



Being A Covenant Church for the Glory of God, Part 1

Hebrews 8:6-12; 10:19-25

January 31, 2016

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Good morning, Beloved! I am so grateful to be back together worshipping with you this morning. Two weeks is too long. I missed being with y'all. I love the snow but I'm hoping that if we get any more this winter that it will start late Sunday night and be fully melted by Wednesday morning. You can join me in that prayer if you like and if you have kids, you may want to pray that they miss one day of school – max!

This morning, the sermon is going to be a little bit different than the usual. Two weeks ago, if you can remember back that far, we were talking about the calling for us to live and to work together to bring glory to God. We looked at the church in Thessalonica and we saw there the character of that church that Paul put forward as the model for all churches, including our own. They were a church, Paul described, as a truly saved people, with transformed lives, certain of their election, who welcomed bold and faithful preaching, who were developing Christlike character, having an unwavering commitment to Christ and as a result were filled with true joy. They were earnestly evangelistic, truly repentant and devoted, and who were filled with expectant hope as they looked to the return of Christ. Those are great characteristics, things we want to emulate. But what does this look like practically? How should we seek to live these things out? What does living for the glory of God mean for us together, in this church, in West Salem Baptist Church? That's what I want for us to consider this morning and, look – no more hour and a half sermons – so I'm going to need to break this into a couple of messages. But what I want us to look at this morning is our church covenant and really, today is going to be about understanding the background for our church covenant.

I'm just curious. By a show of hands, how many of you even know we have a church covenant? Ok, by that same show of hands, how many of you know what it says or even take it that seriously? To be honest, and I need to ask your forgiveness here, we have not

been very good at keeping the covenant before you as a body. We haven't made it that important in our church life and that is going to change. It has to change and there are a lot of very practical reasons why, that and I'll get to that next week. Today, I want to take a systematic approach to understanding the importance and the value of having a church covenant and living by it. Some of you may be thinking that now would be a good time to check out of this sermon. We're just going to talk about some old fashioned document that most modern churches don't even have, right? But if you do that, you will miss the very reason why we even exist as a church. Let me say that again – the very reason that we exist as West Salem Baptist Church is because of this covenant that we have made to be a church, together. It's that serious. The first question that I want us to consider this morning is this:

What is a Covenant? There are several theological definitions of the word, covenant, which I could give to you and some of them can get really technical. Perhaps the simplest way to describe the word covenant is to say that a covenant is a relationship, a bond between two parties in which privileges, promises, obligations and penalties are established and enumerated

This arrangement could take several forms. Sometimes covenants were agreements between families or people. Let's say there was a dispute over the use of wells on a particular piece of land. One of the ways to fix that situation is that a covenant might have been made. A mutual agreement, saying, "Okay, we will work here, we'll farm here, we'll draw water here and my herdsman won't go in and draw water from your wells and yours shouldn't come over to my wells and draw water, etc." It was a legal way, a contractual way of dealing with problems in day-to-day life.

There were other forms of covenants as well. For instance, covenants were used as international treaties. Let's say a *suzerain*, and by a suzerain I mean some sort of ruler, someone who has the power over a particular region, conquers another tribe. Often times a suzerain would go into an area, conquer a people, and basically require them to make a covenant with him, and that covenant would go something like this: "If you will pay me a tithe of your plantings, your yield at harvest time, if you will promise to offer your sons of fighting age to me in military service in times of war; if you will promise not to rebel against me, and if you will promise to recognize my lordship over you, then I will (a) not slaughter you immediately, and (b) provide a system of justice and courts and establish order in your land and we'll get along." And in that context the relationship was rather unequal. The suzerain had all the chips and the vassal basically had the choice: I either enter into this

agreement or we are wiped out. These are examples of earthly covenants in the ancient days.

Well, that's all old stuff, ancient stuff. Why does that matter to us? Here's why. God is a God who relates to us, to His people, on the basis of covenant. God is a covenant making God. O. Palmer Robertson gives the best definition of the nature of the covenantal relationship between God and His people when he says: **A covenant is a bond in blood sovereignly administered.** Let me just break that down for you a little bit.

