

The Shepherding Movement Comes of Age

By Lynn and Sarah Leslie

There is a new twist in the old Sheperding Movement and it is coming soon to your church, if it hasn't already. This new twist is presented to pastors wrapped in silver gilding, and looks quite reasonable and rational. Should a discerning pastor, or one who steeps himself in the Word, take a second look, the gild disappears and in its place will appear rust and corrosion.

Across the country, parishioners are now being challenged to take oaths, perform vows and sign covenants. These things would have been unheard of in generations past for one simple reason. These things used to be forbidden, or only permitted under the gravest of circumstances. A few decades ago churches founded their beliefs sturdily upon the rocks of historical creeds, documents that have withstood the test of time and human whim, and which have imparted to each new generation an understanding of the major tenets of the Gospel faith. Now, in our latter days of dumbed-down Christianity, a minimal number of people in the pews know the creeds, have studied them, or even know about them!

And it is no wonder. A few years ago a pastor told a particularly grievous story. He had attended a meeting with pastors from his conservative denomination. At the meeting the men were handed paper and pencils and asked to come up with their own creeds. This pastor was duly horrified! Courageously he stood to speak against this. The great historical creeds of Christianity, he stated, were wrought in the fires of persecution, under great seriousness and solemn efforts to preserve the Truth of the Gospel. Wasn't this a frivolous, touchy-feely kind of exercise? Should a handful of men in an auditorium even dare to presume to be able to come up with such a ponderous document in a few short minutes with paper and pencil, he asked. His protest, sadly, was greeted with scorn and ridicule.

The New Covenants

Churches which have come under the influence of Rick Warren, Lyle Schaller, Bob Buford, or any of the other church growth business-model experts, have undergone profound changes. They will have adopted a Mission

Statement, Core Values, and Vision, often through a "consensus" and "dialogue" technique. In order to become a member of these churches, parishioners are required to sign an oath to uphold their church's covenant. The word "covenant," which used to have biblical significance, is now applied liberally to this new church structure, apparently to give it credibility.

These churches post their covenants on the internet, presumably so that "seekers" will read about their church. Each church which has adopted this new model of membership is exactly like each other church. They are all cut from the same mold. "New Age" Unitarian churches have adopted the same plan as Presbyterian Reformed churches. Baptist, Assembly of God, Nazarene.... the list could go on and on. The new church structure is cross-denominational. Everybody's plan looks exactly like everybody else's plan, even though some churches have been led to believe that they had reached their own "original" or "grassroots" plan. This new plan came from on high, and it was carefully calculated to lure pastors and leaders into its new system of church governance.

This emergent church is hierarchical in nature. It is a top-down management structure, resembling the old shepherding models of the 1970s. There is an over-emphasis on "leaders" and "leadership" and "leadership potential." In many of these churches, leaders are given complete authority over the lives of those in their flocks.

The Valley Church Servant Leader Covenant is a typical model. The aspiring leader makes a commitment with the church:

As a servant of God in The Valley Church, I want to unite with my fellow servant leaders at this time to undertake commitments appropriate for leadership. These commitments are made in the first place between me and the Lord, and in the second place between me and this community. Realizing that I may fail at times to fully keep these commitments, I think it is important that I purpose in my heart and confirm publicly my desire to keep them. Although this covenant may be changed in coming years this is where we presently stand as a church.

A list of "Spiritual Commitments" includes a daily prayer life; regular time in God's Word; active involvement in a small group (usually a cell group); responding obediently to God's discipline; purposing to discover, develop and use spiritual gifts; living a moral life, maintaining a healthy family life; attending church services; tithing; and supporting the leadership. Most church covenants emphasize the word "all" or "everyone" in their statements such as "Everyone involved in a weekly or ongoing ministry" or "everyone involved in discipleship experience." No one is excepted.

Each church covenant includes a section pertaining to resolution of conflict. These examples are noteworthy in their extreme application of Matthew 18, in which the parishioner must agree to never speak "evil" of anyone or any leader in the church, including "negative" or "critical" statements about church policies or doctrines. Also, the conclusion of any dispute will be resolved by the leadership of the church, and the parishioner must agree beforehand to submit to their discipline.

Membership is described as the "gateway to leadership." Everyone is presumed a potential leader. Aspiring leaders must make additional commitments, usually called "responsibilities," which have to do with evangelism, promoting church programs, discipling others, agreeing to be held accountable, and undergoing periodic "continuing education."

