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Bread of Life Baptist Church
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Nehemiah 9-10

Why Do We Covenant with One Another?

Public reading of God's Word: Neh. 9:32-38

Several months ago, I was having a very enjoyable conversation with a Christian friend. We were getting to know each other more, and I asked him where he went to church. He told me; but then, as the conversation went on, it became clear that while he faithfully attended the church, he wasn't a member. I asked him why he had chosen not to join, and one of the reasons he gave was that he didn't really see the point. "After all," he said, "there doesn't seem to be anything meaningfully different between me and the rest of us non-members who regularly attend and those who attend and *are* members of the church." I think we've all seen situations where this is the case. In fact, I think we've all seen situations where there are people who are *technically members* of a church - in the sense that their names are on the church roll - but they aren't involved in the church community at all, and haven't even attended church in months, maybe years, or decades! So when you see a situation like that, it prompts the question: what exactly is the purpose of church membership? And does it mean anything at all?

And then, when we look to the Bible, and we read about what the New Testament says a Christian church community should look like, and what is expected of Christians as they live out their faith in the community of other believers, in the church - that is, when we look to see what the Bible has to say about church membership - what we see is something *far more extensive and meaningful* than someone just having their name officially recognized on a church membership roll! In fact, according to the Bible, such a person isn't meaningfully a member of the church community at all! And that's because the biblical picture of a church is one in which to belong to that church community - to be a *member* of that body - is meant to be a *meaningful, committed relationship*. To be a member of the church means to profess faith in the gospel and the same beliefs as the church family, and to be recognized as a genuine Christian by them. But membership also means being *committed to each other*: it's a commitment to living as a Christian, both as individuals, and towards one another as a church community. And that includes holding one another accountable to that commitment.

So how do we make church membership genuinely *meaningful*, so that it more closely matches the picture of what it looks like to be part of a church community in the Bible? How do we make it clear that there's a meaningful, legitimate difference between those who attend our church services and those who are actually *members of our local church family*? Furthermore, how do we *maintain* that difference, so that membership *remains* meaningful, guarding our church and our members so that it never becomes the case that we have official members who refuse to attend or who walk away from the church and Christ, or who walk in unrepentant sin, or who stop giving evidence of faith in Christ, the gospel, and GOD's Word? The way that faithful Christian churches - and Baptist churches in particular - have historically answered this question is by having *church covenants* - making it clear that church membership is meaningful by making it clear that it is a *covenantal membership*: membership that is a *relational commitment* to one another. First and foremost, it shows that to be a member of the church is to reflect one's personal faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, reflected in our commitment to live a life of faith to Christ and obedience to His Word. And secondly, it makes clear that this involves a commitment to carrying out obedience and discipleship with a specific body of believers: a specific, local church family.

And this isn't just a historical practice; we see a clear pattern of God's people covenanting with one another through the Scriptures. For example, we see this in 2 Kings 11,, and again in chapter 23. But one of the clearest and most informative examples of this is found in Nehemiah, chapters 9 through 10. The book of Nehemiah takes place after Israel is conquered by their enemies and brought into exile, as the judgment of GOD against their sin, idolatry, and disobedience. But now, in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, God fulfills His promises and brings them back into the land, where they begin rebuilding Jerusalem, the city walls, and the temple. And during this time, the people return to the Lord. In Neh. 9, verses 1-3, they begin reading the Law of God, God's Word, to the people - and they are all convicted of their sin. But then, in chapters 9 and 10, we see them *praising GOD* as they recount the Lord's faithfulness, and finally, *committing to repent and obey God* as a community by signing a covenant with one another. But here's the important thing to notice: they renew their commitment with one another by first recounting *the Lord's covenant faithfulness to them*, despite their own unfaithfulness. So that's the first thing we need to see from our text this morning, and the first answer we have to our question: *Why do we covenant with one another as a church?* It is because, first and foremost...

I. God is a Covenantally Faithful God (Neh. 9:1-37)

Our commitment to one another is first and foremost based on God's covenantal faithfulness with us. Chapter 9 shows us that Israel's covenant with each other and recommitment to obey the Lord is not ultimately rooted in their own obedience and faithfulness; it is instead rooted in the Lord's faithfulness to His covenant promises to His covenant people. It's rooted in a right understanding of who the Lord is: the one, true God who is faithful to His promises and abounding in steadfast love, forgiveness, mercy, and grace to His people. That's what Nehemiah 9 shows us: the Lord's covenantal faithfulness and graciousness against the backdrop of Israel's unfaithfulness and sin. We see this in a brief recounting of the story of God and His people that unfolds throughout the Old Testament.

