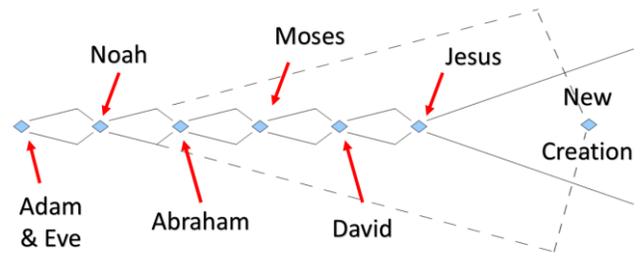


Covenant Living: Living in Covenant with Each Other

Responsive Reading, “Living in Faith Community” (appended) ¹

Last week we took a quick look at the major covenants of the Bible, that is, the covenants God made with Noah, with Abraham and his descendants, with Moses and Israel at Sinai, with King David, and then the new covenant God made with Israel and with us through Jesus, as foretold by the prophet Jeremiah. All of that was background for our consideration of the first part of our Church Covenant, our covenant with God.



We noted that our Church Covenant is organized around what Jesus identified as the two great commandments: “*The most important [commandment], answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these*” (Mark 12:29-31).

This morning we conclude our consideration of our Church Covenant as we look at its final two sections, which have to do with our covenant with each other. Another way to describe this part of our Covenant is that it has to do with promises we make to each other as members of this community of faith.

One of the keys to any successful and effective organization is getting a clear idea about what our product really is. And every organization has a product, though its nature may not be as easy to identify as the widgets produced by Company XYZ. **Our product in the Church is community.** God’s purpose in the Church is to join together the lives of born again persons in a fabric of relationships so unusual—indeed, so divine—that it will be clear to the watching world that this is something only God could do.

Our life together in the Body of Christ constitutes the firstfruit of the New Creation; and that’s what the last part of our Church Covenant is talking about. So here we go

B. WE COVENANT WITH ONE ANOTHER:

- 1. Because God has accepted me, I accept you into my life and into my care. I covenant to accept you as you are and hope that we can grow together to be mature children of God.**

To accept another person means to welcome that person and to refrain from judging that person, actions that are generally much easier to affirm than they are to actually do. We’re not likely to be able to welcome and to accept each other to any great extent until we become deeply aware of how wonderful God’s gift of acceptance is in our own lives. It’s not until we begin to see the full extent of what God continues to overlook and to forbear in our own lives that we become willing and able to extend that same grace to others.

Further, once we begin to realize that God doesn’t redeem us for ourselves alone, but for the greater purpose of joining our lives together in a fabric of relationships that only God can weave, we begin to become able to extend care more fully to each other. I suspect that this first covenant principle grew out of Ephesians 4:15, where Paul wrote that, “*speaking the*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on November 25, 2012.

truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”

2. Because I have experienced the forgiveness of God in my life, I covenant with you as a friend in Christ to forgive you, even when I feel the pain you may cause me.

One of the absolute necessities of durable relationships is the willingness to ask for and to offer forgiveness. We're all sinners, and we sometimes hurt each other, mostly by accident. The mark of true faith community is not the absence of any conflict or disagreement, but rather the presence of an earnest and reconciling spirit.

Forgiveness is like acceptance in that the more we understand how desperately we ourselves need it, the more able we are to offer it to others. When Jesus told us that *“whoever has been forgiven little, loves little”* (Luke 7:47), He didn't mean that there are some people who need little of God's forgiveness, because there are no humans like that. What He meant was that persons who think that they themselves are righteous in God's eyes tend to be stern and unforgiving toward others.

It's easy to be loving when relationships are stress free. There's no news in that. It doesn't require extra-ordinary, God-given resources to love folks who love us. No, the love Jesus has in mind has to do with how we relate to each other when stresses increase and when we feel interpersonal pain rather than warmth and gladness. It's when relationships are under stress that their fundamental strength or weakness is demonstrated. That's why doctors subject our hearts to “stress tests.”

I think it was this sweaty soul work of forgiveness Paul had in mind when he told us to *“work out our salvation in fear and trembling”* (Philippians 2:12), and it has been my observation that deep friendships often grow out of offenses that have been handled according to the principles of Jesus. I'll say more about this when we come to statement #5.

3. Because I know God's help and support in my life, I covenant to support you to the best of my abilities, in times of your grief, stress and sickness.

By now you may be noticing the dance that's going on in several of these affirmations. It's a two-step dance that goes like this: (1) because God has offered this gift to me, (2) I am grateful to be able to offer it to you as well. This is the dynamic of which Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4: *“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 any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”* As John would later write, *“since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another”* (1 John 4:11).

This third statement has to do with the support we offer to each other in the difficult seasons of life, and that ability, too, comes originally from God: *“As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust”* (Psalm 103:13-14).

