



# YOUR CHURCH *and you*

LIVING THE FREE WILL BAPTIST  
CHURCH COVENANT

**By Robert E. Picirilli**

**Your Church and You:**  
**Living the Free Will Baptist Church Covenant**

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## To start with...

You've got to understand that "church" is more than somewhere you visit on Sunday mornings. That's what this booklet is all about.

Too many people see church this way. Form with little significance. Stumbling through the strange-sounding words of a hymn. Uncertain whether to close your eyes when someone else prays. A nervous glance at the watch when the sermon starts to go long. And through it all a vague sense of relief that a duty has been done.

Church is much more. Church is a family of people with a common bond. Church is a relationship to fellow believers. Church is sharing with each other, concern for each other, helping each other. Worshiping and serving together. Encouraging, strengthening, and even disciplining one another. Growing together in spiritual things. Church is commitment. This is the meaning of the Free Will Baptist Church Covenant.

The purpose of this booklet is to expound that covenant, and to help us become more conscious of the meaning of membership in a local church. While the wording of the covenant is not divinely inspired, the covenant is based on inspired Scriptures. So, the Bible's words often will be used to explain the ideas contained in the covenant.

The covenant is arranged in seven paragraphs. This booklet is divided accordingly. My thanks to Randall House Publications for graciously allowing me to repeat things I have written before in a lesson on the covenant.

## PARAGRAPH ONE

*Having given ourselves to God, by faith in Christ, and adopted the Word of God as our rule of faith and practice, we now give ourselves to one another by the will of God in this solemn covenant.*

The key word here is the verb *give*, which occurs twice. Both times the object of the verb is ourselves. In the first place, *we have given ourselves to God*. The whole covenant builds on this foundation. Only those who have come to know God can establish a church fellowship.

Giving ourselves to God means taking Christ as Savior and Lord, and so becoming God's children and servants. This is a free commitment, a gift of love in response to His gift of love (John 3:16).

Notice we do this *by faith in Christ*. Christ is God's Son. He died for our sins and rose to give us new life. Faith is trust. When we put faith in Christ we are forgiven and born again. Christ's Father becomes ours. This is the only way we can give ourselves to God.

Furthermore, giving ourselves to God automatically means *adopting the Word of God as our rule of faith and practice*. If Christ is the only way to the Father (John 14:6), then the Bible is the only way to know Christ. Almost any company provides a handbook or manual to guide employees. The Bible is God's rule book for our faith and practice. Faith is what we believe. Practice is how we behave.

You can't claim to choose God without choosing what He has said. The Scriptures contain the only and the whole description of our duties toward God and one another. Our commitment to God and each other, therefore, is defined precisely in the terms of the written Word of God.

If you haven't given yourself to God by faith in Christ, don't become a member of any local church. Too many unbelievers already spoil the fellowship. Christians love you and want to see you saved, but there is no real bond between the saints and the sinners (2 Corinthians 6:14-16).

In the second place, *we give ourselves to one another*. This is the whole covenant in a nutshell. If we could just perfectly live up to this, the church would be paradise on earth. But while the church certainly isn't perfect, every believer ought to aim at giving himself unreservedly to his fellow believers.

The Bible lays a solid foundation for this commitment: "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). When a person is saved, he or she is not left to go it alone. The Spirit of God does a blessed thing for believers. He brings us together into a family, with each one concerned about the welfare of the others. The local church is that family, the unit that expresses the "one body" in the most practical way.

The names the Bible uses to describe the church speak of this oneness in interesting ways. Thus *body* is often used, sometimes comparing the church to a human body, even representing the church as the body of Christ (Romans 12:4, 5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:3-16; Colossians 3:15). The church is also called a *household*, which means family (Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19). Then, sometimes, the church is called a *building*, a living "temple" where God dwells (1 Corinthians 3:9-17; Ephesians 2:19-22).

This oneness is also seen in the ways the Bible expresses our relationship to each other. One of the most beautiful of these is members of one another (Ephesians 4:25; Romans 12:5). We belong to each other. In the fellowship of the local church, each believer says to the others, "I am part of you, and you of me."

