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Title: "The OIC Covenant of Membership"

Key verse: Hebrews 10:24 (NASB) – "And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds."

Good morning. Happy Anniversary, OIC! Today we celebrate 51 years since our church held its first worship service back on October 13, 1974.

Before I begin my message today, I would like to tell you a little bit about the history of Osaka International Church, and something about my own history as well. You might say that OIC's history began at the 1970 World Exposition in Osaka. At the exposition, some Japanese Christians hosted a "Christian Pavilion." Many foreign Christians visited that spot and asked if there was an English-speaking church in Osaka where they could worship. The answer was No. Back in the 1970's, there was no English-speaking church in the Osaka area. A Japanese pastor named Peter Okayama heard this plea by their Christian brothers and sisters. He and another man, Tsugio Saito, desired to give expatriate Christians in Osaka a place to worship and fellowship in English. They visited Pastor Okayama's friend in the United States named Jack Marshall to share this vision with him. Jack had been a missionary in Japan and had experience pastoring two English-speaking churches in Kanto for a short time. Pastor Jack was excited by this vision. After a visit to Osaka and after much prayer, he accepted the call to pastor this new international congregation. In 1974, Jack and his wife Geri moved here, and on October 13 of that year, the first worship service was held. That took place at the Royal Hotel, which provided a meeting room for them. The first hymn sung was "To God be the Glory," which we sang today.

It was in 1992, the same year that Jack Marshall retired as pastor of OIC, that I first visited Osaka International Church. In those days, our worship services were being held in the Miyako Hotel. I have here a collection of Sunday bulletins from the 1990's and 2000's, and you can see two of the bulletins on the screen over here. In the early 1990's, our bulletins featured a photo of the Miyako Hotel along with two Bible passages: Ephesians 2:19 and Ephesians 5:19-20.

Let's read Ephesians 2:19 (NKJV) – "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

That verse really touches me because when I first came to Osaka, I did feel like a stranger and foreigner in this city, and I did find a church home with the people of God at OIC.

When I first came to Osaka, I was quite starved for Christian fellowship. I had done quite a bit of traveling abroad and I had also done some missionary work in a remote corner of Japan. I was eager to settle down in Osaka and I came here and found a job teaching English in a high school. At that time, there were three English-speaking churches in Osaka prefecture, and I visited all three of them during my first couple of years in Osaka. But it was at Osaka International Church where I felt most at home. What I found at OIC was similar to what I found when I visited various churches during my world travels. What I had found so remarkable during my trip around the world was that I could find like-minded people wherever I went because in the churches that I visited, I found brothers and sisters with the same faith and the same values as myself. Even across denominations. Among evangelicals who stand on the Word of God and on the fundamental Christian doctrines, such as those

outlined in the Nicene Creed and in our church's Statement of Faith, there is far more that we agree on than disagree on despite denominational differences. I loved what I saw at OIC: a church that was thoroughly evangelical in its doctrine, but broad-minded in accepting fellow Christians from various denominations.

I would like to read for you the opening words of our church constitution: "Preamble: Whereas a group of English-speaking Protestant Christians resident in the Osaka area, believing it to be the will of God that the followers of Jesus Christ associate themselves in fellowship for mutual encouragement, for public worship and for active service, did band themselves together and organize the Osaka International Church, ..."

The founders of our church believed it to be God's will that followers of Jesus Christ should associate together for three main purposes: mutual encouragement, public worship, and active service. Last year, I delivered the sermon on our anniversary Sunday and I outlined for you these three main features of church life that our founders considered so important: mutual encouragement, public worship, and active service.

This year, for today's message, I would like to focus on another portion of our church constitution: the Covenant of membership that new members of OIC are expected to pledge to follow. A few months ago, we had a ceremony welcoming some new church members – if you were here, you may have seen them here on the stage reciting this Covenant. We may soon be having another ceremony to welcome some more new members. So, I thought that today would be a good time for all of us to take a look at our covenant of membership. In addition to this Covenant, our constitution also contains wording for a Congregational response, where the current members of the congregation pledge to support the new members. Today, I would like to look at both the Covenant of membership and the Congregational response. Long-time members can be reminded of the covenant pledge they took long ago and the congregational response they make whenever new members are welcomed into our fellowship. New members and prospective members may learn in detail what the expectations of church membership are at OIC. This covenant is a heritage that the founders of our church have passed on to us, and we would all do well to reflect on these expectations of church membership.