The truth is that there's a lot going on in the background in all of our lives—struggles of which only God may know. It's not necessary to scratch any of us very deeply to touch the pain in our hearts, and when, for any of a hundred reasons, one of our journeys leads us through the “Valley of Shadow” (Psalm 23:4), it's our mutual privilege to provide a safe place for one another, even in times when one of us may not sure he or she even believes in God anymore. During such times of Darkness, the faith community “believes for” the broken one,

surrounding her or him with others who continue to believe, whose vision is not presently dimmed by tears.²

4. Because we are members of Christ’s Body, the Church, I covenant with you to share life and service with you, with all of its joys and sorrows. I covenant to be concerned about you and your family.

When Mr. Alter met his fifth-grade class for the first time at Lake Elementary in Oceanside, California, fourteen boys in the class had no hair. One of the boys, Ian O’Gorman, had lost his hair due to chemotherapy, and thirteen of his friends had shaved their heads, too. “If everybody has his head shaved, sometimes people don’t know who’s who,” eleven year-old Scott Sebellius said. “They don’t know who’s sick and who just shaved their heads.”

Ten year-old Kyle Hanslik started it all. He talked to the other boys, and off they went to the barber shop. “The last thing he would want is to not fit in,” Kyle said. “We just wanted to make him feel better.”³

The Bible puts it this way: “*If one part [of the Body of Christ] suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it*” (1 Corinthians 12:26). “*Share each other’s troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ*” (Galatians 6:2).

5. I promise to defend you as brothers and sisters from those who would deny you their love and respect. I covenant to be honest with you, even when it may be painful to us both.

Our family moved to Ft. Worth, Texas in 1976 to begin seminary studies. Our pastor in those days was Miles Seaborn, and it was from Miles that I learned the phrase “clear spirit.”

Though “clear spirit” doesn’t appear in the Bible, that phrase captures for me what I think this part of our covenant intends. Jesus doesn’t call us to some ethereal way of living. Jesus acknowledges the reality that even born-again folk sometimes hurt each other, and He tells us—actually, He commands us—to do the sweaty soul work of working through those hurts in ways that lead to community healing and strength.

In Matthew 18:15, Jesus said, “*If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the fault. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back.*” The crucial point here is that our goal is not to win, but to win them. Our normal, unredeemed response when someone does something that hurts or offends us is to pout, to avoid them, to put negative things on the grapevine about them, and to wait petulantly for them to crawl to us on their knees to beg forgiveness. Such behavior is neither helpful nor Christlike, but that’s the default mode we all have in our sinful nature.

As He so often does, Jesus turns our normal pattern on its head. He tells us to go directly to the other person and to say something like this: “I care very much about our relationship, and something has happened that is making it difficult for me to have a clear spirit with you. You may not even know that it has happened, but I’d like to talk it over with you so that our friendship is not damaged.” Of course, on those occasions where we know or discover that we have caused hurt, we don’t wait for the other person to come to us. We go to them at once to seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

Jesus intends for us to go to each other for such face-to-face conversation about anything that we know has happened, that we think may have happened, or that we have

² Evelyn Whitehead and James Whitehead, *Community of Faith*, p. 14.

³ Sherman Buford, Fairmont, West Virginia, in *Leadership*, vol. 15, no. 3; also an Associated Press story in March, 1994.

heard might have happened, so that we maintain clear spirits with each other at all times. Miles put it this way, “Because I care about you, and because I would want you to do this for me, I want you to know that such things as this are being said about you. I want to hear about this from you yourself so that I will be able to give a strong and good report about you, and so that I might encourage you.”

I think Miles is right. Further, because relationships are not restored “in general,” but in particular, we don’t ever pass along information such as this without telling our friend the source of what we have heard. Allowing persons to say destructive things without being held accountable for them allows those members who are least committed to congregational health to hold the entire Body hostage. If we don’t know who is speaking ill of us, we can’t move toward them to try to accomplish reconciliation or to limit community-destroying behavior.

Let me repeat this principle again: *allowing persons to say destructive things without being held accountable for them allows those members who are least committed to congregational health to hold the entire Body hostage.* Adherence to this principle is absolutely essential if the Body of Christ is to remain healthy and strong.

Now such conversations as these are hard work. As I’ve mentioned, I think Paul had such conversations in mind when he wrote about “*working out your salvation in fear and trembling*” (Philippians 2:12). And because all relationships experience pain now and then, if we choose not to do this work, then our circle of community becomes smaller and smaller, and we end up as captives in tiny prisons of isolation and bitterness that we ourselves have built. Achieving a clear spirit is not an optional enterprise if we expect to have relationships that last.

