

Update

Bylaws Review Team

Bylaws Review Team Answers Frequently Asked Questions About Membership Covenants

Dear Church Family.

One year ago, the church elected a special team to review the current FBCTC Constitution and Bylaws. The Bylaws Review Team, as it came to be called, reviewed those documents and recommended that a new Constitution and Bylaws be written. Subsequently, the church affirmed this recommendation. Over the course of the past year, the Bylaws Review Team has learned a great deal about church polity. We have sought the Lord for guidance and have listened to the concerns offered by members of our congregation. We have examined the Constitutions and Bylaws of other healthy churches, and have determined that one way to strengthen the testimony of our church is by having members sign a Membership Covenant and by offering membership classes.

To that end, the Bylaws Review Team presented a Membership Covenant to the church in June, which was then affirmed in the June business meeting. At the same meeting, we presented to the church a draft of a new Constitution for the congregation's review. We held a series of "town hall meetings" to entertain questions and suggestions, and received a number of very fair and reasonable corrections and suggestions. Because of this, we deemed that it was wise to make the necessary corrections to the Constitution, re-submit it for review, and wait until September 20 to ask the church to vote on it in a special called business meeting on that day.

During the town hall meetings and in conversations with some members of our congregation, a number of questions regarding the new Membership Covenant arose. The Bylaws Team has taken those questions

and compiled them in a list for your review, in order that any concerns that you may have about this Covenant may be addressed directly. They are also available online at

www.fbcthecolony.org/bylaws

as are the latest draft of the Constitution, a list of frequently asked questions about elders, and other information to enlighten the congregation about the work that the Bylaws Review Team has been doing.

The Bylaws Review Team would like to thank you for your patience and support. We have heard from many that are praying for us and we certainly appreciate this. We hope that you will continue to pray for us in the days ahead. We hope to complete the work set before us in a way that glorifies God.

In Christ,

FBCTC Bylaws Review Team
James Barfield
John Carlsen
Jennifer Cottle
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IMPORTANT DATES

September 9 @ 7 pm – Town Hall Meeting
September 16 @ 7 pm – Town Hall Meeting
September 20 @ 10:35 am - Special Business Meeting to affirm new constitution (please make note of special time)

Frequently Asked Questions about Church Membership Covenants

The Church in America

A Ft. Worth Southern Baptist church struggles over whether to allow homosexuals to be a part of the church pictorial directory. Another area church schedules a "pet blessing" service.

Much of the culture has seeped into the local church. We live in a transitional time for the Church in America. Major seismic shifts are taking place. For example, 80% to 90% of SBC churches are in a state of decline or have leveled off and have been for fifteen years. This trend, which exists in all denominations and conventions, has led to closing of approximately seventy-two North American churches at the end of every week!

If this drift continues, 60% of all existing Christian churches in America will disappear before 2050. It appears that the Lord does indeed remove a church's lampstand if it continues to neglect His Word (see Rev. 2 and 3). Only 37% of SBC members show up for the primary worship service in their churches. This statistic should lead us to consider a few related questions:

If we attended class only 37% of the time, would your average professor give us a passing grade?

If we were faithful to our spouse 37% of the time, would this be acceptable and God-honoring?

If our car started 37% of the time, would we think it was time to get it fixed?

Q: What is a covenant?

A: A church covenant can be described in five different ways.

A church covenant is a promise - a promise made to God, to a local church, and to one's self.

A church covenant is a summary of how we agree to live. While our statement of faith is a good summary of what we believe, our church covenant is a summary of how we agree to live - more importantly, it is a summary of how God would have us live. It does not include every explicit command regarding obedience, but it does give a general summary of what it means to live as a disciple of Christ.

A church covenant is a sign of commitment - a commitment to God, to His church, and to personal holiness.

A church covenant is an ethical statement. Historian Charles W. DeWeese writes, "A church covenant is a series of written pledges based on the Bible which church members voluntarily make to God and to one another regarding their basic moral and spiritual commitments and the practice of their faith" (Baptist Church Covenants, p. viii). One theologian calls church covenants the "ethical counterpart to confessions of faith."

A church covenant can be an important part of applying a Christian worldview to every aspect of our lives. Inherent in the purpose of a church covenant is the understanding that church membership involves being held accountable to live in a manner consistent with a common understanding of Scripture.

A church covenant is a biblical standard. As members of a church, we exhort one another to live holy lives, and we challenge brothers and sisters persisting in sin.

Q: Why have people sign a covenant?

A: The covenant is simply a discipleship tool that is used to help fulfill the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ: "...make disciples of all nations...teaching them *to observe* all that I commanded you..." (cf. Matthew 28:16-20, italics added).

What if our nation's founding fathers did not sign the Declaration of Independence? What if a groom refused to sign the marriage license on the wedding day? Would you get a loan if you did not sign for it? How many things do we sign for relating to our child's school, health care, or sports activities?

Yet our church is engaged in the most serious and joyful endeavor in the history of humanity: building believers who reach others for Christ (cf. Matthew 28:16-20). Because of the nature of our mission, the glory of God is at stake and the destiny of souls are on the line.

Signing something creates an awareness of the commitment being made. We have lost what Jesus meant when He said to take up our cross and follow Him in the American church (cf. Luke 9:23). Jesus told us that in order to be truly His we must make Him first above all other relationships and things of this world (Matthew 10:37-39; Luke 9:25). Consequently, when you put your name on the covenant you are affirming the pursuit of following Jesus according to God's Word with the church family. This is done in a spirit of mutual love, respect, and accountability.

Q: Isn't it legalistic to have people sign a covenant?

A: Legalism is when a person trusts a set of rules or regulations in order to gain acceptance or salvation from God. There is no prohibition in Scripture against signing a church covenant.