There is a signature line and a date at the bottom of these covenants for people to sign, indicating their commitment to abide by this new church structure. Some churches require that their members sign the covenant yearly. Others only require it upon membership. Some churches require strict adherence to the oaths, and promise that they will hold the members accountable. Other churches leave wiggle room for people who fail. One church states: "While nothing is set in stone, nor do we track your fulfillment of the covenant items, this Covenant does give you an idea of the level of commitment we consider membership to be here." Some churches reveal that their covenants may change, although it is not specified whether the parishioners will be able to participate in this process, or be given a chance to resign the oath at that time.

The use of New Age terminology is often mixed with biblical-sounding language. One church explains why it is necessary for its parishioners to sign a "pledge": "...a pledge is a solemn promise (which is an indication of future excellence) characterized by deep thought. That is exactly the kind of spiritual practice I would have us engage in! To make a pledge is to enter into an agreement, and to agree is to be of one mind. A pledge holds

more potential than I ever realized.... Let us consider making and keeping agreements that express that harmony and oneness." Another church explains that their "collective consciousness on social issues" is "not enforced legalistically but members agree to embrace them...." Yet another church states that a "membership covenant implies a clear ownership of the core values, beliefs, vision, and mission that function as the DNA of congregational life embedded into every leader" for a "shared identity."

A few churches, which were originally founded upon a congregational model, give slightly more freedom to lay people in leadership and decision-making roles. However, this new church structure is markedly characterized by the demise of congregational forms of church governance. In fact, some churches have re-written their bylaws, and make them part of the actual church covenant which must be signed. In these cases the parishioner is then signing a legal contract as well as joining a church body.

ThatChurch! is probably the scariest example of the new covenant, found on a brief internet search. "Congregational members do not have the right to vote in business matters of the church....All governmental authority in the church shall be vested in the Director of Ministries, the Board of Directors, and the Leadership Team as set forth in the Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws of the Church." The leaders can prescribe that members take any courses of study at any time. Members are accepted into the church at the sole discretion of the "Director of Ministries" and must fulfill "responsibilities" such as "follow and support the leadership of this church as they follow the Lord." In exchange they are offered "rights and privileges" which include permission to attend worship services; entitlement to receive Christian teaching, personal pastoral care, and prayer support; and opportunities to grow in the Lord.

In an ominous revivification of the shepherding movement, ThatChurch!'s bylaws indicate, "Grounds for discipline will be determined by the leadership of the church." Many paragraphs later, after incredibly detailed explanations of how disciplinary functions will be carried out, it becomes evident that the church leaders retain the right to bar members from the "rights and privileges" listed earlier in their bylaws. But, it isn't over yet. Each member must consent in *advance* "to the exclusive jurisdiction of the church in resolving any matter involving church discipline." Further, there is an elaborate explanation of mediation/arbitration and "outcome" of such discipline, including agreeing to "specifically and expressly [waive] any right to sue in a civil court on any matter covered herein."

Rick Warren Driving the Church

Dr. Robert Klenck, an orthopedic surgeon, has been speaking out at conferences around the country about the origination of this new covenant agenda. He explains that Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*, has sold over a million copies and that over 150,000 pastors and church leaders have been trained in his model.¹ Rick Warren was mentored by Peter Drucker, a corporate management guru with strong ties to the New Age/New World Order. Drucker "influenced the start and growth of Saddleback Church."²

Drucker has dedicated much effort into bringing the church into conformance with the "systems" model of governance, which is known as Total Quality Management in the corporate world. In this model, parishioners are "customers." The focus shifts to "outcomes" which means that people will have to be held "accountable" for "performance." Certain rewards ("rights") and "responsibilities" accompany these outcomes, and a small group structure like cell groups is a perfect way to ensure that people are meeting these "outcomes." These "outcomes" or expectations are driven by people, not by the Lord or His Word. By implication, if one doesn't meet the "outcomes," there may be "penalties" such as the ones prescribed by ThatChurch!

According to Klenck there are rapidly developing networks for "21st century churches" and "best practice churches." These networks are databasing churches and parishioners. Chief among the organizations spearheading this change is the Leadership Network, which provides "technical assistance" for orchestrated "continuous" change in churches, fitting churches neatly into the business model.

Peter Drucker grew up under the influence of the German philosophies of the 1800s. His "systems" theories are based on "General Systems Theory" (GST) which is esoteric, derived from a merger of social Darwinism and eastern mysticism. GST believes that man is evolving to a higher-order. In order for this to occur, man must become unified and of one consciousness. Drucker developed the theory of a 3-legged stool – Corporate, State and "private sector" (Church). The first half of his long life (he is 94 years old) was devoted to merging Corporate and State into one "system." The second half of his life has been devoted to merging Church with Corporate, and Church with State into one comprehensive system. He has been wildly successful.