*Brother* is the best word of all. The Bible pictures our Christian tie as *brotherly love* (Romans 12:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; Hebrews 13:1; 1 John 2:9-11). We shouldn't underestimate the significance of this word. The word expresses our oneness, our family bond, our mutual love, even our obligations to one another. The fellowship of the church is a *brotherhood* (1 Peter 2:17) that often outweighs flesh-and-blood family ties.

Giving ourselves to one another, then, means we see our need for each other and say we will serve each other. That is brotherly love. And loving is more than feeling. Loving is choosing. Brotherly love is promoting another believer's welfare, even at one's own expense (1 Corinthians 10:24; 13:5; Philippians 2:3-4). When church is what it ought to be, you will seek prosperity and happiness for fellow church members, and they will seek yours, "in honor preferring one another" (Romans 12:5).

Notice we give ourselves to one another *by the will of God*. There is no higher authority behind forming ourselves together into a church than an inner conviction that God has bound us together. No one should ever join any church without this conviction.

So we bind ourselves together *in this solemn covenant*. A covenant, by the way, is a pact, an agreement. In this particular covenant, we give ourselves to each other because we have given ourselves to God. Church is a fellowship of people who make such a pact. The detailed terms of the agreement will be spelled out in the following paragraphs.

## PARAGRAPH TWO

*We promise by His grace to love and obey Him in all things, to avoid all appearance of evil, to abstain from all sinful amusements and unholy conformity to the world, from all sanction of the use and sale of intoxicating beverages, and to “provide things honest in the sight of all men.”*

When we gave ourselves to God, we gave ourselves to a holy God. Therefore, when we give ourselves to each other, we establish a holy fellowship. We commit ourselves to pure lives. The second and third paragraphs of the covenant express this awareness and determination. This second paragraph presents mostly the negative side of this holy behavior: separation from sin.

*We make this promise by God’s grace.* The Christian is always aware he or she can never be good without God’s help. Though redeemed in spirit, the believer lives in a body of unredeemed flesh. He will still fail to live for God without the grace of God (John 15:5). Grace is help humanity does not deserve, and God graciously gives His children the Holy Spirit. We cannot be holy apart from the help of the Holy Spirit.

The promise *to love and obey Him* in all things is the kind of commitment we know we cannot fulfill without His help. But this is what we sincerely intend to do, and the intention itself shows that our hearts are right. And, by the way, you can’t separate loving God from obeying Him. As I’ve already said, loving is choosing. To love God is to choose Him and

His ways. The heart's devotion to God will always show itself in obedient conduct. As Jesus put it: "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15; compare 1 John 5:3).

The *all things* used here is broad. Those who wrote our covenant probably meant for the rest of this paragraph to list the specific ways we are to love and obey God. There are four of these ways.

The first is *to avoid all appearance of evil*. This phrase is borrowed from 1 Thessalonians 5:22. Literally, the words mean we are to "abstain from evil every time it appears on the scene." The covenant writers, however, probably used the words in the more popular sense. We purpose to avoid anything that appears evil to others. As members of a holy fellowship, we are concerned how our behavior looks to others.

This is a double-barreled concern. On the one hand, we guard our testimonies in the eyes of our brethren. The "appearance of evil" in my life might cause my brother to stumble into sin, and thus cause him spiritual harm. This is the reason Paul said, "If meat make my brother to offend [stumble], I will eat no meat" (1 Corinthians 8:9-13).

On the other hand, we also want to guard our testimonies in the eyes of the unsaved. We desire to protect the reputation of the entire fellowship as well as our own. This is the motive behind Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 10:27-28. He instructed the Corinthians not to eat certain foods they could otherwise eat if the unbelievers raised a question. He understood we must avoid "all appearance of evil" in the eyes of unsaved men, even when they aren't completely right in what they expect of Christians.

Second, our love and obedience for God will cause us *to abstain from all sinful amusements and unholy conformity to the world*. This duty is based on Romans 12:2: "Be not conformed to this world." The *world* is the system of life of unsaved men under the control of Satan in this age. Avoiding conformity to the world means more than refraining from a few specific sins. The world's philosophy affects every area of life, defining values, ideals, moral standards, fashions, aspirations. The very



meaning of life is at stake. The world tries to press us into its mold. The Christian must be set against this conformity, willing to be different when necessary—even at the cost of ridicule—and determined to conform instead to the lifestyle of the Word and will of God.

