

Covenant is the Foundation

Over the next several articles in Green Shoots, I'll attempt to walk you through the rich tapestry of a Baptist covenant. There are many covenants in Baptist life. The following covenant is used widely among our fellowship. It is historic and it provides insight into how our forefathers thought about covenant and its importance in the life and gatherings of the local church. Hopefully, we will be able to gain insight into their thinking which may challenge our own. Here is what is known as the Waterville Covenant of 1833:

Having been led, as we believe by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior and, on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we do now in the presence of God, and this assembly host solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.

We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit to walk together in Christian love; to strive for the advancement of this Church in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines; to contribute cheerfully and regularly 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.

We also engage to maintain family and secret devotions, to bring up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our deportment; to avoid all tattling, backbiting, and excessive anger; to abstain from the sale of, and use of intoxicating drinks as a beverage; to be zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Savior.

We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in prayer; to aid one another in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and Christian courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation, and mindful of the rules of our Savior to secure it without delay.

We moreover engage that when we remove from this place, we will, 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.

This church covenant is probably the most popular one used by Baptist churches in North America. It was written at First Baptist Church of Waterville, Maine. It was used as early as 1833 though it was published in *The Baptist Church Manual* in 1853.

How Baptists use covenants is foundational to our understanding of church. While covenant is not a uniquely Baptist construct, Baptists did uniquely understand covenant as foundational to church constituency. Unlike other church bodies, Baptist understood God's eternal covenant in Christ particularized a relationship between God and distinct

local congregations. Each local church is gathered by Christ who calls her into covenant to “walk worthy of the Gospel together”.

Covenant membership in a local church is voluntarily submitted to by a believing adult who understands what Jesus had accomplished on the cross for his/her salvation and recognizes that covenant membership brought him/her into a covenant community where the expectation on all covenant members is to work out their salvation because God is at work among them.

Baptists gather as a covenant community because Christ calls a church into a covenant relationship with Him. The church is a called community and while the covenant is entered into voluntarily, the church, however, is not a voluntary community since it gathers by invitation of and in obedience to Christ as the covenant maker. The community of faith does not just decide to meet but is called to gather in the reality of Christ's lordship. It is the risen Christ who calls, who is present in the gathering, who governs His Church as “prophet, priest, and king”. He has not delegated nor abdicated His governance over His Church. He alone calls.

It is Christ who seals the covenant through the impartation of His Spirit, who hosts the gathered at His table celebrating His death and resurrection, who gives His word as witness to His saving grace and power, who transforms His people into a community of the redeemed who reflect His love, power, and grace and who displays through His church signs and wonders giving evidence to His lordship over all creation.

This is why Baptist covenants often begin with “Having been led, as we believe by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior and, on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we do now in the presence of God, and this assembly host solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.”

It is a paragraph which recognizes the vertical dimension of our faith and the invitational call of Christ to gather in His name according to the eternal covenant made for us in Christ's shed blood. The key phrase being “Having been led”. Our response to His invitation is to enter covenant solemnly and joyfully with Christ and with each other as “one body in Christ”. There is no other ecclesiastical authority over the local church. Christ alone is Lord because He alone purchased it with His own blood. All members of the body are in covenant, and none is greater than any other. Each member has a place of significance in the body without which the body is weaker.

Therefore, we claim as Baptists that Christ is present each time we gather because He invites us to gather and provides all that is necessary for our gathering. He is always present when His people gather. Gathering is a response to Christ's initiative and not simply a voluntary act.