

*Andrew Fuller*  
CENTER *for* BAPTIST STUDIES  
at THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

# Congregational covenanting with God:

A FORGOTTEN SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

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## CONGREGATIONAL COVENANTING WITH GOD: A FORGOTTEN SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

Rooted in the soil of the sixteenth-century Reformation, the making of a personal covenant with God was a common feature of seventeenth-century Puritan and eighteenth-century Evangelical spirituality.<sup>1</sup> The personal covenants of which we have record from this period generally fall into three categories:

- 1) Those made at the time of a person's conversion or those made later to mark this birth into spiritual life;
- 2) Those made on the occurrence of natural birthdays or at the start of a new year;
- 3) Those made upon the occurrence of an event of special significance, such as ordination or entry into a new sphere of ministry.

None of those who drew up *written* covenants in this period were unaware of the two major dangers that covenant-making can involve:

- 1) Legalism—thinking that it is the drawing up of a covenant that saves, whereas it is Christ alone who is our Saviour;

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1 The following account of covenant-making is dependent on the marvelous study by Gwyn Davies, *Covenanting with God. The story of personal and church covenants and their lessons for today* (Bryntirion, Bridgend, Mid Glamorgan: Evangelical Library of Wales, 1994). See also Gwyn Davies' summary of aspects of his book in "Covenanting with God—a look at personal covenants," *Grace Magazine* (February 2005): 8 and 16.

Other helpful studies include Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1990), which is based on his doctoral thesis, "The Origin, Development, and Use of Church Covenants in Baptist History" (ThD thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1973), and David Fountain, "Can the old Church Covenants help us today?," *Sword & Trowel* (December 4, 1985), 8–10.

- 2) Spiritual complacency-viewing this formal transaction as henceforth ensuring that one's spiritual life was guaranteed to be healthy and flourishing.

Moreover, our seventeenth-century Puritan and eighteenth-century Evangelical forebears well knew that there is no biblical injunction that a Christian must draw up a written covenant. Yet, they regarded a written covenant as a helpful tool in reminding them what they had undertaken when they took Christ as their Lord and Saviour. These written documents, which were for their eyes only, could be meditated on at a later point in time and be a spur to spiritual renewal, "a more serious profession, a more watchful life, a more tender conscience towards God."<sup>2</sup>

### **Covenanting together**

Some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century churches also sought to promote and safeguard their experience as communities of Christian disciples by the adoption of a written covenant.<sup>3</sup> Champlin Burrage, writing on this subject in 1904, suggested that the idea of a church covenanting together may well have originated among German Anabaptist communities in the 1520s.<sup>4</sup> Be this as it may, by the seventeenth century, written covenants were common to both Scottish Presbyterians—where they eventually took the form of a national covenant rather than one agreed to by an individual local congregation—and those Puritans who had separated from the Church of England, namely, English Presbyterians, Independents or Congregationalists, and the Particular and General Baptists.<sup>5</sup>

The heart and substance of these church covenants was usually a series of carefully formulated commitments that were biblically based and that church members voluntarily made to God and to one another. Whereas confessions of faith are centered mainly on vital doctrinal issues, these covenants deal primarily

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2 Davies, *Covenanting with God*, 34. See Appendix 1 for an example of a personal covenant by Matthew Henry.

3 For the views of those Baptist leaders who felt that a church need not have a written covenant, see Champlin Burrage, *The Church Covenant Idea: Its Origin and Its Development* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1904), 113–121, 124–125; Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 26–27; Davies, *Covenanting with God*, 51–52.

4 *Church Covenant Idea*, 13–25. See also Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 20–21.

5 Davies, *Covenanting with God*, 39; Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 22–23.



with Christian conduct.<sup>6</sup> In the words of Charles Deweese, a Southern Baptist historian, they were designed to “deepen the quality of a church’s fellowship, sharpen a church’s awareness of vital moral and spiritual commitments, clarify biblical standards for Christian growth, and create and maintain a disciplined church membership.”<sup>7</sup>

### **John Miles and the Swansea Baptist Church Covenant**

Some of these covenants, however, were fairly general. Take, for instance, the one drawn up in 1663 by Swansea Baptist Church, the first Baptist congregation in Massachusetts, New England. This congregation was planted by the Welsh Baptist leader John Miles (1621–1683) and a company of fellow Welsh Baptists who emigrated to Rehoboth, Massachusetts, in 1662 when Miles was forced out of his pastorate at Ilston, Glamorgan, by the Act of Uniformity.<sup>8</sup> It would appear that Miles was one of a handful of Particular Baptist ministers in England and Wales who had received his salary from the established church. When the state church began to tighten the screws on the Puritans within her midst in the early 1660s and the Act of Uniformity passed in 1662 that specified all legitimate ministers had to be ordained by a bishop and required them to adhere to all aspects of Anglican polity as found in *The Book of Common Prayer*, men like Miles had no choice but to leave their charges.

