

Convenant Service 2025

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] I want to ask you a question. What happens inside of you when you hear the phrase, terms and conditions?

In particular, what happens when you're online and you're trying to do something and suddenly it flashes up? Please read and tick the box that says I agree to these terms and conditions.

And you scroll down and down and down and down and down and down and down and down. And a document that looks about it's the length of the entire contents of Wikipedia and you tick that box. A few years ago, the Washington Post reported on a study of how we tend to respond. When we come across those online, please agree to terms and conditions.

It was an experiment. Open Wi-Fi was set up in a busy public area. Signs were put up all over the place and you could get free Wi-Fi.

[1 : 13] When connected, all the users or about to be users were presented with the said terms and conditions, which they had to tick the box before they could connect.

In that small print, as an experiment, they inserted what was referred to as a Herod clause. This meant that the free Wi-Fi was offered in exchange for full ownership of the user's firstborn child. And people just ticked and agreed. A survey found out that 58% of the population would rather read an instruction manual than a set of terms and conditions online.

12% said they'd rather read the phone book from cover to cover. Interestingly, in 2010, on April Fool's Day, so not an experiment, but just as a prank, in the UK, in one place, shoppers were tricked in a similar set up with free Wi-Fi and were tricked into signing away their souls.

Terms and conditions. Terms and conditions. Contracts. Keeping our part of the deal. Today's the day we're invited to join together in saying the covenant prayer.

[2 : 49] And we think about that theme of covenant. And as I said earlier on in the service, perhaps it's not a word that tends to find its way into everyday conversation that much.

But it's an important word. It's a word that means so much more than just a contract. A set of terms and conditions. The risk of oversimplifying, biblically, when we come across that word covenant, we need to think not in terms of terms and conditions, but we need to think in terms of a God who says, look, this is what I'm doing for you.

This is what I'm giving you. This is what I want you to have. I long for you to have. This is what I'm promising you. And what I ask is quite simply that you follow me.

To unpack that a little bit more, I just want to focus in on just a few words from that passage from Mark chapter 1 that Lorna read for us a moment ago.

Jesus says at the beginning of his ministry as it's recorded in Mark's gospel, repent and believe in the good news.

[4 : 18] Actually, what I want us to do is focus in not on even all of that sentence, but just on the first part of that sentence, where Jesus says, repent and.

See, the word repent, repentance, you've probably heard this said before. It sort of means stop, but it means something more dynamic than that.

It means change, change direction, turn around. But interestingly, when we look at that word in the New Testament, we notice a pattern when it comes up.

Because very often we find that the word is not presented in isolation. It's repent and something. Stop, change, and something. It's as though we need to understand that for repentance to make sense, or for the sort of response that God invites us to make sense, if we just look at what we're stopping doing, what we're changing from, we can miss the most important thing, which is not so much what we're changing from and leaving behind, but what we're walking into.

[5 : 38] Repent and. So Jesus doesn't just say repent. He says repent and believe in the good news. Stop doing that stuff.

Leave that behind and believe in this, because this is just amazing. This is so much bigger and better and fuller and wider and deeper and richer than anything else you're going to leave behind. Think of some other examples.

Think of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the people of God. The church was born. Acts chapter 2. People see all of these Christians receive the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit pours into people's hearts, and it begins to manifest in all sorts of amazing ways. People start to worship God. They're falling down. They're speaking in tongues, in multiple languages.

And quite understandably, who could blame them? The bystanders, the onlookers, say to Peter after he's preached a sermon, he says, you know, so what are we to do then? And Peter says, if you want some of this, repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[7 : 01] If the Holy Spirit is there, it's on the people. If you want some of that action, repent and be baptized, and you will receive the Holy Spirit.

You see, it doesn't stop at the point that you stop and leave behind certain things. No, that's not the end. It's the beginning. Repent and be baptized and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Well, in the next chapter in the book of Acts, we see Peter, again, Peter and John, they've ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit to a man who could not walk.

He can walk. He's been healed. And understandably, people around see this happen. This guy who's been sat there by the temple begging for years, and suddenly he's prayed for and he's healed.

And they say, what's going on? And Peter says, then repent and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.

[8 : 08] If you want the action, yeah, repent, repent, and this will happen. Most very often in our own lives, maybe we've been followers of Jesus, trying to follow Jesus, made all the failures along the way, but maybe for years we've been trying to do this.

We've been Christians. This is not new stuff to us, but we feel that we've run dry. We're burnt out. We're exhausted spiritually. We long for something new. You know, these words are just as much for us as they are for anybody.

Because we see in the book of Revelation, right at the end of the New Testament, as that revelation is given to John, and he writes to the different churches, one particular message that he gives in that book to the church in Ephesus, is he says, you know, you're a great church.

You're full of great, faithful Christians. But you've forgotten your first love. And it says you need to rekindle that first love. Come back to when you were first knew the transforming power of Jesus.

And it says this in Revelation 2, verse 5, repent and do the things you did at first. John Wesley knew that when you came to faith, you gave your life to Jesus, that wasn't the end of a process.

[9 : 39] It was just the beginning. That repentance, it doesn't just stand on its own. It's not just stopping doing certain things, but it's starting the new life in Christ, and it never ends.

