

The Covenant

– Our Commitment to Community

Romans 12:9-21

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Introduction

⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. [ESV]

There are a number of texts that shape our commitment to one another as a community of believers. The “Who are We?” texts give us our identity as God’s people. The “One-Another” texts give us our responsibility as God’s people. We have done some work on this in series and in studies in the past.

The church at Rome faced some major problems. The gospel needed to be clarified in their minds so that there was a firm affirmation of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. The doctrine of justification with the righteousness of Christ imputed to us emerges as a fundamental doctrine defining true Christians. The church there also faced enormous practical problems. Many of the new believers were Jews who had a whole heritage of living by the Law with the tendency toward legalism that entailed. Many in the church were Gentiles saved out of grossly sinful and pagan living. Now, they must be together in a community of people. They have to work out their differences. At the core of being a covenant community, a gathered church, is both the unifying commitments and the unifying commands of the Scripture. If God’s people, being saved out of wildly different backgrounds, are going to live in unity, then they must understand the gospel and they must live in liberty.

This text shapes that. This is what it means to live together with brothers and sisters who need to live in holy harmony. This text so clearly connects to the Acts text we read this morning. And it is enormously convicting over our own lives.

This evening, it is my intention to briefly expound and explain our church covenant. Each of you who become members was asked to read the Book of Faith and Order and to affirm the covenant. Many churches use the church covenant to bind people's consciences and to limit their liberty. We have chosen, as carefully as we could, to ground the covenant in the clear principles and precepts of the Scripture. As we launch this month's series on community, we thought it would helpful to review and affirm together what we have promised as members here.

Our Focus in the Covenant

Recognizing our responsibility to obey all the Scriptures and the need to distinguish ourselves from the world as a community of believers, all members shall affirm their commitment to please God in all areas of life by entering into this covenant:

This opening clause establishes the focus of our church covenant. It is based on the Scripture. It aims to identify ourselves in the world. We aim to be distinctly Christian. We have to be different from the world. We cannot be poured into its mold. Yet we must live here in a way that our lives reflect the holiness and the honor of God.

Our Enabling for the Covenant

Humbly depending on the Holy Spirit's enabling and aiding us, and affirming *The Truths We Treasure*, WE COVENANT TO GLORIFY GOD by striving (as follows in the promises)

As we covenant together, we want to humbly depend on God to help us keep what we promise. We do not want to be a people who become proud in these things. We do not want to depend on the flesh nor keep these as mere outward acts of obedience. We desire to have an inward, heart dependence and reliance on the enabling grace of the Spirit of God.

We covenant together as a people who believe the truth. We see the Scriptures in what they teach as essential for our unity. So, we affirm for membership the brief summary of essential doctrines we call the *Truths We Treasure*. This summary of doctrine is what binds us together in truth. Our expression of that bond is through sacrificial deeds of love. But acts of love where there is the division of error simply masks disunity.

We aim in covenanting together to make God look large to us. We believe that God is glorified when His people confess truth and commit live together in harmony. God is seen to be large, not just to individuals in the church, but to the gathered church as a whole.

So we covenant together, humbly depending on God, aiming to glorify Him by committing ourselves to one another as His people. We acknowledge that we are a New Covenant people who are placed into Christ and so share in all the great promises God has made to His people. We are not covenanted together like Israel under a treaty and a law. We are united together in Christ as a body where His everlasting covenant of good for His people gives us the freedom to covenant with one another for our mutual good and His majestic glory.

Our Promises by the Covenant¹

Here is what we promise one another.

To walk in obedience to the Scriptures by loving the Lord God with all our heart, all our souls, and all our minds

We promise to obey God who reveals Himself and how we ought to live in the Scriptures. We will obey God as the outworking of loving Him with all we are, with our whole persons. This transformed obedience then arises from the heart and works itself out according to the Scripture as obedience to God. This obedience is to one whom we have acknowledged to be our Lord and Master and whom we love.

To walk in harmony with our fellow Christians by loving them as we love ourselves

We promise to live together in harmony and unity. This harmony is framed and fueled by loving one another and preferring one another as we do tend to love and prefer ourselves. We also acknowledge, though not expressed here in the covenant itself, that Christ has illuminated and interpreted this second commandment infusing it with a newness that reflects the New Covenant. We are to love one another as He has loved us. The attention of the heart is not to be on ourselves, but on Christ. By His example of sacrificial love we are shaped to express that love to one another.