Let me read our church's covenant of membership as stated in Article 3 of our church constitution:

"Being thankful for God's abundant goodness and for His great gift of salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord, I hereby covenant to seek to know and to do His will and to promote as far as I can the interests of Christ's Kingdom.

"Accepting Jesus Christ and His teaching as my supreme standard of faith, and the Bible as God's progressive revelation of Himself to man, I seek fellowship with all who devoutly love the Lord Jesus Christ and accept His standard of teaching and conduct as set forth in the New Testament.

"Realizing that the success of the church depends upon the consecration of its individual membership, I covenant to attend its services, to contribute in its support, to labor to maintain its peace and harmony and in every way to promote its temporal and spiritual welfare."

And then the members of the congregation are supposed to make the following response:

Congregational response:

"We, the members of Osaka international Church family, welcome you to our fellowship. We promise to pray for you and to aid you as we are able. May God grant that, loving and being loved, serving and being served, blessing and being blessed, we may be prepared, while we dwell on earth, for the perfect fellowship of the saints in heaven."

Let us now look in detail at each phrase of the Covenant of membership.

**Being thankful for God's abundant goodness and for His great gift of salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord, ...**

*Being thankful for God's abundant goodness.* God is abundantly good in providing us our basic needs, and oftentimes more than our basic needs. Psalm 100:4-5 – “<sup>4</sup>Enter His gates with thanksgiving And His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him, bless His name. <sup>5</sup>For the Lord is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting And His faithfulness to all generations.”

**Being thankful ... for God's great gift of salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord, ...**

God created mankind to enjoy fellowship with Him. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and fell into sin, breaking mankind's relationship with God. But God provided the way of salvation and the restoration of our relationship with our Creator – that is through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross for us. The early apostles declared that we can be saved only through the name of Jesus Christ – that is the message of the Christian church. Acts 4:12 – “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.” John 3:16-17 – “<sup>16</sup>For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”

**Being thankful for God's abundant goodness and for His great gift of salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord, I hereby covenant to ...**

Here is the word “covenant.” What is “a covenant”? Let me quote a definition of that word in the *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*:

**Covenant.** Arrangement between two parties involving mutual obligations ... Covenant is one of the central themes of the Bible, where some covenants are between human beings, others between God and human beings. ...

Covenant is thus an interpersonal framework of trust, responsibilities, and benefits, with broad application to almost every human relationship from personal friendship to international trade agreements. In Scripture covenant is also the most comprehensive concept covering an individual's relationship to God.<sup>1</sup>

In Scripture, you find this concept frequently, and most of the time it refers to our relationship to God. But in today's message, we are looking at a covenant made between human beings, between brothers and sisters in Christ in the local church. It is important that fellow Christians in a local area join together in a church fellowship. Many churches have a “church covenant” that members are expected to agree to in order to become members of the church. As we read a moment ago, a covenant is an “arrangement between two parties involving mutual obligations.” Mutual obligations. And a covenant is “an interpersonal framework of trust, responsibilities, and benefits.” Trust ... responsibilities ... benefits. Keep those thoughts in mind as we look at the various parts of the OIC covenant of membership.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Covenant,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 530–531.

**I hereby covenant to seek to know and to do His will and to promote as far as I can the interests of Christ's Kingdom.**

The first two things that we pledge to do as members of this church is *to seek to know and to do God's will ... and to promote as far as we can the interests of Christ's Kingdom.*

Seek to know and to do God's will. In order to know God's will, you need to find out what it is. The best way to do that is to read God's Word, the Bible, or hear it preached at church in sermons and Bible studies. Many people seek to know what God's will is in some specific area of their own lives – whether to take this job or that job, whether to marry this person or that person. While that is important to know at particular moments in your life, most of God's will for any of us is contained here in the Bible describing God's basic standards of behavior.

