

# **FPC Biblical Standards for Teachers**

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Why do we need a Biblical Standards for Teachers covenant?**

The leadership of First Presbyterian Church (ruling and teaching elders) has a responsibility to ensure that teaching within the church aligns with our beliefs and Christian tradition. One of the primary ways to support that is by making sure that those who are doing the teaching are qualified and share the same essential beliefs of the church. Without a standard in place, evaluating teachers and placing expectations on them becomes a subjective process. The elders of FPC wanted to be proactive in establishing standards that help teachers understand the expectations on them and that give Session a process to hold teachers accountable.

Establishing standards for teachers is also in line with scripture, as James 3:1 states (NIV), “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”

It is important to note that while this is something new for FPC, the concept of a covenant is nothing new within similar organizations. It is a common expectation for working or volunteering at many faith-based universities, Christian non-profits and other parachurch ministry groups.

### **How was the covenant created?**

The Discipleship Committee, with direct involvement from pastoral staff, commissioned a task force in April 2022 to explore the creation of Biblical standards that teachers of FPC would be asked to affirm. The task force spent several weeks meeting and researching and prayerfully compiling a list of standards presented within a covenant to be signed by teachers. The Discipleship Committee and Session then approved the standards in June.

The goal was to have the standards ready for the fall class/group session, allowing for a clean start at the beginning of a new season rather than introducing the standards in the middle of classes/groups that were already in progress or waiting until January 2023. The standards and the process of introducing them to teachers were topics of discussion in meetings of both the Discipleship Committee and the full session throughout the fall.

### **Has the covenant already been in use?**

Yes, the session approved the covenant in June. That began a process over several months where members of the task force met with staff leads and many individual teachers to share the rationale for the covenant and give them time to review it. All teachers were offered an opportunity to meet with the task force to ask questions and understand the rationale for the standards. Teachers were then asked to sign the covenant and submit it to the church office. The majority of the 72 individuals identified as teachers at FPC have signed the covenant and expressed appreciation for their implementation. The covenant was recently revised in the February 2023 session meeting.

### **Why have I only heard about the covenant in recent weeks (or hearing about this for the first time right now)?**

Although the covenant was approved months ago and its passage was noted in the monthly session report sent in FPC's e-newsletter at the time, there was not an initial plan to distribute the covenant and the rationale behind it to the entire congregation. The covenant was intended for current teachers and those who may wish to teach at FPC in the future. This meant any outreach or explanation about the covenant was directed toward church members who fit that description rather than all church members.

As the standards were introduced throughout the fall and eventually revised in February, there have been two cases of teachers who have disagreed with the process and have not signed. This has led the Discipleship Committee and the Session to weigh next steps for those in question, which has also led to some non-teachers directing questions about the covenant to members of Session and the Discipleship Committee. To address those concerns and give the congregation more clarity, the Session asked for the covenant and its rationale to be shared more broadly.

### **What will happen to the teachers who do not sign the covenant?**

When the Session approved the covenant, it did not approve any specific actions to be taken toward those who refuse to sign. The elders wanted to let the process play out, gather feedback on how the covenant was received and handle any questions or resistance to signing on a case-by-case basis. Again, the overwhelming majority of teachers have received the standards with understanding and appreciation.

Any teachers with concerns are provided an opportunity to meet with church elders to discuss the standards. Session is still considering the most appropriate action to be taken for those who have yet to sign.

### **Why aren't specific actions spelled out for teachers who won't sign?**

Someone could have different reasons that they don't want to sign the covenant. For instance, they may not want to submit to Session authority over lay teaching at FPC. Others might be concerned about committing to a higher standard of Christian discipline related to prayer, scripture reading, preparation, etc. Still others may take issue with agreeing to the first standard listed, "Scripture is the final authority for truth and is the basis for all teaching."

The Discipleship Committee has committed to a thorough discernment and listening process for any teachers who have reservations. That process is designed to find out the root issue(s). For instance, the task force has spent several weeks engaging with and listening to those who have yet to sign through email exchanges, attending classes, one-on-one meetings, etc.

Each reason for not signing can differ in significance, which reasonably should lead to different actions that Session considers taking. For instance, not accepting the Bible as the final authority is more significant than an uneasiness about being held to a higher standard of preparation and spiritual discipline.

### **Does this mean teachers will now be questioned over what they teach?**

The covenant is written in a way that focuses on the beliefs of the teachers themselves, not on the specific content they teach in a class/group that they lead. The expectation is that having teachers who share a Biblical foundation should prevent specific topics or beliefs from being taught within the church.

The Discipleship Committee understands that controversial topics such as sexuality, critical theory, identity, gender roles, etc., need to be addressed within the church. There is a difference, however, between learning about controversial issues vs. teaching on them that contradicts Christian tradition. For instance, there is nothing wrong with studying why different religions might question the divinity of Jesus. It is not appropriate, however, for a teacher within FPC to themselves question the divinity of Jesus and incorporate resources that hold that position.

This covenant does not put specific topics off-limits. The Book of Order, however, does give the Session authority over teaching in the church and it can exercise that authority when needed to address specific content.

### **Does this mean that if a teacher commits a sin, they will be removed?**

No, it does not. As the covenant states, we are all sinners and cannot be expected to be without sin. However, those who practice “a habitual, unrepentant lifestyle” of sin would be going against the standards in the covenant. If a teacher is found to be in such an unrepentant sin pattern, the same process of listening and discernment would take place with that teacher to find the root of the issue before Session would consider taking any action.

### **How will the standards be introduced to teachers going forward?**

New teachers will be identified by staff and members of the Discipleship Committee. They will be provided the standards either by the staff lead over their class or by an elder and asked to sign. As with the initial rollout, they will be offered the opportunity to meet with members of the Discipleship Committee if they have questions or concerns.

For established teachers, their initial affirmation of the standards will remain valid unless/until significant changes are made to the standards that require a reaffirmation.

### **Are the standards permanent or can they be changed?**

As a document approved by Session, the standards are always subject to Session review and can be changed at any time at the discretion of the Session. The Discipleship Committee and the Session will annually review the standards to determine if they need to be updated in any way. This process will include feedback from the pastors, current teachers at FPC and those who may wish to teach in the future.