

Church Planter Network Resource

# The Covenant for Church Planting Today



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Imagine for a moment a group of people who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They meet together regularly. This congregation does not always agree but are committed to doing all things with one accord. They are close, you might even say they are intimate. There is an openness within the group. It is obvious that a love relationship prevails. They seem to hang together no matter what. This group would be partially characterized by the following:

Finding and returning lost sheep is not just a parable.  
You miss a gathering one morning and by 2 p.m. you have a dozen phone calls inquiring about your health.

Divorce from the group is never an option because there is a strong commitment to a love relationship. Sound idealistic? Of course not . . . in Christ this can be a reality.

The new generation in the United States can be characterized by the word “broken”. On a recent radio broadcast a young man carefully considering marriage and having come from a broken home, had his poem read. The poem was entitled “Broken.” It went something like this

broken dreams  
broken trust  
broken relations  
broken family.....

This young man wanted all the hearers to know what he was feeling about life in general. He probably had 25 broken in his poem. Could this not be said of the church today? Perhaps, like never before churches are firing pastors, splitting, and/or dying. In the Southern Baptist Convention alone, recent indications are that 75 to 80 percent of churches are plateaued or declining. Fifty percent of church members have not attended their church in more than a month. Where are we headed and how can we keep new churches from going there?

This paper does not propose to solve all of our problems. However, there may be one little piece of the puzzle that has been forgotten or put aside as irrelevant--covenant relationships.

The section on the church in "The Baptist Faith and Message" begins

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a local body of baptized believers who are associated by *covenant* in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the two ordinances of Christ, committed to His teachings, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth."1

Why could a renewed emphasis on covenant or covenant life play an important role in solving some of our current church problems as well as reaching new broken generations? The answer lies in God's purpose for a covenant relationship with man and then men with each other.

John Walton in *Covenant: God's Purpose*. God's plan sets out a thesis that is important for us.

God has a plan in history that He is sovereignly executing. The goal of that plan is for Him to be in relationship with the people whom He has created. It would be difficult for people to enter into a relationship with a God whom they do not know. If His nature were concealed, obscured, or distorted, an honest relationship would be impossible. In order to clear the way for this relationship, then, God has undertaken as a primary objective a program of self-revelation. He wants people to know him. The mechanism that drives this program is the covenant, and the instrument is Israel. The purpose of the covenant is to reveal God.2

Covenant is central to our understanding of God's character, what He wants for us, and how He plans to carry out His ultimate purpose. Without understanding covenant the church will miss the "big picture."

God's ultimate purpose or "the big picture" is expressed in 1 Cor. 15:28: "that God may be all and in all." Fromke, in summarizing about God's one ultimate intentions, has said,

The Father is realizing that which His heart has yearned for throughout the ages--a vast family of sons conformed to the image of His only Begotten. His is a family who will bring to Him paternal honor, glory, and satisfaction. The Lord Jesus, as the Son, is receiving what the Father has purposed for Him--a many membered Body that will be for the expression of Himself throughout the universe.

The Holy Spirit is receiving a glorious temple built of living stones that will be for His eternal habitation.

This is truly so uniquely divine as to be utterly beyond human comprehension! The Three-in-one Godhead is finding Triune delight in one great intention – the Family, the Body, and the Temple are all one and the same. All are three in one. And furthermore, the Father has intended for His Son to have the pre-eminence in all things. It is no marvel then that the Lord Jesus is gloriously referred to as:

Christ, the first-born – in the Family. “He is the Beginning, the First-born from among the dead, so that He alone in everything and in every respect might occupy the chief place – stand first and be pre-eminent” (Col 1:18 Amplified Bible).

Christ, the head – of the Body. “He also is the Head of (His) body, the church .... For it has pleased (the Father) that all the divine fullness – the sum total of the divine perfection, powers and attributes – should dwell in Him permanently” (Col 1:18,19 Amplified Bible)

Christ, the chief cornerstone – of the Temple. “Behold, I lay in Zion a chosen, precious chief cornerstone .... The very Stone which the builders rejected has become the main Cornerstone.... (1 Pet 1:6,7 Amplified Bible).”<sup>3</sup>

It can be seen then, that in all three of these expressions of Christ the Lord Jesus has pre-eminence. Jesus becomes the covenant for us. He is at the heart of our relationship with our heavenly Father and with one another.

