

Q. Are church covenants and membership policies biblical?

A. I am sometimes asked to evaluate a specific membership policy or covenant, but the following answer really covers all church covenants and membership policies. First, let's define our terms. Church covenants and membership policies list certain requirements for membership and/or describe the expected behavior of members. While membership policies might reference a confession or statement of faith as something members are to believe, what I am addressing here are not confessions of faith but policies or covenants that bind the behavior of members.

Many Christians and many churches claim that they abide by the principle of the Bible alone. Then they will turn around and formulate something called a church membership policy or church covenant. But where does the Bible tell us to have such a thing? When we become Christians, God places us under the New Covenant, which is a covenant of grace. By grace, God actually takes believers out from under law and its condemnation and places them in Christ Jesus where there is no condemnation (see Romans 8:1). The New Covenant contains law, but it never condemns.

Typically, church covenants say that members are to love one another, care for one another, share one another's burdens, grow in grace, bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and so forth. But these admonitions are already part of the New Covenant, and we are to carry them out using the grace God gives us. To create another covenant—a man-made covenant—that repeats what is already in the New Covenant between all believers and God seems to be a way of saying that one doesn't take the New Covenant seriously. Another covenant—one that the Bible never mentions—must be added on top of Jesus Christ's New Covenant.

Church covenants and membership policies are fundamentally legalistic. They are, after all, a set of laws that a member binds him- or herself to keep. Some of the most popular church covenants say, "We engage to" do this or that. The word "engage" here means "bind

ourselves." Such covenants and policies are clearly asking Christians—who are now supposed to be under grace and not law—to put themselves back under a law. This is to be absolutely disobedient to Galatians 5:1: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." These covenants remind me of Exodus 19:8: "And all the people answered together, and said, All that the LORD hath spoken we will do." But, of course, they did not do all that the law said. They broke the law because people cannot perfectly keep any law. That applies even to Christians. That's why we need the grace purchased for us by Jesus Christ who paid for our transgressions with His life, kept the law perfectly for us, and put us under the New Covenant of grace.

A church membership policy is, in essence, saying that the grace of the New Covenant, the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit, and faith are insufficient. To these, we must add a law, called a church membership policy or church covenant. In response, I say with Paul, "This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? Have ye suffered so many things in vain? if it be yet in vain. He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" (Galatians 3:2-5); and, "I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain" (Galatians 2:21).

By their very nature, church covenants and membership policies are contrary to the grace of the New Covenant. Even when their rules agree with those of the New Covenant, they still directly contradict the principles Paul teaches in such passages as Romans 14. They inherently cause us to judge one another and to not trust that God is leading a believer on a walk that is between him or her and God: "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand" (Romans 14:4). Romans 14:10 says, "But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ." The judgment seat of Christ is not the judgment seat of the pastor or church board or anyone else. Verse 12 clearly teaches that "every one of us shall give account of himself to God." The Bible never says that your church pastor will give an account for you of how well you did or did not keep the church covenant.

Of course, many pastors will bring up Hebrews 13:17. This verse says, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." But we must understand that Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians, and the writer here is giving his endorsement of their leaders whom he apparently personally knew. It should be obvious that the Bible cannot make a blanket statement to all Christians for all time to follow the leaders of the church they happen to be attending. The leader might be a bad leader teaching a false doctrine.

So again, this verse is the writer's personal recommendation of leaders he was familiar with. All he is really saying in Hebrews 13:17 is that these Hebrews should not be willfully unbelieving of their leaders and resisting them. As good leaders, they are "sleepless" (*agrupnousin*—the word translated "watch" in the King James Version) for the lives or souls (*psuchōn*) of those they lead. The allusion is to shepherds watching over their flocks by night. In this manner, that is, by showing their concern through their watchfulness, they are giving an accounting of their faithfulness to their duty. So, the admonition is, don't stubbornly disbelieve the leaders so that they can do their duty with joy. The verse has nothing to do with pastors ruling the church because God will hold them accountable for the souls of their congregants. It is about Christians not stubbornly disbelieving recommended leaders, and the leaders selflessly serving their brethren by watching over them as shepherds or pastors. Their being watchful shepherds is their giving account. The verse does not say that the shepherds will one day stand before God to account for the souls of people in their church. We are responsible for ourselves. Shepherds lead their flocks, make sure they are fed, and protect them from danger. The flocks trust them because of the example they set, not because they threaten or beat their flocks into submission or force them to live by a legalistic set of rules called a church covenant or membership policy. (For a fuller explanation of Hebrews 13:17, read "Authority and Accountability in the Bible" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/accountable.htm>)).

