

OUR MUTUAL CHALLENGE

“We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in prayer; to aid one another in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and Christian courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the rules of our Savior to secure it without delay.

We moreover engage that when we remove from this place we will, as soon as possible, unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.”

Churches that use the Church Covenant usually give a copy of it to potential new members along with a copy of the church's Articles of Faith and Church Constitution. These documents do not replace the Bible. The Bible is the rule of faith and practice and because it is, the church at its beginning, prepared certain documents to assure the correct interpretation and application of the Scriptures.

The Articles of Faith set forth what we *believe* while the Church Covenant is a declaration as to how we will *behave*. These studies of the Church Covenant have been a reminder of congregational responsibility and should, at the same time, renew our sense of individual accountability.

We come now to the last two paragraphs in the covenant. Here we have Our Mutual Challenge. Therefore, "Let us walk by the same rule, let us mind is the same thing." (Philippians 3:16) The church is a family, fraternity, fellowship and fortress. The Church Covenant is intended to safeguard each.

The church also is a body -- Ephesians 4:1 -- 16;
It is a building -- I Corinthians 3:11 -- 17;
It is a bride -- Ephesians 5:22 -- 27;
It is a beacon -- Matthew 5:13 -- 16;
It is a brotherhood -- Acts 2:41 -- 47;
It is a brigade -- Matthew 28:19;
It is a bulwark -- Matthew 16:18'

Every one of these areas of responsibility brings its own challenge. These last two paragraphs of the Church Covenant deal exclusively with the internal relationships of the church. This indeed is a great challenge incumbent upon all who unite with a local church.

Paul writes to the Roman Christians saying, "As much as lies in you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom.12:18) and, "Be kindly affectionate one to another in brotherly love." (Rom.12:10) to the Ephesian Christians he wrote, "With all lowliness and meekness with long-suffering, forbear one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:2,3) To the Christians in Philippi he wrote, "Be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind." (Phil. 2:2) To the Colossians he said, "Forbear one another, and forgive one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ

forgave you, so also do you." (Col. 3:13)

His tone in each instance was conciliatory. He was fostering unity and harmony within the brotherhood and family. That is the mutual challenge in the last two paragraphs of the Church Covenant. **Let** us examine them as follows:

WE ARE CHALLENGED TO DEMONSTRATE CHRISTIAN GOODNESS.

"We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in prayer; to aid one another in sickness and distress...."

How can we do a Christian goodness? There are three ways suggested here:

A. Look out for one another. *"watch over one another...."*

We should watch out for one another, not like Cain, not like Joseph's brothers or not like Judas. We are our brother's keeper!

B. Look up for one another. *"....to remember one another in prayer...."*

C. Look in on one another. *"....to aid one another in sickness and distress...."*

"Bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2) "Given to hospitality." (Rom. 12:13)

Illustration: A teacher asked the children in a Sunday school class, "Why do you love God?" Several different answers were given but the one she liked the best was, "I guess it just runs in the family." In the Church Covenant we pledge to demonstrate Christian goodness because "It just runs in the family!"

WE ARE CHALLENGED TO DEVELOP CHRISTIAN GRACES.

"....to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and Christian courtesy in speech...."

Recipients of grace should live gracefully. I Corinthians 12:25, 26 admonishes believers as follows: ".... members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice."

Members pledge *"to cultivate"* certain graces. *"To cultivate"* means "to develop, improve, to help grow." There are two questions that come to mind: (1) Are we cultivating our own Christian graces, and (2) are we encouraging the development of Christian graces in others? What, specifically, does the Covenant address?

A. Develop The Grace of Sympathy. *"....to cultivate Christian sympathy...."*

"Sympathy" is "the act or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings or interests of another." Edmund Burke said, "Next to love, sympathy is the divinest passion of the human heart." One tribe of North American Indians described sympathy as "two hearts pulling one load."

There is within all of us at one time or another a craving for sympathy. Often we can do nothing but sympathize, but how it helps the one and distress! Romans 12:15 urges us to "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." To share in ones sorrow

or joy is to show sympathy. Alexander Pope left us these lines:

“Teach me to feel another's woe,
To hide the fault I see;
The mercy I to others show,
That mercy show to me.”

Illustration: In the early days of the American West, a U.S. government Indian Agent showed special kindness to the Saddle Mountain Mission Indians. When his son suffered an injury and had to have his leg amputated the Indians sent a message to him as follows, "We have learned with great sorrow that your son whom you love very dearly, has suffered the loss of a leg. We are poor Indians and cannot help except to put our heads together with you for him. When a big storm comes, our horses bunch together and stand with their heads down trying to keep each other warm. A storm has come to you and we put our heads together and bow down with you and put our hearts beside yours in your trouble." That is a good illustration of sympathy!

B. Develop The Grace Of Courtesy. “....and Christian courtesy in speech....”

Let us review some of the many statements in God's word about our speech:

Proverbs 15:1 - "A soft answer turns away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger."

