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COVENANT

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COVENANT
FOR A
GOSPEL
PEOPLE

INTRODUCTION

Baptists are seeking through a journey of reform and renewal to awaken hearts and minds to the vision of the Church as a missionary people. Our pledge through hundreds of years has been to covenant together under God, 'to walk with each other and to watch over each other'.



The Revd David Coffey
General Secretary

Wherever our current journey leads us in the 21st century, 'in ways known and yet to be made known', our deepest desire is to be faithful to the Great Commission of Jesus, so that by the words and deeds of the Gospel we make new disciples of all nations.

God spoke to us as a Union through the process of the Denominational Consultation in 1996 and we have had glimpses of the new things he has in store for his people, through such events as the Wembley Leaders Day in 1999. Central to the vision God has given us is a new beginning in relating to one another. We desire to give a priority to the spiritual relationship over the institutional organisation.

◆ *As a sign of this new beginning in our Union, each local church is invited to use Covenant 21 for a New Year covenant service.*

◆ *Association gatherings are invited to use Covenant 21 to mark a new beginning.*

◆ *The Baptist Assembly delegates in 2001 will be invited to share in a Covenant 21 Communion service.*

The renewing of our relationships with God and one another in a covenant service is not about signing a contract. It is a visible symbol that we are there for one another. It is a sign in our hearts and lives that we are making ourselves freshly available to God for gospel service in his world.

COVENANT
21

Covenant 21 is a resource pack which offers a rich variety of ideas. Every person should find here material suitable to use or adapt to their local situation. Here you will find:

◆ **A Worship Outline**

setting the tone for action-oriented covenant worship within its sections, 'We gather, We believe, We serve, We covenant, We share'.

◆ **Prayers, Readings, Responses and Songs**

suggesting their possible use within these sections.

◆ **Historic Notes**

giving the context to our interest as Baptists in covenant making.

◆ **Sermon/Bible Study Notes**

providing ideas on how to prepare groups for the Covenant Service.

◆ **The BUild Booklet**

offering ideas for working with people with learning difficulties.

◆ **The Covenant Prayer**

conveying the essence of covenant making, and providing the common connection between and across all the celebrations that take place.

◆ **The Covenant Text**

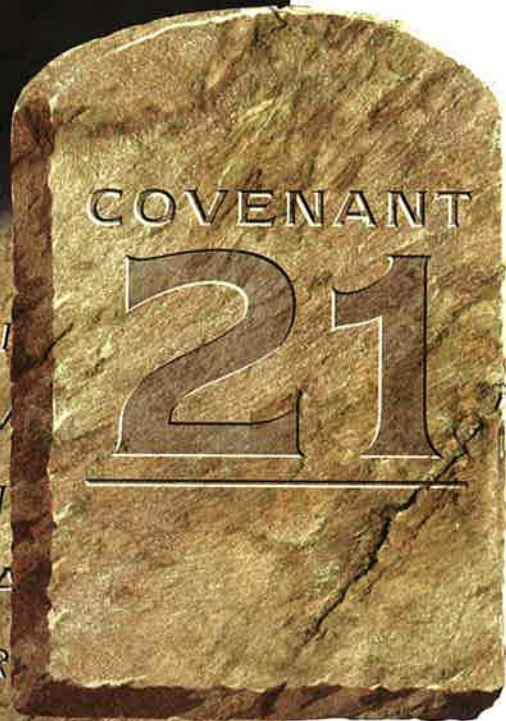
*A black and white version of the text for photocopying.
(Covenant 21 will be mailed to every church minister and college in mid-October).*

Please use Covenant 21, or the alternative version produced by the BUild group.

I trust that through Covenant 21, we will personally sense in our time the new thing that God is doing in our Union of churches, associations and colleges. I pray we will be fired in the imagination of our hearts to travel with the Lord who has gone before us and is graciously with us. I believe that God is able to revive his missionary people in the midst of the years. In this hope let us make our covenant together.



MAKING COVENANT TOGETHER



FELLOWSHIP-SHARING

Being bound together in communion by the work of the Holy Spirit has radical implications for our commitment to each other and to the nature of our sharing. A covenant service is our opportunity to express this fellowship and actually to make it deeper.

Sometimes we use the word 'fellowship' in a weak and wishy-washy way. It conjures up warm but vague feelings of cosy friendships and loose commitments. However, the New Testament word which is usually translated 'fellowship' stretches our thought in at least two ways.

First, it speaks of sharing together through the Holy Spirit in the very life and love of God (2 Cor 13:14, 1 John 1:3). Second, it also carries the very earthy meaning of 'material sharing'. When, in 2 Corinthians 8, Paul invited the Corinthian church to give money towards the needs of the Jerusalem church, he was challenging them to give reality to the fellowship-sharing (v4) between them and the saints in

Jerusalem. Both these aspects of fellowship were no doubt in his mind when he blessed his readers with the words, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God', and added: 'and the fellowship-sharing of the Holy Spirit be with you all'.

We need to keep on reminding ourselves 'We are the Union and the Union means fellowship!' The Baptist Union of Great Britain is not an organisation which we join, or a bundle of resources which we access; the Union is a fellowship of churches, associations and colleges. Home Mission is one important expression of the fellowship-sharing of the Holy Spirit; so is our commitment to love, support and pray for each other.

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FOR YOUR
OF GRACE MADE
FOR OUR SALVATION
IN JESUS CHRIST
OUR LORD. WE
COME THIS DAY
TO COVENANT
WITH YOU AND
*'We proclaim to you
with companion
what we have seen and
disciples to watch
over each other
may have fellowship
and to walk
together before
you in ways
1 JOHN 1 : 3
known and to
be made known.*

COVENANTING IN WORSHIP

We belong together because we are called by God. Our act of commitment in fellowship-sharing should therefore be as we worship God together. We have a vision of local churches, associations and the Union all responding to God's call upon his people, as we covenant together in various worship services during 2001.

The Act of Covenanting which follows is a module which will be used at the Baptist Assembly in 2001, and which we offer you for use in your local church or association. It is intended to be part of a service and, while you must plan a service appropriate for your own situation, we are also offering some resources and ideas which you may find helpful.

