

Called Into Covenant, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 23041114
Ephesians 2:11-22 and Luke 21:5-19
Elon Community Church, UCC, 14 November, 2004

A covenant is a binding agreement. We don't hear the word covenant much anymore; it has fallen into disuse. As a practical form of social organization, covenant-based relationships have become almost obsolete. George Mendenhall writes, "the fragile institution of marriage remain[s] the most noteworthy vestige of such relationships."¹

Nowadays, we have long written legal agreements: "Know all men by these presents that so-and-so hereby covenants and agrees to and with the party of the first part, hereafter acquiring any one or more of the construed provisions and is hereby subjected to the said restrictions and every part thereof by whomsoever owned, to wit, etc. etc." Even marriages these days have "prenuptial agreements," legal documents stating whose prior property goes to whom when the marriage breaks up.

There was a time when one's verbal word formed an agreement or a covenant. Property used to be marked by piles of rocks and exchanged with a handshake and a smile. It is difficult for us to conceive of relationships built upon little more than promises reliably made and honorably kept. Yet, our Judeo-Christian faith is founded on such covenants.

The Hebrew Testament contains three well-known covenants: the covenant with Noah promised that God would never again destroy creation with a flood. The covenant with Abraham promised land and descendants. The covenant with Moses promised law, order, and salvation. When we say the words Old Testament and New Testament, we are referring to covenants: the old covenant and the new covenant.

Covenants are binding agreements, but the binding is with the mouth and the heart. Covenants are not enforced by gun, court, or force. Let us talk about three kinds of covenant in the church: The covenant we make with God; the covenant between this congregation and our denomination, the UCC; the covenant we make with each other to form a church.

We make a covenant with God when we confess our faith in public. For our side of the covenant, we promise that we will love God above everything and everyone else. God promises unending and unconditional love. That covenant is not written on paper or recorded in courts. It is written on our hearts. It is like a marriage, in that we remain in covenant even though we may disagree with the way God is handling things. In the covenant of marriage, a couple remains committed to each other through the difficult times. One doesn't just walk out because he disagrees with her. Our covenant with God is sealed in the person of Jesus Christ who has revealed the nature of God to us. It is confirmed every time we have communion.

This congregation has a covenant with the United Church of Christ. We are a part of a denomination: something that names and identifies us. We are bound together with mouth and heart. The United Church of Christ does not hold title to this building as is the case with Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic churches. There is nothing that legally binds us to the United Church of Christ. We can leave any time we choose, and in fact, some congregations have. They disagreed with their fellow congregations and broke covenant. Our covenant with the UCC means that, as in a marriage, we remain committed to each other even though we may disagree on some issues.

¹"Covenant" an article by George Mendenhall in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Volume I* © 1992, New York, Doubleday, p. 1179

Our covenant with the UCC means that we are subject to the scrutiny of our fellow United Churches of Christ. There is a limit or boundary to theologies or practices that may be wacko. In 1978 Jim Jones felt no longer bound to other congregations in his denomination, went off with his people to Guyana and killed them with kool aid laced with cyanide because he thought he was the messiah. That is what can happen when we do not bind ourselves in covenant with other congregations.

We are in the midst of a study of what God is calling this church to be and to do. One calling is, “Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ proudly proclaims itself a part of, and is called into covenant with, the United Church of Christ. We will proclaim the fact that God is still speaking to people with a Word that is at once timeless and fresh each day.” When we say that God is still speaking, we affirm that God’s word is not written in stone. It is living and dynamic.

We are in agreement with James Russell Lowell’s words,

“New occasions teach new duties,
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward,
Who would keep abreast of truth.”²

Our third covenant in church is with each other. As Paul wrote in Ephesians, we “are no longer strangers and aliens, but [we] are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”³ We covenant with each other to be the church. We promise to walk with each other in faith, love, and care.

When we join the church, it is like a marriage. If a couple is merely living with each other, either one can walk out when the going gets rough. When a couple makes a marriage covenant, they promise to love each other for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. With that promise, they work together to resolve issues. That is how we as church members covenant with each other. There is no paper, gun or court to enforce the covenant. It is held together by promises reliably made and honorably kept.

Today, we reaffirm our covenant with God, with our denomination, and with each other. In a moment, we will invite each person present to come forward with their estimate of giving for the year 2005. By making your estimate of giving, you are saying you love God and you are saying thank you to God for all of the blessings God has given you. You are saying you believe in the mission and ministry of this congregation and are willing to support it with your time, talent, and treasure. And, you are saying that you care about and are committed to the other members of this congregation, that you support them in times of hardship and doubt, that you celebrate with them in times of joy and growth and that you are going to work to make this the best congregation it can be, faithful to God’s call.

²“Once To Every Man and Nation” by James Russell Lowell, 1819-1891

³Ephesians 2:19