

Part III

CHURCH ISSUES

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"The New Covenant"

- 1 Co 11:25

It does not take reading many books on the subject of "home church" to realize that the development and implementation of a church covenant is an important subject in the so-called "home church movement." In fact most all home churches that have been around any significant length of time agree that the single most vital element in maintaining a home church is a properly developed covenant. Lois Barrett, author of a popular home church book stated that "the one thing that all house churches have in common is a covenant" (*Building The House Church*, 29). Her reasoning for a covenant is based on three arguments.

The Argument For A Church Covenant

1) *We enter covenant type relationships by default.* All groups have a sense of "groupness" which works out in a set of guidelines. Even if unwritten, such a guideline defines who is in the group, what is that basis of entrance or exit, how the group should relate, and what is accepted behavior. The argument goes that if such guidelines exist anyway, it is more honest and more practical to simply spell out the expectations, talk about them, and then agree upon them so that everyone knows the rules.

It would be hard to deny the reality of this argument. The home church to which I belong . . . (Well, I think I belong! We do not have a church membership roll call, nor do we have a covenant to sign. But I am on the one-page "phone list," so at least I am a recognized attendee.) Anyway, the home church in which I do participate seems at times to be stuck on certain issues about which there is strong disagreement. A covenant which states clearly both the areas of toleration and the areas of intolerance would certainly soothe some "ruffled feathers" which from time to time are exhibited. Brother A raises an issue which is felt by Brother B to be out of line. Brother A, however, feels that this is the need of the moment. Brother B feels that the subject is not worth the time of the group and is, therefore, unedifying. Brother A feels that the subject is completely edifying in that it challenges some "sacred cows" of the group. Such events could be dealt with if all the assumed rules of the group were brought out and written down so that all could see what is expected in such issues of the group.

2) *The boundaries of a covenant are freeing in that they establish all the expectations and directions.* Thus, Barrett reasons, a sense of aimlessness and wandering do not exist. Barrett give the following

quote to demonstrate the problem of not having such boundaries: "The initial group of people that gathered was diverse: . . . Not wanting to offend anyone, the group never did come to agreement on a covenant . . . There were no boundaries. Because there was no basis for excluding anyone, there was also no basis for including anyone. The group dissolved after a few years without ever becoming a church" (30).

This argument is a very compelling one also. Having been around a few home church groups, I have consistently seen the problem of "exclusion" where no one feels quite in or out. I have also seen behavior, which under other social settings would be completely intolerated, being tolerated in home churches under the guise to "get along like Jesus would" or another such phrase. A well-thought-out boundary would certainly help the newcomer to know when he or she is in the group and the old-timer to have an agreement to use in the encouraging of the intolerable to become more agreeable. It is very hard to imagine any assembly of persons for any reason accomplishing anything without some "ground rules" for how they ought to conduct themselves while in or a part of the assembly. It is harder still for any community of persons to gather in frequent events of mutual participation without an agreement of how they ought to conduct themselves.

3) *Covenant is an idea basic to the biblical faith. Both the Old and New Testament expresses humanity's relationship to God in terms of covenants.* Barrett shows the three essential elements of all covenants: 1) the relationship with God, 2) the allegiance to the other persons in the same covenant, and 3) the relationships with those outside the covenant. She then brings these arguments to the level of the house church. She states that this "kind of relationship is what house church covenants are all about" (31). She then concludes by asking, "Is it really necessary to write down all these specifics? Yes. We don't live our lives totally on the abstract plane, in lofty statements about ultimate commitment. We live as Christians in the everyday grind that needs structures to organize it, that deals with the concrete and the specific" (31).

The Argument Against A Church Covenant

Barrett's statement that "We don't live our lives totally on the abstract plane, in lofty statements about ultimate commitment" has a shocking effect on me. It seems that the unstated implication is that the Biblical injunctions have no practical effect on the human condition. Have the Scriptures become to us the "abstract plane of lofty statements about ultimate commitment?" If so, no wonder we look for a human level covenant to replace what the Scriptures are no longer good for!

The argument *against* a church covenant being established in the home church begins with a simple premise-*There already is one.* It is a covenant dipped in the blood of our Saviour. This covenant *does* satisfy all three of the stated requirements of a covenant previously mentioned. The need is not to start a new covenant, but come to grips with the reality of the one we are now in (the New Covenant).

The New Covenant is an agreement between the Redeemer and the redeemed. This agreement includes: 1) the fundamental issue of our relationship with God, 2) our life with our fellow redeemed ones, and 3) our relationship with those outside our covenant-be they the stranger, the neighbor, the enemy, or the whole world.

The relationship of the OT people to their covenant is helpful in understanding the dynamic relationship of the human to a God-originated covenant. Imagine the children of Israel creating a man-made covenant of their own in order to better obey their covenant with God. Imagine God's response to such an action! There must be a definitive response to covenant. It is, however, beyond

capture in a human creed. The basis of all relationships in a covenant is the sole possession of the original Creator of the covenant. In the New Covenant, we have a meal-not just any ole' meal! In the ordinary event of eating food, we find the extraordinary event of covenant. We become participants in something that is larger than us-too large to be captured in a bottle, written in a creed, or signed by a subgroup.

