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## Review: Church Covenants

### **What is a church covenant?**

A church covenant is a summary of church members' responsibilities and commitment toward one another that is agreed upon by church membership and into which new members enter with church membership.

### **What is the difference between a statement of faith or confession of faith, and a church covenant?**

A confession of faith (Westminster Confession, 1689 London Baptist Confession, Baptist Faith and Message, etc). is a statement of faith adopted by a group of churches. A church's statement of faith is specific to the local church, summarizing the doctrine of that congregation, and is useful for in discipleship in doctrine.

A church covenant summarizes a congregation's ethical obligations toward one another in the local church, and would be helpful for discipleship as we share life together in the local church.

A statement of faith focuses on what a church believes and teaches, while a covenant is focused on how a church is to love one another.

### **History**

Rooted in the Protestant Reformation, free and independent congregations broke away from the parish model, where membership had largely been determined by geography. Instead of this, believers would bind themselves together into a congregation with a mutually agreed upon church covenant.

### **Today**

In contemporary evangelicalism, church membership can often be non-existent or meaningless, or so informal that it hardly matters.

Instead of using a church covenant to constitute a new local church, foundational documents usually consist of constitutions and by-laws as is necessary for non-profits, with an accompanying statement of faith. Constitutions and by-laws are rarely well suited for use as a discipleship tool in church life.

For churches who believe in and practice meaningful membership, there has been a growing recovery of the historical practice of using church covenants as members commit to one another in the local church. Like a statement of faith for teaching doctrine, covenants are a practical aid for discipleship in local church fellowship.

## Meaningful Membership at OBC

As we believe in and seek to practice meaningful membership at OBC, we believe that using a church covenant at OBC would be helpful for discipleship in how to share life together.

Though our four-week Discover OBC membership class provides important instruction on the meaning of membership, there is a need for ongoing discipleship of our church family toward a biblical vision and practice of what it means to share life together in the local church.

We have 173 members at present, who are accompanied by 125 non-member children. We live in an incredibly transitory community, and the Lord brings people into our church family and leads them out again. Over the past five years, we have seen sixty-seven members move out of the area, and we have welcomed 113 new members. The majority of our congregation has been with us for five years or less. The transitory nature of the DC area heightens our need for clarity when it comes to the meaning of membership.

## On Covenants

Throughout the Scriptures, God has made covenants with his people. These Divine-Human covenants include the Adamic covenant, the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, the Davidic covenant, and the New Covenant.

Throughout the Scriptures, we also see human covenants as saints made commitments to one another.

The New Testament clearly defines the responsibilities of those who are part of the New Covenant, and which are to be lived out in the local church. A church covenant between church members is a commitment to seek to love and care for one another according to the Scriptures.

A membership covenant for OBC would distill the membership commitments entailed in Scripture that have already been held by Occoquan Bible Church, and have been presented in OBC's Statement of Faith, Constitution, membership class, and teaching.

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## Projected Timeline

<b>February—April</b>	Sunday School
<b>May</b>	Present draft covenant at the members' meeting.
<b>June—August</b>	Collaborative revision and discussion with church membership.
<b>September</b>	Ratify at the members' meeting.

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## The Work and Worship of Membership: The Duties of Assembly and Identification

### I. The Duty of Assembly

#### The Church is an Embodied and Emplaced Assembly

In the Bible, the word for church is *ekklesia*, and it is used 114 times in the New Testament. The word has the idea of “assembly” or “gathering” (see Acts 19:32, 39, 41). Most of these occurrences (~100) refer to local churches—i.e., “the church of God in Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2) or “the churches of Galatia” (16:1; Gal 1:2).

Believers are to gather instead of forsaking the assembly of the saints (Heb 10:25). The place of worship is no longer the physical structure of the temple in Jerusalem (John 4), but the gathered church is the New Covenant temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16) where God is uniquely present with his people (Matt 18:20).

#### OBC Statement of Faith, VI. B. – The Local Church

We believe the local church glorifies God by making disciples (John 15:7–8). As a local embassy of the universal church, these disciples are to gather for worship (Heb 10:24–25) on the Lord’s Day (John 20:1; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10) in order to proclaim the Word, share in fellowship and prayer, and keep the ordinances (Matt 28:19-20; Acts 2:42-47).

#### Church Gatherings in Early Christian Literature

##### The Didache (c. 90-100 A.D.)

“On the resurrection-day of the Lord, called the Lord’s Day, assemble without fail, giving thanks to God.”

##### Pliny’s letter to the Roman Emperor Trajan (c. 112 A.D.)

Christians “were in a habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ.”

##### Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* (c. 150 A.D.)

*In the concluding chapters of Justin’s defense of Christianity he provides a description of the church’s liturgy as they gather for worship on Sunday.*

... After we have thus [baptized] him who has been convinced and has assented to our teaching, bring him to the place where those who are called brethren are assembled, in order that we may offer hearty prayers in common for ourselves and for the baptized person, and for all others in every place ...

And we afterwards continually remind each other of these things.

And the wealthy among us help the needy; and we always keep together; and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost.

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the one presiding verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.

Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the one presiding in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.

And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succors the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead.

For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

### **The Scriptures Direct Worship in the Church**

1. Read the Word (1 Tim 4:13)
2. Preach and Hear the Word (2 Tim 4:2; Rom 10:17)
3. Sing (Eph 5:18-21; Col 3:16)
4. Pray (Eph 6:18)
5. Give (1 Cor 16:2)

## II. The Duty of Identification: Baptism and the Lord's Table

### OBC Statement of Faith, VI. C. – Ordinances: Baptism and the Lord's Table

Water baptism and the Lord's Table are the only two ordinances given to the church. They are to be observed by the church when the church gathers for worship (1 Cor 11:33-34). While neither add to nor in any way aid an individual in meriting salvation, both should be seen as an obedient expression of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in someone's life.

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water symbolizing the believer's death to sin, union with Christ, burial of the old life, and resurrection to walk in new life (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 10:47-48; 16:32-33; 18:7-8; Rom 6:1-4). In baptism, the repentant believer bears witness to faith in Christ, just as the church bears witness to the visible faith of the baptized.

The Lord's Table is a symbolic act testifying of Christ's saving work for the redeemed and expectant anticipation of Christ's Second Coming (Acts 2:42-47; 1 Cor 11:17-32). When we take the Lord's Supper, we proclaim the death of Christ and bear witness to one another of our mutual participation in Christ (1 Cor 11:17, 18, 20; 1 John 1:7).

We believe that baptism precedes admission to the Lord's Table, with baptism being the initiatory rite of the New Covenant and the Lord's Supper being an ongoing rite for those who belong to the New Covenant. As a local church with many visiting saints from other churches, we practice "close" communion, where we invite believers from other gospel-believing congregations to share in the Lord's Table with our members.

### The Identifying Mark of Baptism

1. Baptism is the initiatory rite of Christian fellowship, being an act of obedience for the new believer to identify with Jesus as his disciple, and an act of obedience for the church to identify followers of Jesus with this divinely prescribed means (Matt 28:18-20).
2. Baptism is preceded by faith in the gospel, and results in one's addition to membership as they are identified with the saints (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 8:12, 36; 10:47; 18:8).
3. Baptism is visual dramatization of the gospel which symbolizes union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Death and burial is depicted in being submerged, and resurrection as the believer is raised out of the water (Rom 6:1-4). In this way, baptism is a sign of the believer's new life in Christ (Rom 6:4; Gal 3:27).
4. As God's people have passed through waters of judgment throughout the Old Testament, baptism displays salvation from judgment through Christ's death and resurrection (1 Cor 10:1-2; 1 Pet 3:20).
5. The waters of baptism symbolize the washing away of sin and the regenerating work of the Spirit (Acts 22:16; Titus 3:5; Heb 6:2).

6. Baptism is a naming ceremony in which the individual takes on the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). Similar to marriage or adoption, this naming ceremony marks out a new identity for one who is entering a new family.

### **The Identifying Mark of the Lord's Table**

1. The Lord's Table is a symbolic meal presenting a visible sign of the gospel as the bread and the cup are representative of Christ's body and blood (Luke 22:19-20).
2. The Lord's Table is only for the gathered assembly of the local church (1 Cor 11:17-18, 20, 33-34), and it is an ongoing ritual of Christian fellowship to memorialize Christ's sacrifice at the cross (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24).
3. As the saints share together in the Lord's Table it displays the reality of their union with Christ and one another (1 Cor 10:17). Communion (*koinonia*) speaks of the shared fellowship and unity we have in Christ.
4. The Lord's Table is also called *eucharist*, which means thanksgiving, as its observance is a shared time of congregational thanksgiving and praise to God for salvation through Christ.
5. Sharing in the Lord's Table is a visible confession of faith in Jesus, as the church testifies that they have received Christ's sacrifice by faith (1 Cor 10:16).
6. Finally, the Lord's Supper is an anticipatory act that the church shares in together as they await Christ's return (Matt 26:29; 1 Cor 11:26).