

Who Has the Final Word

Upon This Rock, Part 5

Selected Scripture

Our series on the church continues today. Thus far, we've covered. Who we are; Why we belong; Why we exist and How we behave.

In this fifth sermon, I want to begin covering some points that are woven into our new constitution and bylaws that we're going to be introducing in early November.

In a simple, categorical phrase these points can be understood as, "What we promise." What we promise each other.

Older terminology referred to these promises as a church covenant, and our original constitution included one; it was a full page of things we agreed to do as members.

I pulled out that old covenant to rehearse in my mind all those original points and, for the most part, they're not changing.

But so much of it was formal vocabulary that you'd need a dictionary nearby to understand; it reads in part, we strive to promote "the prosperity" of the church; to give it a sacred preeminence over all institutions of human origin . . . to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and courtesy . . . always mindful of the rules of our Savior."

Etc. etc.

What are the rules of the Savior and what does it mean to prosper as a church?

One of the things we're doing is giving greater clarity to this matter of covenant promises, and we're dropping the vocabulary we no longer understand without an online dictionary at hand.

However, what is worthy of revising and what is worthy of rehearsing are the privileges and responsibilities of the members of the local church.

Church covenants trace back hundreds of years and simply remind the believer that we are not only

surrendering to the truths of the gospel; we are surrounding ourselves with others of like faith and doctrine and purpose.

It's possible for someone to sign on to the organizational chart after inspect the roles of elders and deacons; we can inspect the finer points of the doctrinal statement; we can focus on the bylaws with its business meetings and elections and tenures of officers . . . we can do all of that and have absolutely no commitment to one another.

We can do all of that and not love each other.

We can sign our name to all of those things and never really play a role or invest any of our lives in the body of Christ, the local church.

A church covenant effectively causes us to put away the radical individualism that breeds in our culture – where all that matters is I, me and mine.

Suddenly, you find yourself in the pages of the New Testament as a believer, and you discover that your life not only belongs to Christ but to His redeemed people – in general – and to a local assembly of His church – in particular.

The language of the New Testament speaks of a family, a body, an assembly of called out ones; we read in the Book of Acts that ***Herod began to persecute those who belonged to the church (Acts 12:1); in Acts 15:4 Paul and Barnabas were welcomed by the church. In Acts 14:27 they gathered the church together and spent a long time with them.***

I don't know how long that particular service was, but Luke writes it was a long time.

So it's clear that believers belong to each other in what is called a local church; we demonstrate the gospel to one another; we serve one another and with one another to reach our world for Christ.

The average Christian has lost the concept in the 21st century that he actually has what we could call, holy obligations to a body of believers; that he isn't riding solo to heaven; that he actually belongs to a wedding party, heading with the Bride of Christ toward the marriage supper of the Lamb of God – which will take place after the church is completed and taken to the Father's House.

So in the meantime, during this wedding processional, what kind of relationship do you and I have with the Bride of Christ?

What if someone told you they were married and had some kids, and you asked them, "What's your relationship like with your wife and family?" And they said, "I love them dearly . . . I go and see my wife whenever I'm hungry – I'll go over to the house, and she'll cook for me . . . I come home and see my kids whenever they're doing something I want to see . . . you know, I check in on my family 2-3 times a month . . . man, do I love my family."

What would you say about that man's love? What would you say about his sense of joy in them and responsibility to them?

Not much.

So what are the holy obligations and promises we make to one another?

In our new constitution and bylaws, we're going to call them: **The Holy Pursuits and Promises of Membership**

The holy pursuits and promises of membership.

Now obviously, if I'm preaching a message about holy obligations, I must not be interested in expanding the membership. I mean, the idea today is to lower the bar so everyone can join, not raise the bar.

Oh no, we're raising the bar.

Our intention as shepherds of this flock is to call people to the definition of the New Testament church and then watch as God's Spirit applies to the truth of the New Testament and watch as some are going to want to join us and others are going to want to get as far away from us as they possibly can.

I think of the early church in Jerusalem where God moved in holy anger against two individuals who came into the assembly lying about a gift of money they were giving. And God's Spirit struck both of them dead. And you read that telling statement that the community around them dared not to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem (Acts 5:11 & 13)

Imagine being both feared and respected by your ungodly culture; imagine somebody not going to some church assembly for fear that God would move in holy anger toward their hypocrisy.

How's that for a church sign out on the lawn: welcome to all who are prepared to be struck dead for hypocrisy; services are at 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 and 6:00 pm.

