

OUR MUTUAL COMMITMENT

“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....”

The word "covenant" 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. It is a clarification of the expectations of the parties who enter into a covenant relationship.

The word “agreement” sums up the intent and content of the Church Covenant. It simply sets forth what the church members agree to do based upon the holy Scriptures. It gives guidelines for duties, deportment and development within the church.

We come to the second paragraph of the Covenant which begins with the words “We engage.” The word “engage” used in this context means, “To pledge; to bind by a promise; to guarantee; to enter into agreement.” (Webster’s New World Dictionary)

We will consider only part of the second paragraph in this message as follows: “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....”

What are the areas of agreement and commitment that are contained in these words? To what are members agreeing, pledging and promising? There are two sections I will address:

The Relationship to Which The Member is Committed
and
The Responsibilities That The Member Assumes

I. THE RELATIONSHIP TO WHICH THE MEMBER IS COMMITTED

“We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit to walk together in Christian love...”

This is the most problematic area that every church and every church leader has to deal with. Right here is the key to unity and harmony in the church. Churches are composed of people. Where there are people there are relational problems. That is true inside and outside of churches, in both places of worship and places of work.

In Christian communities interpersonal relationships can be exacerbated because the devil desires and delights to interrupt the oneness, the accord and the peace of the Christian fellowship. Therefore, the church members need to be reminded regularly that, when they became members of the church, they promised to “walk together in Christian love.” That is the goal at which every member should aim.

A. The Aim of This Commitment - “to walk together in Christian love...”

Paul stressed this when he wrote, “Be of the same mind toward one another..... If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.” (Romans 12:16 & 18)

The principle that unifies us is “Christian love” The encouragement to “love one another” is repeated eleven times in the New Testament. This unifying principle is basic to all Christian relationships. We are brothers and sisters in the same family. We are in God’s family because of our Father’s love for us. Why is it that many church members “tolerate” one another rather than “loving” one another?

One reason is that the average member does not really know the others in their fellowship. Oh, they know people by name, faces are recognized, etc. but do they really know the background, the problems, the heart, the heartaches of their fellow travelers to heaven? Do they hold their Christian family members at arms length? Do they mix and mingle with them? How many of their sick brother or sister saints have they visited in their homes?

If we love a person we want to be with them, talk with them, listen to them, pray with and for them, work with them, share their burdens and their blessings, etc. “Togetherness” is missing in so many Christian congregations. The principle of unifying love is lacking either because the agreement to “*walk together in Christian love*” was not taken seriously or has been interrupted by some disagreement.

B. The Act of Our Commitment – “walk(ing) together”

The early church in Jerusalem affords us a good example of walking and working together as recorded by Luke: “Day by day they continued with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:46,47)

Paul admonishes the Ephesian Christians to: “walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love,” (Eph. 4:1-2)

Notice that Paul said, “bearing with one another in love.” He recognized that we humans have different personalities, perspectives and peculiarities and so he said “bear with one another” – that is, to put it in modern day vernacular, “put up with one another” in order to “walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.” If we are going to “get along” – that is make progress - we are going to have to “get along together”!

The secret, the key to “walking together” in Christian love is Christian maturity. Let’s face it squarely: some Christians just need to grow up!

C. The Aid In The Commitment - “We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit....”

Our *aim* is to *act* out our commitment and walk in Christian love. We have been given by God the *aid* of the Holy Spirit to enable us to fulfill our commitment.: “The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” (Romans 5:5)

God has lavished us with His love and poured into our hearts His love by the Holy Spirit. Now it behooves us to lavish that Christian love upon others. Let it go! Show it! Share it! Send it out to others!

II. THE RESPONSIBILITIES THAT THE MEMBER ASSUMES

“....to strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness, and comfort”

President John F. Kennedy's famous challenge in his Inaugural Address was, "Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country." Those words are appropo for every member of a local church - "Ask not what your church can do for you - ask what you can do for your church."

However, it is my observation that many unite with the church expecting the church to work for them. I've had prospective members come to interview me, throughout my years of pastoral ministry, asking me, "What does this church have to offer me and my family?" "What can you do for us?" Certainly the church should minister to the members spiritual needs and if necessary, when it can, help in other ways as well.

My answer has been something like this: "If you become a member of this church, you become part of a living organism. In a very real sense you and your family will become the church extended. The church is not an organization that caters to spectators. It is a living organism. An organism is a body composed of different organs or parts performing special functions that are mutually dependent and essential to life. An organism is something that is alive, as is the human body. The Apostle Paul likened it to a human body saying, "In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." (Romans 12:5). The church is a divine organism, a living, vibrant spiritual body (Eph. 2:19-22; 4:11-16; 5:23-33; 1 Cor. 12:12-27). What will you contribute to the Body? What will be your function in this living organism?"

My answer has not always been met with glad receptivity. In some cases the questioners have appeared shocked at the scriptural view of the church and have gone away to look for an organization that will serve them rather than an organism of which they can be a growing part.

The Church Covenant makes it clear that, while the church as a whole ministers to the members, the members have responsibilities to the church. The Covenant states,

"We engage to strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness, and comfort...." That is, we pledge, we promise to "strive." The word "strive" means "To put forth strenuous effort; to labor fervently and earnestly."

The New Testament uses the word "strive" several times:

- "I myself always **strive** to have a conscience without offense toward God and men."
(Acts 24:16)

- “Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you **strive** together with me in prayers to God for me.” (Romans 15:30)
- Paul encourages the church in Philippi to “stand fast in one spirit, with one mind **striving** together for the faith of the gospel.” (Phil. 1:27)

Church membership, like salvation, has a work element included in it. Philippians 2:12 says, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” That is, God has performed the work of salvation within us, now we are to work it out in our daily lives.