◆ We offer you a pattern for covenanting together in its entirety, recognising you may wish to substitute your own prayers for the ones printed, or another confession of faith in place of the Apostles' Creed, a Scriptural Declaration of Faith, or the Nicene Creed.

◆ We hope you will use the Covenant in common with all the other churches, as a sign of our commitment to God and each other. This covenant text offers an opportunity for your congregation to say something together not only among yourselves but with other Baptists in other places.

◆ There should be plenty of congregational participation as we express our being called by God; as we commit ourselves to the kingdom vision of the Five Core Values for a Gospel People; and, as we give ourselves to one another in fellowship-sharing before God.

On page 14 of this booklet you will find a resources section. Included within this are additional worship resources that you may like to draw upon as you prepare for this important event.



This covenant provides an exciting opportunity, for it celebrates God's generous and costly love for us and calls us to generous costly love for one another and for his world. Here are the raw materials: but, led by the Spirit, you need to make them live.

COVENANT IN SCRIPTURE, BAPTIST

The idea of covenant in Scripture

There is a diversity of thought about 'covenant' relationships in Scripture, and since Baptists have always looked to Scripture to shape their faith and practice, this very variety has had an effect upon their own acts of covenant-making. In the Old Testament, 'covenant' describes an agreement God makes with his people, a relationship to which the partners have bound themselves, and in which God says, 'I will be your God and you shall be my people' (Leviticus 26:12; 2 Corinthians 6:16). But there are different types of covenant in the faith of Israel, the two most distinctive being associated with the names of David and Moses. We can trace the characteristics of these two main types through both Old and New Testaments, and then onwards into Baptist covenantal thought.

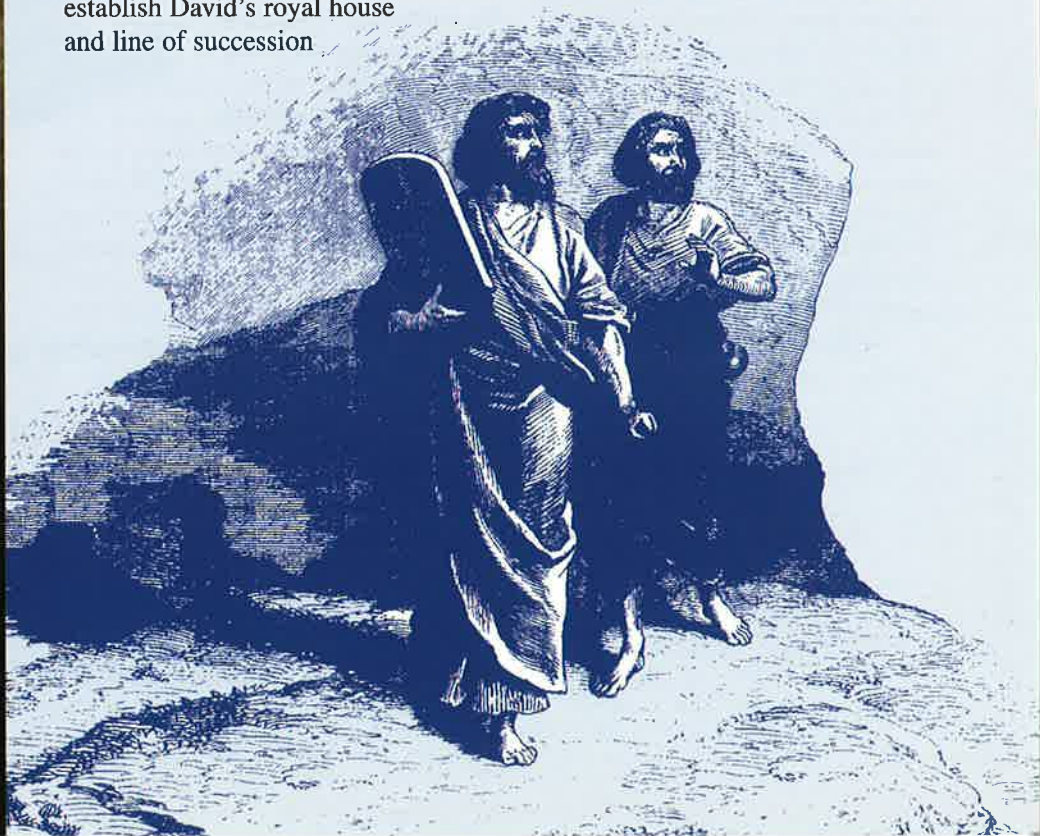
First, Israel thought of God's offering as a covenant which was essentially a *promise* to his people, granting them life and well-being unconditionally from his side. So they celebrated a covenant of God with King David, as the representative leader of the people. In this covenant God promises to establish David's royal house and line of succession

for ever (2 Samuel 7), and so to give the whole people health and a good life through God's special relationship with the Davidic King. Although the human partner is called to be obedient to God, this obedience is not presented as a condition for the continuance of the covenant. While the covenant with David is the most outstanding example of a *covenant of promise* in the Old Testament, there are other instances – such as God's covenants with Noah and Abraham (Genesis 9 and 17). Israel had to be reminded from time to time that this covenant was not given for her own benefit alone, but in order for God to use her in his purpose that all nations should be blessed (Isaiah 55:3-5). On the other hand, Israel also thought of the mighty act of God in delivering the nation from slavery in Egypt, and at the heart of this story they placed another covenant – one made *through* Moses at Mount Sinai. This is made with the whole people of Israel, but through Moses as mediator. And this type of covenant stresses definite obligations which are owed by the human partners in the covenant (eg Exodus 20:1-17). The survival of the

*'I will walk among you
and be your God and
you will be my people.'*

LEVITICUS 26 : 12

*'Behind all the forms
of covenant there is the
initiative God takes to call
his people to himself.'*



THOUGHT AND BAPTIST PRACTICE

The idea of covenant-making among Baptists

covenant is conditional upon human response to God's demands, to God's commandments; if his people fail in obedience, then the covenant is broken, null and void.