This does not mean everything done by those of the world is evil. The world practices common courtesy, for example, and a Christian ought to be courteous. For this reason, those who wrote our covenant used an adjective modifier: We avoid *unholy* conformity to the world. We need not be different from unsaved men just to be different, not when their deeds are acceptable. But when evil is involved, we must draw the line.

Note the covenant also uses the adjective *sinful* to modify amusements. Not all the world's amusements involve us in wrong-doing; but when they do, we have to separate ourselves again. Christians must examine carefully the amusements and recreations instituted by the world.

Some of these behaviors are clearly sinful; these we must avoid. Others are questionable. Agreement within the congregation may not always be unanimous regarding amusements. The congregation ought to reach a Spirit-guided agreement when questions exist. And, in the covenant relationship, each member ought to leave off what the general agreement is against, even when he or she personally disagrees. In a sense, each member of a local church submits his own conscience to the voice of the whole fellowship. This is one way submission is manifested. Compare 1 Peter 5:5, which urges, "All of you be subject one to another."

The third element involved in our love and obedience to God is *to abstain from all sanction of the use and sale of intoxicating beverages*. The Free Will Baptist congregation takes a stand for total abstinence from all alcoholic drinks. And we are concerned about their sale as well as their use, in the spirit of Habakkuk 2:15 and Ephesians 5:18.

Some discussion certainly needs to be devoted to what it means to "sanction" the sale of these products. Some Christians are convinced they do not sanction such sales when they buy from a business that also deals in beer or whiskey; others disagree. Again, the local congregation

of believers ought to reach a general agreement that will be practiced by the whole church. One thing is sure: Christians have an obligation to make their influence count against the traffic and use of alcohol.

Alcoholic beverages are evil primarily because they contradict the spiritual virtue of self-mastery and self-control (temperance). Those who framed the covenant did not know about our modern drug problems, but the abuse of drugs must be opposed for the very same reasons.

Finally, the promise of paragraph two also commits us *to provide things honest in the sight of all men*, a quotation from 2 Corinthians 8:21. The context of this verse is especially important for our covenant relationship. Paul was taking up a collection for believers in Jerusalem. He was not satisfied with his knowledge of his honesty. He insisted each church appoint men to assist and observe him, so no one else would doubt his honesty. Thus, he recognized an obligation to his brethren to “avoid all appearance of evil” in their eyes.

We must avoid dishonesty in our relationships with each other within the covenant fellowship. Ephesians 4:25 says we must “speak truth” with each other because “we are members one of another.” We must also “walk honestly toward them that are without,” that is, the unsaved (1 Thessalonians 4:12).

Church is a spiritual family of people who want to live for God. They covenant together, for the sake of all of them together, to live clean and honest lives, separated from the sins of the world.

## PARAGRAPH THREE

*We agree faithfully to discharge our obligations in reference to the study of the Scriptures, secret prayer, family devotions, and social worship; and by self-denial, faith, and good works endeavor to “grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”*

If paragraph two in the covenant expressed the negative side of our commitment to maintain a holy fellowship, the third paragraph presents the positive side of that same commitment. Love and obedience toward God involve what we do as much as what we don't do. The covenant relationship demands that *we agree faithfully* in a common concern for positive good.

First, we promise *to discharge our obligations in reference to the study of the Scriptures*. We agree to let the Bible teach us what to believe and how to behave. But the Bible's teachings will remain a mystery to us if we do not “search the Scriptures” (John 5:39). Furthermore, we agreed to follow Romans 12:2 and avoid conformity to the world. But that verse also tells us to be continuously *transformed* by the making new of our “minds” or the way we think. The Word of God is the only influence that can retrain our minds every day.

The study of the Scriptures involves at least two levels. First is the personal level. Every Christian should study the Bible regularly. You won't start as an expert, nor will you ever learn everything. But you can

have a meaningful, satisfying, growing knowledge of the Lord's way by feeding on the Word (1 Peter 2:2).