A covenant is a bond... It is a bond that binds people together in a relationship. It is a formal promise that is accompanied by oaths and signs. Sometimes the oath can be a verbal promise, a verbal declaration of all that one would do in the relationship. Sometimes it can involve the giving of a gift, the eating of a meal, the setting up of a memorial, the sprinkling of blood, the offering of a sacrifice, the seal of circumcision, the sign of the Sabbath, baptism, the Lord's Supper. All of these covenantal signs are reminders of the binding character of the covenant. So a covenant is a bond.

A covenant is a bond in blood... What Robertson means by that is that a covenant is a life and death commitment. God never enters into a casual or informal relationship with man. Instead, the implications of God's covenant with man extends to life and death. There is a life and death obligation involved in the bond of the covenant. And being in or out of covenant with God is a matter of life and death. It is a bond in blood. God takes covenant seriously. A covenant is not just a bond. It is a bond in blood – it's life and death.

A covenant is a bond in blood sovereignly administered. A covenant is a bond in blood and it is sovereignly administered. In other words, God is the initiator and He does not bargain with us. It is not a back and forth discussion or bartering over points. The sovereign God of heaven and earth dictates the terms of His covenant, His relationship with man. God is not obligated to come into covenant with us. He does not have to. He chooses to because of His love. He chooses to enter into a relationship with us because of His own will, because He desires to be our God and to make us His people and that is the essence of God's covenant with His people.

The underlying purpose of God's covenant, through the Bible, is to create for Himself a people out of the whole of sinful man to whom He will unchangeably give Himself as their God and Lord, and who will give themselves to Him as His people. It is His choice to enter into a relationship of love and blessing with sinners. Let me show you what I mean. Look at Genesis 17 and I am not going to preach this right now, but I do want to show you some of the characteristics of God's covenant with His people. Read verses 1-10.

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between

me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojourning's, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised." (Genesis 17:1–10, ESV)

Now what do I want you to see? When God says to Abraham: "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you... and I will be their God," God is committing himself to Abraham and Abraham's seed, who does not yet exist, in a way in which he does not commit himself to others. God's covenant commitment is an expression of His sovereign choice to give himself as their God to the people whom He chooses – Abraham and his seed. Throughout the Scriptures, the essence of the covenant that God makes with sinful men and women is "I will be your God and you will be my people." And Abraham and his physical descendants are to respond to God's offer of covenant by faith, pledging to walk before Him and taking the sign of circumcision, setting them apart as God's people.

This is the essential nature of the covenant that God makes with those whom He chooses – not everyone, His people – Abraham and His physical descendants, Israel and Abraham's spiritual descendants, the church. Paul, in the letter to the Galatians, says of the church—**"And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."** (Galatians 3:29, ESV) So, the big picture of the covenant is this, it's the promise of God to give Himself to His people whom He has called to be His own, who in turn give themselves to Him. That's the heart of the covenant.

Now after this covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants, the Scripture, and especially the book of Hebrews, speaks primarily of two covenants, foreshadowed by, following and fulfilling the covenant made with Abraham, designed by God, to bring people (sinners) into relationship with Him and with one another – the Old Covenant that God made with the nation of Israel when He delivered them by the Exodus from slavery in Egypt and the New Covenant with church, sealed by Christ's blood, when Jesus died for sinners and rose from the dead for the forgiveness of sins. The old covenant, in the book of Exodus, created the nation of Israel. The new covenant, in the New Testament, created the church, the true spiritual Israel, made up of Jews and Gentiles and people from every tribe and nation on the earth.