The covenant which Miles and his fellow Welsh Baptists established at the heart of their Baptist congregation in Massachusetts seems to be modelled on Paul’s train of thought in Romans 12:1.<sup>9</sup> There the Apostle Paul refers to the “mercies of God,” by which he undoubtedly has in mind the various blessings accompanying salvation that he has enumerated in Romans 3–11. On the basis of these “mercies” he urges his readers to present themselves to God as “a living sacrifice.” Similarly, the Swansea Baptists begin by enumerating what God had

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6 Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, viii–ix; Fountain, “Church Covenants”, 8.

7 Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, x.

8 On Miles, see Henry Melville King, *Rev. John Myles and the Founding of the First Baptist Church in Massachusetts* (Providence, RI: Preston & Rounds, Co., 1905); B. R. White, “John Miles and the Structure of the Calvinistic Baptist Mission to South Wales 1649–1660” in Mansel John, ed., *Welsh Baptist Studies* (Cardiff: South Wales Baptist College, 1976), 35–76.

9 See Appendix 2: Swansea Baptist Church Covenant (1663).

done for them as believers.<sup>10</sup> “Through the exceeding riches of God’s infinite grace,” they state, they have been “mercifully snatched out of the kingdom of darkness, and by his infinite power translated into the kingdom of his dear Son,” an allusion to Colossians 1:13. They have thus become “partakers with all the saints of all those privileges which Christ by the shedding of his precious blood hath purchased.” Constrained by their enjoyment of Christ’s “matchless love and wonderful distinguishing mercies,” and conscious of their duty as Christians “to walk in visible communion with Christ and each other” and of their right to enjoy “all the privileges of God’s house which our souls for long time panted after,” they took the solemn step of freely offering themselves to God as “a living sacrifice.”

They prayed that through Christ’s strength they would seek to fulfill all their “respective duties towards God and each other, and to practice all the ordinances of Christ according to what is or shall be revealed” to them. They further affirmed their commitment to maintain visible Christian unity with all whom they judged to be fellow members in Christ’s body. In fact, they went so far as to state that division over “controversial points as are not absolutely and essentially necessary to salvation” was “abominable and loathsome” and “utterly inconsistent with that Christian charity which declares men to be Christ’s disciples.” It should be noted that Miles was committed to an open membership position, that is, he was prepared to admit to the membership of the church men and women who could give a substantial testimony of their conversion regardless of whether they were baptized.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Bourton-on-the-Water Baptist Church Covenant**

A good example of a much more complex covenant is that of the Baptist cause at Bourton-on-the-Water, Gloucestershire, dated January 30, 1720.<sup>12</sup> At the time when this covenant was drawn up the church had been in existence for approximately seventy years. Extant minutes of the Midlands Particular Baptist Association reveal that representatives of the Bourton Baptists were present at this association’s second general meeting on June 26, 1655. How long the church

<sup>10</sup> A copy of this covenant may be found in Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 132–133.

<sup>11</sup> King, *Rev. John Myles and the Founding of the First Baptist Church in Massachusetts*, 90.

<sup>12</sup> For a copy of this covenant, see Appendix 3: The Bourton Church Covenant (1720). It is taken from “The Bourton Church–Covenant,” *Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society*, 1 (1901–1904): 272–273. See also Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 122–124.

had existed prior to this date, however, is not exactly known. According to one account, it was founded in 1650.<sup>13</sup> After the death of their pastor Joshua Head in 1719, who had served in this capacity for the previous nineteen years, the church was divided over the choice of a successor to Head. So deep was the division that the church actually dissolved for a brief period of time. In January 1720, though, a majority of the members formally recommitted themselves to one another as a body of believers and Christian disciples: “We ... freely & heartily give up our selves afresh,” they declared, “to God the Father & his Only Son our Lord and Lawgiver; & to one another according to his Will.” Documenting this act of recommitment was a covenant composed of thirteen articles.

