

April 16, 1967

Romans 12

ON BECOMING COVENANT MEMBERS

By: BeBee and Barbara Holdren

It is with great joy and enthusiasm that I talk with you about the Church of the Covenant and what this expression of the Church Universal means to me.

About one year ago we came to the Church of the Covenant for the first time. From that moment I remembered a statement I had made to P.G. back in December, 1965; in which I said it would be impossible for us to come sixty miles to church every Sunday. Impossible or not, we came, we are here today. With the Lord all things are possible. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles.

It is by God's grace that we are together at the Church of the Covenant this morning. This is the moment of God's harvest when we are together in corporate worship. Then upon the benediction we will be scattered again. Will we fall onto fertile ground where we will be vessels of God's grace and forgiveness, or will we fall onto unfertile ground where we will be poor witnesses for God?

This is the point at which we choose whether we take Christ out into the world, on our jobs, to our clubs and social functions, to school, on the street and highways, to the market place, or wherever the opportunity should be. Or we could leave Him here in the chapel and meet Him here next week.

I want to have the full responsibility of doing whatever I can to help this covenant community carry Christ out into the world. While recognizing that the Church is the body of Christ in the world today, as Jesus in His human form was the Christ in the world of His day. I must be committed to be a mature Christian and to know the will of God. To me this means that Christ is the center, or He is first in my life. There are no obstacles, there is complete openness.

God never shuts us out. If He should close one door there is always another opened. Should He close our door, He wants us to start a new course of action. God wants action, He moves with action. He doesn't want us to become stale, lazy, or indifferent, but to accept life as He has offered it, full of grace.

I understand that the object of the Church of the Covenant is to bind together followers of Jesus Christ for the purpose of sharing the worship of God and in making His will dominant in the lives of men, individually and collectively, as that will is set forth in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Scripture. Feeling that we receive strength and encouragement from a joint commitment to Jesus Christ, I do covenant that:

"I will engage in the regular and systematic reading of the Bible each day, as a source of guidance, inspiration and insight.

"I will develop my prayer life through setting aside daily the time needed for this purpose.

"I will give through this expression of the Church at least a tithe of the income which is entrusted to my stewardship as a token expression of God's total claim on my total life.

"I will participate regularly each week in corporate Christian worship usually the worship of our church.

"I will fulfil the privilege of Christian service by assuming the responsibility in the life and mission of the community to which I am best suited or for which I am most needed.

"I will endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness.

"I will indicate to the community or some member of the church any difficulty I may be having with any area of our Covenant, and I will seek the counsel, prayers, and support of the church."

Here in the Church of the Covenant we speak often about life as celebration. Today is a very special time of celebration for me and I'm excited about sharing it with you.

The primary reason for celebration today is to publicly make known the commitment of my life to God and to this Church. Another is that it was exactly one year ago today that we first came to the Church of the Covenant. Most likely, each of us has found his way here in a very different way, and I'd like to tell you about some of the events that led us here--and why I feel that God has really called us to become a part of this fellowship.

As you probably know, for a number of years we were members of Northminster Presbyterian Church in Roanoke where P.G. was minister. For a while we were not very active members--our participation consisting mostly of attending Sunday School with the children and occasionally staying for the worship service. Gradually, there evolved for me a growing sense of awareness of the reality of God and His importance in my life. My desire to know more about Him and His Church deepened.

Though I began taking a more active part in our church, I felt a vague sense of dissatisfaction--with myself and with the church. I had read Call to Commitment which tells the story of the Church of the Saviour, so I had caught a glimpse of what life in a Christian community can be, also what it means to be the Church at work in the world today. I was unhappy, too, about the attitudes of people both in the church and outside--the racial prejudice, the general lack of concern for other people, and an unwillingness to become involved.

I knew I was not doing anything to improve the situation, but it didn't bother me enough to do anything about it--not then! As I said earlier, these feelings were vague, the ideas were simply forming.