To be faithful in our witnessing, to uphold our testimony, to defend the doctrines of the Word of God, and to expand the Kingdom of God

We promise to commit ourselves to outward tasks of the gathered church. This cluster of tasks is primarily that in which we speak for God in this world. We seek to serve God's agenda by faithfulness in these areas. Successfulness is not the criteria. The results are up to God. We covenant to faithfully speak of Him, to show what He is like in our own living, to uphold doctrine by affirming truth and denying error. In all of this we expect to see the Kingdom of God to expand.

To be faithful in edifying, exhorting, rebuking, discipling, encouraging, praying for, and meeting the needs of the Body of Christ

We promise to commit ourselves to the personal, interrelational tasks of the gathered church. This cluster of tasks is how we express our love for God and for one another in personal and practical ways. At the core if it is knowing one another well enough that we know what it takes to stir each other up to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24). It recognizes that we must exhort one another daily unless the deceitfulness of sin hardens us (Hebrews 3:12-13). Thus we are going on the maturity through our ministry with one another.

¹ These scriptures are the foundation for the elements of the church covenant. Proverbs 13:24; 23:13; 29:15; Malachi 3:8-11; Acts 2:42, 47; Romans 8:3-4; 1 Corinthians 15; 16:2; 2 Corinthians 5:11-21; 12:13; Ephesians 4:11-14; 5:23-24; 6:1-4; Philippians 1:3-6; Colossians 4:2-4; 2 Timothy 3:16-4:4; Hebrews 10:24, 25; 13:17; James 2:12; 5:13-14; 1 Peter 2:5,9; 3:7; 1 John 2:19.

To exercise our spiritual gifts to build up and to serve one another

We promise to commit ourselves to the use of the spiritual abilities, experience and aptitudes God has given us for the ministry tasks of the gathered church. This promise is both to use our gifts and to Biblically focus our gifts. Every member of the church has been given Holy Spirit enabled abilities designed to cause each one and all together to grow into maturity in Christ. These gifts are primarily in two categories, serving gifts and speaking gifts. Each of us are to exercise our gifts through the opportunities and ministries functioning in the church.

These gifts are primarily others oriented. They are aimed to serve the physical and spiritual needs of others. The Holy Spirit does not bring attention to Himself. He spotlights Christ and fills our hearts with concern for others. When giftedness is about us, our place, position, prominence and even our perceived needs, then it has begun to malfunction.

Therefore, all spiritually qualified people should be actively serving. The community of the church is not for spectators. It is intended as a place to learn and serve. This is your promise – to use all that God has given me in experience, ability, skill and so on to serve in and through the body of Christ.

To be submissive to one another in Christian love

We promise to submit to one another in preferring one another, looking out after one another's interests, caring for one another practically and humbling ourselves for the good of others first. This promise is broken when we assert our own agenda, complain about others, disregard, discredit or dishonor others. The call for mutual submission is not a denial of authority in the church nor is it establishing some modern egalitarianism. It is be willing in all areas of liberty and freedom to give way to others.

To regularly attend the services of the church and not forsake the assembling of ourselves together

We promise to regularly assemble as God's people. While modern churches and Christians have tended to discount the value and priority of meeting together, the Bible declares is necessity. While personal, private ministry in homes and elsewhere is important, the Bible has called us to be together in public, participatory gatherings. This is of such importance that the closer we come to the end of days, the more we ought to meet.

As a church, we have chosen as a wise implementation of this precept and promise to have three primary, public gatherings of the community. We have Sunday Morning with its Bible Education Hour and its Worship Service. The AM Worship Service is designed to be a blended, God-centered, Bible saturated, preaching exalting time. The PM Closer Walk Service is designed as a more informal worship time with opportunities for testimonies, prayers and fellowship, along with textual and topical expositions by the Elders. The Wednesday night flock is designed to be a time where those who live somewhat in the same community can build relationships, care for one another, engage their pastor in discussion, share meals, prayers and the Word as well as reach out into the immediate community. Each public meeting has a distinct purpose and flavor. All of them are needful for a full orb'd Christian walk.