Like the Swansea Baptist covenant, a number of the articles (1, 3 and 4) specify a commitment to preserving their unity in Christ. Their recent experience of fractious disagreement over the choice of a new pastor may well have led them to devote nearly a quarter of the specific articles of the covenant to this matter. “We will, to the utmost of our Power,” they affirm in the first article, “walk together in one Body, & as near as may be with one Mind, in all sweetness of Spirit, and saint like Love to each other, as highly becomes the Disciples of Christ.” Article 3 draws on the language of Ephesians 4:3, a classic text with regard to church unity, to make essentially the same point: “we will with all care, Diligence, & Conscience labour & study, to keep the Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace, both in the Church in general, & in particular between one another.”

This concern for church unity, however, was not an indiscriminate embrace of all who affirmed that they were Christian disciples. Those who signed this covenant declared their readiness to “shun those that are Seducers & false Preachers of Errours and Heresies” (article 4). And in the second article the signators state their determination to “jointly contend, & strive together for the Faith & Purity of the Gospel,” which they further define as “the truths of Jesus Christ, & the Order, Ordinances, Honour, Liberty, & Priviledges of this his Church.”

The fifth and sixth articles are a promise to bear one another’s burdens and weaknesses. Bearing the burdens of a brother or sister, it is explicitly stated, fulfills

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13 *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660. Part 1. South Wales and the Midlands*, ed. B. R. White (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1971), 20 and 40, n.9; C. R. Elrington and Helen O’Neil, “Bourton-on-the-Water” in C. R. Elrington, ed., *A History of the County of Gloucester* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), VI, 47. For a history of the church, see Thomas Brooks, *Pictures of the Past: The History of the Baptist Church, Bourton-on-the-Water* (London: Judd & Glass, 1861).

“the End of our near relation.” In other words, “being there” for one another is part of their *raison d'être* as a community of believers. Informing these two articles is the realization that Christian discipleship cannot exist in isolation; it requires community.

Article 7 is a pledge of how they would act if persecution came upon them. “We will, as our God shall enable us, cleave fast to each other to the utmost of our power; & that if perilous Times should come, & a Time of Persecution ... we will not draw back from our holy profession, but will endeavour to strengthen one anothers hands, & encourage one another to Perseverance.” For any in the Bourton church who were roughly fifty years of age or older, persecution for the faith would have been a vivid memory, since, apart from the brief period when England had been ruled by Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) in the 1650s and experienced “Cromwellian freedom,”<sup>14</sup> genuine religious toleration had not existed until 1688. In fact, in 1714, only six years before this covenant was drawn up, there had been an unsuccessful attempt made by Anglican die-hards to close down all of the academies and seminaries run by anyone outside of the Church of England. This pledge takes seriously the fact that the ultimate loyalty of the Christian disciple is to Christ and that he or she must be prepared to give up all for his sake. But also noteworthy is the communal context in which this test of discipleship is placed. The persecution of a believer inevitably affects the entire community. And as God gives them grace, these believers promise to stand alongside one another in suffering for the gospel.

Then comes a vow to be circumspect in what is said about the church's inner life to those outside of the congregation. “We do promise to keep the Secrets of our Church entire without divulging them to any that are not Members of this particular Body, tho' they may be otherwise near & dear to us.” The reason given for this is drawn from the imagery of the Song of Solomon 4:12: “for we believe the Church ought to be as a Garden enclosed & a fountain sealed.” This comparison of the local church to an enclosed garden was commonplace in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Baptist documents that talked about the nature of the church.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> King, *Rev. John Myles and the Founding of the First Baptist Church in Massachusetts*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, *The First London Confession of Faith* 34, where it is stated that, by entering the local church through the doorway of baptism, believers are placing themselves under Christ's “heavenly conduct and government, to lead their lives in his walled sheep-fold, and watered garden” (William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* [Rev. ed.; Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969], 165–166). Also see Benjamin

The next vow, article 9, is based on 2 Corinthians 6:14 (where Paul urges Christians not to be “unequally yoked together with unbelievers”) and 1 Corinthians 7:39 (Paul’s command to marry “only in the Lord”). The members of the church promised not to marry an unbeliever, for, they stated, “we believe it to be a Sin to be unequally yoked, that it is contrary to the Rule of Christ, & the ready way to hinder our souls peace, growth, & eternal Welfare.” The tenth article is a pledge to help each other materially, while article 11 is focused on the spiritual help that believers must give one another. The latter is designed especially to encourage a pastoral attitude on the part of the members towards each other. If they see a brother or sister harbouring a sinful lifestyle, they promised “to remove it by using all possible Means to bring the person to repentance & Reformation of Life.”

