

## Church Covenants.

THE duties of a church member to-day are often left very vague, so that a boy who has committed himself to Christ in baptism, is not always informed of any special obligation to which he commits himself, when joining a company of Christ's followers.

When Free Churches were first formally gathered in England, there was much discussion as to what were the mutual relations of their members. The people round Gainsborough and Scrooby, from whom members went via Holland to New England and to London, "joyned them selves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walke in all his wayes, made known, or to be made known to them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them." So did John Bradford phrase it, forty years later, in an atmosphere where the word Covenant had come to bear a technical meaning, of the conditions on which they associated. The great point is, that a covenant was not concerned with beliefs, but with conduct. And these people agreed to conduct themselves as they felt, from time to time, that Christ desired.

Many people cannot be content with one broad principle, but desire to expand it, and to enumerate some of the corollaries. The growth of the "Church Covenant Idea" in these circles was traced in 1904 by Champlin Burrage, who found that it was far more developed in America than in England, and among Congregationalists rather than among Baptists. He did not refer to one list of duties drawn up in 1656, and adopted by the Western Association: the "Confession of Somerset" was signed by representatives of sixteen churches, with their General Superintendent, Thomas Collier, and was published. This gave wide publicity to what an important Association considered to be "the duty of every man or woman":—Having repented and been baptized, and being thus planted in the visible church or body of Christ, to "walk together in communion, in all the commandments of Jesus." Experience had led them to mention "some of these commandments further"; and they enumerated twenty, gathered directly from the New Testament, but arranged in no intelligible order.

The idea of a Covenant took shape among the Congregationalists. In 1645 it was sharply opposed by Hanserd Knollys, who said that the London practice had been to admit on the condition of faith, repentance and baptism, and none other; without making any particular covenant with members upon admittance. And he challenged any one to show that a Covenant had any Scriptural basis. This made it by no means popular among Baptists. But when churches rejected baptism, they often did adopt a Covenant. Thus out of Holcroft's work there arose a Church at Hitchin, of the "saints-as-saints," or mixed-membership type, dear to Bunyan, who often preached to this Church. On 25th October, 1681, they renewed their covenant to the Lord and one to another, "to walke together as a Church of Jesus Christ in love to the Lord and one another, and indeavor to yeld sinceare and hartly obedienc to the laws, ordinances and appointments of our Lord and Law-Giver in his church."

Again, in Norfolk, where Congregational churches were addicted to Covenants, and to solemn renewals, a Baptist church, newly embodied at Great Ellingham, adopted one which was "assented, and consented to, and openly confessed, and professed by us, whose names are hereunto set, upon the 29th day of the ninth month, 1699," together with seventeen articles of faith. It was kept regularly in use till 1758, every member on admission being asked, "Are you willing to give up yourself wholly to this Church, to walk with this Church in all the ordinances of Christ, so long as you can walk here to the glory of God and your own edification?" After that date, only thirteen names are entered at intervals till 1789; and the fifth pastor, who came next year, opened a new book, which ignores the old Covenant. There is no sign that at any time it was amended. It ran thus:—

We, a little handfull of the meanest, both of the Children of men and of the Children of God, being called by the grace of God, out of the Iron Furnace of the Land of Egypt, judge it our Duty to enquire by what methods we may glorify our Redeemer, in the highest Form the saints are capable of attaining to in this Life. And after a diligent enquiry into the mind of God in this great Concern; we are Satisfy'd by Holy Writ, that a Church state, is next to a state of grace, and in order to a state of glory, the most conducive to the Saints' happiness here below. & forasmuch as the Lord hath shewed us the form of his house and the fashion thereof, we Judge it our privilege as well as our Duty, to be waiting at the place of Wisdom's Doors; for it is better to be Doorkeeper in the house of

