

Church Covenant (Part 1)

Foundations

Jan. 27, 2019

Introduction

This morning and next Sunday morning I am going to be talking to you about the exciting subject of church covenants. I know you lay awake at night thinking about church covenants. It is probably right up there with root canals and colonoscopies. My point is you probably don't think about root canals and colonoscopies until you need one and yet these are very important medical procedures.

Although you may not sit around and think much about church covenant, you ought to. Like critical medical procedures, church covenants are important tools for maintaining and improving church health when appropriately used.

Think about church covenants this way:

- Chick-fil-a: when you go into Chick-fil-a what do you expect upon entering the restaurant? There are simply certain things you expect when you go there. First, you expect to get your food before you order it and the worker says, *"It is my pleasure."*
- NFL and the player "moral clause" policy. It is a contract that can cause a player to forfeit the privilege of playing if he violates this policy.

These two examples underscore the importance of who we say we are, who we identify with, and how that public message and identification relates to how we act and live. We live in a society that has these kinds of expectations in our work and our community. It is simply part of life and we understand that. It should not surprise us that it is no different when it comes to the church.

For example, James warns us in James 1:26, *"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight reign on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless."* Likewise, 1 John 2:3 says, *"We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands."* My point is, it matters how we live. In particular, it matters how we do life together as a church body. Members of a local church are members of one body and how we live and act with in our covenant community is important.

So, as we begin our study on church covenants, I want to let you know where we will be going. We will answer four questions:

1. What is a church covenant?
2. Why have a church covenant?
3. What does a church covenant say?
4. What does our church covenant say?

I. What is a church covenant?

John Piper writes that it is good to have a church covenant even if church covenants aren't in the Bible. He says, "*The Bible does not say explicitly, 'Thou shalt have a written church covenant,' any more than it says, 'Thou shalt have marriage licenses,' or, 'Thou shalt have wedding rings.'*" Piper goes on to say, "*One way to look at it is that a church **without** a covenant is like a marriage without vows. Marriage vows are not spelled out in the Bible just like church covenants aren't. Both follow necessarily from the nature of the relationships.*"

A church covenant can be described in five different ways:

1. A church covenant is a promise.

It is a promise that is made to God, to the members of the local church, and to one's self.

2. A church covenant is a summary of how we agree to live.

While our statement of faith is a good summary of what we believe, our church covenant is a summary of how we agree to live. More importantly is a summary of how God would have us live. It does not include every explicit command regarding obedience, but it does give a general summary of what it means to live as a disciple of Christ.

3. A church covenant is a sign of commitment.

It is a sign of commitment to God, to personal holiness, and to the members of our local church.

4. A church covenant is an ethical statement.

Charles Deweese wrote a helpful book entitled *Baptist Church Covenants*. In it he writes: “A church covenant is a series of written pledges based on the Bible which church members voluntarily make to God and to one another regarding their basic moral and spiritual commitments and the practice of their faith. A covenant mainly deals with conduct (although it contains some doctrinal elements) . . . The basic meaning of the church covenant resides in the divine/human relationships in the context of the church membership.”

One theologian calls church covenants the “*ethical counterpart to confession of faith*.” A church covenant can be an important part of applying a Christian worldview to every aspect of life.

5. A church covenant is a biblical standard.

A church covenant is essential for a church that practices Biblical church discipline. It teaches church members that as disciples of Christ in a local church they are to exhort one another to live holy lives and challenge those who are living in persistent sin. Inherent in the purpose of a church covenant is the understanding of meaningful church membership that encourages, exhorts, and holds one another accountable to live in a manner consistent with the Scripture.

II. Why have a church covenant?

In a nutshell a church covenant answers the very important question: *what does it mean to be a member of Grand Avenue Baptist Church?* Dr. Matt Capps writes:

“Membership covenants help clarify the expectations of membership by providing a biblical standard of behavior and educating individuals on what it means to be a member of a local church. Generally speaking, a church membership covenant is a ‘commitment to God and to one another as to how we will live out our faith in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.’ A church membership covenant is a reflection of the local church’s understanding of what the Bible teaches and expects of Christians associated with a local church. While many churches have a statement of faith that articulates their theological convictions, a church membership covenant functions to articulate how those beliefs are to be lived out within the local body. In the words of many theologians, a membership covenant is the ‘ethical counterpart to a church’s doctrinal statement.’”

