

Teaching on the Church Covenant

Introduction:

This church covenant is the one appended to *The New Hampshire Baptist Confession* when it was originally written in 1830 (it was first adopted in 1833). The one usually associated with the NHBC was the one added when it was published again, with two extra articles, in 1853.

1. Why do we need a Church Covenant?

1a. A Church Covenant provides a basis for our unity

Those who are members of the church must agree not only with her doctrinal statement, but also with the standards set for membership and service. The church covenant spells out those duties while leaving much flexibility in how they are carried out. People ought to be taught that they have responsibilities toward the church and their brothers and sisters in the church and so shown what is expected of them in church membership to accomplish those duties..

1b. A Church Covenant provides a guide for teaching and discipleship

The church has a responsibility to see each member grow to maturity in Jesus Christ. This responsibility is not the sole responsibility of the Pastor(s), as if one can pay another to complete one's own spiritual obligations. The church covenant establishes a goal toward which the church may work with regard to each of her members while also providing guidance with regard to how these goals may be accomplished. In working toward these goals, we acknowledge the necessity of the Holy Spirit to effect change and growth in the lives of believers but also acknowledge our responsibilities in this regard.

1c. A Church Covenant provides a standard for discipline

Church discipline has fallen by the wayside in most churches today, but it is an important, though painful, part of the church's responsibilities. However, people cannot be faulted for not doing what they do not realize they ought to do. The church covenant guides the members in encouraging each other toward spiritual growth and explains the basic elements of Christian growth. When someone is disciplined, it should not come as a shock to them because they have understood from the very beginning what they must do to contribute to the spiritual growth of the church.

2. What does it mean to be "in Covenant" with the church?

To be in covenant with the church is to recognize and fulfill our responsibilities toward the church and so our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our consumerist culture assumes that even church members are consumers who expect certain services out of the church. This is contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures, which place the burden and responsibility upon every member under the leadership of the elders.

3. Why should we use this Church Covenant?

While there are many Baptist church covenants in print, this one is not only the covenant originally appended to Zion's Statement of Faith; this church covenant focuses on the spiritual responsibilities of members to the Lord and to one another. It also allows room for the church to implement different means of carrying out the duties of this covenant.

1. The Basis of our Unity

Having been, as we trust, brought by divine grace to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ, and to give up ourselves wholly to Him; we do now solemnly and joyfully covenant with each other, to walk together in Him with brotherly love, to His glory as our common Lord. We do, therefore, in His strength engage,

Comments: God's sovereign grace leads us to salvation and his providential grace leads us to the church with which he would have us unite. We give ourselves "wholly to Him" and that is manifested in our giving ourselves to his body, the church. Our relationship with God is founded upon the concept of covenant and so our relationship with one another should also reflect this concept. The covenant is a binding agreement upon the members of the body to fulfill certain duties toward one another and toward the church as a whole. A healthy church will by its nature do such things anyway; a covenant should only serve as a reminder our responsibilities.

Walking together in brotherly love is a sign of our fellowship in the gospel and our submission to the savior. We have a common commitment to the Lord because we have all been washed by his blood and baptized into him. Therefore, we enter into this covenant not out of constraint, but willingly and, as the covenant says, "joyfully," and in honoring one another, encouraging one another, loving and lifting up one another, and rebuking, warning, and teaching, one another, we bring glory to God.

We do not endeavor to accomplish the growth of the church (both spiritual and numerical) or maintain the health of the church of our own power, wisdom, or means. We must use the means provided by God: his Word, the ordinances of the church, baptism and the Lord's Supper, fellowshiping with and comforting one another. All these means we use but we understand that they must be anointed by the Spirit, as we must, to accomplish anything of eternal value, anything that will impact the kingdom.

This Holy Spirit has been given to all believers in common and his power must be sought and his guidance in the Word be heeded to bring glory to God in our worship and by our service.

