

WHY A COVENANT?

To many, the idea of developing a covenant may seem extreme and unrealistic, but there are some good reasons for a written covenant.

God has always used covenants. Throughout the Old Testament, God used covenants to define His relationship with His people. He made covenants with the patriarchs and with the people He delivered from Egypt through Moses. Needless to say, while God's people often failed in their fulfillment of the covenant, God was always faithful and, even many times, gracious in spite of their failures. God's covenants throughout the Old Testament were about the spiritual growth of His people. They were about knowing Him, His purposes, and His blessing.

Covenants reflect the type of surrender that God requires of His followers. The disciples left all to follow Jesus. In light of this, wouldn't their surrender have impacted their understanding of the words of Jesus when He told them to "make disciples?" Would they have expected any less surrender or commitment from their followers than they themselves had surrendered to Christ? I have had church leaders oppose a covenant because they think it too high a commitment level for church members. I would submit to you that for many reasons, including numbers and money, we have encouraged church membership with little or no expectations at all. Salvation is free gift from God, but it does not come without expectations. Perhaps we should emphasize the name "Christian" less and emphasize more the following of Jesus and His teachings. Maybe we should expect that when someone becomes a Christian, he would regularly get into the Word in such a way that the Word gets into him so that he becomes like the Word, Jesus Christ.

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, we celebrate the new covenant between God and man. In the words of Jesus, *"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"* Matthew 26:28 (NIV). Although salvation has always been a product of God's grace and man's surrender and faith (*The just shall live by faith*—Romans 1:17), the new covenant spells this out in detail. The symbols that Jesus used in the Lord's Supper remind us of the formation of a new covenant between God and man based upon the sacrifice of Jesus that would provide forgiveness, allowing humanity a new relationship with God through faith.

Jesus told His disciples that if people did not receive their message, then the disciples should shake the dust off their feet—move on. Defining expectations through a covenant agreement can help me know when I need to stop, dust off, and move on. Through my years of pastoral counseling, I have learned the difference between supporting and enabling, which I can define in one word, "PROGRESS." I want to see progress. I am asking only what Jesus commanded in the Great Commission—"to teach them to obey all that I commanded." I am not talking about my commandments but God's commandments that He may use me to reveal. Observed obedience to the commands of Christ is the progress I am looking for. If I do not see it for an extended period of time, I may be in danger of enabling. Covenants can help me know where the person has stopped progressing, where I need to stop supporting, and where, if they are willing to obey and recommit, we can start again.

Covenants give me permission to speak into the lives of people. We live in a free society where we cannot force accountability; it must be something that is mutually agreed upon. Supervision and servitude can be forced from the top down, but mentoring and accountability must be volunteered from the bottom up. I can force my children to do a lot of things, like cleaning their room, but I can never force them to like it. This is the difference between obedience and honor. While in honor you will always find obedience, in obedience you will not always find honor. A covenant is an honorable agreement between two individuals that always includes an act of obedience that comes from healthy accountability and mentoring.

Throughout my book, you will hear me raising the bar when it comes to Christianity, expecting more of someone who calls himself a Christian. A covenant agreement is the most practical way to do this. It clearly defines what my responsibilities are and what I expect of a follower of Jesus. Once again, it is all about holding them accountable for getting in the Word and the Word getting in them, measured by them becoming like The WORD—Jesus Christ.