Then there is the congregational level. One of the main reasons for believers to gather every week is to study the Bible. The Sunday school and the worship hour are intended to help meet this need. Often the midweek service is, too. Sometimes, smaller groups meet for Bible study at other times during the week.

The trouble is, too many churches neglect real Bible study. Christians must be fed and nurtured on the Word of God (Matthew 4:4), and they will respond to that which satisfies this hunger of the soul. Churches have no excuse for being filled with people who remain spiritually illiterate and ignorant of the Bible.

We need the Bible these days. If we are to avoid being "carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14), we must learn the Word of God. Church means learning God's Word together.

Second is a commitment to *secret prayer, family devotions, and social worship*. Worshiping the Lord takes three forms: privately, within the family, and with the whole congregation. Worship is the Christian's first duty. Worship is the basic function of the assembled congregation.

All three levels are necessary for complete success, and all three are scriptural. For personal prayer, see Matthew 6:6. No doubt our greatest spiritual battles are fought and won alone. For family worship, see Ephesians 6:4 and Deuteronomy 6:6-7. The fear of God may not dwell in the hearts of our children if we neglect the family altar. For congregational worship, see Colossians 3:16 and Hebrews 10:24-25. Christians who think they can get along without regularly worshiping with the church are tragically deceiving themselves.

We need each other; we need to assemble for regular services. The Lord has always moved His people to come together in an organized way, for His worship and the believers' welfare. Ephesians 5:19-20 explains that being "filled with the Spirit" means, for one thing, "speak-

ing to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Notice you sing both "to yourselves" (to one another) and "to the Lord." When we meet and sing, then, we sing to God in honor and praise and thanksgiving. We are glorifying Him and Christ. This is worship. But we are also "speaking to each other," instructing and challenging and exhorting and encouraging one another in the things of the Lord. If you sing next time with these things in mind, you may find a new understanding and appreciation for the hymn.

Colossians 3:16 makes the same truths clear. Hebrews 10:24-25 also speaks clearly of the need to assemble and to exhort "one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." The nearer we come to the day of the Lord, the more faithful we must be in assembling and exhorting each other to be steadfast in Christian commitment.

Third, we promise *to endeavor to grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*. This exhortation is taken directly from 2 Peter 3:18. An infant who does not mature is a tragic deformity. So is a "babe in Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:1) who does not grow spiritually; compare Hebrews 5:12-14. Peter shows us Christian growth is the only guarantee against falling from grace (2 Peter 1:5-10).

One of the basic reasons Christians assemble is to assist each other in spiritual growth. The Bible describes this as "edification." This need should be uppermost when we assemble: "Let all things be done unto edifying" (1 Corinthians 14:26). According to Ephesians 4:11-16, the edification of the church is the purpose of the "spiritual gifts." Every church member has a place to fill and service to render in working toward the objective of spiritual maturity for all.

Free Will Baptists ought to be more concerned about edification (see also Ephesians 4:11-16) than those who believe in the so-called doctrine of "eternal security." After all, if evangelism leads a man to salvation, and our edification fails to build him up, and he falls and goes to Hell,

we still have not “saved” him.

This sentence in the covenant suggests the means whereby we will grow: *by self-denial, faith, and good works*. *Self-denial* is a word suggested by Matthew 16:24. We must renounce all selfishness. The interests of Christ and our brethren must take precedence over selfish interests. Self-denial also includes self-control. By self-control, the desires of the flesh are allowed fulfillment only in proper ways. By self-control, spiritual values are made to rule the whole personality (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

*Faith*, as used here, involves more than the “saving faith” by which we were placed in the body of Christ and are kept there. This faith is confident trust in God, which causes us—His children—to rely on Him for the provision of our needs and the power for service. This kind of faith can be greater in some than in others. This faith can be nurtured in ourselves and in each other. Church is helping one another grow in faith.

The *good works* mentioned here probably include righteous conduct in general (as in Matthew 5:16), deeds of service to others (as in 1 John 3:17- 18), and any form of ministering (serving) for God (as in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). All these things will foster Christian growth. More than anything else, then, church is a fellowship of believers who are willing to do whatever is needed to help each other grow in grace. For this reason they assemble and worship and sing and pray together.

