

Making Covenant

Various texts--Fall 2011

Introduction:

I've been preparing couples for marriage for 25 years. In that time I've noticed a movement away from covenant ceremonies and an increase in cohabitation arrangements. It seems that paying rent together or paying a mortgage together has become the new implied relationship contract replacing vows and rings.

I understand the sociological reasons for this shift, but I can't help but think that on an emotional level lots of these relationships with unspoken expectations and hoped for commitment are based on fear—fear of failure of a marriage, so better to live together; fear of repeating a bad marriage of parents, so better to spare yourself the pain of that; or fear of loss of wealth in a potential divorce—as the country western song says, it would have been cheaper to keep her around.

My main issue with relationships with unspoken expectations and hoped for commitment is that both parties are unknown to themselves practicing conditional love. If you will do this.... I will do that; If you do... I will stay; if you don't... I will leave...all this is implied in what becomes a covert contract. So, you always have to prove yourself. This is love based on performance, not acceptance and certainly not covenant.

Covenant on the other hand is the highest form of relational commitment. It writes the future in advance by choosing to do good to someone despite what may come. When you define your relationship by covenant, it is defined by commitment, love, and acceptance and not by performance. People tend to blossom in covenant relationships because of the commitment, love and acceptance.

Today we are going to ask you to freely and voluntarily participate in making covenant with us here at CapChurch. Our Capchurch covenant is value laden. The values behind the covenant express

- our common experience of being called by God;
- the content of our faith—what we believe about the triune God from the Bible;
- who we are as a community,
- our sense of purpose, mission,
- And our unique history with God.

Behind our covenant are other values—values that define who we are as a community of faith and how we will treat one another; values that the shape and character of church life. All of our ministries and programs; and our pastoral posture when we meet with you for coffee arise out of these values. By affirming these values we as leaders are writing Cap’s history in advance. At our elders meeting this past Sunday evening we reaffirmed these values which can be found on our website under the “about us” heading.

CapChurch Values

What we believe in before anybody comes or anything happens

At CapChurch we believe in biblical values. By that we mean that we hold in high regard those values which “create life” – values God has revealed to us through the Bible for our own good. In our community of faith these values are what we are before anybody comes or anything happens. To the degree that we adopt these values and live them out, we are successful.

- ***Pursuit of God*** — *We seek Jesus Christ and wait expectantly for His presence in all that we do (John 4:34, 5:19-20). Pursuing and waiting — we think that this is worship.*
- ***Teaching from the Bible*** — *The bible is our final authority and so we teach and conform our lives to God’s Word. We are challenged to live, conduct our business and shape our ministry in response to Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17).*
- ***Unity in the Church*** — *Our brothers and sisters are never our enemies, neither is another church. We will love what Jesus loves: the whole church (Ephesians 4:3-6). And we will seek creative ways to participate with others in God’s Kingdom.*
- ***Equipping & Empowering*** — *God calls and enables believers to express the talents, gifts, and ministries that He has set aside for them. This power will be expressed in our various living, vocation, church and school communities (Ephesians 4:11-13). Church is the context for empowerment for living life better.*
- ***Compassion & Mercy*** — *We desire to stand with anyone who is attempting to walk in adherence with God, is grieved about his wrong-doing, recognizes their need for forgiveness, and is responsive to the teaching of Scripture and the leadership of the church. God’s mercy always triumphs over judgement (James 2:13; John 8:1-11).*
- ***Simplicity*** — *We want to be “naturally supernatural” in all the ways that we conduct our lives; and we seek to avoid behaviour that diverts right focus from Jesus to ourselves (1 Corinthians 2:2-5; 1Thessalonians 4:11-12).*

- **Generosity** — *We are stewards of God's generosity to us (Matthew 10:8,39; 13:45-46). We do not own our ministries or our affluence, so they are not ours to defend nor keep. We give for the privilege of giving.*
- **Community** — *We know that maturity develops in an environment of trial-and-error, so we are patient with people's weaknesses and failures as they grow in the right direction (John 12:15-19; Galatians 5:22-23). This is also where we learn to serve – it is not about us, it is all about God.*
- **Covenant & Relationships** — *Caring for people is our highest priority after submission to God. The purpose of the cross was the winning back of men and women who have been far from Him (Romans 12:9-13; 1 Corinthians 13:4-9; Colossians 3:12-14).*
- **Welcome** — *We seek to welcome Christians and pre-believers and to discover something of the wonder of God's creation in each adult, teen or child. People are important to God and to us.*

You can see that if you covenant with us today you are declaring that *Christ is our Lord and we are His people* and I am available to God and to the people in this community for the fulfillment of the purposes that we share in common.