For the purpose of this paper, we will consider only one covenant (even though many see as many as eight), with two phases or expressions. The first is expressed in Exodus 19:5,6a, “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (NASB) The new covenant says “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” (Jer 31:33 NASB; also found in Heb 10:16)

This new covenant is written on our hearts in Christ Jesus. Humans are not the central theme of the Bible or God's plan. Jesus is who it is all about. We keep reminding ourselves at Christmas that "Jesus is the reason for the season..." But this is true in everything. Too much time is spent focusing on our wants, desires, and needs. Because of this we fail to view all that is around us from God's point of view.

Let us explore God's view of His church. First, the church--both universal and local--is His. Because it is His we should act accordingly. Far too often we act from perceived principles and methods and not from a fresh encounter with the living Christ. We substitute human leadership for divine leadership. We canonize our traditions in place of the gospel. As the head of His church our Lord, through the workings of His Spirit, desires to lead us into fresh expressions of service with Him daily. There is a substitution of the Bride of Christ for a glorified club. We must cease striving to do church for Him and let Him create church from the Life which indwells us. This could lead to an infinite number of models of church.

Second, our Father sees His church as His family. A body made up of brothers and sisters bonded together by a common Spirit. The Lord is sensitive to how we treat each other. The covenant we have with the Father should lead brothers and sisters in a local New Testament church to be covenanted together as stated earlier in the quote from the "Baptist Faith and Message." Perhaps baptism is ultimately symbolic of entering into covenant with each other, as it is a symbol of the covenant we have entered into with the Father through Christ. The Lord's Supper possibly could be a renewal of our covenant with Him and each other. The cross, as our one and only symbol, reminds us of the two directions in which the covenant takes place; vertically with our Father and horizontally with one another. The quality of our horizontal relationships is proportionate to our vertical relationship. Hence, the New Testament is full of

covenant language. For example, the “love one another” passages in 1 John 4:7-12 shows us how the covenant is to be lived out. The New Testament is full of one another verses (see appendix B) which can be summed up in “love one another.” Rick Warren pastor of Saddleback Church has said that today's church ought to be purpose-driven and value-based. The critical value for the New Testament church in any century and for any generation ought to be relationships. As is true with His Word, His church is about relationships not programs and ministries. Programs and ministries will be born out of righteous relationships. Covenant is at the heart and soul of enduring relationships.

As our Father views His church, so must we. We must see Jesus as the alpha and omega of everything that happens. There are these words from our Lord . . . “But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ.” (Matt. 23:8-10, NASB) We sometimes aspire to bigness and greatness when the Lord works mostly in still, small ways. Most of the time we see the Lord’s work taking very practical steps.

How then could a new church work toward being a covenanted people? One very practical process is found in the North American Mission Board’s “The Church Constitution Guide.”

*A new congregation should take the following steps toward adopting a covenant:*

Step 1: Develop sensitivity to the Lord’s leadership. There comes a time when the Lord “births” His church. At that point, the covenanting process should begin.

Step 2: Lead the congregation in a study of Scripture. Concentrate on the “one another” passages. Examine the New Testament for characteristics of Christians’ relationships to each other in local church.

Step 3: Identify the relational elements that are indispensable in the church. Structure these elements into a document that includes statements of introduction and conclusion.

Step 4: Secure unanimous and personal agreement by every church member. The covenant is a statement that defines the relationships into which new members are received. It also becomes a clear statement for discipline.

A covenanting service should be a significant event in the life of a new church. It is not a goal to achieve. It is an outward expression of a church’s internal awareness of its status before God and its spiritual birth as a local expression of the body of Christ. A church should celebrate its covenant often.

A sample covenant from "The Church Constitution Guide" is included in Appendix A of this paper. However, rather than copying it, the better route would be to lead the congregation to write it own as a result of studying Scripture and dialoguing until unity can be found. It would seem an ill-fated task to work out a covenant statement that did not have as an ultimate end complete unity. Do not mistake uniformity for unity. A pastor who writes a covenant for his people and elicits compliance will have always something less than God’s ideal. Unity can be hard to achieve but the results can be enduring and most rewarding. For here is where the Lord is truly free to bless.