Many church covenants don't stop at merely repeating New Covenant admonitions; they add many of their own. Notice this from a very common Baptist church covenant that is usually considered to be quite innocuous. "We also engage...to abstain from the sale of, and use of, intoxicating drinks as a beverage." "Intoxicating drinks" obviously means alcoholic drinks. Certainly, they can intoxicate if abused, and the New Covenant addresses this (see Ephesians 5:18), but they do

not have to be abused. There is nothing in the Bible that forbids the drinking of alcoholic beverages altogether, and Paul specifically advised Timothy to "use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities" (1 Timothy 5:23). Also, how could wine be the element used in the Lord's Supper if it is inherently wrong to drink it? (See "The Elements of the Lord's Supper – What Kind of Bread and Fruit of the Vine Are We to Use?" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/lordssupperelements1.html>) A church covenant that forbids all consumption of alcohol is trying to be holier than the Bible. And this is simply a typical example of the kinds of things church covenants wrongly try to impose on members.

Other things commonly added by church policies or covenants are: regular attendance of church services (the Bible says nothing about this: see "Hebrews 10:25: What Are We Not To Forsake?" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/hebrews1025.htm>); faithful tithing (the New Covenant does not require tithing: see "What the Bible Says About Tithing and Christian Giving" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/giving.html>); submission to an accountability partner (a concept foreign to the Bible: see "Authority and Accountability in the Bible" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/accountable.htm>); completion of a class before being baptized and becoming a member (Acts 2:41; 8:38; 10:47-48; 16:14-15, 31-33 show the people being baptized the same day they believed the Gospel); and an age requirement for baptism and membership (while the Bible does not teach that infants who cannot understand and believe the Gospel should be baptized, it does not teach a specific age requirement—anyone who understands and believes the Gospel should be baptized; this can sometimes include young children). Of course, this list is not exhaustive, and some covenants and church policies will put other requirements on members and potential members.

A church covenant or church membership policy, then, is a legalistic usurpation of the grace of the New Covenant. Quite frankly, I believe these covenants/policies to be attempts by the leadership of local churches to control the behavior of members with laws because the leadership does not have the faith to believe that Christians can be left to the care of the Holy Spirit and God's Word (or, as Paul put it, commended "to God, and to the word of his grace" Acts 20:32). It seems to come down to a matter of control. Church covenants and membership policies are a means to exercise control over the members. Yet Jesus said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great

among you, shall be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25-28, *English Majority Text Version* used for clarity). And you elders reading this should take special note of Luke 22:26 where Jesus says, "He that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger." We cannot be as the younger if we are strutting around demanding our special privileges as elders. When we violate this dictum of our Lord, we show that we do not trust the Lord to lead His people, demonstrate that we do not understand the humble and brotherly ecclesiology of the New Covenant assembly of God's elect, and open the way for abusive cultism.

I just happened to read today in a Christian textbook the following: "[Many churches] are no longer strict about sin.... They do not require their members to dress modestly, to keep the Lord's Day, to attend church services regularly, and to avoid pleasure seeking.... Instead of changing wicked people's hearts, they are asking the government to pass laws to change people's behavior" (*Homelands of North America Grade 5*, Rod and Staff Publishers, 323-324). What the publishers of this book seem not to realize is that, while it might be a wrong approach for churches to ask the government to pass laws to change people's behavior, it is even worse for churches to legalistically impose moral codes on their members. And contrary to what this book says, churches cannot change wicked people's hearts; only God can.

In conclusion, church policies are legalistic and stifling, contrary to the grace of the New Covenant, confused in their ecclesiology, and easily lead to spiritual abuse and cultism. You might ask me, What would you do if you were considering membership in a church and it had a church covenant or membership policy? After being burned a couple of times in my life, I will tell you that without any hesitation I would turn and run as fast as I could!

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