2. The Responsibilities of the Member to the Body

That we will exercise a mutual care as members one of another to promote the growth of the whole body in Christian knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to the end that we may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

Comments: We as members of the body of Christ must endeavor to care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25-26), looking out for others as we would ourselves and even more so (Phil. 2:1-5). While numerical growth is important, the health of a church is vital. To remain healthy, the church must focus on the spiritual growth, health, and well-being of her members. The Bible mandates that we are to grow in the faith (1 Pet. 2:1-3; 2 Pet. 3:18) and the church is God's gift to his people to accomplish that in each of his children (Eph. 4:11-17).

The aspects in which the church should seek to grow her members is manifold:

- (1) *Knowledge* (2 Pet. 3:18) is important for loving and obeying God and for serving one another (2 Pet. 1:5-11).

- (2) *Holiness* (Heb. 12:14-15) is vital in one's walk with the Lord and all teaching and encouragement should be ultimately to lead people to walk in holiness (1 Pet. 1:13-16) in preparation for the Day of Judgment (2 Pet. 3:11-12).
- (3) *Comfort* (1 Thess. 5:11) involves not only the lifting up of one who is in despair or downtrodden, it also involves strengthening each other (Luke 22:32) to continue in the Christian life and the work of God.

The purpose for growing them is of eternal significance: that each member be able to "stand perfect and complete in all the will of God." The Bible tells us much about God's will for the believer and those things revealed as God's will in his Word we must endeavor to accomplish in each believer. The church has not accomplished her mission if any are left behind or are found immature. God gives the means and the Bible gives instruction for accomplishing this. If any is unwilling to grow or to walk in knowledge and holiness, the church must exercise her authority to discipline so that the person may be handed over to God to chastise (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20) in the hopes that they will return to the faith and seek maturity and holiness.

3. The Manner of Accomplishing our Responsibilities

3a. Accomplishing our Responsibilities in and to the Body

That to promote and secure this object, we will uphold the public worship of God and the ordinances of His house; and hold constant communion with each other therein; that we will cheerfully contribute of our property for the support of the poor, and for the maintenance of a faithful ministry of the gospel among us.

The Scriptures are clear about the importance of public worship (Hebrews 10:25) but preachers often fail to stress or believers fail to understand the importance of it. Hebrews 10:19-27 details the importance of faithful church attendance: we are able to stir one another up (and, I would add, be stirred up) to good works. This is essential so that we maintain our testimony of faith and service and not be found in disobedience in the Day of Judgment.

Indeed, many of the activities so crucial to the Christian life and to Christian service can only be accomplished in community. While we like to think that we need no one, such bootstrap living is foreign to the New Testament. In fact, the New Testament neither mentions nor has room for a category of Christian that is not united with a local church.

Three expressions in the covenant drive this home:

- (1) "*public worship*," which must by its nature be in front of others;
- (2) "*the ordinances of his house*," that is, the corporate observance of the ordinances (there are few reputable teachers, regardless of their ecclesiology, who will argue that the ordinances may be performed in private by a lone individual or even a group of individuals who come together apart from a church of some sort); and
- (3) "*constant communion*," a phrase that necessitates not only church membership, but active participation.

The final two parts of this paragraph explain two of the most important responsibilities of the church to itself: (1) the support of the poor, that is making sure that none in our midst are in need while also remembering the hungry and needy in the world whom we are able to show

Christ's grace to by providing for the essentials of life, and (2) the support of the gospel ministry, in accordance with Paul's teaching in 1 Cor. 9:1-14 and elsewhere.

3b. Accomplishing our Responsibilities Away from the Body

3b1. In our homes

That we will not omit closet and family religion at home; nor allow ourselves in the too common neglect of the great duty of religiously training up our children, and those under our care, with a view to the service of Christ, and the enjoyment of heaven.

Eph. 6:4 exhorts Christian parents (the word translated "fathers" here and in Col. 3:21 may be used in these contexts to refer to both parents) to raise their children by giving them training ("nurture" in the KJV) and instruction and warning ("admonition" in KJV/NKJV). Such education involves discipline, which is more than the punishing of wrongdoing, it is the careful training to instill the proper thoughts and behavior, just as one trains for a career or sport. Such education also involves "admonition," which involves both instruction and warning (see Pastor's Bible study on "Warning and Admonishing in the Church" for further details).