So, I am going to say this as kindly as I know how. Clearcreek Chapel is not a Sunday Morning only kind of church. We do not design our Sunday Morning services to meet all the needs of the church nor to even meet all the precepts and expectations of the Bible. While other churches may try to do that, we do not, intentionally and purposefully. So, we want you to be gathering with your brothers and sisters as much and as often as possible. After all, it was the habit of the early church to meet every day in the evening. In some Ghana, for example, many churches meet each evening except for Saturday for prayers and preaching. May God stir up your hearts to faithful gathering with God's people.

To be submissive to the God-ordained elders as to those who give an account for our souls

We promise to have a poise of heart to submit to, to be persuaded by the Elders. We believe that God has entrusted the leadership of the gathered church to a body of men, called the Elders. Before the face of God and under the Word of God, we oversee and lead the church. We are responsible to God for the doctrine and practice of the church. We have committed ourselves not to lord it over the church while recognizing that we must make many decisions by the wisdom of God.

Now, this begins with each of the elders themselves. We commit ourselves to submit to the Elder body. Individually, we submit to the Elder body in decision making and in our overseeing the ministries each of us are responsible for. When we serve in another elder's ministry, we submit to his guidance and authority. For example, when I am counseling, teaching counseling and in counseling matters, I submit to Pastor Greg. I serve in counseling at his pleasure. When men preach in this pulpit, they are under my oversight. When I am asked to preach elsewhere or speak at conferences here or oversees (as I will be doing in February and March, 2008) I ask the Elders permission.

What we exemplify among the elders we covenant together as a people to do. We are not submitting to one person, but to a plurality of God ordained leaders. As Peter stated it, this causes the ministry by the elders to be one of joy for them and profit for the congregation. It is our poise as elders to govern by the Word and through teaching. Yet we will be zealous for our doctrinal purity and our personal holiness.

May God continue to raise up godly men qualified for the eldership, loving and leading by the Word. May God continue to give you grace

To give heed to the ministry of the Word

We promise to be a people who bend our hearts to pay attention to the Word, to instill it in our hearts and to be transformed by its work in our hearts and lives. We are hereby committing ourselves to the supremacy and sufficiency of the Scriptures. They are the final word. They are the full word. They are what guide and guard our lives. In a day where the Word is often handled and heard casually, we intentionally and gladly recognize its supreme and final authority over our lives as the very presence by the Spirit of our King, the Lord Jesus Christ, among us.

In submitting to the Word of God, we recognize that many handle the Word differently yielding different understandings and interpretations of its message and meaning. The Elders often must seek to study and arrive at an understanding of a text or a truth as what

is to be taught. As men humble before the Lord, we want to engage in profitable discussions over differences of views. We want to be men who are able to admit error and to change where an understanding of the Word is shown to be faulty. In all these challenges, we promise to hold up the Word even in the midst of differences so that those differences never undermine its authority over us.

In giving heed to the ministry of the Word, we also are promising to come prepared for when the Word is ministered. We will so value being attentive to the Word that we will arrange our lives so that we can give our best concentration to its preaching and teaching. We will come ready to be fed with its spiritual, life-giving food

To attend the ordinances of the church faithfully, approaching them in a serious, spiritual, and holy attitude

We promise to be at the services where the ordinances are taking place. We will attend our baptism services. Many of you have heard the testimonies of God's grace in our baptism services. Seeing others publicly profess Christ through baptism is a means of grace to us. We know grace has flowed because gratitude arises.

We will attend the Lord's Table. We commit to sharing together to remember the Lord's death together. We will heed the summons of the Elders to the table. We will come knowing that this New Covenant celebration prepares us for pleasing God in our lives. We also commit to coming to the ordinances with an attitude that recognizes the grandness of what God has done in our salvation. We will come, serious about our joy. We will come ready to examine ourselves and exult in our God.

To honor the Lord in our finances in all things including regular, proportionate giving to the church

We promise to be good stewards of all that God has given us. We will be diligent to live in such a way that we can give much to further the Kingdom. Observing the precepts for giving in the Old Covenant and recognizing the patterns of giving in the New Covenant we commit ourselves to plan our giving, to give proportionally to our income, to give to the church and to do so enabled by the grace of God and filled with gratitude to God.

