



## THE HEALTHY CHURCH: CHURCH LIFE: BY CONVENIENCE, CONTRACT OR COVENANT?

Stephen A. Macchia

Published in Church Executive Magazine, April 2008

Whenever I hear comments like, I didn't get anything out of that sermon or I don't think I can stomach another praise song or I'm leaving this church if they don't stop supporting those missionaries, I begin to ask myself, "Why are these comments filtering into the church in the first place?" What is it about the church that we have developed so many conditions attached to all of our pet projects or interests and likes and dislikes?

Part of the reason stems back to the fall—we are in a continual cycle of obedience and disobedience toward all who are in authority. Some of it brings us back to the Reformation, and we've been in "protest" with one another in the body of Christ ever since (consider the fact that we started with a single protestant movement that has since splintered into thousands of denominational distinctions).

Another alternative is that we simply have developed very strong opinions, rationale, philosophies and theological bents that lead us to our convictions and conclusions. Still another option is that we all have different stylistic preferences.

### Culture creatures

I'd like to suggest still another reason: We've become creatures of our culture. Rather than being leaven, we've become the loaf itself. And, in the consumer-focused, litigious society we are living in today, we have acquired the world's mindset and transferred it directly into church life as well.

In a consumer-focused culture, the attitude is "You deliver on your products, services and promises or I'll return it or walk away to another vendor that's quicker, cheaper and/or more convenient" or worse yet, "I'll sue you." We compare and contrast, always shopping around for the best "bang for our buck" and the cycle is never ending.

There's always another superstore or specialty shop being built (or uploaded onto the internet) or another option to consider, and their respective marketers know how to lure us away from the competition with sales, mark downs, fine-print-like promises and glitzy ads.

### Centuries-old dialogue

Has this mindset seeped into the pores of our life together as communities of faith? Have we become so enamored by the biggest, best and brightest, the fastest, sleekest and most convenient, to the point that we too have become competitors in the body of Christ? Is that how all the one anothers that we ascribe to are being translated today—love one another, pray for one another, serve

one another, encourage one another, bear one another's burdens, just to name a few?

This is really not a new question for the church to wrestle with. In fact, it's been an ongoing dialogue for centuries: Are we in the culture, above the culture, being formed by the culture, against the culture or seeking to transform the culture?

However, I'd like to offer yet another question for us to consider in the discussion: Are we pursuing life together as local churches on a convenience, contract or covenant basis? Which word best describes your membership process, church leadership style, strategic decision-making, conflict resolution and ministry evaluation?

Conveniences are accommodating to consumers. They make products and services readily available at the lowest cost, the quickest service and the most accessible location. The success of the convenience is based on bottom line results.

Contracts are drawn up as an agreement between two or more parties that formally enforce or legislate terms. When each party does so satisfactorily, the contract is binding and eventually comes to completion. If left undone for any reason, legalism sets in and dominates all attempts at resolution.

Covenants have similarities to contracts as a mutual agreement to uphold doctrines, polity, faith, etc. But the addition of God into the equation marks a covenant as a more solemn fulfillment of a promise that parallels what God has pledged to us as his people. God's promises are throughout the Scriptures, and he continually calls us to mirror them here on earth.

If we are truly to become leaven in this culture (transforming the culture), I propose church life that's more covenantal in nature. Yes, the kind of covenants that link relational health, theological strength and ministry effectiveness together as one strong three-stranded cord of love.

Contracts are necessary when dealing with vendors (those who build our buildings, manage our money, stock our supplies, and insure us from harm), but with and among members of the body of Christ we need to lean instead on our covenant promises of love. Convenience should only be an afterthought.

### What's a covenant?

When I asked a group of pastors about their church covenants, most of them just had a glazed look on their faces: Did I mean their by-laws? Vision and mission statements? Philosophy of ministry? All of these are needed, but if these are superimposing, sup-

planting or smothering a biblical understanding of life together, then they are inverted inappropriately and carry too much priority power over what it means to become a covenantal community of grace.

A healthy church is committed to biblical principles, lived out in loving community, where godly relationships and ministry practices lead to life-giving growth for all. In a covenant-based community we follow fervently after the leadership of the Trinitarian God who perfectly displays unity.

We commit to principles that define our life together no matter what the cost, sacrifice or swallowing of our pride or preferences. And we lean into God's perfect will for our life together no matter the season we may find ourselves in or the current health or dysfunction of the church family.

When we live by covenant, we throw off the consumer mindset that hinders us from running the race together from the starting line to the finish line. The race is a marathon, the runners have differing abilities, and as we run together, occasionally offering a cup of cold water along the way, we will truly keep our eyes on the eternal hope that awaits us—a heavenly home with streets paved with the pure gold of the covenantal love of God.