Drucker is a communitarian, which is a modern "communist" who has effectually distanced their views from the old communists. In his communitarian model of governance, the State is in reality the only leg of the stool. The Corporate and the Church subsume their identities

and comfortably merge with State into one comprehensive "system" of governance for mankind. Drucker's ideas gave rise to the faith-based institution movement of the last decade.

Indeed, it is noteworthy that the highest concentration of the new "covenant" style churches can be found in the faith-based arena. The federal bills in Washington that originally began dispersing funds to churches that were doing welfare reform, job training, etc. required that these churches exhibit "ecumenicity." Churches receiving federal dollars must be held "accountable." One significant way to achieve this goal is to transform the churches into the Corporate/State mode of governance, using the "systems" model.

It is not uncommon, therefore, to find that faith-based, government-financed "covenant" churches are requiring even more of their members. Members at one such church in Pennsylvania must participate in daily e-mails from the pastor, evening worship several nights a week, daily intercession activities, cell group activities, and up to 5 hours per week of "community service" in any of over a dozen state-funded, community-based "ministries." Churches like this one have become "centers" for State charity work. They then become "accountable" to the "State" for the monies that they receive. When one signs an oath to uphold the covenant of this type of church, they are also agreeing to uphold the State/Church relationship!

What Does God's Word Say?

Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil. (Matthew 5:33-37)

But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation. (James 5:12)

According to Webster's, a "covenant" is a "binding, and solemn agreement made by two or more individuals, parties, etc. do to or keep from doing a specified thing." Covenants can be legally binding contracts. "Covenant" can also mean "an agreement among members of a church to defend and maintain its doctrines, polity, faith, etc." Covenants are supposed to be irrevocable, un-

changing and binding on those who made it. It is the strongest expression of a relationship.

An "oath" is a "ritualistic declaration, typically based on an appeal to God or a god, or to some revered person or object, that one will speak the truth, keep a promise, remain faithful, etc." An oath, therefore, is a sworn promise to keep the terms of a covenant or agreement. The oath is a verbal statement or pledge to keep the covenant. Related to the word "oath" are the words "vow" and "pledge."

The issue of taking oaths came up a few years ago when the men of Promise Keepers were making seven promises. It is possible that PK broke the ground on this matter, desensitizing Christians to the whole idea of taking an oath. On the one hand, the "promises," like those of PK, seemed like 7 "suggestions" and trivialized the whole idea of keeping commandments. On the other hand, it is important to realize that in the spirit world, there is great significance to these matters. There are rituals that accompany these activities, and it is believed that curses accompany broken covenants or failure to keep an oath or vow. Pagans would invoke the name of a deity to set evil in motion. Secret societies such as freemasons require oaths. This explains one major reason why the Lord Himself would state the issue so strongly in His Sermon on the Mount.

Historically, Christians have agreed with these Scriptures and opposed oath-taking. These verses from Scripture were considered to be so vital for a Christian that at the time of the Reformation both the Anabaptist and Reformed branches of the church addressed them in their creeds. From the Reformed branch, from which arose churches such as Congregational, Lutheran, Anglican and Presbyterian, came the Westminster Confession of Faith, Article 22:

Of Lawful Oaths and Vows.

I. A lawful oath is a part of religious worship, wherein upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth or promiseth; and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he sweareth.

II. The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear, and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence; therefore to swear vainly or rashly by that glorious and dreadful name, or to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful, and to be abhorred. Yet, as, in matters of weight and moment, an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the New Testament, as well as under the Old, so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters ought to be taken.

III. Whosoever taketh an oath ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act, and therein to avouch nothing but what he is fully persuaded is the truth. Neither may any man bind himself by oath to any thing but what is good and just, and what he believeth so to be, and what he is able and resolved to perform. Yet it is a sin to refuse an oath touching any thing that is good and just, being imposed by lawful authority.

IV. An oath is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation or mental reservation. It can not oblige to sin; but in any thing not sinful, being taken, it binds to performance, although to a man's own hurt: nor is it to be violated, although made to heretics or infidels.

V. A vow is of the like nature with a promissory oath, and ought to be made with the like religious care, and to be performed with the like faithfulness.