## PARAGRAPH FOUR

*We will not forsake the assembling of ourselves together for church conferences; public worship; and the observance of the ordinances of the Gospel, nor fail to pay according to our ability for the support of the church, of its poor, and all its benevolent work.*

This fourth paragraph of our covenant suggests we have certain duties to the congregation as a whole. Two obligations are specifically named: to assemble and to pay.

The promise *we will not forsake the assembling of ourselves together* is taken from Hebrews 10:25. This duty was discussed some under paragraph 3, in reference to “social (public) worship.” The Greek word translated *church* in the New Testament is, literally, “the called out ones.” In particular, the word refers to ones who were called to assemble. Each ancient Greek city, for example, had a special group, a chosen few, “called out” to assemble and conduct the business of the city. That assembly is the same word the early Christians adopted for their “church.” The very nature of a church, you see, is to assemble.

Three occasions for assembling are mentioned here: for *church conferences* (business meetings), *public worship* (social worship in the previous section), and *the observance of the ordinances of the Gospel*. We meet to conduct business because we are committed to congregational church government. We are brethren in the covenant relationship,

and it is not fair that this responsibility be left in the hands of a few. We meet for these, and for public worship, as often as the congregation deems necessary. The conscience of the majority of members determines the frequency and schedule of services. Every member in the covenant fellowship ought to submit to this conscience and meet faithfully.

The ordinances are three: baptism, the Lord's supper, and footwashing. We call these "ordinances" because they are object-lessons ordained by the Lord Jesus for the local church's regular practice. Their value lies in the spiritual lessons which they visibly portray.

In baptism, new believers give a public witness of identity with Jesus Christ and His people. The lesson of baptism is especially clear in Romans 6:3-4: We died with Christ, buried our old way of life, and rose new creatures. Immersion depicts this accurately because the believer is put down into the water and then raised from the water.

The Lord's Supper, also called "communion," is explained in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. The bread and cup remind us of the body and blood of the Lord, offered at Calvary, once for all for our sins (Hebrews 9:25). While baptism is needed but once, communion is frequently repeated: often enough to keep us reminded of Christ's sacrifice, though not so often as to become commonplace. According to 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, communion is also an expression of our unity in "one body."

Also for repeated observance is footwashing. This ordinance speaks pointedly about our fellowship with each other. Jesus began the practice on the night before His death (John 13:2-7) and stressed by this action His commitment to service. At the end, He said we should do it, too. When one washes another believer's feet, he or she says, "I am your servant. I will do whatever I can for your welfare and happiness." This is the spirit of Philippians 2:3-8, and this is what church is all about.

The other promise is that *we will not fail to pay according to our ability*. "God loveth a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). The Old Testament community of saints had a system for regular, proportionate giving:



tithing. The New Testament continues to call on the family of God for proportionate giving. Note 1 Corinthians 16:2, for example, where each is to give “as God hath prospered him.”

Grace does not free us from the need to give. In fact, in 2 Corinthians 8:7, giving is called a “grace.” Under grace, we certainly cannot justify giving less than those who were under the law. Under grace we give more as a manifestation of love for God, for His people, and for His cause, than as a mere legal obligation.

This clause about giving seems to mention three causes for which we commit to pay: *for the support of the church, of its poor, and all its benevolent work*. The church—the local congregation—has many expenses, including the obligation to pay well its spiritual leader, the pastor. See Corinthians 9:14 and Galatians 6:6.

In addition to these congregational expenses, the covenant singles out a particular cause we must support: the church’s poor. This practice is certainly scriptural, as seen in such passages as Galatians 2:10 and 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 (especially 8:13-14; 9:12-14). One of the most blessed experiences and expressions of fellowship as “members of one another” is found in sharing material goods with needy brethren.

In particular, note 1 John 3:17. The truth is this: If we see a brother (fellow believer) in want and have the resources to help but do not respond, then the love of God is not in us. James 2:16 implies the same. Our churches must be quick to call attention to real material and physical needs within the fellowship. It is a joy either to give or to receive when genuine brotherly love is manifested in such a practical way.