Q: Are we in danger of becoming a cult?

A: A cult is any religious group whose doctrines contain major deviations from historic Christianity. Our church covenant helps guard against such a danger.

Q: Doesn't it diminish the New Covenant in Christ to require a church covenant to be signed?

A: Signing the church covenant is just another way to publicly affirm our sincere faith. What diminishes the New Covenant is when hundreds of church members who claim to be under the New Covenant and yet could care less about its meaning or the loving Lordship of Jesus Christ. The New Covenant is diminished when those who claim His Name live in willful, ongoing opposition to the New Covenant.

Q: Is the membership covenant creating an elite membership?

A: God's Word has been so neglected and compromised that simply following His Word may seem "elite", but in reality the purpose is to help us make faithful servants of our members. It helps

establish a more faithful, more biblical membership. Membership has lost its meaning in the modern church and we want to change this by a return to God's Word and for His glory.

Q: Why should "long-standing" members have to sign the covenant?

A: Why wouldn't members who are already faithful want to help set an example for others? It would not seem fair to have prospective new members sign the covenant when others have not. This is a great opportunity to help lead and shape the next generation in the church.

Q: Is the membership covenant a legal document?

A: Yes, any local church's membership card is considered a legal document, just as is your current membership card.

Q: What about church discipline?

A: The words of Jesus and the apostle Paul are always the best to follow on any issue, including church discipline (cf. Matthew 18:15-18; ; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Galatians 6:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; 1 Timothy 5:19-20; Titus 3:9-11).

Many people fail to make a clear distinction between the concepts of punishment and discipline. Punishment avenges wrong and asserts justice. Discipline serves to lovingly correct the one who has failed to live according to the standards of the Scriptures.

Be a Part of Turning the Tide

Last year it took 64 members to reach one soul for Christ, an increase of 45% from the previous year. Again, the covenant is simply a discipleship tool that is used to help fulfill the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ: "...make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all that I commanded you..." (cf. Matthew 28:16-20, italics added).

Sources:

The New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. Walter Martin, Kingdom of the Cults, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1985).

Carl Laney, A Guide to Church Discipline (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1985), 79.

Matthew Schmucker, 9Marks Director, "Membership Matters," [Membership Matters - What is Our Church Covenant?](#).



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Is the membership covenant legalistic?

Here's how a leader of a prominent, healthy, growing church in our area has responded to this question:

Perspective and position are important. Peering over the edge at the top of the Grand Canyon is quite different from standing at the river below and gazing up. Both views produce awe, but they are very distinct feelings. The former sense of awe is accompanied by a healthy fear and respect as the very real danger of falling is comprehended. The latter view allows the participant the opportunity to feel immersed in the canyon without the fear of death. Both are real views of the canyon, but each stirs up diverse emotions in us. Perspective and position have consequences on how we live life and how we interpret the life which we live.

Recently there has been some hesitation and concern among

potential members regarding our membership covenant. This unease is often related to a fear that the prohibition of certain behaviors is a promotion of the legalistic spirit against which we often teach and preach. Why list certain sins and not others, why not merely list the command to love God and consequent command to love others, why list any behaviors at all?

Position

First, we must keep in mind that the covenant is in no way intended as a means into the relationship with God. Positionally speaking, those to whom the covenant is addressed are those who have already tasted of the goodness of the Lord through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

While it is certainly true that we are brought into and kept within salvation by grace alone, such a belief does not negate the very real necessity of subsequent obedience to the Lord.

This is the exact struggle that most of the writers of the New Testament battled. Paul, the defender of grace alone, wrote in Romans 6 "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" James, responding to a similar misconception of grace, responded by writing, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?"

In case you are curious, he expects you to answer "no." That type of faith does not save. Elsewhere he calls such a faith "dead" and "useless." John too wrote about this in his first epistle, "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says, 'I know him' but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him..." The apostles were very concerned lest we misinterpret grace as a license for sin. The covenant is intended not for those who are in a

position of disbelief, but for those who are already "in Christ."

Position is crucial.

Perspective

We, as followers of Jesus, have not only the responsibility, but also the opportunity to respond to His commands with glad obedience. This is what I mean by the importance of perspective. The membership covenant simply enlightens us to opportunities to obey.

We should desperately want to be conformed to the image of Christ. We should fervently desire to "put off [the] old self, which belongs to [our] former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of [our] mind, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24).

We will fight for that because the Scriptures say that we must and can fight for that. Granted we do not fight alone, our help and hope is the Spirit of God, but we battle nonetheless (Romans 8:13). The sinful flesh wants nothing to do with God and His holiness. It is by nature opposed to the Spirit and His work in us (Galatians 5:17). When we fall into sin or feel the enticement of worldly desires, we should not remember the covenant and think "oh yeah, I signed something that says I need to confess this."

Rather, we should remember the Scripture which promises grace to those who bring their struggles into the light and we should long for that grace. We should remember that we have the opportunity to fellowship with God and that unconfessed sin inhibits us from the fullness of that communion.

All we have done in the membership covenant is tried to sum up what Jesus has told us regarding following Him. We are not adding to Scripture, we are not negating grace, we are not promoting legalism, we are simply saying, "These are a few areas in which we have the opportunity to gladly obey the sweet commands of our Lord." When you read through the membership covenant don't think "I have to do this," but instead think "I get to do this."

Perspective is important.

In the end, we want to commend love for Jesus Christ, but this love must not and cannot be separated from obedience to His commands. As He has said, "If you love Me, you will obey My commands."

Geoff Ashley
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http://hv.thevillagechurch.net/resource_files/articles/Ordinances/Membership_Covenant_Legalistic.pdf