And so Wesley wrote this. Bear in mind, this was written quite a few years ago. He said, yea, and when you have attained a measure of perfect love, when God has enabled you to love him with all your heart and with all your soul, think not of resting there.

That's impossible. Get this. He said, you cannot stand. Still. When we hear the words repent, stop, change, we need to hear the and, and what that means for us.

And sadly for so many, faith dries up. It gets static, because we've either forgotten about, or we've not been told that following Jesus is not just about a conversion.

It's about an ongoing, lifelong experience of that repent and knowing the ongoing power of God's Holy Spirit.

[10 : 58] You know, it's not a contract where we receive the forgiveness of Jesus and we say, thanks Jesus, I'll see you in heaven. But it's an ongoing life changing that never ends.

Go on being filled with God's Holy Spirit. Repent. And. And each of us is faced with the challenge of working out what that means for us, what that looks like for us, because it will be different for each and every one of us as we work out what it is that God wants us to do in our daily lives.

To keep on asking, what is that and for us? What direction is he calling us into? What is, what is he saying to us in this next stage of our lives every single day?

But you know, perhaps what's even more tragic is when people don't give Jesus a chance at all.

Because they look at the message of Christianity and they only think of the word repent.

And they only think of stuff that we've got to stop. I was saying that story last week of that teenager I met years ago when I was a youth worker. And I'd never forgotten the story when, you know, she said, I'm not a Christian.

[12:18] And I said, why aren't you a Christian? And she said, well, if you become a Christian, you can't do stuff. You see, repent is important.

There is the change. There is the turn. But as important is the and. That not so much what we're necessarily what we're being called to leave behind, but what we're being called to step into.

It's not just the stop. It's about the start. We'll share you one, one last story. Tamara, my wife, is a music teacher, freelance music teacher.

Before she did that, she spent six years working as a classroom teacher in primary schools. That was a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. I have permission to share the story I'm about to share with you, by the way.

Well, sort of. I think I do. As a classroom teacher, she taught across the different things that you have to teach, including sex education.

[13:31] to year five and six. And the first time she did this in this particular school, a letter went home to the parents and saying that we're going to be doing sex education next week and the children are going to be shown a video.

And if you want to know more about this before the lesson, then please just come and ask. Well, one particular parent did come and ask and asked if they could borrow the video. This was back in the day of VHS tapes.

It will give you an idea of how long ago this was. So, the mum took this tape home and watched it over the weekend. So, in case you're interested in what it was, in fact, you need to know in order for the story to make sense.

There was a scene in the video where there was a mum and dad and they got out of bed one by one and they walked with no clothes on across the landing to the bathroom very slowly and so the commentary could then describe the differences between a man and a woman in all their glory.

Well, Monday morning came and Tamara's getting ready to teach when a very, very uptight and angry looking parent clutching a VHS tape was marching across the playground wearing a facial expression that's generally reserved for the act of swallowing a wasp.

[15:00] She was not a happy bunny. And we said, is everything okay? She said, no, everything is not okay. Slamming the VHS tape down on the desk.

I've watched this over the weekend and frankly, I am disgusted. I am appalled. How could you possibly show that to children? She said, go on.

I saw this scene when they get out of bed and they walk along the landing to the bathroom. Yeah.

Well, I'm appalled. Did you see the state of their wallpaper?

not quite knowing what to say, Tamara was speechless but the mum went on.

And their carpets! I know some people live like that but do we all have to see it? Now, the point of me telling you that story and there is one, maybe there are times when our attention is completely in the wrong place and we're noticing completely the wrong things and we're caught up in totally the wrong direction.

[16:32] What a tragedy it is when we look at repent and believe the good news. Repent and turn to God. When we focus just on the repent, the stop doing this.

And God just longs for us to see that yes, stop doing that. But, but, but if only you saw how tiny and pathetic and trivial the stuff is that I'm asking you to leave behind in relation, in contrast to that which I want you to step into and live.

And my prayer today for all of us as we've prayed in that very dangerous prayer that we prayed earlier on in the service called the covenant prayer is that our focus will not be distracted on the things that God continually calls us to leave behind and leave them in our past and not to go back there but rather our full attention and focus will be on the amazing life that ultimately lies in eternity but starts right here and right now.

That life where he just longs to fill and go on filling in ever greater measure with the power and the strength of his Holy Spirit.

And the implications of what that looked like will be different for each one of us but I can tell you this it is exciting. Whatever age or stage in life we are at whatever challenges or inhibitions we may face God's there.

[18 : 19] And as long as we are here in this world to quote Billy Graham God's got a plan and that will only ever be exciting. so let's pray together now.

Lord thank you that though at the heart of the gospel there's a challenge to stop and to change that the thrust of your message of the good news is not what you're calling us not so much about what you're calling us to leave but what you are calling us to step into.

We thank you for the excitement of that. Lord help us to open ourselves each day to those new things that you call us to.

Whatever that looks like in our daily lives. Open us up to the power of your Holy Spirit. Help us to know that you have only the best in mind for us.

Forgive us for those times when our view of life with you is so small. Lord open up our hearts and our minds and our eyes and our ears to all that you have in store for us that we may live out expectantly the plans that you have.

[19 : 56] Lord fill us and go on filling us now and in the time to come. In Jesus name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.