Verses 4-6 begin by proclaiming the glory and praise of God as the one and only true, creator God. Verse 6 proclaims, "You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you." It reminds us that God is God and creator over all; He deserves worship and glory from every living thing, because God creates all life and every good thing we have - even every breath - is due to God's faithfulness in sustaining creation. And if God is good to all creation and flesh, how much more so is he to His redeemed people? And so we move into a retelling of redemptive history.

Verses 7-8 remind us of God's covenant with Abraham - a promise to make Abraham's family into God's people and to live in the promised land; a promise based on God's choosing and covenant with Abraham by faith, not Abraham's works. And sure enough, God kept his promise. Verse 8: "And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous." Verses 9-12 begin recounting how God kept that promise to Abraham's family, even bringing them out of slavery in Egypt, during the miraculous deliverance of the Exodus story, performing signs in Egypt, parting the Red Sea, leading the people through the wilderness by cloud and fire. Verses 13-15 recount God giving them a new Covenant, the Law Covenant of Moses, on Mount Sinai, where God "gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments" (v.13). But then, verse 16 gives us a reality check and reminds us of how Israel responded to the Lord's faithfulness: "But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments." They immediately made an idol out of a golden calf, disobeying God in idolatry. Yet the Lord remained faithful: "But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and

merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them” (9:17). And so the story continues in throughout the rest of chapter 9. God continues to provide for Israel in incredible, miraculous ways in vv.18-21, recounting their wilderness wanderings, even amidst Israel’s sin and unfaithfulness. In verses 22-25, we’re reminding how God did, indeed, deliver on his promises to Abraham, bringing ISrael into the promised land and delivering the land and their enemies into their hands. But again, the reality check comes, in v.26: “Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their bak and killed you prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies.” Yet the pattern holds true, time and time again in Israel’s history, as we see in verses 26-37. Even when God’s people lack faith, sin, and disobey, God remains faithful to His promises, showing mercy and grace. While he is faithful to the Law covenant of MOses, and allows the curse of wrath and judgment to fall on them for their sin, He also remains faithful to the covenant of Abraham: as we see in v.31, “Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.” And so, the chapter closes with a call for Israel to repent and come back to God, trusting in God’s faithfulness to His promises, trusting that God will continue to show steadfast love, faithfulness, grace, and mercy to them as His people.

And we know the story didn’t end there. God ultimately fulfilled all of these covenant promises by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, the true promised offspring of Abraham, who perfectly fulfilled the Law of Moses, and ushered in the New Covenant, not by the blood of bulls and goats, but by His own blood - by offering a sacrifice for our sins, once and for all, in His death on the cross in our place! And he gives us the glorious gospel promise of His New Covenant: that all who repent from sin and turn to Christ in faith, trusting in His perfect life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection from the grave will be completely forgiven and declared righteous in Christ, by grace through faith alone! That all who are in Christ through faith are part of God’s New Covenant people - the true Israel of God (Gal. 6:16)!

And that is glorious news for us this morning. This means that if you’re trusting in the gospel of Christ alone for your salvation, then you are part of God’s people, and you will be saved. And this is based purely on God’s faithfulness to His covenant promises, not based on your faithfulness and obedience! Just like Israel, we have moments of sin, faithlessness, and disobedience. And yet, everytime we Christians are unfaithful, God proves His faithfulness over

and over again! God does not forsake us, but proves time and time again that He is rich in mercy and grace, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, and will never stop forgiving His people - those who repent and continue to trust in the covenant promises of the gospel of Christ Jesus! So if you're a Christian this morning, the most important thing that I can tell you, and the most important thing this text has to say to you today, is that God is faithful to keep his promises of mercy and grace in Christ to you, even when you and I are unfaithful. As 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

And if you're not a Christian this morning, then the most important thing I can say to you is to hear and believe this Word from God! Confess your sin to the Lord; repent and turn to Him! And you turn not by promising to be better or by first getting your act together; no, turn to Christ and believe that Jesus obeyed perfectly in your place, died on the cross for your sins, bearing the wrath of God that you deserve, and rose again on third day, so that you can be raised to new life with Him! And then, profess your faith in baptism and join the church, proclaiming that you're in Christ and part of God's people by grace through faith in Christ alone!

