

Why House Church Covenants?

The covenant focuses on the interpersonal relationships that God requires of His people. This chapter explains why we use a covenant to define the membership of the Church. Each Church writes its own covenant. The covenant should focus on relationship, not doctrine. Jesus taught that the defining characteristic of his people would be their love for one another. A quick review of the “one another” verses of the New Testament and of the life of the early Church (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32ff) confirms this. Thus, the covenant is a summary of the relational expectations God has for his people's fellowship as the Church. The covenant should be "inclusive" that is, any Christian should be able to sign such a covenant. A sample covenant as well as a covenant-signing ceremony appears in Appendices 10 and 11. In Appendix 12, you will find a paper on "Reasons for Breaking a Church Covenant". In Appendix 9 you will find an extensive study developed by Kitty Halloway developed for taking a group of Muslim background believers through this concept.

Although in reality only Jesus Christ can plant a Church, just as only he can save a soul, we baptize people as a response to this personal salvation. In similar fashion the way we recognize a Church has come into existence is to have two or three families commit themselves to one another by covenant. In the West we ratify it by signing, since this is consistent with making covenants (contracts) in other spheres of life. Each member signs a personal copy, which he/she keeps. They also sign a common copy, which someone in the Church keeps. Often the covenant signing ceremony will be accompanied with baptisms, since we might wait to baptize new believers until the Church is ready for birth. The companion booklet *Covenanting Together* appears in Appendix 9, and is used with new people to prepare them to be added to the community.

The Covenantal Basis For Defining The Church:

The Church may be defined as a community of believers committed to living out the corporate life of the kingdom before the world and the heavenly realm (Ephesians 2:11-3:10). This section addresses how membership in a local Church community can be defined using covenants. Some may argue that the Church and its membership do not need to be defined, but rather we ought to let the Spirit define it. But the New Testament makes it clear that there were Churches in different cities and those were not buildings, but congregations of people (Acts 14). They knew who they were and were aware of their membership (Cf. I John 2:19, Ephesians 3:6, 4:25, Romans 12:5). The community was so carefully defined that when a believer went from one community to another it was normal for him/her to carry a commendation from his/her former community to the new community (Cf. Romans 16:1, 2).

What was the vehicle by which a person became a member of a Church in the first century? The way one entered into the community in the early Church was baptism. Baptism was a public statement that the initiator had turned from his old life (which involved the worship of particular god's) to embrace a new life (Acts 2:37-41); he had entered into the new covenant with God and His people through Jesus Christ. This testimony thus had two components: a vertical one between the person and God, whereby he disavowed his old god and turned to the true God; and a horizontal component which involved inclusion in a new community, the Church. Since baptism was often public, it could lead to persecution. Baptism was an excellent vehicle to define who was and who was not in the community; who was and who was not included in the covenant. It still is in many cultures. Even in those cultures where baptism is a good emblem of covenanting with the community, the principles of covenant commitment, which were surely understood in the first century, need to be taught.

But today, in Western culture, baptism is seldom understood as having a horizontal component (new relational commitment to the Christian community). Baptism is rather seen as symbolic of a personal decision with only a vertical component (of the individual following Jesus). In Churches where it has lost its horizontal component, it no longer defines meaningful membership in the Church. There are many people who have been baptized who are not members of any local assembly, nor do they understand why they ought to be.

Perhaps some differences in our modern society contribute to this. In the first century the community to which a person belonged (a guild, mystery religion, synagogue, Church, etc.) was the social/welfare network for that person and his family. Today, largely the government takes this role. Thus a person does not depend upon an intimate community in time of need. In planting Churches in America have tried in times past to teach the horizontal component of baptism and thus utilize it as the vehicle for defining community, but without success in our independent culture. The Christian culture in America is so influenced by the "individual commitment" understanding of Baptism, that the horizontal component remains hidden for many. Often Christians in other cultures have been heavily influenced by this pietistic type of emphasis on following Christ with little or no understanding of the horizontal component of the covenant. In this case there is a need for an explicit emphasis on covenantal commitment even in cross-cultural Church planting situations. So if Baptism is not a good vehicle for defining membership in an assembly in some cultures, what is? We will explore three other vehicles, which have been used historically in defining membership in an assembly: a covenant, a constitution, and articles of faith.