At first sight there seems to be great difference between these two kinds of covenant: one seems *unconditional*, the other *conditional*. But the basis of both of them is the initiative that God takes. The Davidic covenant stresses that God takes the first step, by making a promise of sheer grace to take this people to himself. But the Mosaic covenant is only there because God has made the first move in saving his people from bondage in Egypt. Moreover, when the covenant is broken from the human side, God will find new ways to make it again. God will go on searching for his lost people and will again call them into covenant with himself, finding new ways to re-make the covenant relationship (Hosea 2:14-20); God will even take the initiative in re-making the hearts of people so that they will be able to love and obey him (Deuteronomy 30:5-6, Jeremiah 31:31). So the difference between these two understandings of covenant is real, but a matter of emphasis.

Behind all the forms of covenant there is the initiative God takes to call his people to himself.

This initiative of God lies at the heart of the *new covenant* celebrated in the New Testament. In Christ, who is both the true Son of David and the new Moses, God calls people to him. Because of human rebellion a new covenant has to be made, and the making of it involves God in the deepest pain of the cross (Mark 14:24, 1 Corinthians 11:25, Hebrews 8:6). In Christ, the two strands of Old Testament covenant come together: God fulfils all his *promises* and deals with the results of human failure to keep our *obligations*.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, stress was laid upon the Church as the community of the new covenant, brought into being through the blood of the covenant made in the cross of Christ. That is, the dimension of the covenant was vertical, between God and humanity. The covenant was 'the everlasting covenant of grace', and was considered to be an *unconditional* covenant of promise from God's side. But in the wake of the Reformation, radical Separatists in late sixteenth century England were also laying stress upon the *conditional* element in the biblical picture of covenant, insisting that the covenant between God and the national Church in England had been broken because of human disobedience. The eternal covenant of grace in Christ stood firm, but God was calling people to re-make covenant with himself as renewed congregations of his church. This double-sidedness of covenant has entered deeply into Baptist thought, so that while Baptists have had confidence in the gracious gift of God's covenant in Christ, they have also believed themselves called to make covenant with God as an act of obedience.

The Baptist understanding of the freedom of the local church from any external human authority is based in this belief that God himself makes covenant with the congregation. Because the local church lives its life under the direct rule of Christ as covenant-mediator, it has 'the seals of the covenant', that is the freedom to call its own ministry, to celebrate the Lord's sacraments or ordinances, and to find the mind of Christ for its life and mission. Since God takes the initiative in covenant-making, the Church is 'gathered' in being called together by Christ.

Alongside this 'vertical' dimension of covenant – that is, between God and

his people – early Baptists also found a 'horizontal' dimension. Often under the pressure of persecution, members of a local church made a covenant between themselves in which they promised to 'walk together and watch over each other'. While this 'horizontal' dimension was a development of the biblical concept of covenant, it was certainly in accord with the Old Testament demand that people should imitate the nature of God in showing *hesed*, or covenant faithfulness, to each other. It must be emphasized that where there was a local church covenant like this, it was not merely a voluntary alliance on a human level; the 'vertical' and 'horizontal' dimensions of covenant were understood to be intimately related to each other. So in 1607 the early (General) Baptist John Smyth defined the Church as a visible community of saints where 'two, three or more saints join together by covenant *with God and with themselves*'. Church covenants were rare among Particular (or Calvinistic) Baptists until the end of the seventeenth century, but from then onwards it became usual for a local congregation to draw up its covenant. The publication of the covenant of the Church at Horsley Down in 1697 was an influential example. The minister of this church who also wrote theology, Benjamin Keach, understood the entering of a member into the local church covenant to be nothing less than a 'renewal' of his or her place in God's eternal covenant of grace.

In the first two centuries of Baptist life there was an ambiguous relationship between the Church's *covenant* and its *confession of faith*. While Baptists have never considered themselves bound in their beliefs by any creeds or statements of faith, making instead a direct appeal to Scripture, early Baptists did write 'confessions'

continued overleaf

COVENANT IN SCRIPTURE, BAPTIST THOUGHT AND BAPTIST PRACTICE

continued from previous page



as a means of explaining themselves to others, and as a teaching tool among themselves. Thus, articles of belief drawn up by the local church or (more usually) a 'Standard Baptist Confession' adopted by the Association of churches often stood in

the Church Book next to the covenant; but it is important to stress that confession and covenant were not simply identical. The confession might be seen as the context in which the church members made a covenant-commitment to live and work together under the rule of Christ. The covenant itself, however, was essentially relational, and concerned mutual trust and faithfulness. Church covenants tended to die out in the nineteenth century because they were seen, wrongly, as inward-looking and a mark of a closed community. Many Baptists thought they had no place in an age where cooperation between the denominations was developing in – for exam-

ple – campaigns for social reform, the work of the Bible Society and the Sunday School movement. But in fact, the *theology* of covenant is open-looking, associational and ecumenical. This is because it is about living under the rule of Christ as covenant-maker.

The wider the understanding we have of the rule of Christ in our world, the wider will be our covenant relationships with others. While early Baptists do not seem explicitly to have made covenants as *Associations* of churches, they certainly used covenant-language when they spoke about 'walking together' as churches in association 'under the same rule' of Christ. The 'Declaration of Principle' of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, first made in 1903, might also be regarded as an inter-church covenant. It is not a confession or statement of faith, but simply sets out the 'basis' on which churches agree to walk together in mutual trust under Christ's rule and to work together in mission.

Significantly, it is based on the 'Great Commission' of the risen Christ, to whom all rule and authority is given (Matthew 28:18-20). Thus, although it is admittedly a new step for churches in the Baptist Union to enter together into a covenant-renewal service, it is a step which has a firm foundation in Baptist thought about covenant through the years.



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A PATTERN FOR COVENANTING TOGETHER

There are specific elements in the pattern of worship which is proposed and we hope the following outline will convey the intention of the Covenant Service provided.



WE GATHER

This deals with the why of the service; making confession for the past, especially the poverty of our relationships.



WE BELIEVE

Here we proclaim the story of our Christian faith.



WE SERVE

This is a statement about the kind of Christian community we intend to be: expressing our core values for a Gospel people.



WE COVENANT

We begin with prayer for God's help; committing ourselves to the Lord and each other in the local congregation, local partnerships, Association, and Union, for the mission of God.