For what are members pledging to strive? The answer: *“to strive for the advancement of this church....”* How many members of local churches understand that the advancement of the church is dependent upon all the members, not just the church leadership? What a beautiful thing it would be to see a church in which all the members are involved in advancing the church! What areas are specifically set forth in this Church Covenant for which the members are to strive?

A. “To Strive For The Advancement Of This Church In Knowledge.”

The knowledge that the church is to advance is not secular knowledge, scientific knowledge, political knowledge, etc. There are schools for acquiring such knowledge. In one community in which I was privileged to pastor, there was another church that advertised weekly sermon topics that had nothing to do with salvational truths or spiritual edification. I remember a couple of the sermon titles: “The Necessity of Crop Rotation” and “Give a Hoot, Don’t Pollute!” One Sunday the services were dismissed and the members gathered at a local lake to clean up the beach! What such subjects and activities had to do with advancing the cause of Jesus Christ’s church I have yet to understand.

The knowledge that the church is charged with disseminating and demonstrating is:

1. A knowledge of God.

Paul prayed “that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” (Colossians 1:10)

“I do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened....” (Eph. 1:16-18)

2. A knowledge of God’s will.

“For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.” (Col. 1:9)

3. A knowledge of Jesus Christ.

“Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (II Peter 3:18)

"And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God...." (Eph. 4:13-16)

"Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord...." (Phil. 3:8)

4. A knowledge of the truth.

"This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (I Tim. 2:3-4)

How is this knowledge to be obtained? It is through the teaching, the preaching and the study of the Word of God publicly and privately. If you are in a church that is not advancing true spiritual knowledge by the exposition of God's Book of Knowledge, His Word, find a church that is and join the truth propagators!

B. "To Strive For The Advancement Of This Church In Holiness."

Are church members majoring on holiness? I am referring to practical holiness. Hebrews 12 reads, "Pursue holiness, without which no one will see the Lord." (vs.14) Does the church of which you are a member emphasize holiness? That question can never be out of date.

How can I help advance holiness in the church?

1. Pursue holiness.

"Pursue peace with all *people*, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord." (Heb. 12:14)

2. Practice holiness.

"As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy." (I Peter 1:15-16)

3. Perfect holiness.

"Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." (II Cor. 7:1)

J. C. Ryle, in his book "Holiness" wrote: "In this hurrying, bustling world, let us stand still for a few minutes and consider the matter of holiness. It is a solemn thing to hear the Word of God saying, "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). Holiness is the habit of being of one mind with God, according as we find His mind described in Scripture. It is the habit of agreeing in God's judgment, hating what He hates, loving what He loves, and measuring everything in this world by the standard of His Word. He who most entirely agrees with God, he is the most holy man. A holy man will endeavor to shun every known sin and to keep every known commandment. A holy man will strive to be like our Lord Jesus Christ. A holy man will follow after meekness, patience, gentleness, patience, kind tempers,

government of his tongue. A holy man will follow after purity of heart. A holy man will follow after faithfulness in all the duties and relations in life. We must be holy, because this is the only sound evidence that we have a saving faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

A church is only as holy as its members. Is yours a holy church? In the last 25 years the Church Growth movement has spawned an entire industry, especially in the book, seminar and web site business. "How To Do It" subjects have been best sellers. Marketing strategies have been the popular themes of these approaches. The emphasis primarily is upon advertising, graphics, programs, architecture, music, platform performances, etc.

Little has been said about "How To Be It" – that is, how to be the member of Christ's Body that will reflect holiness and attract persons to Him and His Church. We need a higher standard of personal holiness in our day.

When a member enters into a church covenant relationship, they pledge "To strive for the advancement of this church." Church advancement begins as an inside job - the church is to be advanced from within! A sanctified congregant is the best advancement advertisement!

C. To Strive For The Advancement Of This Church In Comfort."

There are primarily two areas in which each church member should strive for a sense of comfort in the church: Physical Comfort and Spiritual Comfort.

1. Physical comfort.

The church facilities should be inviting and convey a sense of a comfortable place to be. Clutter should be non-existent; cleanliness should be conspicuous; seating should be comfortable; beauty should be evident; worshipfulness should permeate the atmosphere; friendliness should abound, etc.

2. Spiritual comfort.

Job said of his friends, "Miserable comforters are you all." (Job 16:2) I hope that is not said about the church of which you are a member. Christians have received comfort from God and should in turn be comforters of others. God wants each of us to "comfort those in trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." His desire is for us to be vessels of his love pouring out to others the love he pours into us.

That is what 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion, and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God"

How many members of the church have visited the sick members in the congregation? How many members have made hospital visits to encourage those who are ill? How many members have visited those in jail? Jesus said of the people in His day: "I was a stranger, and you took me not in: naked, and you clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and you visited me not." (Matt. 25:43)

"If I can stop one heart from breaking, I shall not live in vain; If I can ease one life the aching, or cool one pain, I shall not live in vain." (Emily Dickinson, poet, 1830-1886)

Hallmark greeting cards are advertised with the words, "When you care enough to send the very best." Meaning, when you really care you will send a Hallmark card. Hitch-hiking on that statement I add, we live in a hurting world. The church that cares enough to give the very best comfort available in this hurting world will share the comfort that comes from God.

"Therefore comfort each other and edify one another." (I Thess. 5:11)

Fanny Crosby phrased the subject as follows:

"Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,
Snatch them in pity from sin and the grave;
Weep o'er the erring one, lift up the fallen,
Tell them of Jesus, the mighty to save."

Church advancement in knowledge, holiness and comfort is the result of a caring church congregation. Each member has the responsibility to **attend** the church, **recommend** the church, **defend** the church and **extend** the church!

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