Mercy ministry, visiting the sick, caring for the poor, welcoming the stranger, is a form of service. Administration and organizational support are forms of service. Musical gifts exercised in the community's worship are a form of service. Hospitality, the opening of one's home and table to the community's members, particularly to those who are new, lonely, or struggling, is a form of service. Prayer, the sustained, intercessory prayer for the community's members by name, is a form of service. None of these forms of service is less important than any other in the body's common life; the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you" (1 Corinthians 12:21), and the member who exercises her gift faithfully in whatever form the Spirit has given it is contributing to the body's common good as surely as the most visible and celebrated minister.

B. Service as Participation in the Mission of God

The member's service within the congregation is not only the fulfillment of a covenant obligation; it is participation in the mission of God. Ephesians 3:10 establishes the cosmic significance of the church's common life: the manifold wisdom of God is being displayed through the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. Every

act of genuine, Spirit-empowered service within the covenant community, every meal prepared for a grieving family, every hour invested in teaching a Sunday school class, every prayer lifted for a struggling member, every financial gift that supports the pastor's ministry, is a contribution to the community's corporate display of the wisdom of God. The member who serves faithfully within the congregation is not doing something less important than the missionary who plants churches in unreached peoples; she is doing the same thing in a different sphere, the local, ordinary, face-to-face sphere in which the gospel's power to create community is most visibly demonstrated.

Service within the congregation also has an evangelistic dimension that is frequently underappreciated. Jesus' prayer in John 17:21, "that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me", identifies the visible unity of the covenant community as the primary evangelical testimony to the surrounding world that the Father has sent the Son. The community in which members genuinely serve one another, in which the wealthy bear the burdens of the poor, in which the gifted labor for the benefit of the ungifted, in which age and culture and background are transcended by the unity of the one Spirit, this community is the most powerful testimony to the truth of the gospel that the watching world can observe. The member's service is not only a form of covenant faithfulness; it is a form of mission.

VI. THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PURSUE UNITY

Diligence for the Bond of Peace

A. Unity as an Active Responsibility

The fourth fundamental responsibility of church membership is the active, deliberate, costly pursuit of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 4:1–3 frames this responsibility in terms of the virtues that sustain it and the diligence that it requires: "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The word translated "diligent" (*spoudazontes*) conveys urgent, earnest, strenuous effort; the maintenance of the community's unity is not a passive achievement of people who happen to get along well, but the active, effortful work of a community that is committed to holding together despite the inevitable frictions that shared life in a fallen world produces.

The specific sins that the member's responsibility to pursue unity requires her to resist are named in the New Testament with pastoral specificity. Gossip and slander, the speaking of disparaging words about a fellow member to a third party rather than addressing the concern directly with the person involved, are among the most pervasive and most destructive forms of community damage in the contemporary church. Paul names them repeatedly in his catalogs of sins incompatible with the gospel (Romans 1:29–30; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Colossians 3:8), and his instruction in Matthew 18:15, "if your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private", is both an ecclesiological procedure and a discipline of communication that requires the member to address concerns directly with the person involved rather than dispersing them through the relational network of the congregation.

Factional spirit, the formation of parties within the congregation around personalities, preferences, or grievances, is the second sin that most directly threatens the covenant community's unity, and it is the sin Paul most urgently

addresses in 1 Corinthians 1–4. The Corinthian factions, “I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ”, were destroying the community’s witness and undermining the gospel by making the personality of the leader rather than the person of Christ the foundation of the community’s identity. The factional spirit in the contemporary church takes many forms: theological partisanship that produces parties rather than fellowship, generational conflict that produces mutual contempt rather than mutual deference, and personality-driven loyalties that cause members to evaluate every decision in terms of which leader or faction it benefits. The member who pursues unity is the member who actively resists every form of party spirit and insists that the community’s identity is grounded not in any human personality or preference but in the one Lord, one faith, and one baptism of Ephesians 4:5.

B. Pursuing Unity Without Sacrificing Truth

The pursuit of unity, as the series has argued throughout, does not require the sacrifice of truth. The unity of Ephesians 4:1–6 is grounded in the sevenfold theological realities of verses 4–6, one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father, and it is the unity of those who share these specific theological convictions, not a lowest-common-denominator fellowship that avoids all doctrinal distinction. Paul’s exhortation to unity in Ephesians 4 is followed immediately by the description of the gifted leaders whose equipping ministry produces the “unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ephesians 4:13), a doctrinal unity, not merely a relational one. The community that pursues peace at the cost of the apostolic deposit is not fulfilling the responsibility to pursue unity; it is destroying the very foundation on which genuine unity is built.