WE SHARE

This is an expression of belonging together; and may include the Lord's Supper.

COVENANT 21

'The wider the understanding we have of the rule of Christ in our world, the wider will be our covenant relationships with others.'

AN ACT OF COVENANT

FOLLOWING THE SUGGESTED PATTERN FOR WORSHIP

COVENANT 21

GUIDANCE NOTES FOR CELEBRATING THE COVENANT

We Gather

This opening declaration reminds us why we have come together, and on this occasion of covenanting it also attempts to express the picture of the Church that we hold together as a fellowship of Baptist Christians.

A and B here may be two voices, or two halves of the congregation, or leader and congregation. Perhaps you could place symbols of our calling by God on the communion table, as these words are said.

In the *Prayer of Confession* you might want to use your own words, but do notice the words of repentance which are provided:

- we have sometimes replaced *your* mission with our own
- we have often been half-hearted in our fellowship-sharing
- our life together has not always witnessed to your love

Can you see how these confessions cry out for a new beginning? This can only be based on:

- the missionary-grace of the Father
- the life-changing forgiveness of Jesus
- and the heart-cleansing power of the Spirit

WE GATHER



A God makes us a people:
B **we are shaped by God's will.**

A Jesus calls us together:
B **we meet in Jesus' name.**

A The Spirit binds us together:
B **and leads us into truth.**

A We come as a fellowship of believers in God,
living under the rule of Jesus Christ:
B **seeking his mind through the guidance of the Spirit and the Scriptures.**

A We come as a people on a journey with God, open to change:
B **ready to discover new ways of being church at this time.**

A We come with our various gifts of ministry, given by the Spirit:
B **called to share in God's mission of reconciliation in the world.**

A We come as people who are free, because Christ is our Lord:
B **finding unity in diversity and defending liberty for all.**

A We come to make the body of Christ visible in the local congregation:
B **and to express the fullness of his Body in relationships between the churches.**

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Leader Covenant God,
we confess to you
that we are sinful humanity and failing disciples.

Silent prayer . . .

We confess
that despite your call, we have not made every effort to maintain the
unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace;

All **we have sometimes replaced your mission with our own;
we have often been half-hearted in our fellowship-sharing,
and our life together has not always witnessed to your love.
Forgive us, we pray.**

Leader By the missionary-grace of your Father's heart,
All make us your missionary people.
 Leader By the life-changing forgiveness of Jesus,
All set us free to love one another and your world.
 Leader By the heart-cleansing power of your Spirit,
**All empower us to walk together as your people
 in the path of obedience.**

**Forgiving God,
 Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
 forgive and renew us, we pray,
 through Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen.**

*A song or hymn on the assurance of God's mercy may be sung here.
 You will find a song list on page 17.*

WE BELIEVE



Leader Together with all God's people, we proclaim our faith and celebrate the story of our salvation.

*(Use either **The Apostles' Creed**, the scriptural affirmation of faith, or an alternative agreed statement. See Guidance Notes, right)*

THE APOSTLES' CREED

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
 creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
 born of the Virgin Mary
 suffered under Pontius Pilate
 was crucified, died, and was buried;
 he descended to the dead.
 On the third day he rose again;
 he ascended into heaven,
 he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
 and he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy universal Church,
 the communion of the saints,
 the forgiveness of sins,
 the resurrection of the body,
 and the life everlasting. Amen.**

We Believe

Christians have a long tradition of declaring together what is central to the faith. Although on the whole, Baptists have not had a tradition of using the ancient creeds in worship, they have always been part of our expression of our place among all believers, and there have been times when we have used them. At other times we have expressed our faith through putting together verses from the Bible.

In the main text of the service two options are offered – The Apostles' Creed and a scriptural affirmation of faith. In addition two further options are offered in these margins – the Nicene Creed and an alternative scriptural affirmation of faith.

The two ancient creeds offered are quite different in character. The Apostles' Creed has the attraction of being concise and simple in its form. The Nicene Creed is more poetic and story-like. Although the Apostles' Creed is in the main text some may feel the Nicene Creed more appropriate for this occasion of covenant making since it is the most widely accepted confession by Christians around the world. (See the Resources Section on page 14 for more about the Nicene Creed.)

The two scriptural affirmations of faith represent a rather different pattern to that offered by the ancient creeds. In the first example the story of our faith is created by drawing together a number of short verses of scripture. It can be used either as leader and congregation, or with the congregation in two parts, speaking to each other. The second example uses extended passages of scripture, again set out with different possibilities for reading.

You may find it good as a community to work together on your scriptural affirmation of faith, using one of these two patterns to draw together biblical material. With careful preparation these words can come alive as the faith is proclaimed. Recorded or live music may help to set the scene, as might a song together, a solo about the love of God in Christ, a focus on the cross, or silent wonder.

THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one being with the Father.

Through him all things were made.
For us all and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin
Mary, and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified
under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand
of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge
the living and the dead,
and his Kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father.
With the Father and the Son,
he is worshipped and glorified.
He has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic
and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for
the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the
dead, and the life of the age to come.
Amen.

A SCRIPTURAL AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

A Hear, O Israel, 'The Lord our God is one Lord'.
In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

B The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it.

A And God said to Moses, 'Say to all the people
'You shall be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy'.

B He has told you what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and walk humbly with your God?

A And when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of children.

B And the Word became flesh and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

A Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news and saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news'.

B And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

A And when they had mocked Jesus, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

B God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

A But this Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.

B For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.

A While Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven.

B Therefore God also exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.

A Jesus told them, 'It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you'.

B Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

A The body is one, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.

B There is one body, and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called: – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

A And all will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

B **Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?**

A See, the home of God is with mortals. He will dwell with them, they will be his people and God himself will be with them

B **He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.**

References used: Deut 6,4; Gen 1,1; Ps 24,1; Lev 19,2; Mic 6,8; Gal 4,4-5; Jn 1,14; Mk 1,14-15; Jn 3,19; Mk 15,20; 2 Cor 5,21; Acts 2,32; 1 Cor 15,20; Lk 24,51; Phil 2,9; Jn 16,7; 2 Cor 3,17; 1 Cor 12,12; Eph 4,4-6; 1 Pet 4,5; Gen 16,25; Rev 21,3-4.