Let's think about the old covenant first. In Exodus 19, we read these words: **"On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves 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 will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.” So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.” (Exodus 19:1–8, ESV)

Then you remember what happened. God came to the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai and gave them the Law, the Ten Commandments. Later, through Moses, he gave to them the sacrificial system in order to worship Him, a number of laws regarding how they were to live as His people, the command to love Him supremely and the love one another. God promised to be their God and they were to keep themselves only for Him. Those were the terms of the covenant. But what happened? Though there were some who kept covenant with God, the nation, as a whole, did not. They broke their end of the covenant. They chased after idols, they intermarried with unbelievers, they failed to be a holy and godly nation and God judged them for it. They were taken into captivity. The OC failed. Man failed to keep the covenant with God. But that was not the end.

And that brings us to the New Covenant, the better covenant in Christ. Turn with me to Hebrews 8 and we will be in that book the rest of the way. The writer of Hebrews says: **“But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.” (Hebrews 8:6–7, ESV)** In other words, what Jesus has accomplished, the covenant that is in His blood, is far better than the Old Covenant. What He did in creating the church through His sacrificial death and His resurrection from the dead is far better. The old covenant had problems but the fault wasn't with God or with the covenant that He made – the problem was with the people. The people broke it. They chose sin over God. When, in the words of Matthew 26, **“Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:26–28, ESV)** and then went to the cross to die in the sinner's place and redeem and purchase his church, He was accomplishing something far greater than that first covenant at Mt. Sinai. He was creating with His people a covenant that could not be broken.

Get this now, one of the main differences in the Old and the New Covenants, beside the promise of the forgiveness of sins through Christ's blood and the gift of eternal life with God, is this: that in the New Covenant, God not only establishes His promises to His people of what He will do for them and be for them, and sets the obligations of faith and obedience required to be in this special, saving, relationship to God, but He also promises to CREATE that faith and obedience. The New Covenant has the Divine guarantee that it will not be broken. How? Because God promises to cause and empower His people, His elect, to fulfill the covenant's conditions. Listen to this:

“For he finds fault with them when he says: ‘Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel (spiritual Israel, the church) after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.’”
(Hebrews 8:8–12, ESV)

So you see, here is the beauty of the New Covenant that God makes with sinners from every nation, tribe and tongue, and with you and me. What makes the New Covenant, new, is that Christ seals it with His blood, and He, not only, purchases eternal life and the forgiveness of sins for the people of God – paying our debt for breaking the Law of God – but He also gives the faith to believe and the obedience, by His Spirit and grace, that we need to inherit eternal life with God the Father.

The New Covenant in Christ’s blood creates a new people, a forgiven people, people who are born from above, a changed people, a people who trust and believe God, who desire to be obedient to God, who want to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, and who want to love their neighbors as themselves. What is new about the New Covenant is that Christ seals it by His blood, purchasing eternal life and forgiveness of sins, giving us His perfect righteousness so that we stand before God as people who are justified and declared “not guilty,” but He also produces in us by His Spirit, the faith and the obedience – the outworking of real faith – that we must have to inherit eternal life. ***I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*** Christ enacts God’s covenant of eternal life with us and accomplishes its requirements for us and through us.

That’s why throughout the Scriptures, and particularly the book of Hebrews, Jesus is exalted as the ultimate hope of all people. He’s the fulfillment of the Old Testament, He’s the final sacrifice for sins, He’s the resurrected Lord, He’s the high priest who intercedes for God’s people, He’s the One who establishes the New Covenant in His blood, He’s the One who ***“is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”*** (Hebrews 7:25, ESV) In view of all these things, all people, everywhere, are called to repent of their sins and trust in Christ, invited into covenant with God. When they do, they’re forgiven of their sin and united with God through Christ in the New Covenant of eternal life. We only exist as Christians because of the divine power of the New Covenant promises, accomplished by Jesus Christ.