VI. It is not to be made to any creature, but to God alone: and that it may be accepted, it is to be made voluntarily, out of faith and conscience of duty, in way of thankfulness for mercy received, or for obtaining of what we want; whereby we more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties, or to other things, so far and so long as they may fitly conduce thereunto.

VII. No man may vow to do any thing forbidden in the Word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded, or which is not in his own power, and for the performance of which he hath no promise or ability from God. In which respects, monastical vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience, are so far from being degrees of higher perfection, that they are superstitious and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself.

Especially note Sections VI and VII, in which oaths were to be voluntary, a personal matter of conscience, unto God alone, not contrary to the Word of God, and in utter dependence upon God to keep. Also of relevance is Article 20, Section II, which pertains to blind obedience, destruction of liberty of conscience, and loss of reason:

II. God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his Word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

The new oaths and covenants run counter to the historical Reformed church on many counts. Whereas previously the Ten Commandments would have been taught, now they are replaced by new church laws which are subjective and potentially heretical. Previously these churches would have taught that Christ won on the cross liberty from the laws of men, and that the conscience is subject to God alone. The Reformed church used to teach that man lives by faith, and through His strength man is able to keep His commands. Now a new structure has been erected, with man-made laws, and man-directed accountability.

The Anabaptist branch of the Church, from which came Baptists, the Pentecostals, and modern evangelicals, historically took a stronger stand and opposed taking oaths altogether. The Anabaptist beliefs can best be summarized by the Dordrecht Confession of Faith (1632):

XV. Of the Swearing of Oaths

Concerning the swearing of oaths we believe and confess that the Lord Christ has set aside and forbidden the same to His disciples, that they should not swear at all, but that yea should be yea, and nay, nay; from which we understand that all oaths, high and low, are forbidden, and that instead of them we are to confirm all our promises and obligations, yea, all our declarations and testimonies of any matter, only with our word yea, in that which is yea, and with nay, in that which is nay; yet, that we must always, in all matters, and with everyone, adhere to, keep, follow, and fulfill the same, as though we had confirmed it with a solemn oath. And if we do this, we trust that no one, not even the Magistracy itself, will have just reason to lay a greater burden on our mind and conscience. Matt. 5:34, 35; Jas. 5:12; II Cor. 1:17.

The Schleithheim Confession (1527), Article 7 states, in part:

Seventh. We are agreed as follows concerning the oath: The oath is a confirmation among those who are quarreling or making promises. In the Law it is commanded to be performed in God's Name, but only in truth, not falsely. Christ, who teaches the perfection of the Law, prohibits all swearing to His [followers], whether true or false,—neither by heaven, nor by the earth, nor by Jerusalem, nor by our head,—and that for the reason which He shortly thereafter gives, For you are not able to make one hair white or black. So you see it is for this reason that all swearing is forbidden: we cannot fulfill that which we promise when we swear, for we cannot change [even] the very least thing on us.

Even today the conservative Mennonites and Amish descendants of the original Anabaptists will not take an oath, but will instead “affirm.” Churches used to teach, even a generation ago, that any words that served no useful function should not be spoken, that it was wrong to “curse” (oaths, swear words), and that “minced oaths” were sinful (“Gosh,” “Gee,” “darn,” etc.). It used to be taught that even portions of oaths, such as “Well, I’ll be...” or “So help me...” were wrong to speak. In today’s loose climate of speech, action, and morality it is no wonder that oaths have now gained a foothold. Remember when a man’s word was “as good as gold”? Few remember or adhere to the old ways of integrity, honesty and forthrightness.

The Trouble With Taking Oaths

Shall men take an oath or make a promise that they have no intention of keeping? Shall they sign on to a covenant that they may break? Not only is this forbidden by Scripture, but in days past this would have been dishonorable and disgraceful act. One Christian writer, Paul Shirk, in his book, *Come Out of Her My People*, has expressed it well:

We...however much we swear, can never guarantee a course of action, therefore we say, “if the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that,” for we know not what may be on the morrow.

Our yes and no should represent the honest intentions of the heart and will, but above that we risk falling into condemnation (James 5:12) for our inability to perform an oath. Originally the oath was used to commit the will to the proper course of action; now, men that have the Spirit of Truth are to simply affirm it with a “yes” and stand by their word.³

Matthew Henry, in his *Commentaries*, on James 5:12, addressed this topic:

...those who swear commonly and profanely the name of God do hereby put Him upon the level with every common thing. Profane swearing was customary among the Jews. Some of the looser sort of those who were called Christians might be guilty also of this. But why above all things is swearing forbidden? Because it strikes most directly at the honor of God and throws contempt upon His name and authority. ...Let it suffice you to confirm or deny a thing, and stand to your word, and be true to it, so as to give no occasion for your being suspected of falsehood. Then you will be kept from the condemnation of backing what you say or promise by rash oaths, and from profaning the name of God to justify yourselves.

