

A Covenant People Called Grace
Genesis 12:1-2,4a; Matthew 26:27

I want to talk today about Grace Baptist Church as a “covenant community.” We are a community of belonging. Covenants express how we belong to God and how we belong to each other.

As the Bible tells of God’s relationship with humanity, covenants are at the heart of things. In Genesis there is the “creation covenant” in the creation stories. In this covenant God asks of us two things: to “be fruitful and multiply” (the fun part), and to take good care of creation (we are still trying to figure that out!). In the Noah story comes a second covenant. In this one God commands us not to shed the blood of another human person because we are all made in the image of God. The sign of the covenant was the rainbow.

But with Abraham, in Genesis 12, a new kind of covenant comes into being. It happens in real dateable history (around 1,800 BCE), and God is calling a particular people into covenant relationship. That is where we begin today.

I

God spoke to Abraham and said, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you.” (Talk about a “leap of faith”, of walking by faith not by sight!)

And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing....by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

This is the way with God's people throughout history: they are blessed so others can be blessed through them.

Then the climactic verse: "So Abraham went and did as the Lord had told them."

This is how faith begins, by hearing the word of God and doing it. Here is the beginning of a covenant people. God, in effect said, "*I will be your God if you will be my people.*"

This God would travel with them wherever they went—unlike the gods of that time and place who resided only in temples, mountain tops and certain holy places. This God was a personal God, and the covenant was as personal as that between a husband and wife—later, God's relationship with them would be described as such.

A covenant stands for a free, trusting agreement between God and God's people, between God and us.

600 years later the covenant between God and Hebrew people took a more definitive form in the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. God said, in

effect, “I am the Lord your God who delivered you from slavery in Egypt. Now if you want to *stay* free, Thou shalt not, Thou shalt not, Thou shalt not.” Over the centuries we’ve learned its wisdom.

II

Now it is 1,200 years later. A man named Jesus is at a table with his disciples, their last meal together before his death the next day. He offers them and offers us a “new covenant”, a covenant of grace.

He took the bread, broke and blessed it and gave it to his disciples. Then he took the cup, gave thanks and said,

Drink of it, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for the many [not the few] for forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:27)

A covenant of grace offered freely to us and to all. Paul put it this way:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8).” Buechner describes such grace this way:

There’s nothing *you* have to do.

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It's all grace. And with this "new covenant" came a "new commandment": That we love one another as Christ loved us. This, Jesus said, is how people will know we are his.

Let's talk for a moment about covenants and commandments. You may have noticed they go together. But here is what makes our covenant a covenant of grace. Commandments are all about the love of God and neighbor. If we do not follow the commandments, God does not break the covenant with us. God will always love us and seek to be in relationship with us. It means that God's love becomes a suffering love; it means we will bring suffering on ourselves and others. But God will forever be at work to restore the covenant relationship.

III

Then how shall we live together as part of a covenant community, a community of grace, a community *called* Grace?

Through the years Baptist churches have drawn up and adopted church covenants to describe their relationship with God and their relationship with each other. They did not have *creeds*—as most other churches—they had covenants. They called themselves a "non-creedal" people. Sometimes they said, "We have no creed but the Bible!"—which is *not* as easy as it sounds!

Such covenants were relational documents: how do we want to live with God; how do we want to live with one another?

So Baptist churches wrote their own covenants (for better and for worse); or, they adopted covenants written for Baptist churches in general.

The Baptist church covenant I grew up with in Southern Baptist Land was one written in the 19th century by J. Newton Brown. It got wide use because it was printed in the 1956 *Baptist Hymnal*, and if it was in the hymnal, that's next to being in the Bible! So, most Baptist churches and all the ones I knew made this covenant their own.

It began, as most, expressing our relationship with God in Christ:

Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and on profession of faith have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we do now in the presence of God and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.

Do you catch the solemnity and joy of this moment as people would say these words, often with the congregation, as they became members of a church?

So it began, describing our relationship with God. Then it began to describe the ways we ought to live together in the body of Christ. There were phrases like this (and I paraphrase):

-to walk together in Christian love

-to help advance the church

-to grow in knowledge and spirit

-to contribute to the needs of the church, the needs of the poor, and the spreading of the gospel.

-to educate and nurture our children in the faith

-to be faithful in worship attendance

-to remember each other in prayer and to come to the aid of one another in sickness and distress.

-to practice “courtesy of speech” (such a lovely phrase) and always be ready for reconciliation.

Then there were the things we were to avoid like the plague:

-avoid all “tattling, backbiting and excessive anger.”

Then the “biggie”

-“To abstain from the sale and use of alcoholic beverages”.

This last item began to disappear from Baptist church covenants when Baptists started speaking to each other in liquor stores. Grady Nutt tells of going into a liquor store and meeting face to face with a church member. He laughed and said to him, “I guess that’s why Jesus made his own!”

This “set” church covenant began to be used less and less, for a variety of reasons, but here are the things I love about it: the call to walk in love, to pray for one another and care for one another in distress, the call to avoid hurtful speech and be always be always ready for reconciliation when hurt has happened.

III

In the last 50 years more and more Baptist churches have begun to write their own covenants. I have seen such covenants have a most positive effect as they expressed the church’s spiritual identity and core values, how they wished to walk together as a covenant community and what their mission was.

You, Grace Baptist Church, have embraced the importance of a church covenant, written your own and made it central. At one point, not long ago, we began to call “members”, “covenant participants”.

Our Covenant begins with a beautiful Mission statement, then it goes on to describe how we are organized and how we do our work together to accomplish our mission.

Our Mission Statement is a wonderful description of who we are and what we are about. It is this part that is most like and about the same length as what most churches call their “covenant”. Here it is:

We are Grace—a ministering people of God, reaching beyond our walls to the needs of our local and global community. We are an intergenerational faith community called and committed to a life of love and servanthood through the experience of celebrative worship, the development of each person’s gifts and the work for peace and justice.

In our diversity we find strength and a way to understand the inclusiveness of God. We recognize each individual as a child of God. We welcome and affirm ALL people (All in all caps), who and where you are, to join in our common mission through participation and leadership in the community of faith.

I love this description of who you are and aspire to be.

As I've studied Baptist Church covenants through the years, I've notice three important parts: 1) A description of their relationship with God; 2) An expression of their core values and mission; and 3) a description of how they wish to live together in the Body of Christ. One church covenant says this:

We accept controversy as a reality of life together and an opportunity for growth toward maturity.

It gave the church courage to face the tough issues as they tried to be God's people in the world.

And in a sentence which echoes our own covenant it says:

We covenant to be a community of God's new creation and affirm that we are open to all and closed to none.

Such covenants are often read by the church and new members as new people come to be part of the community. It reinforces who they are and want to be.

I think our church has struck the right note on the centrality of our covenant. Doctrine does not hold us together. We accept everyone wherever they are on their journey of faith. Alike-ness does not hold us together. If birds of a feather flock together, it is not this flock.

What holds us together is a belongingness deeper than these things. Like our common mission, like our shared desire to increase in the love of God and neighbor.

I guess it boils down to love, a love that is more than our own, that is “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5).

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is generally thought to be a round-robin letter, a circular letter to be sent to all the churches Paul knew. It is wisdom for all the churches. In it he urges us,

...to lead a life worthy of the calling for which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager (eager!) to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:1-3)

It could be the basis for any covenant community.

1) Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 34.