Now, here’s the thing, and this is vital to understand. The old covenant and the New Covenant are not individual covenants that people make with God. It is not an individual, “me and God,” kind of thing. God’s covenants are not individual things. Not Abraham’s covenant, not Israel’s covenant, not the New Covenant that Jesus makes – not individual

Christians, but the church. The New Covenant, in particular, is corporate. It does not create individuals, but a people. That's why Peter says, **"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."** (1 Peter 2:9–10, ESV) A covenant is created with community in mind, not individuals. It establishes how people are to with God, for God, for one another, and for the world. It envisions a people of God, not individuals. And that brings us to the second question that I want to answer today:

Why Have a Church Covenant? I want to answer that question by looking at Hebrews 10 and starting in verse 19: **"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."** (Hebrews 10:19–22, ESV) Now, the writer of Hebrews says basically, "Since by faith we have received the forgiveness of sins, and have been brought into a covenant relationship with God; since we have received the promise that God will be our God and we are His people, and let's draw near to God, let's make our lives with God, confident that we belong to Him in Christ." There is more to it than that, of course, but that is the gist of it.

If all of this is true – that we have forgiveness in Christ, the way opened into the presence of God – the writer of Hebrews says, verse 23, **"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful."** (Hebrews 10:23, ESV) If we have come into covenant with God through our confession of Christ as Savior and Lord, our call is to hold fast and to persevere until the end. Profession of faith in Christ isn't just a one-time thing . . . it's a daily experience. Every day, we need to war against the seduction of the world that calls us to forsake Jesus and give into sin, but instead stay true to the covenant. Every day, we need to remind ourselves of Christ and His truth and His promises. How is that going to happen? God has given to us the gifts of His Spirit and His Word and the promise that we are secure in His hands. Those are great gifts but they are not all.

There is gift that He mentions here, in verse 24, in which the gifts of His Spirit and His Holy Word operate most effectively. The writer of Hebrews says: **"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."** (Hebrews 10:24–25, ESV)

"Let us not give up meeting together." What does the author have in mind? The universal and invisible church? No. He has in mind Christians making their lives together in local churches. How do we remain faithful to the end? Through our life together as a church. It's far more than showing up for church on Sunday. We are to **consider how to stir up one another to love and good works**. We are to be **but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near**.

We remain find strength to remain faithful to the covenant with God by folding our lives together in deep relationships with other people in covenant with God, fueled by the word of God, which encourage us, and exhort us, and stir us up to faithfulness to Christ and to pouring ourselves out for the kingdom of God. Here's the thing, the very nature of relationships is that they require commitment to flourish and to be life-giving, not conditional commitment, not convenient commitment, but covenant commitment.

Do you see it? Christ has created us to be His people, not individual followers but a people, a body, for Himself. To fulfill that calling demands that we come together and form local assemblies called churches. We see that in the NT. The letters, with few exceptions, are written to churches. The New Covenant demands that we form churches, visible churches, which covenant together to be the visible body of Christ for the glory of God, for each other, and for the world.

The church exists because of covenant promises. We exist because of God's promise in Christ to forgive our sins, to write His law upon our hearts, and to make us His people and to be our God. And this local church exists because of a covenant commitment by all of us to believe in and trust Christ as Savior and Lord, to worship God, to love each other in gospel ways, and to make Christ know in this world – TOGETHER – as a specific church that testifies to the existence of the invisible church and the eternal church to come.

The local church is more than a place. The church is the glorious gathering of the redeemed, the sanctified flock of the great Shepherd, the united household of God, the beautiful body and bride of Christ. God calls His people into covenant, not only to Himself but also to each other. Think about it; when Jesus inaugurated the Lord's Supper as the sign of the new covenant in His blood, he did not do it with each of the disciples separately and individually, did He? No, he did it with all of them together. He called them and us to a life of sacrifice, generosity, service and covenant commitment and this joyful duty is most readily pursued within the context of a particular body—a local church.

