

# A CHURCH COVENANT

## REHEARSING OUR GOSPEL COMMITMENTS

**Brian Chesemore**

*Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville (Louisville, KY)*

---

**A** few months ago my wife and I were tired of hearing about how much better Costco was than our beloved Sam's Club. Concerned that we might be missing out, we decided to see for ourselves. Sure enough, after about three minutes, we were convinced. We went straight to Customer Service and asked, "Where do we sign up?"

In order to enter the esteemed world of mega-grocers, you have to sign the paperwork to make the deal official. Membership has its privileges—and its responsibilities.

In my early years as a Sovereign Grace pastor, our church had a very thorough membership process. Unlike Costco, this was no simple "just step over here and sign the paperwork" process. Joining entailed not only attending a dozen classes and meeting with a pastor, but also the signing of a membership covenant.

"What in the world is that?" you may rightly ask. The covenant<sup>65</sup> was carefully crafted and sought to meaningfully express how church members pledge to live life together. In order to formalize one's membership, signing this document was one of the final steps.

I confess that for me, and probably for most members, signing the document was the only time we truly engaged with its content. Too often prospective members skimmed and signed the agreement and happily moved on. Corporately it functioned as little more than a well-intended formality. And it was never referenced again—maybe akin to the fine print of my now-beloved Costco membership.

### ***Why Have a Membership Covenant?***

Why should a local church go to all the trouble to craft such a statement? If it functions as merely a formality, pastors and their ever-faithful administrative assistants have far more important projects to attend to.

---

<sup>65</sup> Some churches prefer to use the terminology of "membership agreement" or "membership statement" to avoid potential confusion associated with the language and significance of the biblical covenants.

But what if that same document could capture and position our churches to think more soberly about the privileges and responsibilities of membership? What if revisiting its content produced a deeper gratefulness for the gospel, a greater longing for holiness, an increased concern for fellow members, and a growing zeal to share the gospel? What if reading it became another corporate moment to delight in the grace of God?

### ***Delighting in a Membership Covenant?***

When our pastors met to discuss the initial membership process for our young church plant, we unanimously agreed to incorporate a membership covenant. We all recognized the potential for a covenant to drift into mere formality and functional irrelevance. To counter that tendency, we aimed for one that would be rich in content which we could rehearse twice a year as a congregation during our Membership Sundays.

### ***Content of a Covenant***

We wanted a church covenant that captures the ecclesiological priorities found in Scripture. What does the Bible say about essential questions such as,

- Exactly who can join my local church?
- How does the gospel inform the priorities and pursuits of my church? What is our core mission?
- How important is it to faithfully gather together? What does our Sunday gathering entail?
- How does the gospel turn me outward in love towards my fellow church members?
- How does Jesus intend to orient my prayers, service, and giving around my church?
- How should we live together amidst the joys and trials of the Christian life?

Just as a Statement of Faith captures the richness of what we believe and unites us around particular doctrinal convictions, a membership covenant clarifies how those glorious doctrines shape our life together in the local church. Such a statement reinforces how our gospel centrality and doctrinal convictions profoundly shape us as a believing community. Disciples both know and do. In signing a membership covenant, I am in effect telling my fellow members, “This is what you and I can expect of each other.” So these two documents reinforce a burden that God’s people have always cherished; it’s who and what we believe that shapes how we live.

### ***Context of a Covenant***

Our church has found tremendous encouragement from corporately reading our covenant twice a year as we welcome new members. On these two Sundays we briefly explain the significance of membership and read the names of each of those joining, inviting them to stand when their names are read. Then we ask all of the members to stand as we read the covenant aloud together. This is consistently a holy moment for our

church—where we stand in the presence of God, and offer to him and one another a sincere rehearsal of our commitments. Finally, we close in prayer thanking God for sovereignly placing these new members in our church (1 Cor. 12:18) and asking for his grace to faithfully walk out the covenant together.

If these ideas are new, or if they serve to revive a vision for the use of such a statement, ponder the benefits of the following two steps. First, consider carefully crafting a membership covenant that is rich in content and lends towards heartfelt expression.<sup>66</sup> Then find a consistent occasion when your church might be edified in its rehearsal. This practice may surprise you in its impact as your congregation remembers what the Lord has done—and the privilege they have to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [they] have been called” (Eph. 4.1). May God give our churches an ever-increasing delight in his grace and a corporate resolve to live by that grace.

### ***Here’s How it Looks at Our Church***

This is the language of the Membership Covenant of Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville:

Having been brought by God’s sovereign grace to repent and believe in the good news of Jesus Christ and his saving work, and having been baptized upon our profession of faith, we do now, relying on His grace, solemnly and joyfully affirm our covenant with each other.

We will pray and labor to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, devoted to the glory of God, resting in the gospel of his Son, and dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit.

To that end,

We will not forsake assembling together, but will faithfully attend our corporate worship, treasuring our church’s weekly opportunity to sing, pray, and receive the whole counsel of God’s Word. We will defend and maintain a gospel-centered ministry by upholding and attending to biblical preaching, the administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline.

We will walk together in brotherly love, as becomes the members of a local church: we will pray for and serve one another, exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other, and reject all opportunities to speak or hear gossip or slander. We will instead seek to encourage one another and build each other up in the faith.

---

<sup>66</sup> Editors’ note: Several Sovereign Grace churches use the same Membership Covenant as SGC Louisville, which is a great option for churches and provides another point of continuity among our congregations.

We will rejoice with those who rejoice and endeavor with tenderness and sympathy to bear each other's burdens and sorrows.

We will seek to proclaim and adorn the gospel of Christ before our family, friends, and neighbors and faithfully transfer the gospel to future generations.

We will contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of our local church, to the care of our members, and to the spread of the gospel locally and to all nations.

We will, if we move from this place, as soon as possible, unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the teaching of God's Word.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.