Church covenants are not something new but something churches have used for hundreds of years to help its membership understand the importance of meaningful membership.

Let me refer to Charles Deweese again. Deweese writes:

“Baptists worldwide have written and used hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of church covenants since initiating that development in England in the early

1600's. They had viewed covenants, along with believer's baptism and church discipline, as means of nurturing and safeguarding the New Testament emphasis on a regenerate church membership. Covenants deserve careful evaluation because they helped shape Baptist church membership standards and practices."

Deweese points out some pretty important facts.

- *First, church covenants have been an important aspect of Baptist history for over four hundred years. Churches have used covenants as a means to promote holy living and accountability in the church.*
- *Secondly, the New Testament focuses on regenerate church membership. Throughout the New Testament there is an emphasis on members of the church being authentic followers of Christ who possess and live out a living faith in Christ Jesus. Church covenants serve to promote and support the idea of regenerate church membership.*

How will a church covenant help our body?

1. **Incoming Members**: It will answer the question: what does it mean to be a member of Grand? This is the usual question of what it means to be a member of Grand or of any church for that matter. A church covenant will be a document that will summarize what that means.
2. **Shepherding Efforts**: It to help our leaders to shepherd and disciple incoming members. When incoming members understand membership it also helps our elders, leaders and the body shepherd one another but in particular our elders. As the church covenant spells out the basics of covenant life in the body so the elders are able to shepherd with more clarity.
3. **Ministry Mindset**: Built into the church covenant is language that call the church to ministry to one another by encouraging and exhorting one another to holdfast to the gospel and live a life of holiness. It encourages a spirit of love and charity among the body. It teaches us and reminds us to stir one another up to love and good deeds and to fan into the flame the gift of God that has been put in us by the Holy Spirit of God.

4. **Unbelievers**: A church covenant helps to establish a visible union with the believers in a local church. Unbelievers are afforded one more means to see that there is an inside and outside of the Kingdom of God. Through this visible line they are called to faith in Christ.

When it comes to covenant life in the body what better way to share with outsiders what covenant life looks like. It also helps to promote the good name of Christ in our community. Unbelievers will often claim that people in the churches are hypocrites. A church covenant is a discipleship tool that we can formally use to agree to not be hypocrites but instead be holy.

III. What does a church covenant say?

What then should we expect out of a church covenant? Expect it to be biblical – rooted in scripture. Expect it to be focused on the whole body of believers – it should be corporate not private. And expect it to be brief.

To help understand GABC's own church covenant we have divided it into three parts. First, the introduction; second, the promises; third, the benediction.

1. Introduction

We can be tempted to pass over the introduction too quickly in our rush to get to the meat of the statement. Don't do this. The introduction is rich with valuable points. Let me draw your attention to three.

a. First, the covenant is to be made by Christians. Borrowing Jesus' words from the opening verses of Mark, the GABC's covenant is to be made by those who "repent and believe" in Jesus Christ.

b. Second, the covenant is to be made by baptized Christians. The church covenant is to be made by those who have been baptized upon their "profession of faith." In other words, those who have been baptized as believers.

c. Third, the covenant can only be kept with God's help- "we, in the presence of God and by His grace, joyfully and solemnly covenant with the members of Grand Avenue Baptist Church." Any ability we have to fulfill the promises of the GABC's covenant is attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit applying the grace of God to our lives. We do not keep this covenant in our own will-power or strength. God gets all the credit and all the glory.

2. The Promises

a. We will faithfully remind one another of the person and work of Christ on our behalf. The gospel applies to all of life and we want to learn how to live in light of the gospel so we must continually remind one another of the gospel because we so easily forget to live in light of it.

b. We will work and pray for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We should pray that God's peace would show itself in the body as a whole. Whether we are gathering for a Sunday morning service, or thinking through matters of church business at a members' meeting, we are to pray that the Holy Spirit would move us together, in the same direction. Unity is a fragile thing.

c. Exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other and faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require. Are we bearing each other's burdens? Are we praying for one another? Are we praying through the church directory? Are we looking out for each other? Are we challenging each other when we sin? Are we entreating one another to a

holy walk? Are we doing these things for people who are outside our demographic group? This is what it means to be a part of a church.