WE SERVE

A We baptize those who repent and trust in Christ as Lord and Saviour:
B in baptism we are called to be disciples who share in the death and resurrection of Christ.

A Through baptism we are received into the Church, the body of Christ,
B immersed into the fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A To know Christ is to follow him;
B To name him Lord is to obey him;

All Jesus calls us to be a gospel people.

*A song or hymn on the theme of the service may be sung.
A suggested song list can be found on page 17.*

Leader Jesus says, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength'.

All He calls us to be a worshipping community, offering all to God in prayer.

Leader Jesus says, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you'.

All He calls us to be a missionary people, making known the redeeming love of God.

Leader Jesus says, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'.

All He calls us to be a sacrificial community, generously giving from all that God has given us.

Leader Jesus says, 'Anyone who comes to me, I will never turn away'.

All He calls us to be an inclusive community sharing the hospitality of God's Kingdom with all.

Leader Jesus says, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, to proclaim good news to the poor'.

All He calls us to be a prophetic community, challenging powers that oppress and values that corrupt.

An Alternative Scriptural Declaration of Faith

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.

Let all the earth fear the Lord;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.

He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

We Serve

Telling the story of our faith calls us to share in God's story, God's mission. Following a confession of the world-wide Church, our response here begins with a Baptist insight about baptism as a place of commissioning to the life of a disciple.

Then there follows a declaration about what it means to live as a 'gospel people'. Each value is placed here as a response to words of Jesus who says, 'Follow me'. You might like to challenge those in the congregation who are not committed Christians to make a commitment and follow the Jesus who gives so much and asks so much of us.

This is also a good place to use visual aids to depict what a life of service means. As the words of Jesus and our response are being spoken, you might use an overhead-projector to display a series of pictures of the life and mission of your own church, and the wider Church.

We Covenant

This is the heart of the service where we commit ourselves to God and each other in fellowship-sharing. This is holy ground – prepare yourselves through prayer, through song, through silence as appropriate.

Two short passages of scripture are included, to be spoken by different voices. Through these we hear God's word of encouragement to us, as we make covenant. You might like to have them spoken out, strongly and boldly, from different parts of the church building.

WE COVENANT



All pray **Creating and redeeming God,
we give you thanks and praise for your covenant of grace
made for our salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord.
We come this day to covenant with you
and with companion disciples
to watch over each other
and to walk together before you
in ways known and to be made known.
Amen.**

*A song or hymn on the theme of responding to God in mission may be sung.
A suggested song list can be found on page 17.*

Voice 'Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.'

PRAYER FOR HELP

Leader Covenant God,
strengthening and saving God,
we claim the promises of your Word
and ask for your help.

All **By the power of your Holy Spirit
Make bold our vision of your kingdom.
Strengthen us to do your will
and help us to walk together in your way.**

**Pour down your Spirit,
that the promises we make this day,
may be an offering of love,
our duty and delight,
and that by our life together
we may glorify you,
Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Voice 'Since we are surrounded by so great a crowd of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.'

All **This day we give ourselves again to the Lord and to each other
to be bound together in fellowship,
for the sake of the mission and glory of God.
Celebrating our shared life,
we commit ourselves to belonging and working together
in our congregation, our local partnerships,**

our Association, and our Union of churches.
We pledge all that we have
and all that we are
to fulfil God's purposes of love.

A moment of silence . . .

All Now may the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Leader Now to him, who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine.

All To him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.



WE SHARE

Leader As a covenanted people, let us greet one another in the name of the Lord.

ALL SHARE THE PEACE OF CHRIST TOGETHER

THE LORD'S SUPPER *(according to your local church pattern).*

*At the conclusion a song may be sung.
A suggested song list can be found on page 17.*

BENEDICTION

Go forth into God's world in peace
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.
And the blessing of God
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
be with you all.

GUIDANCE NOTES FOR CELEBRATING THE COVENANT

We share

We are bound to each other because we are bound to God – this is the fellowship-sharing of the Holy Spirit, made possible by the love of the Father and the gracious sacrifice of the Son. Here we can share a greeting of peace with each other, because Christ has first made peace with us. Please use a form of mutual greeting or sharing of the peace which is familiar to your own congregation.

We recommend that this covenant is made in the context of the Lord's Supper – a profound expression of what has taken place. Here we can commit ourselves to being a Christian community patterned after the likeness of Jesus Christ, the bread of life and the hope of the world.

Finally...

Please do not ignore the rich possibilities of this service. Gather a group of people together to plan how these resources might come alive in your situation, so that you might offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God.



RESOURCES FOR A COVENANT SERVICE

THE USE OF THE CREED IN A BAPTIST SERVICE OF COVENANT

Confessing our faith together

It is fitting to make a confession of our faith as we come together to renew our covenant with God and each other. It has often been part of our practice to have a confession of faith as a context or background for covenant-making. We no longer have Baptist 'standard confessions', as did our fore-fathers and mothers in the first two centuries of our life as Baptist Christians. Local churches who share in the covenant-renewal services of the new millennium may therefore wish to use a statement of belief which is familiar to them, or one upon which they have already agreed as a church meeting. The Covenant Service contained in this booklet offers two confessions of faith drawn from verses and passages of Scripture, selected in two different ways as the notes to the service explain. However, the service and notes also provide the text of two historic creeds of the Christian Church.

Both these creeds were recognized by early Baptists as true witnesses to the apostolic faith, and the very first congress meeting of the Baptist World Alliance in 1905 was marked by a recitation of the Apostles' Creed by those present.

Three reasons for using the Nicene Creed

There are some reasons commending the use of the Creed of Nicaea in a service of covenant-renewal. First, it is the most widely used confession of faith among the churches of Jesus Christ, affirmed in both East and West. Using it therefore makes

'... in making covenant we are sharing anew in the eternal covenant relationship within the triune life of God, as a fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'

clear that our covenant-making is not a private affair: we make our covenant promises to each other as members of the whole body of Christ throughout the world. Second, the creed is thoroughly trinitarian in both its content and shape, and in making covenant we are sharing

anew in the eternal covenant relationship within the triune life of God, as a fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Third, this creed takes the form of a story, unlike modern lists of doctrines or points of belief. In renewing covenant we enter again into the story of God's making of covenant with his people, and make it our own in our own time. Each of these three points will be expanded below.