I have a wonderful little book by John MacArthur entitled *Found: God's Will*. He outlines five things from the Scripture that are clearly God's will for His people. Here are those five principles: **it is God's will** that we **be saved** (1 Timothy 2:3-4), **be sanctified** (1 Thes. 4:3-4), **be Spirit-filled** (be filled with the Holy Spirit, Ephesians 5:17-18), **be submissive** to proper authority (1 Peter 2:13-15), and **be suffering** (be willing to suffer as a Christian, if necessary, 1 Peter 4:19). If you look up those verses, you will see that each one says this is God's will for us. This is not the entirety of God's will, but this is the basic foundation. If you are following these five principles, you will be doing well. If you would like to learn more about what the Bible says about God's will, I suggest you look at the sermon I did on this topic in June 2023 or look for John MacArthur's book online.

And please remember what I said when I spoke on the Epistle of James, chapter 1, a few months ago. James 1:22 – “But prove yourselves **doers of the word**, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.” Know and Do what God's Word says.

**I hereby covenant to seek to know and to do His will and to promote as far as I can the interests of Christ's Kingdom.**

*To promote as far as I can the interests of Christ's Kingdom.* As I was reading the church covenant last week, I noticed that this phrase is not what I am accustomed to hearing when we talk about the Kingdom of Christ or the Kingdom of God. It says: *To promote the interests of Christ's Kingdom.* “The interests” – well, I know that countries and governments have “interests,” their own national interests, which they work hard to achieve. The Kingdom of God has interests: that human beings would turn from their rebellious ways and restore their relationship with their Creator. That is why God sent His son Jesus Christ to this earth: to provide the way of salvation for us and to usher in His Kingdom. He then told us in Matthew 28:18-20 to make disciples of all nations. We Christians are citizens of heaven, says Philippians 3:20, and in 2 Corinthians 5:20 we Christians are told that we are “ambassadors for Christ.” It is our responsibility to represent our Lord Jesus Christ to the world and to share the good news of the Gospel with them.

If you would like to hear more about the Kingdom of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I invite you to join us at 9:00am next week for our Christian Education Hour. We are scheduled to watch a video on that very topic next week.

**Accepting Jesus Christ and His teaching as my supreme standard of faith, and the Bible as God's progressive revelation of Himself to man, ...**

Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Do you accept His teaching as your supreme standard of faith? Do you accept the Bible as God's revelation of Himself to mankind? If you call yourself a "Christian," then you have identified yourself as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ – you are what we call a "disciple" of Christ. A "disciple" is defined as being a follower of a particular teaching and/or of a particular teacher. In our case, our teacher is Jesus Christ. Here in the pages of the New Testament, we have the essentials of His teaching recorded in the Gospels and further elaborated upon in the letters that the apostles wrote. Have you accepted this teaching as your supreme standard of faith? That is what being a "Christian" is all about. Following the path of faith and repentance, obeying the teachings set forth in the Scriptures.

Jesus gave his "Great Commission" to His followers in Matthew 28:19-20 – "<sup>19</sup>Go therefore and **make disciples** of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>**teaching them to observe all that I commanded you**; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Make disciples. Baptize them. And teach them everything Christ has taught them. We should be following everything He taught, everything the apostles wrote down for us in the New Testament.

We say that the Bible is "God's progressive revelation of Himself to man." You can learn some things about God as creator just by looking at this marvelous world around us. But we need to have further revelation directly from God Himself if we are to really know Him. That is what the Bible is: His revelation of Himself to us. At the beginning, God revealed a few important things, and as time progressed during the lifetimes of Noah and Abraham and Moses and David and the prophets, more information was being revealed. That is what we call "progressive revelation" – He reveals more and more about Himself to us as time moves forward. The Bible is now in its final form, in the Old and New Testaments.

**Accepting Jesus Christ and His teaching as my supreme standard of faith, and the Bible as God's progressive revelation of Himself to man,**  
**I seek fellowship with all who devoutly love the Lord Jesus Christ and accept His standard of teaching and conduct as set forth in the New Testament.**

We seek fellowship with fellow Christians. This is important. Let me share with you a verse that I memorized when I was a college student and which has been special to me ever since. Hebrews 10:24-25 – "And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup>not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

We need to assemble together. We ought to be encouraging one another. We ought to "stimulate one another to love and good deeds."