the Lord, than to dwell in the Tents of Wickedness: besides we find the way which God chose to lead his people in, both in the Old Testament's days, and also in the primitive times of the Gosple: he had his Church, in the Wilderness then, and he hath his churches in the Wilderness now. And we Esteem it a more Honourable thing to Follow Christ in a more Solitary path, than to Enjoy the pleasures of Sin, which are but for a season. We likewise find in holy Writ, that an Explicit covenanting with, and giving up ourselves to the Lord, and one another, is the formal cause of a particular visible gosple Church. We likewise desiring to be Added to the Lord, Do make a Sure Covenant, according to the Example of the Church, in Nehemiah's time; who made a sure Covenant, and wrote it; and we do hereby Engage our Selves, (as the Lord shall Assist us) to walk with one another to the Glory of God, and the Edification of Each other in love, for the bearing of one anothers burdens, for the strengthening of one anothers faith, for the improving of each others gifts, and the watching over one anothers Souls: and we do hereby further engage ourselves as the Lord shall Assist us, to keep close to the Ordinances of our Lord Jesus Christ, as they are delivered to us in the holy Gosple, without any mixture of human Inventions. We do likewise Covenant & agree together to separate ourselves wholly from the worship of the world, and the Religion of the Times we are fallen into, that we may (thro' the strength of Christ) keep our Garments unspotted from the world. And we likewise engage our Selves to walk circumspectly in Gods house, not forsaking the Assembling our Selves together, but to Worship God in Publick, and as oft as may be in private one with another. We also engage ourselves so far as we are, or shall be Able, to keep up the Ministry of the Word, and Ordinances of Christ, amongst our Selves; that our Souls may be Edify'd, and the Church multiplied, and encreased with the Encrease of God. And this Covenant engagement of ours, we [word forgotten at turn of page] through the strength of Christ to pursue, so long as we can walk together to the glory of God, and the comfort and Edification of our own Souls: and this, so far as we have learned from the Word, is that Covenant which the son of the Stranger, and the Eunuch, viz. the Gentiles are to take hold of, that they may have a Name and a place in Gods house, and within his Walls, even a better name than of Sons, and of Daughters; and this is imply'd in giving our Selves to

the Lord, and therein to one another by the will of God, thereby to be visibly Added to the Lord, and one another. We therefore having covenanted with each other, to walk together in the Ordinances of Christ. Judge it meet to draw up the sum of our belief in matters relating to Divinity, for the Satisfaction & encouragement of Such, as may hereafter desire to Joyn with us, in Church fellowship, and in imitation of our dear Lord Jesus, who witnessed a good Confession before Pontius Pilate. the like is said of Timothy, who professed a good profession before many witnesses, and this no doubt was the form of Sound Words, which he had heard of Paul, and which he was Commanded by him to hold fast; Upon these grounds we have delivered the Sum of our belief in these Articles following.

The seventeen articles seem original; that on Reprobation is terribly explicit; there is one on the Covenant of Grace. All are fortified by proof texts.

Elias Keach had a short and very useful career in Pennsylvania, then returned to London, where in April, 1693, a new church was constituted, of which he was ordained pastor. Till his death eight years later he was in the front rank. In 1697 he published "The solemn covenant of the church at its constitution," as also the articles of its faith, and a display of its discipline. In the same year his father Benjamin published similar documents relating to his church in Horseley-down. The eminence of these two men, and the fact that their church covenants were available in print, caused these covenants to be copied or modified in many quarters. Thus at Pershore, whose links were with the Midland Association, Wrexham and Shrewsbury, Josiah Thompson, who was pastor 1726-1736, recorded a covenant, seven of whose eight articles are the same as Keach's. But the coda of Keach is numbered 8, his original being omitted: it had run, "We do promise according to our Ability (or as God shall bless us with the good things of this World) to Communicate to our Pastor or Minister, God having ordained that they that Preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel. (And now can any thing lay a greater obligation upon the Conscience, than this Covenant, what then is the Sin of such who violate it?)" This refusal to recognize the duty of supporting a pastor was very general; the Pershore ministers and others near, at Alcester, Henley, Worcester, etc., supported themselves by keeping schools. Yet there was always the Keach document; and the Confession of Somerset, in a section distinct from the Covenant it contains, is clear that their brethren's "duty it is to provide a comfortable subsistence for them."

