

Week 6 Membership that Matters

Today, I want to ask you a question: What obligations does church membership carry with it? All too often, the answer that I think you would get from many church members in America today is, “Obligations? What do you mean? Isn’t it good enough to have my name on a church roll somewhere?” Or another person might concede, “Well, OK, I should do more than just have my name on a church roll. I should probably should drop in on Christmas and Easter every year – weather permitting, of course.” There are others who say, “I’m much more spiritual than that Christmas and Easter bunch. You can count on me every week to be there in my same seat on the same pew. But you shouldn’t count on me to interact with many people, and really, you shouldn’t depend on me to give. And if you get right down to it, you shouldn’t bank on me to serve in any area of the church’s ministry. But I’ll be there.” Here’s our question for today: Are any of these people doing all we see local church members being commanded to do in the Bible? Or is there something more that’s expected of you if you’re a member?

Today, we’re going to survey some important commitments that Scripture requires from the members of a local church. Historically, churches have found it helpful to summarize these commitments in something called a church covenant, which is a document that states how members are pledging to conduct themselves as members of a local church. A church covenant is different from a church’s statement of faith in that while the statement of faith emphasizes doctrine (what we believe), the covenant emphasizes conduct (how we commit to live). Most churches include or reference both their statement of faith and their covenant within their church constitution and bylaws and require prospective members to read and agree to these before joining the church. That way, every member of the church will join agreeing that he or she pledges to live by these commitments.

And today, it is my pleasure to present to you a church covenant that the elders have drafted and are proposing to you. As we turn our attention to the proposed covenant, let me begin by saying this: Scripture gives us many, many commands regarding the way we should live our lives. It would not be practical to list every one of them here in our church covenant. We’d be here all afternoon if we did! Instead, what this covenant attempts to do is to take the major categories of commands in Scripture and summarize them into short statements of commitment. In almost every one of these, more could be said, but for the sake of brevity, we have just tried to hit the highlights.

Proposed Church Covenant

The covenant begins with an introductory paragraph:

Having, as we trust, been led by the Spirit of God to repent of our sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and having been baptized upon our profession of faith, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, relying on God’s gracious aid, solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with each other.

In essence, we’re saying that we are a group of baptized believers seeking to covenant together as we depend upon God’s help.

After that it dives into the first commitment we're making together, the first of the "we will" statements:

We will recognize the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ as Head over this church, and we will submit ourselves to His will as revealed in Scripture. Scripture, therefore, will occupy the place of ultimate authority in our doctrine and practice.

Colossians 1:18 He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. (See also Eph. 1:22; 4:15)

2 Timothy 3:16-17 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (See also 2 Pet. 1:20-21)

Notice here what we begin by addressing: It's the question of authority in the local church. And notice what we're saying: Jesus Christ is Lord of this church; He is the head. Here He has first place as He does in everything. Folks, we're not even talking about "making Jesus Lord of this church." The news for us is, He already is Lord. We're simply recognizing and submitting to that.

And how do we know what Jesus wants us to do? The answer is, He wants us to obey Scripture. Jesus spoke very highly of Scripture. He said of it, "Your word is truth," and "Scripture cannot be broken." And He said that the Holy Spirit would bring the apostles to remember and understand all that Jesus taught them. This we believe they recorded perfectly in Scripture, which we believe is the word of God. Folks, this is a bedrock, foundational principle for us in terms of the way we do church: Scripture is God's word. What God says is authoritative. Therefore, Scripture is authoritative; in fact, it's our ultimate authority. By saying that, we are simply acknowledging God's rightful place of authority over us. God, not Christians, decides what is good and right and best for us, and we are pledging to submit ourselves to His revelation.

We do not want it to be up for debate in our church whether we will obey Scripture. We may discuss how to interpret it or how best to go about obeying it, but whether or not we will submit to God's word will not, by God's grace, be an argument that we intend to have. This statement seeks to safeguard that by having us all agree from the beginning on Scripture's authority in the church.

We will seek to live carefully in the world, denying ungodliness and worldly desires and remembering that, as we have been united with Christ in His death to sin, so also we have been raised with Him to walk in newness of life.

Titus 2:11-14 *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,¹² instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age,¹³ looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus,¹⁴ who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.*

Romans 6:1-4 *What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?² May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?³ Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus*

have been baptized into His death?⁴ Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

This statement concerns our conduct, and it summarizes a large chunk of NT teaching.