Such training, often neglected even in Christian homes, as the Covenant reminds us, should be for more than training the child to be a good person or a good citizen or a good employee or husband, or mother, etc. but should be directed toward making them a mature disciple of Christ. When one becomes a good disciple of Christ, one will be a good citizen, employee, father, wife, etc.

Such training also keeps in mind that this child will one day be an adult, responsible to the Lord for his or her own soul. If they choose to follow Christ, you have the joy of knowing that the Lord used you in his seeking of that child for himself. If not, on the Day of Judgment the parent's conscience will be clear that they did what God instructed them to do with regard to their children's souls.

3b2. In the world

That we walk circumspectly in the world, that we may win their souls; remembering that God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind; that we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth, and that a city set on a hill cannot be hid.

Eph. 5:15-17 reminds us that the days are short and the Lord's return is near. Therefore, each believer must guard how he lives and works in the world so as not to bring shame or reproach on Christ and his church. Such righteous living will lead one to opportunities to share the gospel with the lost in order to "win their souls." While righteous living does not in itself guarantee fruitful soul-winning, it may certainly make others more receptive to the Gospel by removing personal and human hindrances. Righteous living, however, is no substitute for sharing the gospel openly and clearly, even if it leads to ridicule or persecution by the world.

To this end, the believer must remember that fear is not of the Lord (2 Tim. 1:7), who gives us the power of his Spirit to speak boldly (Acts 4:31), the ability to love the unlovable and to demonstrate the nature of divine love (2 Cor. 5:14-15), and the words to say when called upon to testify for him (Mark 13:11; cf. Matt. 10:19-20).

If you are faithful to testify for Christ, he will make you fruitful in the winning of souls. But even if not, you have served as salt and light as our Savior instructed (Matt. 5:11-16), and will not be ashamed in the Day of Judgment.

3c. Building Up One Another

That we will frequently exhort, and if occasion shall require, admonish one another, according to Matthew 18, in the spirit of meekness; considering ourselves lest we also be tempted, and that as in baptism we have been buried with Christ and raised again; so there is on us a special obligation henceforth to walk in newness of life.

Believers must be committed to one another. This means exhorting those who need to be lifted up (1 Thess. 4:1; 5:14; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 2:15; Heb. 3:15; 10:25) and warning those who need to be admonished (Rom. 15:14; Col. 3:16; 2 Thess. 3:15).

The reference to Matthew 18 reminds us that we are each subject to one another (1 Pet. 5:5, "...all of you be submissive to one another and clothed with humility..") and to the church, who ultimately disciplines those who do not walk according to the Scriptures by casting them out of the fellowship (Titus 3:10), handing them over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, in the hopes that they will learn repentance and be saved in the last day (1 Cor. 5:5; cf. 1 Tim 1:20).

Such warning and discipline should be done in much prayer and humility, remembering our own propensity for sin (Gal. 6:1), and we must possess a willingness to forgive and to restore those who repent and seek mercy (2 Cor. 2:5-11) at any stage of the discipline process. If they refuse to repent, the painful task must be carried and the church must be faithful to her Lord by casting out the offending member (1 Cor. 5:2).

These warnings remind us that we have been born again into Christ's family and are to reflect our resurrection life (Col. 3:1-14) by walking in that new life after the pattern of Christ, whose dying and rising again is reflected in our baptism (Rom. 6:1-7).

Benediction

And may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make us perfect in every good work to do His will; working in us that which is well-pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ: to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

This prayer expresses God's desire for his church:

- (1) That we enjoy true peace through the God of peace.
- (2) That we remember that the church belongs to Christ, not to us.
- (3) That we mature in him by being conformed to Christ's image.
- (4) That we as a church be faithful in doing good works.
- (5) That we as a church seek his will and do it.
- (6) That we seek to see and to know his working in us and in our midst.
- (7) That we be well-pleasing to Christ individually and corporately.
- (8) That we bring glory to Jesus Christ, who is alone worthy.