There may be differences among us as to our understanding of what proportional means. We do affirm and teach that since the movement from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant is from the lesser to the greater, then our giving should be as well. Those who would hold that the tithe is not for the New Covenant must be freed to give more, not give less. This open handed, sacrificial generosity will be pleasing to the Lord and honors Him.

To be consistent in our own study of the Word

We promise to read, study and learn God's Word. It is food for our souls. It is cleansing to our hearts. It guards us from sin. It guides our paths and illuminates our ways. It is more necessary than daily bread, water and air. It is the window through which we see God by faith. In this promise, we are affirming that the public preaching and teaching of the Word is not sufficient to bring Christians to maturity. A regular, personal application of my own mind to the reading and understanding of the Word is necessary for Christian growth and change.

To love our wives as Christ loved the church or to submit to our husbands and to teach and train our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord

We promise to live together as husbands, wives and parents as the Scriptures command. Recognizing that the primary aim of marriage is to display the glory of the union between Christ and the church, we commit ourselves to living privately and publicly to please God. Having already committed to live with our brothers and sisters as the Scripture commands, we now commit ourselves as brothers and sisters to honor God in the roles in which He has placed us.

In this commitment, we also acknowledge that the home is where we become skilled and qualified for ministry. We will be diligent to be pleasing to God in our homes as a means to being fit for ministry.

We also acknowledge that the church is the fundamental relationship binding us together. The church commands and commends the home, not the other way around. We affirm that we who are believers are united to Christ and to one another. Our marriages and our homes are in the community of the church. So, we covenant, not to create a covenant household along the lines of the Old Covenant, but rather to recognize our union in the New Covenant and to place our homes under Christ.

We promise then to obey the Scriptures in the primary commands given us. In our day, these affirmations are not politically correct and are rejected as valid for modern believers. We assert that the love of Christ for the church and the submission of the church to Christ, and the parental care, correction and chastening of the church by the Father all are to be reflected in our homes. What we do in our homes is derived from what we observe and are commanded by God. God is a family. God is a father and son. God has a bride who will become His wife. We exemplify this now and throughout eternity.

To extend the Lordship of Christ into all areas of our lives

We promise to think through each area of our lives and seek in an ever more mature way to bring them under the authority of Christ. This acknowledges that there is no part of life over which Christ does not have dominion. So, in every sphere of home, work, vocation, recreation, school, parenting, personal and public finance, government – we will seek to know God’s mind on that area and live in obedience to Him.

To abstain from practices harmful to our physical bodies and injurious to our testimony

We promise to live wisely treating our bodies as a stewardship from God. We will also govern our conduct so as to keep a good conscience, clear testimony and be blameless before others while walking in obedience to God. We acknowledge that we are freed from our sins and to live holy lives. We also acknowledge and welcome the great liberty God has given us in the New Covenant. Unlike the Old Covenant, much of our conduct is not circumscribed. In that liberty, we commit ourselves not to take advantage of that liberty to harm the bodies God has given or our testimony to the world.

While many churches use language like this to limit your liberty, we do not. Issues of conduct are matters of conscience and liberty. So, we will seek in that liberty to grant much grace to others while seeking to live with an unblemished conscience before God.

To purpose that if we relocate we will, as soon as possible, unite with another church of like faith, where we can carry out the spirit of this Covenant and the principles of God's Word.

We promise to carry out the underlying commitments in this covenant wherever God's providence takes us. This commitment is an expression of our belief in and treasuring of these principles. In making this commitment, we declare our intention seek a gathered people and church where we can continue to grow and change.

Conclusion

Over the next 5 Sundays we will be thinking together from the Word about our being together as God's people in community. The morning series by Pastor Mark will build a Biblical Theology of community. The evening services will deal with different aspects of community, from circumcision to baptism, from spiritual gifts to giving. This will culminate on the first Sunday in October with the launch of the capital campaign for our educational facility expansion.

In closing, let us remember God's covenants and promises never vary and never fail. We may not keep all our covenants and promises, but His faithfulness is great and unchanging. As we walk together as God's people, let us keep our promises, our covenants, as we rest on God's unchanging and unfailing grace.