Proverbs 16:13 - "Righteous lips are the delight of kings; and they love him that speaks right."

Proverbs 25:11 - "A word fiddly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver."

First Corinthians 15:33 - "Evil communications corrupt good manners."

Ephesians 4:29 - "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace to the hearers."

It is not always what you say but how you say it which counts. One can say the right thing in the wrong way. The tone of voice can make all the difference. A young man once said, "it was not so much what my mother said to me that I remember but how she said it. Even when she's severely review committee has scolded me, there was a sincerity and tenderness and love in her voice.

Have you noticed the coarseness with which worldly persons address each other? Over the years that coarseness has found its way into church fellowships and not a few church splits are the result of discourteous speech between brothers and sisters in Christ. These things ought not so to be!

The tongue is a small member,
And bone doth lack;
But a stroke therewith
Can break another's back!"

“Pleasant words are as a honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones.”
(Prov.16:24)

WE ARE CHALLENGED TO DEVELOP CHRISTIAN GROWTH.

“.....to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the rules of our Savior to secure it without delay.”

The challenge here is to display Christian growth in two ways:

A. Growth In Personal Discipline. “.....“.....to be slow to take offense....”

Growth in personal discipline is evidenced by:

1. Controlled reactions. “.... *be slow to take offense....*”

That is, be slow to get your feelings hurt! Control your actions and reactions! Remember, you cannot carry loads with a chip on your shoulder! James 1:19-20 says, "My beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man works not the righteousness of God."

Did you hear about the fly that flew into the open window of a butcher shop? The butcher had left a roll of bologna on the chop block and the fly landed on the bologna and after eating its fill flew out the window and landed on a shovel handle that was sticking upright in a sawdust pile. After a brief rest it then flew off and immediately hit the ground and broke its neck. The moral of the story is this, never fly off the handle when you are full of baloney!

2. Continuous reconciliation. “....*always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the rules of our Savior to secure it without delay.*”

The word "reconcile" means "to cause to be friendly again, to bring back into harmony." Some Christians appear to be angry all the time. An angry disposition will be reflected in an angry appearance which is certainly not winsome. Resolve that you are not going to go through life as an angry person. If you feel that you have been wronged, forgive and move on! Life is too short to allow anyone or anything to rob you of the joy and peace that Jesus Christ wants you to experience and that the Holy Spirit who indwells you desires to impart.

B. Growth In Perpetual Discipleship.

“We moreover engage that when we remove from this place we will, as soon as possible, unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God’s Word.”

How can I perpetually grow in discipleship? The answer is, by continuing your commitment to Jesus Christ and his Church, as is pledged in the last paragraph of the Church Covenant. Some people, when they relocate geographically, also relocate spiritually. That is, having moved away to a new community they postpone seeking for a good Bible teaching church where they can be led and fed and join in with that congregation to help advance the work of God.

Don't become a dropout casualty. Don't go AWOL! A true Christian is a soldier in the army of Jesus Christ and ought to always be identified with a company of Christians. Not to be is to be absent without leave - or in Army lingo, AWOL.

Baptist minister, John Fawcett's hymn reminds us of our privilege and responsibility:

"Blessed be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love!
The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.
When we asunder part it gives us inward pain;
But we shall be joined in heart, and hope to meet again."

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HOW DO YOU SPELL "LUKEWARM"?

Kavya Shivashankar, 13, of Olathe, Kan., won the 82nd Scripps National Spelling Bee on Thursday night, May 28, 2009 on national television. She beat out 292 other hopefuls to win the 2009 competition. She took home more than \$40,000 in cash and prizes and, of course, the huge champion's trophy. You could say that afterward she was spellbound!

Her winning word was "Laodicean," which is a spiritual sickness the symptoms of which are lukewarmness and indifference. The word comes from the name of the city of Laodicea which was a resort area where people came to luxuriate in the warm springs located there. Jesus said of the church in that city that it too was like the water, lukewarm. (Rev. 3:16)

This church had conformed to the culture in which it was located and consequently had cooled off toward God. They just sat, soaked and soured! Because of this tendency in human nature, Paul wrote to the church in Rome: "Do not be conformed to this world." (Rom. 12:2)

Some symptoms of Laodicean sickness are:

- A spiritually lukewarm temperature, neither hot nor cold toward God, just blah;
- Satisfied just to be a mediocre Christian;
- Preoccupied with day-to-day routine, no time to meditate on God's Word;
- Focused upon growing wealth rather than growing spiritually;
- Content to enjoy the pleasures of life rather than think about the purpose of life;
- Loving Jesus and living for Him is an afterthought;
- Fixated more upon being happy than being holy;
- Too self-centered to be interested in sinners who need the Savior.

This was the church where Christ was outside trying to gain entrance. He said, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with me." (Rev. 3:20)

Knock! Knock!

"Who's there?"

"God!"

Open to Him and He will rekindle the fire of devotion. That is spelled R-E-V-I-V-E-D!