There can be no real covenant without a “unity of spirit” (Phil 2:2). Covenant not only binds us to our Father but to one another. Is covenant the answer to the church’s woes? Certainly not the only answer, but perhaps an important piece. New churches with a committed people to being in covenant may have a greater chance at being a healthy church than if covenant relationships barely exist. Covenant is like the marriage relationship ... “for better or worse, for

richer or poorer till death do us part.” We need to work toward covenant relationships in a new and changing world.

## Notes

1. “The Baptist Faith and Message” (Nashville, Tenn.: Sunday School Board, SBC, 1963, p.12.
2. Walton, John H., *Covenant: God’s Purpose, God’s Plan*. Zondervan, 1994, pg. 24.
3. Fromke, DeVern, *Ultimate Intention*. Sure foundation, 1963, pgs. 179-180.

## Appendix A

### Sample Church Covenant

We, the members of \_\_\_\_\_ Church, do hereby covenant with each other before God to:

Be family; to be committed to each other; to love, accept, and forgive each other until death or God's call causes us to part.

Live in Jesus Christ and take His commands seriously.

Help one another grow toward Christian maturity by bearing one another's burdens, encouraging one another, exhorting one another, praying for one another, confessing our sins to one another, speaking the truth in love to one another, admonishing one another, building up one another, teaching one another, comforting one another, submitting to one another, serving one another, patiently bearing with one another, being hospitable to one another, greeting one another, living in peace with one another, regarding one another as more important than ourselves, caring for one another, exercising our spiritual gifts to serve one another, being kind and tenderhearted to one another, being devoted to one another, accepting one another, forgiving one another, loving one another.

We invite fellow members to pray for us, teach us, correct us, or rebuke us, if necessary, in a spirit of gentleness and humility should we stray from our Lord's commands, because the thing we desire most in life is to serve Christ. We voluntarily submit ourselves to one another and to the discipline of the church. Such discipline will always be for the loving purpose of restoration – restoration to fellowship with God and with the covenant community – and it will always be done in accordance with Matthew 18:15-22.

Bring honor to the body of Christ by maintaining a good testimony.

We enter into this covenant because we have the common purpose of obeying Jesus Christ, and because we believe that we need one another's help to do this.

As believers, and disciples of Jesus Christ, we have entered into a covenant relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – with the God who revealed Himself in Jesus. Since the blessing and promise of the covenant been freely extended and given to us, out of wonder, love thanksgiving, and reverence, we hereby accept and take up the covenant responsibilities that go with such a privilege. This is our reasonable service and we should do nothing less.

God helps us all! We rely on His grace and hold fast to His promise that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

## Appendix B

### “One another” passages of the New Testament

Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his saliness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another” (Mark 9:50).

“A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another” (John 13:34).

“By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35).

“This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

“These things I command you, that ye love one another” (John 15:17).

“Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8).

“And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you” (1 Thess. 3:12).

“But as touching brotherly love you need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another” (1 Thess. 4:9).

“Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently” (1 Pet. 1:22).

“For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (1 John 3:11).

“And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment” (1 John 3:23).

“Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God” (1 John 4:7).

“Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

“No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12).

“And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another” (2 John 1:5)

“Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another” (Rom. 12:10).

“Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits” (Rom. 12:16).

“Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus” (Rom. 15:5).

“Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another” (Rom. 14:19).

“Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do” (1 Thess. 5:11).

“Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7)

“And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another” (Rom. 15:14).

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Co. 3:16)

“Salute one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ salute you” (Rom. 16:16).

“All the brethren greet you. Greet ye one another with an holy kiss” (1 Cor. 16:20).

“Greet one another with an holy kiss” (2 Cor. 13:12)

“Greet ye one another with a kiss of charity. Peace be with you all that are in Christ Jesus. Amen: (1 Pet. 5:14).

“That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another” (1 Cor. 12:25).

“For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to be flesh, but by love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13).

“With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love” (Eph. 4:2).

“And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32).

“Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye” (Col. 3:13)

“Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God” (Eph. 5:21).

“Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5)

“Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thess. 4:18).

“But exhort one another daily, while it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13).

“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Heb. 10:25).

“And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works” (Heb. 10:24).

“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (Jas 5:16).

“Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous” (1 Pet. 3:8).

“Use hospitality one to another without grudging” (1 Pet. 4:9)

“As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pet. 4:10).

“Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way” (Rom. 14:13)

“But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another” (Gal. 5:15).

“Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another” (Gal. 5:26).

“Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds” (Col. 3:9).

“Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge” (Jas. 4:11).

“Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door” (Jas. 5:9).