We are saved, forgiven, and declared righteous not by our own works in anyway, but purely because of GOD's grace. We can have assurance of salvation, even on our worst day, by trusting not in our own faithfulness, but in the faithfulness of God, trusting in His covenant promises! We are God's covenant people because of God's faithfulness to the promises of His New Covenant, fulfilled in the finished work of Christ Jesus on our behalf!

And this means that because we are God's people, we are also called to *live* as God's covenant people. Bringing us to point two...

II. As God's Covenant People, we are Called to be a Covenantally Faithful People (9:38 - 10:39)

After recounting the Lord's covenantal faithfulness, and their own sin and faithlessness, the people corporately repent and renew their commitment to being faithful to God's commands. Now again, as we just saw, their repentance isn't based on their own commitment and obedience - it's based on the Lord's faithfulness and grace, not their own faithfulness or obedience! And yet, their repentance and faith is demonstrated by their commitment to believing and obeying GOD's Word. And they demonstrate this by making a covenant with one another: a commitment to obeying God's promises, to consistently living as God's covenant people.

We see this in 9:38: “Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests.” In 10:1-27, we see a list of the names of those who signed and sealed the covenant, representing the people of Israel. In verses 28-39 (the rest of chapter 10), we see the covenant they are making: they are renewing their commitment to obeying the Lord, keeping the commands of the Mosaic Law that they were under, and living consistently as His people.

Now, we are not under the Law of Moses, but we are under the New Covenant, and the Law of Christ. We just finished the book of Galatians, and we saw clearly there that the true sons of Abraham, the true people of God, are those who believe the gospel and trust in Christ Jesus alone. We are justified by grace through faith, not works of the Law! And yet, Galatians also showed us, that true faith will be made evident by the fruit of the Spirit, as we walk by the Spirit and fulfill the law of love, the law of Christ. In other words, we are saved by grace through faith, not works, yet because we are saved, we are *called to do works of obedience*, putting our faith into action! We are God’s redeemed people because of *God’s faithfulness to his promises*, not our faithfulness! Yet as God’s people, we are called to *be faithful to God’s Word*. Our salvation is *not dependent on our faithfulness* - we’re saved by grace through faith in Christ alone! But if we have faith, then *we will necessarily pursue faithfulness to God in obeying His Word!*

Therefore, it is right for us, as a church community, to make a covenantal commitment with each other to obeying God and being faithful to him, both as individual Christians *and as a church community!* Which leads us to our final point:

III. Church Membership is our Covenantal Commitment to Live out the Christian Life Together as a Biblical Church

This is what we’re committing to when we join a church: we’re agreeing to strive to be faithful Christians and a faithful church, according to how God’s Word calls us to live. But this raises an obvious question: what exactly does it look like to obey God under the New Covenant of Christ, both as individual Christians and as a faithful local church? Well this is where church covenants are very helpful. The purpose of a church covenant is simply to summarize what the Bible plainly and clearly commands for each Christian and church to do. Just as our statement of faith is a summary of what the Bible teaches that we should believe, so our church covenant is simply a summary of how the Bible teaches us to live. *It is a general summary of what it means to live - as individual Christians and as a local church community - according to the Word of*

God. Our covenant is simply a list of things that every Bible-believing, Spirit-filled, Christ-following Christ and church must be committed to following - not perfectly, but it is to be our goal.

And so, I'd like for us to spend the rest of our time by simply walking through our church covenant, and seeing how each line is simply a summary of explicitly biblical commands and passages from the New Testament. And then, we'll close this morning by doing exactly what we see going on in Nehemiah 9-10: we will renew our commitment, to each other and to the Lord, to strive to be faithful to this covenant, as individual Christians and as a church community.

So let's walk through our covenant and some of the scriptures we draw it from:

Our Church Covenant

Having been brought by the grace of God to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, having been baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and believing that Christ has led us to become a part of this fellowship, we now choose to renew our covenant with one another. As members of Bread of Life Baptist Church ...

We will work and pray for unity among the members of this body, choosing to love one another even as we love ourselves.

(Matt. 22:39; Rom. 12:16; 15:5; 1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:1-6; Phil. 2:1-4; 1 John 4:19-21)

1 Cor. 1:10 - "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment."

Eph. 4:1-3 - "... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Line 2 continues:

We will walk together in brotherly love, exercise affectionate care for one another, and faithfully encourage and exhort one another as occasion may require.

(Rom. 12:10; Eph. 5:1-2; Col. 3:12-17; 1 Thess. 4:9-10; Heb. 10:24; 1 Pet. 3:8)

Rom. 12:10 - "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor."