The church covenant, the covenant that we make with one another, is a solemn pledge, an oath to one another and before God, a binding agreement upon the members of this body to fulfill the commands and the duties of Scripture in a special way – not in an exclusive way - - but in a special way to this particular group of Christians—the Christians who gather at West Salem Baptist Church. It is a sacred calling to be involved in the redemptive work of our sovereign God to push back the darkness of a fallen world through the power of the Holy Spirit by manifesting the light of His Son, Jesus Christ. The Church Covenant is that which takes us from being a mere group of people and transforms us into a church. It is that which transforms us from a conglomeration of people into a gathering of the saints of God. The covenant is that which binds us together. Our relationship with God is founded upon the concept of covenant, and so our relationship with one another should be founded on the same thing.

I want to close by reading our church covenant to you. It's on the back of your bulletins and it will be on the screen in front of you so you can follow along. Let me just read this in closing:

Having been brought by God's grace to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, we now, depending upon the Holy Spirit, establish this covenant with one another. In all we do, we will aim to glorify and enjoy the God of our salvation, from whom and through whom and to whom are all things: to Him be all glory forever! (1 Cor. 10:31; [Rom. 11:36](#))

We will eagerly maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace by walking together in love and in the Spirit and by putting away all bitterness, anger, and injurious speech. ([Eph. 4:3](#); [Gal. 5:16, 25](#); [Eph. 4:29, 31](#)) With humility and gentleness, patience and love, we will be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, even as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us. ([Eph. 4:1-2](#); [Luke 17:3](#); [Col. 3:13](#); [1 Thess. 5:11](#); [1 Pet. 1:22](#)) We will carry each other's burdens, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. ([Gal. 6:2](#); [Rom. 12:15](#))

We will train our children in the instruction of the Lord, seeking to walk in a way that adorns the gospel of Christ before our family, friends, and neighbors ([Prov. 22:6](#); [Eph. 6:4](#); [1 Pet. 3:1](#)). We will strive to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age, as we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. ([Gal. 5:22-24](#); [Titus 2:12](#); [1 Pet. 1:14](#))

We will not neglect to gather together, but will support and treasure the biblical preaching of the whole counsel of God, the faithful observance of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the loving exercise of church discipline. ([Heb. 10:25](#); [2 Tim. 4:2](#); [Acts 2:38](#); [1 Cor. 11:26](#); [Matt 18:17](#); [1 Cor. 5:13](#)) We will contribute cheerfully and generously to the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the advancement of the gospel both to our neighbors and the nations. ([Matt. 28:19](#); [Luke 12:33](#); [2 Cor. 9:7](#)) We will, when we move from this place, unite as soon as possible with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.

In all these things, we rely on our God who has made a new and everlasting covenant with us, saying: "They shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. . . . I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good . . . with all my heart and all my soul." ([Jer. 32:38-41](#))

We, the elders of WSBC, while living the above, also covenant with you that we will: lead the church as humble servants ([Acts 20:28](#); [Philippians 2:1-4](#)), appoint leaders that meet the biblical criteria ([1 Tim. 3:1-13](#); [Titus 1:5-9](#)), watch over your souls as men who will give an account ([Heb. 13:17](#)), equip you for the work of ministry ([Eph. 4:11-14](#)), administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, preach God's word ([1 Tim. 3:2, 4:11-13](#); [2 Tim 4:1-2](#), [Titus 1:9](#)), pray for you, and strive to be examples of faith that can be imitated for God's glory ([Heb. 13:7](#)).

Beloved, these are beautiful words, filled with promise and, if they are followed, would be an immeasurable blessing both to us and to the gospel of Christ. Can you imagine??

The time of half-hearted or convenient commitment, of attendance minus investment are over, especially in a culture and nation that is increasingly tolerant of sin and intolerant of the true church. But the truth is this, a church covenant like this, apart from a God-fueled and love-empowered commitment from all of us is not worth the paper that it is written upon. So here's what I want you to do this week. I want you to read this, really read it, look up the Scripture references, study it with your family. There are six sections – study one a day for the next six days until we come together again next Sunday to break it all down and make application and ask yourself, “Can I commit to this? Will I commit to this? Am I all in?” I hope your answer will be a resounding, “Yes.”

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