Following this period of "developing" came the birth--my rebirth. It happened during the worship service on a Sunday in October, 1965. Our choir sang "Let There Be Peace on Earth--And Let It Begin With Me." As they sang, I had the strangest feeling that the words were meant for me--that God himself was speaking. The simple, familiar words seemed to hold new meanings--or I reached new depths in my comprehension of them. Now God was speaking to me through them, telling me it was time for me to do something, to get with it!

Now all this was something new to me, so about two weeks passed while I tried to gather enough courage to go to P.G. to talk with him about what I could do, when I heard that somebody else had gotten to him first--and I don't think God had sent this person! I learned that later on the same day I had felt God's call claiming my life, the "powers that be" in that church had sent a representative to tell P.G. that we needed a change of ministers. There were many more of us who wanted him to stay--and the battle was on!

Thus began a period which held for us the deepest despair at the thoughts of losing P.G. and his family, and also the greatest excitement at really being involved in a cause we felt was right. We were hoping we could keep P.G. in Roanoke so we could get on with what God wanted us to do. We even talked of starting a new church in Roanoke, one that would be similar to this one. But this is not what God had planned for us.

Our blackest moments came when P.G. made the decision to leave Roanoke, and to come to Lynchburg to work with the Fellowship here in the inner-city ministry. This was not what I had prayed for! I know now that often God denies our requests in order to give us something better--but I didn't know it then! Some of our closest friends at Northminster left when P.G. did. Others, like us, stayed to try to rebuild.

On a Sunday in April, we drove with two other families to Lynchburg to visit you here, and to see something of the work that P.G. was doing and seemed so happy about. When we came, we certainly had no intentions of ever becoming a part of this church! And besides, nobody would drive sixty miles to go to church--and with four children! Mainly, we wanted to check up on you and to reassure ourselves that you were treating P.G. right, and that he really was happy in what he was doing!

I think I'll never forget even the tiniest detail of that first visit--which marked the beginning of what has been the most exciting and inspirational year of my life. The worship service was similar to others--and yet there was a difference. Bev's sermon was on "What It Means to be a Free Person" and I longed to hear more about it. We stayed for lunch and lingered on through the afternoon. Everybody was so warm and friendly; instead of being ill-at-ease, I had the oddest feeling that I had "come home." Several times that day as we toured the grounds and

buildings here and at Madison Street and talked about the missions of this church, Bev said, "You know, we really don't have the ideal situation here." And I didn't believe a word of it!

On returning to Northminster there was still no sense of fulfilment, only that same disturbing feeling of emptiness that we had felt since P. G. left.

God was very persistent with His gentle nudgings, so that three weeks after our first visit we were back again--for the weekend. Bev had encouraged us to bring our tent along and camp out. I was a little skeptical, but he assured us that "people camp out here all the time!" That Sunday morning there wasn't a single raised eyebrow directed toward that little green tent perched on the side of the hill; even though I learned later that people didn't really "camp out here all the time!" This was just typical of Bev's way of always putting other people at ease and making them feel welcome. Anyway, this is when the camping mission was born--with all of its promises of a most exciting venture! And, as you know, that little green tent stayed on the side of this hill for most of the summer!

From that time on, there was really no question of our going back to Northminster, or of finding another church home. And though we told ourselves that coming here each Sunday was only temporary--just until we could decide what to do--both Bee and I felt that this is where we belonged and that God had used the events of the previous months to lead us here.

I've told you how we came--now I'd like to tell you why we stayed, and about some of the exciting discoveries we've made.

We found in the Church of the Covenant a fellowship of people who love God and who express this love through their love and concern for each other and for other people outside the fellowship. We found a quality of life here that is very different and exciting.

I have found, through the person of Jesus the Christ, a personal relationship with God. I know that to be a Christian I don't have to be perfect! I may fail in many areas of my covenant with God, but I know that I can confess my failures--and He will love me anyway. For this is the loveliest thing that Jesus did for us. He revealed for us the true nature of God--a God who loves us, accepts us, and uses us just as we are with all of our imperfections. One who by His example taught us to love each other; and because He loved us, died in a human way that we might live.