Pursuing unity without sacrificing truth requires the pastoral wisdom to distinguish between the kinds of disagreement that genuinely threaten the community’s unity and the kinds that are the normal, healthy friction of a community of diverse people growing together under the Word. Not every theological disagreement is a gospel-level crisis; not every conflict within the congregation requires formal mediation or ecclesiological intervention. The mature member develops the discernment to address real threats to unity with the urgency they require while extending patience and grace to the ordinary frictions of life together that do not rise to the level of genuine disunity. This discernment is one of the most practically important fruits of mature church membership, and it is cultivated over years of sustained engagement with the community’s life rather than developed in a single lesson or a single season of study.

VII. THE RESPONSIBILITY TO SUBMIT TO LEADERSHIP

Trust-Based Submission to Godly Shepherds

A. What Submission to Elders Means and What It Does Not Mean

The fifth fundamental responsibility of church membership is the trust-based submission to the elders’ oversight that Hebrews 13:17 commands: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” The command is significant, and it deserves careful definition. “Obey” (*peithesthe*) in this context carries the sense of being persuaded by or responsive to the leaders’ guidance; it is not the blind, unquestioning

compliance of subjects to a command, but the trust-based responsiveness of sheep to a shepherd whose voice they have learned to recognize and whose guidance they have found to be trustworthy. “Submit” (*hupeikete*) means to yield, to give way, to allow the other person’s judgment to prevail in a situation of potential conflict. Together, the two words describe a disposition of genuine trust and genuine deference toward the elders’ leadership.

This submission is not blind obedience. The member who discovers that an elder is living in unaddressed, persistent sin; who is teaching doctrine that contradicts the apostolic deposit; who is exercising authority in a coercive, self-serving, or abusive manner that contradicts the servant-leadership model of 1 Peter 5:1–4, that member has both the right and the obligation to address what he or she has observed, through the appropriate processes of congregational accountability, rather than submitting to an authority that has exceeded its scriptural authorization. The elder’s authority is derivative from and accountable to the Chief Shepherd; it is an authority exercised within the limits of the apostolic deposit, not an independent authority that can require compliance regardless of scriptural warrant. The congregational polity that this series affirms is precisely a safeguard against the abuse of elder authority: the congregation that holds its elders accountable to Scripture and to the covenant obligations of their office is exercising a form of governance that protects both the flock and the elders.

Within those limits, the submission to elder oversight that Hebrews 13:17 commands is a genuine and important obligation. It means receiving the elder’s preaching with a disposition of genuine faith and genuine submission, rather than critiquing it in the spirit of a theological consumer evaluating a product. It means consulting the elders in significant life decisions rather than treating the pastoral relationship as an emergency resource for crisis situations only. It means responding to the elder’s pastoral counsel with genuine receptivity and genuine action, rather than treating the conversation as an opportunity to present one’s own already-reached conclusions. And it means contributing to a congregational culture in which the elders’ work is genuinely joyful rather than grievous, in which the members’ submission, gratitude, and cooperation make the pastoral office a privilege rather than a burden.

B. The Member’s Covenant as the Integration of All Obligations

The five responsibilities of membership, faithful attendance, generous giving, active service, the pursuit of unity, and trust-based submission to elder oversight, are not five independent obligations to be checked off a compliance list. They are the integrated expression of a single covenantal commitment: the commitment to be genuinely, fully, wholeheartedly present in the community that Christ purchased with His own blood. The member who fulfills all five with love, faith, and joy is not the member who has successfully navigated a complex set of institutional requirements; she is the member who has genuinely understood what she is a part of, and whose whole-souled participation in the community’s life is the natural overflow of that understanding.

The church covenant, whether it takes the form of a written document or a public affirmation before the congregation, is the most direct institutional expression of this integrated commitment. When a member affirms the church covenant, she is not accepting a legal contract; she is making a covenant promise before God and the community that she will be the kind of member who attends, gives, serves, pursues unity, and submits to leadership. That promise is the public expression of a private commitment that the gospel has already created in her heart. The member who makes the promise with integrity will keep it, not perfectly, but genuinely and consistently, as an expression of the gratitude and the love that the gospel produces in those who have truly understood what they have been given.