In article 12, the church members committed themselves to worshipping “on the Lord’s days” and on other occasions that the church deemed fit. The final commitment, article 13, was a promise to engage in private devotion, regularly engaging in prayer for one another, the growth of the church, and especially for their “Ministers & the success of their Ministry.”

### **William Carey and the Leicester Church Covenant**

In the early summer of 1789 William Carey (1761–1834) moved to the town of Leicester to assume his second pastorate. The congregation, Harvey Lane Baptist Church, had been founded in 1760, but by the time Carey came to the town in 1789, it was weak, dispirited, and some of its members were leading openly dissolute lives. One of the latter was the previous pastor, a John Blackshaw, who preached his final sermon in June 1788, but was disfellowshipped the following year for being “frequently intoxicated with liquor.”<sup>16</sup> The members were divided over what to do to restore the work, so Carey took the radical step of dissolving the church in 1790 and reforming it on the basis of a new covenant.

This new covenant, known as the Leicester Covenant, was drawn up by Carey

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Keach, *The Glory of a True Church, and its Discipline display'd* (London, 1697), 50–51.

16 Sheila Mitchell, *Not Disobedient... A history of United Baptist Church, Leicester including Harvey Lane 1760–1845, Belvoir Street 1845–1940 and Charles Street 1831–1940* ([Leicester], 1984), 20. I am indebted to Mr. Chisso Wang, a graduate of the Toronto Baptist Seminary and Bible College, for getting me a copy of this rare work to use for this lecture.

in 1790 and was based in part on the church's original 1760 covenant.<sup>17</sup> Most of this covenant, typical of such documents in Baptist circles, as we have seen, dealt with issues of practice and behavior. But in the first article, Carey laid out the theological convictions upon which membership in the church was based:

... we receive the Bible as the Word of God, and the only Rule of Faith, and Practice, in which we find the following Doctrines taught, namely, that in the Deity are three equal Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Who sustain distinct offices in the economy of Human Salvation; We believe that all Things were fully known to God from the foundation of the world, that he from Eternity chose his People in Christ to Salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the Truth; that all rational Creatures are under indispensable Obligation to obey the Law of God, which is Holy, just and good, but that all Men have broken it and are liable to eternal Punishment; that in the fullness of Time God sent his Son to redeem his People whose Blood was a sufficient Atonement for sin, and by the imputation of whose righteousness we are accounted righteous before God, and accepted with him; and that being Justified by Faith we have Peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We further believe that Men are totally depraved, and that the carnal Mind is enmity against God, and that we are convicted, and converted only by the sovereign operations of the Holy Spirit upon our Hearts, being made willing in the Day of his Power, and that the life of Grace is maintained by the same Divine Spirit, who is the Finisher as well as the Author of our faith, that those who are received thus shall persevere in the way of Holiness, and at last obtain everlasting Happiness through the mercy of God.<sup>18</sup>

Here we see how a church covenant can serve as a filter by which a local church can determine to some degree who or who was not a disciple of Christ. In addition to the standard evangelical convictions about the authority of the Scriptures and the classical doctrine of the Trinity, Carey affirmed here God's sovereign election of a people whom he redeemed by his Son's atoning work and justified by the imputation of his Son's righteous, flawless life. This was needed due

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell, *Not Disobedient*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix 4: The Leicester Covenant (1790).