6. I covenant to respond when you try to help me. I promise to trust that you act from a concern for me.

This statement affirms that whatever happens, we will give each other the benefit of the doubt when it comes to motives, and that we agree to stay engaged with each other rather than retreating into petulant pouting of various sorts. Like many of these covenant promises, this one, too, is anchored in Paul’s admonition that we “*speak the truth* [to each other] *in love*” (Ephesians 4:15).

While it’s crucial to the health of our community that we keep short accounts with each other and that we sometimes courageously say things others may not wish to hear, how we do this is just as important as that we do it. Paul told us to “*let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them*” (Ephesians 4:29, NLT).

That verse reminds me of something I learned from my teacher, Wade Rowatt. Wade frequently pointed out that “The sword is always sharper on the blade end.” While that seems obvious, the point Wade was making is that, when I’m offering feedback to you, attempting to “*speak the truth in love*” (Ephesians 4:15), no matter how prayed-up I am and no matter how carefully I choose my words, I’ve always “got the sword by the handle.” Feedback is always sharper on the “blade end.” The writer of Proverbs reminds us that “*Gentle words bring life and health*” (15:4, NLT). How much we need gentleness in our speaking!

7. I covenant with you that henceforth I will commit my life to be your friend in Jesus Christ, the One who has touched us all and given our lives meaning.

I think we could summarize this last principle—and perhaps all of them together—with Jesus’ admonition that “*freely you have received, freely give*” (Matthew 10:8). The truth is that we deeply need each other. Leonardo da Vinci is said to have defined an arch as two weaknesses that, by leaning on each other, make a strength.⁴ That’s what we do together for each other in the community of faith, which is the Body of Christ.

Such community-building doesn’t happen naturally, nor is it purchased cheaply. Like marriage, community-building requires that we remain in relationship even when the going becomes difficult.⁵ Being in community requires that we make whole-hearted promises . . . and that we keep them.⁶

Well, we’re nearing the end of our time together, and we another whole section yet . . . but don’t despair. I’m going to treat these quickly, though they’re worthy of much more time than this. Here are the last six principles:

C. WE COVENANT TOGETHER:

1. **To apply our faith in all aspects of our lives;** (integrated/congruent)
2. **To strive for a more perfect society in keeping with the Spirit of God;** (compassionate)
3. **To be faithful stewards of our time, influence, abilities, and possessions; to use them wisely and fully;** (virtuous)
4. **To assemble ourselves together regularly for worship, study, witness, and fellowship;**
5. **To pray for one another and care for one another;**
6. **To encounter God daily through reading the Scriptures and prayer; and to be faithful to this fellowship of Christians.** (Bible-centered; prayer-filled)

I can’t help noticing that these commitments are quite similar to what we’ve looked at before as the six characteristics of what I call “Great Commission Christians,” that is, Christ-followers whose lives are prayer-filled, Bible-centered, virtuous, compassionate, integrated, and spiritually powerful. These commitments also address our five principles of WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP, DISCIPLESHIP, MINISTRY, and MISSION, focusing outward on our relationships in the world as well as inward in personal devotion and congregational commitment. And all of this seems gathered up nicely in the hymn, *The Servant Song*:⁷

Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey; we’re together on this road.
We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you in the nighttime of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping; when you laugh, I’ll laugh with you.
I will share your joy and sorrow till we’ve seen this journey through.

⁴ Quoted by Jane Rubietta in *Marriage Partnership*, vol. 12, no. 2.

⁵ Peck, *Different Drum*, p. 62.

⁶ Daniel A. McKeever, “The Religious History: A Pastoral Instrument” (Th.M. thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1971), p. 39.

⁷ Words and music by Bob Gillman (Kingsway’s Thank You Music, 1977).

When we sing to God in heaven, we shall find such harmony,
Born of all we've known together of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.

Let's sing this hymn together as a reaffirmation of the mutual commitments
of our shared covenant. . . .

Living in Faith Community

Leader: *"I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples" (John 13:34-35).*

People: ***"Now you can have sincere love for each other as brothers and sisters because you were cleansed from your sins when you accepted the truth of the Good News. So see to it that you really do love each other intensely with all your hearts" (1 Peter 1:22).***

Leader: *"Accept each other just as Christ has accepted you; then God will be glorified." . . . "This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other equally" (Romans 15:7; 1 Corinthians 12:25).*

People: ***"Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love" . . . "Be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:2, 32).***

Leader: *"Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other." . . . "Share each other's troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ" (Romans 12:10; Galatians 6:2).*

People: ***"Encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing." . . . "Think of ways to encourage one another to outbursts of love and good deeds" (1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 10:24).***

Leader: *"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and wonderful results" (James 5:16).*

People: ***"God has given gifts to each of you from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Manage them well so that God's generosity can flow through you. Are you called to be a speaker? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Are you called to help others? Do it with all the strength and energy God supplies. Then God will be given glory in everything through Jesus Christ. All glory and power belong to him forever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 4:10-11).***

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God!

People: **Thanks be to God!**