I'm not trying to make it sound weightier than it is, just to describe the reality. Covenants have a long history according in the bible. And while the Bible doesn't have an explicit example of a local church making a covenant, the precedent for making covenants is certainly there.

The Old Testament term for 'covenant' (*berith* in Hebrew) is borrowed from everyday life, to describe an agreement or contract. It becomes used, fundamentally, as a metaphor to describe the relationship of God to God's people. As the Bible progresses, the concept of covenant takes on a life of its own – lending itself to imaginative development far beyond the original scope and significance of its origins.

The books of Exodus and Deuteronomy tell a love story whereby God patiently wooed a certain people; brought them out of Egypt; and sustained them through the desert. Prior to entering the long-promised land, God 'gets down on one knee' and invites them into a marriage style covenant relationship:

Will you be my treasured possession, will you be my people? I long for you to be my people. I want to be your God. Will you have me?

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation...” (Exodus 19:3-6)

The initiative here lies entirely with God, even though the relationship is clearly bilateral. The marriage style covenant underlines how God wishes to reveal himself to humankind in order to enter into relationship with them. God promises them intimacy.

At the heart of this covenant are the Ten Commandments. At times the covenant is equated to the commandments:

[The LORD] declared to you his covenant, which he charged you to observe, that is, the ten commandments; and he wrote them on two stone tablets (Deuteronomy 4:13)

As OT history progresses, we see other examples of the marriage-style covenant. The book of Hosea describes this marriage style covenant in mid-life crisis when Israel is wandering outside the marriage and taking on other lovers. Hosea underlines the reality that it only takes one to keep covenant. God is faithful even though Israel has become an adulterer. (Hosea 1:2; 11:8). The covenant is not broken, even though it is continually threatened.

Throughout the OT each retelling of the Exodus covenant makes it clear that the covenant from Sinai is not a past action related only to the original generation in the wilderness but a living reality for subsequent generations. The covenant does not end in the way that most human covenants do. Each generation is addressed as if they were the recipients of the original covenant. The covenant goes on forever. The Sinai covenant becomes the overarching picture of God’s special relationship to Israel.

Most of the Old Testament describes covenant in terms of faithfulness and failure—an up and down of the divine-human journey. Even at the ‘honeymoon’ stage, the relationship is threatened by unfaithfulness.

Yet, in the face of extreme human depravity at the golden calf incident comes the most unconditional statement of God’s mercy (Exodus 34:6-7) as well as the most emphatic expression of God’s uncompromising loyalty (Exodus 34:14).

So Moses cut two tablets of stone just like the originals. He got up early in the morning and climbed Mount Sinai as GOD had commanded him, carrying the two tablets of stone. GOD descended in the cloud and took up his position there beside him and called out the name, GOD. GOD passed in front of him and called out, "GOD, GOD, a God of mercy and grace, endlessly patient—so much love, so deeply true—loyal in love for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin.

Failures and their more destructive partner sin, never bring an end to the covenant but a reinforcement of the covenant's privilege, permanence, and exclusivity. The possibility of failure is envisaged from the outset stands as a testimony to the fact that God understood human nature from the start and still made covenant.

The New Testament describes an extension and refocusing of the covenant to include Gentiles. We are welcomed in to ``a marriage made in heaven``-- the ongoing covenant now between Christ and his Church. The Bible ends with a covenant fulfilled affirmation –

And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband... (Rev.21:2)

Baptism is a covenant celebration that marks your personal "yes" to God. in the same way that God got down on his knee at Mt. Sinai, baptism involves God making promises to love you forever and be your God and you accepting God's love and committing to be a follower of God—this is a covenant between two parties recognizing where each fits in the story of salvation. Baptism, as with other forms of covenant, is built on the principle of *imitatio dei* ('imitating God' – for example, Lev. 11:44, 19:2, 20:26).