to the total depravity of all mankind. In fact, this depravity was so deeply rooted in the human heart and so hostile to God that only the unconquerable work of the Spirit could overcome it. As Carey would later say: one “may well expect to see fire and water agree, as persons with sinful hearts and desires cordially approve of the character of God.”<sup>19</sup> Once this people have been converted, the all-divine Holy Spirit will keep them loyal to Christ to the end when they shall “obtain everlasting Happiness through the mercy of God.” It is noteworthy that Carey himself was certain that those “proofs I have of the evil tendency of my heart...convince me that I need the constant influence of the Holy Spirit; and that, if God did not continue his loving-kindness to me, I should as certainly depart from Him, and become an open profligate, as I exist.”<sup>20</sup> The final result of the reconstitution of the Leicester church on the basis of this covenant, according to Carey’s grandson, was that “they filled the fellowship with faithful love” and the “nettles gave place to the Spirit’s flowers and fruits.”<sup>21</sup>

### **A concluding word**

Church covenants, of which these three are representative of many others from the first two centuries of Baptist witness, are thus of great significance in the formation of Christian disciples. First of all, they serve as filters by which a local church can determine to some degree who or who was not a disciple of Christ. The covenant is also a means of reclaiming recalcitrant members, who have left the pathway of discipleship. It can be used to remind them of what they had once promised to do and to observe.<sup>22</sup> Finally, covenants give expression to a distinct

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19 Cited Eustace Carey, *Memoir of William Carey, D.D.: Late Missionary to Bengal; Professor of Oriental Languages in the College of Fort William, Calcutta* (Boston: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1836), 281.

20 Cited Carey, *Memoir of William Carey*, 13. For this quote and the previous one, I am indebted to Andrew Kerr’s work on Carey’s adherence to the so-called five points of Calvinism, “The Botanist’s Tulip: Calvinism in the Writings of William Carey” (Unpublished paper, March 2009).

21 S. Pearce Carey, *William Carey* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1934), 61–62.

22 Davies, *Covenanting with God*, 52. In the concluding words of the church covenant drawn up by Benjamin Keach for his London congregation: “Can any thing lay a greater obligation up the Conscience, than this Covenant, what then is the sin of such who violate it?” (cited Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 121). When Christmas Evans (1766–1838), who for more than forty years was the most celebrated Baptist preacher in Wales, arrived in the island of Anglesey, off the northern coast of Wales, he found the life of the Baptist churches there at a very low ebb. His response was to hold a day of prayer so that the members of these churches might be brought to repentance and a recommitment to the promises they had made when they signed their church covenants. See Davies, *Covenanting with God*, 53

view of the Christian life as one of a voluntary, wholehearted commitment to God and to his church, which theologian John Hammett has rightly called “the Baptist mark of the church.”<sup>23</sup> Christian discipleship is first of all a dedication of the entirety of one’s being to God. And the indisputable evidence of this dedication is found in living wholeheartedly for him in the context of the life of the local church.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 81.

<sup>24</sup> Fountain, “Church Covenants,” 8–10.



## Appendix 1

### A personal covenant by Matthew Henry

The following covenant drawn up by Matthew Henry (1662–1714), the well-known English Presbyterian Bible commentator, around 1700 is a good example of a personal covenant.

This new-year's day I have solemnly renewed the resignation and surrender of my whole self to God, as my God, deliberately, and upon good considerations. I have renounced the world and the flesh as knowing they cannot make me happy; and have devoted my whole self to the blessed Spirit, to be enlightened, and sanctified, and so recommended to the Son, as qualified for an interest in his mediation, according to the tenor of the gospel. I likewise devote myself, through the Spirit, to the Lord Jesus Christ, as my Advocate with the Father, and my way to him; by him to be recommended to the grace and favour of God the Father, relying upon Christ's righteousness alone; for, without him, I am less than nothing, worse than nothing. I likewise devote myself, through the Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father, as my chief good and highest end; as the author of my being, to whom I am obliged in duty; and the felicity of my being, to whom I am obliged in interest. O Lord, truly I am thy servant. I am thy servant; may I ever be free in thy service, and never desire to be free from it. Nail my ear to the doorposts, and let me serve thee for ever.



## Appendix 2

### Swansea Baptist Church Covenant (1663)<sup>25</sup>

Swansey in New England. A true copy of the Holy Covenant the first founders of Swansea entered into at the first beginning, and all the members thereof for divers years.

