

O How Blest the Congregation

Henry Francis Lyte (1793–1847)

O how blest the congregation
Who the gospel know and prize!
Joyful tidings of salvation
Brought by Jesus from the skies;
He is near them,
Knows their wants and hears their cries.

In His name rejoicing ever,
Walking in His light and love,
And foretasting in His favor
Something here of bliss above;
Happy people!
Who shall harm them? Who shall move?

By His righteousness exalted,
On from strength to strength they go;
By ten thousand ills assaulted,
Yet preserved from every foe;
On to glory,
Safe they speed through all below.

God will keep His own anointed;
Nought shall harm them, none condemn:
All their trials are appointed,
All must work for good to them:
All shall help them
To their heavenly diadem.



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In the Nick of Time

Your Church Covenant

Kevin T. Bauder

Chances are that your church's official documents include one called a "church covenant." If you look at that covenant, you will discover that it represents a series of promises made between all the members of the church, usually in the presence of "God, angels, and this assembly." You may wonder about this covenant. Why do churches have one? Why the solemn language? After all, the Bible doesn't mention a church covenant, so aren't we adding to God's Word by adopting one?

These are good questions. The place to begin answering them is by asking what a church is. Most people will answer that a church is a body of believers, and they would be right as far as that goes. New Testament churches include only saints (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1).

But not every meeting of believers is a church. Seminaries and mission societies are bodies of believers, but they are not churches. When two or three Christians meet on the street, they are at least temporarily a gathering of believers, but they are not a church. If you and your Christian friends form a softball team, it is not a church.

Why are some Christian gatherings churches while others are not? Because churches cannot form by accident. The very first requirement of a church is that the people who constitute it must intend to be a church.

Still, the simple intention to be a church is not enough. Suppose you and your Christian friends decide that you want to organize a church, and the purpose and mission of your organization is to play checkers. All you'll have is a checkers club that calls itself a church. To have a church, you and your friends must intend to fulfill the mission that the New Testament assigns to churches.

What is that mission? Sadly, Christians disagree in their answer to that question. Is the purpose of the church to change society? Is it to evangelize the lost? Is it to provide religious amusements? Is it to teach theology? You can find churches that give each of those answers and more.

They also disagree about who should be admitted as members of the church. Even supposing that all members must profess faith, other ques-

tions remain. Must members submit to water baptism? If so, what counts as baptism? Must members meet some standard of holy living? If a member falls away from this standard, what are the obligations of the other members?

Christians also disagree about how a church should be ordered. Will the congregation make the decisions? The deacons? The elders? The pastor? Which offices will your new church recognize? Which ordinances will it observe, and who will participate in them?

Paul names the local church as the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). In the absence of the apostles, local churches have the duty to define and defend correct doctrine. Obviously, a church must clearly define and defend the gospel. But what about other important doctrines, such as whether and how God elects people to salvation, whether God created the world directly or through a process, or in what order the various end-time events will occur? Will your church take a position on any of those? If not, then will the church become a free-for-all in its teaching? If it does, then how will your church hedge against the danger of doctrinal division?

The thing about these differences is that a church must choose. It cannot both baptize and refuse to baptize infants. It cannot both receive and refuse to receive unbaptized members. If the elders have the final decision in church discipline, then the congregation cannot. It cannot both define and not define its understanding of prophecy. This principle is true across a whole range of choices. Churches must decide to be one thing, or they must decide to be another.

There can be no church where there is no agreement as to what the church is for, what obligations it has toward its members, and how its discipline and doctrines will be defined. Different views on these questions are possible, and more than one answer may sometimes be compatible with biblical Christianity. But often, the answers are not compatible with each other, and the people who form the church must choose or they cannot be a church.

Furthermore, the Bible requires certain duties of all Christians. They must walk together in Christian love (1 Cor 12:14-27; Rom 15:5-6). They must strive to advance one another in knowledge, holiness, and comfort (Heb 10:24; Gal 5:13; Jas 5:16). They must promote each other's wellbeing and spirituality (1 Thess 5:14; 1 Cor 16:2; Eph 4:11-14). They must commit to a common vision of worship, observance of the ordinances, discipline, and doctrine (1 Cor 5; Heb 10:25; Acts 2:42; 1 Pet 2:9; 2 Thess 3:13-15). They must share a commitment to supporting the work financially, including the relief of the poor and the spread of the gospel to all nations (2 Cor 8:14; 9:7; Gal 6:6, 10). They must prioritize sobriety and personal and family devotion (Titus 2; 1 Tim 2:8; Eph 6:4). They must walk circumspectly in the world (Eph 4:1-3), dealing fairly with people, keeping their word, and setting an

example of good conduct (1 Pet 2:12; Phil 3:16-18). They must avoid gossip, backbiting, and unholy anger (Matt 12:36; Eph 4:25-32). These are not merely duties of solitary Christians. They are responsibilities that believers should help each other to fulfill, and the venue for doing that is the local church.

To form a local church, then, its organizers must agree about the choices that the church must make. They must also agree about which duties they will help each other fulfill and for which they will hold each other responsible. This agreement may be formal or informal. It may be written, oral, or simply understood. But a church cannot be a church without some such agreement. That agreement is the thing that makes the church a church. It cannot be entered casually, with a "maybe we'll do this and maybe we won't" attitude. It is a serious thing, and it is also what we call a church covenant.

To eliminate misunderstanding and to emphasize the solemnity of the agreement, churches commonly adopt formal, written covenants. Such covenants take the form of a solemn promise that members make in the presence of God, the holy angels, and each other. In other words, they take the form of a vow or oath. A covenant cannot exist without an oath, and a church cannot exist without a covenant.

That is why a covenant and its associated documents (such as a statement of faith) are so important. They specify that the members intend to be a church. They also specify what that means. The covenant does not replace Scripture, but it states what the members understand the Bible to require of a church. It is not Scripture, but it is the most important document next to Scripture. It is important because the covenant is what makes the church a church.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