I don't know about you, but the older I get in the faith, the more I'd like our church to become a place where people feared to go, knowing that God was uniquely present in the assembly; and people were afraid to attend unless they were truly and transparently ready to worship Him.

So listen, we're not doing this because we want to get more people to sign on . . . we're doing this because it's time to bring clarity to our doctrine and our stand and our commitment to Christ and each other.

Now what we've done is take these 21 promises and holy obligations – basically from our original covenant, and we're dividing them into three categories;

First, a **member's promises regarding their conduct**

Secondly, a **member's promises regarding their church**

And thirdly, a **member's promises regarding their community**

The first category is: A Member's Promises Regarding their Conduct

Here's how we're stating it: members of this congregation willingly and faithfully pursue these promises in their personal lives:

And make sure you catch the language – we are pursuing these promises in our personal lives.

In other words, nobody gets it perfect, okay? Nobody gets an A+ on every test. We fail tests sometimes. We have makeup work to do; we have to stay after class sometimes, and sometimes we get special help tutoring – we call that discipleship.

I don't know about you, but my report card growing up was never something to frame. My parents' never put it up on the refrigerator – it came home on the weekend and went back the following Monday, signed by my parents: it was never a happy weekend.

In fact one year – when I was in the 5th or 6th grade I decided that it would be better if my parents never saw my report card – and maybe they'd even forget it was due; so I forged my father's name on

the report card, and did such a horrible job that I dribbled water over it to smudge it all up and try to blur it all. Let's just say it didn't work . . . those were not happy days.

Listen, we're not handing out report cards . . . however, we are handing out what we loved getting in High School or college – the teacher's manual – the teacher's exam guide – to show us all what was expected; we're effectively looking into this manual – this examine guide to see what our Divine Teacher expects us to learn and relearn and live out.

So, here are the holy obligations and promises we as members are going to make in relation to our own personal conduct.

1. First, to submit to the authority of scripture as the final authority on all matters (Psalm 119; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21; Acts 17:11)

To whatever it speaks, it is the final authority.

Paul writes in *2 Timothy 3:14*. *You however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation.*

By the way – these are the sacred writings. What about the Baghavad Gita of Hinduism; what about the Koran of Islam? Aren't they sacred too?

Well ask yourself the question – can they lead you to this all important sacred truth – notice that phrase again in *verse 15; the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ.*

There is no plan or hope of permanent atonement for sin in the Koran. There is no hope of forgiveness and salvation in the Baghavad Gita – there is nothing but self-improvement and good works in the Apocrypha and the Book of Mormon.

All other supposed sacred texts put you on a path of self-improvement, and you can only hope you will one day reach whatever your definition of heaven happens to be.

I was witnessing some time ago to a Hindu, here in Cary. Eventually I was able to say to him; “Sir, I have been to your country and I have watched priests bathing in the filthy waters of the Ganges River hoping to wash away their sin; I know that you and a billion other people are following your religious teaching on reincarnation – and that you'll

come back in a lesser form – perhaps even an insect – if you've been particularly evil; I said, “Sir, the primary distinction between your sacred writings and mine, is that mine delivers to me the good news of the forgiveness of sin and yours does not.” He sadly shook his head and quietly admitted, “What you say is true.”

These are the sacred writings that deliver the most stunning truth – eternal life isn't earned . . . it isn't something you do for God; it's something God has done for you; forgiveness is granted on the basis of faith in the cross work of Christ our Savior.

Notice *verse 16*. *All scripture is inspired by God* – literally God-breathed – that's what the word inspiration means – this is the breath of God –

- *and profitable for teaching* – that tells you what is right;
- *for reproof* – that tells you what is wrong;
- *for correction* – that tells you how to get right;
- *and for training in righteousness* – that tells you how to stay right.

Look at *verse 17*. *So that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*

That word translated *equipped* is a reference to someone about to embark on a long journey by ship. It refers to the ship being stocked with everything necessary for the voyage.

So in this analogy, stock up with the word of God – it is the supply you will need for your voyage through life.

But someone might say, “But the Bible is just a bunch of men writing down their opinions . . . they've just made it up.

Turn to your right a dozen pages or so to Second Peter and chapter 1. He writes in *verse 20*. *But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, 21. for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*

This is the word from God. And so what should we do about it? Look up at *verse 19*. *So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place . . .*

In other words, this Book is all the more important when you find yourselves in a dark place – a darkening culture - look here – this word is the lamp . . . this is the light.