Covenants:

We believe a covenant is the most suitable vehicle in our culture for defining membership in the Church. A covenant places the emphasis on the Church as an organism of living relationships rather than an institutional organization. This is the obvious emphasis of the book of Acts and the Epistles; the New Testament Church was a body of believers identified by their deep intimate inter-personal relationships (which neither came nor were maintained with ease as evidenced by the Epistles). The relationships that believers enjoyed were based on the relationship that each one shared with Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. The relational responsibility among believers is exemplified by Jesus' relationship with his disciples (Cf. John 13, 17), and is defined in the many "one another" verses in the New Testament, as well as in passages such as I Cor 12, Galatians 5, Colossians 3, Ephesians 4-6.

The relationship believers have with God is a formal covenantal relationship. God establishes His relationship with His people through covenant, and his people often responded to God's covenantal love by entering into covenant with one another (See "Covenanting Together", Appendix 9). In our culture, the marriage covenant is the best example of a covenant, which defines a relationship. A marriage covenant establishes the expectations that a husband and wife have in the marriage relationship.

A Church covenant can be an excellent way to define the expectations, which believers ought to have with one another in a particular assembly, and should be based on God's commands regulating relationships among believers. Thus, a Church covenant identifies the expectations of the members of the community, which we call the Church. It establishes the fact that to become a part of the Church a believer enters into a RELATIONSHIP with the other believers in the assembly. It sets the parameters of the relationship. In our independent thinking culture, it also serves to bind those who would leave the covenant community for spurious reasons, which short-circuit God's plan for sanctification both for the Church and the individual. Since the reformation, especially Anabaptists have often used covenants to define the membership of Churches.

Constitutions / Articles of Faith:

The other two ways mentioned to define community membership (Constitution and Articles of Faith) have serious deficiencies arising from our culture. The traditional constitution is borrowed from the corporate world. It defines the Church as an organization rather than an organism. As such it defines membership as being part of a corporate institution, with the constitution defining the way in which the institution is run. It may be important for Churches to develop constitutions at some point, but not as a vehicle for defining membership. It is not effective in forming the Church into a loving community. We have likened a house Church to a virus, which needs to mutate rapidly to adapt to changing conditions. A constitution fixes the operation of a Church and keeps it from adapting. For this reason we have found constitutions counterproductive not only for defining the membership of the Church but also in defining the operations of a house Church. We have found that a family conference approach to decision making, using Scripture

and led by godly elders, is more helpful than constitutions. (for more on this see Appendix 8, Consensus Decision Making).

Using articles of faith as a vehicle for defining membership suffers from the same drawback of not treating the Church as a living community. In this case the connection with the Church is based on a system of belief rather than a commitment to relationship. This has been more common in denominational type Churches. Another drawback is that articles of faith, rather than distinguishing believers from unbelievers usually serve to distinguish between different types of believers. For example, views on end times, election, predestination, scripture, spiritual gifts, are almost always included with the understanding that "our kind" of Christians are welcome here. What an affront to the unity of relationship which Christ calls us to have (John 17:21-24)! If a believer is included in God's heavenly Church, how can we use such distinctions to exclude him from our local assembly?

Summary:

For these reasons we have chosen covenants as a suitable vehicle for defining membership in a local assembly. Apart from the Bible it is the most important document in the Church, since it sets forth the expectation of members of the community; and the community is the body of Christ.

Key Principles:

1. God has saved us covenantally.
2. This covenantal salvation has procured for God a People, not merely a collection of individuals.
3. The best way to express this covenantal salvation is by the people of God entering into a covenant before God to be His people. This is best done using the commands of Christ for His people in the New Testament.
4. A group of people is not a Church until they determine to be the Church.

Questions for further thought:

1. What should be included in the content of a Church covenant? What should be avoided?
2. Why is a covenant a good way to define Church membership?
3. In what ways are a Church covenant and a marriage covenant similar?
4. In what ways do covenants oppose the thinking of our culture?
5. What is the problem with defining Church membership with a constitution or articles of faith?