Human covenants such as Cap's covenant are formed to reflect characteristics of God's covenant. We believe that in making covenants we are shaped to reflect more fully the image of God. we believe that covenant making is a means to grow in faithfulness. We

believe that through covenant making Cap becomes become a window through which the North Shore may more fully understand God's mercy.

Cap's covenant represents an intentional agreement between otherwise-unrelated parties.

I would not naturally bind myself to you in public way that invites even requires my loyalty—my monogamy to you if it weren't for God's call on my life and your life.

Call it spiritual formation, call it forming good habits of relating to God and neighbours—I believe that faith in Christ calls us to be covenant makers and covenant keepers. This is how believers for millennia have responded to God. Making covenant, in the end, is not about what we do but who we are; it is about where we fail and how we respond; how we see and where we are blind; what we give and where we resist; how we trust and how we are trustworthy.

Everyone here is invited to participate with us in this covenant. You are invited to count yourself in. It is not a must; it is a may. Covenant is a radically inclusive thing.—it enables us all to be in on something—not only a social and purposeful bond beyond nuclear family relationships or friendships; but a commitment to community—a self-chosen obligation to do good not harm to one another you and to the cause of God.

Making covenant publicly means we witness one another consenting to this covenant. As witnesses we can during the coming year remind one another of our covenant—of the *for better and for worse* commitment we made and the opportunities to bear with one another in love and so fulfill the law of Christ [Gal. 6:1-3].

Last year when our staff team reaffirmed our team covenant which is stated in first person, not third—“I” not “we”. I argued for the “we” as it seemed more community oriented; more gift based, but was voted down 7 to 1. Our team said that the “we” can all too easily let you off the hook—easy to assume that someone else will pray; someone else will give; someone else will serve. Covenant is an invitation to each person to respond in multiple ways to build community under God. so as we express the following covenant you get to say “we” but think “I” and “we”. It is really both.

I overheard Nancy on a phone call saying to a friend, “You were born into this world to make a contribution to it and the people around you. When you make that contribution all of us benefit. If you don’t make your contribution, then all of us are diminished”.

This is also true in community—you all have a contribution to make. As you make that contribution the community is greater than without your contribution. If you withhold your contribution, the whole is diminished. This is true in terms of ethics, service, finances, relationships, worship, and maturity.

the covenant

The covenant is printed in your newsletter and up on PPT. If what we have talked about this last month has made sense to you and you want to freely commit yourself to this community of faith, I invite you to stand. If this is not your intention at this time, that's fine—and I invite you not to stand, and not to make covenant. Either way, it is a good thing to know what you are about and act on that decision.

For those of you wanting to express covenant with this community, please stand.

Our Experience & Call

As God's people we do not stand alone, we live in God's world. And we are called to live out our faith among God's people.

Our Faith

We believe in God the Father, who created and is creating, who has come among us in the person of Jesus, to reconcile and renew, who works within us and among us by his Spirit, who has given us the bible to guide and train us in faith. We trust God and His purposes.

We proclaim Christ's reign and rule over us and over the whole world. He is Christ the Lord. We will proclaim His Lordship even when this requires courage greater than our timidity.

Our Purpose

Lord, You call us to be Your church. You call us to love and build up one another as we celebrate Your presence. You call us to serve others beyond this faith community. You call us to seek justice as we overcome with good all kinds of evil.

Our History

Lord you have been faithful to us through the years. You have redeemed us. We are yours. In life, in death and in life beyond death You are with us. You have never left us alone. Thanks be to you, our God, Our Friend, Our Guide, Our Saviour!

Our Covenant

In gratitude for Your mercy and in response to Your call, I make a choice to partner with You and Your People at Capilano Christian Community. I will seek to participate fully in Your life and grace in its expression at CapChurch. All that I do, whether loving or leading, praying or giving, I will do to the glory of God.

Amen, Shalom!