Whereas, we poor creatures are, through the exceeding riches of God's infinite grace, mercifully snatched out of the kingdom of darkness, and by his infinite power translated into the kingdom of his dear Son, there to be partakers with all the saints of all those privileges which Christ by the shedding of his precious blood hath purchased for us, and that we do find our souls in some good measure wrought on by divine grace to desire to be conformable to Christ in all things, being also constrained by the matchless love and wonderful distinguishing mercies that we abundantly enjoy from his most free grace to serve him according to our utmost capacities, and that we also know that it is our most bounden duty to walk in visible communion with Christ and each other according to the prescript rule of his most Holy Word, and also that it is our undoubted right through Christ to enjoy all the privileges of God's house which our souls for a long time panted after, and finding no other way at present by the all-working providence of our only wise God and gracious Father to us opened for the enjoying of the same, we do therefore, after often and solemn seeking to the Lord for help and direction in the fear of his holy name, and with hands lifted up to Him, the most High God, humble and freely offer up ourselves this day a living sacrifice unto Him, who is our God in covenant through Christ our Lord and only Saviour, to walk together according to his revealed Word in the visible gospel relation both to Christ, our only Head, and to each other as fellow-members and brethren of the same household of faith.

And we do humble pray that through his strength we will henceforth endeavor to perform all our respective duties towards God and each other, and to practice all the ordinances of Christ according to what is or shall be revealed to us in our respective place, to exercise, practice and submit to the government of Christ in this his church, viz.: further protesting against all rending or dividing principles or practices from any of the people of God as being most abominable and loathsome to our souls and utterly inconsistent with that Christian charity which declares

<sup>25</sup> From King, *Rev. John Myles and the Founding of the First Baptist Church in Massachusetts*, 52–55.

men to be Christ's disciples. Indeed, further declaring in that as union in Christ is the sole ground of our communion, each with other, so we are ready to accept of, receive to and hold communion with all such by judgment of charity we conceive to be fellow-members with us in our Head, Christ Jesus, though differing from us in such controversial points as are not absolutely and essentially necessary to salvation.

We also hope that though of ourselves we are altogether unworthy and unfit thus to offer up ourselves to God or to do Him a, or to expect any favor with, or mercy from Him, He will graciously accept of this our freewill offering in and through the merit and mediation of our dear Redeemer, and that he will employ and improve us in this service to his praise, to whom be all glory, honor, now and forever. Amen.

The names of the persons that first joined themselves in the covenant aforesaid as a church of Christ,

John Myles, Elder, etc.

### Appendix 3

## The Bourton Church Covenant (1720)<sup>26</sup>

We whose Names are underwritten, having been Members & much the Major Part of a Church or Separate Congregation late under the Pastoral Care of the Revd Mr Joshua Head, decd., still desirous to walk together in all the Ordinances of Jesus Christ, as much as may be, blameless, (seeing that Church, by reason of different apprehensions of some of the Brethren about the Choice of a Pastour, hath been, in the presence & by the Advice of some neighbouring ministers, peaceably dissolved,) do now freely & heartily give up ourselves afresh to God the Father and his Only Son our Lord and Lawgiver, & to one another according to His Will. And so becoming a new Church or Sacred Society incorporated by the Gospel Charter, do now in the presence of God and those that are here Witnesses of our Order unanimously agree in the Name & fear of Christ

1st. That we will, to the utmost of our Power, walk together in One Body, & as near as may be with one mind, in all sweetness of Spirit & saint-like Love to each other, as highly becomes the Disciples of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

2dly. That we will jointly contend & strive together for the Faith & Purity of the Gospel, the Truths of Jesus Christ. & the Order, Ordinances, Honour, Liberty, Priviledges of this his Church against all Opposers.<sup>28</sup>

3rdly. That we will with all Care, Diligence, & Conscience labour & study to keep the Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace, both in the Church in general, and in particular between one another.<sup>29</sup>

4thly. That we will carefully avoid all Causes & Causers of Divisions as much as

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26 From "The Bourton Church-Covenant," *The Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society*, 1 (1901–1904): 272–273. Spelling or capitalization has not been modernized. The biblical references found in the footnotes appear in the original covenant at the side of each article.