David wrote, *Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path (Psalm 119:105).*

The word of God is *the* final authority. Follow this word and it will lead you by its light; dismantle it and debate it and redefine it ignore it and you will walk around in darkness.

Listen, has it ever occurred to you that the Christian isn't asked to vote on matters God has made clear. His word *is* the vote.

I'm amazed at the audacity of churches and denominations today – never mind culture. I've watched them over the recent years establishing their committees to study sexual matters in light of changing times.

I don't know how many times I've seen some church or school or organization appoint a committee to take another look – one denomination said recently that they were going to appoint a committee to study the issue of sexuality and that they would engage in a time of listening.

It was pretty obvious to me who they were going to be listening to.

Look, even if all the other churches and denominations got together and voted on redefining marriage – as one man and another man; or one man and two other women; or as one man and one woman for a lease arrangement of 3 years (I'm going to talk about that tonight) – listen, all of that voting isn't going to change one thing for us – because the vote of people does not overrule the word of God.

If a group of pastors or priests or professors or politicians decide that culture is evolving, and now something is politically correct, that doesn't mean it's biblically correct.

In fact, mark it down – things that are politically correct are more than likely biblically corrupt.

I often recall that woman a few years ago who visited our church one time – and then wrote me a note, telling me she would not be back because, she said, we take the Bible way too seriously.

Yes, we do.

It's the difference between darkness and light. It's the difference between Hell and Heaven.

500 years ago the Reformers referred to it as *sola scriptura* – the scriptures alone – any other authority is subordinate to the authority of scripture.

And we make this promise as members – this word will be the ultimate – the final – authority because we believe it is *the* word of God.

Okay, that's number 1 . . . I've got 20 more to go.

We as members of the church consider it our holy obligation in matters of personal conduct (secondly):

**2. To pursue holiness in all aspects of life—
home, work, community, personal life—
as a joyful act of worship to the Triune
God (Romans 12:1-2; I Peter 1:13-16, 4:1-3)**

To pursue holiness in all aspects of life – considering such a pursuit to be nothing less than a joyful act of worship.

Paul wrote to the Christians living in Rome, Italy, *I urge you by the mercies of God, present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship (Romans 12:1)*

I beg you – and by the way, he's not talking to unbelievers, but to believers. And he's begging them to consider their bodies as a living sacrifice to God.

Not a dead one . . . a live one.

Which of course, . . . creates the dilemma, one man wrote – since I'm alive, I am always climbing down off the altar.

So make an ongoing presentation of your life – every aspect of life – nothing is reserved – nothing is closeted or compartmentalized; nothing is kept from Him.

So as members, we're effectively making the promise that our lives belong to God, and we're going to live in light of His ownership.

That doesn't mean we're never going to crawl down off the altar and need confrontation and conviction and repentance and rededication to get back up there.

But this promise simply means we're not debating it.

I had the pleasure of talking out on the sidewalk this past week with one of our college students. He'd been raised in a godly home but got away from the gospel . . . and ended up in trouble.

While sitting in jail – God began to literally arrest his attention.

He's now following with passion his Lord.

And we talked about how wonderful it is to get up in the morning and not have any discussion or debate in your heart as to the direction of your life.

Who are you living for . . . that has been answered!

You might trip and stumble, but your toes are pointed in the right direction.

You have decided, by the goodness of God which led you to repentance to offer your life to Christ.

Holy living is no longer a drudgery . . . it's your direction in life . . . with joy that you might please your Father.

Not so you can go to heaven, but because you are going there.

So the Apostle Peter likewise urged the believer, ***As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One, who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior. (1 Peter 1:14-15)***

This is our passion . . . this is our promise.
The next promise follows closely along.

3. We promise to avoid sinful habits and entanglements such as illicit drug use, drunkenness, gossip, gluttony and all other sinful behavior as taught in Scripture (Romans 1:28-32, 6:12-14; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:18; James 3:3-18)

In other words, we thought we might list just a few attitudes and actions listed in the New Testament.

The problem with holiness isn't that we might not know what it looks like – the problem is we're not sure we want to look all that holy after all.

Well, the members of Christ's church are marked by effectively promising to pursue a pattern of purity.

And some would say, but aren't you being legalistic to rattle off specific things like gluttony or gossip . . . I mean isn't that being picky?

To the church in Galatia, Paul, the picky Apostle, adds a lot more; he writes, ***Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh . . . now the deeds of the flesh are evident*** – in other words, c'mon, they're really obvious aren't they? - ***they are sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing and things like these . . . I have forewarned you, that those who practice these things – in other words, those who unrepentantly pursue the pattern of these things –***

will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:16-21).