In 1793 the church at South Lane, Downton, Wilts, which had existed from 1735, was re-settling itself under John Bain; it discovered that a Covenant was "the usage of all organized Churches of the faith of Jesus Christ," and chose the same general model, of eight clauses. As always, the differences are more important than the mere adoption, since they show what independence of thought existed. Downton did not promise to pray for one another, but it did promise "with regard to the Minister which God shall give us and set over us from time to time, that we will to the utmost of our ability, make his life Comfortable both with spirituals and temporals, knowing it to be the will of the Lord that they who Labour in the vineyard should be partakers of the fruit thereof." And whereas Keach and Thompson led their churches to promise that church proceedings should be kept private, Bain led Downton to make a proviso, "except when any are excluded from the Communion for unworthy walking." There is, however, no new clause to indicate that the old Somerset Article XXXIV., "it is the duty of his church, in his authority to send forth such brethren as are fitly gifted and qualified through the Spirit of Christ, to preach the gospel to the world," had received new illustration by the founding of the B.M.S.; not yet had Joshua Marshman of Westbury Leigh volunteered; so Downton missed the opportunity of covenanting that every member should spread the gospel; it still spoke only of internal and mutual duties.

A covenant of another type is found in Lancashire and Yorkshire, and the church at Barnoldswick has preserved a long and careful account how it renewed its covenant in 1744. It mentions how all records before 1711 had been cut out of the church book, how no member had ever signed the covenant of their Communion, and how the reforming synod of New England in 1679, which renewed church covenants, was well worthy of conscientious imitation, as related by Cotton Mather in his *History of New England* (1702). And thus for the second time, American practice influenced English; it may be an interesting study to note how the simple covenant of John Smyth at Gainsborough fared at New Plymouth, what changes took place at Salem in 1636, at Charlestown and Boston, at Windsor in 1647, at Cambridge in 1648. Barnoldswick, however, started with a preface whose opening words are the badge of this family; "We a small handful of the unworthy dust of Zion," and which goes on to renew the solemn covenant of communion with God and with one another, in articles to be subscribed with the hand of every member. They are seven in number, quite unrelated to those of Somerset or of London: two seem of special interest; family worship, and "as we have given

our children to the Lord by a solemn dedication," praying for their conversion and setting them a good example.

The covenant of the church at Hog Lane, Woolwich, drawn up in 1757, was printed in 1761, and is here reprinted. It is of interest in that the church was avowedly mixed-membership, like that at Greenwich. This proved no hindrance to its pastor being admitted to the Baptist Board in 1761; evidently the Londoners were more liberal than has sometimes been thought, or else they recognised the wisdom of suburban churches taking in all Christians. This covenant may be compared with that of Stony Stratford, in our volume III, page 41.

We, who desire to walk in the Fear of the Lord, do through the Assistance of his Holy Spirit, profess our deep and serious Humiliation for all our Transgressions; and do also solemnly, and in the Presence of God, Angels, and each other, under a Sense of our own Unworthiness, give up ourselves to the Lord, in a Church State, according to the Institution of *Jesus Christ*, whom we profess is our High Priest; to justify, sanctify and save us, and also our Prophet to teach us; likewise our King and Law-giver, to whom as King of Saints, we openly profess Subjection, and desire to be conformed to all his holy Laws and Ordinances, for our Growth, Establishment and Consolation, that we may appear an holy Spouse unto him, and to serve him in our Generation according to the Will of God, and wait for his second Appearance, as our glorious Bridegroom, who has assured us, and whom we believe, will come the second Time without Sin unto Salvation, being fully satisfied in the Way of Church Communion, according to the Word, and Truth of Grace, in some measure upon one another's Spirits, we do solemnly give up ourselves to one another, and join ourselves together in an holy Union and Fellowship, promising humbly to submit to the Discipline of the Gospel, and all holy Duties required of a People in such a spiritual Relation, according to the Word of God; and also we agree, and promise, in the Fear of God, to observe the following Things, which we judge agreeable to the Mind of *Christ*, and necessary for our Peace and Comfort as a Church.

*First*, That we will, as much as in us lieth, strive to walk in all Holiness, Godliness, Humility and Brotherly Love, that we may render our Communion pleasing to God, comfortable to ourselves, and lovely to the rest of God's People; and in order here-unto, we promise to watch over each other's Conversation for Good, and not suffer Sin upon one another, so far as God shall discover it to us, and to stir up one

another to Love, and to good Works, to warn, rebuke, and admonish one another with all Meekness and Long-suffering, according to the Rules left us by *Christ Jesus* in that behalf.