The new oaths and covenants put a pressure on church people—a pressure that comes, not from God but from man. Peer orientation, fear factors, and the demands to conform or meet expectations prevail. The focus is on self-mastery, not God-directed discipline. Some will do the bare minimum just to “get by.” For others, good deeds that were formerly done in secret, arising out of love and compassion, are now done openly and boldly so that leaders will see and approve.

This new “gospel” of “works” requires one to neglect the unseen duties of life. One must perform visible deeds in order to meet requirements of “accountability”—even to the detriment of their God-given responsibilities. Women will especially suffer under this odious system, developed by corporate businessmen and perpetuated by institutional church men. Caring for elderly parents, nursing babies, chasing toddlers, raising handicapped children, homeschooling, or other family-oriented personal deeds of self-sacrifice and love which are performed on a hourly basis every day of the week, will go unnoticed and unrewarded in this new “system.” Fulfilling the onerous requirements and obligations of these types of covenants will be well-nigh impossible for those who are elderly, infirm, or duty-bound to others. Should these churches establish two tiers of membership—one for the “do-ers” and the other for the “be-ers”? Or are those who are less able or unable to meet the stringent requirements unwelcome?

Indeed there is a certain elitism about the new church structure. Pastors who are true shepherds, quietly feeding their flocks on the hillsides of life, ministering to their births, deaths, illnesses and crises, can’t compete in this new system where everything is “purpose-driven.” This new style of church is for the Type-A personality who is “driven” by “results.” Everything is programmed according to modern business methods. The little church in the vale isn’t good enough anymore—everything has turned into a “volunteer mobilization unit.”

A Still Small Word

There may be a reason for the upsurge in oaths and covenants. It may have to do with the agenda of Peter Drucker and his management gurus who wish to transform the Church into the likeness of the Corporation and the State. Historically, “citizens were required to take an oath of fealty. Starting from the year 1066, every English male took an oath of allegiance to the King of England. When the Protestants had established their power in England in 1688, additional oaths were required denouncing the Pope’s authority and the doctrine of transubstantiation.”⁴ In other words, States have required oaths and the Churches, whenever or wherever they have reigned supremely, have required oaths.

Wherever the nationally established Christian religions have taken root they have tried to use religious oaths as a means to bind the wills and consciences of men to their own expediency and have used various methods to argue that Christ never meant what he plainly said concerning the taking of oaths.⁵

Oaths and covenants are a new form of legalism entering the church like a flood. They require more of us than Scripture requires. It is a horrible new form of bondage, accomplished in the name of a new church for the 21st century. This is a “transformation” not a “reformation.” It would return the church to the dark ages of oppressive State Church. This movement did not arise from God, but from the rapacious desires of evil men.

If you have been caught up in this whole extravaganza, and are marching in this parade, it is time to slow down, stop and reflect. If you have taken an oath to one of these new covenants, you can repent. The Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ does not require so much of us:

“The Lord do so to me, and more also,” is God’s form of Old Testament oaths—a binding of judgment upon the soul. From this shackle the Lord frees us when He asks us to “Swear not at all.” If free from condemnation, why should we invite the judgment by taking the oath? (S.F. Coffman)

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, Comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work. (2 Thess. 2:16-17)

Endnotes:

1. For solid documentation on Peter Drucker and his work with Rick Warren and others in the church growth movement, readers are referred to *Readings In the Dialectic: Papers Presented at The Institution for Authority Research Diaprax Conferences*, “How Diaprax Manifests Itself in the Church (Growth Movement),” Dr. Robert E. Klenc. This booklet is available for \$15 plus shipping from the Institution for Authority Research, Box 233, Herndon, KS 67739, iardeangotcher@yahoo.com.
2. [Http://www.fullydevoted.blogspot.com/2002_12_15_fullydevoted_archive.html](http://www.fullydevoted.blogspot.com/2002_12_15_fullydevoted_archive.html), p. 3.
3. *Come Out of Her My People* by Paul Shirk, page 164. This book, which is a scholarly apologetic work which effectively counters modern dominionist theology, is available from Discernment Ministries for \$11.00 plus postage.
4. *Ibid*, page 160.
5. *Ibid*, page 166.