Confessing our faith with the whole people of God

The Nicene Creed begins 'We believe', and repeats this 'we' at the beginning of each major section. This is not a statement of faith to be signed by an individual, but a confession only to be made with others in the setting of worship. It belongs in the context of the worship of the whole people of God, and the creed seems indeed to have had its origin in earlier confessions used in services of the baptism of Christian believers. Representatives of the churches of both East and West in the fourth century agreed upon this confession, at a time of crisis for belief when the divine sonship of Jesus Christ was being widely denied (in the 'Arian' controversy). At the heart of the confession is thus the conviction that unless God is fully manifest and present in Jesus ('of one being with the Father'), we can have no saviour and no salvation. This was, we might say, ecumenism with mission at its heart. In our own day, the sharing of mission with others needs to be based on a common understanding of our faith and our salvation in Christ. Today, when partnership between the churches is possible in new ways, there is thus no

longer a strong case for a separate Baptist confession of faith, although it is important to affirm our own Baptist way of being a church – as we do in the 'Declaration of Principle' of the Baptist Union. As we make covenant with each other as Baptist churches in this new millen-

ium, we do so in the hope that this covenant-making may spread until all members of the body of Christ may make outward covenant together, and we express this hope by using a confession of faith which belongs to the world-wide Church and not just to one part of it.

The trinitarian shape of the confession

The first section of the creed speaks of God the Father ('We believe in... the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth'), the second speaks of God the Son ('We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God') and the third speaks of the Holy Spirit ('We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life'). But while a high profile is thus given, respectively, to the Father as Creator, the Son as Saviour and the Spirit as Renewer of Life, the work of the three Persons is not confined within each section. Trinity is about relationships in God, and the oneness of God with which the creed begins ('We believe in one God') refers to the one intense communion of the three Persons with each other. Mention of the Father immediately follows 'one God', because the Father is the source from whom the Son is eternally begotten and from whom the Spirit is eternally poured out. So while the Father is described as 'maker of heaven and earth', the Son and the Spirit are affirmed as working in their own way with the Father in creation: the Son who saves is also the one 'through whom all things were made', and the Holy Spirit is the 'giver of life', making a new creation among God's people. While the Son is identified as the Saviour ('for our sake he was crucified'), he can only save because he is eternally sent forth from the very being of the Father, so that the Father himself in his own way must share in the costly act of redemption. While the Spirit renews human life and empowers prophetic witness, his work is immediately rooted in his relationship with the Father ('who proceeds from the Father') and in his relation to the Son with whom, together with the Father, he is worshipped and glorified.

As we – apparently – celebrate each Person in turn we find that we are in fact exploring a network of relationships; each Person can only be known in and through the other and through their mutual indwelling. Thus the creed ends with a section on the Church, inviting those who say the creed together to enter into this fellowship between the Father, the Son and the Spirit. We who make covenant with God and with each other are being drawn into an eternal covenantal life.

The confession as a story

We are drawn into the triune fellowship of God as we are drawn into the story of this missionary God. The confession sets out the one great story of salvation from God's perspective, beginning with creation and ending with new creation ('the resurrection of the dead'). We find as we make the confession that this story in fact begins even further back than the actual events of creation, in God's eternal aim to make fellowship with created persons. Eternally the Father sends forth the Son out of his very being ('eternally begotten... God from God'), and the Father's purpose is finally to send him further into the world on mission for those who were made in his image ('for us all he came down from heaven'). The story of the journey of salvation continues, through the womb of Mary, the incarnate life of Jesus, the events of passion week and its human actors, the cross, entry into the realm of death, resurrection from the dead, exaltation to the right hand of the Father and the final judgement of all things committed to Christ. The creed thus completes the story of Jesus in line with the early confession of Philippians 2:6-11, but then immediately reminds us that the Holy Spirit has also shared in this story at every stage. It is in the

age of the Church that we have, however, become more aware of the part the Spirit plays and the gifts he gives, so the creed ends with telling the story of the Church as a continuation of the story of Jesus, embodying his own mission in the world. It is sent forth as he was sent by the Father. The Church is a world-wide ('catholic') community which is being made holy as it remains in the faith of Jesus' disciples and allows itself to be sent out as he sent them ('apostolic'). On its journey, begun in baptism, it continually needs the forgiveness of sins each day and will finally be transformed in the resurrection from the dead which was pictured in baptism ahead of time. Then the story will come to one kind of end, but it is an end with ever-new beginnings: 'the life of the age to come.' Amen. We should add that this is a truly inclusive story. The affirmation that the Son is 'eternally begotten' from the Father is an image of giving birth as well as begetting. The picture is one of the Son as eternally issuing from the being of God, like a child coming forth from the womb of its mother. God the source of all life is being portrayed in both male and female terms, and the creed thus rebukes attempts to use the doctrine of the Trinity for the support of male domination.

'Unlike modern statements of belief, every time the Nicene Creed is said it combines a confession of faith with an opportunity to realize anew our place in the fellowship of God's life and to share in God's missionary story.'

The confession and covenant-making

Unlike modern statements of belief, every time the Nicene Creed is said it combines a confession of faith with an opportunity to realize anew our place in the fellowship of God's life and to share in God's missionary story. It is a drama in which we are invited to share. The note of the creed is 'We believe in...'; although this includes 'We believe that...', the emphasis is upon commitment and engagement. Even the final section on the Church begins 'we believe in...' so that we give ourselves to each other as we give ourselves to God. This, of course, is also the note of covenant. Though Baptists do not usually say the Nicene Creed in their worship, covenant-renewal is a truly apt place to do so.

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

'I am about to do a new thing'

The keynote theme of covenant is summed up in Isaiah 43:16-19: 'Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, 'I am about to do a new thing.'" This notion, of an endlessly creative, utterly generous, life-giving, covenant-making God, lies at the heart of our faith, not least because it lies at the heart of the story of God and his people. Bible studies or sermons on covenant should then be arenas in which God's people today can hear this keynote theme afresh.

