

## **“Our Covenant”**

**Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 9/22/19**

*Hebrews 10:10:22-25*

The word “covenant” comes from the Latin words “con” (meaning “together”) and “venire” (meaning “coming”). *Covenant* from its roots means “coming together.” Simply stated it can mean an “agreement.” The question then becomes: Why do we use the word “agreement” instead of “covenant”? Because *covenant* is a very specialized word in our English language today, reserved for something much deeper than a general “agreement.” We seem to only use it in weddings and in religious contexts nowadays. It is reserved for a special designation harking back to the Hebrew word “*berit*,” which is used 280 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, and used for very special relationships. Its Greek counterpart “*diatheke*” is used 33 times in the later Christian Scriptures. However, it seems to have a clear reverence when used, and when the founders of our community, “Church of the Covenant,” chose the English word “covenant” to embody the essence of our faith sojourning, I don’t think they chose the word lightly. Not at all. They chose the word to evoke an emotion, a commitment to something much bigger than just themselves. It resonated deeply with our first members, especially in a time when a feeling of indifference and apathy when it came to personal faith and the condition of the world around them seemed to be prevalent sentiments. The founders regarded their genesis of forming a new community out of a deep desire for “renewal.” And in order to achieve renewal both personally, let’s say “inwardly,” and in the world around them, let’s say “outwardly,” they chose to enter into an annual *covenant* with one another, one which will require consistent revisiting of the terms, revisiting of the essence, revisiting of the purpose—better yet, a consistent “renewal” among the parties involved. Our community is designed around the idea of spiritual growth through self-examination, contemplation, and action – and this process is recursive, cyclical; it never ends. It never stops.

Historically “covenant” or “berit” was always relational. It was not a simple austere contract, it was human bonding with human under the Divine. In the ancient stories of the Hebrews, we see occasions of “berit” (covenant) between two parties accompanied and sealed by a shared meal together as seen in Genesis 26 and 31. Though not always the case, it was very common and seemed to symbolize a celebration of human equalization, we are bonded together as siblings, as family; co sharing in a meal together becomes symbolic of our love for one another, our comfort with one another. Covenant meant we were equals, bonded together in this relationship. Sealed in an almost familial bond.

These forms of “covenant” were used by the ancients in contexts of “making peace.” Remember what Jesus said, “blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called the children of God.” Abimelech and Isaac settled their land disputes by making a “berit” together. In the same way Joshua later made peace with the Gibeonites, to avoid war and violence. To live in peace. Solomon and Hiram made “berit” together, to live in constant peace with one another. While these seem to be more political covenants to bring about peace among people groups, the importance is not lost. Other uses of “berit” were in a love relationship between two people, like in a marriage. Or like the relationship between Jonathan and David, where a commitment made to love one another is central. In both cases, the “berit,” though wholly human, is made in the presence of the Divine. How we at “Church of the Covenant” use the word “covenant” is a mix of both of these principles. We make a loving commitment to certain things throughout the year that feed the individual member personally, inwardly, that will provide internal peace—and also provide for a love for others outwardly (or external peace). The member makes the

covenant in a spirit of love and peace for the sake of love and peace, as expressed inside and outside oneself. For those who choose not to make the covenant that year does not mean that they choose to ignore the covenant or even live outside it, but as the name of the this community infers, we all strive to live by the principles of the covenant itself, whether we made a public commitment or not. We each work out aspects of the covenant and strive to leverage their goodness in our lives regardless of whether we committed our names to paper. We often call these principles our *disciplines*:

The disciplines include five areas of our life: 1) Personal growth (daily), 2) Growth in community with others (weekly), 3) Commitment to Mission (loving others), 4) Commitment of Resources (putting your money where your heart is), and 5) Personal accountability (commitment to self). These principles are entrenched in a love for one another. It is called, in fact, a “covenant one with another.” We see this in the initial followers of Jesus. The writer of Hebrews encouraged them, and this was the feeling of our church founders here. The words of Hebrews 10 are ever present in how we are to be with one another: *“Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the day approaching.”*

Now, you do not have to be perfect in all five areas to commit to being a “covenant member.” Not at all. We know that God’s strength is in fact “made perfect in our weakness.” However, it only takes a person stepping out on faith with an earnest willingness to adhere to these disciplines, willing to attempt them in an authentic and genuinely honest fashion. Community members are members whose disciplines mirror four of the five, with the exception being the Resources commitment. As you can see we do not take membership renewal lightly in our church. Many are members of our community because they journey with us, and aspects of our disciplines are practiced by all—which is obvious, just look around at the various Missions we undertake throughout our larger community, or the contemplative nature of our worship and deep fellowship with another. We are all members of this community by association and choice. The Covenant aspect permeates each of us whether we know it or not. The principles are central to most all we do. And when October 1 comes along each year, which is our Church’s birthdate, we revisit the importance of these principles and plot how we are to enter into a time of reflection about them. By the way, we are 65 years old this year. What an accomplishment! It was 65 years ago that the six original Covenant members (Bev and Jack Cosby, Irving and Ann Stubbs, and Jim and Mary Jane Ould) made that initial commitment. Our custom is to invite all of us to a retreat on the grounds at the time of renewal. This year our church retreat will be on Saturday, October 5 – 9-4. Please consider coming. If you are contemplating whether to commit this year as a Covenant or Community member especially make it a priority to come. And if you simply would like to join us on a personal retreat in the company of others, come. It is a silent retreat, dedicated to personal journeying, through prayer, meditation, study, journaling, contemplation, a community meal, and sharing. Come and partake in this beautiful journey of spiritual authenticity through retreat together on the grounds on October 5. We will make our commitments at the end of the retreat. So if it is on your mind to consider the commitment as your own, then please make it a priority to come if you at all can.

Now to highlight the beauty of what committing to the disciplines is like, I am inviting three of our six members to join me up here for a brief sharing time.