The final word of this lesson and of Unit 4 is the same word with which the whole series began: the church is Christ's. He purchased her with His blood. He is building her. He will present her in glory without spot or wrinkle at the last day. To belong to her as a covenanted, committed, accountable, attending, giving, serving, unity-pursuing, leadership-submitting member is to participate in the most important community on earth, the community that the triune God is building, in which He is displaying His manifold wisdom to the watching universe, and through which He is accomplishing the purposes of His eternal grace until the day when the building is complete and the Bridegroom comes for His bride. There is no greater privilege, and no obligation more worthy of the whole self's investment.

“And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

Hebrews 10:24–25, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Corporate Worship	The regular, ordered, covenantal gathering of the covenant community around the means of grace Christ has appointed, the preaching and reading of the Word, psalmody, prayer, and the ordinances, for the purpose of glorifying God and receiving the grace that forms and sustains His people. A unique theological event that cannot be replicated by individual spiritual practice or online substitutes; grounded in the Spirit's corporate presence in the assembled community (Matthew 18:20; 1 Corinthians 3:16).
Pastoral Care	The specific, personal, ongoing attention of the elders to the members of the flock entrusted to their oversight, including preaching and teaching, pastoral visiting, counseling, rebuking, encouraging, and the exercise of church discipline. Grounded in the eschatological accountability of Hebrews 13:17 ("they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account"). Available in its fullest form only within the context of formal church membership.
Accountability	The active, concerned, truth-speaking love of a covenant community toward its members, including the willingness to address sin gently and directly (Galatians 6:1–2) and the disciplinary pursuit of members who depart from covenant faithfulness (Matthew 18:15–20). Distinguished from institutional surveillance by its ground in genuine covenantal love; experienced as a privilege by those who understand what they have been given.
Faithful Attendance	The first and most basic responsibility of church membership: regular, consistent, covenantally motivated presence at the community's gatherings. Grounded in Hebrews 10:24–25's prohibition against forsaking "our own assembling together." Not the heroic achievement of the extraordinary but the basic practice of the covenantally committed member, maintained even when personal circumstances make it inconvenient.
Generous Giving	The regular, proportional, cheerful financial contribution of the covenant member to the support of the local church's ministry. Grounded in 1 Corinthians 16:1–2 (regular, personal, proportional) and 2 Corinthians 9:6–8 (the cheerful giver; the grace of God as the theological ground). The local church is the primary recipient of the member's financial stewardship; parachurch giving is properly secondary.
Spiritual Gifts	Special endowments distributed by the Holy Spirit to each member of the covenant community "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). Not for private spiritual enrichment but for the building up of the whole body (Ephesians 4:12, 16). Every member has received a gift and is a steward of it within the community (1 Peter 4:10–11). The exercise of gifts within the congregation is both a covenant responsibility and a participation in the mission of God (Ephesians 3:10).
Factional Spirit	The formation of parties within the congregation around personalities, preferences, or grievances, specifically addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1–4 regarding the Corinthian "I am of Paul / Apollos / Cephas / Christ" factions. One of the primary sins against the covenant community's unity. The antithesis of the diligent preservation of the unity of the Spirit that Ephesians 4:3 commands.
Trust-Based Submission	The disposition of genuine trust and genuine deference toward elder leadership that Hebrews 13:17 commands: "Obey your leaders and submit to them." Not blind obedience (elders are accountable to Scripture and to the congregation), but the trust-based responsiveness of a sheep to a shepherd whose voice has been learned and whose guidance has been found faithful. Contributes to a congregational culture in which the pastoral office is a joy rather than a burden.

Church Covenant	A written or verbally affirmed public commitment through which a member formally declares the covenant obligations of membership before God and the congregation. The integrated expression of all five membership responsibilities (attendance, giving, service, unity, submission), not as independent obligations but as the unified expression of whole-souled participation in the community that Christ purchased with His blood.
Hebrews 10:24–25	The New Testament’s most direct address of the responsibility of faithful attendance: “not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” The eschatological urgency of the exhortation, “all the more as you see the day drawing near”, is notable: the approaching return of Christ intensifies, not diminishes, the obligation to be present in the corporate assembly.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the privileges and responsibilities of church membership are the two faces of a single covenantal relationship, and that the proper theological order is always grace before obligation, the privileges received before the responsibilities embraced. The member who approaches the obligations of membership as burdens to be managed has not understood what she has been given; the member who has genuinely received the privileges of corporate worship, pastoral care, the ordinances, and accountability will find that the responsibilities flow naturally from the gratitude those privileges produce.

