

Who Are We and How Do We Wish to Live Together?

Colossians 3: 12-17; Romans 12: 9-18,21

Today I begin a series of three sermons on the flourishing of the Church. Today's sermon is on the importance of the covenant we make to God and to one another as we become covenant members of Grace Baptist Church.

Baptist congregations are distinctive in their creation of church covenants that guide their life together. These covenants, rather than Statements of Faith, or doctrinal statements, are at the heart of their community of faith.

Covenants generally revolve around three main questions: 1) Who are we?; 2) what is our mission in the world?; and 3) How do we wish to live together?

Over a decade ago, we here at Grace created the Church Covenant that is at the heart of our life together. Among those who were on the Covenant Committee were John Barnard, Tip Nicolson and Susan Rawls. They did good work, and the Covenant has served us well. This year, led by a new Covenant Committee, we will consider revisions and perhaps *new*-visions. This sermon is meant to begin a conversation, not *end* one!

A number of years ago I began a fascinating (to me) study of Baptist Church Covenants over the past several hundred years. And I have seen how important Church Covenants can be in sustaining the vision and guiding the life of a community of faith. I have also seen how they can be virtually irrelevant to the life of a church.

The latter often happens when a church adopts a Church Covenant that has been handed down to them by a denominational body. Such happened in many Southern Baptist churches in my growing up years. The Baptist Hymnal of 1956 had printed in its first pages a Church covenant written by Baptist leader J. Newton Brown in 1853. Most churches automatically adopted that covenant as their own.

It had many virtues, but most church members paid little attention to it. It had been written as the Temperance Movement in America was rising, and included the words, “We will abstain from the sell and use of alcoholic beverages.” A hundred or so years later many Baptists were crossing their fingers when they said that part!

But congregationally conceived covenants can be most helpful in sustaining congregational identity, mission and the promises we make to each other.

I saw this vividly the case at Myers Park Baptist Church. Its covenant was printed in the order of worship. It was read together when new members came to join.

Visitors would read it with interest. Some would say, “I’m going to hang around and see if they really mean what they say here!”

The beginning words set the tone: “We are a people on a journey of faith.” We haven’t arrived yet, but we are on the way!

Only one sentence was added in that Covenant’s many years of existence. That was in 2001, when the Church added the sentence, “As a community of God’s New Creation we are open to all and closed to none.” That sentence put into words our full welcome of all people, including LGBTQ people.

A covenant often describes the spiritual identity and the denominational identity of the congregation. When the New Road Baptist Church in Oxford, England, was founded in 1780, it included in its covenant these words:

We therefore denominate ourselves a Protestant Catholic Church of Christ, desirous to live in Christian peace and love with all [people], and to hold the Communion of Saints with all Protestant Churches....

It was a bold statement of their ecumenical identity. Their covenant also, as part of their broader spiritual identity, described their practice of honoring two

forms of baptism, the sprinkling of babies and the baptism by immersion of believer's baptism.

How do we at Grace “denominate” ourselves, a particularly challenging question in a “post-denominational age” when many churches have dispensed with denominational affiliation?

Can we say we are a *Baptist Christian Congregation*? An interfaith congregation that embraces those of other faiths? Can we say we are *ecumenical* in the deepest sense of that word, meaning a church that strives for unity with all Christians and friendship with all religions? We do not require a belief statement from those who wish to join us here, and we welcome those whose spiritual and moral commitments do not include a specific set of beliefs.

What are the connections with other religious and denominational bodies that we wish to sustain?

II

An important part of our spiritual identity has to do with our mission. How are we involved in the mission of God in the world? From our beginnings here at Grace we have identified ourselves as a “ministering” congregation. At the beginning of our covenant is a statement titled “Our Mission”:

We are Grace—a ministering people of God reaching beyond our walls to the needs of our local and global community.

That is at the heart of who we are, and it is printed in every Sunday's bulletin.

A church addresses anew at every moment of its life the question: Who are we and what is God calling us to do at this moment of our congregational life?

III

A third dimension of a church covenant is an expression of how we wish to live together as the Body of Christ.

The 1948 Covenant of the Baptist Union of Victoria, Australia states beautifully:

WE COVENANT

by the power of the Holy Spirit—

to walk and worship together in Christian love,

to watch over and pray for, and encourage one another,

to guard each other's reputation,

to bear each other's burdens,

to share each other's joys and sorrows,

to cultivate Christian courtesy and sympathy,

to be slow to take offence, and ready always for reconciliation.