The “benevolent work” of the church is a broad expression including giving for the church’s poor and any other ministry, whether for saints or sinners. *Benevolent* means kind, good, or charitable. The church must not spare itself from sacrificial service to the community outside its own walls. The members of the fellowship must contribute to make such ministries possible.

## PARAGRAPH FIVE

*We agree to accept Christian admonition and reproof with meekness, and to watch over one another in love, endeavoring to “keep the unity of the Spirit” in the bonds of peace, to be careful of one another’s happiness and reputation, and seek to strengthen the weak, encourage the afflicted, admonish the erring, and as far as we are able to promote the success of the church and of the Gospel.*

The fifth paragraph of the covenant examines our responsibility for one another in the congregation. The previous paragraph spoke of duty toward the local church as a whole and of material obligations. This paragraph speaks of duties toward our brethren as individuals and of our responsibility for each other’s spiritual welfare.

First, *we agree to accept Christian admonition and reproof with meekness*. Since we are responsible for one another’s spiritual wellbeing, we need to admonish or reprove one another from time to time. When we receive such correction, we must submit with a consciousness that our brethren are genuinely concerned about our spiritual progress. Isn’t it interesting that a commitment to accept such rebuke comes first in this paragraph?

Obviously, the one who delivers rebuke must do so in a spirit of genuine love and concern. That is the meaning of *Christian admonition and reproof*, and this concern can be compared to the natural care members of a closely-knit family feel for each other. The “unruly” believer who is “warned” (1 Thessalonians 5:14) ought to hear the warning meekly and

with appreciation for the concern expressed. Leaders, such as pastors and deacons, especially must admonish believers whose lives are not consistent with their Christian profession and threaten to tarnish the testimony of the fellowship. Note 1 Thessalonians 5:12. Hebrews 13:17 asks us to obey and submit to those who have such responsibility because “they watch for your souls.”

The next commitment is *to watch over one another in love*, a good summary of the entire paragraph. Too many churches have lost this sense of responsibility for one another, this self-sacrificing willingness to seek a brother’s welfare in preference, even, to one’s own (1 Corinthians 10:24). But this is the very reason the Spirit binds us together in a local fellowship, so we may “watch over” or guard and foster each other’s spiritual wellbeing. This is what church is.

This watching is not with suspicion but with concern. Each is devoted to the cause of the others’ good. One of the parts of the ceremony that admits new members into an established fellowship ought to be a prayer like this: “Lord, make our hearts one with this one. Help us to care about him.”

The next clause presents our attitude and objective in this commitment, *endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*. This is an exact quotation of Ephesians 4:3, where the following verses remind us we have been baptized into one body by the one Holy Spirit (compare 1 Corinthians 12:13). To *keep* this unity means two things: first, that we recognize our need for and dependence on one another, and second, that we spare no effort to preserve the peaceful unity of that body. We do not stand alone; we are not complete without each other. The oneness of this body is regarded by us as a sacred thing, and our responsibility over one another will be exercised in this consciousness.

To *keep the unity of the Spirit*, then, is to preserve this right relationship with each other. Fractured fellowship in the church deprives us of the fullness of the Spirit. Ephesians 4 and 5 provide helpful explanation of this relationship, especially in those verses where the words “one

another" occur. First, 4:2: "With all lowliness [humility] and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love." Next, 4:25: "Speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another." Then, 4:32: "Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another." Finally, 5:21: "Submitting yourselves one to another." What a wonderful picture of a local fellowship is this: exercising patience, honesty, kindness, forgiveness, and submission to one another in the *unity of the Spirit*. That unity is worth keeping!

We also promise, and this is a more specific implication of what has already been said, *to be careful of one another's happiness and reputation*. In exercising care about another believer's happiness, we will guard our actions toward him or her. We will be more interested in seeking that individual's real good than in any selfish aims (Philippians 2:4). In exercising care over his or her reputation, we will watch what we say or listen to, either within or without the church.