- d. ***Rejoice at each other's happiness.*** Sometimes seeing our friends fail make us feel better. There's something wrong with that, isn't there? In a world of envy, jealousy and greed, we are called to see other's happiness and praise God for it. This may be one of the most difficult promises made in our covenant to keep. We truly are a selfish and proud people in need of God's grace.
- e. ***Bear each other's burdens and sorrows.*** God did not design us to go through difficulty alone. As this promise from Galatians 6 points out, God ministers to us through others. One of the best ways we can be an example to the world is through being faithful brothers and sisters in Christ to one another.
- f. ***Do not forsake the assembling of ourselves together.*** Christians don't meet simply so they can be blessed; we meet so that the church can glorify God. As we learn about Scripture together, praise God together, pray together and serve together, Christ's bride is being made ready for her bridegroom. So we're not here merely to have our own needs met. Attending regularly is vital because it is the first step toward being held accountable. If you are not attending regularly (maybe you've moved, maybe you've become ill, maybe you have left for school, maybe you've simply chosen to attend another church) LET SOMEBODY KNOW . . . preferably the pastor. Non-attendance is either a portal to sin or a reflection of sin. It is prevented by formative church discipline, and remedied by corrective church discipline.
- g. ***Strive to see GABC continue faithful, biblical ministry.*** Have you ever seen a church drift away from biblical ministry? It happens often. Over time just gradually drifting, compromising, by giving into worldly culture or unbiblical church culture practices like church growth or the prosperity gospel. Part of our responsibility is to strive together with one another to make sure we do not drift.
- h. ***Support the ministry of the church.*** We also commit to give of our time, talent, and treasure to see gospel ministry continue. We just do not give every now and then or when we have extra funds but we commit to give on a regular basis so the church is able to mobilize to reach our city, state, and the world.
- i. ***Evangelize.*** "The spread of the gospel to all nations." Evangelism can take place in many ways. One of the most obvious ways is by us sharing the Gospel with unbelievers. We are called to do that by the church covenant. I think that this church covenant also calls us to evangelize in another way. God will show the world who he is through the church. We are a corporate witness, a display of God's holiness, by his grace. Therefore, how we serve together and love together is a means God uses to communicate the Good News to a lost world. We see this in

John 13:34, where Jesus shows His master plan for evangelism: “A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Get this point: we’re not just individuals assembling in the same spot. God intends us to be one body! And that alone can be an evangelistic tool.

- j. ***Live carefully in the world, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts.*** One of the reasons we covenant together is because we realize that we could use some help with our own Christian walk with God.
- k. ***Endeavor to practice personal and family discipleship.*** The practice of spiritual disciplines or habits of grace on a personal level and with our families. This does not mean we all do the same thing or that each family does the same kind of family discipleship or family worship. It means it is a priority and so we strive to practice spiritual disciplines in our lives and with our families.
- l. ***We commit to practice repentance and forgiveness with one another.*** You may be thinking, “Wasn’t that included in an earlier one?” In some ways it was but since we are a church full of sinners we need to be reminded and it needs to be made explicit that this is what we practice in order to love one another well and strive for unity.
- m. ***When we move, we will unite with some other church.*** Membership isn’t about a particular affection for one group of Christians. Membership is about unity with the body of Christians God has physically placed you around. You are building the local church as you willingly transfer your membership. We all look forward to being together in heaven. Until then, we divide and conquer for the Kingdom of God.

3. Benediction.

These words may sound familiar. They conclude most services at GABC. More importantly, they are from 2 Cor. 13:14. We are a people who possess the grace of Jesus Christ, the saving love of our heavenly Father, union with His Son, and unity with all the family of God through the Holy Spirit.

Concluding thoughts on church covenant

There are just two final points to make about our church covenant. First, our church covenant should be a challenge. Second our church covenant should be a comfort.

- A. ***Our church covenant is a challenge simply because there are times when living a godly life is hard.*** It is also a challenge because each member of the church now bears responsibility for the lives of other believers – this is that “accountability goes both ways” part. This is serious responsibility. Not the kind of responsibility you have just because you are somebody’s friend, but the kind of responsibility that comes from saying, before God, “I care for you and will work to encourage you in your discipleship.” This challenge is a serious thing.

- B. Our church covenant is a comfort.** A comfort to know you'll be cared for and prayed for, not perfectly, but faithfully. The comfort is that by joining a church and covenanting with other believers, you now have Christians who are going to build you up when you are down. You have Christians who are committed, before God, to walk with you, pray with you, serve you. You have Christians who are so concerned about your spiritual walk, that if they see you break the covenant you have made as a disciple of Christ, they will exhort you to turn back; and if you don't, they'll do all they can to make the gravity of your sin clear. This is our ideal, our vision, what we strive for.
- C.** *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."* John 13:34¹

¹ This last section is adapted from an article by Matt Schmucker: [Membership Matters – What is Our Church Covenant?](#).

