

Leadership as Covenant, Not Contract

Text: 1 Peter 5:1–4; Acts 20:28; Jeremiah 3:15; Hebrews 13:17

Today we're going to talk about leadership as a covenant. A covenant is not the same as a contract. In a contract one person agrees to do something, say construct a building and a second person agrees to pay the first person for his work. A contract asks, what do I have to do and what will I get when I do it? A covenant asks, how can I be faithful to my side of the agreement?

Scripture presents leadership in the people of God as a sacred, mutual commitment formed before God, sustained by grace, and oriented toward faithfulness.

I. God Is a Covenant-Making God

From Genesis to Revelation, God relates to His people through covenant. There are 7 specific covenants mentioned in the Bible, which are often categorized into three types.

One type is a conditional covenant. This is the type of covenant God made with the people of Israel after they escaped slavery in Egypt. This is called the Mosaic Covenant with Israel, because it came to the people through Moses. The Mosaic Covenant was a conditional covenant. God promised to bless the people as long as they obeyed his commandments.

Another type is Unconditional covenants. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation and that they would have a land of their own. God also made an unconditional covenant with David, that his descendants would sit on the throne of Israel forever. The unconditional covenants were promised made by God, which would hold true regardless of what Abraham or David did.

Then there are general covenants. These are the covenants made with Adam, Noah, and the new covenants which would be fulfilled through Jesus Christ. General covenants were made with one specific person or group of people, but rather involve all of humanity.

When God speaks of leadership, He does so within this covenantal framework:

“I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.” (Jeremiah 3:15)

Church leaders are not hired hands; they are covenant stewards entrusted with God’s people.

II. Leaders Are Called, Not Contracted

1 Peter 5:2–3

“Shepherd the flock of God that is among you... not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you.”

Leaders serve: Willingly, not merely dutifully. If there ever comes a time when you think, I have to do this ministry because it is my duty, you are wandering from God true call on your life.

Leaders also serve eagerly, not for personal gain. I like how the New Living Translation puts vs. 2. “Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly—not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God.” Again, if you ever start thinking about your ministry and wonder, what’s in it for me? You need to reexamine your calling.

Leaders also serve as an example, not dominating. We spoke about this at length yesterday, so I recommend you go to the Live For Him Ministries website and review that lesson.

A covenantal leader always remembers “These are not my people; they are God’s flock entrusted to my care.”

This echoes Jesus’ words in John 10—the true shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

III. The Church Entrusts, Not Consumes, Its Leaders

Hebrews 13:17

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”

Covenantal relationships are mutual. Just as leaders are accountable to God, the congregation is called to: Trust, Pray, Participate, Support

Sadly, not every congregation understands this. In some congregation the focus isn't on trust, prayer participation, and support, but rather what is the pastor doing to meet my needs. That attitude creates a very toxic environment. I say this from personal experience. My first church that I had after I finished seminary was a congregation that thought only of its own desires. As a result, that congregation had over 20 different pastors during the forty years prior to my arrival. That means, on average, a pastor stayed at that congregation less than 2 year. I followed this pattern and left after two very long and trying years.

Thankfully, there are congregations who understand the covenantal model of ministry and asks, “How do we together remain faithful to Christ?”

Leaders are not spiritual service providers; they are soul-watchers, and that responsibility is too heavy to carry alone.

IV. Covenant Involves Faithfulness Through Difficulty

Covenants between individuals and God and among individuals endure through repentance, forgiveness, and restoration.

Paul tells the Ephesian elders:

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock...” (Acts 20:28)

Why such vigilance? Because wolves come. Trials arise. Conflicts happen. Covenant does not deny these realities—it perseveres through them.

A covenantal church does not flee at the first sign of tension.

A covenantal leader does not abandon the flock when ministry becomes costly.

V. Christ Is the Center of the Covenant

Ultimately, church leadership is covenantal because Christ Himself is the head of the church (Ephesians 1:22). Leaders and congregations alike stand under His lordship.

Jesus is: The Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4), The Mediator of the New Covenant (Hebrews 9:15), The One who binds us together in love (John 17:23)

Every pastoral promise and every congregational commitment finds its meaning in Him.

Conclusion: Renewing the Covenant

Church leadership is not a business agreement.

It is not a power structure.

It is a holy covenant formed by God, for God, and sustained by God.

So today we ask: Leaders: Will you shepherd with humility, faithfulness, and love?