

Is the New Membership Covenant Legalistic?

Perspective and position are important. Peering over the edge at the top of the Grand Canyon is quite different from standing at the river below and gazing up. Both views produce awe, but they are very distinct feelings. The former sense of awe is accompanied by a healthy fear and respect as the very real danger of falling is comprehended. The latter view allows the participant the opportunity to feel immersed in the canyon without the fear of death. Both are real views of the canyon, but each stirs up diverse emotions in us. Perspective and position have consequences on how we live life and how we interpret the life which we live.

Recently there has been some hesitation and concern among potential members of The Village Church regarding our membership covenant. This unease is often related to a fear that the prohibition of certain behaviors is a promotion of the legalistic spirit against which we often teach and preach. Why list certain sins and not others, why not merely list the command to love God and consequent command to love others, why list any behaviors at all? As to the third question, "why list any behaviors at all?" position and perspective are important.

Position

First, we must keep in mind that the covenant is in no way intended as a means into the relationship with God. Positionally speaking, those to whom the covenant is addressed are those who have already tasted of the goodness of the Lord through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

While it is certainly true that we are brought into and kept within salvation by grace alone, such a belief does not negate the very real necessity of subsequent obedience to the Lord. This is the exact struggle that most of the writers of the New Testament battled. Paul, the defender of grace alone, wrote in Romans 6 "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" James, responding to a similar misconception of grace, responded by writing, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?" In case you are curious, he expects you to answer "no." That type of faith does not save. Elsewhere he calls such a faith "dead" and "useless." John too wrote about this in his first epistle, "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says, 'I know him' but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him..."

The apostles were very concerned lest we misinterpret grace as a license for sin. The covenant is intended not for those who are in a position of disbelief, but for those who are already "in Christ." Position is crucial.

Perspective

We, as followers of Jesus, have not only the responsibility, but also the opportunity to respond to His commands with glad obedience. This is what I mean by the importance of perspective. The membership covenant simply enlightens us to opportunities to obey.

We should desperately want to be conformed to the image of Christ. We should fervently desire to "put off [the] old self, which belongs to [our] former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of [our] mind, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24). We will fight for that because the Scriptures say that we must and can fight for that. Granted we do not fight alone, our help and hope is the Spirit of God, but we battle nonetheless (Romans 8:13).

The sinful flesh wants nothing to do with God and His holiness. It is by nature opposed to the Spirit and His work in us (Galatians 5:17). When we fall into sin or feel the enticement of worldly desires, we should not remember the covenant and think "oh yeah, I signed something that says I need to confess this." Rather, we should remember the Scripture which promises grace to those who bring their struggles into the light and we should long for that grace. We should remember that we have the opportunity to fellowship with God and that unconfessed sin inhibits us from the fullness of that communion.

All we have done in the membership covenant is tried to sum up what Jesus has told us regarding following Him. We are not adding to Scripture, we are not negating grace, we are not promoting legalism, we are simply saying, "These are a few areas in which we have the opportunity to gladly obey the sweet commands of our Lord." When you read through the membership covenant don't think "I have to do this," but instead think "I get to do this." Perspective is important.

In the end, we want to commend love for Jesus Christ, but this love must not and cannot be separated from obedience to His commands. As He has said, "If you love Me, you will obey My commands."

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