

In conversation last Sunday afternoon with someone visiting from the Pacific Northwest, the topic of membership covenants at large evangelical churches came up. This person is in such a church, and she described that the form to fill out is quite lengthy. She felt it intrusive, though she did eventually sign it. At some point they came around again and apparently wanted to be really sure that everyone was with them, and they required each one to re-sign the document. This person was clearly disturbed by the process. She was even cautioned by a friend about differing too much with a particular man, as he had the power to “ruin her reputation as a Christian woman” in that particular large city.

My conclusion is that those documents are about power, about control, the power of church leadership to keep the members in subjugation or obligation. I do not ever expect to be in a church where I would be asked to sign such a document, nor do I see any possible way that I would sign such. However, if someone were to approach me about signing a membership covenant, my response will be clear: I first want to see the covenant that the leaders signed. If there is no such leaders’ covenant, or if it is not more binding in responsibility and accountability than what is expected of the members, something is insidiously wrong with the power structure of that church.

I understand that there are serious questions of submission to authority at stake, and I understand from those that have signed such that they desire to be in submission. Yet nowhere in the New Testament do I see anything like this form of compelled, oppressive subjugation, with even the threat of defamation if one differs too much. Paul was very clear; his authority was to build up, not to enforce rigid conformity — or else....

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