The Covenant of St. John's Baptist Church in Charlotte, adopted, I think in the 1970's, encapsulates many of the dimensions of what a church covenant should be. Its major headings are:

- We will be faithful to the public worship of God....
- We will take seriously the responsibility and privilege of personal Christian growth....
- We will love and encourage one another in the family of the Church.
- We will be faithful stewards, as God has prospered us....
- We will be a servant church, recognizing the eternal worth of every person and believing that Christ has called us to active involvement in behalf of human brotherhood [sisterhood].

IV

Let's now turn to the biblical texts for today from Colossians and Romans, Paul's guidance about how a community of faith thrives and the ways they live together in Christ. You hear these words echoed in many of the church covenants I have cited today.

In Colossians, Paul pictures the community of faith's life in Christ as putting on a new set of clothes. The old clothes no longer fit:

Put on, then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, *compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience*, forbearing one another.

That phrase, *forbearing one another*, a bearing with one another, is often described by Paul, but largely neglected today. Bearing with one another in their foibles and flaws, in their times of difficulty and challenge, is a profound expression of love.

Put on *forgiveness* too...forgiveness! How is community ever sustained without it?

*Above all put on love,
which binds everything in perfect harmony.*

Wear Christ's love like a new set of clothes, and as you do, you will more and more become the clothes you wear.

What are the clothes we should wear to church? They are not found in fashion magazines, they are found in Christ.

And *harmony* is our goal. That's the work of the Spirit. Not tolerance, harmony! If you put on all the clothes that Paul lists, harmony will come.

Now to Romans 12. In the first part of the chapter Paul talks about the gifts of the Spirit or *charismata*, that God gives us to enable our various ministries.

Here, in the second part of the chapter, he turns to the gifts of the Spirit that build up community and help it thrive.

It is a list of powerful imperatives:

Let love be genuine. No fake, put on love. Southerners have mastered such faux love in phrases like: “Bless her heart!”

Hate what is evil

Hold fast to what is good.

Hating evil helps us turn from it, helps us fight against it. It’s okay to hate things like cruelty, injustice, and things that harm—as long, as long as we don’t become the evil we hate in our desire to defeat it.

But we also at the same time need to hold fast to what is good, love what is good. William Sloane Coffin put it this way:

Loving what is good without hating evil is sentimentality. Hating evil without loving the good just makes us damn good haters.

Love one another with mutual affection. Churches thrive on affection.

Wendell Berry says, “It all turns on affection.” That is true in every arena of life.

Affection makes work good work. Affection vitalizes friendship and relationship. What we call love can become cold. Affection warms the heart.

Outdo one another in showing honor. Let's set up a contest trying to outdo one another in showing honor! It's part of what we do in our weekly prayers together as we celebrate one another or some good work.

Do not grow slack in zeal. I think the line in St. John's covenant about being dedicated to personal spiritual growth applies here.

Be aflame with the Spirit. That is, the fire of love the Spirit brings.

Serve the Lord. The Roman Catholic worship service ends with these words: "The Mass is ended, go in peace to love and serve the Lord." What good words to accompany our leaving and going.

Then there are three imperatives for the long haul:

Rejoice in hope

Stand patient in suffering

Be constant in prayer.

Hope keeps us going. It says, like the character in *Waiting for Godot*, "I can't go on. I'll go on."

Patience in suffering waits for what God can bring to us in our suffering. I heard someone speak of being stewards of our suffering. Never waste a failure!

And be constant in prayer.

Most church covenants call us to consistent, daily, weekly prayer. There's a beautiful phrase in one old Baptist covenant which goes:

We will...not omit the great duty of prayer, both for ourselves and for others.

There is not a thriving congregation that is not a praying congregation. A great hymn on prayer calls prayer,

...The Christian's vital breath

The Christian's native air.

Contribute to the needs of the saints.

Extend hospitality to strangers.

We take care of one another in this congregation as well as other people experiencing need. And we extend the grace of the hospitality of the kingdom to all people.

Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Here is an unmistakable mark of the Christian community: we feel each other's joys and

sorrows. When we can no longer feel each other's joy and sorrow the community begins to fall apart. We suffer a kind of spiritual neuropathy in the body of Christ.

Be of one mind, live in harmony with one another. One mind?! A Baptist Church?! But Paul is talking about sharing the mind of Christ. And there's that word "harmony" again. It should be our aim, and it is a mark of the Holy Spirit. As Paul put it: "Be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the Lord of peace." Eager!

I now skip to the last of Paul's list of imperatives, one which sounds a lot like Jesus:

Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good!

We are on a goodness campaign in the world, believing God's goodness prevails over all that is evil.

I close with the words of Wendell Berry, writing of marriage. He could also have been writing on churches:

The meaning of marriage begins in the giving of words. We cannot join ourselves to one another without giving our word.

What are the kinds of words we want to give to one another?