I wish I could say more, but we must move on with our look at our church covenant.

**Realizing that the success of the church depends upon the consecration of its individual membership, ...**

*Consecration.* This word is related to the words “sacred” and “sanctify” and “make holy.” To be holy, to be consecrated, is to be “set apart” for God’s purposes. That’s what “holy” means. We are now separated from the world and its corruptions. We are set apart from the world and we are consecrated to God, devoting ourselves to living God-honoring lives.

*The success of the church depends upon the consecration of its members.* Well, the success of the church also depends upon the Holy Spirit ... letting the Holy Spirit perform His work of transformation in our lives. If we aren’t living God-honoring, Spirit-filled lives, the spiritual life of the church is hampered and we will not make progress in personal discipleship nor in evangelism, the two crucial tasks of the Christian church.

**Realizing that the success of the church depends upon the consecration of its individual membership, I covenant ...**

- **to attend its services,**
- **to contribute in its support,**
- **to labor to maintain its peace and harmony, and**
- **in every way to promote its temporal and spiritual welfare.**

*Attend our church’s services.* You can hardly be encouraging one another and hearing the teaching of the church if you are not attending the services – mainly that means the Sunday service though it could include other meetings of the church, such as Bible studies and small groups. I realize that during some seasons of a person’s life, you might have to be absent from the services. I know in my own life, when I was in Japanese language school Monday to Friday, I had to work on Saturdays and Sundays and I often missed the church service – but I attended the Wednesday Bible Study and some special events. I kept in contact with my brothers and sisters. Please be sure to attend church regularly and participate in the fellowship life of the church.

We should *contribute in the support of our church* – that’s financial support, mainly, but it can also mean contributing your time by volunteering for one of the ministries at church. You see the announcement every Sunday asking for volunteers for several ministries at OIC that need more workers. Please consider that announcement and pray about volunteering for one of those ministries.

We should labor to *maintain OIC’s peace and harmony*. With any group of human beings, you will find some personality conflicts and sinful attitudes. As Christians, we should seek to transcend these negative impulses and maintain harmonious relationships. Please recall some of the things I said in my sermons a few weeks ago on James chapters 3 and 4 about quarrels and conflicts in church and the ways to solve them – the solution begins by searching your heart and cleaning it up, since that influences what comes out in your attitudes and your speech. And James 5:16a – “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed...” Spiritual, physical, and emotional healing can be found when you confess to your brother or sister that you have sinned against them in speech or action, and then when you pray for one another.

And in the last line of our church covenant, *we pledge in every way to promote OIC’s temporal and spiritual welfare*. Promote its temporal welfare by contributing financially and

by your volunteer activity in one of the ministries here. Promote its spiritual welfare by living up to the high standards that Christ calls us to and by encouraging your brothers and sisters to do the same ... and by reaching out and sharing the gospel to the people outside the church so that they, too, can be included in the family of God.

I have come to the end of my commentary on the Covenant of membership of Osaka International Church. Let me read again the Congregational response:

“We, the members of Osaka international Church family, welcome you to our fellowship. We promise to pray for you and to aid you as we are able. May God grant that, loving and being loved, serving and being served, blessing and being blessed, we may be prepared, while we dwell on earth, for the perfect fellowship of the saints in heaven.”

When new members are inducted into our church fellowship, we current members of OIC pledge to welcome them, to pray for them, and to help our new brothers and sisters when they have a need. In the last phrase here, we read that while we dwell here in earth, we are being prepared for the perfect fellowship of the saints in heaven. We live life imperfectly here, but we should be striving daily to grow into the likeness of Jesus.

In today’s message, we have taken a look at our church’s Covenant of membership and I would like all of my brothers and sisters at Osaka International Church to consider these ideals of what it means to be a member of the local church and to strive to live by these ideals.

Let me close today’s message with a passage that I think is a nice summary of life in the Christian community. Colossians 3:12-14 (NASB) – “So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; <sup>13</sup> bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so must you do also. <sup>14</sup> In addition to all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.”