We are to live differently, as those who have been saved, denying ungodliness and worldly desires. We are to put sin to death by the Spirit's power. And the reason we can do this is because we have been united with Christ in His death to sin, His burial, and His resurrection to walk in newness of life. Those things that are true of Christ are now true of us, too. Sin no longer has power over us, such that we must obey its desires. We have been set free from its mastery and our slavery to it. As a result our conduct can and should change. Now, we are to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus and present our bodies as instruments of righteousness to God. The time already past is sufficient for us to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles. Now we are to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the desires of men, but for the will of God, obeying Him gladly from the heart. And we are committing as a church to help one another do just that. This statement says that we are a church that takes personal holiness seriously.

We will not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, nor neglect to pray for ourselves, others, and the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

***Hebrews 10:23-25** Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful;²⁴ and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds,²⁵ not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.*

***Ephesians 6:18-20** With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints,¹⁹ and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel,²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak. (See also Phil. 4:6; Lk. 18:1-8; Rev. 22:20)*

Hebrews 10:23-25 contains an important, but often neglected commandment of Scripture.

In order to kill sin, we need one another. We need to be stimulated to love and good deeds. And in order for that to happen, you need to be regularly assembling together with your local church family.

I'm not going to place a number on how many services you should attend each week, but I will say this: The question you should be asking is not, "How seldom can I attend church and still obey this command?" It should be, "How often can I attend?" I understand about various work schedules, and I understand that not all of our health permits us to come as frequently as we'd like, but I don't suspect that this is really the reason many of us often don't attend. I want to challenge each of us to increase our commitment to our local church in this coming year and to make an effort to be there as much as possible. Be there to serve, be there to learn, be there to grow in godliness, and be there to help others learn and grow in godliness.

This statement also deals with our pledge to pray for ourselves, one another, and the return of our Lord. We want to be a praying church, not only during Wednesday night

prayer time, but also in our private devotions and throughout the day. We should be encouraged to pray b/c our loving heavenly Father delights to give good gifts when His children ask for them.

We will seek to worship God in spirit and in truth, both in our personal lives and in our corporate assemblies.

Romans 12:1 *Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.*

Colossians 3:16 *Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

This statement recognizes that all of life is worship – not only what we do here in our gatherings at church, but also the way we live our lives throughout the week as living sacrifices before God. The way you do your job, the way you treat your spouse, the way you eat and drink and do all that you do – you are worshiping something or someone and it should be God. That’s the reason you were created, to glorify God. This statement says that we want to honor God with both corporate and lifestyle worship that responds with praise, gratitude, and obedience to who He has revealed Himself to be and for what He has done for us.

We will work and pray for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We will walk together in brotherly love, rejoicing at each other’s happiness, and endeavoring with tenderness and sympathy to bear each other’s burdens and sorrows.

Ephesians 4:1-3 *Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love,³ being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (See also Col. 3:12-15)*

Romans 12:10-15 *Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor;¹¹ not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;¹² rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer,¹³ contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.*

We said quite a bit last week about the importance of unity in the church, having a common mindset focused on selfless humility and mutual love. We are also to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, thereby sharing one another’s burdens. This describes a church that shares life with one another. Gone is the individualism that keeps one another at arm’s length. Gone is the Lone Ranger mentality that I don’t need you. This is a place where you can be real. In many churches, the members are just strangers passing up and down the aisles during greeting time. In our church, I pray that you would form your closest friendships, that you would laugh and cry together, and that you would help one another bear life’s

burdens and grow in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's a special thing to be a part of a church family like that. Let's commit that we want to be that church.

We will exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other, and faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require. We will submit ourselves to the church in matters of discipline and seek to restore those members caught in any trespass.

Galatians 6:1 *Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. (See also Matt. 18:15-18; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2:5-11)*

We are also making a commitment to watch over one another as members. We are allowing each other the opportunity to offer needed words of correction in our lives. Scripture says, "Better is open rebuke than love that is concealed." We need each other to lovingly speak truth to one another. And we need to go after one another if we become caught in sin in an effort to restore each another to walking with the Lord. This statement is a commitment to be an active part of a church that disciplines and restores.