27 John 15:12, 14; Rom 13:8; Eph 5:2; 1 Thess 3:12; 1 John 4:21.

28 Jude 3; Gal 5:1, 13; 1 Tim 1:13; Rev 2:25.

29 Phil 2:1–3; 1 Cor 1:10; Eph 4:3; 2 Cor 13:11.

lyes in us, & shun those that are Seducers & false Preachers of Errours & Heresies.<sup>30</sup>  
5thly. That we will sympathize & have a fellowfeeling (to our power) with one another in every Condition, & endeavour to bear each others Burthens, where we are joyfull or sorrowfull, tempted, or otherwise; that we may be mutual Helps to one another, & so answer the End of our near Relation.<sup>31</sup>

6thly. That we will forbear, & bear with one anothers weaknesses & Infirmities, in much Pity, Tenderness, Meekness, & Patience, not daring to rip up the weakness of any to those without the Church; nor to those that are within, unless it be according to Christ's Rule & Gospel Order, endeavouring all we can for the glory of the Gospel, and for the credit of this Church; willing to cover & hide one anothers Slips & common failings that are not sinful.<sup>32</sup>

7thly. That we will, as our God shall enable us, cleave fast to each other to the utmost of our power; & that if perilous Times should come, & a Time of Persecution (which God for our non-proficiency may justly send), we will not dare to go back from our holy profession, but will endeavour to strengthen one anothers hands, & encourage one another to Perseverance, let what will fall to our Lot.<sup>33</sup>

8thly. We do promise to keep the Secrets of our Church entire without divulging them to any that are not Members of this particular Body, tho' they may be otherwise near and dear to us; for we believe that the Church ought to be as a Garden enclosed & a fountain sealed.<sup>34</sup>

9thly. Those of us that are or may be single persons do fully design never to enter into conjugal Bonds with any that are Unbelievers; for we believe it to be a sin to be unequally yoked, that it is contrary to the Rule of Christ, & the ready way to hinder our souls' peace, growth, & eternal welfare.<sup>35</sup>

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30 2 John 10; 1 Tim 6:3; Rev 2:14, 20.

31 Gal 6:2; Heb 13:3; 1 Cor 12:25; 2 Tim 1:16.

32 Eph 4:2; Rom 14:13; 15:1; Col 3:12; 1 Cor 13:4, 7.

33 Heb 10:23–39; 2 Tim 4:10, 16.

34 Song 4:12; Prov 11:13; 1 Tim 5:13.

35 2 Cor 6:14–18; 1 Cor 7:39; Mal 2:10; Ezra 9:2; Neh 13:23–27; Gen 6:2–3.

10thly. That we will communicate to one another of the good Things of this Life, as God hath or may prosper us, so far as our Ability will suffer, or any of our Necessities shall be thought to require.<sup>36</sup>

11thly. That we will endeavour to watch over one anothers conversation for Good, not for each others halting; yet so as not by any means to suffer sin to rest in the bosom of our Brother, but to remove it by using all possible means to bring the person to repentance & Reformation of Life; & that we will endeavour to provoke one another to Holiness, Love, & good Works.<sup>37</sup>

12thly. We do all purpose constantly to attend the Meetings appointed by the Church, both on the Lord's days & other Days; nothing hindering except Distance, Sickness, or the Works of Mercy & Necessity.<sup>38</sup>

13th. That we will make Conscience of praying for one anothers Welfare at all times; but especially in Time of Distress as Poverty, Sickness, Pain, Temptation, Desertion, or the like; & that we will pray for the Peace and Growth of the whole Church in general, & for our Ministers & the success of their ministry in an especial manner.<sup>39</sup>

Signed at Bourton on the Water the 30th Day of January 1719/20.

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36 Heb 13:26; 2 Cor 9:1; 8:7; 1 John 3:17.

37 Lev 19:17; Gal 6:1; Heb 10:24.

38 Heb 10:25; Acts 2:42, 46.

39 1 Cor 12:26; 2 Thess 3:1–2; Rom 12:15; Acts 12:12; 1 Thess 5:25.





## Appendix 4: The Leicester Covenant (1790)<sup>40</sup>

We, the Church of Jesus Christ meeting in Harvey Lane, Leicester, being convinced of the importance of impartial Discipline and pure Doctrine in order to our Peace, and Prosperity in the Ways of God: do in the Presence of God, and of one another, solemnly Covenant and agree, in Manner and Form as follows:

I. That we receive the Bible as the Word of God, and the only Rule of Faith, and Practice, in which we find the following Doctrines taught, namely, that in the Deity are three equal Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Who sustain distinct offices in the economy of Human Salvation; We believe that all Things were fully known to God from the foundation of the world, that he from Eternity chose his People in Christ to Salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the Truth; that all rational Creatures are under indispensable Obligation to obey the Law of God, which is Holy, just and good, but that all Men have broken it and are liable to eternal Punishment; that in the fullness of Time God sent his Son to redeem his people whose Blood was a sufficient atonement for sin, and by the imputation of whose righteousness we are accounted righteous before God, and accepted with him; and that being Justified by Faith we have Peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We further believe that Men are totally depraved, and that the carnal Mind is enmity against God, and that we are convicted, and converted only by the sovereign operations of the Holy Spirit upon our Hearts, being made willing in the Day of his Power, and that the life of Grace is maintained by the same Divine Spirit, who is the Finisher as well as the Author of our faith, that those who are received thus shall persevere in the way of Holiness, and at last obtain everlasting Happiness through the Mercy of God.

II. That we will pay the strictest regard to our conduct in the World, acting with the strictest Honesty and integrity in all our Worldly Dealings, we will likewise abstain from all unlawful Amusements and diversions by which Time would

<sup>40</sup> From John Appleby, *'I Can Plod...'* *William Carey and the early years of the first Baptist missionary Society* (London: Grace Publications Trust, 2007), 285–287. Appleby transcribed it from a photocopy of the original church minute book held in The Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester & Rutland, Wigston Magna, Leicester.

be wasted, Money spent, our Minds carnalized, our Brethren's minds hurt, or religion dishonoured. We will abstain from worldly Labour on the Lord's Day, and carefully sanctify it, we will pay the strictest regard to our Promises, and by an holy conduct endeavour to honour the cause of God.

III. Also that we will endeavour to train up our Families in the Fear of the Lord, and to instruct and govern our households as little charges entrusted to us.

IV. That we consistently attend the Worship of God on Sundays, at Church Meetings, and other Meetings appointed by the Church; if we ever are absent we will be ready to give a Reason why, if required; if we are absent from public worship three Sabbaths, or should attend but only in three Weeks for six Weeks together, or if we are once absent from the Lord's Supper or twice from Church Meetings without Just cause, it should be a sufficient reason why the Church should visit and enquire the reason, and deal accordingly, as shall be required. At our Church meetings only one of our Brethren shall speak at a time, and if in any matter a difference should take place, we will endeavour to weigh the matter deliberately and fully, and then put it to the Vote that it may be determined by the Majority to which the Majority shall peacefully accede; all our Sisters shall have the same right to vote as the Brethren, and be as capable of giving evidence in any matter; yet they shall not be permitted to dictate. We will not watch for each other's Faults but will visit each other, mourning with the Mourners and joining in the joy of them that rejoice; we will warn, rebuke, exhort, and encourage with long suffering, and desire to keep the unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace. If called to act against those who break the Law of our Lord's House we will do it in the spirit of the Gospel, admonishing, Suspending, or Excluding, as the matter of the case requires.

V. We will regard and highly esteem our Minister for his Work's sake, constantly attending on his Ministry and freely consulting him on the concern of our Souls, contributing according to our ability to his comfortable support, and avoiding all that may weaken his hands, or discourage his Mind; in a Word we will all seek the good of the Body with which we are connected and if the good of the Body calls us to sacrifice our own case or interest, we will cheerfully do it; esteeming the honour of Christ as far preferable to our own.

VI. We will seek out those in our Congregation who appear under concern of soul, and having good evidence of a work of Grace on their Hearts, will set before them the Privileges they have a right to, and the Duties they ought to be found in, and endeavour to remove the Stumbling Blocks out of their Way that they may enjoy the Communion of Saints.

VII. To receive such, and only such into our Communion who make a credible profession of Repentance towards God, and Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and who have been baptised according to the primitive Mode of administering that Ordinance, that is, by immersing them in Water, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

VIII. That in all personal Misunderstandings the person offended shall go to the Offender, and in a Spirit of Love seek to be reconciled, before the matter be reported to any other. That all debates of the church shall be kept as secret as possible. That no person under censure shall have a Voice in the Church. That this Covenant be READ at the admission of members, and that all things be done decently, and in order.

These things and whatsoever else we find contained in the Word of God, we (in a dependence on divine support) solemnly Promise in the Presence of almighty God to observe, and do, but knowing our insufficiency to do any things without divine help, we look up to the strong, for strength, and daily influence—Hold thou us up O Lord, and we shall be safe, Amen.

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