The next clause binds us to three specific duties toward certain groups of brethren: *We will seek to strengthen the weak, encourage the afflicted, and admonish the erring*. Such failures do not always necessarily exist within the local fellowship of believers, but when they do, our responsibility for each other's spiritual welfare calls on us to help.

These three duties were most certainly adapted, in reverse order, from 1 Thessalonians 5:14. The *weak* are those with spiritual infirmity; they are ailing, unable to stand alone spiritually. We give them ourselves to lean on; we help hold them up. They are not sound of soul, not healthy spiritually. So we teach them and pray with them. We help them recover and develop spiritual health.

The *afflicted* here are the "feeble-minded" in 1 Thessalonians 5:14. This word literally means "little-souled." Their spirit is flagging. They are discouraged, about to run out of steam, ready to give up. Can they survive? Not without help from others in the fellowship. So, we encourage them. We pray with them and help them find new enthusiasm and determination. Anyone who has never needed help probably hasn't been

a Christian long. What a joy when God puts it in the hearts of fellow believers to sense and respond to such a need.

The *erring* (King James: “unruly”) are those who get out of step, who fall, who are, in the words of Galatians 6:1, “overtaken in a fault.” They have sinned. But instead of kicking or mocking, we admonish firmly but in love, and restore them. By the way, one of the most important practical implications of the Free Will Baptist doctrine of apostasy is this: we are responsible to help one another avoid “failing of the grace of God” (Hebrews 12:12-15). This responsibility sometimes requires us to discipline one another. This is scriptural. Note 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, for example.

Finally, in this paragraph we covenant together to, *as far as we are able, promote the success of the church and of the Gospel*. In the context of this paragraph, this means the “success” of the local church and of the Gospel is measured in terms of the spiritual progress of those saved and bound together in the local congregation. No need to quibble, here, about whether the primary task of the church is to evangelize the lost or edify the saints. Paul measured success, in Colossians 1:28-29, in terms of presenting mature (perfect) saints to Jesus. In order to do this, we must both win them and nurture them. Church is a group of saved people who are helping each other make it through to spiritual victory and maturity, to a successful entrance into Heaven when this life is done.

## PARAGRAPH SIX

*We will everywhere hold Christian principle sacred and Christian obligations and enterprises supreme; counting it our chief business in life to extend the influence of Christ in society; constantly praying and toiling that the Kingdom of God may come, and His will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.*

Up to now, the covenant has dealt almost entirely with our duties toward ourselves and each other within the circle of congregational fellowship. But the church does not exist in a vacuum, nor is its purpose to withdraw, hermit-like, from society. The sixth paragraph reminds us of our obligations to the world around us. We promise *we will everywhere hold Christian principle sacred and Christian obligations and enterprises supreme*. This promise shows we realize we must be the right kind of persons ourselves if our influence on society around us is to be meaningful. *Everywhere* is especially appropriate because it puts us out in the world, recognizing that those around us are watching our daily lives.

To *hold Christian principle sacred* means the basic principles of right living, as taught by Christ, are regarded as duties toward God. To hold Christian obligations supreme means our primary duties are those imposed on us as followers of Christ. To hold Christian enterprises supreme means we put first those activities and labors in which the Lord Jesus has involved us. Those who composed our church covenant may well have thought of Matthew 6:33: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God."

The next part of this promise regards our priorities and purposes: *counting it our chief business in life to extend the influence of Christ in society.* You will easily catch the emphasis of the word “chief.” To extend Christ’s influence in society is, no doubt, the same as being “the salt of the earth.” Not that we expect to convert everyone or transform all of society, for we know this will never be accomplished. But we do aim at bringing to bear, in our world, the influence of Christ at every opportunity. Whenever and wherever we can, we take aim at the social structure around us with the principles of Christ’s teaching. This kind of social concern is not so much for official church programs as for individual Christian actions. Christians must be concerned about social injustice and other problems in the land and world of which they are part. By example, by teaching, by actions, the Christian seeks to change things as much as he or she can according to Christian patterns.

The last clause in this paragraph expresses the ultimate goal for which we strive: *constantly praying and toiling that the Kingdom of God may come, and His will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.* For this, Jesus taught us to pray (Matthew 6:10).

