

## CHURCH COVENANT – INTRODUCTORY MESSAGE

The best word to describe the contents of the Church Covenant is the word “commitment.” Unfortunately, we are living in a society that, in general, does not like the word “commitment.” That is all the more reason why church members need to review regularly the covenant into which they entered when they became church members.

Synonyms for “covenant” are: “allegiance”, “dedication”, “faithfulness”, etc. For the local church to survive and thrive it must have members who take seriously their commitment to Jesus Christ, His church and to one another. Therefore, a review of the Church Covenant should be whole-heartedly welcomed and embraced by serious minded saints.

Years ago it was the custom in many Baptist churches to have “Covenant Meetings.” The following gives some historical background for the practice:

**“Covenant Meetings.** Before the monthly celebration of the Lord’s Supper, in many parts of our country, a meeting is held for the members of the church, where they relate briefly their religious experience and renew their covenant with God and with each other. After the devotional exercises at the commencement of the service are over, the pastor relates such of God’s dealings with his soul as in his judgment it is proper to communicate, then others follow, commonly in the order in which they are seated, beginning at the right or left of the pastor, and continuing until the end of the opposite side is reached. In these meetings the sisters speak as well as the brethren. No one is obliged to utter a word. In some sections of our country covenant meetings are unknown. Where they are held they are regarded as eminently profitable. They are generally observed on the Saturday before the Lord’s Supper is celebrated. (Cathcart, William. *The Baptist Encyclopedia*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1883.)”

I wonder how different our Baptist churches might be today if the practice had continued. Perhaps church members would take their covenant commitments to God and each other more seriously.

The Standard Covenant for Baptist Churches that many Baptist churches use is as follows:

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

**We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit to walk together in Christian love; to strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality and to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines; to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations.**

**We also engage to maintain family and secret devotions; to religiously educate our children; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances;**

**to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our deportment; to avoid all tattling, backbiting, and excessive anger; to abstain from the sale of, and use of, intoxicating drinks as a beverage; to be zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Savior.**

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

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

The particular covenant above originated in the New Hampshire Association in the 1800s, and is believed to have been written by J. Newton Brown. This covenant, with several slight variations, has been the most popular among Baptists in the United States. The covenant above is from the Baptist Church Manual, 1853.

Church Covenants are not new. In "Baptist Church Covenants," Charles Deweese reprints covenants as early as 1640. According to Deweese, the oldest remaining (1663) Baptist covenant in America was used by Swansea Baptist Church in Rehoboth, Massachusetts.

### **WHAT IS THE MEANING OF "COVENANT"?**

The word "covenant", according to Webster's dictionary, means: "A formal and serious agreement or promise between persons or parties; a formal agreement between two or more people, businesses, organizations, countries, etc.; a written agreement or promise between two or more parties especially for the performance of some action such as a covenant of marriage, etc."

A covenant, in its most general sense, is a solemn promise to engage in or refrain from a specified action. It is an agreement entered into for the purpose of informing the covenanting parties of the duties, obligations and responsibilities of each party to the other. It is a clarification of the expectations of the parties who enter into a covenant relationship.

### **WHAT IS A CHURCH COVENANT?**

A Church Covenant is an agreement, a solemn compact between members of a church to maintain its faith, discipline and doctrines. The Church Covenant is a declaration in which responsibilities of church members are outlined in a summarized way. It sets forth, according to the Scriptures, the duties of a Christian which each member of the church pledges himself or herself to honour, in the best way possible.

A Church Covenant is a pledge made to God, the church body and one's self. It is based upon the congregation's faith and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is a commitment of how we agree to live as fellow Christians and how God expects us to live.

As new churches are organized or later as new members come into the church, it is only proper they know what they are getting into. It's called truth in advertising.

### **WHERE IS THE CHURCH COVENANT TO BE FOUND?**

It varies with each church. Some churches use the Church Covenant as the preface to the Church's Articles of Faith and Constitution. These documents should be reviewed by every potential membership candidate. Some churches place a copy of the Church Covenant on the inside of the front or back cover of the hymnal. Some churches periodically print the Church Covenant in the church bulletin. Copies of the Standard Covenant for Baptist Churches can be bought at Christian Bookstores.

### **WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONSTITUTIONS, ARTICLES OF FAITH AND CHURCH COVENANTS?**

Ordinarily, Baptist churches have three documents that set forth the church's beliefs, practices and procedures. They are:

- The church's Articles of Faith which delineates the major biblical doctrines that define the church;
- The Church Covenant which is different from the Articles of Faith in that the Articles of Faith declare what the church believes while the Church Covenant declares what we agree to do on the basis of our beliefs;
- The Church Constitution which outlines the policies, personnel, practices and procedures of the local church.

### **WHY MESSAGES ON THE CHURCH COVENANT?**

As we study the Church Covenant we can find answers to some of the following questions:

- How does our relationship with Christ place us into a covenant relationship with each other?
- How should this scripturally based covenant shape our attitudes, behaviors and actions?
- How does it shape our interactions with each other?
- What obligations do we have as members of this local church to perpetuate it?
- What is our corporate and individual responsibility to the world outside the church?

In 2004, Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, California wrote an article in the Baptist Press recommending pastors and congregations adopt church membership covenants as a way of encouraging their flock to become more involved in and committed to the ministry of their church.

It is my observation that fewer and fewer churches, especially the newer churches, do not have a Church Covenant. Even many of the older churches that do have a Church Covenant

do not emphasize its importance and fewer still exercise discipline of members who violate it.