I've learned that the heart of Christian experience is not simply trying to imitate Christ, but it is calling on Him for help. It's not something we do for Him, but it is something He does for us. We need the help and strength that comes from Christ.

My participation in the School for Christian Living has been a wonderful experience, and many points have been clarified for me. As a result of these classes I've come to have a clearer understanding of words such as: grace, baptism, sacrament, discipline, and mission--words I had heard before, but had never really grasped the meanings. Religion is no longer something we practice on Sunday, but is the center of our lives. I have learned the real meaning of Church, that it's not an institution with the primary purpose of carrying on the teachings of Jesus; but rather that the Church is really the body of Christ in our day just as Jesus was the body of Christ in His day. This body--the Church--is made up of many parts, each of which is vitally important to the operation of the total body. We, as the Church, must do as Jesus did--go out into the world as agents of God's love and forgiveness. This is the way God's love is expressed--through people like us.

As we grow, we reach new depths in our understanding and awareness. I can remember a class P.G. was teaching at Northminster about five years ago, when he quoted from our book the statement that "once we're saved, we're always saved." I questioned him about it and he explained what it meant, but not until more recently have I understood what it really means. It simply means that once we have asked for and received God's forgiveness, He's not going to take it back. We may lose our joy in our salvation and have to ask God to restore it--but we still belong to Him.

For a long time one of my primary concerns has been to help remove the artificial barriers that separate people from each other and from God--mainly those of race, economics, and social standing. In the Church of the Covenant I have found, through God's grace, the freedom to engage in relationships in depth with people of other races and social classes, learning to know and love them as persons and giving them an opportunity to know me as a person.

I'm learning what it is to be a "need-meeter" instead of a "do-gooder." This is why we want to move to the house on Madison Street, to join God there, to be friends with the people who live in the area, sharing their burdens and loving them, and trying to meet their needs in any way we can. Also, I want my children to be aware that life does not begin and end with Boonsboro Road -- or on Hazel-ridge Road where we live in Roanoke, I want them to realize that we do live in a broken world, a world with suffering and need all around us--and that they can help to relieve some of that suffering to any degree in which they feel called to do so.

One of my favorite quotations is that one which begins, "No man is an island, entire unto itself," and goes on to say, "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in all Mankind." Because I am involved in all mankind, I feel called to help in some way to relieve some of the suffering caused by the conflict in Viet Nam. This is why I want to help care for the children--burned victims of the war--who may arrive in Lynchburg soon for medical treatment and convalescence.

As a newly-committed person, I don't claim to have "arrived," but I am making a start towards the growth that hopefully will lead to a full Christian maturity. There have been disappointments and disillusionments. I've learned that not everybody in the covenant community is as open as I had thought they were. Recently when my spirits were low and I had a few problems, nobody seemed to care, though intellectually I knew they did--and I felt rejected. I've discovered that we really don't have the ideal, or perfect, situation; and that all my needs won't be met here. Through this discovery I've become more aware of my own imperfections and have reached a new level of understanding and forgiveness in my relationships with others. I know now that genuine community is not based on an idealistic wish-dream, but that we are bound together only through the forgiving love of Jesus Christ. Christian brotherhood is a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate and be thankful.

There will always be disappointments and failures, but as Bev has said a number of times, "I think we are on the threshold of a whole new era, here in the Church of the Covenant." I am looking forward to whatever the future holds, with the great joy of anticipation, and with gratefulness for God's grace which brought us here.

I'd like to close with a prayer of Peter Marshall's:

"Thou hast invited me 'to ask, to seek, to knock' -- assuring me that if I ask, it shall be given unto me; if I seek, I shall find; if I knock, it shall be opened unto me.

Help me to believe that O God. Give me the faith to ask, knowing that I shall receive. Give me the faith to seek, believing that I shall surely find. Give me the faith and the persistence to knock, knowing that it shall be indeed opened unto me.

Help me to live the Christian life in daring faith and humble trust, that there may be worked out in me, even in me, Thy righteousness and goodness. With a sense of adventure, I make this prayer. Amen."

Be Bee and Barbara Holdren
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