*Secondly*, That we will, in a special manner, make Conscience of praying for one another, and for the Glory and Increase of this Church, and for the Presence of God in it, and the pouring forth of his Spirit upon it, and his Protection of it to his own Glory; and that we will cleave to each, and bear one another's Burthens in all Conditions, both outward and inward, as God shall enable us; and that we will bear, and forbear, with one another's Weaknesses, Failings, and Infirmities, with much Pity, Tenderness and Compassion; and in all Respects, endeavour to behave towards each other according to the Rules of *Jesus Christ*, and the Order of the Gospel, recorded in the written Word.

*Thirdly*, That we will avoid all Causes and Causers of Divisions, and endeavour to keep the Unity of the Spirit, in the Bond of Peace, and that we will meet together on Lord's Days and other Times, as the Lord shall give us Opportunity, to serve and glorify God in the Way of his Worship, to edify one another, and to contrive, and seek the good, and real Advantage of this Church.

*Fourthly*, That all those that are, or shall be convinced in their Minds, of Believers Baptism by Immersion, shall submit there-unto; and those that are otherwise minded, either as to Subject or Mode, shall also Walk according to the Dictates of their own Consciences, and that we will give no Uneasiness or Trouble to each other, or the Church, about either the Subject or Mode of Baptism, but leave each other, and exhort each other to act herein, as they shall judge most agreeable to the Mind of *Christ*, believing, that as we have received *Christ Jesus* the Lord, so we ought also to Walk in him.

*Fifthly*, That we will abide by, and cleave to our Pastor, and not desert him, or his Ministrations, so long as he shall take the Gospel for his Guide and Rule, and publish the Doctrine of Free Grace, as the everlasting Love of God to his Elect; free Redemption by *Jesus Christ* alone, from Sin and Wrath, and final Perseverance of the Saints in Grace here, to Glory hereafter, and his Walk and Conversation be according to Godliness, but will, as God shall bless us with the good Things of this World, according to our Abilities, communicate thereof to him, believing, that God hath ordained, that they that preach the Gospel, should live of the Gospel; those, and all other Duties, found in the

Word, we humbly submit unto, promising, and purposing to perform them, not in our own Strength, being conscious of our own Weakness, but in the Power and Strength of the Blessed God, whose we Trust we are, and whom we desire for ever to serve, in Witness whereof, we have not only solemnly lift up our Right Hands to God, but do also subscribe our Names, agreeable to the Word, which says, one shall say, I am the Lords, and another shall subscribe with his Hand unto God, and also, come let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual Covenant, never to be forgotten.

To-day, many churches place in the hands of their new members a small manual, which includes a statement of the basis of the church, both as to beliefs and as to aims. While the actual word, Covenant, may be not used, the duties of the member are still put before him. It is probably an advantage to have language that is not antique or Biblical, but the ordinary speech of the day. And as the relative importance of duties varies from age to age, from country to country, the advice given and the pledge taken may well be phrased afresh at suitable intervals. A possible covenant to-day might run:—

Recognizing that the Church was called into being by Jesus Christ to win men to His leadership and to train them in His ways, We agree that

Within this church to which we have united, we will by God's help maintain a brotherly spirit; will remember the spiritual need of the young and the weak, the material need of the poor and the sick; will attend public worship, and contribute regularly towards the expenses of the church; will plan for and support such forms of activity in Christ's cause, both locally, in concert with other churches, and overseas, as seem to suit the varying conditions:

In all our relations the same spirit is to be shown; thus within the family we will maintain devotion; and will so live and speak that our conduct may lead to Christ those who see us most intimately; in commerce and in public life we will be trustworthy, doing what is honest in all things, behaving to others as we wish them to behave to us; as God may open the way, we will try directly to enlist others into Christ's church:

And as it is only by God's guidance and help that we may learn and do His will, we will maintain our private fellowship with Him in prayer, expecting thus to gain ever a clearer view of His hopes for each of us and for this His church.