The importance of context

In what follows, we suggest, and briefly comment upon several **key texts** and themes which take this basic covenantal

conviction and reform it so that it can again transform the life of God's people, the Church. These can be used to form the basis of bible studies or a series of sermons in preparation for the Covenant Service. Simply rehearsing the 'old, old stories' will not do.

Questions must be asked today about the shape that covenant faithfulness and obedience will take for Baptist Christians at the dawn of a new millennium. And we must not be surprised when our changing context leads us to detect that God is doing a 'new thing' among us. If we do not engage in such a process, then we run the risk of becoming servants of the letter 'chiselled on stone tablets' rather than of the Spirit who brings freedom (see 2 Corinthians 3:7-18).

Selected texts and themes for Bible studies and/or sermon series

The following texts and themes could usefully be used as a sermon series running up to the Covenant Service itself, or as the basis for a series of bible studies, exploring the dimensions of the covenant concept within the scriptures.

1 *Covenant: The Basic Shape*

The foundational Old Testament chapters that provide us with the clearest insight into the overall dimensions of the covenant is Exodus 20-24. Here we find many of the central ideas outlined above. For example:

◆ God's gracious initiative: note the way that the giving of the ten commandments is

continued overleaf

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

continued from previous page

set in the context of God's liberating activity in Exodus 20:2. These chapters in Exodus presuppose deliverance from Egypt.

◆ The response of God's people in love, obedience and worship: this is the focus of the ten commandments and the other the obligations laid upon the people in Exodus 20-23 and in the covenant ratification ceremony in Exodus 24. Central to it all is the invitation to love God alone (Exodus 20:1-7) and to encounter God (Exodus 24:9-11, 15-18).

◆ The community aspect of covenant: the second half of the ten commandments (Exodus 20:8-17) deal with the crucial question of how God's people now learn to live with each other and with strangers. Note how the Israelites are commanded to treat others in the way that God has first treated them (see Exodus 22:21-27; 23:9). In other words the renewed *vertical* relationship has direct *horizontal* implications, by offering the possibility of living differently as neighbours.

◆ Loyalty to the one God: this point emerges at Exodus 20:3-6, 23; 22:20; 23:23-33. Acceptance of the covenant includes rejection of all other loyalties.

Consideration of such a passage could easily form the basis for reflection on our own understanding of covenant, and our identity as God's people. It would also work well as the basis for initial planning of the Covenant Service, and consideration of the material provided in this booklet. Other relevant texts: see the story of the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:1-17 and the covenant renewal ceremony described in Exodus 34:10-28 (originally a parallel story to chapters 20-24).

2 'Never Again':

The Covenant with Noah

The danger with covenant language is that it can easily become restricted to issues of church, faith, religious observance and the like. It is therefore worthwhile using Genesis 9:1-17 to remind ourselves that the first covenant in the Bible is made with the whole of creation. In short, in the words 'never again' we see that **God's primary commitment is to the world**, not the Church. This passage speaks of God's reliability and goodness in bringing order out of chaos once again. Such a passage

will naturally lend itself to reflections on such themes as environmental responsibility; the use and abuse of the earth's resources and, in the light of Genesis 10, issues of conflict and division.

Other relevant texts: The flood-traditions, and the associated theme of God's covenant with the whole earth, are used elsewhere in the Bible. For example, Isaiah 54:9-17 offers comfort to Israel in the light of God's eternal covenant of peace. When reading such Isaiah texts, we should never forget that Israel's salvation is for the sake of the whole world (see Isaiah 42:5-9; 45:18-23). See also Colossians 1:15-20, where God makes peace with everything on earth and in heaven through the cross.

3 Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of Covenant

Deuteronomy 10:12-22 is perhaps the clearest passage treating this relationship, one in which covenant faithfulness to God (ie, what the Lord your God requires of you, 10:12) is equated with **doing justice**. This passage takes up traditional covenant language, including allusions to the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, and boldly states that Israel will fulfil her obligations if she 'loves the stranger'. In so doing, Israel will reflect the character of God 'who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice' (10:17-18). Inevitably such a passage raises questions as to how we fulfil our covenant obligations as God's people today. The material for the Covenant Service suggests that the *Five Core Values for a Gospel People* document may offer to Baptists a benchmark for covenant obedience today.

Other relevant texts: The prophetic critique of Israel's covenant disobedience is often framed in terms of the failure to do justice. See for example Isaiah 56:1-8; 58:6-14; Micah 6:3-8; Amos 2:6-11.

1 Corinthians 11:17-33 is also a good example of this relationship: celebration of the new covenant in Christ is not truly possible without 'discerning the body' (11:29), a reference to the need for unity across the social, racial and cultural divisions in the Corinthian church.

4 'The more they went from me': Disloyalty and Love

Hosea is the great prophet of covenant relationship, exploring, through the metaphor

of the marital bond, the themes of Israel's disloyalty to her God and Yahweh's passionate commitment to his people. Hosea 11:1-11 is the most poignant and graphic presentation of this theme. Israel's departure from her God is only hinted at in 11:2, referring to sacrificing to idols. This perhaps invites us to ask questions about the extent of our idolatry and unfaithfulness. **Where do our true allegiances lie?** What have we become blind to? To what extent do we prefer living in slavery? How far are we from our true home? The Covenant Service material rightly begins with confession and this true 'lament', though painful, should always precede the recognition that God's covenant faithfulness and love is enduring.

Other relevant texts: Isaiah 42:14-17 contains similar ideas and Isaiah 44:9-23 is a more sustained polemic against idolatry. But equally interesting are those New Testament passages where the language of covenant loyalty (especially the prayer of Deuteronomy 6:4) is reshaped in the light of the Lordship of Christ: 1 Corinthians 8:1-7 is the best example of this. See also other examples of the call for Christians to abandon former loyalties in favour of their new life in Christ (Galatians 5:13-6:10; Ephesians 4:17-32; Colossians 3:1-17).