We must believe that every responsibility of membership is simultaneously a form of worship and a contribution to the mission of God. The member who attends faithfully is not merely checking a religious box; she is contributing to the corporate worship of the living God that is the most fundamental activity of the covenant community. The member who gives generously is not merely meeting an institutional budget requirement; he is participating in the apostolic pattern of covenant community life in which the needs of the body are met through the voluntary generosity of its members. The member who serves actively is not merely filling a volunteer slot; she is exercising the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good of the body that Christ has purchased.

We must believe that the responsibility to pursue unity and submit to elder oversight are not optional extras for the particularly compliant; they are constitutive dimensions of genuine covenant membership. The member who pursues unity actively, resisting gossip, factional spirit, and every form of community-damaging communication, is fulfilling one of the most practically consequential obligations of membership. The member who submits to elder oversight with genuine trust and genuine responsiveness is making the elders' work a joy rather than a grief and contributing to a congregational culture in which pastoral ministry can be exercised with the faithfulness and fruitfulness that the gospel deserves.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel a genuine and deep gratitude for the specific privileges of membership in this congregation: for the corporate worship that exposes us weekly to the preaching of the Word and the administration of the ordinances; for the pastoral care of the elders who know us by name and are accountable for our souls; for the accountability of the community that loves us enough to speak the truth when the truth is uncomfortable. These are not taken-for-granted entitlements; they are the gracious provision of the God who has placed us in a specific community with specific people who have specific obligations toward us and to whom we have specific obligations in return.

We should feel a holy restlessness about the areas of our membership where we are falling short of the covenant we have made. Not a crushing guilt that paralyzes or a perfectionist anxiety that exhausts, but the honest recognition of a genuinely converted person who sees the gap between what she has promised and what she is currently doing, and who brings that gap to the Lord in repentance and to the community in honest conversation. The privileges of membership include the privilege of accountability; the member who uses that privilege honestly will grow toward the wholehearted covenant faithfulness that the community needs from her.

We should desire to be the kind of member who makes this congregation a joy to belong to: who attends faithfully, gives generously, serves actively, pursues unity diligently, and submits to leadership trustingly. Not because these

obligations are easy or natural, but because the gospel that created this community and the Lord who purchased it are worth the whole self's investment. The member who gives the community his or her best is not being impoverished by the giving; he or she is participating in the most important community on earth, and every investment in that community is an investment in the eternal purposes of the triune God.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Take the church covenant of this congregation and read it as an examination of your current practice. For each obligation it names, give yourself a honest self-assessment: are you fulfilling this obligation faithfully, imperfectly but genuinely, or largely neglecting it? Identify the one obligation you are most faithfully keeping (give thanks) and the one obligation you are most significantly neglecting. Bring the neglected obligation to God in repentance and prayer, and make one specific, concrete commitment to strengthen your practice of it in the next thirty days.
- Evaluate your relationship with the specific privileges of membership this week. When you attend the next corporate gathering, receive the Word with the prayerful expectation of a member who knows that the Spirit is present, that the Bridegroom is speaking to His bride through the preacher's ministry, and that the gathering itself is a means of grace that cannot be replicated elsewhere. When you participate in the Lord's Supper, receive it with the self-examination and the covenant consciousness that 1 Corinthians 11:28 requires.
- Examine your financial giving to the local church. Is it regular? Is it proportional to your income? Does it reflect the cheerfulness of a giver who has understood the grace of God? If your giving has been irregular, disproportional, or primarily directed toward organizations other than the local church, set aside time this week to establish a regular, proportional giving pattern that places the local church first among your charitable priorities.
- Identify one specific act of service that this congregation needs that you have not yet stepped into. Not a general aspiration to "serve more," but a specific task, ministry, or need where your particular gifts, time, and availability could make a concrete contribution. Speak to an elder or ministry leader about how to engage, and make a commitment with a specific starting point and a specific person to report to.
- Pray for the unity of this congregation with the specificity and urgency that Ephesians 4:1–6 calls for. Pray about any specific relationships within the congregation that are strained or broken. Pray about any conversations you know need to happen in which you have been avoiding direct address in favor of informal venting. Commit to one specific act this week that moves you toward the unity of the Spirit rather than away from it.

