

'Covenant of trust' for Baptist ministers deals with ethics_111504

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For Texas Baptist Communications

SAN ANTONIO-Ethical failures by Christians are more about breaking trust and shattering relationships than simply breaking rules, Texas Baptist leaders believe.

That is why, two years after messengers to the Baptist General Convention of Texas annual meeting asked for a code of ethics for Baptist ministers, they got a "Covenant of Trust" instead, explained Phil Christopher, chairman of the committee that drafted the covenant.

"We tried to be faithful to the intent and spirit of the 2002 motion," Christopher, pastor of First Baptist Church in Abilene, told participants in a ministerial ethics breakout session at the BGCT annual meeting.

"We spent a lot of time talking about 'code' versus 'covenant,' and the consensus was that 'covenant' is more consistent with the Baptist way of thinking about things," he noted.

Some Texas Baptists might have expected “a checklist of thou-shalt-nots,” added committee member Bill Tillman, who teaches ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology.

“That is appropriate in the business world, where the main concern is to control external behavior. But the biblical model is about dealing with the spiritual and internal failures that cause the 'bad' actions.”

The committee's 29-page report, “Ministerial Ethics: A Covenant of Trust” is not a ready-made, one-size-fits-all document, Christopher stressed.

“We have tried to identify the theological, biblical, behavioral and practical issues that need to be considered,” he said. “Any congregation can take this material and find enough to begin the conversation to develop what is appropriate for their situation.

“Some folks may think 'covenant' is too 'churchy' a term, but we feel it is a most appropriate term, because we approach this from a 'churchy' perspective, since ethical failure within the church destroys the church. And as a pastor, I am different from a doctor or a lawyer, because I don't have clients, and the personnel committee is a lot more than just my boss.”

The committee also heavily stressed that, while the title speaks to ministers, the principles apply to all Christians.

The doctrine of the priesthood of the believer logically makes all Baptist believers ministers, and the agreement between professional/paid staff and the congregation entails responsibilities that run both ways, they emphasized.

“Following Jesus does not mean one thing for vocational ministers and something less for laity,” Christopher said.

The report includes three subsections—ministerial integrity, the stewardship

of power and the biblical concept of covenant, as well as supporting sections on “call,” relationships, stewardship of time, health, economic responsibilities, sexual conduct and community involvement.

A three-page summary reframes the main points and “could be handed out to a personnel committee or a group of deacons because we know not too many people will read all 29-pages,” Tillman said.

“We want very much for this to be something useful and not just another report that never makes a difference.”

Ideally, the resulting covenant “will guard against moral failures and help restore relationships when moral failures occur,” Christopher added.

Trust is the lynchpin of the report, because Christian fellowship is based on being able to trust each other, he said.

“People can disagree with an application I draw from Scripture, and we can split our votes on how to allocate the budget and still be the church,” Christopher said.

“But if I do something that breaks trust so they can't have confidence in my integrity, we have failed.”

The covenant still resonates with “code-type language,” just as the Old Testament talks of God's covenants with Israel that resulted in specific standards of behavior. The summary has a suggested eight-point “pledge” from the minister and a suggested eight-point list of responsibilities for the church.

“I recently went with a member of my church to his Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to celebrate his 25th anniversary of being sober, and what I experienced there made me want to bring it back to my church,” Christopher concluded.

“And I made a connection between their 12-step program and what this committee has been working on. I was particularly struck by the confession that abuse of alcohol resulted in their lives getting out of control. They don't go into specifics about how that loss of control worked out. They are confessing in a covenant situation.”

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