Affirming the Church Covenant makes the church member aware of the seriousness, commitment and responsibility concerning duties which, although established in the New Testament, can easily be neglected or delegated to others. It defines our intentions and reminds us of our relational conduct.

## **BAPTISTS AND THE CHURCH COVENANT**

Baptists have no creed to which they must subscribe. It is accepted by us that the Word of God is the one perfect rule of faith and practice. However, so that others may know what we believe that the Bible teaches on various subjects, we have what we call Articles or Declarations of Faith. These declarations do just what they say they do. That is, they declare what we believe the Bible to teach.

The Church Covenant is also a declaration. It declares what we believe the obligations of the members of the church are to be. The major difference in the Church Covenant and the Declaration of Faith is that the Church Covenant is an agreement among ourselves that we will *do* something. It sets forth in the light of Scripture our duties as members of a local church. The Declaration of Faith is a statement that we *believe* something.

Many members of the average church family have forgotten the covenant that they made when they united with the church, or either they do not think it is very important. Therefore, I believe that a thorough study of the Church Covenant will enrich the church's life and strengthen the church family and witness.

A graphic picture of two parties entering into a covenant is seen in II Kings Chapter 10 where Jehu and Jehonadab enter into a covenant. We read that Jehu *"met Jehonadab the son of Rechab, coming to meet him; and he greeted him and said to him, 'Is your heart right, as my heart is toward your heart?' And Jehonadab answered, 'It is.' Jehu said, 'If it is, give me your hand.' So he gave him his hand, and he took him up to him into the chariot."* (II Kings 10:15)

Jehu and Jehonadab entered into a covenant by joining hands and then they journeyed together in the same chariot. When one becomes a member of a local church, hands are joined in common purpose and as long as both keep their covenant they enjoy the journey together in the chariot of the church.

The church cannot be all things to all people. We must take our stand for the truth of God unashamedly and declare where we stand. We must take a stand and then stand firm. The Church Covenant advertises where we stand.

### **Illustration.**

A man opened a fish store and hung out his sign which read, "Fresh fish for sale today." He invited his friends to come to the opening of his fish store and they all congratulated him on his new enterprise. However, one friend suggested that his sign might be improved. He said, "Why do you have the word 'today'? Of course it is today, not yesterday, or tomorrow." So, the fish store owner removed the word "today" from his sign.

Another said, "Why do you have the words "for sale"? Everybody knows that your fish are for sale or else why would you open the store?" So, the store owner removed the words "for sale" from the sign.

Another shopper complained, "Why do you have the word "fresh" on your sign? People who know you know that you are a man of integrity which guarantees that your fish will be fresh." The frustrated owner reluctantly removed the word "fresh" from his sign.

Finally, the only word left on the sign was the word "fish." But that wasn't the end. Another objection was raised, "Why do you have a sign advertising your fish? You can smell your fish two blocks away!"

The church that tries to satisfy everyone ends up pleasing no one. Put your sign up and stand by it! Stand by your Church Covenant. It positionalizes the church and advertises where the church stands. Print it out; read it regularly; preach its truths and encourage every member of the church to hold each other member accountable.

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## HOW TO FAKE CHURCH

### 1. Emphasize "doing" rather than "being."

Be busy all the time. Have something going every night and also during the daytime if you can get enough people involved. Whether aerobics, dietician classes, sewing, basketball, etc. get everybody involved in activities. Keep the family away from home as much as you can. Family time will build a family but what you want to build is a crowd so keep the family away from home as much as possible and on the temple's turf. (But be careful not to attempt to have a Prayer Meeting – you will be embarrassed.)

### 2. Put more emphasis on "show" than on "substance."

That is, be more interested in cosmetics than in character. Specialize in "Platform Christianity" by imitating the theatre, nightclub and show business venues. Make a big splash with lots of lights, glitter, glamour and pizzazz. Put on a good show for the pew people by having a good religious pep rally! Preacher, dress down. Look like "one of the street people."

### 3. Get a big crowd, never mind how; just get a crowd.

Focus on parading the "Personality Cult" genre. Feature popular singing groups. Never mind if the medium becomes the message; if the sound is the sermon; if the lyrics are man-centered and not God-centered and are not scriptural, because the majority of those who attend such religious shows are not into Bible anyway. They have yet to learn that a crowd is not necessarily a church; that a screen production is no substitute for the Spirit's unction.

### 4. Do not use Bible terminology which makes people uncomfortable.

The words "sinner", "sin", "judgment", "repent", and "hell", etc. might offend and they may not return to your "crowd." Tell them that we may occasionally make mistakes and that we all have our faults but that God understands, and after all, Jesus has already died to cover our deficiencies. Do not "declare" anything, only "suggest." Yes, I know that Paul said, "I declare

to you the gospel," ( I Cor. 15:1) but that was back in the dark ages; we are now more enlightened people.

**5. Avoid doctrine. Preach "Feel Good" sermons only.**

Keep people ignorant of the great doctrines of the faith which edify the believer and glorify God. Avoid that which historically has been the hallmark of solid, sound churches. Give them a lot of "How To's" but none of the "Don't Do's"! Massage the attendees the right way by turning the pulpit into a psychiatrist's couch, dishing out heaping helpings of humanistic philosophy.

**6. And, whatever you do, do not let the people read the following!**

*"An astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land: The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end? (Jer. 5:30-31)*