Key Texts: *Hebrews 10:24–25; 13:17; 1 Corinthians 12:7; 16:1–2; 2 Corinthians 9:6–8; Ephesians 4:1–6; 1 Peter 4:10–11*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Looking back over the three lessons of Unit 4 (Lessons 10, 11, and 12), what is the most significant shift in your understanding of church membership that this unit has produced? Was it the theological case for formal membership itself? The doctrine of regenerate membership? The specific privileges and responsibilities this lesson has named? What will be most practically consequential for your own participation in this congregation?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Hebrews 10:24–25. What two activities does the writer call for in verse 24? What specific behavior does verse 25 address? What is the eschatological motivation the writer gives (“all the more as you see the day drawing near”)? Why would the approach of the day intensify rather than diminish the obligation to assemble? What does the corporate gathering have to do with eschatological readiness?
- Read 1 Peter 4:10–11. What does Peter mean by describing the member as a “steward of the manifold grace of God”? What are the two categories of gifts Peter names in verse 11 (speaking gifts and serving gifts)? What is the ultimate purpose of the exercise of gifts (“so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ”)? How does this doxological purpose transform the way we think about even ordinary acts of service within the congregation?
- Read Ephesians 4:1–6. What four virtues does Paul name in verse 2 as the means of maintaining unity? What does the word “diligent” (verse 3) suggest about the effort required to maintain unity? How does the sevenfold theological foundation of verses 4–6 ground the community’s unity in something more than mutual affinity or shared preferences?
- Read Hebrews 13:17. What is the basis for the command to obey and submit to the leaders? What does the phrase “they keep watch over your souls” imply about the nature and depth of the pastoral relationship? What is the consequence of making the leaders’ work grievous rather than joyful? To whom is that outcome described as “unprofitable”?
- Read 2 Corinthians 9:6–8. What principle does Paul state in verse 6 about the relationship between generosity and return? What does “each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart” imply about the basis of Christian giving (internal conviction rather than external compulsion)? What does the phrase “God loves a cheerful giver” reveal about the character of giving that God desires? How does verse 8’s promise of God’s abounding grace connect the theology of giving to the theology of sufficiency?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson presents accountability as a “privilege” of church membership rather than a burden or a threat. Is this framing convincing? What makes accountability a genuine privilege rather than an imposition? How does the covenantal basis of accountability (the promise that the community has made to watch over the member’s soul) change the way the member should receive it?
- The lesson argues that corporate worship is a unique theological event that cannot be replicated by individual practice or online alternatives. On what theological grounds does it make this argument? Is the argument convincing? Are there ways in which online worship services or individual spiritual practices can

approximate the benefits of corporate worship, and if so, does this weaken the case for in-person attendance?

- The lesson identifies gossip and factional spirit as the two primary membership sins against the covenant community's unity. Are these the most significant threats, or are there others the lesson has not named? What specific forms do gossip and factional spirit take in the contemporary evangelical church, and what is the theological diagnosis of each, what does each reveal about the sin nature's resistance to the community's unity?
- The lesson argues that submission to elder oversight is trust-based rather than blind, and that it has real limits when elders exceed their scriptural authorization. How do you determine in practice when elder authority has been exceeded? What is the process by which a member should address an elder's failure or overreach? How does the congregational polity that this series affirms provide structural protection against elder abuse?
- The lesson ends with the claim that there is "no greater privilege, and no obligation more worthy of the whole self's investment" than membership in the covenant community of the church. Does this claim strike you as realistic, given the ordinary and sometimes frustrating texture of actual congregational life? What would it mean to inhabit the ordinary routines of faithful church membership with the theological weight this lesson has given them?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- Rate yourself honestly on each of the five responsibilities of membership on a scale of 1 to 5: faithful attendance (1 = rarely present, 5 = virtually never absent); generous giving (1 = sporadic or minimal, 5 = regular, proportional, first-fruit); active service (1 = passive attender, 5 = actively and consistently exercising gifts for the common good); pursuit of unity (1 = contributing to relational damage through gossip or factionalism, 5 = actively building peace and directly addressing conflict); submission to elder oversight (1 = resistant and critical, 5 = genuinely trusting and responsive). For your lowest-rated responsibility, name one specific step you can take in the next two weeks.
- This lesson presents the Lord's Supper as one of the greatest privileges of covenant membership, the regular, enacted proclamation of the Lord's death in which the whole covenant community participates. How does your current experience of the Lord's Supper compare to this description? What specific practice of preparation (reading 1 Corinthians 11:23–32, self-examination, specific prayer, reviewing the covenant commitments of membership) might deepen the quality of your participation?
- Paul's instruction in Matthew 18:15 requires direct, private address of a concern with the person involved, rather than discussing it with others. Is there a specific situation in your congregational life where you have been practicing the latter rather than the former? What is the obstacle to direct address in that situation, and what would it take to remove it?
- The lesson closes with the claim that generous, active, unified, submitted membership is participation in "the most important community on earth." Describe in your own words what you think that means for the specific community in which you are a member, this congregation, in this city, in this moment of its history. What are the specific ways in which this community's faithful covenant life is contributing to the display of God's manifold wisdom in this place? What would be lost if this congregation ceased to exist or ceased to be faithful?