Grand Avenue Baptist Church Covenant

Having been led, by divine grace, to repent of our sins and to believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior,² and having been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,³ we, in the presence of God and by His grace, joyfully and solemnly covenant with the members of Grand Avenue Baptist Church.⁴

We endeavor to remember and to remind one another of Jesus Christ, crucified for our sins and risen from the dead.⁵

We endeavor to work and pray for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace⁶. We strive to walk together in Christian love through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁷ We endeavor to exercise affectionate care and watchfulness for each other, using our spiritual gifts for the common good,⁸ so that together we might live to God's glory⁹.

We endeavor to rejoice with each other's joys and bear each other's burdens with tenderness and sympathy.¹⁰ We strive to regularly encourage each other and pray for each other.¹¹ When offenses occur, we stand ready to reconcile.¹² We endeavor to submit to the church's discipline and lovingly assume our responsibility to participate in the discipline¹³ of other members, as taught in Scripture.

We endeavor to meet together as a church body, faithfully participating in corporate worship and members' meetings.¹⁴

² John 3:3-8; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5-6.

³ Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38, 41; Rom. 6:4.

⁴ Neh. 9:38; Amos 3:3; Titus 3:8; Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:13-27; Heb. 3:12-14; Heb. 10:19-25.

⁵ Rom. 10:13-16; 1 Cor. 1:18; Col. 1:3-14; Heb. 3:12-14; Heb. 4:11-16; Heb. 10:19-25.

⁶ Eph. 2:11-22; Eph. 4:1-16, 29, 31; Gal. 5:16, 25.

⁷ Eph. 5:1.

⁸ Rom. 12:9-12; Eph. 4:9-32, Heb. 3:12-14; Heb. 10:19-25.

⁹ 1 Cor. 10:31.

¹⁰ John 13:34-35; Rom. 12:4-16.

¹¹ Eph. 1:16; Eph. 6:18.

¹² Matt. 12:34-35; Eph. 4:29, 32; Col. 3:16, 4:6; James 3:2-12.

¹³ Matt. 18:15-20, 1 Cor. 5:1-9, 2 Cor. 2:5-11, Titus 1:10-16.

¹⁴ Col. 3:16; Heb. 10:24-25.

We endeavor to continue a faithful biblical ministry in this church maintaining its worship, ordinances,¹⁵ discipline,¹⁶ and doctrines.¹⁷ To this end, we strive to contribute time and money cheerfully and regularly to support this church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the Gospel throughout all nations.¹⁸

We endeavor by God's grace and power to live as Christ in the world, resisting ungodliness and worldly desires, leading holy lives, being honest in our dealings and faithful in our responsibilities and commitments.¹⁹

We endeavor to practice personal and family discipleship,²⁰ training our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.²¹

When we fail in any of these endeavors, we will strive to practice repentance and forgiveness.²²

Should we leave this fellowship, we will seek to unite with another church where we can continue to carry out the spirit of this covenant.²³

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all²⁴. Amen.

¹⁵ Matt. 28:19; Luke 22:17-20; Acts 2:41-42; 1 Cor. 11:23-32.

¹⁶ Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Cor. 2:5-9; Gal. 6:2; Titus 3:10.

¹⁷ Gal. 1:8-9; Rom. 16:17; 2 John 10.

¹⁸ Deut. 15:7-11; Prov. 3:9-10; Prov. 19:17; Mal. 3:8-12; Matt. 6:1-4; Matt. 28:18; Mark 12:41-44; Luke 12:33; 2 Cor. 9:7; Heb. 13:16.

¹⁹ Gal. 5:22-24; 1 Thess. 4:1-12; Titus 2:12; 1 Pet. 1:14; Heb. 12:14.

²⁰ Deut. 6:1-9; Psalm 1:1-3; Psalm 119:9-17; Luke 5:16; 1 Tim. 4:7-8.

²¹ Deut. 6:7; Judges 2:10-11; Prov. 22:6; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:20-21.

²² Eph. 4:32-5:2.

²³ Acts 9:26; Acts 1:18:27; Rom. 16:1-2.

²⁴ 1 Cor. 13:14.