God in His goodness and grace is clearly warning us . . . these lifestyles will only empty you . . . they will never fill you up . . . they will never satisfy you . . . they will only take from you.

God isn't a killjoy . . . He's marking out the path with incredible kindness.

A few months ago I was speaking at a conference in Kentucky. My wife and I planned to see a few sights along the way – and we enjoyed the drive. At one point, our GPS put us on a tollway.

We couldn't help but remember what happened when our oldest daughter had come home some time earlier from the mission field – she was home for Christmas break, and she decided, along with one of her girlfriends, to go to New York City to see some sights.

When they got through New York and were on the highway in New Jersey she called me and said, "Daddy, we didn't even think about the toll roads – we don't have any cash – but don't worry – because we were able just to drive through one lane without stopping because the sign said, "E-ZPass".

I said, "I don't think that's what E-ZPass means . . . that only works if you've got an E-ZPass sticker . . . you're going to get an easy ticket.

Well here we were at the toll booth; I didn't have any cash either . . . but I'd used my credit card in Pennsylvania tollways and wasn't worried about it. We drove up to the booth, and I handed the lady my debit card and she said, "Sorry sir, we only take cash."

You only take cash? But I don't have any cash.
"Sorry sir, we only take cash."

I should have gone through the E-ZPass (wait that wouldn't have been holy).

We scrounged up enough money to get through – literally had to get nickels and dimes out of the armrest.

So after the conference was over, on our way back, I told Marsha that I had clicked in the GPS the option to avoid toll roads.

This was not a very smart idea! That's another way of saying, "Take me through all the back roads on the planet."

So at one point we're in the wilderness, winding our way through the hills of West Virginia.

One cut back after another, at some places just crawling around steep curves . . . then the road would straighten out again but then there'd come

another sign that read – Slow – Curve Ahead – and it would have a new speed limit that was sometimes only 5 miles an hour.

Now imagine I'm tired of this entire ordeal . . . I am tired of these warning signs . . . I've had enough.

But here comes another sign – Slow . . . 5 miles an hour.

Now I can respond to that sign in one of three ways:

- I can obey the sign and slow down;
- I can ignore the sign and maintain the same speed;
- Or I can defy the sign and speed up!

No matter what I choose to do, one thing remains constant – the truth of that sign.

My actions do not change the truth of that sign.

I remember reading the interview of a famous actress who was asked about God and morals and the Bible; and she said, "If I could meet God right now I would want Him to explain to me why He made sexual relations with whomever I wanted something that could cause a disease. I would ask Him why He would do something like that.

It's called a gracious, divine, warning.

Paul is writing to the church in **Romans 13**, and he says to us, ***Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the daylight, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy.***

By the way, he's not writing that to the world – he's writing that to the church – ***let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light . . . let us behave properly as in the daylight.***

Listen, God is calling us to holy purity; holy living . . . to avoid sinful traps and the entanglement of corruption in every aspect of life.

And a church is made up of people who are serious enough about following Jesus Christ that they want to pledge their lives and their testimony and their efforts in the gospel to others who also

want nothing to do with the pathway of darkness that once enslaved them – they want to be reminded and exhorted and confronted and disciplined and challenged to walk in the pathway of light.

Unfortunately, in our culture today, joining the church is nothing more than joining a tennis club, being willing to pay the fees and stick around as long as the club pro is talented and the courts are clean and the other people are nice to you.

Joining the church, belonging to the church, according to the New Testament, is a mark of courage . . . you dare to meet with others who worship a holy, righteous, eternal, true and living God; you dare to align your life with others who are forsaking their culture of darkness and are willing to walk in the light of God's word!

Joining the church is nothing less than an act of dedication; promising to take on a host of holy obligations . . . first and foremost, in relation to our personal conduct.

Well, those are the first three promises . . . we have 18 to go.

I wonder, what do these first three promises make you want to do? Join us, or get as far away as you can get?

I'm praying that this overview and exposition of a variety of texts and New Testament principles will become just that kind of crossroads in your life – so that you will understand there is no middle ground; there is no fence to sit on.

It is either signing on in holy obligation to God's authority and God's word and the assembly of God's people – or to stay as far away as you can go.

Oh how we need to arrive at a place in this generation, at this moment in church history where the church is made up once again by people who make these kinds of promises – who embrace these holy obligations . . . for the purity of the gospel and the glory of God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/18/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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