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading 1 Peter 4:10–11 aloud: “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God; whoever speaks, as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves, as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” Pause on the final phrase: “to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever.” Every act of service within this covenant community, however small, however ordinary, however unglamorous, is offered to the One to whom glory belongs forever. The teaching of a Sunday school class, the meal prepared for a grieving family, the financial gift given cheerfully, the elder’s pastoral visit, the prayer offered in the quiet of a personal devotional for a specific member by name, all of it is stewardship of the manifold grace of God, offered to His glory. Let that doxological conviction ground the prayers that follow.

Give thanks, specifically and with theological seriousness, for the privileges of membership in this congregation. Thank God for the corporate worship of this community, for the faithful preaching of His Word, for the ordinances administered with covenantal seriousness, for the prayers of the gathered assembly and the songs of praise that constitute the community’s corporate response to the grace it has received. Thank God for the specific pastors and elders who watch over the souls of this congregation, for their faithfulness in study and prayer, for their courage in preaching, for their pastoral visits and counseling conversations, for the eschatological accountability they carry on behalf of the flock entrusted to them. Thank God for the accountability of this covenant community, for the people in this congregation who love each member enough to speak the truth, even when the truth is uncomfortable.

Pray for this congregation’s common life with the specificity that genuine membership requires. Pray for each of the five responsibilities of membership as they apply to this specific community: that the members would attend faithfully and receive the Word with genuine expectation; that the giving of the congregation would be generous, regular, and sufficient for the full funding of the pastoral and missional ministry that the elders are called to lead; that every member would be actively exercising the spiritual gift given to them for the common good, so that the whole body builds itself up in love; that the unity of the Spirit would be actively pursued in the bond of peace, with gossip and factional spirit replaced by direct, honest, gentle address and the patient forbearance that covenant love requires; and that the relationship between the members and the elders would be one of genuine trust, genuine responsiveness, and genuine joy on both sides.

Pray for those members whose participation in the community’s life is less than what their covenant commitment calls for. Pray without judgment and with genuine pastoral love: for those whose attendance has thinned, that the Spirit would renew in them the desire and the habit of gathering with the covenant community; for those whose giving is sporadic or minimal, that the Spirit would open their understanding of the grace they have received and the stewardship it requires; for those who are passive attenders rather than active servants, that the Spirit would stir in them the awareness of the gift they carry and the need the body has for it. Pray for the elders as they pursue those who are drifting, that the pastoral pursuit would be experienced as the covenant love it is, and that the pursued member’s response would be restoration rather than further departure.

Close with Hebrews 10:24–25 as the benediction of this unit: “And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one

another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” The day is drawing near. The Bridegroom is coming for His bride. The gathering of the covenant community around the means of grace is both the rehearsal and the anticipation of that great final gathering. Let this congregation be found faithful when He comes, gathered, giving, serving, united, submitting, and looking with eager expectation for the day when what the creed confesses by faith will be revealed in its full and glorious eschatological truth. To God alone be the glory.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Hebrews 10:24–25; 13:17; 1 Corinthians 12:7; 16:1–2; 2 Corinthians 9:6–8; Ephesians 4:1–6; 1 Peter 4:10–11

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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