Can we fairly expect the event of the covenant meal to have an effectual influence on the church? Indeed we can! While the description in 1 Co 11 of the Lord's Supper is often used as a "pattern" by the church, it should be understood that Paul was using it to drive the wayward Corinthians to obedience. The problem was not that they needed to be reminded *how* to eat the meal. Rather their problem was that they were treating it as a meal without purpose. Paul reminded them that the meal was a covenant meal (v 23), was a representative of the person and work of Christ (vv 24-25), and was a proclamation of His death (and, therefore your participation in it!) until He comes (v 26). The ethical force of the meal was clearly intended by Paul: 1) to stop the bickering, 2) to end the divisions, and 3) if unheeded, to result in judgment up to and including physical death. This covenant of which Paul was speaking was completely practical, specific and concrete. It, the covenant, has not changed in our day. If there is change, it is on our part. The solution is always the same-repentance, confession, forgiveness, and living in the new light. The solution is not to erect another covenant from which to derive our ethics.

Consider Gideon after his stunning victory (Ju 8:22-23). The people said: "Rule over us-you, your son, and your grandson-because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian." Gideon, however, chose to be "on the abstract plane, in lofty statements about ultimate commitment" for he said in reply, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you."

Consider when the elders gathered to Samuel saying, "now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have" (1 Sam 8:5) and "We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Sa 8:20). This time it was God Himself who chose to be "on the abstract plane, in lofty statements about ultimate commitment" for He said to Samuel: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king" (1 Sam 8:7-8).

In both of the above circumstances, the people would deny that by wanting a king they were rejecting the King of Kings. No doubt they would argue that they are only ordinary people in "the ordinary grind that needs structures to organize it," that need a king who "deals with the concrete and the specific" such as judging them and going before them in battle. I would also assume that in our day, people who design church covenants would deny that they are rejecting the Covenant Maker. However, the practical effect is the same. Just as the people began to derive law and ethics from a king of human flesh and blood, we would, by making a church covenant, be deriving our laws and ethics from a human covenant rather than from the Covenant of Christ. No doubt a reaction to this statement will be that too much is being made of a simple covenant activity. However, one who thinks that this is going too far should test their argument against the statement of the Lord about the desire of Israel to have a king.

But we have a God who is near. A very jealous One at that. We have entered a treaty with a Great King. This treaty, called a covenant, was drawn up by the King Himself. If this King was jealous for His people and their fidelity to the Old Covenant that He made, how much more of a jealous King must He be if we find that the New Covenant, which was drawn from Emmanuel's veins, is too much "on the abstract plane." How terrifying a thought to think that this New Covenant is so un compelling,

so impractical, so abstract "in lofty statements about ultimate commitment" that a lesser covenant, drawn not even in human blood, is even considered necessary.

While there is little need to balance the above argument, it is important to note that this objection to a *covenant process* in the church is not an objection to a *decision-making process* in the church. Perhaps the reason home churches have chosen to enter a covenant agreement is a misunderstanding of the dynamic role our Lord has given the church. Our Lord called His church to a "binding and loosening" role in His Kingdom (Mt 16:19; 18:18).

In the Old Covenant, judges were appointed to make judicial decisions. Decisions regarding sin, disagreements, marriage, practice, and a host of other issues that face every believer in every age. Christ has given His people the right and the obligation to make judgments. It is incumbent upon us to fulfill our role of judges within the Church (1 Co 6:1-7). There are those who need to be removed from our midst (1 Co 5:1-8). There are those who should be ignored after two or three warnings (Ro 16:17-19; 1 Th 3:6, 14-15; Tit 3:10-11). There are those who need to be shown a more excellent way. There are actions that deal with the need of the moment or the physical famine in another church located elsewhere (Ac 11:28-29). In all these things, we are called to be dynamic as Christians. If we become dynamic in the area of decision-making (judicially) and remain static in the area of covenant-making (legislatively), we have responded to the covenant of our Lord as our Lord intended us to do (see chapter entitled "I Will Build My Church").

The assessment of the problem, as given by Barrett and others, is a valid one. My argument is only against the solution being a church covenant. We tread on Holy Ground when we seek to "work out a set of guidelines" and to "establish the group's expectations and directions." If indeed our King has already established our covenant, then we have all things necessary in the guidelines that we already have to function within the expectations and directives of our King. If such an idea is too lofty and unrealistic to us as Christians, then the problem is our lack of appreciation for what it is that we have in our New Covenant. It bears repeating, that the solution to the problems that Barrett raises in her arguments is repentance, confession, forgiveness, and living in the new light. The solution can not be to erect a new covenant from which to derive our ethics.

Conclusion

The premise that the home church should prepare and agree upon a covenant together as fundamental is a false and misguided premise. This conclusion is stated in opposition to the tide of the "home church movement."

Any church who is considering a covenant, or has already entered one, should deeply reflect on these things. A church covenant will become an ethical standard for its participants. Improperly placed ethics are ultimately bad ethics. I have no doubt that churches that have covenants will be more likely to last longer, at least humanly speaking. However, the frightening possibility is that the wind of the Spirit would no longer be blowing in the midst of a people, yet they would be unaware of it because they are now sensitive to the covenant made with human hands and no longer sensitive to the Spirit who binds the covenant of Christ to the hearts of men.

- T.W.

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