We will trust God by submitting ourselves to the leaders He has given us, who keep watch over our souls as those who will give an account, and we will follow their leadership inasmuch as they do not lead us contrary to Scripture.

Hebrews 13:17 *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. (See also 1 Thess. 5:12-13)*

I've heard this saying before, and I think it reflects Scripture's teaching: "You should trust and follow your leaders or replace them and find those you can trust and follow." Not trusting and not following are not a biblical option. In fact, trusting your leaders, insofar as they are not violating Scripture, really amounts to trusting the God who gave them to you. However, in some churches people constantly oppose their leaders and persistently rebel against their leadership. If the pastors lead them to sing a new song in worship, or choose a certain teaching curriculum, or plan a certain outreach activity, these people may dig in their heels and oppose it. I would simply say this: These people have yet to comprehend that authority is a gift from God to them. When a church is led by godly, biblically-qualified elders that the congregation can trust, their leadership should be one of the greatest joys and blessings that a church receives. This statement is a pledge to make sure that we have such leaders, and then to follow their leadership.

We will, by a pure and loving example and faithful gospel proclamation, seek the salvation of the lost. We will, by faithful instruction from the Scriptures, seek to present every believer complete in Christ.

Romans 10:14-17 *How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵ How will they preach unless they are*

sent? Just as it is written, "HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!"¹⁶ However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, "LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT?"¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. (See also Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Pet. 2:12)

Colossians 1:28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. (See also Acts 20:32; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 2:2)

I'm going to say more about this next week, so I'll save my comments for then.

We will endeavor to bring up our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord and to cultivate marriages that display the relationship between Christ and His bride, the church.

Ephesians 6:4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Ephesians 5:22-25,28 Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.²³ For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body.²⁴ But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her...²⁸ So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies.

This section concerns the family, which was God's design from the beginning. We want to parent our children biblically in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, so that by God's grace they might grow up to trust Christ for salvation and to live lives that glorify Him. We also want marriages that point the world toward the Lord Jesus Christ and His relationship to His bride, the church. Your marriage is not fundamentally about making you happy; it's about displaying the glory of Christ. We want you to know that if you join our church, you are joining a church that will fight for and defend your marriage, and we will offer you teaching and resources to help you be a better spouse and parent.

We will contribute cheerfully, regularly, and generously to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations.

2 Corinthians 9:6-8 Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.⁷ Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed;

Scripture says that the love of money is the root of all sorts of evil. The sin isn't in having money; it's in loving it too much. Money serves as a functional god in so many of our lives today. But God doesn't want our money to rule us. Instead, we are to give generously, even sacrificially, to our church, its ministries, and those who are in need. A wise pastor has said, "The purpose of money is that we might, by the way we use

it, demonstrate that God, not money, is of supreme value.” The way you give of your money, rather than hoarding it, displays for all to see the truth that God and His kingdom are of greater value than attempting to build our own. Think about this – God has given you the financial resources He’s given you for a reason. It’s not so that you could build your own empire, retire at 45, move to a beach house in the Florida keys, and spend the next 40 years of your life playing shuffleboard and collecting sand dollars. That may be the American dream, or something like it, but let me say this: in kingdom terms, that is a life wasted. You will one day stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account, and you do not want to tell Christ that shuffleboard trophies and a handful of sand dollars is what you’ve done with your money. Instead, plan to use your money for the furtherance of God’s kingdom. Give generously and freely to your church. Give to see the glorious gospel go forth among the nations.¹

The NT doesn’t put a percentage amount on how much you should give. It simply says to be as generous as you can be. This statement is our joint commitment not to be mastered by the love of money, but to use it in God’s service and thereby demonstrate that God, not our money, is supremely valuable.

We will, when we move from this place, as soon as possible, unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God’s Word. (*See Heb. 10:25*)

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

All Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible.

So, here’s my challenge to you: Take this covenant home. Study it, and study the Scripture texts provided. And so long as you think that it is faithful to what Scripture commands of you, I challenge you to “own it,” to “buy in” to it, to commit to it as expressing the principles you would insist that future members of your church embrace. We’re not interested in an idea of membership that just involves your name on a church roll and nothing more. We’re interested in membership that matters. And membership that matters is one of the foundations of a healthy, God-honoring church. By God’s grace, may we be just that.

¹ On this, see John Piper’s very helpful book, *Don’t Waste Your Life*.