5 Covenant Renewal

Jeremiah 31:31-34 is a key text in any understanding of the biblical notion of covenant. It stands as a bridge between Old and New Testaments by introducing the notion of the 'new covenant' – a covenant that stands in continuity with what has gone before, but has been shaped by new circumstances. Christians, of course, claim that the coming of Christ, the new Moses, the Davidic King, the seed of Abraham, indelibly alters the shape of God's covenant with his people and the world. Our knowledge of God assumes new dimensions because of our knowledge of Christ. The question is, however, should this process of covenant renewal still continue? The uniqueness of Christ as 'God manifest in the flesh', is clear but there is still a need for God's people to continually detect the new thing that God is doing in their midst. Jeremiah reminds us that a renewing of our covenant commitment to God, whether we be Jews in exile, or Baptist Christians in a

post-Christian society, involves us in a commitment to God's radically new future, that journey of faith and faithfulness to that place where we all, from greatest to least, shall know the Lord.

Other relevant texts: The 'new covenant' theme is developed in several ways in the New Testament. In Hebrews (especially 8:8-13, 9:15-22, 10:16-17) it is used christologically to argue for the supremacy of Christ. In the Last Supper narratives (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25), Jesus' death is seen as the event which establishes a new covenantal relationship. In 2 Corinthians 3:12-18, Paul asserts that the new covenant in Christ is nothing less than the full revelation of God's glory to the Church.

6 New Covenant

In the New Testament the covenant theme takes on a radically new and rich meaning because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The mystery of this new covenant is celebrated according to the example shown by Jesus through the sharing of bread and wine.

It is radically new because it is not just about God relating to people through holy places and representative people, but about God embracing human form in the person of Jesus.

Jesus, expressed covenant love in the way that he related day by day, giving to us a model for our own relationships.

In the story of the foot washing (John 13:1-7), he challenges us to learn again how to give generously and receive graciously in our dealings with others.

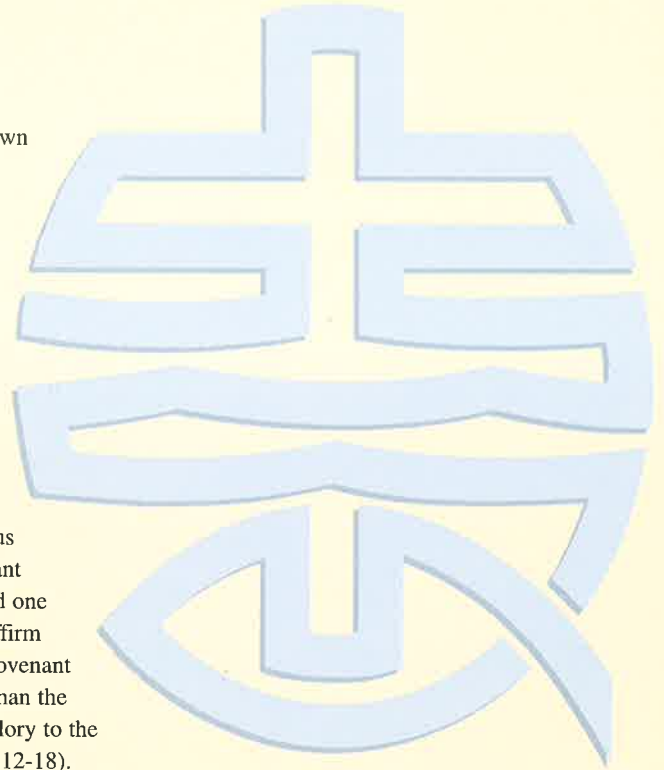
In the story of the great feast (Luke 14:15-24), we learn better late than never that those on the fringes and margins of our lives are also a part God's family and have a place at the table.

In the story of the rich young ruler, (Matthew 19:16-30), Jesus invites us to look truth in the face as we discover what obstructs our relationships with each other and with God.

In the story of the anointing of Jesus, (John 12) his acceptance and affirmation of Mary's prophetic action, exposes the hypocrisy of the disciples in their apparent concern for the poor which was actually

a smokescreen for their own inability to reach out to Jesus and declare their love.

The full significance of these Gospel encounters has become clear with the resurrection and activity of the Spirit across two millennia. We are able more clearly to see how Jesus' death invites us all into a dynamic covenant relationship with God and one another. So we want to affirm with Paul that the 'new covenant in Christ is nothing less than the full revelation of God's glory to the Church' (2 Corinthians 3:12-18).



MUSICAL RESOURCES

Here is a suggested list of hymns and songs which may help you in planning your Service. If you think it appropriate to use an unfamiliar song, we suggest that you teach it in the weeks before the Act of Covenant Service, ideally alongside the suggested Sermon series detailed under 'Selected Texts and Themes for Bible Studies / Sermon Series' on the opposite page.

After confession

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| A General Confession | <i>Baptist Praise & Worship</i> 641 |
| Before the throne of God | <i>Hymns for Today's Churches</i> 453 |
| Oh, the mercy of God | <i>Songs of Fellowship</i> 958 |

Serving God

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Brother Sister let me serve you | <i>Baptist Praise & Worship</i> 473 |
| Jesus Christ is waiting | <i>Baptist Praise & Worship</i> 534 |
| Lord Jesus Christ | <i>Baptist Praise & Worship</i> 444 |
| From heaven you came | <i>Baptist Praise & Worship</i> 529 |
| I the Lord of sea and sky | <i>New Mission Praise</i> 59 |
| One is the body | <i>Let's Praise</i> 2, 383 |
| Will you come and follow me | <i>Baptist Praise & Worship</i> 363 |

Responding to God in mission

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Far and Near | <i>Songs of Fellowship</i> 709 |
| Filled with the Spirit's power | <i>Hymns for Today's Churches</i> 233 |
| Forth in the peace | <i>Baptist Praise & Worship</i> 607 |
| Men of Faith – Women of the Truth | <i>Songs of Fellowship</i> 921 |
| Missionary God | <i>Baptist Praise & Worship</i> 447 |
| Send me Lord (thuma mina) | <i>Sing Glory</i> 694 |
| Tell all the world of Jesus | <i>Baptist Praise & Worship</i> 582 |
| There is a louder shout | <i>Songs of Fellowship</i> 1034 |

COVENANT

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Further copies of this booklet can be obtained from the Publications Department at

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