There should be two interpretations of this objective. First, we are working for the establishment of the spiritual Kingdom of God in men’s hearts when we urge sinners to be saved and saints to grow in grace. We would see His will done on earth when we practice and teach the principles of this mystical kingdom even now. Perhaps that is what Jesus meant when He commanded us to seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33).

Second, we look forward to a sudden work relative to the Kingdom of God at the Second Coming of our Lord. Some see this in terms of an earthly, thousand-year kingdom; others think of the new earth and the eternal state. Either way, we realize the full manifestation of the Kingdom of God can never be achieved without the King’s return. And we constantly pray and work to prepare for this “blessed hope.”

## PARAGRAPH SEVEN

*To this end we agree to labor for the promotion of educational and denominational enterprises, the support of missions, the success of Sunday schools, and evangelistic efforts for the salvation of the World. And may the God of peace sanctify us wholly, and preserve us blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

The final paragraph recognizes that local Free Will Baptist churches voluntarily band together for mutual interests. Churches working together can accomplish more than churches working independently. We don't mean denominations—even our own—have the authority of a local congregation. But we certainly believe God has providentially brought us together with common beliefs and hopes.

This consciousness of a denominational bond leads us to say that *to this end we agree to labor together*. The end is our toil for the Kingdom of God, our zeal for the will of God on earth. In particular, we promise to labor together, as churches in a denomination, in five areas.

First, for *the promotion of educational enterprises*. Educational ministry occurs at the local church level first. But such enterprises as collegiate work can best be carried out at denominational levels. Free Will Baptists are committed to such enterprises, though we still have much to learn about the great costs involved.

Second, we promise *the promotion of denominational enterprises*. This



includes activities carried out at various denominational levels: local, state, and national. We believe in working toward mutual goals. This does not ask for blind denominational loyalty. Each individual member of the body has the freedom to work for the causes in which he sincerely believes. He does not have the freedom, however, to be merely a spectator.

Third, we promise *the support of missions*. Free Will Baptists, at the national level, sponsor both North American and international missions programs, though we recognize the term missions is more inclusive than this. We want to work together to win men and establish churches in other places around the world. Carrying the gospel is not an option but a command to be obeyed.

Fourth, *we seek the success of Sunday schools*. This particular institution has proved itself through many years as an effective means both to teach the believers and to win the lost. We work first for this success at the local level. We also work at the denominational level to improve this ministry by providing good literature, teacher training, and other aids.

Fifth, and as a general summary, we work together denominationally in *evangelistic efforts for the salvation of the world*. All our enterprises and programs are geared to this goal. We do not expect to convert everyone, but we labor to save all who can be reached. And their salvation includes both winning them and establishing them in the faith, for their salvation is not final until they have been received in Heaven.

The covenant concludes with a prayer taken from 1 Thessalonians 5:23: *May the God of peace sanctify us wholly, and preserve us blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*. This prayer is particularly appropriate for a local congregation's common interests. We are working together. We are bound to one another's welfare for the purpose that we may stand without shame before our Lord at His return.

# Now, at last...

I hope you have a clearer picture what church is all about. Church is, after all, many things.

Church is a group of people in a Sunday School class excited about the Bible, learning all they can about God's way, wanting to apply what they learn to the way they live.

Church is a new convert, heavily burdened about a spouse's salvation, surrounded by those who come together to pray, because they care.

Church is an offering received to help one of the widows who couldn't manage hospital bills on her small Social Security check.

Church is a preacher expounding the Word in the pulpit, feeding his flock the spiritual food their souls hunger for.

Church is missionaries on furlough reporting about their overseas work, thanking listeners for contributing and praying so they could go.

Church is a pair of volunteers out visiting on Saturday afternoon because they want to see neighborhood families saved.

Church is a delegation of people appealing to the city's beer board to revoke the license of a local establishment for selling alcohol to teenagers.

Church is all this and more: preaching and praying together, singing and sharing together, teaching and testifying together, eating and edifying together, laughing and laboring together, weeping and witnessing together. Church is caring because we are members of one another.

At least this is what church ought to be. Maybe your church isn't all it could be. And that's where you come in. ***You can help!***





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