1 Thess. 5:11 - "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."

1 Pet. 3:8 - "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind."

Line 3:

We will seek to fellowship with our brothers and sisters, and we will not neglect to pray for one another and ourselves.

(Acts 2:42; Gal. 6:2; 1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 10:25; James 5:16)

Heb. 10:24-25 - “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.”

James 5:16 - “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”

Line 4:

We will strive to bring up our children and any under our care in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and by a pure and loving example to seek the salvation of our family and friends.

(Matt. 28:16-20; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21; 1 Pet. 3:15)

Matt. 28:19-20 - “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Eph. 6:4 - “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Line 5:

We will rejoice at one another's happiness and, by tenderness and sympathy, bear one another's burdens and sorrows.

(Rom. 12:9-15; Gal. 6:2)

Rom. 12:15 - “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

Gal. 6:2 - “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

Line 6:

We will seek, by His grace, to live in a manner striving for holiness in the world, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts. We will constantly renew our minds to the truth that by being born again by His grace and brought into His Kingdom and being voluntarily baptized and identified with His Church, we are to lead a new and holy life glorifying our Father in heaven.

(Rom. 8:1-11; 12:1-2; Gal. 5:16-26; Eph. 4:17-32; Col. 3:1-17; 1 Thess. 4:1-8; 1 Pet. 2:1-5)

Rom. 12:1-2 - “I appeal to you... to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. DO not be conformed to this world, but be

transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Gal. 5:16 - “But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

1 Thess. 4:3-8 - “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregard not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”

Line 7:

We will submit ourselves to the discipline of this Church as a testimony of our desire to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. And for our brothers and sisters, we will seek their spiritual advancement as dearly as our own.

(Matt. 16:13-20; 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; Gal. 6:1; Col. 1:22-23,28; Titus 1:13; Heb. 13:17)

Matt 18:15-18 - “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Heb. 13:17 - “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Line 8:

We will uphold and defend the doctrines of the faith against all who would come against them and, consequently, against all who would come against the Word of God.

(Matt. 7:15-20; Gal. 1:6-9; 1 Timothy 1:3-11; 3:14-4:11; 2 Tim. 1:8-14; 1 John 4:1-6)

2 Tim. 1:13-14 - “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.”

Line 9:

We will contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the relief of the poor and those in need, and the spread of the Gospel throughout all the nations.
(Matt. 6:1-4; 28:16-20; 2 Cor. 8:1-15, 9:1-15; 1 Tim. 5:17-18)

Gal. 6:6-10 - “Let the one who is taught the word shall all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary in doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

Line 10:

We will serve one another, using the gifts God has granted us in His sovereignty and grace. And in doing so, we will strive always to rely on the power of His Holy Spirit that all glory may be given to Him.
(Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:1-31; Eph. 4:7-16)

1 Cor. 12:4-7 - “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

The covenant closes with these lines:

We will, if the Spirit leads any of us to move from this place, unite with some other church as soon as possible, keeping ourselves under the oversight and discipline of the church. At such a time we will continue to carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.
(Matt. 16:13-20; 18:15-20; Acts 2:42; Heb. 10:25; 13:17)

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

As the ending makes clear, this covenant is not a promise to obey the Lord perfectly. No one can do that! Instead, it is our commitment, as God's people and Christ's church, to strive to

obey the Lord in all things, by His grace, through faith in Christ, in the power of the Spirit, to the glory of God in His Church. So then, Bread of Life Baptist Church, let us renew our covenantal commitment, to one another and to the Lord, to live out our faith in the gospel by striving to follow Christ and obey the Lord in all things - as individual Christians, and as a local church body. So as we close this morning, after we pray, I'm going to call up each member to come forward and sign a copy of this covenant as we renew our commitment - as we make clear that being a member of this church *means something*; that it means we are professing faith in the gospel and are committed to believing and obeying God's Word in all things; that we are committed to being a biblical church community; and that we are committed to helping and holding one another accountable to this Christian walk, in the love and grace of Christ.

If you're not a member of this church, but are a Christian, then I pray that as you witness us renew our covenant as a church this morning, it will encourage you to be committed to your own church family - or, if you're not a member of a church at all, I pray that this will impress upon you the importance to belong to a biblical, faithful church. And if you're not a Christian, then I pray this will prompt you to turn to the Lord, trusting not in your own commitment or works, but in the faithfulness of God to save all who trust in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, by grace alone. If you have any questions about this, I would love to speak with you after the service.

Let us pray, and then we will renew our covenant together.